Walker Percy's Return to the Feminine.

John Patrick Zmirak Jr

Louisiana State University and Agricultural & Mechanical College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses

Recommended Citation
https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_disstheses/6226

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Historical Dissertations and Theses by an authorized administrator of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
INFORMATION TO USERS

This manuscript has been reproduced from the microfilm master. UMI films the text directly from the original or copy submitted. Thus, some thesis and dissertation copies are in typewriter face, while others may be from any type of computer printer.

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleedthrough, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send UMI a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

Oversize materials (e.g., maps, drawings, charts) are reproduced by sectioning the original, beginning at the upper left-hand corner and continuing from left to right in equal sections with small overlaps. Each original is also photographed in one exposure and is included in reduced form at the back of the book.

Photographs included in the original manuscript have been reproduced xerographically in this copy. Higher quality 6" x 9" black and white photographic prints are available for any photographs or illustrations appearing in this copy for an additional charge. Contact UMI directly to order.
WALKER PERCY'S RETURN TO THE FEMININE

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

John Patrick Zmirak, Jr.
B.A., Yale College, 1986
M.F.A., Louisiana State University, 1990
May 1996
Dedication

This work is dedicated to the memory of Sheryl Hoffer.

In other times, her spirit would have bound
those feet to shamble cobbled convent walks,
retracing the steps of habit, anonymous
as one black bead on a chaplet; the Rule
— that shrouds a gold-green life in lead and blights
a proud name, a womb’s hope, a hearty will —
have spread for her its stony shelter wings
and schooled her adventuring soul for flight.
Then thorns and scourges, blood-drinks and barren fasts
— these Gothic novel props, Sadist trinkets —
made literal, and twisted purposely,
might salve the mind that burns to die with Christ
and reconcile her to life, at last.
Alas, for darker, more hopeful ages!
May He Who knows what suffering is worth
count hers, and reckon it as if she spent
herself on stony floors by Teresa,
or stood with Joan and mocked the flames that paled
before such incendiary spirits.
And my less fervent soul — dry clod of earth
that strains to shove some ragged skeins of grass
into the sun — may I compose myself
to prayer, and force a single blade to yield
at last, one dew-drop as pure as her tears.

— Good Friday, 1996.

Eternal rest grant unto her, O Lord, and may perpetual light shine upon her. May
her soul, and all the souls of the faithful departed, through the mercy of God, rest in
peace.
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my director, Dr. John May, for his ongoing help, advice, encouragement and virtually paternal concern during my long sojourn in this department, over which he ruled so benignly for many years. Also, to the members of my committee: Dr. James Babin and Dr. Edward Henderson, and especially Dr. Louis Simpson who interrupted his retirement to serve, I offer thanks for their patience, persistence and generosity. Other teachers whom I have special cause to thank include (but are not limited to) Dr. Fred Hobson, Dr. Robert McMahon, Dr. Lawrence Sasek, Prof. Rick Blackwood, Dr. Charles Bigger, Dr. Andrew Horton, Dr. John Lowe and Dr. Robert Edgeworth. In an age of helots, I have fallen among gentlemen.

For their love and loyal friendship, I thank: Ellen Chauvin, Paul Connell, Denise Matychowiak, Wilfredo Comellas, Charles Richard, Allen Kirkpatrick, Chris Zentner, Duncan Anderson, Lisa Shreve, Margaret Hart, Charles Coulombe and Lawrence Auster.

For the greatest gift, the gift of Faith, I first thank my mother, Theresa Marie Zmirak; then Miss Gertrude Best, Father John Hardon, S.J. and Father Dermot Mulloney, C.S.Sp.

For the financial support that made my work possible, I thank the LSU Alumni Federation, Intercollegiate Studies Institute, the taxpayers of this state, and all those who have employed me during these ten years, particularly Roy Fletcher and Rolfe McCollister.

For all that I am, for showing me all I could ever hope to become, I thank my father, John Patrick Zmirak, Sr. His industry, decency, honor, intelligence, piety, and his kindness shine always for me as a beacon of what a man should be, and a glimmer of the Fatherly love of God. May I someday live up to his example, and bring honor to his name.

iii
# Table of Contents

Dedication ........................................................................................................... ii  
Acknowledgements ........................................................................................... iii  
Abbreviations ................................................................................................. v  
Abstract .............................................................................................................. vi  
Chapter One: Sex and Metaphysics ................................................................. 1  
Chapter Two: The Moviegoer — Exodus from the Wintry Kingdom ............... 50  
Chapter Three: The Last Gentleman — And the Flight from Woman .............. 105  
Chapter Four: Lancelot — A Blood Wedding with the Feminine ..................... 145  
Chapter Five: The Second Coming — The Ecstasy in the Garden ................... 183  
Works Cited ..................................................................................................... 222  
Vita ..................................................................................................................... 227
Abbreviations

Works By Walker Percy:


By William Alexander Percy:


These works will be referred to in the text of this dissertation by these abbreviations, followed by page number. All other works will appear in footnotes at the bottom of the page.
Abstract

What has been lacking in the corpus of interpretation of Walker Percy's work is a synthesis of approaches, a reading of the novels that unites the philosophical, psychological, theological, and linguistic insights that have accrued over three decades of criticism, and applies them to the vexing question of sexuality within his novels. In the present work, Percy's four central, non-satiric novels, The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, Lancelot, and The Second Coming, are analyzed in the light of the Christian allegorical tradition, which employs sexual categories to explicate the metaphysical order, and to inform sexuality with meaning.

In each of Percy's novels, the center of consciousness is a male protagonist who has experienced a radical alienation from the feminine — as traditionally conceived in the Christian tradition, to entail both the lower reaches of Dionysian emotion and the highest capacity of the human soul for supernatural faith. This alienation recapitulates the "flight from woman" described by Catholic psychoanalytic writer Karl Stern. Such an alienation is endemic in the post-Cartesian West, subject to ideologies that denigrate the feminine even as they purport to liberate women. The Cartesian *cogito* severed the mind from the senses, effecting a split in human consciousness whose ramifications are still being felt. Post-Cartesian philosophy has encouraged the rejection, denigration, and denial of the feminine aspects of man — especially the body, the emotions, and religious faith. This rejection found itself repeated in the Southern Stoic philosophy to which Percy was heir through William Alexander Percy. Cartesian and Stoic traditions were major influences for Percy, in response to which he accepted the Catholic faith, largely for its sacramental resistance to dualism.

The persistent trouble which Percy's male protagonists encounter when they attempt to form relationships with women is itself an allegorical representation of the Western rejection of the feminine, which can only be healed through the reintegration
of the feminine as an active principle within the psyche. We find such a re-integration only in Percy’s fifth novel, *The Second Coming*. 
Chapter One: Sex and Metaphysics

If literature is about anything, it is about human nature. If it serves any purpose higher than diversion — a mental enactment of that incessant travel which Pascal diagnosed as the flight from unresolved anxiety — then it serves to ask questions and suggest answers about the mysterious predicament in which every individual finds himself on this earth. The novel, the first “modern genre” to arise after the shattering of Western thought in the Reformation, directly addresses the nature and prospects of the newly problematic, “historical” human self. If we see the novel as the literary form that arose to meet a specific need — the “self’s” need to interpret itself in relation to desacralized Time — then we understand the “philosophical novel” not as a mixture of genres, or an “impure” form of literature, as some “aesthetic” critics have suggested (most notably Nabokov, who assails Dostoevsky with precisely this complaint). If the novel’s cultural task is to attack the problem of selfhood, then the philosophical novel is simply the most direct form of assault, a charge head-on into the heart of the matter. The problem is — as Pickett learned — that most such charges fail. In this study, I hope to show why most of the novels of Walker Percy succeed, to examine Percy’s choice of objectives, his angle of attack, the forces against which he struggled, and the nature of his achievement.

The model of creation that I think most applicable to Percy’s work differs considerably from the images of the artist that have pervaded modernist aesthetics. Briefly summarized, these have images have included Matthew Arnold’s high-priest of culture, whose function is to conserve, interpret, and contribute to “the best that has been written and thought”; James Joyce’s Promethean creator, whose rebellion against God the Father cuts him off from mother country, mother Church, and material

---

reality,\textsuperscript{2} a self-consecrated mystagogue in the gnostic religion of art; Donald Davidson's ethnocultural bard, who defends a way of life in its particularity by uniting his own vision with the myths and history of that place, elaborating and re-ordering them for use in the future, and fighting his people's enemies as his own.\textsuperscript{3}

Instead, we find in Percy an artist who attacks the problem of selfhood directly, struggling to establish a personal anthropology that makes his own life and artistic creation possible, to claim and embody in writing the Catholic faith that he had accepted at the very outset of his writing career. To make this faith his own, to form himself according to it so that it became integral to him rather than an accretion or a pious ornament, Percy needed to elaborate the Catholic interpretation of the self in novelistic form — to show why that gospel was \textit{not} simply another theory of man presented to the intellect for inspection, but the very "news" Percy had been waiting for, which made sense of his life in the here and now and the hereafter. Like Dante's pilgrim conversing with the souls in Hell, Percy's heroes encounter a series of figures who espouse or embody false gospels, whose supposed answers to man's alienation are themselves symptoms of that condition. Such ideological constructs cobbled together to replace or eclipse the complex, traditional representation of man in the orthodox Western tradition Eric Voegelin calls "second realities."\textsuperscript{4} Always a pungent satirist, Percy allows characters who promote such misconceived theories of man to damn themselves in their own words, allowing the cracks in their rhetoric to speak volumes, to adumbrate the truth by way of negation. Indeed, the voice of orthodoxy


\textsuperscript{3}Simpson, p. 167 ff. In Davidson's self-conscious adoption of the bardic vocation, he continued and improved upon the work of such 19th century southern apologists as Timrod and Page. Ironically, even as white southern writers largely abandoned this role, black authors seemed to adopt it. Even today, novelists such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are seen as spokesmen for the \textit{ethnos} of "African America," whether or not they in fact represent the attitudes of most black citizens. It is a curious anomaly.

volumes, to adumbrate the truth by way of negation. Indeed, the voice of orthodoxy itself is usually muted, distorted or disguised in Percy's fiction, allowed to express itself only in the Kierkegaardian mode of "indirection."

The literary results of Percy's philosophical skirmishes vary in quality and complexity, according to how deeply a particular false gospel appealed to Percy and how much energy he expended in exorcising it. Generally, the more tempting Percy found an ideology, the more imagination he put into the characters who embodied it; the less it attracted him, the more likely he was to depict it in simple caricatures, using his consummate ear for dialogue, jargon, and inauthentic speech to render, say, the superstition of the actress Dana in *Lancelot*, the pseudo-eastern mysticism of Doris More in *Love in the Ruins*, or the conspiracy-paranoia of Mrs. Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*. In some contexts, Percy resorts to simple taxonomy, drawing in a few simple strokes the range of existential alternatives his characters are pursuing. In one scene in *Lost in the Cosmos* we encounter eleven different people, each in his own "orbit of transcendence," ranging from an abstracted nuclear physicist at Los Alamos to an unreflective tourist from Moline, Illinois (*LC*, pp. 130-133). Such scenes are often uproariously funny, and frequently serve to illuminate philosophical distinctions that Percy considers essential; nevertheless, they also shift our attention away from the texture of the literary work, towards the realm of intellectual history and polemic. They risk "the loss of the creature" — missing the dramatic particulars of a given man's situation for the rhetorical satisfaction of classifying him and refuting his position.5 This was a risk from which Percy could not afford to flinch. As an explicitly philosophical novelist he was hunting for an authentic, metaphysically complete account of the self — large quarry indeed, requiring high-caliber

ammunition. The scattershot weapon of broad satire allowed Percy to give the self-
deifying, self-cancelling ideologies of our time the most important gift a novelist is authorized to offer, in Percy’s words “a good kick in the ass.”

Sometimes he delved far deeper, and it is those trips that plumb the gnostic depths of the post-Christian psyche, yielding the most powerful pleasures, rewarding the reader with insight and pathos, as the addled, bemused Percy protagonist approaches the moment of decision between salvation and spiritual death. On these trips into the underworld, two antagonists stand out in bold relief in novel after novel, grim and stern, armed with mighty temptations and woeful countenance, burnished bright by tradition or gleaming with angelic knowledge and raw power, like two golems grimly barring the road back to life: the white southerner as hero, and the western scientist as Faust. These two inauthentic selves imposed themselves on Percy, the first through his upbringing and social position as an aristocratic southerner, the second through his intellectual aspirations in a “scientific” age. Quarreling with them, he quarreled with his own deepest longings and oldest compulsions and, in doing so, left behind a legacy of provocative intellectual dissent and high literary art. This study will treat four of Percy’s novels in detail: The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, Lancelot and The Second Coming, omitting Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome because these two primarily satirical works function less as explorations of the self than as intellectual tours de force, sophisticated spoofs of ideologies and anthropologies that Percy considered heretical — satires on the order of C.S. Lewis’ Pilgrim’s Regress or Erasmus’s The Praise of Folly.

