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Autobiography as Repetition in the Works of Walker Percy.

Edward Joseph Dupuy

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Autobiography as repetition in the works of Walker Percy

Dupuy, Edward Joseph, Ph.D.

The Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical Col., 1993
AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS REPETITION IN THE WORKS OF WALKER PERCY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

The Department of English

by

Edward Joseph Dupuy
B.A., St. Joseph Seminary College, 1980
M.A., Louisiana State University, 1989
May 1993
Acknowledgments

Novelists, we are told, project parts of themselves into the characters they create. They disperse or fracture themselves into their various works. Critics, on the other hand, work in an opposite direction. They take what others have given them and try to fashion a whole from disparate parts. Contrary though their motions may be, both a novel and a work of criticism strive for the same goal. They try to offer something inviting and enduring. If this work has anything of those qualities, it is largely because of those from whom I have received so much.

Thus, I wish to thank my parents, whose abundant generosity during these last six years of graduate study has helped me stay focussed on my work. To my wife, Jan, I say thanks for everything, but especially for the time and support I needed to get this work done. Although she endured a rigorous schedule of work and children during this last year, she still found time to help me with my work. To our three children—Benjamin, Madeleine, and John—I say thanks for enduring a closed study door.

My dissertation committee at LSU has been equally generous. James Olney’s wisdom and encouragement offered themselves as quiet guides. And John R. May’s keen eye challenged me to sharpen my prose. Thanks, too, to Peggy
Whitman Prenshaw, John Lowe, John Whittaker, and David H. Smyth. Professor Lewis P. Simpson, who was not on my committee, nevertheless offered his valuable comments and encouragement, as did Patrick Samway, S.J. and Fred Hobson. Sr. Jeanne d’Arc Kernion, O.S.B. and Mrs. Jennie LeBeau kindly proofread the typescript for me.

The monks of St. Joseph Abbey and Seminary not only gave me a foundation in the Liberal Arts several years ago, but also provided me this last year with a quiet place to work. Fr. Matthew Clark, O.S.B., was kind enough to lend me his computer, and Fr. Adrian Hovey, O.S.B., helped set it up. On the business of computers, I am most grateful to Mr. René B. deLaup, whose wizardry and expertise saved me countless hours of work, and to Mr. Marc Fluitt, who lent me a laser printer.

Mrs. Mary Bernice Townsend Percy was very generous with materials such as audio and video tapes that came from her private collection. For those, and for giving me a copy of Henry Kisor’s memoir, I offer my gratitude.

I also want to extend a general thanks to the interlibrary loan staff at Middleton library at LSU and to the staff of the Southern Historical Collection at the Wilson library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Preface

If it is true that critics are closet autobiographers, that whatever they write about someone else's work inevitably bears the impression of their own lives and selves, then readers should be forewarned; you are undertaking an exploration into my own life.

I first became aware of Walker Percy some time during my years at St. Joseph Seminary College, a small liberal arts college in Covington, Louisiana. This is the same school where Percy taught one year and where he delivered the commencement address in 1983. He was an acquaintance of the rector-president of the college—a "priest-sociologist"—and I saw them from time to time walking around the campus. I was not an avid reader during those years, so when I learned that Percy wrote novels, I did not rush out to get one of his books. I did have the occasion, however, to buy Love in the Ruins for a friend of mine during the summer of 1979. I bought the book from The Kumquat, the bookstore in Covington owned by Percy's daughter, Anne Moores. Mrs. Percy happened to be working in the store when I went in. After I paid for the book, she said, "Walker is working upstairs. He'll be down in a few minutes if you'd like to talk to him."

Being somewhat like Will Barrett of The Last Gentleman, an affable, albeit
"addled young man," I declined. What was I going to say to this man? Why should I want to talk to him? So I took the book, wrote a note to my friend, a large part of which I copied from the dust cover—something about the "apocalyptic" nature of the work—and delivered it. Later on, I bought a paperback copy of the book for myself, read it, and became even more addled. I enjoyed the story, what I could make of it, enjoyed the descriptions of the "Love Clinic" and Tom More's lapsometer, but I had no idea of what Percy was up to. All the same, I sensed that he was "onto something," a favorite phrase of his. So I read it again. Soon, I was hooked. I had to read his other works.

I gradually realized that this man was writing about me! It was not an altogether pleasant realization, for, if you know Percy's characters, you know that they are a rather wounded lot. How could he know me so well? How could he show me my own wounds?

Thirteen years and one graduate degree later, I seek an answer to those questions in this study. I return, then, to the place I began. I think it is accurate for me to say that it was through reading Walker Percy that I ever came to do graduate work in English. I would like this study, the culmination of that work, which is also a beginning, to be seen as a tribute to him whose work has opened new possibilities for me. I can only hope that it is a fitting tribute.
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List of Abbreviations

The following list provides the editions of Percy’s works I use as well as the manner in which I abbreviate them in the body of my work. The dates in parentheses indicate the original year of publication. Except for *The Moviegoer*, which was published by Alfred A. Knopf, all of Percy’s works were published first by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

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<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Title</th>
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<tr>
<td><em>Con</em></td>
<td><em>Conversations with Walker Percy.</em> UP of Mississippi, 1985.</td>
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<tr>
<td><em>SHC</em></td>
<td>Letters and Papers. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Signposts</em></td>
<td><em>Signposts in a Strange Land.</em> Farrar Straus and Giroux, 1991.</td>
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Abstract

While many critics have explored some connections between Walker Percy's work and the philosophies of Søren Kierkegaard and Martin Heidegger, none has examined that link in terms of autobiography and autobiographical theory. This study looks at both Percy's fiction and nonfiction in light of the category of repetition and its relation to autobiography. Following largely the work of William Spanos, the first chapter establishes a reading of autobiography as repetition—understood as *inter esse*, "being between" and concerned in time. It then discloses a link between such a view of autobiography and Percy's diagnostic use of the novel. The remainder of the study examines Percy's works in light of repetition and the three component parts of the word "autobiography"—*autos*, *bios*, and *graphein*. Chapter Two investigates Percy's semiotics of the self, especially with regard to the self's "unformulability" and "dislocation" as those themes are displayed in *Lost in the Cosmos*, *The Moviegoer*, and *The Last Gentleman*. Chapter Three explores Percy's criticism of a gnostic culture as it is framed in "The Loss of the Creature" and "The Message in the Bottle," and it explores references to the Nazi Holocaust (taken as the most extreme expression of gnosticism in this century) throughout his novels, but especially in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Chapter Four examines the reflexive nature of Percy's writing—the
interpenetration of repetition as a theme and repetition as narrative technique—
with reference to the "blue-dollar hawk" story as it is told in "Metaphor as
Mistake" and *The Second Coming*. Chapter Five recapitulates much of the
dissertation but with regard to Percy the man. In a large part of his life and work,
Percy seems to have absorbed and been absorbed with the category of repetition.
Introduction

We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.

—T. S. Eliot
"Little Gidding"

The search is what anyone would undertake
if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life.

—Binx Bolling
The Moviegoer

During an interview in 1981, J. Gerald Kennedy asked Walker Percy,

"When your biography is written, are we going to see your novels in those terms?"

Percy replied candidly:

"Oh, I guess some of it, but not in the current sense of a roman à clef. Not because I think there is anything wrong with it, but I mean the American vogue of writing a roman à clef to me is a big bore. It’s no fun. The fun comes in transforming experience, taking something that’s happened to you, something you might imagine that happened—or I’m talking to you and I could imagine something that might have happened to you—and putting the pieces all together; that’s where the fun is."

At first glance, Percy’s comment does not seem altogether significant. For what he admits must undoubtedly transpire in almost every writer. Writers transform experience—lived or imagined—into art. But what does it mean to transform
experience? Transform comes from the Latin prefix *trans*, "across, implying change," and *formare*, "to form." Experience has its roots in *experientia*, which means "a trial or a test." To transform experience, then, would be "to change across the form of a trial," or better, "to change the form of a trial."²

Although Percy uses "experience" in this interview to signify the more or less "ordinary" understanding of the word, that is, "an actual living through an event or events," his comment gains significance when placed in the context of the existentialist philosophy which he found so illuminating.³ For, as he states time and again in both his essays and his novels, experience, the actual living through events, has returned to its original sense and has itself become a trial: "How does one live through an ordinary Wednesday afternoon?" This ostensibly innocent question provides much of the impetus for Percy's writing.

Following his existentialist progenitors, Percy wonders whether one actually "lives" through events anymore. It seems, on the contrary, that a pervasive sense of death prevails. The "gas of malaise," "ravening particles," and "death-in-life" becloud and bombard attempts at ordinary living and pit his characters against the seductions of death. As Binx Bolling reflects in *The Moviegoer*, "for some time now the impression has been growing on me that everyone is dead" (86). And the older Will Barrett asks in *The Second Coming*, "Am I killed and until this moment did not know it" (135)? Or again, "Is it
possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane" (113)? And Percy's last novel even has death in its title: *The Thanatos Syndrome*. He speaks for himself (and more directly) in his essay "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World": "The hero of the postmodern novel is a man who has forgotten his bad memories and conquered his present ills and who finds himself in the victorious secular city. His only problem now is to keep from blowing his brains out" (*MB* 112). 4

While Percy's heroes have not necessarily forgotten their bad memories—Binx ponders his father's death, Will Barrett confronts his father's suicide both in *The Last Gentleman* and more powerfully in *The Second Coming*, Tom More remembers his daughter's ugly death, and *Lancelot* is built on the recovering memory of Lancelot Lamar—they nevertheless struggle constantly with the task of "living" through ordinary experience.

But as Kennedy's question and Percy's response suggest, Percy himself often found experience a trial, and the "fun" of writing his novels came about in changing the form of that trial. In a general sense this transformation, of course, is the autobiographical movement. Commenting on what by now must be considered the "classic" work in the field of autobiography, *Metaphors of Self*, James Olney writes about his own work:
When I began (in about 1966) to write what eventually became *Metaphors of Self* it never occurred to me to look for critical works on autobiography for the simple reason that I did not think of what I was doing as a study of autobiography; I thought of it as a study of the way *experience is transformed into literature* (which I suppose could be another way of describing autobiography)—as a study of the creative process, a humanistic study of the ways of men and the forms taken by human consciousness.

The uncanny similarity between Percy’s comment and the words I have italicized in Olney’s passage opens the door (as if it needed opening) to an understanding of Percy’s works in an autobiographical context.

Of course, readers familiar with the extensive criticism that Percy’s writing has generated know that that metaphorical door has already been opened. William Rodney Allen’s *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* approaches Percy’s fiction in light of his struggle with "fathers"—literal, adoptive, and literary.

Following closely the insight of Richard King’s *A Southern Renaissance* who in turn acknowledges debt to Harold Bloom’s *The Anxiety of Influence*, Allen argues convincingly that "Percy’s fiction is in a very real sense his response to his father’s suicide" (xvii). But Allen maintains that Percy had more than one father to contend with:

I will suggest that Percy had an inordinate number of "fathers" to defeat in order to, in Bloom’s words, "clear imaginative space" for himself: his literal suicidal father; his stoical, melancholy adopted father; Freud (against whom he struggled in three years of psychoanalysis); Faulkner, whose
influence he has too insistently denied; and finally, American literary precursors like Twain, Warren, and Hemingway. (xviii)

Allen's readings of the particular novels are solid and insightful. He is at his best when he mines the rich layers of Percy's literary allusions. Yet, I find it odd that in this "autobiographical study" he neglects the ever-growing body of material on autobiography as a field of critical inquiry. Thus, while he implicitly traces the change in form of Percy's trials, especially that of his father's suicide, he does not explicitly place the works in a broader theoretical concept of autobiography. That is, he seems to presuppose a transformation of experience without exploring connections between Percy's work, autobiographical theory, and actual autobiographies. I hope to cast light in this direction by means of this study.

Thus, while Allen's work in some measure unlocks the mysteries of Percy's fiction with the keys of his personal experience, I will explore the "fun" of transforming experience at a more general level. I will look at Percy's works (fiction and nonfiction) to discern their relation to the autos, bios, and graphein of autobiography, and I will do so, furthermore, in light of what I take to be one the central movements of both his life and his work: Kierkegaard's category of repetition, the movement in which "everything is returned double." I hope to show first, then, that autobiography—the type of work that presents itself as the story of its author's life, written by himself—follows this same movement. That is
to say there is a sense in which autobiographers recover, regain, or, as we shall see, "repeat" their experience (as do Percy's characters) so that they are able once again to inhabit, to live in, that experience. They thus attain a type of reconciliation and redemption. I will then go on to show the relation between repetition and autos, bios, and graphein, respectively, in light of Percy's works and theories of autobiography.

It is interesting to note and entirely germane to my argument that autobiography is a relatively recent entrant in the many fields of critical inquiry. Almost every critic of autobiography with whom I am familiar has commented on this fact. Yet it is Olney who offers lucid insights as to why this might be. According to Olney autobiography has found its place in this cultural moment for three reasons, the first related to genre and the second two to criticism:

First, there is the dual, paradoxical fact that autobiography is often something considerably less than literature and that it is always something rather more than literature. It refuses, simply to be a literary genre like any other. ("Cultural Moment" 24)

James Cox seems to say something similar when he writes that autobiography as a genre exists somewhere between the self-enclosed and self-referential literature of imagination and the purely referential literature of fact (Cox 8). Autobiography, then, defies any facile generic classification.
Olney continues: "A second, related reason . . . is that critics of twenty-five years ago insisted that for satisfying aesthetic apprehension a work must display (in Stephen Dedalus’s phrase) ‘wholeness, harmony, and radiance’" (25). While some autobiographers may strive for the latter two of Dedalus’s triad, the first, in the sense of a completed and closed work is for autobiography an impossibility: "The end of the story cannot be told. . . . The narrative is never finished, nor ever can be, within the covers of a book" (25).

Here, Olney implicitly refers to what might be called the "revolution" that has occurred in literary studies during the last few decades. That is, he refers to the shift in allegiance from the New Critical (modernist) paradigm—a model that, as William V. Spanos and others have shown, takes its credo directly from Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* and which holds "timelessness" in priority to time—to the deconstructive or destructive (postmodern) criticism which has its origins in existential philosophy and which places a priority on time. I will treat this shift in perspective in more detail in chapter one—especially the relation between autobiography and time, for as Olney says in another context, the autobiographer's prime motive is to "redeem the time." But it is enough to say now that autobiography, based on these first two reasons alone, can be viewed as the postmodern form *par excellence*, inasmuch as postmodernism has a form.
The third reason for autobiography’s delay in entering the circles of critical inquiry has to do with its self-reflexive nature (in spite of Cox’s claim above, or maybe in addition to that claim, since he places it in the middle, which would mean, of course, that it is self-reflexive to a degree). As Olney phrases it, autobiography is a self-reflexive, a self-critical act, and consequently the criticism of autobiography exists within the literature instead of alongside it. The autobiographer can discuss and analyze the autobiographical act as he performs it. (25, his emphasis)

From Augustine’s reflections on time and memory in his Confessions to Mary McCarthy’s italicized, complementary sections in Memories of a Catholic Girlhood, to Ronald Fraser’s fascinating blend of subjective and objective history (psychoanalysis and interviews) in his In Search of a Past, autobiographers theorize about their work even as they enact it.

Percy, of course, never wrote what is commonly considered an autobiography. His forms of choice were the essay and the novel. While he never completely abandoned the essay form, I agree with Patricia Lewis Poteat who maintains that it is the novel that is best suited to Percy’s aims as a writer. She argues that "Percy’s conceptual vision becomes progressively more blurred as his style and vocabulary become progressively less anecdotal or narrative and more analytical and abstract—hence, ever more tenuously anchored in the concrete particulars of persons in predicaments." Those essays which incorporate
anecdote and narrative (persons in predicaments)—essays which might be called "novelistic," such as "The Man on the Train," "The Loss of the Creature," and "The Message in the Bottle"—she claims, are clearer and more persuasive than the technical and more abstract essays which comprise the other pieces in The Message in the Bottle. Percy himself was aware of this problem: tired of "getting paid in reprints," interested in the French novel of writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, writers who "see nothing wrong with writing novels that address what they consider the deepest philosophical issues," and eager to reach a broader audience than his essays allowed, Percy turned to novel-writing during the 1950's (Con 183, and Coles 137).

His first two efforts—"The Charterhouse," and "The Gramercy Winner"—were, by his own admission, terrible: "[I wrote] two bad novels which I'm glad were not published" (Con 89). He made his breakthrough with The Moviegoer, published in 1961 and the winner of the 1962 National Book Award. The rest, as the saying goes, "is history." His writing career spanned the next thirty years of his life: The Last Gentleman (1966), Love in the Ruins (1971), The Message in the Bottle (1975), Lancelot (1977), The Second Coming (1980), Lost in the Cosmos (1983), The Thanatos Syndrome (1987), and Signposts in a Strange Land (1991), the posthumously published collection of essays, edited by Patrick Samway, S.J., Percy's "authorized" biographer.
But this brief foray into the chronology of his works steers me away from my principal concern with his novels and his view of the novel. For, as I will claim in the first chapter of this study, Percy’s view of the novel and the characteristics of autobiography already outlined above share much in common and thus further signal the aptness of an autobiographical approach to his works. Percy’s comments in essays and interviews about the novel being a "mess" or having been "always in trouble," for example, correspond not only to the "oppositional poetics" Walter Reed discusses in An Exemplary History of the Novel, but also to the generic instability that Olney sees in autobiography.14 Furthermore, Percy’s view of the novel as "diagnostic" and ultimately therapeutic, what Michael McKeon calls its "problem-solving mode,"15 seems to correspond to the autobiographer’s attempt to name himself by writing his life. Although naming a problem is the first step to solving it, giving a name entails a fall of sorts, a misname, for Percy. And since the self, as I will show in chapter two, is semiotically adrift, and since, as Percy writes in "Metaphor as Mistake," we can only know "one thing through the lens of another" (MB 82), it is precisely through the attempt to name that a subject opens itself to the possibility of being a self. Of course, this striving after a name presupposes that the self is problematical in the first place; otherwise, why try to name it? The self cannot be so readily named as other things because it is not a thing among other things, but a nothing. Thus, and this relates Percy’s novel-
writing to autobiography all the more firmly, the attempt to name is life-long and hence without closure.

Furthermore, Percy sees the novel as the perfect medium for depicting what Marcel called *homo viator*, man the wayfarer or pilgrim (*Con* 231). Such a wayfarer, however, cannot reach his end. For if the novel is about "man on the road," then the road, quite literally, can have no terminus. Some critics have chided Percy for his ambiguous endings (except for *The Second Coming*, which was criticized for its apparent closure!), but it is precisely that ambiguity that points to the openness of possibility and the life-long process of self-naming. Both autobiography and Percy's novels, then, struggle with the question of time, whose end remains unknown, but which nevertheless seems to demand redemption. That is to say, both Percy's writing and autobiography share a common goal of calling the writer (and the reader) back to time through the process of self-naming.

The correspondence between the self-reflexive nature of autobiography and Percy's work is less clear. Instead of making his novels self-reflexive, as Faulkner does, for example, in *Absalom! Absalom!*, Percy seems to have used the essay and the interview to reflect on the nature of writing. He does not develop a theory of the novel in the act of writing a novel; instead, he uses other occasions of writing or speaking to think about the form as such. Nevertheless, his narrative style itself displays an interpenetration of form and content, if you will. Repetition finds
embodiment as a theme in Percy's works even as it is manifested in his writing style. In this sense, his works can be read as exhibiting a self-reflexivity.

This essay, then, will introduce several new approaches to the appreciation of Percy's works. Chapter One, "Autobiography, Repetition, and Percy," will place Percy's works within a theoretical understanding of autobiography as repetition. Chapters Two, Three, and Four will carry as their main titles, respectively, "Repetition and Autos," "Repetition and Bios," and "Repetition and Graphein." But each of these chapter headings will bear subtitles as well, to give more specific focus to the topic at hand: "The Unformulability of the Self," "Surviving Life in a Century of Gnosticism and Death," and "Metaphor and The Mystery of Language and Narrative." Finally, Chapter Five, "Autobiography, Repetition, and Percy," will provide a coda which "repeats" many of major themes developed in the work as a whole, but reflects more on Percy the man.
Notes to Introduction


4. Quotations from *MG* and *SC* are taken from the Ivy paperback editions. Quotations from *MB* taken from the original edition: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1975.


6. Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 1986); hereafter to be cited parenthetically in the text by page number.

7. Søren Kierkegaard, Fear and Trembling/Repetition, eds. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, Princeton UP, 1983) 220. In her book (see note 3 above), Mary Deems Howland argues convincingly that Percy's major philosophical category is Marcel's concept of "intersubjectivity." Yet, it seems to me that intersubjectivity and repetition are contemporaneous movements for Percy and thus of equal import.


11. *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age: Reflections on Language, Argument and the Telling of Stories* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1985) 2. While I agree with Poteat's basic claim, I think that what she "discovers" about Percy's behavioral stance in the essays is off the mark. On the one hand, she does not consider the rhetorical situation of each essay—i.e., its audience—as does Coles, for example. On the other hand, she seems to disallow any incongruity in Percy's thought. He was, after all trying to bridge a gap, as he says, between theorizing about "man" and theorizing about animals: "So you have this tremendous gap between accounting for animals and their behavior, which can be done by fairly adequate mechanistic models, and accounting for man, who can erect theories and utter sentences about these very creatures" (*Con* 134). It is surprising, too, that Poteat makes little reference to the essays that are collected in *Signposts*; although uncollected at the time of her writing, most of them were nevertheless available in their original form. Nor does she refer to the "Intermezzo" section of *Lost in the Cosmos*, a work Percy himself thought of as his "most important" achievement.


Chapter One

Autobiography, Repetition and Percy

When the novelist writes of a man "coming to himself" through some such catalyst as catastrophe or ordeal, he may be offering obscure testimony to a gross disorder of consciousness and to the need of recovering oneself as neither angel nor organism but as a wayfaring creature somewhere between.

—"Notes for a Novel about the End of the World"
(The Message in the Bottle, 113)

1. Autobiography: A Necessary Attempt at Limiting the Term

One of the problems any writer confronts in developing an autobiographical study is the setting of limits to the term itself. That is to say, how does one define autobiography? Is there such a thing as a genre called autobiography that is characteristically different from other genres? What are the boundaries that set it off from other types of writing?

The OED defines autobiography as "the writing of one's own history; the story of one's life written by himself." This seems to be a fair assessment of the term; yet what can be considered as one's "history"? Is it a simple compilation of the events that occur during the course of one's lifetime? And if this is so, how
does one pattern those events, or can there be a pattern at all? Is it true that a pattern distorts, in some way, the material it encloses? Or is it more truthful to say that when one writes something in narrative form, a pattern is established or assumed in the very act of writing itself, and that writing without a pattern carries no significance beyond individual words? Furthermore, how can one account for those autobiographies, such as Herbert Read’s "The Innocent Eye," that contain very little reference to actual events? In short, this definition begs the question of history and historiography. Nor do the waters become less murky when one turns to a definition of "story." Cannot poetry be considered, in some sense, as the story of its writer? And if poetry can be so considered, why not a collection of essays, a philosophy, a theology, or a series of novels? If a story implies a pattern, as the *OED* suggests, then practically any narrative could be considered autobiography. The genre, if indeed I can even use that word, cannot be so readily catalogued.

But none of this is new to the study of autobiography. I have already cited the comments of Olney and Cox who say that autobiography is both more and less than literature. In *Metaphors of Self*, Olney explicitly eschews any generic approach to the field:

> It is not at all my present purpose to try to define a literary form, or to distinguish and classify all the varieties and types of autobiography; indeed, definition of autobiography as a literary genre seems to me virtually impossible, because the definition must either include so much as to be no definition,
or exclude so much as to deprive us of the most relevant texts. Either way, definition is not particularly desirable or significant. (38-9)

But if Olney denies any explicit definition of autobiography, his theory—the preceding quotation is taken from his chapter entitled "A Theory of Autobiography"—suggests an implicit one. Autobiography creates a metaphor of self for both its writer and reader. It names the self through the process of metaphorical indirection. Autobiography is that type of writing which creates and names a metaphor of self. Granted, this "definition" itself leaves much to be clarified—something which Olney does throughout the remainder of his book in his discussions of Eliot, Jung, Montaigne and others; nevertheless, it is a definition of sorts.

Theorists of autobiography seem to escape the trap of definition through an appeal to function. If autobiography cannot be classified generically, then what it does for both the writer and reader, or for the study of literature in general for that matter, comes to the fore. Thus, Cox maintains that the study of autobiography provides for the "recovering of literature’s lost ground," which he takes to be history. Janet Varner Gunn says that because autobiographers claim and take hold of the events of their lives, they become "fierce with reality." Georges Gusdorf writes that autobiography is "the symbol, or parable of a consciousness in quest of its own truth." And Paul John Eakin argues that
autobiography functions as a "process of self-discovery and self-creation" which ultimately points to the fictive structure of the self. Like Olney's metaphorizing then, these functions of autobiography define, in some sense, both the act and the product.² At the same time, however, they are definitions which refuse to be definitions. While autobiography encompasses these functions, it is also always beyond them. As a genre, autobiography would seem to "de-struct," as William V. Spanos would say, the antinomy I suggest above between explicit and implicit.³ For Spanos, "de-struction is not . . . a nihilistic activity of thought that [portrays] its active force by levelling difference. Rather, it is, paradoxically, a positive or . . . a pro-jective interpretive activity in which thinking (theoria) is doing-in-the-world (praxis)."⁴ In this sense, then, the explicit is the implicit—the work (or the study of the work), the doing-in-the-world, is the definition and vice versa. One's theory of autobiography is as much autobiography as is the work or works under scrutiny. It seems, then, that there can be no single definition of autobiography; rather, we are left only with the paradoxical and circular view that each instance of autobiography is its definition, just as each instance of criticism about autobiography projects a new and (one hopes) fruitful limitation, which is paradoxically a widening, of whatever boundaries autobiography can be said to have.⁵
In this "limitation" of the term, then, I may have realized nothing more than Olney's resistance to definition. Or perhaps I have returned to the view established in the Introduction of this study, that autobiography is the "transformation of experience into art," a broad enough definition, to be sure, yet one which still seems a good guide for an understanding of the term. For such a transformation involves, as I hope to show, both limitation and possibility. It involves repetition.

2. Autobiography and Time: Repetition

In Autobiography: Toward a Poetics of Experience, Janet Varner Gunn looks at the transformation of experience into art with an emphasis on the role of time. She contends that "traditional" theorists in the field of autobiography (writers such as Gusdorff and Olney) place the self in a privileged position with regard to itself, and that the "ultimate expression of the self's privileged position is the Cartesian cogito" (Gunn 7). The result of such a placement of the self is its separation from the vicissitudes of time. She writes:

[In traditional autobiographical theory] to avoid the contamination of time, the privacy of the true self must be made absolute . . . . Autobiography has therefore to be understood as a form of "transcendental voyeurism"—as though the reader were getting a second-hand account of what the self, watching and overhearing itself, has seen and heard. (7)
Gunn portrays Olney, Gudsorf and others as promoters of a Cartesian dualism whose ultimate effect on autobiographical theory deport[s] autobiography from the country of vital experience to the desert island of Husserlian reduction or a reified textual system. At the center of their assumptions about autobiography is the hidden or ghostly self which is absolute, ineffable and timeless. Being outside the momentum of temporality and beyond the reach of language, this self cannot be said to have a past at all; it never was; it simply is. (8, her emphasis)

Gunn offers a corrective to what she sees as the fatal flaw to such a conception. Since she sees Olney and Gudsorf as removing the self from its involvement with time, she works from a view of the self "displayed in time":

The fact of the autobiographer's anchorage in the temporality (and spatiality) of his or her lived world constitutes the beginning as well as the telos of autobiography. Not as an escape from time, but as a plunge into it; not as a self's divestment of its world involvement, but as acknowledgement of temporal experience as a vehicle of meaning—this is how autobiography displays its bios. (9)

Gunn's vision of autobiography points ultimately to a reversal of what she takes to be the implicit question traditional theory posits: "Autobiography embodies the story of Antaeus and not, as so many are ready to assume, Narcissus. Understood so, the real question of autobiography becomes where do I belong? not, who am I?" (23).
This idea of placement offers a fresh critical stance on the field, and I shall return to it later. Gunn follows through soundly with her thesis, and she offers compelling readings of texts, especially *Walden*. Yet I agree with Paul John Eakin who maintains that her view of autobiography has more in common with Gusdorf and Olney than she admits (Eakin 184). Eakin does not offer an analysis of these similarities; he merely suggests that Gunn would become aware of them through a closer reading of Olney. I wish to examine briefly what Eakin has left unexamined, in anticipation of my discussion of Kierkegaard's elusive category of repetition.

Gusdorf argues that man's movement away from the mythic structures that quelled the "terrors of history," the awareness of time itself, forms one of the "conditions and limits" of autobiography in the first place. When an acute awareness of historical time emerges and time itself becomes problematic, the individual as individual may be compelled to write his life. The self, then, is not necessarily a fugitive from time, as Gunn suggests in her reading of Gusdorf; rather, time impels the writer forward in an attempt at self-definition, a definition, furthermore, which would have been unnecessary had the myths that provided stays for the self remained intact. For Gusdorf, the multiple self-portraits of Rembrandt and Van Gogh bear witness to the "impassioned new disquiet of modern man" (33), a disquiet brought on by their confrontation with time. The
autobiographer's recollection of the past "satisfies a more or less anguished
disquiet of the mind anxious to recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever"
(35).

Gunn also seems to overlook Olney's claim that one reason for the current
interest in autobiography, as I pointed out in the Introduction, emerges from the
very question of time in relation to literary texts. The shift in allegiance in recent
years from the New Criticism, which heralds Stephen Dedalus's
triad—"wholeness, radiance, harmony"—to what might be called "postmodern"
criticism signals in itself a new appreciation of time and clears the way for the
study of autobiography, which can never satisfy the criterion of wholeness. The
roots of this shift date to the 1940's, even as the tenets of New Criticism were being
formulated, but at a time also, as we shall see, when the works of Søren
Kierkegaard were making their way into the English-speaking world.

In what has become a "classic" essay for postmodern theorists, Joseph
Frank shows how "spatial form" comprises the aesthetic of the modern period. Following Gotthold Lessing's distinction between the plastic and the literary arts
in *Laokoon*, Frank suggests that what evolves in the modern period is the attempt
on the part of literary artists to emulate the plastic arts. They establish an
aesthetic
based on a space-logic that demands a complete re-orientation in the reader's attitude towards language. Since the primary reference of any word-group is to something inside the poem itself, language in modern poetry is really reflexive: the meaning-relationship is completed only by the simultaneous perception in space of word-groups which, when read consecutively in time, have no comprehensible relation to each other. (229)

Modern poetry's—and, incidentally, the novel's—creation of "images" (what Pound defined as "that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time" [226]) removes the very medium through which the literary arts are conveyed, namely time. While the plastic arts can be apprehended in an instant of time, Lessing contends that literature cannot because of its use of words in sequence (and because sequence implies time). Frank cites Lessing:

If it is true that painting and poetry in their imitations make use of entirely different means or symbols—the first, namely, of form and color in space, the second of articulated sounds in time—if these symbols indisputably require a suitable relation to the thing symbolized, then it is clear that symbols arranged in juxtaposition can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts exist in juxtaposition; while consecutive symbols can only express subjects of which the wholes or parts are themselves consecutive. (223)

Lessing's distinction suffers, as William Spanos has shown, "in its over-simplification. . . . He is clearly wrong in his insistence that a painting or a sculpture is perceived in an absolute instant of time." It is restricted also, as Frank says, because Lessing developed his argument to attack the pictorial poetry
and the allegorical painting of his day (223). Nevertheless, as Frank and Spanos make insistently clear, the "spatial" formalism of modern literature and the emphasis on the self-enclosed work that the emerging New Critics espoused lead to both the artist's and the work's removal from time. Frank cites Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* as offering the epitome of the New Critical artistic posture:

> the personality of the artist, at first sight a cry or a cadence and then a fluid and lambent narrative, finally refines itself out of existence, impersonalizes itself, so to speak . . . the artist, like the God of creation, remains within or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails (233).

It is this indifferent, transcendent, timeless, attitude that Frank sees as emblematic of the "mythic" stance of modern literature, a stance that severs it from its fundamental building blocks, words in sequence—time:

> past and present are seen spatially, locked in a timeless unity which, while it may accentuate surface differences, eliminates any feeling of historical sequence by the very act of juxtaposition. . . .It is this timeless world of myth, forming the common content of modern literature, which finds its appropriate aesthetic expression in spatial form (653).

His appeal to difference and time explains why his article has attained classic status and has become a sort of rallying point among those who wish to debunk New Criticism, sometimes without the finesse of Frank himself.
Be that as it may, Frank's insights into the "spatial form" of modern literature serve to foster a needed corrective to the view of poetry and literature as a "well-wrought urn" or "verbal icon."\(^{10}\) Whereas the modern, as Frank suggests, confronts the problem of time and then retreats to the timeless world of myth, the postmodern seeks re-entry into the flux of time itself. Following Frank, William Spanos bemoans the implications of New Critical thought:

> The tendency of the New Criticism to collapse the distinction between the plastic and the literary arts and thus to argue in behalf of the aesthetic doctrine of simultaneous perception is itself an ontological commitment—one analogous to and probably having its specific source in the obsessive effort of the modern literary imagination to escape the destructive impact of time and change, of which a disintegrating cosmic order has made it acutely and painfully conscious, by way of achieving the timeless eternity of the aesthetic moment or, rather, of "spatial form." (Mod Lit Crit 91)

Now I have taken this circumambient route not so much to reveal what I see as a weakness in Gunn's approach to autobiography in itself—her emphasis on time seems entirely appropriate and in line with my own thoughts on the subject; rather, I question what I see as an oversight in her analysis of Olney and Gusdorf. For if Olney's claim about autobiography's place in the cultural moment is true, then autobiography is inextricably joined to the question of time and literature. Autobiography cannot be thoroughly encompassed by a New Critical approach to literature because that approach represses the crucial dimensions of time and
change, the dimensions without which the act of autobiography would never
coccur. Olney does not picture the autobiographer as a fugitive from time; if there
can be any single picture of the autobiographer, and for Olney this is highly
unlikely, even undesirable, then it is a picture of a writer confronting and
grappling with his stance in time, trying to redeem his time.

Let me say, too, by way of parenthesis, that while I have called and will call
upon the aid of William Spanos and his destructive project, I do not thereby
readily assent to all its implications; nor do I claim that Walker Percy would, if he
ever read him. There is a sense in which, as Charles Altieri has shown, Spanos
restricts the difference he champions: "We find a much more varied world than
[Spanos] offers."11 As an example, Altieri offers a much richer definition of
modernism than the one Spanos develops:

Modernism . . . is at least a set of tensions between scientific
ideals of description and anti-scientific values, between
symbolist and immanentist views of the mind, between
desires for highly articulate formal arrangements and a need
to make expressive arts somehow representative (by
exploring mythic structures, for example), and between a
desire to pose new images of spirit that can proclaim a
nobility for man and a fear of sentimentality and rhetoric.