---

Prometheus on Horseback: The Southern Hero as Ersatz Messiah

In a slim but perceptive study of southern narrative, *The Figure of the Hero in Southern Narrative*, Michael Kreyling suggests that Walker Percy's first and most powerful antagonist, the presence with whom he would always have to wrestle on his path to personal and literary productivity, was the lingering figure of the southern hero, a literary-cultural type that southern letters had inherited from Europe and transfigured to meet the needs of the region. As Kreyling points out, the hero is a male figure who possesses

an inherent and instantaneously acknowledged capacity to render the provisional nature of any situation or condition into part of a consecrated pattern.... [T]he heroic figure guarantees meaning "from above" the horizontal plane of simple contingency.\(^7\)

In the south, the situation to be consecrated was the paternal order, the rule of the white fathers who headed the plantations and the legislatures, who dominated the regime of "extended families" (as W.J. Cash described the south), whose leadership was deferred to in times of crisis, who led the south through the nightmare of invasion and defeat, and through the long resistance to Reconstruction. As Richard King points out in *A Southern Renaissance*, the southern hero was not merely a figure of fiction, but an exemplar set up for eligible white men to emulate that exerted real force on the behavior of the leaders of the region. The hero stood at the center of the mythic structure King calls the "southern family romance" — a psychological and social semiotic that allowed generations of upper-class southern white men and women to construct their identities and find their places in society, to preserve what the Agrarians extolled as an organic, traditional society in a country that tends toward atomism and levelling.\(^8\)

\(^7\)Michael Kreyling, *The Figure of the Hero in Southern Narrative* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1987), p. 5.

In the teeth of America’s love affair with democracy and egalitarianism, men of the south wove a different, equally compelling myth, based on subordination, ritual, and paternalism. This myth formed the self-conceptions of the most powerful men in the south from the age of Jackson until the administration of Johnson, teaching them that their duty as white men was to preserve order and honor, both of which depended on certain hierarchical political arrangements and social distinctions. An assault on these institutions was an encroachment of utter chaos upon the region and the family — like an assault by a gang on the family demense. It is no wonder that so many southern men fought so heroically in the War for Southern Independence — and so bitterly afterwards, to pull together the pieces in defeat.

In literature, then — and putatively in history — the southern hero is the locus of political power in his immediate region, the patriarch who rules one of the extended families that constitute southern society. He preserves women from dishonor, summons men from lives of chaos or cowardice, preserves the hierarchy (hieros-archos: meaning “sacred order”) from the collapse of distinctions, and “protects” the slaves from their own impulses and the depredations of poor whites. By guaranteeing political stability, he stands above and against history, transcending the entropic, feminine matter of temporality, and conferring upon it the masculine stamp of eternity. The hero attains his transcendence by restraint: self-restraint in the face of temptations to venality, sexual “dissipation” and cowardice — and restraint of others who threaten the “transcendent” order he imposes and embodies.

The hero, by right of inheritance and inner virtù, defends the traditional order against foreign incursion and internal revolution; by his very presence he magnetizes the disordered elements of society that otherwise might collapse into the miasma of anarchy, social levelling, and miscegenation. He is “the linchpin of a powerful social, historical, and psychological myth, which supports the unanalyzed structures of
individual and group awareness and behavior.”9 The hero restores a consecrated order, preserving it against material enemies who would overwhelm it by force or fraud; likewise, the author of an heroic narrative summons his readers to rally around the order thus consecrated, to fend off intellectual enemies who would attack the “sacred” origins of the hierarchical order with economic or historical explanations.

The hero “forg[es] a foundation myth that in large measure aimed to supplant history in the southern imagination as the explanation of the nature of things.” In resorting to the heroic tradition, the writer seeks nothing less than “the power of directed myth to establish unity where history supplies only contingency.”10 The hero controls the interpretation of the past — making it “sacred” and unassailable — and thereby seals off the future, freezing it in the amber of myth.11 Events are neither random, nor defined by the mysterious progress of the City of God through history towards the eschaton; rather they culminate in the actions of the hero, self-consecrated military Messiah on the Old Testament model.12 His actions are exempt (it is asserted) from historical critique; thus he transcends the past. The order he founds (it is hoped) is exempt from change, and thus determines the future. The heroic self attains a secular eternity through the enactment of a ritualized pattern; he escapes the realm of contingency not through grace but by his own efforts. If (as Kreyling suggests) the cultural power of this figure is borrowed from Christ, the nature of his ambitions make

9Kreyling, p. 11.
10Kreyling, p. 29.
12Kreyling suggests, following Theodore Ziolkowski, that “the historical Jesus is the prototype of all Western heroic figures, and the messianic narrative is the keystone of Western history that obtained until the modern age” (p. 4). I think it more fruitful to consider this: since Christ’s kingdom was explicitly “not of this world,” and He disappointed the Jews to whom He came precisely by renouncing the possibility of an immanent, politicized messiah-state, it is rather in heretical movements that we find secularized messiah-figures, such as Joachim of Flora famously predicted. As Eric Voegelin suggests, such movements generally began by declaring Christianity either corrupt or superseded, and proceeded to “perfect” Christ’s work through secular means. Generally, this entailed a radical critique of creation and a rebellion against God the Father. (Cf. Nietzsche’s Zarathustra, and Dostoevsky’s Grand Inquisitor.) The hero who imitates Christ is always in danger of becoming Antichrist.
him the rightful heir of Prometheus. He participates in the modern gnostic revolt against the order of being.

In *The Dispossessed Garden*, Lewis Simpson makes this link directly, refuting the 19th century mythmakers (north and south) who linked the "chattel garden" of the plantation order with the feudal heritage of Europe. He describes the attempt to found a pastoral order on the basis of chattel slavery and capitalism as a southern variation on the basic American theme:

> Throughout our national history we have tended strongly to idealize the Republic in a gnostic spirit. Having secularized Christian perfectionism and millenarianism, we have assumed that we know the end of history; and that this is America, which is the "immanentization of the Christian idea of perfection." In sheer idea — in the most commonly accepted version of the American Dream — America is one of the most alluring fantasies of a new world the gnostic imagination has conceived. Our whole national character, and our existence as individuals, is colored by the assumption that America is a "recreation of being." 

Nor were the men of the South immune to this fantasy:

> The imagination of the Old South responded to the dynamics of the revolutionary redemption of mankind from the past by the gnostic concepts of modernity. Southerners, for example, spurred by recurrent dreams of perfecting the South as a great tropical slave empire — embracing Mexico, Central America, Brazil, the islands of the Caribbean — transferred the magic of nineteenth-century "American Manifest Destiny" into terms of a "Southern Manifest Destiny."

As Lewis Lawson points out in his analysis of William Alexander Percy, even in decline — in the hands of a self-consciously failed generation — the gnostic ambition

---

13. Allen Tate preceded him in this observation. The shabby "feudal" tournament in *The Fathers* parodies attempts by southerners to identify their order with that of medieval Europe. Simpson reiterates: "Early overrun with a divisive and fragmenting Protestantism, the Old South, as Allen Tate pointed out long ago, found no center in the profession of a traditional religion and thus was without a prime requirement of a traditional society," Lewis Simpson, *The Dispossessed Garden* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1983), p. 80.


embodied in the “traditional” heroic order slept lightly, “vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,” ready to awaken when the time came.16

The suggestion that the Stoic/heroic position contains the seeds of gnosticism and a Promethean revolt against the orthodox order of being finds support in the writings of W.A. Percy, Walker Percy’s older cousin, the man who raised Walker to adulthood after his father’s suicide and his mother’s suspicious death. In both his autobiography Lanterns on the Levee and his poetic works, W.A. Percy combines in his world view an absolute, unshakeable elitism, and an insistent hostility to Christian faith. In fact, the two attitudes seem to be inextricably linked for him, as his attempted critiques of that faith repeatedly make clear. For instance, to describe the ethics of ordinary Christians, he selects a tendentious example — people who believe that their status as “born-again” guarantees them salvation, regardless of their sins — and offers it as typical. (As a well-catechized Catholic who’d frequented the confessional until age sixteen, he certainly should have known that his former church teaches no such thing — nor indeed, do most Protestant churches.) Having thus ‘demonstrated’ the ignobility of Christian ethics, he dismisses the whole edifice of faith — that produced or preserved most of the cultural treasures he so reveres — with the phrase “Thus the Negroes believe!”

We see similar sentiments expressed in W.A. Percy’s long poem “Enzio’s Kingdom,” a mournful celebration of the heretical Emperor Frederick II (and implicitly of W.A. Percy’s own father, LeRoy, whom he idealized as an exemplar of the southern heroic tradition) by his imprisoned son, Enzio. The Emperor sets forth his religious policy as follows:

“Protect the masses in their breeding moil; Feud them; and sweeten them by fear’s remove: But do not build for them, for they are doomed

To everyday contents and grievances—
Unspeculative, level, themselves their study.
But, oh, the flashing-eyed minority,
The Enzios of the world, the sons of light—
These would I turn free-pinioned on an earth
That they would make august and radiant!

"I will concede the masses to the Pope:
Their stultified obedience makes for peace.
But I'll not give my eaglets to his cage:
For them there shall be freedom if it takes
The very toppling down of Peter's throne...."

Seen in the light of these verses — which surely speak for W.A. Percy himself
— the Stoic creed of noblesse oblige that so charms a reader throughout Lanterns on
the Levee seems more like the creed of a revolutionary gnostic elite; albeit one fallen on
hard times, awaiting a riper moment, a leader who will redeem its cause. W.A. Percy
explicitly stated that he hoped for the coming of such a mystagogue, for the "seer or
saint who sees what I surmise — and he will come, even if he must walk through
ruins" (LoL, p. 321). His dreams are mirrored in The Moviegoer by Aunt Emily,
who used to talk with Binx and Sam Yerger of

the new messiah, the scientist-philosopher-mystic who
would come striding through the ruins with the Gita in one
hand and a Geiger counter in the other. (M, p. 145)

W.A. Percy's yearning for the lost greatness of the age of the Fathers and his
casting ahead to a forceful restoration of order by a warrior wielding secret knowledge
are both characteristic of the southern heroic tradition. As Lewis Lawson shows, the
Stoic world-view in the south reached back to Thomas Jefferson himself — the
archetype of gentleman planters. (Indeed, Percy's description of the "dubious" truth
value of the Gospels echoes Jefferson almost word for word.) The Stoic system,
Lawson points out, was particularly well-suited to a slave-holding society. Unlike
Christianity, which at least contains implicitly the moral equality of all men — as
Abolitionist clergy were never slow to point out — Stoicism specified a rigid moral

18See also Lawson, Another Generation, p. 128.
hierarchy, at the top of which stood "aristocratic virtues." While orthodox Christianity teaches that all men are sinners and anyone may be saved by repentance, the Stoic view divides the world dualistically between those who uphold such values as duty, honor, good manners, honesty, and graciousness, and those who neglect them.19

In Southern Honor, Bertram Wyatt-Brown distinguishes the "genteeel" tradition of southern Stoicism, with its emphasis on inward righteousness and the willingness to patiently endure evil, from the "primal honor" code that demanded public revenge for wrongs and the preservation above all of a "good name." If an adherent of primal honor esteemed himself based on the approval of the community — especially of other men of honor — the southern Stoic drew that jury of honor into himself.20 He created an internal tribunal of great men, whose lives he learned to revere in classic texts (especially Plutarch), in works of history, and by reputation. These heroes might range from Socrates and Marcus Aurelius to Robert E. Lee and even one’s own recent forebears. An admirable result of the Stoic tendency was the filial pride it evoked — moving Robert E. Lee to spend his final years writing not about his own, but his father’s exploits; inspiring William Faulkner to memorialize his great-grandfather Col. William C. Falkner in The Unvanquished.21

Less happy was the immense psychological burden such an internal pantheon placed on the shoulders of the latter generations, who lived in a political and economic world that left little room for heroic action. Faulkner portrayed the plight of these heirs in his sagas of the latter-day Compsons, the Reverend Gail Hightower, and other “degenerate scions” of heroic forebears. These scions displayed, according to Richard King,

a gradual decline in energy and will as generation gave way to generation. As Florence King has sardonically suggested, the Southern scion was urged by his mother "be half the man your daddy was," and the son took her injunction to heart." The upshot was that, after three generations or so, the heroic age of the grandfathers who had fought the Yankees and driven out the carpetbaggers had given way to grandsons, pale copies of their fathers, and fallen prey to brooding, drink, or other destructive impulses. Colonel John Sartoris gives way to young Bayard Sartoris, hell-bent on self-destruction; General Compson is followed by the psychotic Quentin Compson. Though lacking the dramatic flourishes, this pattern was at work in the Percy family; at least Will Percy felt it to be. This pattern was in part the result of historical change, of the inevitable breakdown of the southern version of the American gnostic dream. Stoicism served very well as a code of action for Thomas Jefferson, leader of the first American Revolution, or Robert E. Lee, leader of the Second. The Redeemers who fought Reconstruction, and the Bourbons (such as W.A. Percy's own father) who protected "their" blacks from the depredations of the poor whites, could alike function within the confines of the same heroic code. But for Percy's generation, the mantle of heroism had been tainted; it had been seized in Europe by demagogues left and right, while in America the heritage and symbolism of the Confederacy had been seized upon by the lowest sort of race-baiters. Heroic action — once approved, applauded, and demanded by an educated public — had suddenly been thrown into question. The World War, in which Percy partook without seeing much action, was a grim spectacle of mass slaughter fueled by propaganda machines, ending in a vengeful and fragile peace. The struggle at home in Mississippi, to uphold the civic order and protect the blacks from the poor whites and from themselves, was a long and fruitless one whose end promised (Percy thought) only the destruction of his own social class and the triumph of barbarism. Seeing all this, Percy created a personal version of Stoicism more wintry and melancholic than the creed of Jefferson, imbued with a Victorian pessimism that seemed more and more justified as the dark decade of the 1930's wore on.
The Mississippi River, and the levees that held it in check, are important presences in Will Percy's autobiography — indeed, one might consider them as characters, so central are both to the region he inhabited, and to the chronicle that emerges from his life. For Percy, the river incarnates the mighty, destructive life-giving forces of nature (and the anima), the levee man's cultural and ethical defenses against its chaotic power. In his analysis of the changing relationship of levee to river, we see reflected his mournful sense of the gradual displacement of the heroic tradition from the world, and his own exclusion from its male pantheon:

The low levees of 1893, ineffectual as they were to keep the Mississippi off the cotton fields, themselves had certain real advantages. When they broke, the water trickled in gradually, stood quietly over the land two or three weeks, deposited a fine nutritive layer of sediment, and withdrew without having drowned anybody or wrecked any buildings or prevented a late planting of the crop. You called that an overflow. Our great dikes of today, when once breached, hurl a roaring wall of water over the country, so swift, so deep, so long-lasting, it scours off the top soil from the fields, destroys everything in its path, prevents crop-planting that year, and scatters death among the humble, always unprepared and unwary. (LoL, p. 244)

The new levee, "forty feet high . . . built by caterpillars and drag lines," cuts off the land around it from the life-giving forces of nature, containing them until the point of inevitable collapse, when they break loose in a flood of destructive energy and ruin. A symbol for Percy of modem mass democracy and the technology that guarantees its rigid, fragile order, the new levee leaves him feeling superfluous. The old levee — like the old order — was policed by aristocrat volunteers with pistols, and allowed more contact between man and nature.

Percy here posits a radical difference between men of his own generation and the fathers who came before them; while the fathers contained and controlled these chthonic forces (the lower classes, blacks, women, physical nature, and sexuality), they were never alienated from it; indeed, the very realm of heroic action served to
mediate between the masculine ego and the world of anima. Percy’s latter generation, as suggested by Kreyling, carried on the anxieties and expectations of their forebears, without the warrant to act on them.\textsuperscript{22} The only possible responses were withdrawal into melancholy resignation, the adoption of aesthetic solipsism, or the search for an heroic death. Each of these alternatives occurs prominently in \textit{Lanterns on the Levee}.

W.A. Percy — always self-conscious and artful in his choice of symbols — draws an explicit link between the decline of the heroic and the change in the levee. He mourns the passing of the old system, with its greater possibilities for heroic action and its closer contact with the feminine, in the following recollection of the heroes who patrolled the porous levee walls:

\begin{quote}
While off duty the guards played freeze-out poker for licks administered by the winner with Mr. Cousen’s broad, water-soaked razor strop to the squinched posterior of the loser as he bent miserably over a log. No winner ever stayed his hand out of friendship or compassion. The game was gay and brutal. Hotspur and the heroes beneath Troy would have joined it and have been companionable in that company. It attracted participants from the whole neighborhood. One planter, affable and tipsy, rode up on his five-hundred-dollar mare as the players were recovering from the last game in a swim. Without dismounting he whipped his snorting mount into the thick of the swimmers, roaring out the while: “Gotta head like a fish and a tail like a man. I’m a mare-maid.” Evidently the Delta gentry of fifty years ago were not effete or decadent. I like to hear about them — theirs was such a magnificent male combination of gentleman and pioneer — but I doubt if I should have been at ease living among them. They were a bit too lusty and robustious; that good rough streak of Rabelais in them was unfortunately omitted from my make-up. (\textit{LoL}, pp. 243-244)
\end{quote}

Percy stands at the remove of an entire generation, behind the concrete wall of an impermeable, fragile levee, contemplating the fathers he so reveres cavorting in the murky waters. These men are unafraid of the river’s power, having become by their actions the happy masters of nature. (One of them goes so far as to claim a special

\begin{footnote}
\textsuperscript{22}Kreyling, p. 125 ff.
\end{footnote}
kinship to the water, as a "mare-maid"; he does so without ever surrendering the masterful position, sitting on horseback with a whip.) These men are neither alienated from the feminine nor subject to it; they rule over it as untroubled lords of creation—at least, that is how William Alexander Percy, watching the sun wink out behind the cypress trees, recollects it.

***

As I will explore in greater depth in Chapter 2, for most of his life the elder Percy could not manage to renounce the possibility of some heroic restoration, or to absolve himself for failing to bring it about. Building and preserving a masculine identity, for Percy, depended on filling one's niche in the socio-cosmic hierarchy and fighting to preserve that order—to keep "the bottom rail" from "getting on top." Richard King suggests that the leaden shadow of this implicit expectation lay so heavy on Percy's generation of southerners that many of them were crushed by it. King cites Percy as a noble and tragic instance of this, and speculates that William Faulkner might have become another—and joined the string of failed and self-destructive would-be heroes in his early works. Only by creating and then sacrificing the figure of Quentin Compson, a man transfixed by the twin fetishes of heroic action and female chastity, could the South's greatest myth-maker escape the soul-consuming "Southern Family Romance," the heroic order in all its sexual and political implications.23

Walker Percy's own escape from the nightmare that consumed his elder cousin and the heritage of doomed and death-dealing father figures is well documented by William Rodney Allen in *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer*.24 Extending and supplementing Allen's insights, in this work I will explore Percy's treatment of fathers and mothers; of male protagonists and female characters; of the masculinizing spirit of

---

23King, p. 77 ff.
modernity and the feminine reality that it eclipses; and finally, of the relation between the heroic masculine ideal and the paternity of God. I hope to link the psychological analysis (and self-analysis) that pervades Percy's novels with the allegorical conventions of the Catholic tradition; to show that his treatment of masculine and feminine characters is in part a reflection of a well-known traditionalist critique, which points to the suppression of the feminine as an aspect of gnostic modernity; and finally to suggest that in the four novels I am treating here, Percy's own philosophical analysis is profound and frequently subtle.

According to this broader critique, the poison of gnosticism runs deeper, and rises higher, than a purely psychological study could suggest. It corrupts the individual's relation to God, driving him into competition with Him for dominance and suppressing the psychic habits that make faith possible; it taints his relationship to physical nature, sexuality, and reproduction, invoking the crippling ghost of dualism — that tendency of the self to identify with the mind and treat the body as "other," a hostile and dehumanizing force.

This implicit Manichaeanism becomes explicit in Faulkner's early works, where such "degenerate" scions of great families as Bayard Sartoris, Gail Hightower, and Quentin Compson share a

repulsion... toward woman... sanctioned by the myth that woman is not a conscious being, is in fact inimical to the conscious (logic, reason, will, art) by virtue of the involuntary ebbs and flows that control her life. Man pursues the antithesis of woman in art or science or the angelic fraternity of war and is denied fulfillment by her intrusion.

---

25The term "traditionalist" is used for lack of a better one; thinkers who took part in this critique might well disclaim it. I use it to denote such defenders of the core traditions of Western Christian teaching on transcendence, immanence and creation as Eric Voegelin, Henri de Lubac, Karl Stern, Martin D'Arcy, Jacques Maritain, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Gertrud von le Fort, Louis Bouyer and others.

27Kreyling, p. 142.
The hero does not find a social context that will allow him to wield power fruitfully, find an appropriate mate, and father a line of worthy heirs. Women are no longer reliable “vessels of honor,” but instead the emblem of a chaotic and soul-extinguishing nature. Even worse, thanks to their sexual power, they remind him of his own fleshly nature, of his status as a mere creature subject to death and history — rather than a creator of order who freezes history in his wake. *They reveal the truth of his being,* and he hates them for it.

The feminine is the sign of creaturely existence, from the Song of Songs to Goethe’s *Faust*, the emblem of immanence, earthly limitation, and natural vitality. He who would assume “angelic” or divine existence must deny it, must repress his own affinities with the body, the earth, and women. In so doing, he turns the earth itself into a monstrous and alien place — a charnel house that imprisons the “pure” spirit of mind and masculine will-to-power. He begins the love affair with death that haunts the literature of the Decadents, and the works of Walker Percy. In this light, we begin to see in Percy’s literary corpus an extended act of exorcism — and reunion.

So viewed, the psychological degeneration of the southern hero was no historical accident, the fruit of Appomattox or Reconstruction. Even if the southern states had triumphed, repelling the brutal and unconstitutional invasion of their territory by federal power, even if they had in fact founded a vast slave empire as Fitzhugh dreamed of doing, there would still have been no escape from the reality of human limitations or the continuing processes of history. Just as America’s sense of mission and Manifest Destiny has collapsed into an orgy of guilt and multicultural recriminations, so the victorious south would have suffered the depredations of human history, and awoken from its gnostic dream.

---

No set of material circumstances, however favorable, will permanently support the metaphysical distortion that tries to freeze history in place — especially in the West, where the Classical heritage and Christian doctrine alike reveal the absurdity of such a quest. As Eric Voegelin demonstrates throughout his works, any attempt to locate immanent meaning and closure in history — whether through heroic political action, intellectual speculation, or technological progress — violates the order of being and belies the fact of every person’s submersion in history. It is built upon a lie, and doomed to failure. What motivates this futile quest? Voegelin suggests one answer:

The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the cognitio fidei, the cognition of faith, will afford; and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.29

This “firmer grip” replaces the theological virtue of faith, which is infused directly by God as a gift to the soul, mediated through human authorities and conveyed by an historical institution, the Church. Instead, the intellect grasps by its own power a “gnosis” born of speculation or experiment. While faith comes from hearing — in Percy’s terms, from the trusting acceptance of “news” — gnosis is an attempt at attaining salvific knowledge sub specie aeternitatis, as a discovery or deduction that grants the knower explanatory power. The gnostic will not wait with the Virgin for the Dove to descend upon him; he looks for transcendence in the laboratory, in the maze, in the lurid pink eyes of starving rats. Or he makes a laboratory of society, and then the starving eyes belong to men and women in the millions, as our century has learned all too well.

The Angel in the Corpse and the Will to Power

Another figure inhabits Percy’s fiction — a father-figure to rival the hero — who offers his protagonists some of the same psychological satisfactions in a more contemporary form. The Faustian scientist, unlike the hero, does not rely on cultural nostalgia or the power of tradition. His prestige is not subject to decline thanks to social change, since it grows not from the structure of a particular social order, but from the demonstrable power of empirical science and the technology it creates. Consequently, he always seems a modern figure, a man of the future, even though his historical origin predates the southern plantation order. For this reason, when Percy’s characters turn away from Robert E. Lee and begin to emulate Descartes, they do not feel they are reaching back but racing forward.

Like the hero, the scientist gains the power to interpret the future by controlling the interpretation of the past — in this case by replacing nostalgia with iconoclasm. For the post-scholastic philosopher and scientist (the two were not clearly distinguished until the late 19th century), the past is a dross, a burden, a decaying mass of unfounded theories, chthonic prejudices, and deadening authorities — the “idols” Francis Bacon sought to smash. Marlowe’s *Dr. Faustus* was the first eloquent spokesman for this rejection. In the first scene the good doctor runs through the whole body of received knowledge — logic, medicine, law and theology — naming the fathers of each field and rejecting them. Aristotle, Galen, Justinian, and Jerome are all invoked and dismissed, in favor of the more “practical” art of magic and its sponsor:

---

30Even today, words like “revolutionary,” “innovative,” and “new” bear a positive valence in popular culture; they are “sexy” words which sell magazines, medicines and movements. If many of our best minds have become cynical about technology and progress, popular culture has yet to catch up.

O, what a world of profit and delight,
Of power, of honor, of omnipotence
Is promised to the studious artisan!
All things that move between the quiet poles
Shall be at my command. Emperors and kings
Are but obeyed in their several provinces,
Nor can they raise the wind or rend the clouds,
But his dominion that exceeds in this
Stretcheth as far as doth the mind of man
A sound magician is a demi-god.
Here try thy brains to get a deity! (I, i: 54-64)

The mind contains within itself the power of self-deification. For the moment, Faustus is bound to the opaque “lines, circles, signs, letters, and characters” of magic. Soon enough, in the mind of the real philosopher Descartes, these would be replaced by “clear and distinct ideas” that shine luminously revealing the mind to itself, washed pure of sensual occlusions and the sediment of the past.

Descartes declares in The Discourse on Method: “[A]s far as all the opinions I had received thus far were concerned, I could not do better than to undertake once and for all to get rid of them.” This might seem the hubris of a single thinker; certainly it would have seemed so to any Classical or Medieval philosopher, for whom “originality” generally implied “heresy.” In the event, Descartes’ dictum became the axiom that drove western intellectual history from that point on, as Jacques Maritain points out:

[Every modern philosopher is a Cartesian in the sense that he looks upon himself as starting off in the absolute, and as having the mission of bringing men a new conception of the world.]

The scientific or philosophical *magus* exerts control over the past, removing himself from its causal chain of tradition, reducing it to shadowy prehistory. He thereby dominates the future, through the explanatory power of his theory and the technological power it unleashes.

---

33Maritain, p. 167.
And power is the point, for Descartes, Faustus and their heirs. St. Thomas put sensible reality (physics) at the base of science, building up concepts from perceptions, positing an unbreakable connection between the mind and the world. He placed metaphysics at the apex of thought, the highest science that pointed by the *analogia entis* beyond nature to its Author. Descartes turned medieval science on its head, declaring that sense data and tradition were alike unreliable, that speculation within the mind was the basis of all certainty. In his famous cogito, Descartes designates self-awareness as the ground of truth. Almost as an afterthought, he posits God as a guarantor that his mind can be trusted; after that, little more is made of theological matters, and Descartes quickly moves on to the serious business of physics and mechanics. Rather than the mind's highest object, the proper study of all men and the crowning jewel of human knowledge, God becomes a theoretical step, a certainty device for a scientist with more important things to do, a mathematical cipher like $\sqrt{2}$. In Descartes' quest to make men the "masters and possessors of nature," God is replaced as the telos of all speculation and research by applied science.