Spanos's definition, as we have seen, places an emphasis on the former member of
each dyad—symbolist over immanentist, for example: scientific description over
anti-scientific values. His description of modernism, then, becomes as "closed,"
according to Altieri, as the enclosure into form he reacts against in the first place.

In any case, I have come across no references to Spanos's work in my readings of Percy. What interests me about Spanos and his possible relation to the work of Percy (and, of course, their relation to autobiography) is his use of Heideggerian retrieval or repetition, which has its source in Kierkegaard's category of the same name. Percy was, of course, a devoted reader of both Heidegger and Kierkegaard. Although Spanos divests repetition of its religious significance (a step which again restricts the very possibilities he hails), he nevertheless points to an understanding of the term with regard to both its philosophical and literary implications. I hope to use Spanos, then, as Percy said he used his foster father, William Alexander Percy: "Surely it is the highest tribute to the best people we know to use them as best we can, to become, not their disciples, but ourselves."

I return, then, to the question of time and autobiography, the question that launched me on this excursion in the first place. (I feel a bit like the narrator at the beginning of Melville's behemoth *Mardi*—"We're off!" he exclaims, and thereupon takes the reader on a metaphysical journey unparalleled in American literature.) Both Gusdorf and Olney see the autobiographer's desire to redeem time as a prime motive for writing. I have already cited Gusdorf's reference to this redemption: The autobiographer's recollection of the past "satisfies a more or less anguished disquiet of the mind anxious to recover and redeem lost time in fixing it forever."
Olney makes the same claim, although more emphatically. He writes: "To redeem the time is one of the autobiographer's prime motives, perhaps the prime motive—perhaps, indeed, the only real motive of the autobiographer." This comment comes in the context of T. S. Eliot's line from *Four Quartets* "If all time is eternally present/ All time is unredeemable." Olney shows the sense in which different understandings of *bios* can render time either absolutely past or eternally present:

If *bios* is the historical course of a life, then at any given present moment of that life it is necessarily true that all things have flowed and that nothing remains: "is" has been transformed into "was" and has thereby been drained of all vitality, of all reality, of all life; "what was" no longer composes a part of *ta onta*, the present, the sum of things that are now existing or that are now being. If, on the other hand, *bios* is taken as the vital principle or the unique spark—life as transformed by being lived through this one-of-a-kind medium—then there is nothing but "is": there is no "was" in the picture and there is clearly no relation between "is" and "was". ("Some Versions" 239-40)

In either case, time becomes unredeemable. The autobiographer redeems his time through the interplay of past and present, which takes place in memory. Although Olney proposes different versions of redemption (some not involving memory at all, and some so transforming memory as to make it unrecognizable), he suggests that the "most complex resolution of the autobiographer's dilemma" takes place in memory:
Time carries us away from all of our earlier states of being; memory recalls those earlier states—but it does so only as a function of present consciousness: we can recall what we were only from the complex perspective of what we are, which means that we may very well be recalling something that we never were at all. In the act of remembering the past in the present, the autobiographer imagines into existence another person, another world, and surely it is not the same, in any real sense as that past world that does not, under any circumstances, nor however much we may wish it, now exist. ("Some Versions 241)

It is this complex interplay between past and present in the act of memory that redeems the time.

Olney's insistence on the possibility of "recalling something that we never were at all" or the bringing into existence of "another person, another world" seems to echo part of what Spanos, following Heidegger, would call the movement of retrieval or repetition. (I say "part of" because the future—"anticipatory resolution"—also comes into play for Heidegger and Kierkegaard, as I will discuss below.) This retrieval seems to be a version of redemption, similar to, yet different from the one Olney suggests. It is a redemption in its most primitive meaning of "recovering that of which possession had been lost," as Nathan Scott puts it.¹⁴ For if a recovery occurs, there is a sense in which it brings into existence another person and world, since the condition of loss means an absence or unawareness of what is lost. Repetition, then, becomes an originary experience—the origin, in the
case of autobiography, of the person brought into existence through the act of writing one's life, in whatever form.¹⁵

Spanos approaches the question of retrieval or repetition from the perspective of a hermeneutics of literary texts, which, in turn, derives from Heidegger's hermeneutic circle.¹⁶ The following note, which includes a footnote from *Being and Time*, helps to clarify both Spanos's and Heidegger's understanding of the term:

The translators of *Being and Time*, Macquarrie and Robinson, translate "*Wiederholen*" as "Repetition" (others, as "Retrieval") and add in a footnote:

this English word is hardly adequate to express Heidegger's meaning. Etymologically, "wiederholen" means "to fetch again"; in modern German usage, however, this is expressed by the cognate separable verb "wieder . . . holen," while "wiederholen" means simply "to repeat" or "do over again." Heidegger departs from both these meanings, as he is careful to point out. For him, "wiederholen" does not mean either a mere mechanical repetition or an attempt to reconstitute the physical past; it means rather an attempt to go back to the past and retrieve former possibilities, which are thus "explicitly handed down" or "transmitted." ("Hermeneutic Circle" 481, note 9)¹⁷

Heidegger writes of repetition with respect to "Dasein," the being that is there to question its own being, that always already has a vague sense of being, and thereby re-opens the question of ontology. His entire methodology as it is set up in the opening sections of *Being and Time* calls for a repetition or retrieval of
the question of being. Spanos, however, applies the category to literary criticism. He shrewdly justifies this shift in emphasis by pointing out that for Heidegger Dasein confronts the necessity of interpreting its own being, and the act of interpretation itself, of course, falls into the domain of literary criticism. Just as Heidegger de-structs (or de-structures) the western metaphysical tradition—which has imposed an interpretation from without, from a standpoint beyond or after the physical (*meta-ta-physika*), a standpoint devoid of temporality—to retrieve new possibilities for Dasein, and hence for the question of being, so Spanos, through his application of the Heideggerian method, that is, through, his emphasis on time, retrieves new possibilities for the act of literature. He writes: "I want to suggest a hermeneutics that remembers or retrieves the occasion—the time—that engaged and interested [literary activity] and, in so doing, reactivated the ongoing and interminable explorative process." It is so-called "postmodern" literature, of course, that opens itself best to this hermeneutic activity:

> Postmodern literature . . . becomes a kind of writing that is 'grounded' in an ungrounded understanding of being, a kind of 'de-structive' writing, as it were, which remains marginal up to the middle of this century, but which increasingly thereafter becomes the central preoccupation of dramatists, poets, and novelists. (Rep 8)

It is important to emphasize, again, that this de-structive method is not, for Spanos (or for Heidegger), a nihilistic movement, one which wantonly destroys
without any possibility of renewal. It is a method, rather, that "dis-closes" what has been "fore-closed" by the metaphysical tradition. Whereas interpretation in that tradition has worked from an atemporal, closed, circle—a repetition that ceaselessly and mechanically repeats the same thing—Spanos works from Heidegger's hermeneutic circle:

To put it positively, the hermeneutic circle is, paradoxically, a liberating movement, an opening towards being. It is finally, to use the important term that Heidegger borrows from Kierkegaard, a "repetition" or "retrieval" (Wiederholen), a process of dis-covering and re-membering the primordial temporality of being and thus of the truth as a-letheia (unhiddenness), which metaphysical understanding and interpretation . . ., in closing time off—in coercing temporality into spatial icon (the circle)—and hardening this closure into "tradition," covers over and forgets. . . . Retrieval or repetition, that is, is neither a process of re-cognizing a (historical) text in the tradition for its own sake; nor is it a process of re-collecting an absolute or privileged origin (logos as presence) as agency of judging a text in the tradition. It is rather a discovering of beginnings in the sense of rendering the present interpreter . . . a homo viator, of bringing him into an original, a careful explorative (open) relationship (a relationship of "anticipatory resoluteness") with the being of a text in the tradition. ("Hermeneutic Circle" 462, his emphasis)

I have quoted Spanos at length because I find this his most concise statement of the de-structive project which destroys only to open up new possibilities—the clearest statement of his use of repetition. Nevertheless, the quotation itself seems to call for some further clarification, something I can only
half-ironically and indirectly, half-seriously and directly provide by invoking Kierkegaard, who remains a very slippery character, and whose book, *Repetition*, gives only "hints and guesses, / Hints followed by guesses" as to what the term might signify. I approach this task fully aware that indirection, as Kierkegaard knew, is the only genuine way to fathom this elusive category, since it belongs, as Stephen Crites points out, to the existential sphere, and that once reduced to the sphere of the aesthetic, it loses its potency. The power, and, of course, the difficulty of Kierkegaard's pseudonymous aesthetic works result from the paradoxical attempt to render the existential by means of the aesthetic. As Crites observes, "these communications in which Kierkegaard set out to evoke the existential categories in their opposition to the aesthetic were themselves self-consciously aesthetic works." Thus, the irony of my treatment derives from Kierkegaard and his pseudonyms (existential writers), and the seriousness derives from his commentators (writers on existentialism).

It is worth emphasizing, following Crites, that in his pseudonymous works, Kierkegaard does not try so much to disseminate knowledge as "to draw the reader into a consideration of his personal life" ("Author and Authorship" 39). This motive behind his works is what makes them "existence communications" (see "Pseudonymous"). At the same time, however, each work is an aesthetic fabrication. Kierkegaard presents his readers, then, with a drama enacted by the
various pseudonyms he sets on stage: Judge William (a representative of the ethical stage) urges the young A (the aesthete of *Either/Or*) to choose; Johannes de Silentio (*Fear and Trembling*) seeks the Knight of Faith, whose movement he is unable to imitate in his own life; Constantin Constantius (*Repetition*) sets up an "interesting" experiment of repetition only to have his hopes dashed, while the young poet (his "nameless correspondent") achieves a repetition without too much effort. This Kierkegaardian drama is not intended to bring stasis or rest. Its primary aim, because it wants its reader to confront his personal life, is to bring the reader to a point of decision, to action, or as Spanos says above, into a careful relationship with being, a relationship possible only in time. It is only through action in time, after all, that repetition is possible (see "Against Christendom"). Kierkegaard's pseudonymous works, then, as the title of Crites's brilliant article suggests, are both "art" and "act"; they point to the existential by means of the aesthetic.

*Repetition* is cast from the point of view of Constantin Constantius. The book begins with his "report" after meeting a young poet who has fallen in love, but who does not love the girl for her own sake, only for the role she plays as his muse. The poet becomes increasingly depressed, and he seeks something to assuage his melancholy; his first efforts are unsuccessful. Constantin goes on to tell of his own humorous attempts at repetition by returning to Berlin and trying
to see that everything is the same as it had been on his last trip. This report is then followed by letters from the poet, who has abandoned his fiancée, and who begins the movement of repetition, at first deepening his melancholy, through reading the Book of Job. The nameless poet achieves a repetition when he learns of his love’s engagement to another man. And the work ends with Constantin’s addressing his reader directly with reflections on the whole affair. Although the poet attains repetition and Constantin does not, the nature of the movement remains obscure.

The book revolves around its subject without defining it directly. One of the hints we are given comes at the very beginning of the book, where Constantin compares repetition to recollection:

Say what you will, this question will play a very important role in modern philosophy, for repetition is a crucial expression for what "recollection" was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition. . . . Repetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, where as genuine repetition is recollected forward. Repetition, therefore, if it is possible, makes a person happy, whereas recollection makes him unhappy.

This distinction between recollection and repetition, although insistent and central (because of Constantin’s "constant" reference to it at the beginning of his enigmatic narrative), remains rather cryptic. The situation is partially clarified when the pseudonymous author, a psychological experimenter, tells the reader,
after he meets the poet in despair over the love affair, that his problem is one of recollection: "His mistake was incurable, and his mistake was that he stood at the end instead of at the beginning, but such a mistake is and remains a person's downfall" (*Repetition* 137).

To say that the poet stands at the end of the relationship suggests that he has cast himself forward in imagination to a time when he and his love are old and grey, sitting around the hearth, reading bedtime stories to their grandchildren. Such a casting forward negates the present (the actual living through) of the affair. It ends the matter before it has actually begun: "If anyone can join in conversation about recollection's love, [the poet] can. Recollection has the great advantage that it begins with the loss; the reason it is safe and secure is that it has nothing to lose" (*Repetition* 136). The poet, Constantin tells the reader, has cast himself clear out of his involvement with time. His recollection is not the "recollection forward" that is repetition, but rather the placing of the self at an advantaged viewpoint (outside itself) so that it might gain an overall view of the affair (its end) before it has actually begun. The poet is unhappy, to be sure, but he is secure in his unhappiness because he has taken no real chances, has made no choices in time. Thus, he has nothing to lose. It is already lost in the recollection.

Yet one has to be wary of Constantin's point of view. One of the central ironies of the book, after all, arises from the fact that while Constantin writes of
the nature of repetition, he never attains the movement himself. And whereas the poet cannot explain the "thunderstorm" that happens to him, he is granted a repetition. Part of the reason for this resides in the pseudonym itself. Since Constantin, the observer and reporter of the affair, is the "constant" one (note that constant is repeated twice in his very name), he is himself removed from the flux, the momentum of time. He has adopted, as Spanos has noted, an observer's stance, a metaphysical viewpoint, the constancy of recollection. He projects, then, his own stance upon the poet. As "reporter," he can only write about the movement, an essentially aesthetic (recollective) activity, but he is unable to make the movement himself. The poet, on the other hand, because he really does suffer (despite Constantin's preferred interpretation) and because he turns to the Book of Job (a book about a legitimate exception, as we shall see below), "step by step" and "educated by life . . . now discovers repetition" (Repetition, Supplement 304). Or, if we grant Constantin his interpretation and say that the poet really is lost in recollective despair, with everything that this situation implies, then the poet nevertheless breaks out of that recollection into the birth of repetition. In either case, Constantin remains all the more impoverished for his constancy, for his recollective posture.

Yet repetition remains nonetheless elusive. Further into the work, Constantin gives us more hints and guesses as to what he means by the term:
The dialectic of repetition is easy, for that which is repeated has been—otherwise it could not be repeated—but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new. When the Greeks said that all knowing is recollecting, they said that all existence, which is, has been; when one says that life is a repetition, one says: actuality, which has been, now comes into existence. If one does not have the category of recollection or of repetition, all life dissolves into an empty, meaningless noise. Recollection is the pagan view of life, repetition is the modern; repetition is the "interest of" metaphysics and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief. (Repetition 149)

Now if "time is the moving image of eternity" as Plato says in the Timaeus, then one's existence in time can claim little value outside of the constant effort to cast off its shackles and so enter the immutable world of forms. One's existence becomes the struggle to recollect what one already knows (but what has been forgotten) because one is himself a moving image of eternity who "has been." But this recollection demands as its terminus the stasis that is eternity, a return to originary time. It demands not that one enter with interest his own time, but rather a disinterested entry into that mythic time (illo tempore), which constitutes the origin of the cosmos.24 This is, to put it simplistically, the pagan view of a life of recollection as Constantin seems to see it, and it is the poet's stance, in the view of the pseudonym, toward his love affair at the beginning of the book. It is the "aesthetic" strategy of dealing with time, the stance that begins with loss. It is also the stance that Frank and Spanos see as emblematic of the literature and criticism
of modernism. For as Frank has shown, modernism seeks the stasis of myth, and
myth as Nathan Scott writes "is that form in which the imagination undertakes to
grasp the eternal present, the Time which is above and outside of time, the Great
Time, in which all the concrete times and seasons of life eternally return to the
same."25

Repetition is the postmodern view. It is a movement not out of time into
an eternity which has been forgotten, and thus in need of being remembered, but
rather a reduplication of the paradoxical entry of eternity into time (the infinite
into the finite). As such, its primary thrust is not backward, but forward. It is not
the stance of loss, but of gain.26 One attains himself: one becomes, by means of a
careful, forward-looking interest which makes decisions in time. It is the
"existential" strategy for dealing with human temporality. Although time is
dreadful for both the aesthete and the existential (in the sense, as Crites puts it,
that it sets forth infinite possibilities, freedom ["Pseudonymous" 205ff]), time is not
something from which to flee. It is, rather, the place where dread can beckon one
to himself. Spanos points out that for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, dread is an
objectless condition. It is the feeling of not being at home (unheimlicheit), which,
in despair and inauthenticity, Dasein seeks to objectify, that is, to convert to fear,
which has an object ("Mod Lit Crit" 87, 102). It is this uncanniness that leads
Dasein to interest, and Spanos emphasizes that term's double significance: "to be
between" and "to be a matter of concern" ("Hermeneutic Circle" 464). Repetition as the "interest of metaphysics and also the interest upon which metaphysics comes to grief" suggests, then, that the proper movement of metaphysics is not from a disinterested stance "beyond the physical," wherein time and space (the individual) hold no sway, but rather from a concern within it. "To be between," in the middest, between, for example, the finite and the infinite, is the human condition of temporality, what the self already is. 27 Without such interest, metaphysics founders because the self becomes not what it is, but, as Crites puts it, a "deficient polarization of spirit" ("Against Christendom" 68). The self flies either to the angelic infinite, which too often has been the case in metaphysics, or it sinks itself in the finite and takes up its home as a beast among beasts. In the movement of repetition, the individual becomes, then, what he already is through concerned action in time. Spanos summarizes the movement with respect to the individual in this way:

In "recollecting forward," repetition relies precisely on the interest, the intentionality of inter esse, of the unique, the existential individual as being-in-the-world, for its access into the meaning of being. It is not an objective mode, a contemplative act from without aeterno modo. It is, rather, a "subjective," a Care-ful, mode, in which the singular, or in Kierkegaard's preferred term, the exceptional interpreter (as opposed to a universal observer like Constantius himself) is guided beyond the present by the intimation of spirit (the primordial question of being) residing in his "memory." As such, repetition is both a mnemonic and an anticipatory—i.e.
a de-structive and ek-static—movement. ("Hermeneutic Circle" 465).

The "memory" that Spanos here refers to is precisely the "vague" sense of being that every individual always and already has, according to Heidegger. Repetition, then, is the movement in which this vague sense of being "stands out" from destructive chaos yet resists angelic form. It is between the pure form of recollection ("spatial form") and no form whatsoever.

The difference between repetition and recollection, finally, is a difference between an entry into the temporality of human existence or a flight from it. In the following passage, Crites provides a good summary of this fundamental difference in terms of the aesthetic and existential:

Both the aesthetic strategy and the existential movement proceed from the impasse created by our peculiarly human temporality. The aesthetic strategy, however, proceeds by negating that temporality, the existential movement by intensifying it and through passion giving it a form that is itself temporalized. . . . Aesthetic apprehension wrests ideal possibility out of the actual through recollection. Existential movement projects a chosen possibility into the real world through action. ("Pseudonymous" 214)

Crites's observation that the existential movement of repetition "gives a form that is itself temporalized" could just as well be read as "giving a temporized form."

For what repetition allows is a continual recasting of the form that the self shall inhabit, not in the sense of grasping after one possibility and then another—that
would be the aesthetic stance—but rather in the sense that the possibility that is chosen (or given) does not close off the self in a definite and mechanical replication of form, but rather opens the self to endless possibilities within that form itself. Form, then, is not imposed from above, as in the traditional metaphysical posture; it is not something which strives for stasis. Rather, it opens from below, if you will, from a stance between the finite and the infinite, which the self already is. Repetition, then, returns one to himself in such a way that a birth of the self occurs: new possibilities are projected because former ones have been disclosed and former possibilities are disclosed because the future enters with its new, indeterminate ones.

In repetition, the self becomes the clearest path to the universal. The self, the "exception" for Kierkegaard, inhabits the universal, not as a slave, but as a co-creator who becomes. Toward the end of Repetition, in a letter addressed to "My dear Reader," Constantin acknowledges the relation between the exception and the universal. The "exception" is a category Johannes de Silentio develops in Fear and Trembling, published the same day as Repetition, with regard to Abraham, who surpassed the ethical, i.e., universal, injunction against murder in his willingness to undergo trial or ordeal by making a religious sacrifice of Isaac. In Repetition, the exception is Job, who despite his friends' claims to the contrary (made on the basis of universal knowledge), is really not guilty and whose entire
story can be seen as a test by God. It is by virtue of these exceptions that repetition is possible for the story's poet, who is himself an exception (by virtue of his ordeal with his fiancée), although only a "transitional" one from the aesthetic through the ethical to the religious: "Such an exception is a poet, who constitutes the transition to the truly aristocratic exceptions, to the religious exceptions" (Repetition 228). This short recapitulation of Kierkegaard's three stages (the aesthetic/poet, the ethical/aristocratic, and the religious), which, as I have pointed out above (following Crites), can best be understood as the aesthetic and the existential, helps clarify the relation between the exception and the universal without which repetition would be impossible. For true repetition, as the poet says, is "eternity" (221)—the paradoxical dwelling of the infinite in the finite, and thus an essentially religious category. It is, as Crites observes, a reduplication of the Incarnation: "if the eternal entered time in that past event, we meet it [in repetition] as the infinite possibility of the future. In the language of recent theology, the Christ-event is the eschatological event" ("Against Christendom" 81).28

The poet does not make this fuller movement of repetition; rather, his is merely transitional. Nevertheless, it is a repetition. Through his suffering and his reading of Job, he makes the initial steps of the religious movement, in the etymological sense of religion: a re-binding, a re-connecting, a re-joining. His
time is redeemed. Because Constantin remains on the aesthetic sphere, on the other hand, he can only create a farce of repetition, his failed attempt at it through his return to Berlin. He can never be the exception because he cannot "repeat" his life. He is, however, capable of expressing the universal. The relation between the universal and the exceptional, then, a relation whose tension Constantin cannot bear, is a good expression of repetition, but also a superb statement of the act of autobiography:

The exception also thinks the universal in that he thinks himself through; he works for the universal in that he works himself through; he explains the universal in that he explains himself. Consequently, the exception explains the universal and himself, and if one really wants to study the universal, one only needs to look around for a legitimate exception; he discloses everything far more clearly than the universal itself. . . . There are exceptions. If they cannot be explained, then the universal cannot be explained, either. Generally, the difficulty is not noticed because one thinks the universal not with passion but with a comfortable superficiality. The exception, however, thinks the universal with intense passion. (Repetition 227)²⁹

Thus Johannes de Silentio says that he can understand Hegel, whose philosophical system "is supposed to be difficult to understand," yet he cannot fathom the figure of Abraham, who, according to the age, "is a small matter" (F&T32-3). Hegel treats the universal without passion, with "comfortable superficiality." But Abraham, as the exceptional, receives the universal after he had surpassed it in his willingness to sacrifice Isaac.
In *Repetition*, this passion is not only the suffering the poet experiences for the pain he causes his beloved, but also the interest with which he questions his own existence: "One sticks a finger into the ground to smell what country one is in; I stick my finger into the world—it has no smell. Where am I? What does it mean to say: the world? . . . Who tricked me into this whole thing and leaves me standing here? Who am I? How did I get into the world?" (*Repetition* 200). This concern heralds not only the radical dislocation which arrives in our postmodern world, but also the care with which the autobiographer questions his own time and place. For the two questions, "Where am I?" and "Who am I?" constitute the autobiographical dilemma, whether one takes as the prototypical autobiographical movement the story of Narcissus or the story of Anteaus, as Janet Varner Gunn suggests (although she sets up a polarity). In either case, it is the writer's reckoning with his time, with a sense of loss or deprivation, which leads him or her to transform experience into art, with the hope, as the poet notes, that repetition will occur:

I am myself again. The "self" that someone else would not pick up off the street I have once again. The split that was in my being is healed; I am unified again. The anxieties of sympathy that were sustained and nourished by my pride are no longer there to disintegrate and disrupt. Is there not, then, a repetition? Did I not get everything double? Did I not get myself again and precisely in such a way that I might have a double sense of its meaning? . . . I am born to myself. (*Repetition* 220-1)
This is the sense in which autobiographers seek to redeem the time, and this is the sense in which autobiography can be understood as repetition.30

Kierkegaard, of course, wrote much of his philosophy as a response to what he saw as the universal, speculative, Hegelian system, which is the ultimate expression of the Cartesian body/mind split. Although he had a great respect for Hegel, and although he applies the Hegelian dialectic in his own works, he applies it to the one entity that Hegel left out of his philosophy—the single individual. For Hegel’s is a philosophy of the universal, the System, and such a system can encompass everything from above (from the end) without worrying at all about the existing individual:

It is from this side . . . that objection must be made to modern philosophy; not that it has a mistaken presupposition, but that it has a comical presupposition, occasioned by its having forgotten, in a sort of world-historical absent-mindedness, what it means to be a human being. Not indeed, what it means to be a human being in general; for this is the sort of thing that one might even induce a speculative philosopher to agree to; but what it means that you and I and he are human beings, each one for himself.31

Without the single individual, for Kierkegaard, there cannot be faith, and without faith, there cannot be a single individual. Just as the existing individual cannot be subsumed by the System, by objective knowledge, neither can faith in Christianity. For Christianity is not so much a matter of knowledge—it is not a System,
although the philosophy of the age tries to make it so; rather, it is passionate
inwardness which paradoxically turns one outward. And such passion belongs
strictly to the single individual. It is Abraham, not Hegel, who is the stumbling
block.

When the poet attains repetition, then, he moves out of his recollective
(speculative) stance which separates mind and body, thought and existence,
 eternity and time, the infinite and the finite. The split is healed. He re-enters
(retrieves/repeats) what he already is. This is not to say that he is a Christian in
the full Kierkegaardian sense of Christianity; it is to say only that he has made the
first movement back to himself, a movement which demands repetition in order to
reach the threshold of faith, for Kierkegaard the highest expression of
individuality.

Similarly, to say that autobiographers repeat their existence is not to say
that they are all Christians, a ludicrous assertion. Rather, it suggests that the
autobiographical posture is the same as that of repetition. The autobiographer
does not remove himself from himself \textit{aeterno modo}. Even Augustine and
Newman, who write autobiographies of conversion, and who thus stand at the end
of their movement rather than the beginning, nevertheless embody the repetitive
posture. Augustine, incidentally, says he writes \textit{sub specie aeternitatis} (apparently
from the recollective posture) but he certainly exemplifies the repetitive nature of
autobiography in his reflections on time and memory in Books X and XI. And although Newman once stated that his doctrinal struggles ended when he entered the Roman Catholic Church, he also said "to live is to change." The autobiographer, then, since he is an existing individual at the present time of his writing, since he is still trying to fathom and redeem his time by means of writing, cannot know the end of his story. He writes from his middle state (inter esse) in an attempt to define himself, to become the single individual for himself and for his readers. He tries, that is, to retrieve himself, to give a form to himself that will not close-off the possibilities for existence, will not continue the split(s) of existence, but rather a form that will close the split only to open possibilities. That form, of course, is the book which reaches an end that repeats or retrieves a beginning—not timelessly, but in time.

3. Autobiography, the Novel, and Percy

Under the entry for Walker Percy in *The History of Southern Literature*, Lewis A. Lawson, perhaps the best of Percy’s students, writes that Percy "has not removed his name from the physicians’ register" because "he continues to diagnose and prescribe." The first book of criticism written on Percy, in fact, emphasizes his stance as diagnostician, Martin Luschei’s *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*. And a short sample of some titles Percy gives
his own essays indicates that he views both the novel's and the novelist's role as diagnostic, as an "instrument for exploration and discovery" (Signposts 219): "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?"; "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise"; "Physician as Novelist." But the novelist is not only a physician; Percy also likens him to a wounded man "who has a better view of the battle than those still shooting." Or, better still,

the novelist is less like a prophet than he is like the canary that coal miners used to take down into the shaft to test the air. When the canary gets unhappy, utters plaintive cries, and collapses, it may be time for the miners to surface and think things over. (MB 101)

Percy's concern with diagnosis and his figures of speech, of course, presuppose a radical disease. His view of himself as writer provides him a chance to "utter plaintive cries" so that his readers might begin to "think things over" and thus get a handle on the malady. The cries have to be uttered, for "it is only when one sees that something is wrong that one can diagnose it, point it out and name it, toward the end that the patient might at least have hope, and even in the end get well" (Signposts 196).

But why is there such desperation in the postmodern world? Why is there a need to "utter plaintive cries"? What is the root of this malaise? Is it a totally new phenomenon or does it have its origins in an earlier age? Why is the novelist well-suited to write about it? That is, what is it about the novel that gives it such
diagnostic potential? And how is all of this related to the question of autobiography and repetition?

As in the first section of this chapter, it may be useful to begin with a limiting of terms, especially "postmodern." For if I wish to place Percy in the company of postmodern writers and theorists, then some clear notion of the term should be available. Fortunately, Percy provides his own definition:

> To state the matter as plainly as possible, I would echo a writer like Guardini who says simply that the modern world has ended, the world, that is, of the past two or three hundred years, which we think of as having been informed by the optimism of the scientific revolution, rational humanism, and that Western cultural entity which until this century it has been more or less accurate to describe as Christendom. I am not telling you anything you don’t already know when I say that the optimism of this age began to crumble with the onset of the catastrophes of the twentieth century. If one had to set a date of the beginning of the end of the modern world, 1914 would be as good as any, because it was then that Western man, the beneficiary of precisely this scientific revolution and Christian ethic, began with great skill and energy to destroy himself. (*Signposts* 208)

Thus, the postmodern world can be understood only in relation to the modern one that preceded it, characterized by the exuberance brought on by rational humanism and the scientific revolution, the waning of Christendom.

It is entirely germane to my point that the modern period so described also witnessed the rise of both the novel and autobiography. And this was not only the age of the scientific revolution, but also of the American and French Revolutions.
I have already cited Georges Gusdorf's superb essay "Conditions and Limits of Autobiography" in relation to the question of time. Autobiography arises, it will be remembered, when the mythic structures that held the terrors of history at bay broke down. Gusdorf reiterates this point when he contends that autobiography emerged when "the traditional communal life" broke down, and "the individual qua individual became important" (30). He continues:

At the cost of a cultural revolution humanity must have emerged from the mythic framework of traditional teachings and must have entered the perilous domain of history. The man who takes the trouble to tell of himself knows that the present differs from the past and that it will not be repeated in the future. (30)

James Cox corroborates Gusdorf's comments about revolution. It is "interesting to note," Cox writes, "that its [the word's (i.e., "autobiography's")] appearance comes just after the age of revolution, when the modern self was being liberated as well as defined. At the time of the revolutions, Franklin and Rousseau were writing their memoirs and confessions, respectively." 34 This paradoxical conjunction of both liberation and definition provides an excellent recapitulation of the previous section of this chapter (autobiography as repetition), for the self is both defined and liberated in the act of writing one's life. The perilous journey through time forms the stuff of the autobiographer's story. Without a (revolutionary) awareness of time, Gusdorf and Cox suggest, autobiography
would find no place in the literary landscape. Autobiography defines and liberates, to be sure, yet the very necessity for definition, in the wake of liberation, is what I find rousing about the study of this field. The obsessive need to define oneself in the modern period points to a dislocation within the very period itself, a period, as Percy sees it, of overwhelming "optimism." If one is not dislocated, if one knows his place in the scheme of things, then there would be no need for self-definition. Yet, as Gusdorf observes, evident at the time is an "impassioned new disquiet" (33).

This period also gave birth to that other problematic literary form—the novel—and it is my contention that the so-called "rise" of the novel also points to the disquiet, the dislocation of modern man. It is not especially surprising, then, that the insights of both Gusdorf and Cox are remarkably similar to those set forth by Georg Lukács in his *The Theory of the Novel*, for autobiography, like the novel, emerged in response to particular (modern) cultural forces. Lukács' distinction between the epic and novel seems apposite here. The epic represents the endless repetitions of cyclical history, what Kierkegaard might call the recollective posture; time is not problematical because immanence and transcendence are one and the same; travel through time, ostensibly adventurous, is not really so because the traveller through eternally-recurring (mythic) time takes no true risks. The novel emerges as a response to the perilous domain of
linear, unrepeatable, time, wherein immanence and transcendence have been radically sundered ("the novel is the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God," [88]); the life of pure immanence or transcendence and the search for a blending of the two, while adventurous, also become burdensome (30, 56ff). The novel, then, as we are often reminded, likewise grapples with the question of time. For it was at the beginning of historical awareness, the beginning of the modern, revolutionary era, that the self proclaimed its independence from traditional and limited definitions only to find itself displaced and disoriented in time. And it is in this period that the self seeks a sense of stability by means of both the novel and autobiography.

Yet, like attempts at defining the novel and autobiography, attempts at defining the liberated self are protean. The novel seems as "opposed," to borrow Walter Reed's word, to a comprehensive poetics as does autobiography. And nobody yet has fashioned an objective or comprehensive definition of the self, although attempts have been made to define it as well as the novel and autobiography. When the attempts do not evolve from hubris, when they do not claim an atemporal universality, each seems to enact a repetition or retrieval that opens possibilities that have been foreclosed in the traditional understanding. Be that as it may, the point I wish to make is that questions of the novel, autobiography, and the (modern) self, because of their historical provenance, are
inextricably united, and each displays its own version of dislocation or displacement.

I have already mentioned the problems with setting limits to autobiography. The situation with the novel is much the same. Boundaries are obscure, even resisted, as the form reaches now in one direction, now in another. With the coming of the novel, we might say that literature, like the modern self, has been liberated, but in its liberation, it has (like the self) both founndered and thrived. It seeks a definition that seems always one step beyond its reach. Walter Reed cogently suggests that the novel is an "outsider" to traditional literary pursuits: "It is this sense of itself as an 'outsider' . . . that I would single out as the most basic feature of the novel as a literary kind. The novel is a deliberate stranger to literary decorum; it insists on placing itself beyond the pale of literary tradition" (3). The novel, liberated sometime during the height of renaissance humanism, cannot find itself defined within the boundaries of a poetics because it "opposes itself to the view of literature that a poetics implies. Not only does it oppose itself to types of literature more traditional than the novel. . . . A novel characteristically opposes itself to other novels" (7). When the novel makes its appearance on the literary landscape, it de-structs, as Spanos might say, the traditional understanding of literature. But, again (perhaps I cannot avoid repetition in a study of this sort), this destruction is not a negative phenomenon.
Instead, it opens new possibilities, possibilities that were foreclosed in traditional literary production. "The novel rose," Reed argues,

first in Spain and then in England, out of the attempt to create a vernacular literature addressed to the middle classes that neither submitted to the classical ordering of genres nor acknowledged the superiority of that ordering by a traditional cultivation of native and popular modes. (12)

Just as it was necessary for the "individual qua individual" to come to the fore as a condition for the possibility of autobiography, so, too, in the case of the novel. Ian Watt, for example, says that it was essential for the ordinary activities of ordinary individuals to become notable before the novel could claim attention, a point not significantly different from either Lukács' or Reed's. Furthermore, the novel addresses itself to an audience entirely different from that of traditional literature—the single, isolated individual. Reed writes:

The audience for these literary fictions is both specific and uncertain. It is not a community of listeners attending to an epic "song," or a member of an aristocratic coterie glancing over poems circulated in manuscript. . . . Rather, it is a solitary, anonymous figure, scanning a bulk of printed pages, out of a sense of nothing better to do. (25)

The novel addresses itself to Cervantes' "idle reader." And if idleness is the devil's workshop, as the Puritan adage goes, then the displacement of the self at the very time the self was being liberated could be considered one aspect of the devil's work.
Leaving for a moment the world of the eighteenth-century novel and the beginnings of the modern world, I wish to return to the twentieth-century postmodern world and the thoughts of Walker Percy. Like Kierkegaard, Percy has had much to say about the dislocation of the self in the twentieth century. And like Kierkegaard's objections to the Hegelian System, Percy utters plaintive cries about the regnant worldview of our time—modern science. Science, he says, in words remarkably similar to those of his mentor, can utter truths about almost every sector of the world; yet, "the sector of the world about which science cannot utter a single word is nothing less than this: what it is like to be an individual living in . . . the twentieth century."38 The scientist, like the Hegelian philosopher, cannot "utter a single word about an individual thing or creature insofar as it is an individual but only insofar as it resembles other individuals. . . . [Yet], the catch is that each of us is, always and inescapably, an individual" (211, 212). The difficulty of life in the twentieth century, Percy says, derives from a profound transformation of the consciousness of Western man:

The consciousness of Western man, the layman in particular, has been transformed by a curious misapprehension of the scientific method. One is tempted to use the theological term "idolatry." This misapprehension, which is not the fault of science, but rather the inevitable consequence of the victory of the scientific worldview accompanied as it is by all the dazzling credentials of scientific progress [sic]. It, the misapprehension, takes the form, I believe, of a radical and paradoxical loss of sovereignty by the layman and of a
radical impoverishment of human relations—paradoxical, I say, because it occurs in the very face of his technological mastery of the world and his richness as a consumer of the world's goods. (210)

This loss of sovereignty—this impoverishment—echoes Gusdorf's "impassioned disquiet of modern man," and it points to Percy's view of the novel as diagnostic.

Dislocation and impoverishment occur when the individual chooses to see himself not as "always and inescapably" an individual, but rather from the point of view of science, which cannot say one word about the individual qua individual: "To the degree that we allow ourselves to perceive ourselves as a type of, example of, instance of, such-and-such a class of Homo sapiens—even the most creative Homo sapiens imaginable—to this same degree do we come short of being ourselves" (212). There is a "gap," then, in the normative cultural worldview. For Percy, this gap is best filled by the novelist: "If there is such a gap in the scientific view of the world . . . and if the scientist cannot address himself to this reality . . . [then] the novelist can, and most particularly the novelist" (213). The writing of novels, therefore, takes its place along the side of science as an endeavor which is "cognitive, a kind of finding out and knowing and telling" (207). And the novelist tells of what it is like to be a displaced and dislocated individual in the twentieth century, even when, especially when, one does not feel himself to be so dislocated.
But this diagnostic role of the novel is not as new as Percy might lead one to believe. Let me return once again to the beginnings of the modern era, the era which, as Percy claims, is largely responsible for our state today, and to the origins of the novel. Might not the seeds of the malady Percy tries to diagnose reside there? It would seem logical that the beginnings of the transformation of the consciousness of Western man dwell in the time of the inception of modern science—the time of the "scientific revolution." In *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740*, Michael McKeon cites numerous examples of what might be called the "idolatrous" exuberance displayed by some proponents of the new philosophy.39 The enthusiasm went to such extremes, McKeon observes, that some thought science could offer "solid history" in the place of "romance." As an example, McKeon cites Joseph Glanville who looks forward to the Royal Society's collective and communal efforts to compose histories of nature: "the Histories of Nature we have hitherto had, have been but an heap and amassment of Truth and Falsehood, vulgar Tales and Romantick Accounts; and 'tis not in the power of particular unassociated Endeavors to afford us better" (McKeon 68). Ancient systems or endeavors "unassociated" with the new philosophy are considered fabulous "romances" while modern ones are heralded as "solid histories." Yet, McKeon points out that the very language used in extolling the endeavors of the Royal Society often mimics that of the romances the Society claims to supersede:
The enthusiasm of Glanville and Thomas Sprat leads both to speak of those "glorious Undertakers" of the new philosophy as the new, "illustrious Heroes" of the modern age, greater than those of epic and romance, "generous Vertuoso's, who dwell in an higher Region then other Mortals." This heady flirtation with the fanciful idealism of romance seems odd coming from sober empiricists; it expresses the disorienting experience of historical relativity with respect both to past dogmas and to future possibilities, which begin now to appear limitless. (69, my emphasis)

What McKeon says, it seems to me, is that science, an endeavor which at first appears limitless in its application, carries with it the seeds of its own limitation, disorientation or dislocation—*the* (post)modern predicament.

But disorientation is but one of the many instabilities which occurred during the time of the "rise" of the novel. McKeon argues that the era exemplifies two broader "instabilities" which include as a facet the one noted above—instabilities with regard to "generic categories" ("questions of truth") and "social categories" ("questions of virtue") (20). The novel emerges at this time, it gains its own limited stability, "because of its unrivaled power both to formulate, and to explain, a set of problems that are central to early modern experience" (20). McKeon goes so far as to say that the new form triumphs as "an explanatory and problem-solving mode" (21). It tries to answer questions of truth and questions of virtue, and thus provide some stability, some definition, to the liberated self.
McKeon's line of thought, then, is not very different from Percy's. The diagnostic model offered by Percy resembles the explanatory and problem-solving one set forth by McKeon. For diagnosis (to "know through") is but the attempt to explain and to solve some problem. The time of the rise of the novel is also a time, as McKeon would say, of the "categorical instability" of the self. Notions of self and place in society (questions of truth and virtue) become problematic. Dislocation ensues. Although this dislocation or instability does not attain the severity it achieves in the twentieth century, it, like the novel, displays what McKeon calls a "pregiveness." It does not "'persist' into the realm of the modern as an alien intrusion from without" (21). Rather, it is akin to what Marx calls a "'simple abstraction', a deceptively monolithic category that encloses a complex historical process" (20). Thus, the seeds of the impoverishment of the self, which Percy cites as the problem of life in the twentieth century, the problem which the modern novel may diagnose, reside within the era of the origins of the novel itself. Since, as Percy argues, the scientific method, despite (or because of) the enthusiasm of its early proponents, cannot utter a single word about an individual as such, but only about an individual as a specimen, instance or example of a general rule, the novel emerges to fill the epistemological gap, to treat the individual self as individual, lost in the wake of the scientific method. I do not, however, claim that the "early" novel treats the "existential" predicament of man as
do modern novels. Rather, because of the "pregiven" status of the novel and of the problems it addresses, the problem of self which ripens in the twentieth century exists inchoately in the eighteenth. The beginning of the modern age is also the beginning of the postmodern one. In this particular epoch, the liberated self, the outsider, finds itself in the paradoxical situation of seeking definition in the two forms that resist definition, forms which arise to treat the individual as individual rather than as a specimen of the scientific method. These forms—the novel and autobiography—are themselves outside the traditional literary enterprise.

The novel and autobiography serve similar functions, then, and to say that Percy's use of the novel is autobiographical is to say that he uses it to retrieve or repeat possibilities of the self which the normative cultural understanding (immeshed as it is in science) forecloses. It is the individual as individual which Percy tries to retrieve from the deadening effects of an "idolatrous" worship of science. His novels "de-struct" the "deficient polarizations of spirit" (Crites) which such a worship of science fosters. The self, as Percy sees it, is neither purely transcendent (the recollective posture of science and art), nor purely immanent (a consumer of the world's goods). Neither is it, as he writes in Love in the Ruins, a "mythical monster," a strange hybrid of the two in the fashion of Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Instead, the "repeated" self finds itself in the same posture as Spanos's genuine interpreter—that is, a homo viator, a wayfarer, pilgrim or
castaway whose feelings of uncanniness, not-at-homeness (unheimlicheit) compels him to look for signs of the transcendent in the realm of the immanent, and thereby to redeem his time. But in Percy’s postmodern world, the road to this redemption becomes clear, paradoxically, only in the aftermath of some sort of violence or situation of ordeal, some "de-struction" of ordinary contexts. So lost is the self to itself that it takes such a situation to wrest it from the shackles of complacency, at-homeness, and to restore it to its wayfaring state. Percy’s linguistic philosophy and a reading of his first two novels in light of that philosophy provide a more practical understanding of repetition. In the next chapter, I explore this movement as it relates to Percy’s "semiotic" understanding of the self.
Notes to Chapter One

1. This definition is taken from the 1971 edition of the *OED*.


3. Spanos borrows this term from Heidegger. See note 9 of the introduction for more on his use of the term, especially "The Indifference of *Differance*: Retrieving Heidegger's De-struction."

4. Indifference of *Differance*, 114.

5. I realize that what I say about autobiography could be just as readily applied to literature in general, since autobiography is both more and less than literature. Current debates about the revision of the literary canon and the polysemous nature of texts point to the same lack of boundaries evidenced in autobiographical texts. The study of autobiography itself displays an instance of the broadening of the literary canon, of what can be defined as "literary."

6. Citations will be noted parenthetically in the text.


8. "Spatial Form in Modern Literature," *The Sewanee Review* 53 (1945): 221-40; 432-56; 643-53. This is an essay in three parts. References to Frank's essay will be made parenthetically in the text.

10. See especially Paul A. Bové's essay "Cleanth Brooks and Modern Irony: A Kierkegaardian Critique," *boundary 24* (1972): 727-59. In his first two endnotes, Bové provides a good catalogue of critics who were becoming impatient with the New Critical positions.


Spanos uses the term "metaphysics" to his own ends. For Aristotle, the term referred only to the chronology of his writing. Thus, he dealt with metaphysics *after* he wrote about the physical universe.

Repetitions 6, hereafter to be cited in the text as Rep.

These lines are taken from "The Dry Salvages" by T.S. Eliot.

"Author and Authorship." For the distinction between the aesthetic and the existential, see "Pseudonymous" 199ff. Kierkegaard actually developed his writings around three spheres--the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Crites argues that since there is an exfoliation of dimensions within the major stages themselves, it is best to approach them under the broader headings of aesthetic and existential, the first comprising the realm of the interesting (pleasure or displeasure), the second in the realm of interest (concern, care). The quotation is also taken from "Pseudonymous," page 205.

22. Richard M. Griffith in "Repetition: Constantin (S.) Constantius," Journal of Existential Psychiatry 2 (1962): 437-48, certainly appreciates the elusiveness of the term: "If I, who use the word repetition, pause to reflect, I despair that I speak nonsense... Repetition feeds upon time which is its poison" (438). He goes on to say: "Fortunately, [Kierkegaard], like Socrates, said the same thing over and over again, but always differently. Thus, in a wider sense, what he said about repetition fills some thirty volumes" (440). And in a comment that could just as well be applied to my reservations about Spanos's "secularization" of repetition, Griffith writes this about Jean-Paul Sartre: "[Sartre] flees before faith, believing, meanwhile, that he pursues freedom. How very silly. For could one chase the shadow of the fox without at once and at the same time pursuing the fox? Faith does not fault freedom. Indeed, freedom is the shadow of faith" (448).

23. This citation is taken from the Hong and Hong edition of Fear and Trembling / Repetition (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983) 131. All future citations will be from this edition and will be noted parenthetically in the text as Repetition or as F&T, depending on the book referred to.


25. The Broken Center 46. It is interesting to note also that, besides Scott, several writers on biblical aspects of time point to an essential difference between the Greeks' understanding of time and that of ancient Israel. The Greeks, as James Muilenburg writes ("The Biblical View of Time," The Harvard Theological Review 54 [1961]: 221-52) had a tendency to reduce
time to form, to spatialize it. The Israelites, however, had no "concept" of
time; rather, it was lived: "In Israel the mystery and meaning of time is not
resolved by appeal to the cosmic world of space" (231). Other articles of
interest on the subject include Fr. Robert Johann, S.J.'s "Charity and
Time," *Cross Currents* 9 (1959): 140-9; Paul S. Minear's "Thanksgiving as a
Synthesis of the Temporal and Eternal," *Anglican Theological Review* 38
Journal of Theology* 6 (1953): 337-61. Lewis A. Lawson has written lucidly
on Percy's "biblical" anthropology with regard to time and words in time,
Novelist and Philosopher*, eds. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl Heinz-

26. See Michael Sprinker, "The End of Autobiography" *Autobiography:
Essays Theoretical and Critical*, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP,
1980), who writes: "Unlike recollection, which 'begins with the loss'
(Repetition 136), repetition is a plenitude, a recovery of what recollection
has lost by means of a transumption of the recollected object into an
atemporal order" (330).

27. Kierkegaard develops a dialectic between the infinite and the finite in *The
Sickness Unto Death*.

28. It is here, too, that I disagree with Spanos's conception of repetition. For
he would balk at any talk of Incarnation, since it is borrowed, as he might
say, from the "archival, logos-as-presence language of the institutional
church." Yet, Incarnation for Kierkegaard, as Crites points out, is not a
call to an intellectual contemplation of doctrine; its nature as absolute
paradox (of eternity entering time) cannot be grasped by the intellect.
Incarnation, like repetition, remains elusive. Like repetition, Incarnation is
the summons to decision by which the individual begins the act of self-
definition. Spanos would seem to see the term only in light of a doctrinal
assent to the dual natures of Christ, human and divine. And yet his writing
on repetition seems to me wholly in line with Crites' and Kierkegaard's
understanding of Incarnation--as a call to decision. That is why I continue
to call on his help in dealing with the term repetition.

There is a sense, too, in which repetition should not be connected with
Incarnation, since, as the title of Crites' article suggests, much of
Kierkegaard's writing was against Christendom, against the very
domesticated version of Christianity that Christendom implies. Thus, the philosophical word "repetition" would seem better suited to an age that already thinks it understands Incarnation or, better, thinks that all it has to do is understand it.

29. This relation of the universal and the exception parallels the thoughts of Barrett J. Mandel on autobiography, who argues that if the writer is genuine, the autobiographer reveals for his readers "meaning so deep as to seem lodged in metaphysical or ontological ground . . . the deepest personal meanings unknown even to the subject . . ." This is from his essay "Full of Life Now," Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. James Olney (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980) 69.

30. Gusdorf has already alluded to the "doubleness" of the autobiographical act in his article: "Some Flemish or Dutch painters of interior scenes depict a little mirror on the wall in which the painting is repeated a second time; the image in the mirror does not only duplicate the scene but adds to it as a new dimension a distancing perspective. Likewise, autobiography is not a simple recapitulation of the past; it is also the attempt and the drama of a man struggling to reassemble himself in his own likeness at a certain moment of his history" (43). I will reflect more on this "distancing perspective" in Chapter Two with regard to Percy's theory of signs and his first two novels.


35. The Theory of the Novel (Cambridge, Mass: Massachusetts Institute of Technology P, 1971). Citations will be made parenthetically in the text.


38. In the development of this section, I will depend largely on Percy's essay in *Signposts* "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," pages 204-221. This essay has appeared in various forms, both as a monograph, published in 1985 by Faust Publishing in New Orleans, and as an article in *Harpers* (June 1986): 39-45. Page numbers cited parenthetically in the text refer to the version in *Signposts*, which Percy delivered at Cornell University in 1985 at the Chekhov festival. The first quotation is from page 213. Referring to this same essay, John Edward Hardy has argued that "[Percy's] comments do not form a coherent system for critical interpretation and evaluation of any works of fiction, his own notably included." I cannot agree. In Chapter Two, I contend that Percy's writing is "all of a piece," that he works out his ideas both theoretically and novelistically. Percy's continual references to himself as pathologist and diagnostician suggest the centrality of these images for understanding his own works.

In an interview with Bradley R. Dewey, Percy makes the connection between Hegel and science clear: "One big difficulty for me in reading Kierkegaard was that I had no philosophical training at all, especially about Hegel or the German idealists. That was a great obstacle and stumbling block for years. Kierkegaard was attacking Hegel. For a long time I thought that was irrelevant. I said, well, what difference does it make whether he successfully demolished Hegel or not, until I realized that you could very successfully extrapolate his attack on Hegel against what we might call scientism. The same thing he said about the Hegelian system might be said about a purely scientific view of the world which leaves out the individual. So once I made that extrapolation from Hegel, whom I cared nothing about, to a whole, scientific, exclusive world view, it became very relevant" (Con 117).

39. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1987). References will be made parenthetically in the text.

40. Taken from the Avon edition of *LR*, page 360 The entire quotation reads: "For the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man."
Chapter Two

Repetition and *Autos.*
The Unformulability of the Self

Why, look you now, how unworthy a thing you make of me! You would play upon me, you would seem to know my stops, you would pluck out the heart of my mystery, you would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass; and there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak. (*Hamlet* III, ii)

1. A Semiotics of the Self

Percy is a difficult writer to pursue. The study of his works demands something similar to what William Scheick says about the study of Jonathan Edwards. According to Scheick, the student of Edwards requires a "keen sensitivity to two and a half centuries of commentary as well as an informed awareness of at least the five disciplines—theology, philosophy, history, American studies, and literary criticism—which have generated that commentary."¹ Percy’s works have generated criticism for only about three decades, yet he requires the same "keen sensitivity" to a broad spectrum of disciplines as does Edwards. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp have edited a book on Percy entitled *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher.*² But the designating terms could be
more numerous: Walker Percy, not only novelist and philosopher, but also psychiatrist, pathologist, linguist, essayist, naturalist, critic, theologian, historian, semiotician, southerner, golfer, bird-watcher, and bourbon-drinker.

It is not without reason that Lewis Lawson calls his book *Following Percy.* The critic finds himself in the uncomfortable position of always trying to "catch-up" with Percy but never quite, as Percy himself used to say, "getting aholt" of him. His reading and interests seem to have known no bounds, not in the sense that he had "read everything" (although one is at times tempted to think so), but in the sense that they are all of a piece. He sunders traditional boundaries set up in professional circles and, from a posture somewhere between professional and amateur, challenges disciplines to open themselves to new possibilities. He "de-structs," that is to say, the closure imposed by "specialization" in "fields of study" with the hope of retrieving possibilities that have been foreclosed or overlooked by such conventional methodologies. To rephrase an example discussed in the last section of Chapter One, Percy retrieves one of the novel's earliest functions, yet repeats that function in such a way as to open new possibilities for the novel taken generically.

While the case seems fairly evident that Percy views the novel from a posture of repetition, his study of semiotics offers more fruitful territory for discussing the centrality of that category in his works. In "The Delta Factor," the
introductory essay to *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy reflects on the origins of the book itself:

> It is the meager fruit of twenty years’ off-and-on thinking about the subject, of coming at it from one direction, followed by failure and depression and giving up, followed by making up novels to raise my spirits, followed by a new try from a different direction or from an old direction but at a different level, followed by failure, followed by making up another novel, and so on. (MB 10)

Written in the early 1970s, this comment both catalogues and foreshadows Percy’s continuing interest in semiotics. In 1983, with the publication of *Lost in the Cosmos*, after completing *Lancelot* and *The Second Coming*, Percy returned to what he once referred to as his "extra-literary pursuit," semiotics. And his final letter to Shelby Foote indicates that after the publication of *The Thanatos Syndrome* in 1987, Percy had once again returned to his favorite avocation. After some sobering reflections on his terminal illness and his "search for a cure," Percy writes: "Like I say, it’s too damn much trouble, this running around looking for a cure. I’m content to sit here and try to finish *Contra Gentiles*, a somewhat smart-ass collection of occasional pieces, including one which should interest you—‘Three New Signs, All More Important than and Different from the 59,018 Signs of Charles Sanders Peirce’—you want a copy?"6

Percy’s interest in semiotics, then, spans the thirty-six years of his writing career. The cycle—study of language, novel, back to language study—while not
entirely consistent, nevertheless points to a "methodology of repetition." What Percy tries to do time and again in his writings on semiotics is to "sketch the beginnings of a theory of man" for an age that has no such consensus theory (MB 10). He agrees with Alexander Pope that "the proper study of man is man" (MB 10), but he focuses his attention on that unique characteristic of human beings, their ability to utter words and sentences and have them understood or misunderstood by another person. Thus, he subtitles The Message in the Bottle, "How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other."

Percy is not interested so much in the formal aspects of language. Neither is he concerned primarily with the mechanics of linguistic transactions. Rather, he struggles to understand sign-users by means of their sign-using activity: "the book is not about language but about the creatures who use it and what happens when they do" (MB 11). In itself, this step is a retrieval of a possibility that the tradition has not explored. As Percy sees it, the two broad traditions that have grappled with a theory of language—the behavioral and the formal—miss the phenomenon itself: "American behaviorists kept solid hold on the world of things and creatures, yet couldn't fit the symbol into it. German idealists kept the word as internal form, logos, and let the world get away" (MB 33).
These traditions, as venerable as they are, can nevertheless be viewed as "deficient polarizations" of the phenomenon. On the one hand, behaviorists place man as an organism in an environment. Like other animals, we have needs that can be fulfilled by the manipulation of our surroundings—hence, the proliferation of countless items and techniques manufactured to help us "adjust." Homeostasis is the goal. Yet this same tradition cannot account for the very behaviorists who write down theories and submit articles with the expectation that they will be read and understood. The stimulus-response model, no matter how complicated, cannot account for the meaning that exchanges between a reader and a writer, an utterer and an interpretant, even if what is written or uttered is misunderstood or misinterpreted. According to Percy, then, the behaviorist remains outside of his own theory.

The formalists or idealists, on the other hand, place man within the confines of his own mind, within the cell of himself, radically disconnected from both the world and others, unable to enter the "ordinary lovely world." While this tradition offers sound theories regarding the building-blocks of language, such an abstracted posture nevertheless ends in solipsism. The self is stranded within itself, cut off from the very meanings its mind generates.

Percy's methodology of repetition seeks a third way, not through an Hegelian, world-historical synthesis of opposites, which, of course, falls into the
latter polarization, but from an observation of the phenomenon itself: "Instead of marking [man] down at the outset as besouled creature or responding organism, why not look at him as he appears, not even as Homo sapiens, because attributing sapience already begs the question, but as Homo loquens, man the talker, or Homo symbolificus, man the symbol-monger?" (MB 17) Percy's interest in semiotics turns to the symbol-user himself—a retrieval of a possibility that has been overlooked in the tradition.

In Lost in the Cosmos, Percy again comes at the issue "from a different level." The "warning-challenge-announcement-introduction" to the intermezzo section suggests the retrieval Percy is about to undertake:

[This section] will irritate many professional semioticists by not being technical enough—and for focusing on one dimension of semiotics which semioticists, for whatever reason, are not accustomed to regard as a proper subject of inquiry, i.e., not texts and other coded sign utterances but the self which produces texts or hears sign utterances. (LC'85)\(^7\)

The intermezzo can also be seen as Percy's synthesis of his thirty years' interest in the field, a synopsis of the essays collected in The Message in the Bottle. As such, it is his clearest statement of his approach to semiotics—i.e., a semiotics of the self, hence the title, "A Semiotic Primer of the Self." His own comments point to the centrality it has with respect to his work as a whole: "Despite its offhand tone, [the 'Primer' is] as serious as can be. I have never (sic) and will never do anything
thing as important. If I am remembered for anything a hundred years from now, it will probably be for that" (Con 285).

Not all critics share Percy's enthusiasm. In *The Fiction of Walker Percy*, John Edward Hardy, for one, writes that he "cannot agree" with Percy's own assessment of the piece: "I imagine that Percy would have had difficulty in finding a publisher even for an essay collection like *The Message in the Bottle*, not to speak of *Lost in the Cosmos*, if he had not established a reputation as a novelist. . . . His greater talent is for fiction." Hardy's point rings true. Yet, it may apply more readily to *Lost in the Cosmos* than to *The Message in the Bottle*. While there may have been no cause for a collection of such essays (in *Message*) had Percy not been a fiction-writer, it is important to remember that these essays gained placement in respectable scholarly journals on their own strengths. Thus, they were recognized as having something important to add to the study of language and the language-user regardless of Percy's fiction-writing. Percy's own enthusiasm for "A Semiotic Primer of the Self" reflects, I think, his awareness of the synthesis he had wrought, of his having brought together his many-years' thoughts on the subject concisely, coherently, and humorously. Although I am in no position to forecast Percy's reception one hundred years from now, I am more inclined than Hardy to accept his own excitement about this work.
The subtitle of the "Primer," while jocular in tone, further points to its character of synthesis: "A Short History of the Cosmos with Emphasis on the Nature and Origin of the Self, plus a Semiotic Model for Computing Impoverishment in the Midst of Plenty, or Why it is Possible to Feel Bad in a Good Environment and Good in a Bad Environment" (LC'86). Percy reintroduces concerns that have been with him from his earliest days of publishing, but comes at the subject here in terms of a "History of the Cosmos." And the latter part of the title not only echoes the long set of questions that begin "The Delta Factor," but also suggests one of Percy's central themes. Why do his characters feel so bad when they have the best of possible surroundings? Percy's attempt to work out this problem "semiotically" suggests that his fiction and nonfiction are also of a piece. While both can stand autonomously, they are nevertheless complementary.10

In the "Primer," Percy retrieves from the tradition of linguistic study the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Just as Heidegger turned to the meditations of Descartes as he struggled to renew the question of being, so Percy turns to Peirce for help with his semiotics. Of course, Percy uses Peirce throughout his writings on language, not only at the time of writing Lost in the Cosmos. He was aware all along that he was building his own thoughts on Peirce's shoulders. On February 3, 1971, he wrote to Foote about his language philosophy: "I would even say that
it is revolutionary: that one hundred years from now it could well be known as the
Peirce-Percy theory of meaning (not Pierce but Peirce and so pronounced Perce-
Percy)" (SHC). Peirce’s presence, however, seems to be stronger in *Cosmos*
because the "Primer" begins with Peirce’s distinction between dyadic and triadic
interactions.11

For Percy, the Cosmos has manifested a predominance of dyadic events.

His history, then, begins with an explanation of what they are:

> From the beginning and for most of the fifteen billion years
> of the life of the Cosmos, there was only one kind of event.
> It was particles hitting particles, chemical reactions, energy
> exchanges, gravity attractions between masses, field forces,
> and so on. As different as such events are, they can be
> understood as an interaction between two or more entities:
> A*B. Even a system as inconceivably vast as the Cosmos
> itself can be understood as such an interaction. (*LC*86-7)

With the appearance of organic life "some three and a half billion years ago" (*LC*
89), interactions both within a single organism and between two or more
organisms could still be understood dyadically. Organisms inhabit an
environment, to which they respond in order to maintain an inner balance,
homeostasis. An organism’s response to its environment and to other organisms
can be understood as a signal response, that is to say, dyadic. Since signals
announce their objects, such signal responses might include the response to flee,
the call to mate, or, as in the case of ants and bees, directions toward food. No
matter how complex, and no matter how many variables involved, such interactions can still be expressed by the formula $A \cdot B$.

Triadic behavior, on the other hand, did not enter the Cosmos until very recently, "perhaps less than 100,000 years ago, perhaps more." It is an event "different in kind from all preceding events in the Cosmos. It cannot be understood as a dyadic interaction or a complexus of dyadic interactions. . . . It is that event in which sign $A$ is understood by organism $B$, not as a signal to flee or approach, but as 'meaning' or referring to another perceived segment of the environment" (LC'95-6).

Percy views Helen Keller's experience at the well-house with Miss Sullivan as the paradigmatic triadic episode. Before the well-house event, Keller responded to Miss Sullivan's words (spelled in her hand) as signals. But when Miss Sullivan put one of Keller's hands underneath the water flowing out of the well and in her other hand spelled out w-a-t-e-r, Keller was quite literally born into the world of triadic behavior. She realized that the word was somehow connected to the thing, that it "meant" the cool liquid flowing over her hand. The connection between the word spelled, the actual thing, and Helen Keller herself form the angles of an irreducible triangle—hence, triadic behavior, or what Percy calls the "Delta Factor," the Greek letter itself ($\Delta$) a symbol for irreducibility. For Percy, the three relations—between Keller and the word, Keller and the actual water, and
the word and the thing—cannot be explained dyadically. This event marks Keller’s crossing over the threshold of sign-use. No longer do Miss Sullivan’s words announce something to Keller; no longer are they signals. Instead, she has entered the realm of the triad—of meaning. Although she is still an organism in an environment with needs to be fulfilled, Percy emphasizes that her new found sign-use places her also in a world.

This idea of placement in a world is central to an understanding of Percy’s semiotics of self, and I will return to it shortly. For now, however, I wish to address Percy’s use of "sign." I have already noted that Percy follows Saussure in his later writings and uses signal and sign (as opposed to sign and symbol in his earlier writings) for the difference between announcement and conception. Yet when he begins to discuss triadic behavior and sign-use on page ninety-six of the "Primer," he seems to put Saussure’s distinction between signifiant (signifier) and signifié (signified) to his own use. For Percy the former is the word itself and the latter is the referent or thing. But this is not Saussure’s meaning of the terms. It is not until page 103 that Percy acknowledges Saussure’s use of the two terms: "The sign, as Saussure said, is a union of signifier (the sound-image of a word) and signified (the concept of an object, action, quality)." Then he adds in a footnote that the signifié is neither a percept nor a concept, but something in between, a "'concrete concept’ or an ‘abstract percept,’ or what Gerard Manley Hopkins
called *inscape.*" For Percy, then, the conjunction of the signifier and the signified, in its paradigmatic form (primordial form), places an object, action, or quality somewhere between the concrete and the abstract: "What comes to mind when I hear *apple,* what in fact the word articulates within itself, is neither an individual apple [percept] nor a definition of *apple* [concept], but a quality of appleness . . ."

Despite his somewhat equivocal use of Saussure, Percy places his thought precisely where he wants it to be. The sign itself exemplifies a state of being between (*inter esse*). From Percy’s own standpoint between the behaviorists (for whom everything exists in the realm of the concrete), and the idealists or formalists (for whom the abstract holds priority), the sign exhibits its own *inter esse.* Thus, sign-use, in its primordial form, enacts a repetition for sign-users. It places them in a relation of interest—in the double sense of "being between" and "concerned."

The paradigmatic sign-using event is itself a repetition.¹⁴

Every act of naming, the "Primer" continues, involves both a namer and a receiver of the name. The irreducible triad really involves two triangles—one for the sign-utterer and one for the sign-receiver: "Every triad of sign-reception requires another triad of sign-utterance. Whether the sign is a word, a painting, or a symphony—or Robinson Crusoe writing a journal to himself—a sign transaction requires a sign-utterer and a sign-receiver" (*LC*97). Miss Sullivan is not merely an ancillary participant in Helen Keller’s breakthrough to triadicity.
For Percy, she relates as an intersubjective "co-celebrant" to the being that primordial sign-use names. A child learning to name things from his parents stands in the same repetitive posture as Helen Keller. Sign-use is social in origin.\(^15\)

As a result of this social nature, Percy offers a fresh view of consciousness. In its etymological sense, conscious means "to know with." For Percy, this "knowing with" carries a double reference—to the sign with which we "know" a thing, and to the other (the namer) with whom we know it. Thus, the Cartesian or Husserlian formula for consciousness—"I am conscious of this chair"—and the Sartrean revision of it—"There is consciousness of this chair"—can be further revised as "This 'is' a chair for you and me" (See \textit{MB} 275-6). For Percy, sign-use constitutes consciousness. Since

\[
\text{one is always conscious of something as something—its sign—[then] it is part of the act of consciousness to place [that something] . . . . The signing process tends to configure segments of the Cosmos under the auspices of a sign, often mistakenly. (LC106)}\(^16\)
\]

A particular interplay of light and shade may "look" like a rabbit, but upon closer inspection it may turn out to be only the shadow of a bush. Furthermore, entities denoted by such names as "unicorn" and "the boogerman" may find a place in the world of the triadic sign-user even though they have no corresponding physical existence. The sign-user inhabits and designates a world.
But the Edenic, paradigmatic sign-using event of Helen Keller at the well-house or of a child learning to name harbors a two-pronged snake in the grass.

On the one hand, the signifier is "interpenetrated" by the signified to the degree that a devaluation occurs. No longer does the signifier reveal the signified, but rather it seals it off. There takes place "a hardening and a closure of the signifier, so that in the end the signified becomes encased in a simulacrum like a mummy in a mummy case" (ZCT05). On the other hand, while the act of consciousness places things in the world by means of signs, there is no sign that can encompass the sign-user himself:

The fateful flaw of human semiotics is this: that of all the objects in the entire Cosmos which the sign-user can apprehend through the conjoining of signifier and signified (word uttered and thing beheld), there is one which forever escapes his comprehension—and that is the sign-user himself. Semiotically, the self is literally unspeakable to itself. . . . The self has no sign of itself. No signifier applies. All signifiers apply equally. (LC107)17

The self, then, cannot be placed in the act of consciousness even though it is conscious of itself. From the aspect of semiotics, then, the self is dislocated. Without a consensus theory of the kind that informed Europe in the twelfth century or New England in the sixteenth, the self literally has no place in the Cosmos. It is unformulable, "lost in the cosmos," forever seeking its place.
It may be useful to take this unformulability of the self as an analogue of the "dread that has no object" discussed in Chapter One. The transformation of dread into fear (the objectification of dread) bears a striking resemblance to the self seeking placement in the world. Placement is the key, but when the traditional modes of placement—Totemism, Eastern Pantheism, and Judeo-Christianity—are declared inadmissible by the postmodern world, the self is left with only two options—immanence or transcendence. In such a world, the self seeks to quell the dread of nonplacement by objectifying itself. It seeks a sign. In our post-religious and post-mythic age, the self seeks its sign either by taking its place as an immanent consumer of the goods that a scientific and technological culture provides for it—i.e., allowing goods and techniques to give it form—or by adopting the objective posture of science itself—i.e., transcending the world so as to make pronouncements about it.

Art offers another means of transcendence. The difference, however, between the transcendence of science and that of art is that whereas the scientist speaks to a relatively small transcendent community of scientists, the artist speaks "to the world of men who understand him" (LC119). The artist names the unnameable and forms the unformulable. For an age in which the self finds no sign for itself, the artist provides the service of at least naming this predicament:
If Kafka's *Metamorphosis* is presently a more accurate account of the self than Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, it is the more exhilarating for being so. The naming of the predicament of the self by art is its reversal. Hence the salvific effect of art. Through art, the predicament of self becomes not only speakable but laughable. . . . Kafka and his friends laughed when he read his stories to them. *(LC121)*

But the transcendence that art provides is more ephemeral than that of science.

The artist's placement is more tenuous.