If theology and philosophy must be adapted and truncated, the better to serve as foundations for technology, the new Queen of Sciences, philosophic anthropology suffers a worse fate. As the awareness of mystery is banished from human consciousness — or diverted into the "depths" of the irrational or the unconscious — the scientific thinker finds himself explaining his fellow men and their behavior, even their innermost thoughts and highest aspirations, according to "objective," reductionist theories. He must implicitly exempt his own thoughts from this reduction, of course, or he cannot claim to "know" anything at all. (*MB*, p. 22) By this theoretical step, he cuts himself off from the human family, the bonds of community, the vital world of nature, and even his own body — all of these are "other," subject to distortion and

---

34 Maritain, p. 112.
35 Maritain, p. 91.
illusion, impossible to know in the particular. It is possible to know about them through generalized laws, even to control them through technological means; it is never possible to commune with them. It's lonely at the top.

Patricia Lewis Poteat describes the disturbing picture of the self that the scientist (and his lay disciples) must confront:

Descartes describes his body as a "machine made up of flesh and bones" and then goes on to suggest that his living flesh is not importantly different from that of a corpse. This rather unnerving comparison comes in the midst of his discussion of "thinking thing" (mind) and "extended thing" (body), and in the wake of both his proposition "Cogito, ergo sum" and his superordination of mathematical reasoning as the model for all knowing. . . . Implicated therein is a picture of the self: reasoning intellect riven from corpse-like body, aspiring to the certitude of clear and distinct ideas modeled upon the univocal meaning of a mathematical equation. This is the picture of the self funded by that spirit of abstraction and obsession with theory which issue in the Cartesian model of clarity. This is also the picture of the self which equates the personal with the "merely subjective" and so renders it philosophically trivial.36

In such a world, one's own body becomes an alien realm. It cannot be the bearer of meaning, the place where the soul indwells, the site of visible means of grace — from eating the Eucharist to the marital act of love — the ground of holiness, the mediator of beauty and joy that declares that the individual is welcome in the world. As Karl Stern points out, this modern ontology recapitulates the reaction of a neurotic who has been traumatized in early childhood, his vital period of identification with the mother foreshortened or marked by coldness, hostility, or absence:

the words for mater and materia, mother and matter, are etymologically related in more than one language. The sense of mystery which the poet and contemplative have towards nature; the sense of imbeddedness, of a personal relationship of protectiveness or cruelty, of the familiar or the awe-ful — all this is not a matter of animism or of a vague sentiment which will eventually be repealed by

36Poteat, Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age, p. 16.
scientific elucidation. Quite the contrary; if a kind of Cartesian ideal were ever completely fulfilled, i.e. if the whole of nature were only what can be explained in terms of mathematical relationships—then we would look at the world with that fearful sense of alienation, with that utter loss of reality with which a future schizophrenic child looks at his mother. A machine cannot give birth.37

This cold and hostile world, where the “wire mother” has replaced mother nature, is the Faustian scientist’s utopia, his answer to the southern slave arcadia. Once he has reduced his fellow men to “nature,” to mere links in the chain of mechanical causality, it is simple for him to go one step further, to make himself the “master and possessor” of men, the rational principle that helps them to become ever-happier organisms in ever-improving environments, under his paternalistic control.

The transaction becomes easier when laymen, impressed by the prestige of science, eagerly agree to this transaction. Imitating their scientific teachers—without their knowledge or intellectual rigor—these consumers identify themselves entirely with their minds and their desires, and dispossess their own bodies as scientists have the world’s body. They imagine themselves as angels or gods, inhabiting a pleasure-and-survival machine with certain needs but without moral significance. Sexual ethics, indeed the whole sacramental sense, fade into oblivion; sexually transmitted diseases become the new moral contagion, to be avoided by any means necessary except abstinence. The body, whatever it does, must not get in the way of the will to power; when it does, it must feel the full wrath of technology: Contraception reduces sex to utility and caprice; abortion turns infants into options; forms of plastic surgery from liposuction to “sex-reassignment” literally carve the resistant flesh into the shape demanded by the will. When religious scruples interfere with the will, they suffer “reinterpretation” in the light of “human dignity.” When the Christian notion of the person makes inconvenient demands—when it specifies that suffering is preferable to

37Stern, pp. 77-78.
sin — it is temporarily dispensed with, to be called back as soon as sentimentality demands. This is the world depicted in full poetic truth in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. It is the hell we currently inhabit.

The Cartesian dystopia is not, as a despairing Victorian humanist might have it, the tragic but inevitable result of man's progressive use of his reason. Rather, this world is an arid, unreal *partial existence* that usurps and impoverishes the experience of people who subscribe to its tenets. Chief among these tenets is the exclusive reliance upon only one mode of rationality. Recognized by Aristotle and described by St. Thomas long ago, the abstract mode of knowing that Descartes isolated and his heirs have fetishized was dubbed by St. Thomas *ratio*. We might profitably refer to it as "discursive reason." This mode of knowing seeks to remove the subject from his concrete situation and allow him to survey the universe as if from an infinite height. This approach is exactly what is called for by certain human tasks; chemistry, mathematics, applied science, physics, and formal logic (among other endeavors) would be impossible without the objectivity *ratio* affords. It makes possible intellectual distinctions, the division of phenomena into categories, the formulation of general rules, and the predictive power of every empirical science from meteorology to seismology.38

Literary criticism, philosophy, and theology all make use of *ratio* for the elaboration of particular insights into larger truths — but none of them originates with it. Each of these phenomena — art, the love of wisdom, and the knowledge of God — depends upon individual experiences, whose integrity must always be respected, and which must always stand ready to test the validity of systematic and theoretical constructs that claim to account for them. *Intellectus* is the rational faculty that best describes these experiences, rooted as they must be in the immanence of the knower in

38Stem, p. 53 ff.
the world and his predicament as a mortal man. The difference between ratio and intellectus comes to Binx Bolling as his "vertical search" for meaning through abstract speculation lumbers into a dead end: "The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over." (M, p. 60)

A significant residue. Perhaps the Socratic injunction "Know thyself" was a warning against taking precisely such a route as we in the West have pursued, at least since the so-called Enlightenment. Certainly, it was a dictum that Percy took seriously; as I said at the outset of this chapter, the quest to understand the self and its possibilities stands at the very heart of his work. (It is also the essential task of the novel as a genre, as Simpson points out.)

Of course, Percy would never deny the validity of experimental science or the abstract mode of knowing; in fact, he identified with the scientific quest for truth, labelling his own novels "diagnostic." In his philosophical essays he strove to use the methods of objective science to demonstrate the essential uniqueness of man, to deny the applicability of determinism to the psyche, and to explore that strange phenomenon, the self. In The Message in the Bottle he describes his own attempt to found a "broad and untrammelled empiricism" (p. 287), which will take account of the self and its mysterious predicament as an "organism in an environment" that aspires to divinity. As we will see in the four Percy novels to be considered here, this predicament drives that self to adopt any number of impersonations, existential roles that it adopts in order to resolve the mystery of its existence. In turn, the self fancies itself as a disappointed god, a rebellious angel, a poorly adapted primate, a sinful son of a loving Creator, a happy consumer of pleasure just one step away from "achieving its full human potential," a sentimental lover of art and music, and a killer.

Whether Percy succeeded in his quest to account for human existence is beyond the scope of my inquiry. It suffices for my purpose that Percy did indeed insist that science, impoverished and blinkered by the Cartesian heritage, does not offer an
exhaustive, all-encompassing Method, sufficient for all tasks. Especially in his novels, he recognized that in order to account for the full range of human experience — to rebuild the bridge between mind and body, the transcendent self and the world — we must recover the mode of knowledge that builds from the *immanence* of the self, which reaches back into the mists of childhood and the inner recesses of aesthetic experience, which incorporates the insights of mystics and poets alike. We must not put them in a tightly sealed compartment labelled "humanism: do not remove under penalty of law," but rather retain the "openness to being" that Voegelin finds in all the great philosophers. We must allow ourselves to be challenged by them, to realize that our most rational activities may reenact pre-rational conflicts *and* the drama of salvation, that our lives are not determined but overdetermined — regaled with causes, explicable in a dozen different ways, each one containing a truth. To do justice to reality and especially to the self, we must recognize the *equal scientific validity* of another mode of knowing.

The Pregnant Virgin and the Wire Mother: Reflections on the Feminine

*Intellectus*, or knowledge by union, does not begin with the radical division of self from environment, but rather with an intuition of oneness and connection, which Karl Stern associates with the "primary process" phase of childhood consciousness, the "oral" phase when a child learns by *taking in* rather than *taking apart*. This mode of knowing, recognized by St. Thomas, Dante, and the whole Christian mystical tradition, proceeds from *immanence*, a deep-seated awareness of the self's status as creature, connected to and nurtured by the material universe. Because of a whole range of associations — from "mother nature" to "mother earth" — it seems natural to call this mode of knowing *feminine*. Stern elaborates on why it is fitting that knowledge of the particular, of individuals, of the self, be associated with women and their mysterious power to contain and nurture life:
the sense of the infinite importance of the single individual is rooted in the experience of pregnancy, birth, and nursing. Scripture and theology teach us that the world has been created for Man to dwell in. But while someone is reading this line, a woman gives birth, with that immediate sense of certainty that the world has been created for this particular new human being. This certainty is not the result of abstraction. It arises out of an irreducible fusion with creative being. Hence the calculus of human logistics, that horrid concept of the human "material," which can be thought of as usable and expendable, is forever inimical to the feminine.

The uniqueness and sanctity of the human person can be reached only by contemplation. It is elusive to discursive reasoning. "But Mary treasured up all these sayings, and reflected on them in her heart," (Luke 2, 19). Now the mystery of the alter Christus in everyman; the fact that each single one of the myriads of births in the world is a Nativity; that each molecule of suffering in the world is a Gethsemane — these are facts on the plane of Grace, but as immediate irreducible insights they are natural to every mother.

The feminine is an obstacle to any system of thought or disease of the spirit that would deify the self. Think of the great female characters in western literature whose very being repels or restrains the Promethean hopes of men: Dante's Beatrice, Goethe's Margarethe, Dostoevsky's Sonia (and, might we add, Percy's Allie). These women "save" the souls of prideful men by calling them back to the earth, teaching them a filial love of nature and a bridal love of God.

Women stand as the emblem of the feminine, especially in their power of motherhood, but it is not limited to them. As the southern hero found out to his disgust, femininity inheres in every created thing; in women and his desire for them he encounters an unbreakable link to the flesh, the ineradicable sign of his mortality — of the Fatherhood and mastery of God. This is no better news to the Faustian scientist, who resents the intrusion of an authority alien to his will, the existence of any order of being prior to his cogito, which might bind him to idols of custom or morals.

39Stem, pp. 286-288.
Thus we see at last the deep affinity between two such apparently different figures, the southern hero and the scientific magus. As Patricia Lewis Poteat aptly points out in her analysis of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, it is only at the very end of his career that Percy could articulate in novelistic form this deep and deadly affinity, in the form of Bob Comeaux and John Van Dorn. These two men apply the power of scientific reductionism to the task of societal restoration: to the recreation of a garden of slavery, a racially and socially striated human-farm, where men are in fact reduced to happy animals by chemical means. In linking both the “conservative” and “liberal” forms of gnosticism, Percy in his last novel uncovers the deeper evil of which they are both manifestations: the demonic masculine spirit, the will to power.\textsuperscript{40}

I will argue that Percy’s novels trace the progression and ultimate exorcism of this dread spirit, and the *return to the feminine* that becomes possible in its absence. First, it makes sense to explore the depths to which this spirit plunges in its rejection of creation, to gauge its motives, to treat it with due respect.

**Hello! My Name is Legion — Summoning the Demonic Masculine**

Rather than continue with my adversarial presentation of the masculinizing spirit, let me offer the testimony of a partisan — Camille Paglia, who in her brilliant, epic-scale investigation of the role of sex in western literature and life offers a powerful evocation and defense of the aristocratic, world-denying gnostic spirit:

> Everything great in western culture has come from the quarrel with nature. The west and not the east has seen the frightful brutality of natural process, the insult to mind in the heavy blind rolling and milling of matter. In loss of self we find not love or God but primeval squalor. This revelation has historically fallen upon the western male, who is pulled by tidal rhythms back to the oceanic mother. It is to his resentment of this daemonic undertow that we owe the grand constructions of our culture. Apollonianism, cold and absolute, is the west’s sublime

\textsuperscript{40}Patricia Poteat, “Pilgrim’s Progress,” in Gretlund and Westarp, p. 210 ff.
refusal. The Apollonian is a male line drawn against the
dehumanizing magnitude of female nature.41

With her characteristic compression, Paglia has summarized the self’s grievance
against nature, the flesh, and the feminine. Her very picture of nature, of course,
presupposes its guilt — treating the human soul and consciousness a priori as an
accidental epiphenomenon of a dead and deadening nature, the enemy of life and form:

   Everything is melting in nature. We think we see
objects, but our eyes are slow and partial. Nature is
blooming and withering in long puffy respirations, rising
and falling in oceanic wave-motion. A mind that opened
itself fully to nature without sentimental preconceptions
would be gluttoned by nature’s coarse materialism, its
relentless superfluity. An apple tree laden with fruit: how
peaceful, how picturesque. But remove the rosy filter of
humanism from our gaze and look again. See nature
spuming and frothing, its mad spermatic bubbles endlessly
spilling out and smashing in that inhuman round of waste,
rot, and carnage. From the jammed glassy cells of sea roe
to the feathery spores poured into the air from bursting
green pods, nature is a festering hornet’s nest of
aggression and overkill. This is the chthonian black magic
with which we are infected as sexual beings; this is the
daemonic identity that Christianity so inadequately defines
as original sin and thinks it can cleanse us of. Procreative
woman is the most troublesome obstacle to Christianity’s
claim to catholicity, testified by its wishful doctrines of
Immaculate Conception and Virgin Birth. The
procreativeness of chthonian nature is an obstacle to all of
western metaphysics and to each man in his quest for
identity against his mother. Nature is the seething excess
of being.42

Of course, it is all a matter of “filters”; Paglia’s own jaundiced filter belongs not
to an ordinary human, whose reaction to natural bounty is unmediated pleasure, which
upon reflection can develop into the virtue of gratitude.43 Paglia’s voice is rather that
of a disappointed god, a human who has discovered — to her immense discomfort —
her deep connection to the earth, her own finitude. The substance of this connection,

42Paglia, p. 28.
43For cosmic perspective, compare the “relentless superfluity” of the earth with the cool,
restrained austerity of inorganic chemistry, as we find it in deep space or on the surface of the moon;
sometimes Paglia sounds for all the world like C.S. Lewis’ Screwtape.
she claims, is sexual in nature: a "chthonian black magic with which we are infected"; this "daemonic identity" constitutes original sin, and its purgation is the mission of Christianity — one that it does not in fact accomplish.