Scientists can remain "in orbit" as long as their community of fellow Olympians accepts their dicta. They have relatively few problems leaving that community momentarily and "reentering" the world. The artist participates in community at the time of creating his art, yet he suffers "spectacular reentries and flameouts" when he finishes his work and tries to reenter the ordinary world. These attempts at reentry bear witness to "nothing other than a pathology of the self in the twentieth century" *(LC121)*, one of Percy's ultimate concerns as a writer.

It seems that I have raised what could be seen as a discrepancy in Percy's thought. Is he a closet modernist hiding in the garb of a postmodernist? His comments about art providing an avenue of transcendence and about its salvific effect sound similar to the views of that high modernist James Joyce, whose Stephen Dedalus reveled in "epiphanic moments of transcendence" and who liked to speak of salvation by art. Is Percy inconsistent?
If art is a sign that names the unnameable for its age, and if a sign is, as we have seen, somewhere between the abstraction and generality of a concept and the concreteness and individuality of a percept, then art cannot wholly exemplify the type of transcendence Stephen Dedalus speaks of. Abstraction and generality belong to the category of transcendence, since what they propose is definition or classification. Concreteness and individuality, on the other hand, fall into the category of immanence. If art provides a sign for the self in an age wherein the self has no sign, then the sign itself must partake of both immanence and transcendence, thus enacting the repetition outlined in Chapter One.

Furthermore, if a poet can "wrench signifier out of context and exhibit it in all its queerness" (LC106), thus forestalling the interpenetration of the signifier by the signified, then art as a sign should resist this same interpenetration and so withstand the closure into form that Percy might seem to be espousing here by what could be taken as his tacit modernism, a Joycean, "transcendental" view.

In other words, if the self is unformulable, then the naming of this unformulability in a work of art, because the naming is itself a sign, cannot close the gap between the signifier and the signified. It is the nature of the sign to "devolve," for the signifier and the signified to interpenetrate. Yet it is the nature of art to counteract this interpenetration, to once again establish a distance between the two elements of the sign. As a sign itself, art endeavors to restore the
sign to its rightful posture. The sign that art provides subverts the devolution of the sign by restoring what Samuel Pickering might call "the right distance" between the signifier and the signified. In this space of the naming act itself, the self finds its transcendence, not as a Joycean abandonment of immanence, nor as a conflation of immanence and transcendence, but somewhere between the two—inter esse. For Percy, art enacts its "reversal" in the space of the naming act itself. The unformulable self can be restored to its posture of interest in the act of naming this same unformulability. Distance and difference are the keys.

In one of his interviews, Percy discusses this very issue of a gap or distance. Referring, once again, to the Helen Keller episode, he says:

But the two couldn't be more different; I mean the symbol water couldn't be more different—whether spoken or spelled into her hand—than the liquid flowing over her other hand. So you can hear her saying it, but there has to be a space, separation, or difference between the symbol and the thing in order for the thing to be grasped. (Con 227)

And in this same interview, when asked whether he agreed with Dedalus's salvific view of art and language, Percy responded:

No, unfortunately I'm much more pessimistic; I would see Kierkegaard as a good corrective of that. I could imagine Kierkegaard seeing—had he lived after Joyce—seeing Joyce as what he would call a hero of the aesthetic, seeing salvation through art and language. What is that great phrase that Stephen Dedalus uses in one place: "forge in the smithy of my soul the uncreated conscience of my race." Kierkegaard would say that's the aesthetic sphere. (Con 231)
There really is no discrepancy in Percy's thought. What might appear as a relapse into modernist thinking finds its place in postmodernism.²¹ Like Kierkegaard, Percy tries to point to the existential by means of the aesthetic. Thus, his novels do not provide a Joycean "moment of transcendence" as he seems to suggest toward the end of the "Primer." The form or the name that Percy offers to the unformulable self cannot place a self that is fundamentally dislocated.

Percy's comments in the interview and his repeated references to the unformulability of the self in both the "Primer" and in essays from *The Message in the Bottle* suggest that the gap between the signifier and the signified must remain so that the self will not flee the dread of its unformulability and objectify itself.

The only name that can place the self in this age—*Homo viator*—places it paradoxically "nowhere," between the transcendence of art and science and the immanence of consumerism. From this interesting place, the signless *autos* retrieves possibilities in the hope of beginning again in the openness of repetition, in the space of the sign itself. It is no accident that *Lost in the Cosmos* ends with the words: "Do you read me? Come back. Repeat. Come back. Come back. Come back." (256).
2. The Openness of the Sign: Binx Bolling

This section and the one which follows provide some needed grounding for what has been handled up to this point on a highly abstract and analytical level. Two dimensions of the relation between repetition and the unformulability of the self—the openness of the sign and placement in consciousness—lend themselves especially well to a reading of Percy's first two novels: *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*.

By now, Binx Bolling must be as familiar to readers of American Literature as Quentin Compson. While this bemused, ironical, and detached son of the 1950's South tells his story in a subdued, laconic fashion, he nevertheless embodies, like the younger Compson scion, the spirit of his age. If Quentin bears witness to the decline of the rural, aristocratic, and stoic South, then Binx gives shape to the "malaise" that has struck the suburban, homogenized, consumer South. If Quentin succumbs to his disorientation, Binx explores his. Percy once told an interviewer that he viewed Binx as a "Quentin Compson who didn't commit suicide" (*Con* 300). Thus, as Quentin wallows in his "love of death," Binx examines the death-in-life of a new age. And as the river closes over Quentin's head, Binx looks for signs of a new possibility.
Yet, like his creator, Binx eludes any facile designation. At once urbane, charming, and calculating, he senses that something has gone wrong. Even that knowledge, however, does little to inhibit his various stage impersonations. Time and again, he tries to objectify his unformulable self. Sometimes, he takes the role of a consumer: "I subscribe to *Consumer Reports* and as a consequence I own a first-class television set, an all but silent air conditioner and a very long lasting deodorant. My armpits never stink." At other times, he plays a scientist:

> Until recently, I read only "fundamental" books, that is, key books on key subjects, such as *War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, a solution to the problem of time; Schrödinger's *What is Life?*, Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*, and such. During those years, I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it. (59-60)

When he plays neither consumer nor scientist, Binx invokes or emulates the stars of the silver screen: "Ah, William Holden, we already need you again. Already the fabric is wearing thin without you" (14).

Yet Binx knows that such objectification of his dread cannot satisfy his "search." His ironic tone subverts the closure he would provide himself in such play-acting and opens him to his own despair. Even the titles of the books he reads, set in the context of his scientific, "vertical" search, undercut the possibility he seeks. How could time be problematical, for example, if one has read a "solution to the problem of time"? For readers, Binx presents an exfoliation of
quandaries. How can they grip someone who has no grip on himself? How can they trust a narrator who ironizes the keen eye with which he sizes up his world? How can they follow, in short, a lost narrator? 

John Edward Hardy has argued that *The Moviegoer* suffers as a work of fiction because "the reader is very often left to labor over gaps that he cannot be confident the author has recognized as such." Patrick Samway, S.J. suggests, on the other hand, in a structural analysis comparing the novel to a segment that appeared as a short-story, "Carnival in Gentilly," that "the gaps . . . become pauses between elements of the code, the moments of silence that make music possible." Samway further suggests that because *The Moviegoer* and "Carnival in Gentilly" share a "palimpsest" relation, the novel is "about semiotics, about encoding and decoding signs." 

Samway offers a sound corrective to Hardy's frustration about "gaps," and there can be no doubt that *The Moviegoer* reflects Percy's interest in semiotics. Yet I find it equally valuable to look at Percy's first novel in light of his concern with the study of semiotics, "not texts and other coded sign utterances but the self which produces texts or hears sign utterances" (*LC* 85). A first-person narrative, *The Moviegoer* is ostensibly "produced" by Binx Bolling. In the Epilogue, Binx makes the only reference to his production of the text when he says "Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time
as any to make an end." (208). It may prove useful, then, to take a semiotic look at the narrator himself.

I have already mentioned Binx's efforts to find a sign for himself by means of immanence and transcendence. I have also suggested that he ironizes his own attempts at such objectification. As a distancing tool, irony duplicates the space within the sign itself. Since irony creates a space between the ironist and the ironized, its expression by means of signs parallels the distance between the signifier and the signified at the very level of the sign. The "gaps" in the text, then, have a twofold origin. They arise as a result of the nature of the sign and as a consequence of Binx's ironic posture. When Binx speaks of his life as a perfect consumer, for example, the ironic tone with which he speaks distances himself from the closure that such a life implies—i.e., from the belief that the self can be informed by consumer items. Because his irony includes self-irony, he cannot close the gap between signifier and signified that such a sign for the self would offer. By means of irony, then, he paradoxically reinstates the unformulability of the self. What appears as a potential sign for the self is subverted by the narrative tone. Binx is left signless.

As ironist, Binx is especially adept at sizing up others. It is as though he cannot avoid seeing the despair of objectifying the self, the despair of
everydayness. Eddie Lovell, for instance, represents what Binx would be were he not an ironist, for Eddie exists solely in the realm of the immanent:

Yes! Look at him. As he talks, he slaps a folded newspaper against his pants leg and his eye watches me and at the same time sweeps the terrain behind me, taking note of the slightest movement. A green truck turns down Bourbon Street; the eye sizes it up, flags it down, demands credentials, waves it on. A businessman turns in at the Maison Blanche Building; the eye knows him, even knows what he is up to. And all the while he talks very well. His lips move muscually, molding words into pleasing shapes, marshalling arguments, and during the slight pauses are held poised, attractively everted in a Charles Boyer pout—while a little web of saliva gathers in a corner like the clear oil of a good machine. Now he jingles the coins deep in his pocket. No mystery here!—he is as cogent as a bird dog quartering a field. He understands everything out there and everything out there is something to be understood.

According to Binx, Eddie exists as an organism in an environment. At once a "machine" and a "bird dog," he lives in the realm of signals. One thing announces another. In his posture of complete immanence, he has annulled the possibility of transcendence or distance. Eddie would have no difficulty describing himself, yet what he would not realize is that his description would more than likely be a signal. He would announce himself—as businessman, as husband, as planner—and thereby close any gap regarding his self-identity.

Yet it is Binx's posture that is interesting here. If Eddie observes and "sizes up" the terrain, Binx observes the observer. And if Eddie annuls the possibility of
distance, Binx exists at an infinite remove. Eddie may be sunk in the immanent, but Binx is totally withdrawn from it. Neither displays the dialectic tension of the self. Rather, each has settled for a "deficient polarization"—one as consumer, the other as scientist. Without Binx's posture of detachment, of course, the book would not exist. There has to be distance. The question remains, though, how much distance?

The temptation to flee the unformulable self is great, and while Binx is aware of such evasions in Aunt Emily (a Catonist), Uncle Jules (a "canny creole"), Walter Wade (a social climber), Sam Yerger (a stoic novelist), and Mercer (an old retainer turned Rosicrucian), he nevertheless cultivates his own evasions. In admitting his own flight from self, he continually throws into question his designations of others. He cannot damn them in moral iniquity because his predicament is similar to, or worse than, theirs. In fact, as Binx encounters each character, he is drawn to their own resolution of the predicament. While speaking with Eddie Lovell, he says "This is how one lives! My exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception" (14). And when he visits with Aunt Emily he acknowledges that "this is where I belong after all" (21). He is drawn to the very despair he names.

Binx avoids himself, to be sure, but his evasions are more self-consciously created. Borrowing terms from Kierkegaard's "Diapsalmata" in Either/Or, he
practices what by now are familiar terms to students of Percy: rotations and repetitions. Binx defines rotation as "the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new" (126). In rotation the unformulable self finds temporary relief from the dread of its unformulability by losing itself (closing itself) in the unexpected experience of the new. Rotation is an aesthetic category.29

Repetition, on the other hand, is both an aesthetic and an existential category. Binx's rather clumsy definition reads:

A repetition is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle. (68-9)

Even though Binx succeeds where Constantin Constantius fails—Binx says he has "a successful repetition" (68)—he is nonetheless impoverished. Since Binx tries to "neutralize" time, to make it "like a yard of smooth peanut brittle" (69), his definition finds its place in the constancy of Kierkegaard's aesthetic sphere. In aesthetic repetition, the unformulable self avoids the issue of its unformulability by viewing experience in closed, timeless "packages," as segments of lapsed time that can be savored of themselves, determinately formulated so as to provide the illusion that the self is also formulable. Such a repetition seeks to calm the "terrors of history" by neutralizing them. It is, in effect, the recollective posture.
But early manuscripts of *The Moviegoer* suggest that Percy had in mind existential repetition as well. A nearly illegible autograph note on the twenty-sixth of fifty-seven pages of initial notes and outlines reads: "That [the?] repetition is more than just a savoring of something. It also makes the present possible" (SHC).\textsuperscript{30} Aesthetic repetition cannot make the present possible because it seeks the Grand Moment of myth (*in illo tempore*)—the romantic IT. It seeks another time. It is not insignificant that one short-story version of "Confessions of a Moviegoer" was subtitled "From the Diary of the Last Romantic." Binx is the last romantic because he has experienced the futility of seeking IT, some pre-packaged experience of time. Binx recalls, for example, the melancholy he sank into after travelling with friends:

> It seemed like a fine idea, sleeping in shelters or under the stars in the cool evergreens, and later hopping freights. In fact, this was what I was sure I wanted to do. But in no time at all I became depressed. The times we did have fun, like sitting around a fire or having a time with some girls, I had the feeling they were saying to me: "How about this Binx? This is really it, isn’t it, boy?", that they were practically looking up from their girls to say this. (34)

In "Confessions of a Moviegoer" itself, the moviegoer has more confidence in the IT. After coming out of a movie he reflects:

> This moment, the moment of the movies, the moment in which I live, is the Significant Moment. Where we [himself and actors] differ from other people is that they live in the moment as if it were like every other moment in their lives, a
routine affair as if things and people were not any more worthy of noticing now than at any other time. The truth is that now everything is highly charged with meaning; everything is a Presence or a Power—that ordinary Brownstone there, that man on the subway: if the significance is not clear immediately, it soon will be. At any moment now, IT will begin. (SHC)

The romantic lives, not in the unformulable present, but in the expectation of the formulated IT. He sets before himself a pre-packaged experience forever beyond his reach, yet one whose attainment, he believes, would cancel the dread of his unformulable self. Living in the expectation that such an experience will set him free, he awaits the day when fate will deliver it to him.31

Binx, of course, is onto the futility of the romantic. In the final version of the novel, he eschews the romantic quest, because, among other things, it "killed" his father.32 And on the bus trip back from Chicago to New Orleans, when he and Kate encounter a young man reading The Charterhouse of Parma, he directly states the romantic's dilemma: "The poor fellow. He has just begun to suffer from it, this miserable trick the romantic plays upon himself: of setting just beyond his reach the very thing he prizes" (189). The depression Binx experiences at times when he should feel the exhilaration of IT offers a clue to his search for new possibilities. Despite his self-consciously cultivated evasions, then, Binx holds out for something more, namely, existential repetition. One especially sly indication of this attitude occurs, once again, when Binx turns his irony upon himself.33
He recalls his freshman year of college when "it was extremely important to me to join a good fraternity." In an attempt to convince Binx that he should join the Deltas, the somewhat grandiose Walter Wade takes him aside, and, although he says he will not "hand [Binx] the usual crap about this fraternity business," he does anyway: "When it comes to describing the fellows here, the caliber of the men, the bond between us, the meaning of this little symbol—he turned back his lapel to show the [fraternity] pin . . ." Then he dangles the IT in front of Binx:

I'll ask you a single question and then we'll go down. Did you or did you not feel a unique something when you walked into this house? I won't attempt to describe it. If you felt it, you already know exactly what I mean. If you didn't—!" Now Walter stands over me, holding his hat over his heart. "Did you feel it, Binx?" (30-1)

Caught up in the romanticism of Walter's rhetoric, Binx cannot avoid joining.

Yet, the rapture of his romantic capitulation ends in irony:

As it turns out, I did not make them a good man at all. I managed to go to college four years without acquiring a single honor. When the annual came out, there was nothing under my picture but the letters ΔΨΔ—which was appropriate since I had spent the four years propped on the front porch of the fraternity house, bemused and dreaming, watching the sun shine through the Spanish moss, lost in the mystery of finding myself alive at such a time and place—and next to ΔΨΔ my character summary: "Quiet but a sly sense of humor." (31)

In this passage Percy endows Binx with his own "quiet, sly sense of humor."

For, despite the banality of the situation and the ironic tone, what is at issue here
is precisely "the meaning of this little symbol"—$\Delta \Psi \Delta$. The delta's, of course, depict
Percy's symbol for the irreducible triad of the sign. And psi provides the initial
letter for "psyche," from which we derive our word for self or soul. Binx's own
identity, then, is connected to the "meaning of this little symbol," the only entry
underneath his picture. Although Binx did not make a good fraternity man, he
nevertheless embodies the truth about the self for Percy: While the self ($\Psi$) cannot
be encompassed by a sign ($\Delta$), it nevertheless finds itself immured in sign use ($\Delta \Psi \Delta$)
and so must look to the delta to understand itself. Binx manifests a repetitive
posture as he watches "the sun shine through the Spanish moss, lost in the mystery
of finding [himself] alive at such a time and place." It is important, first, that Binx
"finds himself," and second that he finds himself "alive" and not "dead dead dead,"
as he so often finds others. The subtle self-irony provides the sign that opens the
"mystery of time and place." Binx inhabits this time and place, and he finds the
"right distance" to reveal himself—"lost"—in it. He finds himself, not in the Great
Moment of myth, but in the ordinary everyday, which is quite different from the
everydayness that precludes the possibility of a search. Thus, Binx is between
(inter esse) the single sign ($\Delta$) that can never formulate him and the sign use ($\Delta \Psi \Delta$)
without which he can know nothing at all and which provides the best avenue,
according to Percy, to know oneself. Binx's ironic naming and the distance that it
creates parallels the gap between the elements of the sign itself, a gap that has to be
there "in order for the thing to be grasped" (*Con* 227). While the romantic loses himself in the closure of his pre-packaged experience, Binx finds himself in the openness of the sign.

It is Binx's subtle signification and irony in the narrative itself that prevents the interpenetration of the signifier by the signified and which leaves him open to new possibilities. Although he slips out of the "right distance" from time to time in his ironic posture, he nevertheless manages what Paul A. Bové and Ronald Schleifer, following Kierkegaard, have called "mastered irony." Unlike his father, who displays an "unmastered" irony and whose eyes "beyond a doubt . . . are ironical" (21) in the picture on Aunt Emily's mantelpiece, Binx manages the distance of his ironic posture. He stands between the fatal romantic irony of his father and the banal seriousness of Walter Wade. He maintains his repetitive posture, which is itself another word for "mastered irony."

But even so subtle an expression of existential repetition nevertheless polarizes into the aesthetic in a work of art, as Percy says it must. It devolves into something to savor, the merely interesting, as opposed to the interest that comprises repetition. What such subtlety demands, however, is a decision on the part of the reader. Although Percy says he "would like to think that [Binx] is an embodiment of a certain pathology of the twentieth century . . . it's an open question." The reader must decide whether Binx is himself "a nut" or whether he
expresses an "authentic mood of the time" (Con 302). Like Kierkegaard, Percy points to the existential by means of the aesthetic. Such an attempt is bound to provide an ambiguous sign. Just as it is impossible to determine whether the "ambiguous sienna color[ed] Negro" has received ashes on Ash Wednesday, the last day of the novel’s action (before the epilogue), so too it is impossible to close the gap in the sign that is the novel. In the openness of this sign, Percy allows for the possibility of repetition.

3. The Dislocated Self: Language, Place, and Will Barrett

To say that Percy’s characters are dislocated offers nothing new to the body of scholarship surrounding his works. And to portray Will Barrett as an example of this dislocation is not to say that Percy’s other characters do not suffer the same fate. Binx Bolling, Tom More, and Lancelot Lamar can all be seen as exiles in almost every dimension of their existence. Yet, Will Barrett of The Last Gentleman is the only character whose story begins and ends outside of the south. Although Percy balked at the label "Southern Writer"—"is John Cheever a ‘Northern Writer?’"—he nevertheless acknowledged that his novels, especially The Moviegoer, would not work without the backdrop of the south’s rich tradition:

Without the southern backdrop—Mississippi, Louisiana (New Orleans)—the novel doesn’t work—it doesn’t work at
Try to imagine Binx Bolling in Butte, Montana. There has to be a contrast between this very saturated culture in the south, on one hand, whether it's French, Creole, uptown New Orleans, or Protestant. It's a very dense society or culture which you need for Binx to collide with. (Con 301)

For Percy to remove a character from this fertile ground, then, suggests a degree of dislocation unequal to that of the other characters. In one of his early interviews, Percy admits that Barrett is "a good deal sicker" than Binx, but, as with Binx, "the reader is free to see him as a sick man among healthy businessmen or as a sane pilgrim in a mad world" (Con 13). Not only is Barrett "sicker," his story—both in *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*—is the only one written from the third-person point of view, an indication, perhaps, that Percy needs to distance himself from this addled young man in order to get the story straight. To further emphasize his dislocation, Percy withholds his name from the reader for the first ten pages of the novel. When he does give his name, he presents the reader with a multiple choice: "[his] name was Williston Bibb Barrett or Will Barrett or Billy Barrett" (21). And to complicate matters even more, the narrator most often refers to Barrett, not by his name, but as "the engineer."

John Edward Hardy has argued convincingly that the novel's opening, with its emphasis on place, is "clearly ironic." Not only is Will a "displaced" southerner living in New York, but the scene at Central Park, ostensibly constructed to provide a definite location for the action, nevertheless devolves into "no place . . .
an anywhere and nowhere."\textsuperscript{38} This reading gains credibility when we learn some pages later that a spot in the southeast quadrant of the park has been marked as "ground zero," the center of a "series of concentric circles" (44), on a map depicting the explosion of a nerve gas bomb. Barrett, then, is thrice removed from place, and he seeks a sign that will locate him in the world: "Often nowadays people do not know what to do and so live out their lives as if they were waiting for some sign or other. This young man was such a person" (13). With his telescope of "an unusual design" (11), this nameless, displaced southerner awaits a sign at ground zero of "no place."\textsuperscript{39}

The telescope is outfitted with a camera so that Barrett might photograph a peregrine falcon he had seen the day before. It does not return, so Barrett begins to dismantle the telescope. Yet "being of both a scientific and a superstitious turn of mind and therefore always on the lookout for chance happenings which lead to great discoveries, he had to have a last look" (12). What he finds proves to be the chance event he has been waiting for, the sign "as a consequence [of which] the rest of his life was to be changed" (11), readers are told on the first page of the novel.

The event that changes Barrett's life is also, of course, the incident that sets the novel in motion. The passage merits close inspection: "There in the telescope sat a woman, on a park bench, a white woman dark as a gypsy. She held a tabloid. Over her shoulder he read: '... parley fails'" (12). The woman turns out
to be Rita Vaught, and we learn that she leaves messages at the park bench for Kitty Vaught, the second woman Barrett sees through his telescope and with whom he falls in love.

Since it is the instrument through which Barrett sees his life-changing sign, the telescope itself merits analysis. We know very little about it at this point of the novel, only that it was of "unusual design" and that it could be fitted with a camera. This latter feature is noteworthy because it doubles its capacity for observation. The telescope narrows and amplifies the field of vision while the camera stabilizes and freezes it into a single image. We learn later that when Barrett purchased the telescope, he had looked upon it as something that would, like the sign it reveals, change him: "his life depended on it." The telescope also suits Barrett's scientific/magical temperament: "[its] lenses did not transmit light merely. They penetrated into the heart of things" (31). The instrument both reflects and creates the world in its "brilliant theater of lenses" (12). In so doing, it recovers things. When Barrett turns his instrument toward a building, for example,

it was better than having the bricks there before him. They gained in value. Every grain and crack and excrescence became available. Beyond a doubt, he said to himself, this proves that bricks, as well as other things, are not as accessible as they used to be. Special measures were needed to recover them. The telescope recovered them. (32)
The telescope is Barrett's instrument for recovering and discovering the world.

Through its lenses, Barrett knows the world.

The character and power of this "unusual" instrument—it is itself the agent in many of the passages that describe it—suggest that it can be read as an analogue or a metaphor for the novel itself. Like the subtle expression of Percy's linguistic philosophy in Binx's ΔΨΔ, the description of the telescope suggests Percy's views about the diagnostic function of the novel. The telescope, after all, is a scientific instrument, and, as I tried to show in Chapter One, Percy uses the novel "scientifically."

Like the telescope, the novel magnifies a section of the world; it wrests it from its usual context so that it might be seen afresh and named. The novel strives to recover the world. Later in the story, when Barrett is on the road with Jamie, Kitty's sixteen-year-old brother who is dying, he observes a man on a "fifty-foot Chris-Craft beat up the windy Intercoastal." He calls Jamie over to see what he sees in the telescope:

"Look how he pops his jaw and crosses his legs with the crease of his britches pulled out of the way."

"Yes," said Jamie, registering and savoring what the engineer registered and savored. Yes, you and I know something the man in the Chris-Craft will never know. (130-1, Percy's emphasis)
Jamie and Will meet in what they see through the telescope in the same fashion as reader and writer meet in the reading of a novel. We know more about Will Barrett than Will knows about himself. The novel establishes an intersubjective community between reader and writer in its very naming. And since a name is also a sign, the novel also resists closure or stasis.

It is significant, then, that Barrett's ostensible use for the telescope, to photograph the peregrine falcon, fails. Made versatile by the addition of the camera, the telescope promises not only to magnify the falcon but also to stabilize it, to close it within the rigid boundaries of a photograph. That Barrett does not capture the falcon on film both foreshadows his coming peregrinations and points to the limits of the novel itself. Like the falcon, Barrett is himself a sign of instability. Just as the falcon has "abandoned its natural home in the northern wilderness and taken up residence on top of the hotel," so Barrett has left the south and taken up residence in the New York City YMCA. Neither remains, however. The "peregrine did not return to his perch" (12), and Barrett soon begins his travels, which end in the "no-place" of the desert. Just as the telescope sees—but cannot place—the falcon, so the novel names—but does not place—Barrett. Both are wanderers, pilgrims without a home, displaced. The names they are given place them "nowhere."
But if the ostensible purpose for Barrett's using his telescope fails, the manifest purpose does not. The telescope, again like the novel, serves its voyeuristic function well. It observes without being observed. It amplifies unobtrusively. At one point, Barrett declares his appreciation of English detective stories, "especially the sort which . . . depict the hero as perfectly disguised or perfectly hidden. . . . Englishmen like to see without being seen." The telescope is the novelist's tool *par excellence*. If neither the novel nor the telescope can place their respective pilgrims from their concealed viewpoints, then both can at least help to name this same predicament. What the telescope does observe, and what the novel ultimately points to as well, is precisely what Barrett sees when he takes his one last look: "... parley fails."

This rich, polyvalent fragment would deserve little consideration were it not in a novel by Percy, and at the all-important beginning. Parley derives from the French *parler* and the ecclesiastical Latin *parabolare*, both meaning "to speak." *Parabolare*, in turn, derives from the Latin *parabola*, a speech, from which we get the word parable. In English, parley can be used either as a verb, "to have a conference or discussion," or as a noun, "a talk or conference for the purpose of discussing a specific matter." Percy is especially sly in his use of the term, for the fragment remains so open that it encompasses both the etymological and the usage definitions.
Since the word appears as a part of a tabloid headline, it apparently refers to a meeting or conference. The time of the novel is never precisely set. There is a mention of John Kennedy's death, and one scene refers indirectly to the riots that occurred at the University of Mississippi after desegregation. So the time would appear to be the early 1960's. The fragment, then, could refer to any number of failed parleys that undoubtedly took place during that era: about the mounting Cold War, about the riots themselves, about the escalation of the United States' involvement in the Vietnam conflict, anything.

Given Percy's interest in the language phenomenon, however, a more fruitful reading arises from evidence inside the novel itself and from his comments in the "Primer" about the devolution of the sign and placement. What we learn as The Last Gentleman progresses is that Will Barrett finds himself in the midst of a number of failed parleys, in every sense of the word. Will's thwarted relationship with Kitty, their aborted attempts at love-making (a connotative meaning of parley), Will's relation to Dr. Gamow (his psychoanalyst), the relationship between Kitty and Rita Vaught (Kitty's overseer and general "helper" who displays ambiguous sexual intentions), between Rita and Sutter Vaught (Rita's ex-husband, a failed doctor turned pornographer), between Will and Sutter, between Sutter and Val Vaught (a nun who works with the rural Tyree people), between Will and his father, and even the picaresque adventures of Will with Forney Aiken
and company, with the ladies on the highway, and with the black bar-owner and
the white policemen in his hometown—all suggest the centrality of his tabloid
fragment. These relationships display the failure of speaking. Words are
bankrupt. The one notable exception to this general collapse is the relationship
between Jamie and Will, whose co-celebration of what is develops in light of their
complementarity: "Jamie read books of great abstractness . . . . The engineer, on
the other hand, read books of great particularity" (130).

Meanwhile, this breakdown of words has to do with the devolution of the
sign. When the signified becomes entombed by the signifier and when the
repetitive posture of primordial sign-use is lost, intersubjectivity in consciousness
also wanes. In other words, when speaking fails, love fails. The problem is not
that the characters do not try to speak. On the contrary, words flow freely
between them. It is the peculiar posture from which they speak that concerns
Percy. Since he explores the conditions that accompany the end of the modern
world, he also examines the causes and effects of the breakdown of language. In
the words of the epigram:

. . . We know now that the modern world is coming to an end
. . . at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs
of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values
and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies . . .
Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from
the face of the public world, but the more precious will be
that love which flows from one lonely person to another. . .
The world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean. 44

The posture that creates the condition for the failure of words, love, and faith evolves from an imbalance of immanence and transcendence. For Percy, the postmodern world bears witness to transcendence or immanence taken separately, or it evinces some strange hybrid of the two, but it has lost any sense of organic unity between them. With such a radical disjunction, Percy suggests, it is inevitable that parleys often fail.

Rita, for example, illustrates one facet of this extensive bankruptcy. Since she blends immanence and transcendence from a transcendent posture, she embodies an Hegelian, scientific-humanist attitude. Her "mode of reentry" consists of a general beneficence which masks an essential isolation. Kitty is onto her—"I knew exactly how to make her like me!" (96)—although she remains awed by her:

Rita is a remarkable person . . . . She showed me something I never dreamed existed. Two things. First, the way she devoted herself to the Indians. I never saw anything like it. They adored her. I saw one child’s father try to kneel and kiss her foot. Then she showed me how a thing can be beautiful. She kept Shakespeare’s sonnets by her bed. And she actually read them. Listen to this, she would say, and she would read it. And I could hear it the way she heard it! Bare ruin’d choirs, where late the sweet birds sang. Poetry: who’d have thought it? We went for walks. I listened to her but then (is this bad?) I began to see how much she was enjoying teaching me. (96)
Percy seems to have endowed Rita with a part of his adoptive father's character. Although she does not portray the stoical melancholia of William Alexander Percy—this facet of his character is given to Will's father, as I will discuss below—it is significant that Kitty's description of her parallels Percy's own comments about "Uncle Will." In the introduction to *Lanterns on the Levee*, Percy tells of the way Will Percy used to read to him or play music for him. He began, he says, to see things the way his teacher saw them: "The teacher points and says *Look*; the response is *Yes, I see*." He also calls Will Percy "the most extraordinary man I have ever known" (xviii).

Like Will Percy's beneficence toward the blacks in the Delta, Rita's work with the Indians is indeed generous. It evolves from the stoic's attitude of *noblesse oblige*, something which Walker addresses in "Stoicism in the South." The stoic's attitude, Percy argues, essentially isolates him. His "generosity" masks the sentiment that doing others "an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which [is] oneself." One cares for others not because they are individuals but because not caring for them would wound "the wintry kingdom self." The stoic's end is a solipsism which seeks to protect the self from the vicissitudes of history. Rita's name for the camper in which Jamie and Will travel—"Ulysses"—and her comment on that name point to her transcendent posture: "He was meant to travel beyond the borders of the Western world and
bring us home" (82). As for Will Percy, so for Rita: intersubjectivity fails, and the world slips away.48

Sutter exemplifies a different permutation of the insolvency of words. As a physician, he participates in the transcendent scientific community. He has even published a paper, an act which confirms his initiation into that sovereign society.49 The title of the essay points to his own predicament with placement on the immanent-transcendent continuum: *The Incidence of Post-orgasmic Suicide in Male University Graduate Students*. The paper itself is divided into two sections with subtitles: "Genital Sexuality as the Sole Surviving Communication Channel between Transcending-Immanent Subjects," and "The Failure of Coitus as a Mode of Reentry into the Sphere of Immanence from the Sphere of Transcendence" (See *LG* 58).

Sutter has recognized the radical bifurcation that has occurred in the wake of the failure of words, and he exists as its most poignant exemplar. Percy argues in *Lost in the Cosmos* that a corollary of such a collapse is the ascendence of sex in various forms. When signs devolve, when the transcendence that sign-use provides falters, the only avenues to transcendence become sex and violence. It is notable that almost every failed parley cited above (pp. 109-10) involves a correlate to sex. The exceptions, the scene at the hometown bar and Will’s relationship with his father, which ends in his father’s suicide, find their correlate in violence. Yet, an
element of sex, too, exists in the story of Mr. Barrett's suicide. On the night of his death, he denounces the fact that his "class" had become "the fornicators and bribers" (258) they once opposed, and he leaves Will confused on the business of lady and whore (144). In The Second Coming, Percy unites sex and violence more trenchantly in Barrett's reflections on his father's suicide, indicating perhaps a confirmation of his own theories and a breakthrough to understanding his own father's death.50

Sutter becomes a pornographer because he is trapped in the transcendence of his science. He seeks reentry to the immanent realm by means of what he sees as the purely immanent, sex. Thus, he manifests a strange hybrid of the immanent-transcendent dialectic, an angelism-bestialism that Percy will develop more fully in Love in the Ruins. Yet, Sutter desairs in his Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde existence. When this mode of reentry fails him, he considers violence. He contemplates suicide.

It is useful to point out again that Percy explores the postmodern predicament with regard to place. The Last Gentleman evolves not so much as a jeremiad, although its tone in parts can be seen as cantankerous, but as a search for possibilities. For Percy, a pilgrim finds his end only at the end of his life. That some characters reach a dead end suggests either that they have quit their search for new prospects or that the logical conclusion of the postures they embrace bears
witness to death-in-life. Alienation and homelessness are natural states, not psychological disorders. Although an adept satirist, Percy does not condemn characters who try to find a home, not even Lancelot Lamar. Rather, as Louis Rubin has argued, he writes of them from the standpoint of having been there himself:

Walker's [fiction] is not Jansenist; it is not written from a position of theological privilege located far above the struggle, judging the poor deluded sinners and consigning them to the fire . . . . [He] includes himself among the sinful.51

The posture that remains most open to possibility is that of the pilgrim, one who is at home in homelessness, such as the addled wayfarer of *The Last Gentleman*.

Will Barrett not only drifts into one failed parley after another, but finds himself, quite literally, in the middle of them. Perhaps the first indication of this middle state manifests itself with Dr. Gamow's "ambiguous chair":

[Dr. Gamow] learned a great deal about a patient from the way he sat in the chair. Some would walk in and sit straight up, swivel around to face the doctor across the desk like a client consulting a lawyer. Others would stretch out and swivel away to face the corner in conventional analytic style. It was characteristic of the engineer that he sat in the ambiguous chair ambiguously: leaving it just as it was, neither up nor down, neither quite facing Dr. Gamow nor facing away. (32)

Neither new-style client (à la Carl Rogers) nor old-style analysand, Barrett resists formulation. That he abruptly terminates his analysis suggests the limits of the
psychoanalytic process, about which Percy has written cogently elsewhere.\textsuperscript{52}

Although he tells himself that he will "engineer the future of [his] life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge [he has] so arduously gained from five years of analysis" (39), the narrator's very tone betrays him. The "scientific principles" of analysis cannot fathom this pilgrim's alienation.

But the "ambiguous chair" is only one of many examples of Will's "being between." After he declares his love for Kitty and wins the affection of Jamie, he steps between almost all of the established relationships in the Vaught family. Rita considers him a rival to the attentions of Kitty and so devises a plan that would allow him to travel with Jamie. Unknown to Will, Rita’s interests focus on separating the new lovers. But Pappy (Mr. Vaught) has already proposed a plan to Will, and so Will finds himself between both Kitty and Rita and between the wishes of Pappy and Rita. Sutter, who wants to take Jamie to die in the desert of Santa Fe and who represents something of a father-figure to Will, has no use either for serving as Will’s guide or for his sister’s (Val’s) desire to see Jamie baptized. Val, however, has charged Barrett with that very task. Will, then, is placed between Sutter’s nihilism and Val’s faith.

Will is also caught between the present and his past. Because he is subject to amnesia, fugues, and \textit{déjà vus}, he is disoriented in time. He often forgets, but when he does remember, he recalls "the remote past first" (51), often unwittingly.
Time and again, he experiences unannounced intrusions of the past into his present consciousness. In a way, Will serves as his own analyst. He doesn’t necessarily "engineer" his life, but he endeavors to be what Dr. Gamow tried to be to him: "it was easy to believe that . . . he served his patients best as artificer and shaper, receiving the raw stuff of their misery and handing it back in a public and acceptable form" (35). The reference to Wallace Steven’s idea of shaping and making complements an earlier reference to Freud:

A German physician once remarked that in the lives of people who suffer emotional illness he had noticed the presence of Lücken or gaps. As he studied the history of a particular patient he found whole sections missing, like a book with blank pages. (18)

Although Freud was Austrian, the allusion seems fairly clear. The psychiatrist fills in the gaps, gives shape to the "raw material" that is a person’s life, as Freud did in his case histories. The psychiatrist, in other words, fashions the story (the parabola) of the patient. He writes the patient’s life.

The danger of such a role—a reason this parley may fail—resides in the fact that a patient may lose sovereignty over that same story. While analysis ostensibly proposes a recovery of patients’ lost sovereignty, the process may result in their further alienation. When the psychiatrist insists too strongly on filling in blank pages, on fashioning a well-made story, the story may serve the wishes of the analyst himself rather than the needs of the patient. In the case of Dora, for
example, Freud seems less concerned with Dora as an individual than with Dora as an instance of his own theories. He masters her story.\textsuperscript{54}

Commentators on Percy's fiction often note the pleasure he takes in turning Freud upside down. Percy himself once admitted that this was one of his narrative strategies.\textsuperscript{55} That Percy writes the story of a character with severe gaps in his memory suggests his attempt to endow Barrett with his own sovereignty. As his experience with the "ambiguous chair" implies, Barrett is not made to fit any theory which places the ideal before the actual. For Percy, such theories are bankrupt: they lead only to romanticism and despair. Percy struggles against the bankruptcy of words by telling a story whose words point to their own inadequacy—Barrett himself is a romantic—yet which nevertheless provide the only means by which to know anything at all. That Will Barrett quits analysis even though he still suffers from gaps points to his inchoate sense of the perils of the analytic process.

At the same time, however, Will recognizes the necessity of fashioning a story, and he looks to those who his "radar" tells him know better than he. Sutter is such a person. Frustrated that Sutter won't play analyst for him, Will reflects: "Damnation, if I am such an old story to him, why doesn't he tell me how the story comes out?" (178) Sutter, however, recognizes that any attempt to satisfy this ubiquitous, although impossible, desire would serve only to alienate Barrett
further. In his casebook, he carries on a dialogue with Val, whom he imagines speaking to Will:

   Look, Barrett, your trouble is due not to a disorder of your organism but to the human condition, that you do well to be afraid and you do well to forget everything which does not pertain to your salvation. That is to say, your amnesia is not a symptom. So you say: Here is the piece of news you have been waiting for, and you tell him. What does Barrett do? He attends in that eager flattering way of his and at the end of it he might even say yes! But he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better. (276)

Sutter leaves Will to his Lücken, and Barrett is left to piece together the story of himself as he shuttles between the past and present.

   One of the main gaps in Barrett's story, of course, concerns his father's death. Fragments of the incident recur throughout the course of the narrative. But once Sutter takes Jamie to Santa Fe, leaving Barrett to travel through the South on his own, he is all the more haunted by déjà vus and intrusions of his past. When he arrives at his hometown, Ithaca, Mississippi, and when he finds himself before his childhood home, the place of his father's death, the story demands form more insistently. Although his father has won a victory over the "bribers and fornicators," all is not well. The boy and his father stroll outside in the night as they listen to Brahms:
As he turned to leave, the youth called out to him. "Wait."

"What?"

"Don’t leave."

"I’m just going to the corner."

But there was a dread about this night, the night of victory. (Victory is the saddest thing of all, said the father.) The mellowness of Brahms had gone overripe, the victorious serenity of the Great Horn Theme was false, oh fake fake. Underneath all was unwell. (259)

The elder Barrett ultimately states his philosophy of life: "In the last analysis you are alone" (259). Although Will repeats his plea several times—Wait. Don’t leave!—his father nevertheless kills himself. But the story has finally taken shape in his memory.

Some years later, as he stands at the place of this horrible memory, past and present merge such that the future seems possible to him. His hand strays to an old ironhorse hitching post around which an oak tree has grown. As he reflects, Will briefly adopts a repetitive posture:

*Wait.* While his fingers explored the juncture of iron and bark, his eyes narrowed as if he caught a glimmer of light on the cold iron skull. *Wait.* I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place. It wasn’t his fault because that was the way he was and the way the times were, and there was no other place a man could look. It was the worst of times, a time of fake beauty and fake victory. *Wait.* He had missed it! It was not in the
Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness and not in the old sad poetry but—he wrung out his ear—but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark that—he shook his head—that— (260)

Louis D. Rubin, Jr., has written beautifully on the significance of this superb passage. What Will realizes as his hand explores the "juncture of iron and bark" is that "his father's ideal of aristocratic virtue, however nobly motivated, was actually a romantic escape from the compromised actuality of human life in time." That Brahms is playing in the background only reinforces the elder Barrett's isolation. For the music sets up a romantic ideal of perfection which in its "massive harmonics pronounce[s] an ultimate resolution superior to merely human difficulties and leaving no further occasion for striving or disruption" (Rubin 211). The music, Rubin argues, sets up an ideal of perfection which parallels the supposed ethical perfection of the Southern aristocrat. The victory over the "rabble" and the music's own victory are fake because each points to a static perfection that annuls a "vital relationship with ongoing experience"—change in time (Rubin 213). The era of the Southern aristocrat has waned, if there ever was one; and, although Rubin does not make the connection, to try to hold on to such standards reinforces what Kierkegaard calls the despair to will to be oneself in despair.
In a passage that closely parallels the plight of Mr. Barrett, Kierkegaard writes:

In despair the self wants to enjoy the total satisfaction of making itself into itself, of developing itself, of being itself; it wants to have the honor of this poetic, masterly construction, the way it has understood itself. And yet, in the final analysis, what it understands by itself is a riddle; in the very moment when it seems that the self is closest to having the building completed, it can arbitrarily dissolve the whole thing into nothing. (69-70)

Mr. Barrett, of course, dissolves the edifice at the moment of both his and the music’s victory.

His son, however, is still building his edifice, not a "poetic, masterly construction," not a "well-made story" which has no gaps. Rather, from his being between (inter esse) past and present, between the failed parleys of the Vaught family and, finally, between Father Boomer and Jamie at the story's conclusion, Barrett holds out, however unwittingly, for the possibility that "nowhere" might provide. That Barrett ultimately "misses," as Percy says, the significance both of Jamie’s baptism and of his experience in front of his father’s house does not devalue the signs themselves. For in the telescope that is the novel, the reader sees and knows something that Barrett himself does not. This parley does not fail.
Notes to Chapter Two


6. Percy's letters and manuscripts are available at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, hereafter to be cited in the text as SHC. This letter is dated Saturday, July 29, 1989. Percy died less than a year later, on May 10, 1990.

Foote could never understand Percy's interest in linguistic philosophy. He wrote a letter to Percy on July 10, 1953 (from which the following quotation is taken), not long before Percy was to publish his first philosophical essay, "Symbol as Need": "I of course know nothing of Symbolic Forms. Go your way. But it seems to me that any philosophy that tries to co-relate [sic] (if that means unify in any sense) Art, Religion, Language, etc is bound to wind up an unholy mess--most especially if psychiatry is included, which doesn't match with anything but logic and even perverts that sophistically to its uses." Foote's papers are also held in the Southern Historical Collection, but, unfortunately for students of
Percy, Foote did not save as many letters from Percy as Percy saved from Foote.

7. The entire page, up to the point I cite, reads: "The following section, an intermezzo of some forty pages, can be skipped without fatal consequences. It is not technical but it is theoretical--i.e., it attempts an elementary semiotical grounding of self taken for granted in these pages. As such, it will be unsatisfactory to many readers. It will irritate many lay readers by appearing to be too technical--what does he care about semiotics?" (LC85)

In an interview with Jo Gulledge in 1984, "The Reentry Option: An Interview with Walker Percy" (Con 284-308), Percy says he was "curious to know how [the intermezzo section] worked, especially that brief page that says you don't have to read this. Some tell me they took it as a dare and therefore said, 'I'm going to read it.' Most of them did, at least the ones I talked to. Some of them were put off and put the book down. Some of them skipped it, but I think most of them read it" (294).

At this point it also becomes necessary to regularize my use of terms. In his earlier writings Percy followed Susanne Langer's and Peirce's distinction between sign and symbol: "Signs announce their objects. Thunder announces rain. The bell announces food to Pavlov's dog. When I say James to a dog, he looks for James; when I say James to you, you say, "What about him?"--you think about James. A symbol is the vehicle for the conception of an object and as such is a distinctively human product" (MB293). Peirce used "sign" to denote the dyadic behavior of organisms and "symbol" to denote the triadic behavior of humans (see LC88, note). In his later writings, however, Percy adopted Saussure's use of "signal" to denote that which announces its object, and "sign" to denote the vehicle for the conception of an object. I will follow Percy's later usage from here on.

8. Hardy 19.

9. It is noteworthy, furthermore, that the manuscript material surrounding Lost in the Cosmos begins with material that eventually finds its way into this intermezzo section, suggesting, as does its final placement in the published edition, its centrality. See the Percy Papers at the SHC.

10. This blending of the two dimensions of Percy's work is not new. Almost every writer who has grappled with Percy's fiction has had recourse to his
nonfiction. Hardy is a notable exception, although he himself refers to Percy's linguistic pieces from time to time. Such a blending lends itself well to what Patrick Samway, S.J. has called the "palimpsest" quality of Percy's works, especially as it develops in the relation between "Carnival in Gentilly" and The Moviegoer. Samway's essay is forthcoming in Shenandoah and Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle.


13. Percy's penchant for drawing diagrams, somewhat stifled in The Message in the Bottle, is given free rein in Lost in the Cosmos, especially in this intermezzo. Perhaps Percy was thinking about what he wrote in "The Delta Factor" some ten years or so before: "I used to have a professor in medical school who, when a student gave a particularly murky answer, would hand him a piece of chalk, escort him to the blackboard, and say, 'Draw me a picture of it!'" (MB 14). Although I do not find Percy's prose in this section particularly murky, the "pictures" are both humorous and helpful. I will resist including them here in the hope that my summary comments are adequate.

14. Helen Keller's description of the well-house episode is worth recounting in its entirety, as Percy does in "The Delta Factor" (35), for even her diction points to the repetition that she has experienced:

"We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word water; first slowly then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That
living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. [She had earlier destroyed the doll in a fit of temper.] I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow.

I learned a great many new words that day. I do not remember what they all were; but I do know that mother, father, sister, teacher were among them—words that were to make the world blossom for me, "like Aaron's rod with flowers." It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come."

15. This aspect of Percy's semiotics opens his entire oeuvre to a discussion in light of "intersubjectivity," which Mary Deems Howland carries out in The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels, (Pittsburgh: Duquesne UP, 1990). It should be clear by now that neither repetition nor intersubjectivity holds priority in Percy's works. Rather, they are complementary categories.

16. In "The Un-naming of the Beasts: The Postmodernity of Sartre's La Nausée," Chapter 2 of Repetitions (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1987), William Spanos argues that Roquentin's paradigmatic experience of consciousness in the park sets the world adrift in all its viscosity. Unlike the placing that takes place in the act of consciousness for Percy, Sartre, Spanos rightly claims, sets the world radically loose. Percy himself says that one of the central scenes in The Last Gentleman, which will be explored later in this chapter, "was written as a kind of counterstatement" to Sartre's novel (Signposts 221).

17. Again, this is not a new insight for Percy. He expresses it several times in The Message in the Bottle: "What is [postmodern man] then? He has not the faintest idea. Entered as he is into a new age, he is like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything, knows everything except
himself" (9). Or again: "It is the requirement of consciousness that everything be something and willy-nilly everything is something—*with one tremendous exception!* The one thing in the world which by its very nature is not susceptible of a stable symbolic transformation is myself? I, who symbolize the world in order to know it, am destined to remain forever unknown to myself" (283).


19. Foote often tried to get Percy excited about Dickens, but Percy preferred the naming capacity of the postmodern novel: "It's something to do with the nature of the times that I'm more at home with a Robbe-Grillet novel about one disoriented man getting off a ferry boat onto an island he can't quite remember than with this great Dickensian parade of people [*Bleak House*]" (SHC).


26. Forthcoming in *Shenandoah* and *Les Cahiers de la Nouvelle*.


28. Richard Gray makes a comment similar to this in his *Writing the South: Ideas of an American Region* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986) 257.


30. Percy makes the distinction between aesthetic and existential repetition in "The Man on the Train" (*MB* 83-100). He also mentions "Kierkegaard's distinction that true religious repetition has nothing to do with travel but is 'consciousness raised to the second power'" (96). My essay is concerned with the latter two types, of course.

31. In Jo Gulledge's interview, Percy elaborates on what he means by the romantic: "Most people cannot conceive planning or initiating a course of action which would truly be an exercise of freedom. Although maybe they ought to. Most people are thinking of or are waiting for something magical to happen" (*Con* 306).

32. For more on Percy and Romanticism, see Lewis Lawson, "English Romanticism . . . and 1930 Science in *The Moviegoer*," *Following Percy* 83-

33. All quotations cited here are taken from pages 30-1 in the text.


36. Percy made this comment in a taped interview with Rebecca Presson ("New Letters on the Air": University of Missouri at Kansas City, November 1989).


38. *The Fiction of Walker Percy,* 59. In "Will Barrett Under the Telescope," *The Southern Literary Journal* 20 (1988): 16-41, Lewis Lawson shows brilliantly that "the very centralness of the place argues that it is the navel of the world, the image of Paradise" (22), which does not entirely discount Hardy's view. For if Will is subject to "scientific romanticism" as Lawson displays, then Paradise would be no place on Earth.

40. As in T. S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets*, the play on "nowhere"/"now-here" is intended. To be "now-here" is precisely the autobiographical and repetitive stance. See Chapter One.

41. Many critics and reviewers have remarked on the subtle beauty of Percy’s prose. In a very short untitled review, to cite only one example, James Dickey writes: "His power of phrase is breathtaking, and is the more so because it is quiet," *American Scholar* 37 (1968): 524

42. Percy toiled over all his works, but especially over the beginnings, as the manuscripts at the SHC display.

43. Etymology and definitions taken from *Webster’s New World Dictionary*, 1984.

44. The epigram is from Romano Guardini’s *The End of the Modern World*.

45. (Louisiana State UP, 1973) xi.


to the idealist ascent of the allegory. In Plato's story, Lawson writes, "only the dutiful return [from their view of the ideal] to live among the wall-watchers, and they only to instruct. It is otherwise with the Percy movement . . . Unlike Plato's movement, Percy's does not culminate with a communion that can be attained by the mastery of an abstract scheme. An individual remains a moviegoer, or a wall-watcher, as long as he distances himself from his ultimate world by the very way in which he looks at it" (91-2). Lawson would seem to place Percy's thought in league with that of Spanos, although the latter would have no dealings with an "ultimate world."

48. Critics, of course, have noted Percy's struggles with his adoptive father and his attempts to work through them in his fiction. See, for example, Lewis Lawson's "Walker Percy's Southern Stoic," and "The Moviegoer and the Stoic Heritage" in Following Percy. See also William Rodney Allen's book, Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer (Jackson, UP of Mississippi, 1986). Although she is trapped in her transcendent ethical code, and although she embodies certain characteristics of Will Percy, Walker does not provide Rita the central role he gives Barrett's father or Aunt Emily of The Moviegoer, who are more obvious incarnations of Will Percy.

49. The figures of speech are not inappropriate since Percy writes in the "Primer" that "the scientist is the prince and sovereign of the age" (LC 116).

50. These are the older Barrett's reflections in The Second Coming.

"In the case of love, more is better than less, two twice as good as one, and most is best of all. And if the aim is the ecstasy of love, two is closer to infinity than one, especially when the two are twelve-gauge Super-X number-eight shot. And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself, the cold-steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck-you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world." (New York: Ivy Books, 1980) 136.
J. Gerald Kennedy has written an excellent article on *The Second Coming* which deals with Will's unfolding memories about his father's suicide, "The Semiotics of Memory: Suicide in *The Second Coming*," *Delta* (Montpellier, France), 13 (1981): 103-25.

51. "Walker Percy: 1916-1990," *Southern Literary Journal* 23 (1990): 6. One of Jay Tolson's primary theses in his biography of Percy is precisely this point, that Percy's fiction embodies the struggles he went through himself. This is not a startling thesis—all writers transmute their struggles into their works—but Tolson does well to show its efficacy with regard to Percy.

52. See Percy's "The Coming Crisis in Psychiatry," *Signposts* 251-62.

53. See Lawson's "Will Barrett Under the Telescope" 17.

54. What I suggest here is similar to what James Olney has written about the relationship between freed slaves and their abolitionist editors. In their zeal, abolitionists often repressed the slaves' stories; they "mastered" the telling of their tales. See "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature," in *The Slave's Narrative*, Charles Davis and Henry Louis Gates, eds. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1985): 148-75.


56. Sutter's comments about news parallel the title essay of *The Message in the Bottle* in which Percy develops his distinction between knowledge and news.


Chapter Three

Repetition and *Bios:*
Surviving Life in a Century of Gnosticism and Death

"When 'socialist man' speaks, man has to be silent."
—Eric Voegelin

"Let me recite what history teaches, history teaches."
—Gertrude Stein

In the Flora Levy Lecture he delivered in the Spring of 1991, Lewis Simpson recalled his burgeoning relationship with Walker Percy.1 Built largely on an exchange of letters in which Simpson solicited contributions for *The Southern Review,* their association was, as Simpson characterized it, "professional." Yet they sometimes exchanged personal notes as well. Percy once responded to Simpson's "note of congratulations on his seventieth birthday" with the following:

I've got news for you. It's not all bad being in your 71st year. So you young fellows can relax.
As a matter of fact, I feel it's a gift, a free ride. Nobody in my family ever lived so long. What it [takes] is Early Times and clean living.
Simpson himself entered his seventy-first year less than two months later. He notes, however, that there was more of "generational concord between Walker and me than the coincidental proximity of our birthdays." He and Percy shared the "drama of a generational sensibility." Based on an early exposure "to the density of the modern European literary mind" as it developed after the catastrophe of the first world war and the period between the world wars, they both participated in a "generational cultural dialectic" which held forth the possibility of either apocalyptic "doom" or a "recovery of memory and history."

Having experienced this dialectic in their reading, both men express it also in their writing. In *The Dispossessed Garden*, for example, Simpson cogently explores the possibility for the recovery of memory and history in the face of modernity. And in his works, Percy strives to retain the unity of the dialectic. For him, apocalypse implies recovery. Destruction opens the possibility for renewal: "The prospect [of the ultimate catastrophe] gets one's attention . . . . If the Bomb is going to fall any minute, all things become possible, even love."3

Percy's comments reiterate what he writes in "The Loss of the Creature." In this essay, he contends that science and romanticism have so entombed the "creature" in theory—a pre-packaged IT—that it takes the destruction of everyday contexts to recover the actual. Thus, the "savage" in Huxley's *Brave New World* stands in an ideal posture for recovery: "[When he] stumbles across a volume of
Shakespeare in some vine-grown ruins and squats on a potsherd to read it, [he] is in a fairer way of getting at a sonnet than the Harvard sophomore taking English Poetry II" (*MB* 56). The ruins allow a recovery of what everyday contexts too often foreclose.  

When Percy tells Simpson that he feels his seventy-first year is a "free ride," that "nobody in my family ever lived so long," he seems to evince a blend of doom and recovery, or at least of ruefulness and celebration. On the one hand, he exults in the very possibility of joking about his age. Yet, his exultation is darkened by a shadow of regret. He seems to brood over the very necessity of surviving in this era, something that many of his progenitors, most notably his father, could not do. As Jay Tolson's biography makes clear, Percy had good reason for both sentiments.  

A scion of the Percy line, he inherited a proclivity toward melancholia, depression, and suicide. As a son of the South, he struggled against a romantic tradition that placed the ideal before the real. Tolson shows how Percy watched his father try—and ultimately fail—to live up to the Southern code of honor, loyalty, and nobility. He likewise reveals the despair that characterized his adoptive father's assessment of the twentieth century, an evaluation that itself denied the possibility of change in time.  

Percy celebrates his seventy-first year because he has overcome both the southern code and his family. He holds to a view of himself as a "pilgrim in the ruins," a seeker of the possibility of recovery
amidst the "catastrophe" and "doom" of the twentieth century. He is a survivor of
what he often called this "century of death." 

I have already tried to show how Percy's characterization of the age holds
ture with regard to its exaltation of science. As a result of the misapprehension of
the scientific method,

[creatures] are rendered invisible by a shift of reality from
crude thing to theory which Whitehead has called the
fallacy of misplaced concreteness. It is the mistaking of an
idea, a principle, an abstraction, for the real. As a
consequence, the "specimen" is seen as less real than the
theory of the specimen. (MB 58)

This "loss of the creature" characterizes the "malaise" of the age. In The
Moviegoer, Binx Bolling defines malaise in these same terms. It is "the pain of
loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains
only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's
ghost" (106). Part of this loss, another facet of the dis-ease of the twentieth
century, can be related to the resurgence of gnostic thought, a stepbrother to the
deification of science, and a stance against which Percy's works, as autobiography,
struggle. For if autobiography displays the repetitive movement which brings one
into a relation of interest in time, then it moves away from an atemporal and
otherworldly gnostic purity and into the vicissitudes of history.
With characteristic lucidity, Cleanth Brooks and Lewis Lawson have already pointed out how gnosticism finds a place in Percy's fiction, especially in *Lancelot.* I hope to show that Percy's entire corpus, fiction and essays, counters a gnostic attitude, especially as it manifests itself in the angelism/bestialism of the Weimar Republic and the Nazi Holocaust. Before I can do this, however, the term itself demands some stability. For gnosticism, like repetition and autobiography, defies facile definition. Christopher Lasch, for example, has written that gnosticism "remains an elusive thing," a "hydra-headed" movement difficult to define. The scholarly attempt to delimit it, he argues, leads only to a "proliferation of definitions" which grows out of a more fundamental "controversy about its origins." In a thorough and illuminating article, Henri-Charles Puech likewise points to the difficulty of arriving at a stable view of gnosticism, and he acknowledges that part of its elusiveness results from a confusion about its roots.

Puech shows that although it was long considered solely as a Christian heresy, gnosticism "came to be understood as a determinate genus, widely distributed in both space and time, of which heretical Christian Gnosis represented only a particular species." For Puech, "determinate genus" refers not to a single expression of gnostic thought; rather, it provides a "category of philosophico-religious thought" for understanding the multiplicity of expressions or "styles" which can be subsumed under the name "gnostic" (55). Although broad and
diverse in its manifestations, gnosticism nevertheless exhibits a common "attitude," itself difficult to define:

If it were possible to [define it] in a few words, we should say that Gnosis (from the Greek word *gnosis*, "knowledge") is an absolute knowledge which in itself saves, or that Gnosticism is the theory that salvation is obtained by knowledge. But this definition, true and central as it may be, remains inadequate. (55)

Puech, therefore, approaches an understanding of this attitude through an exploration of the gnostic's stance toward time, a strategy that also proves useful for comprehending Percy's relation to this enduring mode of thought.

Puech argues that a gnostic view of time remains distinct from that of both Hellenism and Christianity. For the Greeks, as I discussed in Chapter One, time was conceived "above all as cyclical or circular, returning perpetually upon itself, self-enclosed" (39-40). Because of this emphasis on eternal return, the Greeks developed two sentiments toward time: they either admired the beauty and order of the cosmos, in which everything finds its place, or they grew weary of the "monotonous [and] crushing" repetition (45). This latter view is, of course, the sentiment of the Stoa.

But the stress on the eternal return had another effect as well. History manifested little interest for the Greeks. They were unconcerned with the particular and singular. It is the immutable world of form, the general or the
ideal, that concerns them. Although continuity exists between the particular and the general—the former participates in the latter and thus establishes a relation between the temporal and the atemporal orders—the particular carries little significance in itself. Furthermore, because a circle is without beginning, middle, or end—and because any point on a circle can be taken indifferently as beginning, middle, or end—the Greeks possess no "central reference point by which to define and orient a historical past and future" (43). Events in time, then, eternally repeat a cosmic pattern which itself elicits awe or boredom, two sentiments Kierkegaard would later pronounce subsumable under his aesthetic category.

If the Greeks placed little value on events in time, then Christianity founds itself on a unique historical event. Time is not cyclical; rather, it is linear, "finite at its two extremities, having a beginning and an absolute end" (46). Events in time do not eternally recur. They are irreversible. As a result, life in time becomes full of significance. An individual's passage through time bears the utmost meaning. The past is gathered up into the present and both point to a fixed end in the future. The future, in turn, gives direction to the past: "Whether near or far, the eschatological end orients the past toward the future and binds the two together in such a way as to make the unilateral direction of time a certainty" (51-2). In other words, the end gives shape, direction, and meaning to the beginning—the beginning finds its source in the end—and the end is prefigured in the beginning.
Unlike the Greek notion of time, the Christian view posits a beginning and end that are both distinct and united. At opposite poles of the line, the beginning and the end are wholly separate yet wholly connected by the line itself, which is history. Christians await the end of time to discover meaning, yet, even as they wait, they draw meaning from the end to determine present action. They stand between what already fills time, but what has not yet reached the fullness to come. The parallels between primitive Christianity's view of time and Kierkegaard's category of repetition seem clear. Both acknowledge *inter esse* as the genuine human placement.

The gnostic attitude toward time is neither historical nor cosmic, neither a straight line nor a circle. Instead, Puech argues, it is best viewed as a "broken line" (40). Whereas Hellenism proffers a continuity between the temporal and the atemporal, and Christianity posits a movement in and toward fullness, gnosticism proposes a radical bifurcation between the temporal and the atemporal, between fullness and history. The gnostic view is primarily dualistic. Because time partakes of the material and visible world, and because this world was created by a "feeble, narrow-minded if not ignorant" god (59), it has no relation to the invisible and spiritual domain which is truth. The Greek either stands in awe of time or grows weary of it, and the Christian waits in eager anticipation, but the gnostic "condemns, rejects, [and] rebels" (60). Time is, "in the last analysis, a lie" (61).
Puech notes that in one gnostic system

time was born from the *hysterema*, a *defectus* or *defectio*, a *labes*—a deficiency, error, or fault—from the collapse and dispersion in the void . . . of a reality which had previously existed one and integral, within the pleroma, [the original fullness]. (66)

That *hysterema* and *labes* derive from the same words that describe organs of the female reproductive system indicates the radical and generative evil that pervades the sexual act for some gnostics (others were extremely licentious), an act which only continues our defective, evil life in time.\textsuperscript{13} The perpetual cycle of a generation which is a degeneration (a creation which is a fall, or a birth-into-death and a death-in-life) is recapitulated in even the smallest unit of time. Each moment "arises only to be engulfed in the next moment, in which all things appear, disappear, and reappear in a twinkling" (66). Time is hell, the region where one's "capacity for seeing and hearing is 'narrow,' limited to what is purely actual and close at hand" (66).

Given such a view of time, its extreme dualism and its preoccupation with evil, it is no wonder that gnosticism proposes an atemporal salvation. Salvation, in fact, liberates the gnostic from time. It sets free the "spiritual" or "perfect" man from the bonds of time. Instead of displaying the fullness of time, salvation "shatters time" and "destroy[s] the world" (70).\textsuperscript{14} The gnostic seeks a return to a lost home, a perfect realm beyond or before the world in which "his substance was
pure of all mixture or adulteration" (73). Gnosis provides the vehicle for such liberation.

For the "perfect man" entombed in defective matter, gnosis provides an "absolute Truth, a total Knowledge, in which all the riddles raised by the existence of evil are solved" (73). Through this exhaustive knowledge, the gnostic answers the triple question: "Who am I and where am I? Whence have I come and why have I come hither? Whither am I going?" (Theodotus, qtd. by Puech 73-4). What begins as a knowledge for freeing the spiritual self enchained in deficient time ends in a totalized "mythological" knowledge. Gnosis not only yields the answers to the individual's origins and destiny, but it provides an atemporal knowledge of the whole universe, visible and invisible, of the structure and development of the divine as well as the physical world. Some of the Gnostics actually call it a total "science"—in the positive sense of the word—. . . an exhaustive and purely rational explanation of all things. (75)

Through gnosis, the gnostic enters into an elite group, either "a class of gnostikoi, 'knowers,' or of pneumatikoi, 'spiritual men'" (54). He thus surpasses time and reenters his "primitive, permanent state" in the total and closed "articulated atemporality" which gnosis supplies (76, 84).

This "articulated atemporality" provided by the "science" of gnosis sounds very similar to Percy's reflections on "theory." The passage I cited above from "The Loss of the Creature," for example, corresponds precisely with the totalized,
atemporal *gnosis* Puech describes. Like the gnostics, modern western civilization turns to "positive science" for knowledge of the self and the world. While the western world heralds the "sacredness and dignity of the individual," its "idolatry" of science nevertheless fosters a posture which devalues both the world and the individual creatures in it. A scientific attitude precludes the possibility of "seeing" a single entity because it places theory before it. In a "theorist-consumer" age, another variant of Percy's transcendent-immanent dialectic, neither theorist nor consumer concerns himself with individuals:

> The scientific method is correct as far as it goes, but the theoretical mindset, which assigns significance to single things and events only insofar as they are exemplars of theory or items for consumption, is in fact an inflation of a method of knowing to a totalitarian worldview and is unwarranted. (*Crisis* 18)

The world is quite literally lost in theory. Because it is more tractable than life in time, theory supplants that life with its own "articulated atemporality." Time is nullified, and the world is surpassed in the transcendence of the scientific posture.

Furthermore, Percy argues that this "loss of the creature" sets up a radical dualism between experts and consumers. Experts know and plan, while consumers need and experience. The consumer's most exalted moment, itself desperate, comes when he wholly matches his very self to the expert's theory:

> There is the neurotic who asks nothing more of his doctor than that his symptom should prove interesting. When all
else fails, the poor fellow has nothing to offer but his own neurosis. But even this is sufficient if only the doctor will show interest when he says, "Last night I had a curious sort of dream; perhaps it will be significant to one who knows about such things. It seems I was standing in a sort of alley—" (I have nothing else to offer you but my own unhappiness. Please say that it, at least, measures up, that it is a proper sort of unhappiness.) (MB 56)

Such a posture suggests, paradoxically, that the "true" self of the consumer has nothing to do with time and matter. I say paradoxically because, by definition, the consumer partakes of the world's goods. But the consumer's surrender to the expert suggests that the true self is located somewhere outside the world and time, i.e., in the theory that the expert holds. Seeing itself as deficient, the material self of the consumer flees to its "true," theoretical self in the hope of gaining approval from the ones who presumably know all about him, the gnostikoi.

This reading of Percy's essay gains more credibility when placed in the context of Harold Bloom's understanding of gnosis. Bloom likens gnosticism to an information theory:

Matter and energy are rejected, or at least placed under the sign of negation. Information becomes the enabler of salvation; the false Creation-Fall concerned matter and energy, but the Pleroma, or Fullness, the original Abyss, is all information. (30)

Consumers, then, place themselves in the hands of those who have information, high-priests of the pleroma. Salvation will be theirs if they can but educate
themselves, make "informed choices," and so participate in the elite club of knowers. Percy's diagram of the "lay reader of Freud" in "A Semiotic Primer of the Self" closely parallels Bloom's view of gnosticism (see LC118). The lay reader leaves the world to enter Freud's orbit. But while Freud managed to maintain a more or less steady orbit, the lay reader cannot sustain his transcendence and so suffers from a "decayed orbit." The lay reader makes only a temporary entrance into the fullness of information; he is obliged to reenter the world. As a supreme knower, Freud was not so obliged.

It should also be noted that the extreme dualistic posture of the gnostics reflects the Cartesian dualism that Percy once identified as "responsible for all our evils" (Con247). In the Jefferson Lecture of 1989, his final public lecture, Percy chides the humanistic sciences for ignoring the bifurcation set up in their own methods. Much of this lecture concerns itself with the chasm between "mind" and "matter" (Descartes' res cogitans and res extensa). Percy argues that such a rift "is not in principle closable—that is, not by the present regnant principles" of the sciences as they are now practiced (Signposts274). Percy himself does not make the connection between Cartesian and gnostic thought, but the parallels seem nevertheless evident. Mind (the transcendent sphere) is enchained in matter (the immanent sphere) from which it either continually struggles to flee or in which it becomes totally absorbed and thus forgets any possibility of transcendence. The
"fateful rift," which forms the "San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," mirrors not only the "three-hundred-year-old dualism" that began with Descartes (Signposts 274), but also the gnostic attitude that has persisted since ancient times and which now pervades our modern era, thanks, in large part, to Descartes.  