If this were a fair exposé of Christian teaching on original sin, it would indeed be a failed creed — a gnostic creed, in fact, dedicated to undoing the Creation of an omnipotent God who had somehow "erred" by making human beings dimorphous and heterosexual. The flight to androgyny and sexual perversion that Paglia advocates throughout her work would be as logical a response as any. Indeed, it is this very response — motivated by the same theological mistake — that fuels the Decadent movement, driving writers such as Huysmans, Baudelaire, Wilde, and D'Annunzio away from nature and inward, into the artificial paradise of fantasy.

But the Decadent reading of Christianity is wrong; it is not even particularly sophisticated, and seems to grow out of negative adolescent experiences with Jansenistic catechism teachers, rather than an honest examination of Church teaching. The Church does not define sexual desire as original sin — as a reading of Genesis, St. Paul, and even the most ascetic Fathers of the Church would reveal. The "daemonic identity" that infects man because of the Fall is pride — not lust, which pertains to the animal faculties, and at worst could be classified as bestial. (A little etymology would be helpful here; "daemons" are spirits.) Genesis is careful to specify that the Lord created and found good the duality of the sexes, their mutual attraction, and their urge to populate the earth. It was 1st and 2nd Century gnostic speculation, and not the Jewish-Christian tradition, which suggested that the division of mankind into sexes was a consequence of the Fall, that the desire for sexual pleasure or procreation is evil.44

---

For all the hostility he is reputed to have displayed against sexuality, St. Augustine specifies in his writing against both the Manichaeans and the Pelagians that sexual difference, sexual intercourse, and marriage are good things, made good by the three proper ends God intended them for: "offspring, chaste fidelity, [and an] unbreakable bond." Augustine further asserts that sexual pleasure in marriage is "honorable." The harshest thing he has to say for sexual desire is that libido — what we might call the "pleasure principle" — has been unhinged from the control of reason by the Fall. This powerful disassociation drove St. Paul to complain to the Romans "about the sin-engendered concupiscence which held him captive... [and] his longings to be freed from the law of sin that dwelt in his members." The sin dwells in his members, as if an unwelcome guest; it does not consist in them, or constitute them in being. St. Paul does not wish, with Hamlet, that his "too-too solid flesh" would melt away — only that it would act in concert with his reason.

Libido is a carnal force that imposes demands on the will against the promptings of reason; because its proper object is a conscious human being with an independent will and rights, its dominion can be disastrous. Untrammeled libido turns a rational animal into a sexual predator or anarchist, perpetrator of adulteries, seductions, promiscuity, and the whole catalogue of sexual sins that the Church condemns. All of these, for Paglia as for Sade, are mere variations on the original sin of sex, which is defined as daemonic and exploitative. As we will see later, Lancelot Lamar derives from the inferno of his own experience the very same lesson:

THE GREAT SECRET OF LIFE
God’s secret design for man is that man’s happiness lies for men in men practicing violence upon women and that women’s happiness lies in submitting to it.

---

46 Augustine, De nupt et conc. II, c. 9, n. 21, cited in Burke, p. 552.
48 Burke, pp. 559-560.
The secret of life is violence and rape, and its gospel is pornography. . . . The Jews in the Old Testament knew the secret: that man is conceived in sin. (L, p. 224)

This radical misreading of Jewish-Christian Revelation serves the ideological purposes of a Promethean thinker — such as Lance — because it displaces the blame for flawed creation onto the Creator, and assumes for itself the vocation of reversing the order of being. The phrase “original sin” is used to describe God’s error, which will be remedied by man’s revolt. This is not a variation on a Christian theme; it is the Lucifer Symphony. 49

This metaphysical hubris — not the stirring of their loins — led Eve and Adam into sin, as Genesis teaches. (It is telling that early Gnostic heresiarchs felt the need to apply their own Higher Criticism to the Creation narrative, suggesting that the “original” dualist account had been suppressed by the Christian community. 50) Scripture and Tradition both insist that sexual shame came as a result of the Fall, and was not the substance of it. The rebellion of Adam against God’s will is inscribed in human nature, and repeated in the rebellion of libido against the sinner’s will. The rejection of divine authority injures human reason, and propels men into the struggle for domination (sexual and social) of other men — to the subjection of other rational beings to the promptings of blind instinct. 51 Having rejected Zeus, Prometheus becomes the slave of Priapus, and degenerates into an exploiter and a tyrant. It is no accident that Faust shares with Don Juan a taste for seduction and abandonment.

If Paglia misreads Christianity, she also displays a certain blindness regarding her own Manichaeanism. She blames the fragility of the individual self on its sexual nature — as if making love were itself an assault on one’s identity. But when we read a little further, we see that the Apollonian’s quarrel with Mother Earth is really

50 Hauke, p. 198-199.
51 Burke, p. 564.
motivated by the fear of death, the realization that however completely the self represses nature, it cannot escape it. The self is permanently enfolded in "the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze. . . . the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian identities as persons." Sexuality is simply the most potent reminder of the self's insufficiency, its carnality, its femininity.

More even than death, it is the power of materiality, its consequence for man's spirit, that haunts and disgusts the dualist, who cannot conceive of a relation of body and spirit in which the former is anything but filthy dross, weighing down and hampering the mind — even if it is also an occasional playground for highly artificial pleasures. Like other thinkers of Manichaean inclination, Paglia resents the body because it resists the will:

She that gives life also blocks the way to freedom. Therefore I agree with Sade that we have the right to thwart nature's procreative compulsions, through sodomy or abortion.52

Here, her resentment is not of sexuality or even of mortality, except as they serve to remind her of the body's presence, its heavy, constricting weight, its dark processes that churn inwardly without consulting the mind, the instincts that frustrate the liberty of pure spirit. The problem with the body is that it is literally humiliating: it induces humility with every eruption of gas, and every bathroom function.

Like St. Paul, she chafes at the demands the body imposes on the will; unlike the saint, she assimilates libido to the will, then crowns the individual, Apollonian will as sovereign. Rejecting the authority from above, she is haunted by anxieties from below. Unwilling to acknowledge the divine masculine, Paglia makes a fetish of the

52Paglia, p. 14.
Apollonian, a phobia of the feminine. And yet the chthonic reaches up to her, with tendrils that unfurl in the nerve and the bone.

For a more balanced view of the symbolism of the sexes, and the interrelation of the various dimensions of human existence, I will turn to Fr. Martin D'Arcy, S.J., a highly influential writer in the English-speaking Catholic world of which Percy was a part. As D'Arcy writes of the two principles, which he christens (following Jung) animus (masculine) and anima (feminine), although with quite a different import:

[In each individual the characteristics of each remain to this extent that there is a positive and a negative principle or movement, and one is called masculine or feminine according to the dominance of one or the other of these two in the individual. Each person has an animus and an anima, each is in different proportions masterful or clinging and submissive, fierce or gentle, hard or soft, Appolline or Dionysiac, intellectual or emotional, selfish or devoted.]

While drawing upon the animal kingdom and the analogies of inanimate nature to give content to the sexual distinction, D'Arcy is careful to assert that a difference of kind enters the formula as it is applied to the human realm. While the distinctions between men and women are not negligible or meaningless (a nominalist position),

54 Hauke warns against the tendency to simplify the problem of sex by asserting a bland androgyny or interchangeability of the sexes—as some feminist theologians do in order to advance arguments for the ordination of women. He writes: "Those who scorn any such philosophical summarization that aligns masculinity and femininity with distinct poles just abandon themselves to the random play of sociological processes and to mindless conformity with those processes. Moreover, they renounce the possibility of seeing the human sexual polarity as part of a wider horizon whose significance extends—as will be seen later here—all the way up to the image of God" (p. 119). The denial of such a horizon of significance—traditionally called the "analogy of being"—is entailed in nominalist thought, the philosophical ground from which Protestantism arose. Hauke summarizes: "Nominalism holds, of course, that our concepts can signify absolutely nothing of the essence of things, but are only stuck-on, interchangeable 'names' (nomina). This philosophical doctrine was also taken over as a basis for thought in theology. Nominalistic theologians maintained that God's redemptive actions were not inherently intelligible and illuminated by divine reason but were, rather, mere emanations of a sovereign divine will.... The omnipotence and freedom of God's actions are misrepresented as mere arbitrariness. Thus, the view was sometimes taken that, since there was absolutely no reasonable explanation for the fact that the Second Divine Person was incarnated as a man, Christ might just as well have assumed the form of a donkey" (p. 74). Hauke goes on to show how this sort of nominalism—especially as taken over by Barth and Tillich—laid the groundwork for feminist attacks on the masculinity of God and the all-male priesthood. In a very different context,
the sexual divide is not so radical as we find in lower animals. Women and men each participate constantly in both animus and anima, and it is only in finding the balance between the two proper to one's individual vocation that one can cooperate with divine grace and attain a right relation with God and neighbor. D'Arcy elaborates:

They are the human equivalent of what the dominant and passive, the masculine and feminine are in the animal. We have to look, therefore, for what in the spiritual part of the self corresponds with the dominant and possessive and what with the recessive and sacrificial.  

D'Arcy's account of the spiritual analogs of masculine and feminine is subtle and comprehensive, and informed by a profound understanding of traditional Catholic mysticism and theology. I quote D'Arcy at length because his is the best single elaboration I have found of the orthodox teaching against which the heroic or scientific gnostic rebels. The nature of that rebellion is suggested in the following admonitory passages from D'Arcy:

[B]y the reason, then, the animus is analogously what the dominating instinct is in the animal. It is essentially an imperialist. The reason is not, however, an absolute king who can rule unchallenged. The animal side of man still survives, and when the reason is forced to abdicate or is tempted to lower its dignity, it descends to the level of brutal mastery or cold selfishness or becomes a mere prejudice, a rationalization, a judgement which is swayed by passion.

By contrast, he describes the anima as

a longing, a breaking away of desire from the self towards an object or a person....[T]he selfish impulses of man

Yvor Winters suggests that the decline of the Puritan mind into "obscurantism" and chaos is an exfoliation of the inner contradictions of nominalist theology. Cf. In Defense of Reason (Denver: University of Denver Press, 1943), pp. 374-430.

55D'Arcy, p. 185.

56This leaves aside the problematic issue of "Catholic feminism," most versions of which differ from official Church teaching so radically as to lose any claim to the religious title, at least in the strict sense in which I use it here. For documentation, see Donna Steichen, Ungodly Rage (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), especially pp. 29-75.

57D'Arcy, pp. 185-186.
have to be balanced by consideration for others, sacrifice for the community or the family, and, as we shall try to show later, by a movement of the anima towards its Lord and lover, God.58

Thus in this account (as in Paglia's), the feminine principle is associated with the loss of ego, the acceptance of otherness, the willingness to sacrifice oneself. But there is a radical difference between the two thinkers and the traditions they represent.

As an aggressively consistent atheist, Paglia cannot see any advantage for the self in surrendering to the feminine principle, in sacrificing the demands of the ego to the needs of community, spouse or species. Such a surrender is inevitable — at the moment of death — but it has no positive human meaning. The triumphant feminine is nothing more than the imperious force of blind, impersonal nature extinguishing the fragile spark of selfhood, crushing personality in the gears of evolution and physics. The feminine is the enemy — an overpowering one, fated to swallow all in the end — which the masculine self must resist by any means necessary.

D'Arcy follows the Catholic tradition in asserting a positive content to the feminine movement of the spirit, which is conceived not as passive but as receptive.59 That tradition teaches that this movement contains within itself the potential for an intuitive knowledge (intellectus) that is higher than discursive reason, that the loss of self is necessary for eternal salvation (a deification in which individuality will paradoxically be preserved), and that the masculine and feminine movements of the soul can operate harmoniously in a mutually-correcting spiritual whole.

To say that such a harmony is possible is far from asserting that it is inevitable; indeed, one could construct an entire ethical theory around the proper and improper uses of the sexual attributes of the soul. (As D'Arcy points out, such a theory was attempted by Paul Claudel and Henri Bremond and — in a very different way — Carl

58D'Arcy, p. 186.
59Hauke, p. 118.
Nevertheless, it was such a harmony that Percy sought in his novels, as my analysis of his most important works will show. D'Arcy's scheme will be important for this analysis, and will recur in subsequent chapters.