While I will explore the relation between gnostis and Percy's work in more detail below, especially with regard to a "method of knowing" which is inflated "to a totalitarian worldview," I want first to examine briefly some aspects of the primitive gnostic attitude that have been transformed in the modern era. For this task, I turn to not just to Harold Bloom but to Eric Voegelin as well, both of whom complement Puech's lucid reflections. It should be noted from the outset, however, that Voegelin and Bloom adopt different attitudes in their analyses. Whereas Voegelin regrets and cautions against the pervasive gnosticism of modern culture, a stance similar to Percy's, Bloom neither castigates nor celebrates it.

A self-proclaimed "Gnostic Jew," Bloom looks for the "irreducibly religious" element in experience—be it of "'the divine' or 'the transcendental' or simply 'the spiritual'" (28)—and he argues convincingly that, in America, that element is essentially gnostic. Bloom goes on to say that "the most Gnostic element in the American Religion is an astonishing reversal of ancient gnosticism: we worship the Demiurge as God. . . . As for the alien God of the Gnostics, he has
vanished" (32). In primitive gnostic systems, the Demiurge was the creator of the material world, the "ignoramus" who, far removed from the true, totally other God, established the cosmos and time. That this lesser god now receives our veneration signals a movement away from the absolute transcendence of primitive gnosticism. The gnostic still flees time and the world, but he flies not so much into the primordial Abyss of the alien God as into the isolated self: "The American finds God in herself or himself, but only after finding the freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude" (32). The self thus sealed within itself tries to escape the contamination of time.20

Voegelin points to another reversal that manifests itself in the modern gnostic attitude. While he argues that the essential thrust of the modern gnostic impulse retains its emphasis on salvation through knowledge, he suggests a new development in the gnostic's attitude toward the world. Like Bloom, Voegelin notes a "recession from transcendence":

Gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intramundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfillment. In the measure in which this immanentization progressed experientially, civilizational activity became a mystical work of self-salvation. The spiritual strength of the soul which in Christianity was devoted to the sanctification of life could now be diverted into the more appealing, more tangible, and above all, much easier creation of the terrestrial paradise. (New Science 129)
For Voegelin, modern manifestations of *gnosis* do not disentangle one from a defective world; instead, they are applied to this world in the hopes of correcting it. Thus, Voegelin does not explore so much the gnostic *self* as he does the *collective* nature of modern gnosticism and its attempt to create a terrestrial paradise. Like Bloom, Voegelin suggests that western civilization has forgotten the alien God and worships the Demiurge. Salvation occurs in a perfected time. However, the evil that the primitive gnostic saw as inevitably bound to the material world is now considered remediable through *collective* civilizational activity in time. Bloom presents the vital expressions of this transformation, but Voegelin displays the morbid ones. For Voegelin, as for Percy, a collective activity based on *gnosis* leads to a "totalitarian worldview" which stands as a corrective to the "impurities" of life. Attempts to create such a total vision lead to the annihilation of those who cannot be subsumed by the vision. In the twentieth century, of course, the overt impulse to create a society based on *gnosis* found its most obvious manifestation in Nazi Germany.

Like Voegelin, Percy cautions against such an unrestrained *gnosis*. Yet, like Bloom, he contends that it is all we have. But whereas Bloom asks us simply to "face the fact" that we are gnostics, Percy looks for another possibility. He offers no programmatic anodyne for an escape from our gnostic flight. Programs are often themselves part of the problem. Instead, he diagnoses and names the
predicament. It is significant that "diagnose" (from *dia*, "through, between" and *gignōskein*, "to know") itself contains the root form of *gnosis.* The word itself, then, points to Percy's (and Bloom's) contention that one must begin where we are—in the midst of a gnostic society. However, while Bloom suggests that we look for salvation *through* atemporal knowledge, Percy argues that the road to salvation lies *between* knowledge and time. The category of "news," as Percy develops it in the "The Message in the Bottle," displays this state of "being between," the *inter esse* of repetition.

In this "parable" about islands and castaways, Percy develops a distinction between "news" and "knowledge." He defines a "piece of knowledge" as "knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis,* . . . [which means a] knowledge which can be arrived at anywhere by anyone and at any time" (*MB* 125). It derives from the objective-empirical, scientific posture which for Percy, following Kierkegaard, falls into the aesthetic sphere. Indifferent to time and place, pieces of knowledge are subject to verification and confirmation by anyone, on any island: "Water boils at 100 degrees at sea level"; "Being comprises essence and existence." A piece of news, on the other hand, "express[es] a contingent and nonrecurring event or state of affairs which event or state of affairs is peculiarly relevant to the concrete predicament of the hearer of the news" (*MB* 126). Although a type of knowledge, news "cannot possibly be arrived at by any effort of experimentation or reflection
or artistic insight" (*MB* 126). Instead, news is "strictly relevant to the predicament in which the hearer of the news finds himself" (*MB* 127). News, then, is determined by the hearer's posture in time and place.

For persons who adopt the scientific, objective-empirical, posture, news is irrelevant because they stand outside and above the world as "knower[s] and teller[s]." They do not recognize themselves as being in a predicament in time and place. At best, Percy argues, news items heard from this posture "occupy the very lowest rung of scientific significance: they are particular instances from which hypotheses and theories are drawn" (*MB* 128). The posture of the castaway (another word for *homo viator*), however, manifests the interest which makes news items relevant. Neither scientist nor complacent consumer, the castaway hears news because he finds himself in a predicament, somewhere between being "at home" and homeless:

To be a castaway is to be in a grave predicament and this is not a happy state of affairs. But it is very much happier than being a castaway and pretending one is not. This is despair. The worst of all despairs is to imagine one is at home when one is really homeless. (*MB* 144)

The castaway longs, waits, and searches for news that speaks of this grave predicament, a message occluded by the culturally dominant postures of the scientist and consumer.
Percy goes on to make a further distinction between "island news" (akin to knowledge because it is "relevant to the everyday life of any islander on any island at any time" \([MB\ 143]\)) and "news from across the seas," which speaks uniquely to the castaway by addressing his deepest longings. Like knowledge, island news is in the sphere of the immanent, but news from across the seas is "in the sphere of transcendence and is therefore paradoxical" \((MB\ 147)\). The castaway is "he who waits for news from across the seas" \((MB\ 146)\). As news, such a message requires a message-bearer. It involves an act of communication between one person and another. But the message and the message-bearer are not to be accepted uncritically. The castaway accepts the message, first, because he is in a predicament, and the newsbearer’s words are relevant to it. Secondly, "simply by the gravity of his message" \((MB\ 147)\), the newsbearer displays the authority to speak, and so the castaway should listen to him. Thirdly, the message-bearer must speak in "perfect sobriety and in good faith" \((MB\ 148)\).

Although Percy never refers explicitly to gnosticism in this remarkable essay, his diagnosis of a society and its denizens for whom the relevance of news has been annulled suggests an implicit critique of the gnostic stance. A society founded on knowledge cannot hear of or see the very predicament it longs to anneal. Island news and knowledge \textit{sub specie aeternitatis} "immanentize" the eschaton through their promise of salvation. They are forms of what Bloom
classifies as *gnosis*—information. Percy does not suggest that the castaway ignore such information. On the contrary, it is valuable for day-to-day island existence. But when society and the individual consciousness are such that information seems the only avenue toward salvation, both fall prey to the temptation of self-salvation. On the personal level, such a stance deludes one into believing that he is "at home," that he knows the "whole story" of himself, something, as we have seen in the discussion of autobiography, that one can never know. At the level of history, it fosters a "totalitarian" view which eliminates differences in the name of purity. The castaway rejects these self-enclosed island salvations and waits for the news that speaks of his true homelessness.

While Percy's works—both novels and essays—are a form of island news and not news from across the seas, they nevertheless try to reestablish in his characters and in the reader a posture whereby news from across the seas would again be relevant. His "diagnosis" of the modern malaise suggests a "treatment" that stands between knowledge and time. For Percy, as for Kierkegaard, such a stance finds its truest expression in the "news" of faith, a form of knowledge which redeems time. Since he sees himself as "without authority" to deliver news from across the seas, however, he writes his island news so that he might at least name the ultimate despair of life lived in the purely aesthetic sphere.
Percy, then, does not offer yet another call—"Come!"—which would annul the difficulties of life in time. He does not offer knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, an "articulated atemporality," which promises salvation. Rather, in a society where *gnosis* reigns unrestrained, where everyone is an apostle of sorts, ringing doorbells and bidding his neighbor to believe this and do that. In such times, when everyone is saying "Come!" when radio and television say nothing else but "Come!" it may be that the best way to say "Come!" is to remain silent. Sometimes silence itself is a "Come!" *(MB 148)*

Percy's works find their fullest expression in what they do not say. This silence questions the presumed closure and wholeness of a gnostic culture and allows for the possibility of repetition. The "gaps" in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, as I tried to show in the last chapter, provide openings for the possibility of this "silent speaking." And in that silence which inevitably follows an end, after characters have made their decisions and after readers have read the last word, the possibility for a new beginning manifests itself.²⁵

Lewis Lawson's essay, "Walker Percy's Silent Character," makes this point abundantly clear in the context of *Lancelot*.²⁶ Lawson shows how Father John, ostensibly a mere receptacle for the ranting of Lancelot Lamar in his prison cell, actually occupies a central place in the novel by means of his silence:

The priest has tried to tell Lance something by his silence throughout their five days together and is telling him once
again by his decision to minister in Alabama. . . . Father John has stood there those five days then as a silent invitation, as a character who could be no more eloquent, and Lance, knowing what the silence says, has fought to protect himself by his noise. The next step is up to Lance. (195)

Lawson could just as well have said that the next step is up to the reader. For Percy also wants the reader to decide in the silence which follows this ending. Will the reader accept the self-actualized apocalypse and renewal of Lance—the logical end of his radically gnostic vision—or will he choose the silent "Come!" of Father John? Like Lance, the reader is left in silence.27

Percy's anti-gnostic stance, then, is less articulated than it is suggested. Although there is mention of the "peculiar gnosis of trains" in The Moviegoer, and Tom More is described as a victim of "gnostic pride" in Love in the Ruins, these are, as Cleanth Brooks points out, the sole references to gnosticism in Percy's works.28 Percy even commented once that he "hadn't thought of gnosticism" when he wrote Lancelot (Con 211). Yet, as Lawson's "Gnosis and Time in Lancelot" reveals, there are direct parallels between this, the darkest of Percy's novels, and the analysis of gnostic time provided by Puech. Lance's "narrow view" from his cell, for example, only grants truth to "what is at hand," as does the disjointed time of the black and white videotaped "movies" Lance has made for material evidence of the crime that involves, in his skewed view, pure
materiality—his wife's sexual infidelity. In every turn of the novel, especially in
the climactic explosion of Belle Isle Plantation, Lance tries to "shatter time" by
projecting gnosis for the eradication of sexual evil. He tells Father John: "I had to
know. If Merlin [a movie director] 'knew' my wife, I had to know his knowing
her" (L 95). Lance knows the end of his story (and history) because he will himself
bring it about. He wants "the whole picture" (L 103). Father John's silence
counters his delusions of wholeness. 29

In one way or another, all of Percy's main characters move out of a gnostic
attitude into the openness of repetition. Binx abandons his vertical search—the
scientific search which annuls time—in favor of the horizontal search in time. Will
Barrett, who hopes to engineer his life according to the scientific principles of
psychoanalysis, longs for the news that would speak of his alienation. In the same
novel, Sutter Vaught expresses the licentiousness characteristic of some gnostic
sects. Tom More of Love in the Ruins hopes to cure the "riven self and the riven
world" by means of the ultimate scientific instrument—the lapsometer. At the end
of the novel, he is "chastened" by Fr. Smith in the confessional, and he returns to a
less grandiose life with Ellen. That book also portrays the radical dualism and
polarity which are consequences of life in a gnostic society. In The Second
Coming, the older Will Barrett contrives a plan that he believes will produce firm
knowledge of the existence of God. Barrett receives an answer, but not in the way
he had anticipated. And Tom More of *The Thanatos Syndrome* contends with
doctors, who, in totalitarian fashion, would purify the state of its imperfections.

More, however, remains a true psychiatrist, a "doctor of the soul," who, instead of
applying gnostic theory, listens to the individual stories of his patients. *Lancelot*,
then, is not the only book in which Percy deals with gnosticism.30

It is interesting to note, however, that whereas Percy’s earlier fiction and
essays counter the doom of a gnostic attitude and offer a recovery "silently," his
later works deal with it more or less explicitly. This movement from silence to
outright portrayal can best be seen, I think, by examining Percy’s complicated
response to the most overt of gnostic societies in this "century of death," Nazi
Germany.

In one of his letters to Shelby Foote, Percy comments on the strengths and
weaknesses of William Styron’s *Sophie’s Choice*.

> I found not so much bad Faulkner as occasionally crappy
cliché: "... her graceful undulant walk." He had a lot of
nerve taking on the Holocaust and for this I admire
him—nobody’s been able to handle it, not even the
survivors, maybe especially not the survivors. I suspect that
it can’t be handled, that is, the dead weight and mystery of
the horror can’t be got hold of by esthetic categories—and
when you try, bad things happen, both to the writer and the
subject. ... The only way you can write about such a thing is
not to write about it. (SHC)
Written in 1979, this letter suggests Percy's own "silent" handling of the Holocaust. In his early essays, "The Loss of the Creature" (1958) and "The Message in the Bottle" (1959), for example, Percy writes about the end result of unrestrained gnosis by "not writing about it." In one of his last published essays, however, the one I have already cited from Crisis, he makes an overt connection between theory and Naziism:

Marx and Stalin, Nietzsche and Hitler were . . . theorists. When theory is applied, not to matter or beasts, but to man, the consequence is that millions of men can be eliminated without compunction or even much interest. Survivors of both Hitler's holocaust and Stalin's terror reported that their oppressors were not "horrible" or "diabolical" but seemed, on the contrary, quite ordinary, even bored by their actions, as if it were all in a day's work. (Crisis 16)

In expository prose, one expects a writer to be overt. Yet, the shift from indirect and subtle argument to clear refutation seems curious. If the best way to write about the "dead weight and mystery of the horror" of the Holocaust is not to write about it, then why does Percy begin writing explicitly about it in his later works, especially in The Thanatos Syndrome?

In The Moviegoer and The Last Gentleman there are no conspicuous references to the Holocaust even though the former contains very strong denunciations of "scientific humanism," especially toward the end. In disgust with himself and his "dark pilgrimage," Binx reflects on "the very century of merde, the
great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person" (199-200). 31 And Percy's second novel reveals the only options left in a gnostic culture—immanence and transcendence—but allows the reader to arrive at his own conclusions about such a bifurcated reality. Percy writes about the Holocaust in these first two novels by "not writing about it." He implies that, in a culture where "everyone becomes an anyone," it becomes very easy to treat others like the merde Binx finds around him. In such a culture, people can be disposed of "without much compunction."

It is not surprising, then, that as a wayfarer and exile, Binx keeps a keen eye on the Jews: "Ever since Wednesday I have become acutely aware of Jews. There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say" (76-7). Neither is it surprising that at the moment he rails against the "century of merde," he also "know[s] less than [he] ever knew before" (199), a good sign for someone trapped in the gnosis of contemporary culture.

The dialectic of immanence-transcendence in The Last Gentleman points both backward and forward. It restates Binx's wavering between consumer and scientist, and it anticipates "More's Syndrome," the chronic "angelism/bestialism" that besets the characters of Love in the Ruins. Following Pascal (Qui fait l'ange, fait la bête) who, in turn, borrows his language from the tradition of the Great Chain of Being, Percy suggests that those who would wish to know like the angels
inevitably produce some form of bestialism. Hitler's Third Reich followed the flowering of the arts and sciences during the Weimar Republic.

The first overt reference to the Holocaust in Percy's fiction occurs in *Love in the Ruins*, and it alludes to this very point. Tom More reflects:

> Once I was commiserating with a patient, an old man, a Jewish refugee from the Nazis—he'd got out with his skin but lost his family to Auschwitz—so I said something conventional against the Germans. The old fellow bristled like a Prussian and put me down hard and spoke of the superiority of German universities, German science, German music, German philosophy. My God, do you suppose the German Jews would have gone along with Hitler if he had let them? (*LR* 141)

Percy seems to suggest here that angelism/bestialism has struck modern consciousness so deeply that even a victim of its most horrible manifestation can miss its significance.

Of course, not all survivors of the German Lagers resemble Percy's "Jewish refugee." Primo Levi, for one, recognizes very clearly the gnostic angelism/bestialism of modern culture, especially as it manifested in the German quest for purity. In *The Periodic Table*, for example, Levi (not unlike Percy in that he was a chemist turned writer) continually refers to the antagonism between spirit and matter and in fact makes that theme part of the framework of his exceptional book. At one point, reflecting on the boredom of his chosen career, he writes:
Chemistry, for me, had stopped being . . . a source [of certainty]. It led to the heart of Matter, and Matter was our ally precisely because the Spirit, dear to Fascism, was our enemy; but, having reached the fourth year of Pure Chemistry, I could no longer ignore the fact that chemistry itself, or at least that which we were being administered, did not answer my questions. (52)

Levi's identification of fascism as "Spirit" corresponds to Percy's comments about theory and a "totalitarian worldview." Just as the spirit of fascism wishes to create pneumatikoi, spiritual men inflamed and dedicated to its cause, so theory creates gnostikoi, knowers who become founts of pure information, the theory that keeps fascism vital. In either case, the impurity of matter ("intractable matter," as Levi calls it at one point) is fallaciously transformed by the purity of theory.

Elsewhere in The Periodic Table, Levi considers the different reactions of zinc in its pure and impure forms to acid. Acid "gulps it down" when impurities are present. Yet, zinc "resists the attack" when in its pure form (33). Levi reflects:

One could draw from this two conflicting philosophical conclusions: the praise of purity, which protects from evil like a coat of mail; the praise of impurity, which gives rise to changes, in other words, to life. I discarded the first, disgustingly moralistic, and I lingered to consider the second, which I found more congenial. In order for the wheel to turn, for life to be lived, impurities are needed. . . . Dissension, diversity, the grain of salt and mustard are needed: Fascism does not want them, forbids them; . . . it wants everybody to be the same. (33-4)
Fascism strives for a gnostic purity, a condition unstained by time. It wants to subsume differences into the original singularity of the pleroma. It is significant that Levi, like Percy, turns to writing in order to combat and reflect on his immersion in a gnostic culture. In fact, Levi once wrote that his experience of the Lager and his writing about it gave him a "reason for life." Language combats gnostic purity because it combines elements of matter and spirit, impurity and purity. As triadic behavior, it may be the bridge—as Percy suggests time and again, but most emphatically in the Jefferson Lecture—between the chasm Descartes created when he posited \textit{res extensa} and \textit{res cogitans}. It is no accident that book burnings occur in totalitarian regimes. The angelism/bestialism in Percy's \textit{Love in the Ruins}, then, points to the same antagonism between spirit and matter (purity and impurity) that Levi writes about. The attempt to create a society founded on the pure knowledge provided by More's lapsometer can lead to the bestialism of the German Lagers.

In \textit{Lancelot} and \textit{The Second Coming}, references to Hitler and the Holocaust become more explicit, but they still occupy a secondary place in the narratives. Lance's ranting against this "age of interest" in which no one is responsible for his actions (145) leads him to search for a "single sin," something conspicuously absent from the twentieth century:
What about Hitler, the gas ovens and so forth? What about them? As everyone knows and says, Hitler was a madman. And it seems nobody else was responsible. Everyone was following orders. It is even possible that there was no such order, that it was all a bureaucratic mistake. (145)

Even so terrible an event as the Holocaust can be explained away in this aesthetic age. Lance implies that the very possibility of explaining it away itself contributes to its occurrence. When psychological categories are applied ("Hitler was a madman"), no one is responsible. The gnostic, to recall Puech, bases his freedom on *gnosis*, even "at the risk of falling into nihilism, anarchism, amoralism, or even licentious immoralism" (70). Such ethical categories become meaningless, however, to an age in the grip of such a liberating knowledge. Lance cannot find sin in Hitler's atrocities because the age will not allow him to. Thus, he will enact his own ethical "order" based on a "stern code, a gentleness toward women and an intolerance of swinishness, a counsel kept and above all a readiness to act" (167). Although he tells Father John that his will be an entirely new order—"Don't confuse it with anything you've heard of before . . . Don't confuse it with the Nazis" (165)—he, like the Nazis, wants to bring about his own apocalypse and recovery. He destroys time in the name of *gnosis* in order to bring about the closure of history in a self and a society of his own making.34

In *The Second Coming*, Percy returns to the implicit link between scientific humanism and the Holocaust. While he circumscribes the issue in *The
Moviegoer—i.e., he writes about it by "not writing about it"—the link becomes explicit in The Second Coming. In large part, the novel follows the older Will Barrett's attempts to come to terms with and place the memory of his father's death by suicide. Barrett "remembered everything," the narrator tells us (72).

Almost anything serves as a signal which fires his memory: a triangular patch of land reminds him of missed opportunities with Ethel Rosenblum, a high-school classmate and would-be sweetheart, and the sound of stretching barbed wire announces the hunting trip during which his father first tried to kill himself and Barrett. In his car, Barrett carries physical reminders of his father—two guns. One is a Greener, the shotgun with which his father ultimately took his life and which comes to represent to Barrett his father's "love of death" (136). The other is a Luger, a pistol his father had taken from an SS colonel, and which provides Barrett clues to the unnamed malaise, the "death-in-life" out of which his father knew no escape but suicide.

The Luger signals a connection between his father's humanism and the Holocaust. Recalling the "colonel's black cap with its Totenkopf insignia and some pictures" his father had taken along with the Luger, Barrett reflects on his father's stories of World War II:

Strange that he, my father, often spoke of the Ardennes and the Rhine and Weimar but never mentioned Buchenwald, which was only four miles from Weimar and which Patton
took three weeks later, never mentioned that the horrified Patton paraded fifteen hundred of Weimar's best humanistic Germans right down the middle of Buchenwald to see the sights. Patton, of all people, no Goethe he who said to the fifteen hundred not look you sons of Goethe but look you sons of bitches (is not this in fact, Father, where your humanism ends in the end?). Yet he, my father, never mentioned that . . . (121)

Even the Faulkneresque rhythms imply what the words themselves make explicit.

Humanism is not enough, be it of Barrett's father or of one of Percy's "literary fathers." Humanism, in fact, leads to the horrors of the Lagers, for it signals the "recession from transcendence" and the "immanentization of the eschaton" that "collective civilizational activity" enacts. For Percy, it leads to the gnosisc which "shatters time" by means of "articulated atemporality" (theory), a comprehensive "science" which inflates knowing to a "totalitarian worldview." In the name of such humanism, millions of people can be killed "without compunction or even much interest."

What occupies a rather small place in The Second Coming, however, moves to the foreground in Percy's last novel, The Thanatos Syndrome. Here, the references to the Holocaust and to Germany are explicit and numerous. Although Percy returns to his befuddled Anglo-Saxon psychiatrist-protagonist, Tom More, two other main characters are of obvious German descent: John Van Dorn, referred to throughout the novel simply as "Van Dorn," and Father Smith, whose
"Confession" and "Footnote" provide the central anti-gnostic message of the novel. Germany seems very much on Percy’s mind as the book unfolds. Percy himself travelled there in the summer of 1934. But it is the Germany of the Weimar Republic (1919-33) that finds emphasis in the novel, not that of the National Socialists. The Nazis and the Holocaust do occupy a significant place, but they are used mostly as examples. As in *The Second Coming*, they signal the end of an unchecked humanism. The bestialism of the Nazi Lagers marks the end of Weimar angelism. In the name of atemporal theory which purports to advance humankind, the Weimar scientists lay the groundwork for the rise of a Hitler. As Father Smith tells Tom More:

> If you are a lover of Mankind in the abstract like Walt Whitman, who wished the best for Mankind, you will probably do no harm and might even write good poetry and give pleasure. . . .

> If you are a theorist of Mankind like Rousseau or Skinner, who believes he understands man’s brain and in the solitariness of his study or laboratory writes books on the subject, you are also probably harmless and might even contribute to human knowledge. . . .

> But if you put the two together, a lover of Mankind and a theorist of Mankind, what you’ve got now is Robespierre or Stalin or Hitler and the Terror, and millions dead for the good of Mankind. (*TS* 129)

It was the Weimar doctors, who, in the name of the betterment of mankind, allowed the termination of lives "unfit for living." Percy’s acknowledgment of
Frederic Wertham's "remarkable book," *A Sign for Cain*, in the Prologue to *The Thanatos Syndrome* only amplifies what Father Smith makes explicit about a society in the grip of gnostic theory.\(^\text{36}\)

Wertham's book, subtitled "An Exploration of Human Violence," contends that one reason for the proliferation of violence in the modern age may be a result of an improper understanding of it. A proper vision eschews the notion that violence is fated or that it is purely accidental in nature:

> Looked at superficially, it may appear that there is a lot of inevitability about violence. But the more we concentrate scientifically on a concrete question in the general stream of violence, the more we find that pure coincidence, accident, and chance disappear and causal sequences of events emerge. (22)

Every act of violence, then, has a long history of contributing factors. "Social customs, institutions, theories, and beliefs" all play a role as "violence-fostering factors" (43-4). The violence unleashed by the Nazis upon the Jews and other so-called "impurities" was not so much a "freak" accident of history as it was a logical end of modes of thought that had preceded it. Although Hitler provided the impetus for its enactment, the Holocaust had its roots in the science and research begun during the Weimar Republic, especially with the publication in 1920 of *The Release of the Destruction of Life Devoid of Value*, a proto-euthanasia manual. Wertham writes:
The book advocated that the killing of "worthless people" be released from penalty and legally permitted. It was written by two prominent scientists, the jurist Karl Binding and the psychiatrist Alfred Hoche. The concept of "life devoid of value" or "life not worth living" was not a Nazi invention, as is often thought. It derives from this book. (161)3 7

Once the question of the "value of life" reaches the floor, Wertham argues, a plethora of "legitimated" violence follows.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith refers directly to this book in his "confession." It was given to him by one of the doctors he met during his trip to Germany in the 1930's, and it created a "heated argument" in the scientific community he came to know:

[The argument] seemed to be between those who believed in the elimination of people who were useless, useless to anyone, to themselves, the state, and those who believed in euthanasia only for those who suffered from hopeless diseases or defects. . .I must confess to you that I didn’t warm up to those fellows, distinguished as they were. But I must also confess that I was not repelled by their theories and practice of eugenics. (246-7)

Here, Father Smith "confesses" his attraction to the gnostic theory that eliminates the impure in the name of purity. This confession foreshadows the more emphatic one he makes at the end of his discourse, that he would have joined his friend who entered the Schutzstaffel had he been a German and not an American: "I would have gone to the Junkerschule, sworn the solemn oath of the Teutonic knights at
Marienberg, and joined the Schutzstaffel. Listen. Do you hear me? I would have joined him" (248-9, Percy's emphasis).

The confession of his attraction to the theory of eugenics reflects an intellectual assent to *gnosis*, but his desire to enter the SS signals a volitional assent. In his interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund, Percy, following Gabriel Marcel, comments on the positive aspects of mass movements:

> Marcel . . . had the nerve to say [that] we tend to overlook something positive about the mass movements. It is easy to say how wrong they were. It is easy to overlook the positive things: the great sense of verve and vitality. This I was very much aware of in Germany in 1934. (*Con* 208)

Percy in no way condones the actions of the Nazi regime; he is well aware of the "dead weight and mystery of the horror" that the Nazis perpetrated on those they considered unfit for life in the Third Reich. Yet, he also recognizes the appeal of mass movements to an age which proclaims the self autonomous. In such an age, the self becomes ever more isolated and thus longs for a sense of commonality of purpose that would relieve it of its loneliness. Like war, mass movements provide such a common purpose. They provide avenues for the self to feel part of something beyond itself.

It is noteworthy, then, that Father Smith "confesses" to Tom More. The word confess derives from the Latin prefix *com*, "together," and *fateri*, "to acknowledge." Father Smith did not ultimately join the SS; rather, together with
Tom, he acknowledges his attraction to them. He breaks the isolation of the self in his confession, through his speaking to another person, not through the violence of war or through another mass movement. Wertham writes that "communication is the opposite of violence. Where communication ends, violence begins" (50). Like St. Augustine, then, Father Smith confesses his sins, and in so doing, he confesses the life he has chosen over the death of a possibly violent past. When Tom asks him why he became a priest, Father Smith responds:

"What else?"

"What else what?"

"That's all."

He shrugs, appearing to lose interest. "In the end one must choose—given the chance."

"Choose what?"

"Life or death. What else?" (257)

Father Smith chooses and confesses life over the death of gnostic certainty. When he asks Tom, "Do you think we're any different from the Germans?" he suggests a parallel between the Nazis and the projects undertaken by Van Dorn and the other well-meaning scientists in the novel. Such projects based on "angelic" knowledge have already led to the bestialism of child-molestation at Belle Ame Academy. But Father Smith suggests that the "qualitarian centers"
which euthanize people unfit for life and the Blue Boy project which eliminates
social problems through mixing heavy sodium ions with drinking water mark the
beginnings of a *gnosis* that will end in the gas chambers—*thanatos*. At one point
in the novel, Tom More tells his colleagues the reason for Father Smith's refusal to
support their endeavors: "He thinks you'll end by killing Jews" (351).

In Percy's last work of fiction, then, he launches a frontal attack on the
*gnosis* of scientific humanism. The question remains, however, why the change in
tactics from indirect to direct confrontation? Why write explicitly about the "dead
weight and mystery of the horror" now, when in 1979 he argued that the best way
to write about it was "not to write about it," to deal with it silently?

It seems to me that three responses could be set forth, each related to the
views of time outlined earlier in the chapter. On the one hand, the change in tactic
reflects a movement similar to the linearity of time as viewed in the Christian
perspective. *The Thanatos Syndrome* stands at the end as the fulfillment of what
Percy has been writing about all along. This last novel reflects the "either/or" that
Percy writes about throughout his career, the choice between *eros* or *thanatos*, and
the novels along the way find their source in them. Each novel, furthermore,
"repeats" this end in its unique fashion. Percy writes about the same thing all
along but his themes find their ultimate fulfillment in his last work. Another
perspective might be compared to the circularity of the Greek version of time.
Percy says all he has to say in the beginning, in *The Moviegoer*, and then repeats in his other novels what has been established as the "ideal" in that novel. The later novels are lesser incarnations of this first, primordial one. Still another view could be likened to the gnostic's view of time. Percy radically breaks from his earlier "silent" treatment of the Holocaust and embarks on an overt refutation of the *gnosis* that leads to it. In this perspective, *The Thanatos Syndrome* stands alone as an "alien" amidst Percy's other works. This alien character relates to the confessional quality of the novel, the "acknowledgment together" by author and character of their attraction to the gnosticism against which they rail. I mean to say that Percy breaks with his commitment to "not writing about the Holocaust" in order to deal with (and ultimately condemn) his own attractions to the vitality of German life that he experienced during his trip in 1934.

In an interview with Phil McCombs, Percy once admitted that although his experiences in Germany were nowhere near "so dramatic as Father Smith's" (809), he nevertheless transformed them in composing *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Like Father Smith, Percy stayed with a family whose son "was dead serious. . . . [He was] graduating from the Hitler Jugend and going into the Schutzstaffel" (809). And just as Father Smith was impressed by the young man he befriended, Percy admits that "this youth was the one who made an impression on me" (809). There can be little doubt, then, that Percy uses Father Smith as a mouthpiece for
his own views against the scientific humanism which seeks to engineer society in the name of "doing good." Furthermore, Percy's comments to Gretlund indicate that, like Father Smith, he was profoundly attracted to the verve that pervaded Germany during Hitler's rise to power. Jay Tolson cites a comment by Shelby Foote regarding this trip: "[Walker] was tremendously impressed by what he saw there. Tremendously impressed." Tolson goes on to argue that character and writer coalesce in the pages of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, especially in the reflections on Germany. He suggests that what so impressed the young Percy, whose "cynicism could verge on nihilism" (115), was the "sense of purpose of the true-believing Nazi" (118). It is not unreasonable to propose, then, that Father Smith's confession is also Walker Percy's confession. Often preoccupied by "troubling questions about life's meaning" (Tolson 113), Percy found himself deeply impressed and attracted to the resolve "unto death" of the National Socialists. When Father Smith says that he "would have joined" his friend, Percy himself seems not too far behind the persona.

If *The Thanatos Syndrome* is viewed as an "alien," then, its difference derives from the alien within Percy himself, that "other" who surfaces and finds expression in the character of Father Smith. In his previous novels, the other seems to be projected onto the culture at large. In this final one, he quarrels with himself. While it is no doubt true that his earlier works also evince this quarrel
with himself, the overt "confessional" quality of The Thanatos Syndrome suggests that Percy's inner struggle with gnosticism had at last surfaced. The movement from indirect to direct confrontation signals a deeper willingness on Percy's part to acknowledge together with his reader that he is himself a product of the very culture he castigates, this "century of death."

His diagnosis of our gnostic culture, then, stands not only between time and knowledge, but also between (inter esse) the "unwarranted totalitarian view" and the sense of purpose (concern) that such a view provides. He condemns the totalitarian view while at the same time standing in awe of its power to give direction to an otherwise formless life. Percy's works ultimately reject the self-actualized and self-contained closure of history that a gnostic apocalypse and recovery would supply, and they point to that repetition which provides a sense of purpose without positing an absolute knowledge of an end. Apocalypse implies recovery; an end offers a new beginning. However, neither can be encompassed by the totalized, articulated atemporality which is theory. In his final works, Percy breaks his silence only to confess. And the confession of a life, of course, is one of the sources of modern autobiography.
Notes to Chapter Three

1. The lecture was delivered at the University of Southwestern Louisiana.


4. In his review of Percy's The Message in the Bottle, Yale Review 65 (1976), Jonathan Culler points to the passage that I have cited to reveal an inconsistency in Percy's thought. He notes that Percy extends this figure of "decontextualization" to a "general educational principle" when he declares that a dogfish would be more accessible outside the context of a biology laboratory: "When [Percy] declare[s] that 'it is nevertheless a fact that the zoology laboratory at Sarah Lawrence College is one of the few places in the world where it is all but impossible to see a dogfish,' one suspects that 'see' has taken on a special meaning and that in his enthusiasm for direct, unmediated perception, he has forgotten that outside of symbolic systems the dogfish would be nothing but a lump of undifferentiated matter and certainly unknowable" (264). Culler seems to be right, especially considering Percy's own comments about language and consciousness in "A Semiotic Primer of the Self" and in "Metaphor as Mistake." Yet Culler seems to overlook the fact that Percy's emphasis in "The Loss of the Creature" is on placement and epistemology. He seems to look for a tertium quid, a posture somewhere between consumerism and science: "One might object, pointing out that Huxley's citizen reading his sonnet in the ruins and the Falkland Islander [Percy uses this figure for another example of 'decontextualized' knowing] looking at his dogfish on the beach also receive them in a certain package. Yes, but the difference lies in the fundamental placement of the student in the world, a placement which makes it possible to extract the thing from the package. The pupil at Scarsdale High sees himself placed as a consumer receiving an experience-package; but the Falkland Islander exploring his dogfish is a person exercising the sovereign right of a person in his lordship and mastery of creation" (MB 57-8).