Reading Sexual Personae through to the end is exhausting — and possibly superfluous. Like a crystal, one can deduce the whole from any of its parts. Like Sade's sexual combinations, Paglia's literary and artistic readings, for all their fiendish perversity, take on the dreary sameness of a repetition compulsion, of a chimp compulsively masturbating or a schizophrenic running through a litany of obscenities. I am sure this is what Miss Paglia was aiming to do — to impose her pattern of interpretation on every possible cultural phenomenon, whatever the genre, from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson and beyond. Indeed, her theory is by its very nature imperial and totalizing, relying for its explanatory force upon a single metaphor, endlessly transmuted but always recognizable: the self rising in a flash of glorious, Apollonian identity, shimmering in the sun, then sinking back down into the muck to be devoured, forgotten, and replaced.

Paglia's manifesto is more important than her purple prose and crotchety public persona will let us believe. Its seriousness lies in this: more thoroughly than Marx, more readably than Sade, Paglia has documented what the "death of God" implies. If no transcendent spirit stands above the wrack and ruin of nature, rescuing our personalities from extinction, sanctifying physical reality and promising us eventual reunion with our bodies, as Christian eschatology declares, then indeed Miss Paglia is right. Her preoccupation with lurid pornography and theatrical violence ceases to be histrionic, once the capital that liberal humanism, feminism, and egalitarianism stole from Christianity has been squandered; it becomes blank realism. Body and spirit are

---

60D'Arcy, pp. 145, 174, 186.
at war, body is winning, and Sade’s gut-churning Fantasia of horrors is merely the Six O’Clock News reporting from the front.

The same fascinated horror of the material universe imbues the work of Jean-Paul Sartre—one of Percy’s literary ancestors—driven by the same metaphysical ambition. Karl Stem cites the following passages from Sartre’s Nausea, in which Roquentin, the narrator, relates a vision:

If anyone had asked me what existence is, I would have answered, in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an empty form which was added to external things without changing anything in their nature. And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things, this [tree] root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness... All these objects... how can I explain? They inconvenienced me; I would have liked them to exist less strongly, more dryly, in a more abstract way, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green rust covered it halfway up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain sounded in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with signs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odor.61

Sartre is here evoking, in powerful narrative detail, the prelinguistic phase of thought that Freud called primary process.62 In this period of development, the infant has no conceptual framework of names through which he can place objects outside himself. Nor can he repel them by force; he is awash in immanence, and must accept what comes, experiencing either

bliss and a sense of well-being, or... sadness and a sense of discomfort. The infant is still open to the world in the most literal, carnal sense of the word. The child’s first relationship to another occurs through the mouth. The

61Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea, as cited in Stern, pp. 127-128.
62Stern, p. 131 ff.
mother and the world *en large* and the mother and food still form an ill-defined whole. Hunger and joy and satiety and nausea and sadness make up the psychic elements of that which one takes in or rejects. This kind of acceptance or rejection is the only mode of relationship with an *other*.63

In *Nausea*, the impingement of the "other," the intimacy with materiality which the feminine imposes on man from without and within, is experienced as an assault, a sensory rape committed by a phallic mother, nature. Sartre elaborates on this experience of the feminine in his essay on Baudelaire:

He had a deep intuition of that amorphous, stubborn contingency called Life — exactly the opposite of Work — and he is in horror of it because it reflects that gratuitousness of his own consciousness which he wants to cover up at any cost. If a man is terrified at the bosom of Nature, it is because he feels trapped in a huge amorphous and gratuitous existence which penetrates him completely with its gratuitousness: he has no place anywhere, he is just put on earth, aimless, without any reason to be there, like a briar bush or a clump of grass. 64

The key word here is "gratuitous." The conscious self — the "for-itself" (*pour-soi*) that for Sartre constitutes human being — is everywhere confronted with the horrifying realization that its existence is not necessary, but contingent. Even worse, its existence is "gratuitous" — given, non-compulsory, by "grace." Who has given the self this existence? A Christian would answer with St. Thomas "God," and go on to point out that He maintains us in existence every moment by intention, that should He remove His gaze from us for a moment, we would vanish. Sartre refuses this answer, asserting instead that his life comes from "nothing," that it is borrowed from the void, is in fact a nothingness, a tiny opening of freedom in the dead, weighty midst of maternal, material "being-in-itself" (*en-soi*).

Why does Sartre make this refusal, choosing the "abyss" rather than God? We see the answer in his system: The self is *defined* as absolute freedom, as the one locus

---

63Stern, p. 133.
of unconditioned force in the universe, the ability to negate all influence, all claims, all impositions of causality. As a god.

To be sure, as a temporary god, but as a god nevertheless, and a jealous one. When Sartre defines love as a dialectic of mutual objectification that we both yearn for and dread,65 his reasoning is obvious. If the self is defined as the negation of all claims of obedience, what room is there for permanent vows, or mutual subjection? Love would entail surrender. When he condemns as “bad faith” the self’s tendency to try filling its negativity with definitions, associations and labels, Sartre is guarding the divinity against fetishism: like the Lord in the Old Testament, the Divine has no permanent dwelling place, and may not be represented by any graven image, nor may its Name be spoken.

As a Christian, Walker Percy might be expected simply to reject Sartre’s vision of the self as a delusion of pride; but he does not. Rather, he finds it valuable and draws on it, extracting from it an essential grain of truth that will persist in his later works: the idea of the “self as Nought.” As Kathleen Scullin explains,

Percy credits Sartre with accurately describing the “predicament” of being human: the feeling of inner emptiness, of nothingness; the inability to know what one is, to discover an identity or name that fits; and the consequent desire to seek out ways of living in “bad faith” — assuming a false identity, an impersonation, to fill in the void... Percy maintains, however, that Sartre’s emphasis on the human predicament amounts to an elevation of psychology over ontology, that is, mistaking how it feels to be human with what it is to be human.66

For Percy as for Sartre, the human self is an irreducible datum, the starting point of consciousness that can never be explained away (subsumed) by a system of knowledge that accounts for the world of physical objects and their interaction — what

65Stern, p. 139.
he calls “dyadic” events (LC, p. 85 ff). The “anxiety” and sense of interior absence that Sartre and other existentialist writers embody in their works are symptoms for Percy of a real disorder, whose persistence is an essential clue about man’s real nature. Percy describes this disorder variously as “feeling bad in good environments, and good in bad environments;” “the unspeakability of the self;” “the catastrophe of the self” and “the Fall.” Recognition of this disorder is a precondition for any true understanding of men in general, and the self in particular:

A theory of man must account for the alienation of man. A theory of organisms in environments cannot account for it, for in fact organisms in environments are not alienated. Judeo-Christianity did of course give account of alienation, not as a peculiar evil of the twentieth century, but as the enduring symptom of man’s estrangement from God. Any cogent anthropology must address itself to both, to the possibility of the perennial estrangement of man as part of the human condition and to the undeniable fact of the cultural estrangement of Western man in the twentieth century. (MB, pp. 23-24)

For Sartre and the rest of the Promethean tradition, that estrangement is due to some fault in the universe, not the self. In no sense can the self accept the blame, or the responsibility for change — since it is precisely changelessness, infallible knowledge, unconditioned existence, divine existence, which the self seeks. The anxiety that the self suffers is the fault of the “other” — whether that other is the “blind

---

67Concerned that the very familiarity of Christian terminology has rendered it nugatory, Percy tries whenever possible to speak in parables, metaphors, and other “defamiliarized” ways when talking about central Christian mysteries such as this. I hope that my “de-coding” of these will not turn his work to naught, opening it like a dogfish on a laboratory table: “Oh, it’s only a religious allegory.” Perhaps orthodox Christian rhetoric has by now become so scarce in the academy as to become itself defamiliarized. Imagine an MLA conference in Sante Fe, attended by the usual critics, job-seekers, interviewers, mildly curious, etc. A speaker, a youngish American of medium height, has just begun his lecture on “The Displacement of Feminine Power and the Rhetoric of Virginity.” As he speaks, he looks anxiously for the women in the crowd, concerned about their reaction, eager for approval. He is looking for a job — and maybe a date. He dims the lights and shows a few slides: phallic symbols in western art, femmes fatales by Aubrey Beardsley, the Venus of Willendorf, the Mona Lisa, and finally the Virgin of Guadalupe. People nod, getting the idea, wondering about lunch. As he describes this final slide, he notices someone walking to the front of the room. It is a young Indian girl, in traditional clothes except for her shoes, which are Nikes. With great composure, she comes up to the slide screen and kneels before it, saying the Rosary audibly in her native tongue (not Spanish) to the image of the Madonna. What will the lecturer do now?
mechanism of nature”; or the ignorant masses who usher in a new Age of Bronze by rejecting the leadership of their betters; or women who violate the sexual honor code; or old, sick, helpless or unborn people who with the incurable suffering they endure disrupt the construction of utopia; or (as Percy will argue in his most polemic moment in *The Thanatos Syndrome*) Jews, whose very survival is a sign of the transcendent dominion of God, and every man’s supernatural calling to bridal union with God.68

That “other” is defined as the feminine, and its threat is not merely to the male self’s political or social dominance, but to his identity.

The demonic masculine self is not entirely closed to the possibility of salvation, but it looks in the wrong place: it examines religious dogmas, truths of science, bits of historical data, as pieces of knowledge *sub specie aeternitatis*, from the standpoint of a transcendent knower interacting with other transcending knowers: “Doctor, look at this slide. See the color it has turned? Let me tell you what I think...” Such a mind looks to each of the “World’s Great Religions” in turn, for the key to the cosmic crossword puzzle, the gnosia. Not surprisingly, the Gospel heard in this mode sounds outlandish, archaic, reactionary (*MB*, p. 119, *LG* p. 276).

Since it is not “in the mode of hearing,” the self has two choices: To watch grimly as the others perpetuate this alienation, adopting a Stoic pride in endurance. Or to do violence to the “other,” and force it back into place. If the self chooses the Stoic pattern of slow acceptance, it may achieve tragic pathos, “transcending” the ruin that surrounds it by retreating into complete isolation; a more likely end is suicide, as we

---

68Cf. Stern, p. 120. Here Stern discusses the Manichaeanism of Schopenhauer, his loathing for physical nature, reproduction, women, and others: “Among Schopenhauer’s many hatreds there was one remarkable one—the Jewish people. And besides all possible accidental personal factors there is a hidden reason for that. The Jews are the live testimony of the Incarnation. No matter how many philosophical systems come and go—the Jews bear witness to something which defies all systems: *the drama of history*. Moreover the Jews are earthy. I do not mean this at all in the sense of materialism. If there has ever been a people in whom reason was nuptially bound to nature, it is the Jewish people...To him Christianity has a dual aspect: in its pure ethical content it is akin to the Vedas, but its association with Jewry is an unpleasant encumbrance—an historical freak.” We will see many other parallels between Stern’s argument and Percy’s literary and philosophical concerns.
read in Percy's work. If the self chooses to retake its tradition "by violence" (as Allen Tate proposed for the South in early, intemperate days), then it enters the lists of the heroic tradition, attempting to impose from above an order that resolves the alienation. By forcing the "lower" elements back into place — whether they be poor whites, women, blacks or even the body — the self asserts its own sovereignty. By denying the transcendent nature of others, while denying its own immanence in history, community, and the flesh, the heroic self assumes the position of God the Father.

As Voegelin suggests in his analysis of the young Marx, atheist humanism is driven by the desire of the individual self to dethrone and then usurp the Fatherhood and sovereignty of God. (Marx's doctoral dissertation contained a celebration of Prometheus; in it, the young Marx adopted that God-slaver's anguished cry as an epigram: "I hate all the gods!") Percy's polemical quarrel is not with Marxism, of course; it was so alien to him as not even to constitute a respectable temptation or enemy. Instead, Percy fought the ghosts that haunted him, those which — bequeathed to him by upbringing, region, and temperament — demanded his allegiance. For only in the space he manages to win back from these ideologies can Percy (or his heroes) practice the "little way" that leads to heaven: live a life, marry a wife, work and pray and watch and wait. Such a vision may sound trite or banal, but in fact is the fruit of a humbled spirit — one that has chosen and earned it, after plumbing the depths of gnostic self-delusion.

The Promethean spirit promises the self a world-creating power, decapitating the hierarchy of human being, removing off the apex (God the Father) and putting man in His place. In the orthodox account of reality, man does not dwell in the divine Nous on this earth — as the idealists would have it. Neither does he find his nature

---


exhaustively explained by any lower level of being — by truths of physics, biology, evolution or anything else — as reductionists would insist. Rather, he marches on a pilgrimage towards the divine Nous, under the sign of death, seeking commerce with it through obedience, union with it by obeisance. If men are in fact divinized, as the theologians of the Eastern tradition speculate, it is not by usurping the privileges of the Father and dragging the virtues of Divinity back down to earth (pace Feuerbach and Marx), but only by marrying their souls to the Son, within His Mystical Body the Church, on the model of the first Christian, Mary. Men must admit their helplessness before sin, and accept that the only contribution their wills can make is to cooperate with Grace.

The first refusal of this surrender could be called man's fall. One might even describe the fall of man as simply his rejection of a bridal relationship to God. (In Genesis, Satan's temptation is presented first to Eve: Is this because women are weaker-willed than men — or rather, because man's femininity constitutes his right relation to God?) The Promethean self of either sex rejects its subjection to God and its rootedness in matter — while in turn subjecting other human beings to itself, denying their transcendent natures, the "masculine" spark that animates them and calls them to eternal life. The masculinizing self rejects the "Fiat" of the Blessed Virgin, crying instead with Lucifer "Non serviam!" It looks up at the Father, and sees a dying tyrant; it looks down at the earth and sees a world of potential concubines and slaves. Its body is alternately a prison and a toy.