7. In his interviews and essays, Percy called the twentieth century many things, most of them subsumable under the title I have cited.


11. These reflections on the paradox of beginnings and endings owe a great deal to T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets*. Some critics, like William Spanos, argue that his emphasis on beginnings and endings returns him to a Greek mentality which is indistinct from Christianity, and thus places him in the narrow confines of a modernist aesthetics. The distinction, as Puech has shown, must remain, even though there was a tendency during the Patristic era to conflate Christianity and Hellenism: "With the Church Fathers—particularly Origen and the Alexandrians—[there was] a more or less exclusive effort to understand Christianity, man and the world, no longer according to strictly historical—and if the term is permissible, horizontal—views but atemporally, according to the hierarchical and vertical schema of Greek rationalism" (53). *Four Quartets* draws its meaning from the fullness of its end—"Not fare well,/ But fare forward, voyagers"—just as the end is foreshadowed in the beginning. The last section of "Little Gidding" recapitulates the entire poem in such a way that
it brings it, not to a static closure, but to a vital fullness. The unity that Eliot manifests in the work is not ultimately circular but a spiralling linearity. As in Christianity, so, too, in the poem. The line that connects the beginning and the end is history. Both Nathan Scott in his *The Broken Center* and James Olney in *Metaphors of Self* make points similar to, but more thorough and eloquent than my own.

12. In *A History of Christian Thought*, 3 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1970) vol. 1, Justo L. Gonzalez has this to say of gnostic dualism: "Gnostic speculation sets out from a single eternal principle, from which other principles or aeons are produced in a declining process, until—usually through an error of one of the lower aeons—the material world is produced. Thus appears the derivative dualism" (131).

13. The Greek *hystera* means "uterus or womb," but *hysteresis* means "a deficiency"; and *labes* shares the same root, *labi*, which in Latin can mean both "to slip, to fall," as in labile, and "a lip, or lip-like organ," as in labium. Although these etymological connections are my own and not Puech’s, they seem to be implied in Puech’s later comments on sexuality and the Gnostics. They also find corroboration in Harold Bloom’s lucid analysis of Ann Lee, the foundress of the Shakers, in *The American Religion: The Emergence of the Post-Christian Nation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992): "Ann Lee began as a desperate, lower-class English wife, who had gone through four painful births, lost all four infants, joined a band of Shaking Quakers (in dissent from the main body of Quakers), and was imprisoned for disturbing the peace in Manchester during the summer of 1770. With waking eyes, she beheld Adam and Eve in the initial act of human sexuality and suddenly understood that lovemaking itself constituted the Fall from Paradise. By 1774, Ann Lee had removed herself and her followers to America. She died in 1784, only about forty-eight years old, leaving her movement as one of the oddest spiritual legacies in our troubled religious history" (66, my emphasis). The story of Ann Lee finds its place in Bloom’s larger contention that, in its roots, the American Religion is not Christian, but Gnostic, an insight I will draw on as I explore Eric Voegelin’s contribution to understanding "modern Gnosticism" and its relation to Percy’s works. Further references to Bloom’s work will be made parenthetically in the text.
14. Bloom calls this "perfect man" and "spiritual man" the "pneumatic self." Drawing on the work of E. R. Dodds (The Greeks and the Irrational), he emphasizes the distinction the Gnostics made between the pneuma or daemon and the psyche. "Any useful account of Gnosticism needs to commence with the history of a magic or occult self, "spark" or pneuma as the Gnostics called it, rather than the soul or psyche" (50-51).

15. It should be noted that Hans Jonas, The Gnostic Religion (Boston: Beacon Press, 1958), likewise calls attention to this "articulated atemporality," although he simply calls it "articulated doctrine" (32). Puech's figure of speech is, I think, more useful for understanding Percy's comments on "theory."

16. Percy describes our age as the "age of theorist-consumer" in an essay that appeared four months after his death, "Why are You a Catholic?: The Late Novelist's Parting Reflections," Crisis (September 1990): 14-19. This article is a reprint of a chapter that appears in Living Philosophies: The Reflections of Some Eminent Men and Women of Our Time, ed. Clifton Fadiman (New York: Doubleday, 1990). References will be made parenthetically in the text to the article as it appeared in Crisis.

17. Percy entitled the Jefferson Lecture as follows: "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind."


19. The pervasive Gnosticism which Bloom sees in America parallels Percy's reference to Tocqueville in the Jefferson Lecture: "Could it be true, by the way, what Tocqueville said of Americans years ago: that Americans are natural-born Cartesians without having read a word of Descartes?" (Signposts 274)

20. Mary Deems Howland's reading of Percy in the light of Marcel's category of intersubjectivity underscores his stance against this Gnostic solipsism.

21. Bloom suggests that current battles surrounding "political correctness" give evidence to an unwillingness to face up to the ubiquitous Gnosticism in America: "I shake my head in unhappy wonderment at the politically
correct younger intellectuals, who hope to subvert what they cannot begin to understand, an obsessed society wholly in the grip of a dominant Gnosticism" (49).


23. The epigraphs to "The Message in the Bottle," one from Thomas Aquinas and the other from Kierkegaard, suggest from the start Percy's category of "news":

"The act of faith consists essentially in knowledge and there we find its formal or specific perfection." (Aquinas, De Veritate)

"Faith is not a form of knowledge; for all knowledge is either knowledge of the eternal, excluding the temporal and the historical as indifferent, or it is pure historical knowledge. No knowledge can have for its object the absurdity that the eternal is the historical." (Kierkegaard, Philosophical Fragments)

Percy comments on this juxtapositioning of epigraphs in an interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund: "Well, it is a classical dispute between Catholics and Protestants whether faith is a form of knowledge. I thought it was a very nice opposition to have Kierkegaard making a clear statement that faith is not a form of knowledge, it is a leap onto [sic] the absurd. St. Thomas Aquinas saying in his classical thirteenth-century way that faith is a form of knowledge. It is different from scientific knowing, but it is a form of knowledge. I tend to agree with Aquinas there, even though I am more sympathetic with Kierkegaard. I am on his wavelength, I understand his phenomenology, his analysis of the existential predicament of modern man. Aquinas did not have that, but I think Aquinas was right about faith. It is not a leap into the absurd, it is an act of faith, which is a form of knowledge" (Con 204).

24. Percy's reference to "writing without authority" relates to Kierkegaard's "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," an essay Percy once described as being "tremendously important" to him (Con 113).

Schleifer and Robert Markley refer to the "meaningful silence that calls to the reader's attention the necessity of choice" (5). And in response to J. Gerald Kennedy's question about the endings of his novels: "But don't your novels have to end at that point? In other words, essentially what you're interested in is in the wandering and the searching and being in doubt, but once the character makes his commitment, that's the time when you've got to hit the road and end the book," Percy answered: "You've got to get out, you have to get out." The silence after you "get out" seems to be a form of the "meaningful silence" Schleifer and Markley speak of. Pat Bigelow relates the question of silence and writing to Kierkegaard in *Kierkegaard and the Problem of Writing* (Tallahassee: Florida State UP, 1987).

26. *Following Percy* 178-95, to be cited parenthetically in the text.

27. In his interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund, "Laying the Ghost of Marcus Aurelius?" Percy suggests that he wants the reader to decide: "What I was doing was to try to destroy the middle ground. . . . At the end of *Lancelot* I was trying to present two radical points of view, neither of which is accepted by most people, most Americans" (*Con* 209, 211). I have already cited his comments about the decision the reader must make with regard to the relative sanity of Binx Bolling and Will Barrett.


29. Lawson also shows how Lance's three-tiered view of sexual history corresponds to Voegelin's analysis of similar Gnostic visions of history, beginning with Joachim of Fiore and continuing in Hitler's view of the Third Reich.


31. Percy alluded to this denunciation when he delivered his acceptance speech for the National Book Award: "The book attempts a modest restatement of the Judeo-Christian notion that man is more than an organism in an environment, more than an integrated personality, more even than a mature and creative individual, as the phrase goes. He is a wayfarer and a pilgrim" (*Signposts* 246).


37. The book was published in Leipzig.


39. *Pilgrim in the Ruins* (See note 5) 115. Further citations will be made parenthetically in the text.
Chapter Four

Repetition and *Graphein*.
Metaphor and the Mystery of Language and Narrative

Shakespeare had it easy: he had the language, a new language bursting out all around him, and he didn’t even have to make up stories; the stories were around him too. We have to do it all, including the impossible or all but impossible task: make up a language as you go along. All you have to do to be a good novelist is to be like God on the first day.

—Walker Percy to Shelby Foote
October 19, 1973 (SHC)

There’s no such thing as a sovereign and underived text.

—Walker Percy
"Herman Melville"

In *Fiction and Repetition*, J. Hillis Miller writes that his book concerns not so much "what" texts mean but "how" they mean.¹ He explores narrative patterns, and what he finds is that narratives depend on repetition to generate meaning:

This book is an exploration of some of the ways [novels] work to generate meaning or to inhibit the too easy determination of a meaning based on the linear sequence of the story. . . . Any novel is a complex tissue of repetition and
of repetitions within repetition, or of repetitions linked in chain fashion to other repetitions. (2-3)

Miller's comment sounds similar to some advice Walker Percy got from Caroline Gordon when he was going through his years of novelistic apprenticeship. Percy sent his manuscripts of "The Charterhouse" and "The Gramercy Winner" to Gordon, who obviously read his work very carefully; she responded to his first novel in about forty pages of singled-spaced prose. Many of those comments did not relate specifically to Percy's work, but dealt generally with novels, the task of the novelist, and writing. In short, she set forth her "theory" of the novel and applied it to Percy's own work. One item she passed on seems especially pertinent to the question of repetition and writing. Gordon relates part of a conversation she had with a rural black preacher who told her about his technique of delivering sermons: "First I tells'em I'm going to tell'em. Then I tell'em. Then I tell'em I done told'em" (SHC).

From one perspective, the preacher's comment would seem to give moral latitude to the centuries-old problem of sleep and the sermon. It would also suggest a reason for the sometimes lifeless structure of some works of literary criticism, which often follow the Introduction ("I tells'em I'm going to tell'em")-Body ("I tell'em")-Conclusion ("I tell'em I done told'em") format. Yet, viewed differently, the comment can quicken both homiletic and critical practice. For the
preacher's words do what they say. The "what" and the "how" interpenetrate. The repetition of the verb "to tell," for example, is not a repetition without a difference. The threefold "tell'em" is compressed and encompassed by "tells'em" and "told'em," which mark the transition from the ideal or the possible to the actual. And "done told'em" repeats the auxiliary form of "going to tell'em," yet, while the auxiliaries are obviously different, the progression of sounds from "done" to "told" and the repetition of sounds in "going" and "told" ("gō" and "tō") signals on a smaller scale precisely what Miller writes about on a larger one. Furthermore, the self-enfolding and extended rhythms of the first and the last phrases find counterpoint in the pithy rhythm of the middle sentence, which nevertheless stresses the same verb. The middle sentence, in turn, is repeated in the first part of the third sentence. In his comment, the preacher engages in what has often been considered the golden rule of all homiletics, and he thus displays his own moral integrity: he practices what he preaches! Gordon passes on the remark to Percy because, like Hillis Miller, she sees this repetition as efficacious in writing as well.

In order for repetition to work in writing, though, it has to be seen as more than a simple restating. It has to be a restating that incorporates identity and difference, limits and possibilities, the ideal and the actual. It has to be like the coach horn Constantin Constantius praises in *Repetition*: "Long live the stagecoach horn! It is the instrument for me for many reasons, and chiefly because
one can never be certain of wheedling the same notes from this horn. A coach horn has infinite possibilities" (175). To approach repetition and *graphein* in the context of Percy's own narrative technique, then, I will inevitably have to repeat myself—with difference.

Chapter One has already dealt with something of the "how" of repetition, autobiography, and Percy's works. Chapters Two and Three engaged the "what." Yet, in Percy, the "how" and the "what" cannot be so easily separated. I agree with John W. Stevenson who has argued that "the distinctive character of [Percy's] style is the particular way he uses language and the way this language controls and discovers its proper form. I suppose I am trying to say that Percy's art (his craft) is as much a part of his theme as is the theme itself." Thus, I hope to show that repetition is not only a theme of Percy's work, but that it informs his narrative style as well. I have already suggested such a notion when I argued that, like Kierkegaard, Percy uses the aesthetic to approach the religious. Another way of saying this is to say that *inter esse* finds embodiment in an "interesting" style. That style, furthermore, is fundamentally autobiographical.

In Chapter One, I refer to James Olney's assertion that the essential autobiographical movement takes place in memory, in the interplay of past and present. In the context of their present consciousness, autobiographers grasp together into narrative form their past experience. But this "grasping together" (I
borrow the concept from Paul Ricoeur\(^4\) in memory and narrative is never a simple recapitulation of past events. The story and the life are never identical. Rather, a distance, a gap, a difference always exists between the past as it was lived and the past as it is written. Yet, as different as they are, lived life and written life, some connection must exist between them, else why bother to write in the first place. Thus, autobiography repeats the life of its subject (the self) in a way that joins identity and difference without a simple synthesis of the two. Furthermore, as the terminal root of the word "autobiography" itself, *graphein* provides the link between the *autos* and *bios*. It enacts the repetition I have already addressed (the "what"), while it also engages in its own repetition (the "how"). Thus, some further thoughts on Percy's views of the self and life—and their relation to autobiography in general—will be necessary to examine repetition and writing. Most notably, I will return to some aspects of his language theory, especially with regard to metaphor and naming. In so doing, I, too, hope to link identity and difference. I hope to sound the coach horn. That is, I hope to practice what I preach.

1. **Metaphor and the Mystery of Language**

Percy's fascination with language extends to every facet of his life and work, especially his analysis of "death-in-life." Although the resurgence of gnostic
thought has much to do with the "Century of Death" I outlined in the last chapter, the death of language, as Percy sees it, also contributes to the "peculiar malaise" he analyzes in his works. A central issue of all of his fiction, but more explicitly in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, concerns what Father Smith calls "the evacuation of signs." 

"[Words] don't signify anymore," he tells Tom More (121), and he goes on to make a direct link between the deprivation of signs and the murder of the Jews, for him, the only sign that has not been evacuated. Father Smith implies that when signs have been deprived, so too has the sign-user. Given such a state, any level of bestialism becomes possible.

If the entrance into sign-use marks the passage into full humanity and thus elevates the sign-user from an animal-like existence, as in the case of Helen Keller, then a loss of the signifying capacity of language divests humans of their unique humanity. For Percy, Keller's experience at the well-house is paradigmatic. Everyone who is able to read these words has crossed the same threshold. I have already suggested that this primordial naming event is itself a repetition because it links concept and percept, the ideal and the actual. Somewhere along the way, however, words lose their signifying potential. They become evacuated. The signified and the signifier interpenetrate. It is important to note that this potential devolution rests in the same primordial naming act. Thus, naming possesses a dual nature. It has a capacity to reveal and conceal or, as Charles Bigger writes, it
is both a "call by Being and a violence against Being." That with which we know
the world is also that which blocks that same knowing.

In the "Intermezzo" of Lost in the Cosmos, to repeat more ground, Percy
implies that art, as a naming event, also displays this same duality. On the one
hand, it resists the interpenetration of the signifier by the signified; it frustrates the
evacuation of signs. On the other hand, it is limited in this same capacity because
of its very use of signs. The epigraphs that head this chapter further indicate the
dual nature of art as naming. According to the first, novelists, like God, create ex
nihilo. When they name, they create in a sense an entirely new world. According
to the second, novelists, like humans, are limited by texts that have gone before
them. They rename or renovate what has been named but forgotten, or they name
something that has been, but which has never been named before. The first
reiterates Percy's call for the novelist to "sing a new song." The second indicates
the limits of that very endeavor. Yet in its limitation, it also discloses possibility.

For Percy, the social character of naming, the pairing of namer and hearer
(or writer and reader), opens the possibility for a "co-celebration" of a thing beheld
in common. The name sanctions and frees. The two impossibilities to which
Percy refers in the epigraphs—the impossibility of creating a new language and the
impossibility of creating a sovereign text—join possibility and limitation. They
both invoke hope: the first, that something entirely new will be sung; the second,
that at least something old will be sung in a new way. This linking of possibility and limitation forms, I think, the mystery of language and narrative, and it will guide my remarks in this chapter. For, Gabriel Marcel writes, "I cannot place myself outside or before [the encounter with mystery]; I am engaged in this encounter, I depend on it, I am inside it in a certain sense, it envelopes me and it comprehends me—even if it is not comprehended by me." If I substitute the word "language" for "mystery" in Marcel's definition, the meaning remains unchanged. For language is precisely that which "envelopes and comprehends" the language-user but which itself remains elusive. Perhaps nowhere can this mystery of language be better revealed (and concealed!) than in an exploration of metaphor and Percy's works, both fiction and nonfiction. For Percy understands metaphor, like the novel, as both inventive and derivative, something newly made, yet something made new, something renovated—something repeated.

In "Metaphor as Mistake" (1958), Percy explores the analogical and cognitive dimensions of metaphor, and he contends that in metaphor "something very big happens in a very small space" (MB 66). That something very big is nothing less than the ontological potential of language and metaphor, their capacity to validate and discover being. For Percy claims ultimately that "metaphor is the true maker of language" (MB 79). Returning once again to his
favorite example, Helen Keller and the primordial naming act, Percy anticipates
the writings of Paul Ricoeur on metaphor. Although Ricoeur notes that metaphor
is a "phenomenon of predication, not denomination," on the level of the sentence
and not of the single word, both writers agree that metaphor "tells us something
new about reality" (Ricoeur 53). It is important to remember that, despite his
repeated use of the Helen Keller phenomenon, Percy understands naming to
extend beyond the level of isolated words. A symphony, a novel, a short-story, a
poem can all "name" and thus disclose being. They can, as Ricoeur puts it in Time
and Narrative, "refigure" reality. I will touch on this aspect of naming in the
second section of this chapter, the mystery of narrative. Suffice it to say now that
although Percy uses "naming" to designate his understanding of metaphor, he uses
it in a sense different from Ricoeur's "denomination."

For Percy, the Helen Keller phenomenon offers fertile ground for an
exploration of metaphor because in this "aboriginal naming act . . . the most
obscure and the most creative of metaphors" manifests itself: "No modern poem
was ever as obscure as Miss Sullivan's naming water water for Helen Keller" (MB
78). The word water has only the "most tenuous analogical similarities" with the
thing itself (MB 79). The aboriginal naming act, which is metaphor, involves a
pairing of word and thing, object beheld and word uttered. Percy writes: "We can
only conceive being, sidle up to it by laying something else alongside. We
approach the thing not directly but by pairing, by apposing symbol and thing" (MB72). By virtue of the space between the word and the thing, language both validates and obscures; it responds to the call of being and does violence against it. When a namer utters a name in good faith and authority for a hearer, the thing beheld in common is both sanctioned and freed: sanctioned because the name somehow formulates, i.e., gives form to, the being of what is commonly beheld; freed because that same formulation nevertheless makes a clearing for the thing to appear in all its strangeness. In its pairing, naming thus becomes a sort of "reconciliation," as Charles Bigger puts it.

Yet, this same pairing leads to the deadening of language. Words no longer signify. Instead, the distance collapses, and words mummify that which they originally disclosed. For the person who has long-since crossed the linguistic threshold, the word water has devolved. Certainly, I do not disclose being to you when I say water and point to the clear liquid that flows from a fountain. Signifier and signified have interpenetrated, and the word has lost its metaphorical potency. It has become evacuated. Ricoeur writes that "there are no live metaphors in the dictionary" (52), and by this I take him to mean that if naming does not both validate and obscure, language is dead.

It is the task of metaphor, then, to reinstate the distance between word and thing. Like naming, metaphor also employs a pairing, although it is often
considered a "wrong" coupling. But in the "wrongness" of its pairing, its strange coupling, metaphor reopens the queerness and obscurity of being—its uncanniness.12 Ricoeur notes that metaphor's function is close to what Gilbert Ryle has called a "category mistake." It is . . . a calculated error, which brings together things that do not go together and by means of this apparent misundersanding [sic] it causes a new, hitherto unnoticed, relation of meaning to spring up between the terms that previous systems of classification had ignored or not allowed. (52)

Thus, in "Metaphor as Mistake," Percy agrees with Gabriel Marcel who says that when "I ask what something is, I am more satisfied to be given a name even if the name means nothing to me (especially if?), than to be given a scientific classification" (MB72). Metaphor circumvents the abstract and general classifications that theory and science depend on, categories that make individual entities a "case of" or an "instance of" a general, discarnate rule. In this function of metaphor, the relation between gnosticism, death-in-life, and language becomes most clear. For if language merely provides a means of conveying discarnate, theoretical categories, then it bypasses lived time in favor of an immediate perception of the atemporal abstract. Theory, then, becomes more real than the concrete, and a "loss of the creature" ensues.13

Ricoeur argues that in its wrongness, metaphor not only circumvents previous systems of classification, but it depends on a "literal interpretation [an
interpretation based on prevalent systems of classification] which self-destructs in a
significant contradiction" (50). This notion of circumventing and destroying normal
classification not only fits in with the "apocalyptic" theme of Percy’s fiction and his avowed writing habits (an exercise in despair and recovery), but it also relates to a comment he once made to a French interviewer:

Recently I have read a book, you must read it: *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* by Robert Pirsig. I had been put off by the title a long time, but then I started reading it, and it certainly set me thinking. There are books, you know, even if you do not admire them, they give impetus to your mind. In that book the hero makes Aristotle and his logic responsible for all our evils—I personally make Descartes responsible—and has a nervous breakdown, which he overcomes by running and maintaining a motor-bike (Con 247).

One wonders if it is both Aristotle’s logic and his "classifications" that provided the "impetus" to Percy’s mind in the reading of Pirsig’s book. If it is both, then Ricoeur’s comments about metaphor and classification would seem all the more apposite.

For Percy, Gerard Manley Hopkins creates metaphors that self-destruct best, and so are thereby most able to capture the peculiar inscape of things. Lightning is not simply a flash of light in the sky, but

a straight stroke, broad like a stroke with chalk and liquid, as if the blade of an oar just stripped open a ribbon seat in smooth water and it caught the light. (quoted in *MB 78*)
Hopkins was surely the kind of poet Percy had in mind when he wrote that a poet can "wrench signifier out of context and exhibit it in all its queerness" (LC 106).

But metaphor does not merely rename what has already been named and subsequently ossified, as in the case of "lightning." It also institutes something altogether new. It names what has been "secretly apprehended" (inscape) but hitherto unknown, because unnamed. Metaphor, then, both renovates and invents. In either case, it establishes in the reader or hearer "a unique joy which marks man's ordainment to being and the knowing of it" (MB 71). It repeats the primordial naming act, and thus opens a new world and a new way of knowing the "old" world. It creates a new language.

Percy's thoughts on metaphor and language find a parallel in the writing of Paul John Eakin on autobiography. In a seminal chapter of his Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention, Eakin outlines the relative positions of self and language in the order of being. . . . When an "I" speaks, and especially in autobiographical discourse, is its language in effect an original speech, a self-validating testimony to the uniqueness of the self? Or is such speech always fatally derivative? Eakin shows how questions of the relation between self and writing have polarized into "a self-before-language or a language-before-self set of positions" (191).

Instead of adopting one pole or the other, Eakin looks for a third way, a position I characterize as "self-in-language."
Borrowing insights from a wide spectrum of linguistic philosophers, developmental psychologists, literary theorists, and autobiographers—some of whom were Percy's own favorites, notably Susanne Langer and Helen Keller—Eakin argues that "the origin of the self as the reflexive center of human subjectivity is inextricably bound up with the activity of language" (198). He posits a model, based on three moments, for "the history of self-definition" of an individual (219). The first moment involves the acquisition of language, whereby the self becomes aware of itself; the second concerns what some have termed the "I-am-me" experience, in which the self undergoes a doubling of self-consciousness, i.e., a "self-conscious experience of self-consciousness" (218); and the third, if it ever comes, is the autobiographical act, which

like the first moment ... is a coming together of self and language; [and] like the second ... is characterized by a double reflexiveness. ... The text of an autobiography is likely to recapitulate the second moment as a content, while the making of the text re-enacts the first moment as a structure. (219)

Put in terms I have developed throughout this chapter, Eakin seems to say that the act of autobiography repeats both the acquisition of language (as the "how" of the text) and the experience of self as self (as the "what" of the text). Autobiography creates a new language which both comprehends and constitutes the self even as its content is derived from a self already experienced as a self
determined and immeshed in language. Thus, autobiography evinces what Hillis Miller says about novels being "a complex tissue of repetition and of repetitions within repetition." In Percy's terms, autobiography evinces the "consciousness raised to the second power" which he understands true Kierkegaardian repetition to be (MB 96). Autobiography attempts to name the self—i.e., to sanction and free it—in the self-consciousness of language. It repeats the aboriginal naming act, and thus it provides, as Olney's classic work suggests, a "metaphor of self."  

It may be useful to examine Eakin's analysis of Helen Keller's experience at the well-house to show further the convergence (and divergence) of his and Percy's thought and to show what I see as Percy's contribution to the understanding of autobiography as metaphorical repetition. Eakin reveals how Helen Keller's experience is similar to the autobiographical act in three respects:

- it is an act of memory ("suddenly I felt . . . a thrill of returning thought");
- it is an act of language in which experience is transformed into symbol ("she spelled into the other [hand] the word water . . . my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers"); and
- it is a constitution of self ("that living word awakened my soul"). (212-13)

Eakin goes on to say that her experience taught her that "the self has a name," and that it is the task of autobiography "to state 'what we have learned we are'" (213). In this sense, then, autobiography would be both invention and derivation:
the self "has learned," but hitherto left unnamed. Is it possible to say that
autobiography, like Percy's metaphor, tries to capture the "inscape" of the self's
experience of self, to capture the secretly apprehended but hitherto unnamed
selfhood of the self, its "unformulated presence" (*MB* 69)? If so, this task,
according to Percy, both discloses and does violence to whatever being the self
may have.

Eakin often worries about, but cannot resolve, the challenge Jacques
Derrida poses to the relation of self and language. For Derrida and his followers,
writing can never manifest the self-presence, "the meeting point of the physical and
the intelligible," that we accept as the norm in speech. 17 Thus, autobiography can
never make present a self which is never self-present. Like Eakin, I cannot claim
to resolve the metaphysical question of self and language, but I can repeat some
aspects of Percy's thought on the question. In Chapter Two, I made much of "the
unformulability of the self," that the self, as Percy claims, names everything under
the sun except itself. The self has no sign of itself. In the case of Binx Bolling, I
argued that although the self cannot find a single sign for itself, its only avenue
toward self-discovery nevertheless rests in sign use, that is, language. Thus, as a
pairing of word and thing, the aboriginal naming act is bound to be frustrated
when it turns toward the self, because the self is "no-thing." No single word can
encompass it. On the other hand, metaphor, as a pairing of one named thing with
another ("flesh is grass"), an activity as I have tried to show that repeats both the aboriginal naming act and the acquisition of language, can provide an avenue to the self. In its queer, "wrong" pairing, metaphor can repeat the queerness of the self which has "fallen" into language. The self is a stranger and, with the help of metaphor's indirection, it can constitute and disclose its own strangeness. One is reminded of the subtitle of Percy's *The Message in the Bottle*: "How Queer Man is, How Queer Language is, and What One has to do with the Other." In this sense, Binx Bolling's experience of people as "dead dead dead" can be likened to dead metaphor. According to Binx, too many people "go gently into" a good dictionary. They accept some theoretical formulation of the self based on the tenets and classifications of scientific humanism, which would deny their queerness. They accept themselves as cases or instances of this or that abstraction.

This notion of strangeness, furthermore, provides an avenue for extending Eakin's lucid analysis of Helen Keller's experience. To the threefold similarity he cites between her experience and autobiography, I would add Keller's last sentence: "It would have been difficult to find a happier child than I was as I lay in my crib at the close of that eventful day and lived over the joys it had brought me, and for the first time longed for a new day to come." Here, Keller repeats ("lived over") the events of the day, not only in her crib, but also in the act of writing her text and in the text itself. The repetition adds a new dimension to her
existence: for the first time in her life, she has a future. She "longed for a new day to come." She longs, in essence, for the opportunity to repeat events, new and old; that is, she has entered into "anticipatory resoluteness." But the longing, like the "repentance and sorrow" she experienced at the breaking of her doll, indicates the very queerness, the strangeness of her newfound existence as a human. One neither longs nor feels strange if one is "at home." Only homo viator longs. Keller's entry into language, then, also marks her entry into the restlessness of her own unformulability, an inter esse which is a happiness, to be sure, but a happy longing. Her entry into language and the language that she employs to tell of that event (the text) are self-reflexive. I mean to say that her entry into language becomes the metaphor for herself, a story in which the "how" and the "what" interpenetrate to disclose a self now happy and strange but never quite itself.¹⁸

One of the places the "how" and the "what" overlap for Percy comes in the account of the "blue-dollar hawk." He first uses the story in "Metaphor as Mistake" as one of the opening examples of the sort of "misnaming" that can result in an "authentic poetic experience" (MB 65). Portions of the story reappear years later as part of the older Will Barrett's "memory trip" in The Second Coming. As in any true repetition, the two versions display both similarities and differences. Undoubtedly, some of the differences result from the demands of the particular rhetorical situations. An essay on the ontology of metaphor requires a clearer
demonstration of a thesis than does a section of a novel. Yet the very differences are themselves posited on a prior acknowledgment of similarity. Thus, the way Percy employs the story in the novel suggests that he repeats his previous work to reveal something about Barrett, something about the novel as a whole, and something about his narrative technique in general.

In "Metaphor as Mistake," the account goes as follows:

I remember hunting as a boy in south Alabama with my father and brother and a Negro guide. At the edge of some woods we saw a wonderful bird. He flew as swift and straight as an arrow, then all of a sudden folded his wings and dropped like a stone into the woods. I asked what the bird was. The guide said it was a blue-dollar hawk. Later my father told me the Negroes had got it wrong: It was really a blue darter hawk. I can still remember my disappointment at the correction. What was so impressive about the bird was its dazzling speed and the effect of alternation of its wings, as if it were flying by a kind of oaring motion. (MB 64)

I want to examine two aspects of this personal account. First, it rings true. As Percy writes, "everyone has a blue-dollar hawk in his childhood" (MB 69). One of my own, for example, must have been rather common for a child growing up at the time because I have heard others recount something similar to it. Louisiana had renewed its interest in its French roots through various grammar-school programs. Yet, being part of a middle-class, suburban (i.e. ahistorical) family, I really had little idea of what "French roots" meant. Thus, when I heard my parents and siblings speak of job possibilities and perquisites that certain
companies provided for their employees and/or customers, I mistook "Fringe Benefits" for "French Benefits." For the longest time, I tried to understand just what sort of benefits were being provided. When I learned the correct form, I shrugged at my own denseness, and I felt a bit chastened and disappointed that the "real" term was so straightforward. But I haven't forgotten the attempt to connect what little I knew of the business world with what little I knew of the French. I conjured a fascinating array of the exotic, the sexual, and the culturally elite. The name, "French Benefits," said much more than its descriptive counterpart. But then, I was only a boy.

At the time he first saw the hawk, Percy was a boy, too. This is the second aspect of the account I want to examine: while Percy is free with the first person pronoun in the account of the hunting trip with his father, the person to whom he refers when he cites the example in the rest of the essay is not the "I" of the present writer, now reflecting on the ontology of metaphor by means of an experience he had as a child, but "the boy" who had the experience (see especially MB 71). Like Henry Adams, Percy eschews the use of the first person pronoun for the third person. I do not want to make too much of this shift in shifters. Certainly, it is due in part to the fact that the example supports the thesis Percy pursues in the piece. In such a "scientific" essay, he removes himself from the writing so that the general idea may be more easily apprehended by the reader. Yet, could one not
say that, in his retrieval of the memory, Percy also retrieves and then distances himself from the disappointment he originally experienced at his father's correction? Furthermore, could we not say that, even here, Percy rejects his father's foreclosing of the possibility of being?¹⁹

In the account as he writes it, it is "I" who "can still remember the disappointment." Yet, everywhere else in the piece, it is "the boy's delight," "the boy can't help but be disappointed," "the boy's preference," and so on (MB71). Thus, the philosopher of language now sitting at his desk in Covington, Louisiana, seems to forget the "I" of his account and to posit someone quite other ("the boy") who experienced the wonder and disappointment of the name and its subsequent correction. This strange shift between "I" and "the boy" opens a distance that can be viewed as a repetition of the strange distance in metaphor which, of course, forms part of the content, the "what," of the essay. However obscure and distanced, then, the essay is not only about the mistake upon which metaphor inevitably depends, it also enacts that same mistake by distancing the writer from "the boy," and then both from the father, who proved so disappointing. In the language of the text, Percy repeats the argument of the text itself: language and metaphor mediate experience by means of distance and indirection. The writer can never relive the experience as it was lived by the boy; he can only write it. In the writing, Percy seems to evince something of Keller's discovery of longing, for
he, too, seems to long for a time before his disappointment. Like Keller, he senses an unformulability that nevertheless calls for formulation in language. The writing, however wrong, remains the only avenue through which the experience might be both renovated and created. It provides Percy with a link between his *autos* and *bios*. "Metaphor as Mistake" thus becomes part of the mistaken metaphor by which the "I" of the writer reconciles himself with "the boy" of the experience. In this essay, Percy not only adds to his reader's understanding of the relation between metaphor and the queerness of language and being, but he reveals his own concealment in metaphor (his own strangeness) as well. He discloses himself as "enveloped" and "comprehended" in the mystery of language.

2. *Metaphor and the Mystery of Narrative*

If it is true that Percy turned from writing essays to writing novels because he wanted to emulate the French, who "see nothing wrong with writing novels that address what they consider the deepest philosophical issues" (*Con* 183), then his use of the blue-dollar hawk account in *The Second Coming* would seem to confirm his self-stated purpose. Whereas the account in "Metaphor as Mistake" serves as an example that supports a philosophical thesis, in the novel it becomes an episode which finds its place in a larger configuration. But in the type of novels that Percy writes, the account should nevertheless serve something of its original
philosophical purpose. I want to explore Percy's fictional repetition of this account to see what light it can shed on his "repetitive" narrative technique as a whole, especially with regard to plot and metaphor.