In the analogical language of Catholic theology, which I am appropriating here, neither masculinity nor femininity is exhausted by physical sex; no living woman participates purely in the immanence of the feminine, since she is also broadly capable of wielding masculine attributes such as abstraction, analysis, and authority.
Likewise, living men experience the immanence of nature, the body, and childrearing,
although in a less complete way.\textsuperscript{71} Without asserting an androgyny that would destroy the very basis of the sexual analogy, we must nevertheless speak of men participating in the feminine, and vice versa. Indeed, insofar as every created soul is subject to God the Father, its nature is bridal (and feminine); insofar as the salvation of each human soul is of more significance than the material existence of the universe, its nature is transcendent (and masculine). For Christian mystical theology, the human soul is feminine and is called to respond to grace as a bride responds to her Bridegroom. For Catholic ecclesiology, the corporate whole of redeemed humanity (the Church) is called both the Mystical Body\textsuperscript{72} and the Bride of Christ.\textsuperscript{73} According to poet and mystic Gertrude von le Fort, the very nature of prayer is feminine, modelled on Mary’s response to the Angel:

In the humble \textit{fiat} of her answer to the angel lies the mystery of Redemption in so far as it depends on the creature. For his redemption, man has nothing to contribute to God other than the readiness of unconditional surrender. The passive acceptance inherent in woman, which ancient philosophy regarded as purely negative, appears in the Christian order of grace as the positively decisive factor. The Marian dogma, reduced to a brief formula, denotes the doctrine of the co-operation of the creature in the work of Redemption.

The \textit{fiat} of the Virgin is therefore the revelation of the religious quality in its essence. Since, as an act of surrender, it is at the same time an expression of essential womanliness, the latter becomes the manifestation of the religious concept fundamental to the human being. Mary is therefore not only the object of religious veneration; but she herself is the religious quality by which honor is given to God; she is the power of surrender that is in the Cosmos in the form of the bridal woman.\textsuperscript{74}

\textsuperscript{71}Bouyer, pp. 56-58.
For her, as for the Catholic tradition, the surrender that we see most clearly in woman, and which pertains in a special way to her, is demanded of men as well. It is a fundamental requirement for salvation that human beings surrender their proud spirits and become Brides of Christ, that they surrender their individuality and enter the Mystical Body of Christ — the Church, always referred to as feminine — which will be united to Him corporately at the end of time, that they surrender their wills to the promptings of the Spirit that dwells within them, urging them to obey the Father, rather than try to supplant Him.

Only the soul that has accepted its femininity towards God, its status as embodied creature, its predicament as alienated from the Master who calls out to it, will be capable of hearing the "news" that saves. Enabled by the consciousness of catastrophe to know the immanent world without "emptying" it into the transcendent nought of self — like a soldier awake on a battlefield, who notices for the first time the lovely intricacy of a sparrow — that soul will be able to accept the word of one who comes "with authority," the apostle who represents Christ.

As I will show in my examination of Percy's four non-satirical novels, it is no accident that his protagonists approach the point where salvation is possible as they approach the feminine. Their relations with women are emblematic of their attitude towards creation, especially their willingness to be entailed in it, to be subject to a Creator. A healthy relation to a woman accompanies a grateful, trusting acceptance of physical nature and one's own creaturely condition; by finding a woman with whom he can overcome otherness, accept their common humanity, and love another person, Percy's men just might find redemption.

What, then, of human masculinity? What place is there in the Divine economy for the virtues particular to the human male, who "represents that which goes beyond
him,” symbolizing the absolute transcendence in which he does not partake? Is the male *qua* male nothing more than an empty sign, a negativity, a Sartrean nought?

This is the question Percy’s heroes try to answer throughout his novels, as they struggle against the demonic masculine heritage. They look for a true masculine role, for the rightful prerogatives and duties of a man within the Christian dispensation. As we will see, this does not entail the absolute renunciation of male authority, or every form of paternalism. Percy’s heroes still do fulfill the patriarch’s role of gathering together and defending an extended family, black and white, against the ravages of an impersonal cosmopolitan world. As Kreyling points out:

> Walker Percy’s fiction seeks to reimplant the hero at the center of a world order, revoke the feeling of being extraneous that has hampered him, and assert his necessity once again.76

Likewise, Percy’s characters do not renounce the pursuit of scientific knowledge, the endeavor of understanding reality and theorizing about it, or the technological benefits conferred by it. Will Barrett, for all his spiritual healing, does not reject the psychiatric medicine that can treat his Hausman’s Syndrome. (The Percy character I have omitted from this study, Dr. Tom More, continues to make use of Freud and Jung in taking care of his patients.) Percy himself draws heavily on the likes of Chomsky and Skinner in constructing his linguistic paradigms. Percy’s men, if anything, become less androgynous and more effectual as they approach salvation.

So what are we left with, at the end of Percy’s work? A pair of dangerous, would-be father figures, renounced then covertly accepted, dressed a little differently, dusted off for fresh use but fundamentally unaltered? Are Percy’s ironized heroes and hung-over scientists really any better off for their adventures — and are we? Has the

---

75 Bouyer, pp. 48-49.
76 Kreyling, p. 166.
dread spirit of gnostic masculinism been exorcised, or has it merely gone underground?

A definitive answer will have to arise in the context of a close reading of the metaphorical allegory that underlies the sexual relationships in Percy’s novels. I will argue that the newly Christian heroism and faithful science that characterizes Percy’s heroes after their redemption is healthy and appropriate, that it recapitulates the marital relationship called for by St. Paul writing to the Ephesians:

Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Observe how no one ever hates his own flesh; no he nourishes it and takes care of it as Christ cares for the Church — for we are members of his body. (V: 30-32)

If man is the head of his wife, it is only by her consent, and only insofar as he imitates Christ, the Head of the Church. That implies a willingness to die for her, a total surrender to her needs and her well-being, a link of fleshly charity that rejects utterly the nightmare of dualism and the dream of domination. By adopting this code, insofar as they successfully do, Percy’s men recapture the true heroism of Christ, the full “science” of Faith.

If we see in Percy’s female characters a series of women who have been wounded, stunted, rendered helpless or speechless and in need of protection, perhaps we should view them as emblems of the feminine under attack. In subsequent chapters I will explore Percy’s women in this light, with a sharp eye to what has wounded them, and what the hero intends to do about it. At some times a Percy hero (such as Binx Bolling and Will Barrett) tries to restore to the woman he loves her transcendent dimension, while at others he falls into grotesque bad faith (such as Lance Lamar displays towards Anna). Using D’Arcy’s scheme for analyzing the sexual components of human psychology and spirituality, I will attempt to break down the pneumopathologies to which the central characters in four Percy novels were subject,
to the end of creating an interpretative scheme that ties together the minutiae of detail and imagery with the broad allegorical motive I argue underlies Percy's work.
Chapter Two: *The Moviegoer* — Exodus from the Wintry Kingdom

In *The Flight From Woman*, Karl Stern employs a technique of literary and philosophical analysis, grounded in careful interpretation (*Deutung*), using the Freudian concept of overdetermination (without Freud's determinism and reductionism) in the service of a neo-medieval hermeneutic, one that affirms the simultaneous validity of the literal sense and multiple allegorical levels of meaning. Stern's central claim, which I support, is that through such an eclectic technique, a sensitive reader can uncover in a philosophical author's work the intimate, inextricable matrix that links his (or her) conscious metaphysics and his semi- or unconscious attitudes toward the feminine — a category which includes women, sexuality, nature and the body. D'Arcy makes the same point in *The Mind and Heart of Love*, referring to what Stern calls "the feminine" as "the anima." (I will use these terms interchangeably throughout the present work.) In this chapter I will apply the interpretative technique suggested by Stern — which one might call allegorical Freudianism — to the heroic tradition and its Stoic underpinnings, as they are depicted in Walker Percy's first published novel, *The Moviegoer*.

The rhetoric and imagery of the heroic tradition, I argued in Chapter One, exert a variety of psychological pressures on the aristocratic white man for whom the hero serves as a governing myth. It encourages him to minimize or deny the presence of the anima in his own psyche; to insist on a rigid social hierarchy as the only alternative to the collapse of community and meaning; to view individual women as the instruments of sexual satisfaction and genetic survival; to regard nature as entirely other, or purely instrumental to the satisfaction and aggrandizement of the individual.

---

1 Stem, p. 41 ff.
2 See Stern, pp. 111-113 for a detailed exploration of this technique.
3 D'Arcy, p. 174 ff.
will; and finally, I will argue, to rebel against the Fatherhood of God, insofar as it
competes with the sovereignty of the imperial self.

If this reading of the southern stoic hero is correct, then the apparently
traditionalist and "orthodox" conception of the self that Walker Percy inherited is in
fact one more version of the modern, Promethean individual, engaged in a gnostic
revolt against the order of being. His movement to Catholic orthodoxy necessarily
entailed that he reject this account of the person, a necessity he avowed explicitly in
"Stoicism in the South." (SSL, p. 85) In the novels I am examining here, we see the
gradual, tortuous exorcism of the heroic shadow, whose lingering power is most
obvious when viewed in the light of the anima.

Lewis Lawson, the critic whose work has been most important for my own
reading of Percy, views The Moviegoer as both a philosophical critique and a
conversion story — a multi-layered narrative that subtly depicts the conflict Percy felt
between his southern, aristocratic Stoicism, and the Catholic faith that he accepted as
he began his writing career.4 I propose to explore further this interpretation of the
novel, with particular attention to Binx Bolling's own Stoic heritage — to the
psychological weight exerted by the heroic tradition on the men of Binx's family, and
the resulting disturbances in their relationships with individual women and the anima.
Since Percy's own ambivalent appreciation of the Stoic/heroic tradition is so closely
tied to his filial love for "Uncle" William Alexander Percy (the man who raised him
after his parents' untimely deaths and imparted this tradition to him), I will make
further reference to W.A. Percy's own works, the better to understand the ghosts with
which the younger Percy wrestled in this and his later novels.

William Rodney Allen5 writes that Binx's successful conversion from despair to
hope hinges upon his confrontation with the memory of his tortured, suicidal father.

---

4Lawson, Following Percy, p. 70 ff.
5Allen, Southern Wayfarer, p. 29 ff.
For Allen, the core conflict in *The Moviegoer* (and indeed, in each of Percy's novels) is the protagonist's struggle to assimilate and overcome the ongoing influence of such a father, and the psycho-intellectual inheritance he passed along — in the form of a Stoicism which for Allen is largely an imperfect adaptation to chronic depression.⁶

Whether or not this is the case, and the psychic distress indeed precedes the myth that shapes and reinforces it, we can certainly identify a powerful synergy between the heroic tradition in general and the individual experiences of severe depression that afflicted Walker Percy, W.A. Percy and so many men in that family, later finding expression in so many literary works. Certainly, Allen is right to identify the struggle with a weak and despairing father as the key structural element in the four Percy novels considered here, including *The Moviegoer*. In this chapter, I will proceed on that assumption and explore the controlling importance for Binx of his father's heritage and the psychological impact of the heroic tradition. The confluence of psychic and philosophical forces that shape Binx's character may be most easily teased out and made explicit by examining Binx's own relationship to the anima — especially to nature, to individual women and to the feminine elements within his own psyche. We will see that the heroic/Stoic tradition (like other modes of metaphysical rebellion) poisons that relationship, with results that will become apparent below.

The defining symptom of this poisoning, I suggest, is the chronic depression suffered by Binx's father — who significantly is never named in the novel. Burdened with a vast weight of heroic tradition and expectations, equipped only with the tools of

---

⁶In his biography of the Percy family, *The House of Percy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), Bertram Wyatt-Brown echoes this position. Richard King suggests the opposite, arguing that the heroic tradition (or "Southern Family Romance") in fact induces depression and a sense of personal inadequacy and futility, at least in a modern, post-aristocratic context. (p. 92 ff) Michael Kreyling's reading largely seconds King's. (p. 159) For my part, I follow Stern in proposing that it is impossible to assign causal priority in such complex matters as the intertwining of metaphysical "heresy" and psychic disturbance. Perhaps the most subtle analysis of these and other modern "pneumopathologies" can be found in Voegelin, "The Eclipse of Reality" in *What is History*, p. 139 ff.
Stoicism and irony, the elder Bolling is finally crushed by the isolation his grandiose self-conception imposes. He escapes his marital depression only by rushing with a suicidal eagerness into combat.7

It is his father’s misery that haunts Binx as a possibility, one which he struggles desperately to avoid — turning towards an aesthetic, shallow existence that seems the very converse of the stern asceticism prescribed by the Stoic code. But escape and avoidance will not suffice for Binx, as he learns in the course of the novel. Nor will it be enough for him simply to assimilate the haunting memories of his father that linger in the back of his mind, fueling his desire for escape. For (as we will see) it was the temptation to escape from the realities of mortal life — most centrally, from the feminine — that drove the senior Bolling to his early death. Rather than reenact this escape in another direction, Binx must find psychic resolution (and enter the religious phase of existence) through an unflinching encounter with the living reality of the central women in his life — his mother Anna, Aunt Emily, and Kate. By exploring his father’s decline and fall he can find “clues” to his own malaise, but it is only in a renewed relationship with the anima that he can open himself to the workings of Grace.