In some of his early essays and interviews Percy often made comments which suggest a lack of concern with plots: "I'm not primarily concerned with plotting a story" (Con 24); "by following a predestined plan with outline, like some writers, I could foresee the action and likely it wouldn't go veering off on another path. But I can't work like that" (Con 8). To Shelby Foote, who often tried to goad Percy into working from an outline—Foote himself seemed obsessed with plotting—Percy once wrote: "The French really kill me—it's all form. Come to think of it, you would like them better than I do" (SHC). And later, he wrote:

The French are idealogues, i.e. madmen, and yet without them we'd sink into a torpor. The mind-body split, locked-in ghost in a machine on one side, structure and world on the other, me with the former, you with the latter, like I used to make ghostly spiritual (but flyable) Lockheed Vegas and you used to make solid structural admirable perfect unflyable P-51s. (SHC)

And toward the end of "From Facts to Fiction" (1966), a piece about "how it came to pass that a physician turned writer and became a novelist" (Signposts 186), Percy refers to John Barth's comment that the age of the nineteenth-century novel has passed:
I agree. When I sat down to write *The Moviegoer*, I was very much aware of discarding the conventional notions of a plot and a set of characters, discarded because the traditional concept of plot-and-character reflects a view of reality which has been called into question. (*Signposts* 190)

Despite these disavowals of structure and plot (and what seems to be a backhanded swipe at Foote's work), Percy, like any writer, nevertheless has to plot his novels. His stories have to be "followable." Since the "traditional concept of plot-and-character reflects a view of reality that has been called into question," it seems likely that Percy turned once again to his philosophical mentor, who called much into question, to derive and create his narrative technique. In *Repetition*, Constantin suggests that "repetition is a crucial expression for what 'recollection' was to the Greeks. Just as they taught that all knowing is a recollecting, modern philosophy will teach that all life is a repetition" (131). If Kierkegaard is right, then it would seem likely that narrative, the primary means by which we know life, would also evince repetition. I have already cited Hillis Miller's and Caroline Gordon's references to narrative repetition. In "Narrative Time," Paul Ricoeur has also written on the subject, and his thought helps to clarify the type of plotting that Percy turns to in the wake of the collapse of the "traditional" novel.

In this essay that seems to serve as a short recapitulation of his three-volume opus, *Time and Narrative*, Ricoeur suggests that
every narrative combines two dimensions in various proportions, one chronological and the other nonchronological. The first may be called the episodic dimension, which characterizes the story as made out of events. The second is the configurational dimension, according to which the plot construes significant wholes out of scattered events. . . . I understand [the configurational act] to be the act of the plot, as eliciting a pattern from a succession.

Despite their relationship of polarity with respect to chronology, both episode and configuration evince temporality. The episodic dimension "tends toward the linear representation of time." The succession and progression of episodes reflects the "irreversible order of time common to human and physical events" (178-9). The configurational dimension, however, "is more deeply temporal than the time of merely episodic narratives" (179). Ricoeur suggests that configuration imposes Kermode's "sense of an ending." When a story becomes well known retelling takes the place of telling. . . . Then following the story is less important than apprehending the well-known end as implied in the beginning and the well-known episodes as leading to this end. (179)

Time is not nullified "by the teleological structure of the judgment which grasps together the events under the heading of 'the end.'" Rather, this grasping together in configuration involves a deepening of time; it involves repetition: "By reading the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, we learn also to read time itself backward. . . . In this way, a plot establishes human action not
only within time . . . but within memory" (180). Furthermore, memory is not on the level of episodic time. Rather,

it is the spiral movement that, through anecdotes and episodes, brings us back to the almost motionless constellation of potentialities that the narrative retrieves. The end of the story is what equates the present with the past, the actual with the potential. The hero is who he was.

(186)

This narrative repetition possesses a forward movement as well; it discloses "the complete retrieval in resoluteness of . . . inherited potentialities" (186). Spanos’ view of repetition as both a mnemonic and projective activity converges with Ricoeur’s. I’m not sure, however, that Spanos would appreciate the company.22

It seems to me that all of Percy’s novels display the type of narrative repetition that Ricoeur writes of. The Moviegoer, for example, begins with a "spiraling" and layering of memory. The first three paragraphs take the reader from the present of Binx’s receiving a note from his aunt to the memory of his brother’s death to the memory of going to a movie with Linda. Then Binx gives a description of his life in Gentilly. We are not brought back to the present until page eight. In those same pages, Binx introduces us to ideas of certification, the search, science, consumerism, and stoicism, all of which will find further elaboration and repetition as the novel progresses.
Furthermore, the beginning and end both concern death, as does a good deal of the "middle," although death of a different sort. Scott's death is recounted in the beginning as a memory, and the epilogue recounts the story of Binx's and Kate's visit with Lonnie the day before his death. This account is also out of sequence with the present of the epilogue. After Scott dies, Aunt Emily enjoins Binx to "act like a soldier" (MG2), thus inviting him to become a "southern stoic." But Binx embraces a Christian view of death when Lonnie dies. One of Lonnie's brothers asks Binx: "When Our Lord raises up [sic] on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?" "He'll be like you," Binx responds (MG210). Thus, while the two accounts repeat one another and provide a frame for the action of the novel, they do not establish a relationship of circularity and closure. Rather, their relation manifests the "retrieval of inherited potentialities" from the narrative itself. Binx tells us at one point that he is at home neither in his aunt's stoicism nor his mother's Catholicism. At the end, however, he recapitulates (and capitulates to) both of these "potentialities"—he goes to medical school as his aunt had wished, and he affirms a Christian view of death, and life. Thus, he is who he was, both the same and other. The end repeats the beginning, and to read this novel from the end foregrounds the wanderings Binx undergoes throughout the book. Just as Binx retrieves the "inherited
potentialities" from the two sides of his family, the narrative retrieves its own possibilities into a configuration of pilgrimage.

Thus, the narrative repetition in *The Moviegoer* takes place on an even larger scale. In "Physician as Novelist" (1989), which is itself a repetition of "From Facts to Fiction," Percy reflects on his first novel:

> The novel, almost by accident, became a narrative of the search, the quest. And so the novel, again almost by accident—or was it accident?—landed squarely in the oldest tradition of Western letters: the pilgrim's search outside himself, rather than the guru's search within. All this happened to the novelist and his character without the slightest consciousness of a debt to St. Augustine or Dante. Indeed, the character creates within himself and within the confines of a single weekend in New Orleans a microcosm of the spiritual history of the West, from the Roman patrician reading his Greek philosophers to the thirteenth-century pilgrim who leaves home and takes to the road. (*Signposts* 193)

The narrative inherits potentialities, then, not only from its own progression but from the tradition of Western letters as a whole. *The Moviegoer* retrieves those possibilities and, like metaphor which both retrieves and creates, which posits something derivative and original, the novel renders them anew so that reader and writer (hearer and namer) may come together in a new/old metaphor for themselves. In its own derivation and originality, *The Moviegoer* sings a new song about something very old—the status of humans as neither angels nor beasts, neither theorists nor consumers, but as wayfaring pilgrims.
The same sort of narrative repetition takes place in *The Second Coming*, especially in Chapter III, where the story of the blue-dollar hawk recurs. The very recurrence in itself suggests the sort of retrieval Ricoeur writes of. Yet, as I hope to show, the retrieval of this particular episode in the larger configuration of this particular novel proves especially fruitful.

*The Second Coming*, like *The Thanatos Syndrome*, is something of a paradox in the Percy corpus. For one thing, it seems that Percy never anticipated writing another story about Will Barrett. On February 8, 1977, he wrote to Foote: "The only thing I'm sure of is that I can't do what you suggested, write a novel-type novel, the doings of Will Barrett after he leaves Santa Fe" (SHC). And to several interviewers after the book's publication, Percy admitted that he was not aware that he was retelling the story of Will Barrett until he was a hundred or so pages into the novel (see *Con* 183, 188, 194, 229). Yet, this work, it seems, more than any other of Percy's, not only returns to the earlier protagonist, but also presents itself as a "novel-type" novel. What I mean to say is that, while the work does not manifest an abandonment of his earlier view about the world of the traditional novel having passed away, it is nevertheless his most obviously structured and plotted work. The alternation of points of view from Will to Allie in the chapters of the first part and their coming together in Part Two manifest an unusual degree of structure for Percy. Furthermore, the "criss-cross" pattern of
the book—Will's "used up language" and Allie's fresh language, Will's memory and Allie's amnesia, Will's "sickness in health" and Allie's "health in sickness"—likewise points to Percy's concern with plot in this work. Moreover, the criss-cross structure itself demands a retrieval of the "plot" at the beginning of each new chapter, at least in Part One, since it alternates between the points of view of the two main characters.

After the book's publication, Percy was fond of telling interviewers that *The Second Coming* was "the first unalienated novel since Tolstoy" (see *Con* 190, 235), and this would seem to place it in the tradition of the "classical" novel. In a way, then, the book's structure suggests the retrieval of the inherited potentialities of the traditional "novel-type" novel even as it works against such a generic conception of the novel. One would be hard-pressed to find characters such as Will and Allie in any traditional novel unless one bypasses Tolstoy to enter the world of Walter and Tristram Shandy. Nevertheless, the book does present a "sense of an ending" and resolution very much different from Percy's previous works.

Now if one reads *The Second Coming* backwards, as Ricoeur suggests, from the perspective of its "ending," then one could return to almost any chapter to find the end repeated and embedded in the beginning. Yet, Chapter III, it seems to me, repeats more of Percy's philosophical concerns and points both
backward and forward in the novel to the themes and imagery that are themselves repeated. In Chapter III, Miller's "complex tissue" of "repetition and repetitions within repetition" begins to manifest itself. The opening words of the chapter, for example—"undoubtedly something was happening to him" (40)—repeat the vague "something" that haunts the opening lines of the novel: "The first sign that something had gone wrong manifested itself while he was playing golf. Or rather it was the first time he admitted to himself that something might be wrong" (3). As the first chapter and the novel as a whole progress, the unusual "something," instead of gaining a simple clarification, becomes both clearer and more obscure.

The definitions that presumably delimit this "something" offer only further possibilities. Is the something related to Will's chemistry or is it part of the "farcical" lives he and his fellows seem to be living? Is it depression, or is it a normal response to a deranged world? The narrative raises but never responds directly to these questions.

The imagery of spraying or dispersion works in a similar fashion. The sand trap into which Will falls on the opening page is repeated in the "spraying sand" of Ed Cupp's "skulled" sand shot in Chapter III (62). Both, however, are recapitulated in the locker-room bar, which is "dominated by a photomural of Jack Nicklaus blasting out of a sand trap" (11). The photomural, in turn, is itself repeated enough—significantly, in the penultimate sentence of Chapter III—to
suggest its relation to Will's memory of his father's suicide. At the end of Chapter III, the narrator tells us that Will's "entire life lay before him, beginning, middle, and end, as plain as the mural of Jack Nicklaus blasting out of the sand trap" (72). But this information comes only after Will has begun to reconstruct (as one does when one views a mural) the hunting trip in Thomasville with his father, the "most important event of his life" (3). Just as the locker-room bar is dominated by the mural of Nicklaus, Will's life is dominated by the memory of this hunting trip and his father's death.

In the account of the hunting trip, the imagery of spraying recurs in the description of the father's gunshot that was meant to kill the boy: "The boy saw the muzzle burst and flame spurting from the gun like a picture of a Civil War soldier shooting" (51). Later, as his father denies the true intent of his shot, he tells his son through D'Lo (the maid): "I had no idea that savage [the shotgun] had a pattern that wide" (54). The "pattern" not only suggests the pattern of the book, but also patterns Will's description of the suicide. It has, in a sense, become so wide as to pattern Will's cosmos: "brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world" (136).
It is while Will lay in the sand trap, too, that "a strange bird flew past" (3). The bird is not mentioned again until page forty-three, but there it is described in terms very similar to those in "Metaphor as Mistake":

Earlier he had seen a bird, undoubtedly some kind of a hawk, fly across the fairway straight as an arrow and with astonishing swiftness, across a ridge covered by scarlet and gold trees, then fold its wings and drop like a stone into the woods. It reminded him of something but before he could think what it was, sparks flew forward at the corner of his eye. He decided with interest that something was happening to him, perhaps a breakdown, perhaps a stroke. (43)

Here, "straight as an arrow," "swift," and "drop like a stone into the woods" all repeat the depiction of the hawk in Percy's essay. But the description in the novel joins the elusive "something" with which the book and the chapter begin, a "something," moreover, that not only disperses Will's thought, but also is itself announced by "sparks," yet another image of "spraying." Repetition discloses repetitions within repetition.

It is interesting to note, too, that the similes Percy employs to describe the hawk's flight in both the essay and the novel are clichés. They are the sorts of comparisons that no longer reveal, but rather entomb. They are, in a sense, dead metaphors. A case could be made for Percy's use of such dried up language in the essay. The main point of the blue-dollar hawk account, is, after all, to show that the sort of misnaming that happened to the young Percy is itself metaphor. Thus,
the similes used in describing the bird's flight are subservient, if you will, to the
main type of misnaming that "blue-dollar hawk" manifests. An attempt to depict
the bird's flight through vivid metaphor might have detracted from the point of
the essay. Can the same be said for the account in the novel?

The second mention of the hawk occurs just after Will sinks a putt, an "eagle" putt. Something fowl is going on here! Despite the "something" that is happening to him, Will still muses on and enacts the "small rites" of golf: "He was of two minds, playing golf and at the same time wondering with no more than a moderate curiosity what was happening to him" (43-4). The hawk, however,

was not of two minds. Single-mindedly it darted through the mountain air and dove into the woods. Its change of direction from level flight to drop was fabled. That is, it made him think of times when people told him fabulous things and he believed them. Perhaps a Negro had told him once that this kind of hawk is the only bird in the world that can—can what? He remembered. He remembered everything today. The hawk, the Negro said, could fly full speed and straight into the hole of a hollow tree and brake to a stop inside. He, the Negro, had seen one do it. It was possible to believe that the hawk could do just such a single-minded thing. (44)

The single-mindedness of the hawk retrieves elements of the account of the cat in Chapter I. The cat is "a hundred percent cat, no more no less"—i.e., of one mind—but people are often only "two percent themselves"—i.e., dispersed (15).

And Will's double-mindedness repeats the effect of the play on personal pronouns
in Allie's "Instructions from Myself to Myself" (24), in which she writes these sorts of sentences: "It took me (you? us?) all my life to make the discovery. Why so long? And then I (you, we) had to go crazy to do it" (36). Will's being of two minds also sets the stage for his meeting with Allie, his double, which takes place toward the end of the third chapter.

But the single-minded hawk and the double-minded Will also retrieve a major aspect of Percy's thought on language. Because of language, Percy argues, we experience a "semiotic fall," a consciousness of ourselves as knowers who can name and know everything in the world through the mediation of signs, everything, that is, except ourselves. With no name for the self, we are semiotically adrift, never quite ourselves. Since cats and hawks do not have language, they have not experienced the "fall" and thus are always one hundred percent themselves. That the single-minded hawk is also "fabled" furthers the complexity of the novel's tissue.

From the Latin *fabula*, "a narrative, story," and *fari*, "to speak," "fabled" implies the hawk's "storied" or "spoken" existence. Although labelled "wonderful" in Percy's essay, the hawk is nowhere called "fabled." It becomes so only in the story about Will Barrett and in the story he reconstructs in his memory. Barrett's memory, in fact, can be seen as both the subject and the agent of much of *The Second Coming*. Like Augustine, who, as Stephen Crites points out, tries to
"collect" his "dispersed" memories into a coherent form, Barrett struggles against the dispersion of himself as a son of his "dispersed" father. He tries to "grasp together" a story that will "make sense" of both himself and his father. At one time, "fabled" suggests, this task was not so difficult. Barrett lived in a storied world: "when people told him fabulous things . . . he believed them." Now, however, the only stories he hears are jokes, and what he hears is "not the joke, but the plan and progress of the joke," its structure (59). Barrett's fabulous world has been shattered and, fittingly enough, it was shattered during his father's attempt to repeat a "fabled" hunt (48).

But the fabled hawk and the fabled hunt do not imply the same thing. For the boy, "fabled" suggests a vivid metaphor, a time when language was not dead, when stories quickened the sense of the world. It repeats, in short, the repetition that is enacted in the aboriginal naming act. That is to say, it discloses the possibility of being. But in the "fabled" of the father's hunt, one senses the entombment of language. Like Constantin Constantius's failed attempt to repeat his trip to Berlin in Repetition, the father cannot repeat the legendary hunting trip:

This hunt had gone badly. The Negro guide was no good. The dog had been trained badly. The lawsuit was not going well. They, the man and the boy, had spent a bad sleepless night in an old hotel (the same hotel where the man had
spent the night before the great Thomasville hunt). The hotel was not at all as the man had remembered it. (48)

Here, "fabled" suggests the devolution of language, its capacity to do violence to being. Instead of opening possibilities, "fabled" in the father's case shuts possibility off, expressed quite literally in the father's attempt to kill both his son and himself. Unable to reckon with—unable to "story"—change in time, the father dispenses with language and memory in his cataclysmic self-dispersion. The "how" and the "what" intermesh. The novel both retrieves its own "inherited potentialities" and becomes the story of Barrett's struggle against his own heritage. One could even say that the rest of the book concerns Barrett's search for a type of dispersion that paradoxically unifies. The sexual nature of the father's suicide—"the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming" (136)—finds counter-expression in the "comings" (sexual and otherwise) that bring Allie and Will together in their difference.

It is interesting to note that at the time of the hawk's third mention in the chapter, Barrett's attitude toward the vague "something" that opens the novel has shifted. At first, the "something" seemed so dominant that "it occurred to him that he might shoot himself" (4). Yet, as I have already cited, when the hawk is mentioned a second time, the "something" holds only "a moderate curiosity" (44).
By the time the narrative returns to the hawk, there is only a "mild stirring of
curiosity... A little something or other was happening, but no more than that"
(64). This shift seems to indicate Barrett's preliminary movement outside himself
and the first hint of his future possibility, for immediately following the
description of the diminution of the "something," we are told that "one day he
heard a footstep. Someone was coming" (64). At this point, of course, the
"someone" is ambivalent. It could be the spectre of his father, who lures Barrett
toward self-annihilation and thanatos. Or, it could be the call of eros: in the very
next section of the chapter, as he hunts for his errant golf balls in the woods, Will
meets Allie for the first time.

The third mention of the hawk occurs just before their coming together. At
the same time he heard the footstep, he

saw the bird. A small cloud passed over the sun, the
darkness settling so quickly it left the greens glowing. A
hawk flew over, a dagger-winged falcon, its flight swift and
single-minded and straight over the easy ambling golfers.
When it reached the woods it folded its wings as abruptly as
if it had been shot and fell like a stone. (64)

The "cloud" retrieves the one he noticed as he lay in the sand bunker on the novel's
first page. There, it is one that "went towering thousands of feet into the air" and
that looked like the cloud "over Hiroshima" (4). Just as the nondescript
"something" has diminished, so have the proportions of the cloud. The rest of the
hawk's description is by now familiar: swift, straight, single-minded, fell like a stone. The distinguishing feature of this reference rests in the fact that the hawk is given a name. It is a dagger-winged falcon.

Artistic license surely allows Percy to change the names that appear in "Metaphor as Mistake"—"blue-dollar hawk" and "blue-darter hawk." But the character of the name here seems more akin to the disappointing "description" the father gives the boy than it does to the more vivid and truer "name" the guide gives. "Dagger-winged," like "blue-darter," suggests a class of bird, not its "inscape." If Will is awakening to the possibility of a future, if "someone is coming," and if the hawk is "fabled," then why would it be given a descriptive designation and not a name?

The important thing to remember here, it seems to me, is that Will is on a precipice. As the ambivalent use of "fabled" suggests, he is both on the verge of a nascent reawakening and caught up in the death-dealings of his father. Since I am reading the book backwards, however, since I am retrieving the inherited potentialities from the end, then what seems to be a description can be seen instead as a reawakening into language. Like Paul John Eakin's tripartite analysis of Helen Keller's entry into language, "dagger-winged" signifies Will's nascent autobiographical act. First, it is an act of memory. Will remembers everything, the narrator says, and the name itself is part of this remembering. From this
perspective, "dagger-winged" becomes a name on a par with "water." Second, it is an act of language; experience is transformed into symbol. The hawk, before unnamed, is somehow formulated and set free under the auspices of "dagger-winged." In the retrieval of this name from his memory, Will manifests the resolve to go on naming. This he does, not only in naming the before unnameable, as in the many "names of death" (246-48), but in his continued renaming, his reconstructing the "fable" of the hunting trip with his father. Third, it is a constitution of self. Will’s naming and renaming brings about "the second coming" of self with Allie. And finally, if I add the dimension of the future to Eakin’s triad, then the resolve to name further comes about by the grace of the "someone coming" to him. Having passed through the death of his father, Will now experiences the gain of repetition. "Dagger-winged falcon," then, like The Second Coming, is both something new and something derived. The hawk repeats the story as told in Percy’s essay, but it introduces a new name. And the novel repeats itself so that it might grasp together the dispersed selves of Will and Allie—and the reader—into a new fable.

Percy was once asked in an interview if he was worried about repeating himself in The Second Coming. He responded:

It’s been said that all novelists write the same novel over and over again. And since the kind of fiction I write is an
exploration to begin with, all I can hope to do is push the boundaries back. I'm convinced that in *The Second Coming* there's a definite advance. (*Con* 183-84)

Percy is right. There has been an advance; but it is an advance within a return. He returns not only to his own work, but also to the tradition of letters in America.

Reflecting on the work of Herman Melville, Percy once gave passing praise to the structuralists's concept of intertextuality (*Signposts* 200). *Moby Dick*, Percy writes, "was not only dedicated to Hawthorne, it was written at him" (200). He goes on to point out the paradoxical way Melville characterized his experience after writing his masterpiece. At once, Melville felt "broiled in hellfire" and "spotless as a lamb." Percy notes that the paradox might be understood by what Melville described as the "ineffable sociability" he felt: "Surely this is the key to the paradox—the ineffable sociability in writing. Intertextuality, if you please. As lonely as is the craft of writing, it is the most social of vocations" (200).

At whom did Percy write his works? With whom did he feel these ineffable sociabilities? The answer perhaps rests in the concept of repetition. Since his fiction is explorative in nature, Percy not only names something new for his reader, but also writes constantly at himself; he *repeats* himself. He pushes the boundaries back, while remaining within limitation nonetheless. What he says of Melville's work is equally true of his own: "As the narrative unfolds, one becomes aware that in its very telling, something else is being told, a ghostly narrative of
great import told by a ghostly self, perhaps one's own shadow self" (201). *The Second Coming* repeats the story of Will Barrett, but it also repeats the account of the blue-dollar hawk, however transformed. That account, in turn, repeats the constitution of the self in metaphor, which as repetition repeats the mystery of language and narrative.
Notes to Chapter Four

1. (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard UP, 1982) 3. Further references will be made parenthetically in the text.

2. It interesting to note that in his adulation of the coach horn, Constantin ostensibly wants to prove the impossibility of repetition. Yet, here again, Kierkegaard masters his irony. For the very difference in similarity (the instrument is the same instrument no matter how often one "wheedles" different notes from it) is precisely what repetition is all about.


8. *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian UP, 1976) 50. Future citations will be made parenthetically in the text.


10. "Symbol" here refers to "sign." In this essay, Percy used the vocabulary of Cassirer and Langer instead of Saussure.

11. "Resonance of the Word" 47.

12. In his perceptive article which I have already cited, Charles Bigger emphasizes the fact that Percy’s stress on the name serves precisely this purpose—to reinstate the strangeness of being.
13. Here, Percy's thought would seem to converge with that of Jacques Derrida, especially Derrida's critique of the traditional view of language as making present some prior transcendent and Platonic "idea." Of course, there are serious differences as well. Whereas Percy wants to maintain a connection between identity and difference, transcendence and immanence, and incarnation (understood here as a simultaneous, "always already" indwelling of transcendence and immanence), Derrida heralds difference and would seem to cut off the possibility of transcendence.


16. It may also be useful for readers to look again at Keller's description of this moment. I have quoted the entire passage in note 14 of Chapter Two.


18. In the forward to Henry Kisor's remarkable autobiography, *What's That Pig Outdoors? A Memoir of Deafness* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), Percy calls Kisor's work "a moving account from a novel perspective of the universal experience, which most of us take for granted, of the human breakthrough into language" (viii). Certainly, this same phenomenon is what so captivates him about Helen Keller's *The Story of My Life.* Thus, just as he reads Keller's *Life* as a metaphor of the acquisition of language, that is what strikes him about Kisor's work.


20. Percy refers to Barth's comment in an interview with Carlton Cremeens in 1968 (see *Con* 24-25). There, he seems to contradict his earlier statement in "From Facts to Fiction": "John Barth said it was no longer possible to write nineteenth-century novels, a novel which has the usual characters where the characters interact, where there is a story line, a development of
plot, a resolution—a classical novel. I'm not sure I agree with him." Percy qualifies this statement by saying that he would agree with Barth to the extent that the view of the world which the "classical" novel reflects has now passed away.

21. I borrow the term from Paul Ricoeur's "Narrative Time." See note number 4 above. I will make further citations to this article parenthetically in the text.


25. It is noteworthy that Jimmy Rogers, the joke-teller in this scene, is described as being "all plans and schemes and deals" (59). The idea of plans is repeated in Chapter IV, when the narrator recounts Allie's struggles against the "plans" of her mother, her father, and Dr. Duk (89-94). She decides to make her own plans: "What if I make plans for me" (96). This resolve to act on her own carries over into her renovation of the greenhouse and stove. The idea of plans, furthermore, finds a place in the later chapters of the book when Leslie makes plans for Will and Will and Allie make plans for themselves.

26. Some parallels between the account of the hawk and that of the peregrine falcon in *The Last Gentleman* suggest an even more complex tissue of repetition—i.e., woods/park, gun/telescope, "something"/"sign."
Chapter Five

Coda: Autobiography, Repetition and Percy

I am having the uncomfortable feeling of having at last been stuck in my slot—as a "Christian Existentialist." I hear sighs of relief all over: now that they know what I am, they don’t have to worry about me.

—Walker Percy to Shelby Foote
January 29, 1979 (SHC)

Speaking at a memorial service in honor of Walker Percy at St. Ignatius Church in New York City, Robert Giroux commented:

We come here today to honor the memory and the work of Walker Percy, a superb novelist, a distinguished man of letters, a witty and searching critic, a great American. If I resist the adjective Southern, I am only following Dr. Percy’s example.¹

Toward the end of his eulogy, however, Giroux dramatically sums up Percy’s life and work with two words which seem to emphasize the very Southernness he earlier resisted: "[Percy] was truly a man for all seasons, whose life and work exemplified that pair of concepts all too rare today—probity and honor." Despite the fact that the South has never been the sole proprietor of these virtues, Giroux nevertheless seems to link the two, the region and the qualities. He had earlier
referred to Colonel John Pelham's appearance in Percy's witty, "The Last Phil Donahue Show" in *Lost in the Cosmos*.² There, Giroux characterizes Pelham as "a Confederate officer, representing probity and honor." Thus, while he refrains from the label in his opening remarks, he nevertheless seems to place Percy squarely in the South in his closing ones.

Giroux's wavering signals something students of Percy often encounter: the difficulty they have in placing him. This difficulty, furthermore, seems to be related to the category of repetition. If it is true that repetition as *inter esse* finds a prominent place in Percy's works, then it may not be surprising that Percy himself resisted labels. Labels foreclose possibility; they demand an adherence, one might say, to a prescribed proscription. That is, they place the abstract before the concrete. They make of the self a neat, rounded-off package. Percy not only resisted the label "Southern," he also resisted "professional," "philosopher," and "linguistician." He did so, moreover, despite his having spent almost forty years of his life thinking and writing about the unique phenomenon of language.

In Chapter Two, I suggested that such a resistance might indicate what I called Percy's methodology of repetition. Not only did Percy return time and again to his "extra-literary" pursuit, but the posture of the nonprofessional, "being between," allowed him a fresh view of what "professional specializations" can too often foreclose in jargon and theoretical apparatus. Percy, thus, took the posture
of the genuine researcher, not the technician. As he writes in "The Loss of the Creature":

The technician . . . [is] always offended by the genuine research man because the latter is usually a little vague and always humble before the thing; he doesn’t have much use for the equipment or the jargon. Whereas the technician is never vague and never humble before the thing; he holds the thing disposed of by the principle, the formula, the textbook outline, and he thinks a great deal of equipment and jargon. (*MB 61*)

Such a researcher is not entirely different from Binx Bolling, who although not disposed to the "pure research" of science as his Aunt Emily seems to think, nevertheless goes out into the world and "doesn’t miss a trick." Such a researcher is, in short, a *homo viator*.

"Research" itself derives from the Middle French *recercher* which means "to travel through, survey." Both words, thus, indicate a posture of wandering or wayfaring. As I tried to show in Chapters One and Two, *homo viator* is a label that both limits and opens possibility. The same could be said for research. As an exploration, its posture is similar to that of *homo viator*—i.e., it places one "no-place." When all is said and done, there is always more to be said and done. There will always be those who go back to retrieve the inherited possibilities of the researcher’s work. One’s place never really solidifies; one is always displaced. Like *homo viator*, then, research is a label that resists labelling.
Despite his status as a researcher, Percy nevertheless used his own sort of tools, notably essays and novels. And the "thing" he explores in both his fiction and nonfiction is really "no-thing"—i.e., the self which places itself in the world in and through language. Without the breakthrough into language, Percy argues, the self has no world. Already, the sort of reflexivity I mentioned in the last chapter reveals itself. For Percy uses language to get at the self that is always and already immeshed in a world of language. The medium which is his tool is also the medium whose relation to the self and world he explores. Because the self and language are inextricably joined, one can step back from neither.

Yet, because of language, the self develops a self-consciousness of itself. And what it experiences is a sense of its own displacement in language. The self cannot place itself as it places other things and so it wanders, in search of a place that would quell the anxiety of its fundamental displacement. Percy's writing bears the indelible imprint of a self-consciously wandering self. It speaks of his own self and life, however transformed either may be in the final product. In his writing, as I suggest at the end of the last chapter, Percy repeats himself. Even an ostensibly "scientific" essay such as "Metaphor as Mistake" traces the attenuated links of a self who is both different and same—the "I" of the present writer, and the "boy" around whose experience the writer frames part of his argument.
Repetition, thus, becomes necessary. Percy tries time and again in both the novels and the essays to come at his displacement in a new way. In a Faulkneresque comment to Linda Whitney Hobson, Percy said that his work up to that point (1981) had been a failure:

I think I've failed in these five novels and in *The Message in the Bottle*, but I've got a good idea for the next one. You know, I'll tell you a secret: I think the only thing that keeps the novelist going (and I'm sure that any other novelist would admit this) is that you are going to do the really big one.

Unlike Faulkner, Percy does not say that his works are "splendid failures."

Rather, the impression he creates is that he forgets his previous failures to go after the "big one." Whether Percy ever wrote the big one (the great novel) is not for me to say. Readers must decide for themselves. Instead, the phrase itself intrigues me. If it is taken not solely as a compound noun—i.e., the masterwork—but as a noun modified by an adjective—i.e., the big ONE—then Percy's comment suggests a search for the unity of repetition.

In this regard, his works begin with himself as a denizen of the postmodern world who experiences himself as displaced in language, and they return to himself as somehow unified, however tentatively—else why continue to go after the big one?—in the difference of writing. In his writing, Percy repeats his life and his self in the hope of creating the unity of self, life, and writing, which is autobiography.
But just as *autos*, *bios*, and *graphein* are different elements of one word, so the self, life, and writing of Percy do not find a simple unity. The self and the life are both different from and the same as the writing which portrays them. Yet, as I suggested in the last chapter, they find a reconciliation in the difference of metaphor. Percy’s works begin and end as "autobiography," which, like "novel," is also a label that resists labelling.

Using the works of three critics in James Olney’s collection, *Autobiography: Essays Theoretical and Critical*, Joseph Fichtelberg categorizes three approaches to the problem of the relation between self, life, and writing: "Olney’s unity, Renza’s difference, and Sprinker’s multiplicity are the three possible responses to the problem of the subject in autobiography." Does the self find unity in the telling of its story? Does it forever differ from the story told? Or does it endlessly multiply itself (and eventually evaporate) in the telling? I have tried to show that in reading Percy’s work as autobiographical repetition, "Yes" seems to be the answer to all three. I do not mean to be overly paradoxical here. What I suggest is that my reading of Percy’s works in light of autobiography has been an attempt to de-struct the necessity of seeing autobiography as falling within the exclusive limits of one or the other school. All three "trouble with," as Olney puts it, "the self and consciousness and knowledge of it." And Percy’s works trouble with these same issues. His research brought him face to face with the
predicament of the postmodern attitude, and although I have read his works in a postmodern light, Percy himself seemed to have retreated from fully embracing its tenets. Thus, his transformation of experience into art calls forth at once all three views of the relation between self, life, and writing. Percy’s place remains elusive.

In the errant label that autobiography provides, he seeks a place for the self whose only place is provided by the travelling of research. His research returns him—and the reader—to the label "homo viator."

In her talk at the memorial service in New York City, Eudora Welty spoke about Percy’s novels as an exercise in defamiliarization:

On first reading a novel by Walker Percy, we might rather soon ask ourselves, Where are we? Where in the world is he taking us? . . . What was until a moment ago a familiar time and place (even, perhaps, "Southern") is signalling "Danger!" . . .

Where is Walker Percy taking us?

We are still at home. But home lies before us in a different light, and its face is turned toward a new perspective, but it’s still where we live. Only we may have altered.

Percy takes us somewhere that seems familiar yet is really strange. In so doing, he ends his exploration in the place it began. He returns us to ourselves so that we know ourselves to be both at home and not at home, at the place of exploration, the no-place of the self whose life is a wandering in the strangeness of language
and writing. The unity of Percy's self, life, and writing derives from the strange unity of repetition and the limited possibility of autobiography.
Notes to Chapter Five


2. In his talk, Giroux mistakenly calls him "Palmer."


Works Cited

What follows is a list of the works that have been cited in either the body or the notes of dissertation. I consulted numerous other books and articles that did not find their way directly into my work. Linda Whitney Hobson's *Walker Percy: A Comprehensive Descriptive Bibliography* (New Orleans: Faust Publishing, 1988) was especially useful to me.


---. Letters and Papers. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill.


---. "Carnival in Gentilly." Forum (University of Houston) 3 (1960): 4-18.


Vita

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Major Field: English

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Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

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