At the story’s outset, Binx’s own connection to the anima is tenuous and unhealthy — and for this very reason he is drawn towards a tenuous and unhealthy woman, Kate Cutrer. By loving her, he can learn to love his own feminine nature — his creaturely existence under God, his body, his kinship to nature. We see here in operation a device Percy uses consistently, throughout each of his novels: the key women in the lives of each male protagonist serve double duty — as possible objects of love, and as objective correlatives of the male’s state of mind, especially his relationship to the anima. Lance Lamar, who has crushed and punished the feminine

7The elder Bolling’s self-destructive eagerness for combat — partly as an escape from the psychic danger posed by women — recalls the frustrated hero Bayard Sartoris, cf. Kreyling, p. 125 ff.
element in his own nature in an attempt at self-deification, desires Anna, who has been raped and traumatized into silence. The young Tom More, vacillating wildly among Faustian, heroic, and Christian self-conceptions, cavorts among wildly different women: Moira, the sweet young thing who responds to his seduction techniques as surely as nature obeys the power of technology; Lola, a post-Hollywood southern belle, who summons him to climb on horseback and rejoin the heroic tradition (in its degraded, Hollywood-Mafia incarnation); Ellen, the stern, “lusty Presbyterian armful” who calls him to duty, fidelity, and fertility. And so on, through each of the novels.

Percy hints at the existence of this device early on in *The Last Gentleman*, when Will Barrett spots Kitty for the first time:

> His heart gave a leap. He fell in love, at first sight and at a distance of two thousand feet. It was not so much her good looks, her smooth brushed brow and firm round neck bowed so that two or three vertebrae surfaced in the soft flesh, as a certain bemused and dry-eyed expression in which he seemed to recognize — himself! She was a beautiful girl but she also slouched and was watchful and dry-eyed and musing like a thirteen-year old boy. She was his better half. (*LG*, p.14)

One could view Will’s reaction as the result of simple narcissism, or it may be taken as a hint from the author that Will is reaching for the individuation prescribed by Jung, the reconciliation of psychological opposites into a whole. I would suggest that we accept these insights, then move beyond the psychological level of reading, remembering that in the Catholic tradition *masculine* and *feminine* represent far more than psychic modes, and cannot be exhausted by intrapsychic archetypes. Rather, the sexes are symbols of metaphysical realities, of the mysterious relationship between Creator and Creation.8 Seen in this light, Binx’s quest for wholeness — for peace with the anima — takes on more significance. His internal conflicts, childhood anxieties, and sexual pursuits may be viewed as part of the drama of Salvation History

---

8Hauke, p. 184.
and the whole complex of philosophical issues that preoccupied Percy all his writing life.

Nicholas Berdyaev makes the following remarks about Dostoevsky's novels, which are also broadly applicable to Percy's:

Nothing exterior, whether it belonged to nature, to society, or to manners and customs, had any reality in itself for Dostoevsky [sic]. His drink-shops where the "Russian boys" discuss the problems of universe are themselves only projections of the human spirit and of the ideological dialectic that is bound up with its destiny; all the complications of the story, the external diversity of the persons who are mutually attracted and repelled distractedly in a gale of passion, reflect the inner deeps of that same unique spirit; they are necessary in order to make clear the hidden moments of destiny, but the human riddle remains the same.

Dostoevsky's novels are all built up around a central figure, whether the secondary characters converge towards it or the reverse. This chief figure always represents a puzzle which everybody tries to solve. 9

Applied to Percy's novels, the structural principle developed by Berdyaev can help explain why so many of Percy's heroines seem less than satisfactory, when considered outside of their function in the protagonist's salvation drama. Percy's novels are not novels of manners or social criticism; they are investigations of the individual self. However memorably Percy depicts secondary characters, they never usurp the story. Our interest as readers is directed toward the fate of an individual soul — and toward other characters mainly insofar as they tell us about the condition of the soul, and help or hinder its spiritual progress. 10 Percy's female characters act as lenses, through which we look to gain new insight about the protagonist's spiritual state. Given the attitude toward the feminine implied in both the heroic ethic and the

---

10 The same thing could be said of *The Divine Comedy*, whose "pilgrim" Dante is presented with the vast spectacle of damnation, purgation, and beatitude for the sake of his individual salvation. (Even Beatrice appears more as the instrument of Grace than as an independent, self-motivated character.) Reading this way, one discovers a strong, if submerged, allegorical motive underlying all of Percy's fiction.
scientific mystique — the two most powerful cultural forces his characters must
confront — it is hardly surprising that the women in Percy’s novels are generally
wounded, inarticulate, or perverse. Their symptoms are part of the syndrome he is
trying to diagnose — a cultural and psychological rejection of the feminine.

This observation about Percy’s work, which fits well with D’Arcy’s scheme of
sexual symbolism, helps turn aside such facile critiques as we find in Timothy K.
Nixon,\textsuperscript{11} who suggests that the very fact that Percy depicts the spiritual quest for
meaning in the lives of male protagonists makes it impossible for female readers to
identify with them — and therefore to benefit from the novels’ “philosophical
affirmation” — unless those readers are willing to “place themselves as critics of other
women.” By accepting a separatist aesthetics that insists upon identification with a
protagonist of similar sexual and sociopolitical breakdown, Nixon renders the cross-
cultural appreciation of art incomprehensible — and puts himself in the curious
position of outflanking on the left such prominent female Percy scholars as Linda
Whitney Hobson and Mary K. Sweeney, implying that they have somehow failed in
their duty of gender solidarity by offering sympathetic appreciations of \textit{The
Moviegoer}.

On a deeper level, by failing to understand the orthodox tradition in which Percy
continues — and its use of the sexual categories of animus and anima to describe
realities that inhere in every human being — Nixon misses the broad philosophical
import of Percy’s entire canon (an import many female critics have understood with no
trouble whatsoever), which applies equally to men and women. While Percy, for
biographical and cultural reasons that I and others have explored, felt comfortable
mainly in depicting the quest for transcendent, incarnate meaning through the male
perspective, his insights are broadly applicable to both sexes, and available to women

\textsuperscript{11}“The Exclusionary Nature of \textit{The Moviegoer},” in \textit{Walker Percy’s Feminine Characters}, Lewis
readers through the ordinary aesthetic magic of imaginative sympathy, just as Jane Austen's insights are attainable by a perceptive male reader. All this is not to deny the particularly male, southern, white context of the quandary in which Percy's protagonists found themselves, struggling against the heroic tradition; rather, we must explore this context in all its singularity, before moving to the more universal, metaphysical questions (including Promethean revolt and gnosticism) that troubled most of his major characters.

Seen in this light, the tortured figure of Kate Cutrer becomes far more than a conveniently fragile love interest. Like Binx a victim of Emily's Stoic ethics and heroic expectations, Kate incarnates the psychic damage inflicted on the feminine by the cool, tight-lipped Bolling code — more vividly than Binx, since she was raised from adolescence by Emily, a wiry stepmother. Better than Binx, Kate recognizes her affinity with the protagonist:

"Aren't you supposed to tell me something?"
"Yes, but I forgot what it was."
"Binx Binx. You're to tell me all sorts of things."
"That's true."
"It will end with me telling you."
"That would be better."

Kate does tell him something; in fact she goes on to utter the most critical sentence in the novel:

"You're like me, but worse. Much worse." (M, p. 40).

This is the piece of "news" that Binx must hear and accept, before he can begin to redeem his life. He must accept his own affinity with the wounded feminine — as embodied in Kate — and begin a process of healing, before he can accept his genuine masculine responsibilities, and come into a true relationship with the eternal masculine, God the Father. Until that happens, he will roam the earth (in reality or in the shadowplay of cinema) a proud spirit defended from truth by an exquisitely refined irony and a Stoicism to which he does not admit. Certainly, at novel's opening Binx is
not ready to recognize any affinity with Kate. He dismisses her insight with a patronizing diagnosis of her condition:

She is in tolerable good spirits. It is not necessary to pay too much attention to her. I spy the basket arm of a broken settee. It has a presence about it: the ghost of twenty summers in Feliciana. I perch on a bony spine and prop hands on knees. (M, p. 41, italics mine)

It is no accident that as Binx ignores the words of life, his narration fills with images of death. Having neglected this chance to recognize the inextricable connection between soul and body and animus and anima, Binx’s mind reverts to a Cartesian mode: he sees a world populated by ghosts and skeletons.

The next memory Binx relates to us suggests that he has been stirred into more serious reflection. He offers us a history of Kate’s relations with her parents — of the “dialectic” that drives her from hatred of one to hatred of the other. On one level, Binx’s discursus is a perceptive analysis of the forces that have stunted his cousin’s psyche — and by implication, his own. Read another way, Kate’s personal history can be seen as an allegory of the degeneration of the Western spirit, from the medieval to the modern age. By using Hegel’s term for the progress of world history, Percy nudges us to look for exactly such an allegory (as we will see, the literal level sustains it).

As Binx relates events, Aunt Emily entered Kate’s life as a stepmother when Kate was ripe for a rebellion against her father’s “dogged good nature, his Catholic unseriousness, his little water closet jokes, his dumbness about his God.” In his bawdiness and his untroubled faith, Jules Cutrer suggests the Chestertonian stereotype of a well-balanced, medieval man. Comfortable with body and soul, untroubled by Promethean fantasies, not curious enough to doubt his religion, metaphysical in a thoroughly earthy way, Jules seems never to have experienced the modern division of mind and body. His relation to creation (and therefore the feminine) is whole and healthy — and to sophisticates like Emily, Kate, and Binx, intolerably naive. In
Faustian fashion, Emily, an “enchanting person,” brought to the Cutrer household a kind of Enlightenment:

Her stepmother had taken her in charge and set her free. In the older woman, older than a mother and yet something of a sister, she found the blithest gayest fellow rebel and comrade. The world of books and music and art and ideas opened before her. (M, p. 42)

At first, Kate revelled in Emily’s brand of liberation, which allowed “the soaring of the spirit beyond the narrow horizons of the parochial and into the lofty regions of Literature and Life.” Kate progressed, logically enough, from Enlightenment to Utopianism, specifically “the girlish socialism of Sarah Lawrence.” Even this was allowable, under Emily’s regime, until Kate took the next natural step, into Revolution. When Kate got involved in “political conspiracy here and now in New Orleans,” the limits Emily set on revolt become apparent.

She could not allow Kate to pursue something that might have actual, tangible effects in the world; in fact, she could only reconcile herself to Kate’s activities by explaining them away as part of her Studententage. She compares Kate’s dead-serious, dangerous politics12 with the aesthetic quibbles of her own past, “when we Wagnerians use to hiss Old Brahms — O for the rapturous rebellious days of youth.” Emily’s response to Kate exposes her own “rebellion” for what it has become — an aesthetic pose, a pretended encounter with dangerous questions by a mind already certain of the answers (those found in southern heroic conventions). One sure marker of Emily’s bad faith, recurring throughout the novel, is her constant recourse to German phrases and references — many of them lifted, as Binx notices, straight out of the kitschy operetta The Student Prince. By equating Kate’s most serious aspirations with her own particular brand of merde, Emily has cut Kate off at the knees,

12While Binx doesn’t specify what kind of activism Kate was engaged in, it likely involved civil rights — a dangerous cause, indeed, in the New Orleans of 1960.
trivializing her and finally earning her hatred. Binx receives the same treatment at
Emily’s hands, as he begins to explain to her his idea of a “search”:

“Of course!” she cries. “You’re doing something every
man used to do. When your father finished college, he
had his Wanderjahr, a fine year’s ramble up the Rhine and
down the Loire, with a pretty girl on one arm and a good
comrade on the other. But what happened to you when
you got out of college? War. And I’m so proud of you
for it. But that’s enough to take it out of any man.” (M, p.
49)

In fact, the Korean War had treated Binx pretty well. It is Emily herself who really has
the power to “take it out of” him:

Wanderjahr. My heart sinks. We do not understand
each other after all. If I thought I’d spent the last four
years as a Wanderjahr, before “settling down,” I’d shoot
myself on the spot. (M, p. 49)

Let us take his statement seriously, for the moment. On some level, hearing
Emily’s account of Binx’s life makes him think of suicide. Considering the effect
Emily seems to have had on Kate, Binx’s reaction is less surprising. In Emily’s
attempts to make life more aesthetically meaningful — to transfigure “all that is
feckless and gray about people . . . into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the
craven” — Emily has instead helped render it virtually unliveable for both the children
she has had a hand in raising.

After this encounter with his aunt, Binx is drained, compliant and sleepy, unable
to speak his mind. Seeing him falter, Emily presses her advantage, and extracts from
him a promise that by his thirtieth birthday — the next week — he will have decided
“what he wants to do with his life.” He numbly agrees, and settles down to massage
her neck. Emily’s unwillingness to take Binx seriously is for him a kind of spiritual
castration, cutting him off from the realm of action he has chosen — a search for the
eternal masculine, for God — and diverting him instead towards a mundane life of
research, noblesse oblige, and elitism. This life would be a close imitation of his
father’s, driven by a dim emulation of shadowy heroic ancestors, a rejection of
transcendence in favor of a spurious "spiritual freedom," and a chilly, isolationist Stoicism that boils down to little more than emotional numbness and social snobbery. Binx rejects this sort of future, but has not yet figured out what to construct in its place.

When applied to Kate, Emily's dilettantism is even more crippling: cut off from the metaphysical (her father's faith), dismissed and patronized when she tries to do something effectual (political activism), Kate feels trapped within her stepmother's world of aesthetic impersonation, of life conceived as a dance of masks. She responds by doing the one thing that Emily will take seriously — plunging into despair. Even so, she does not escape her stepmother's categories; for now Emily may view her in the caricatured terms of southern female fragility, a fitting bride for any "southern hero" Emily can arrange.

As degenerate a scion in her way as any of Faulkner's latter-day Compsons, Kate finds her relationship with the masculine (animus) imperilled by Emily's heroic expectations: deprived of her childhood faith in a heavenly Father, turned for a long time against Jules, driven into such complete passivity that she resents the men who love her, Kate rejoices when her fiancée dies in an accident. Emily herself, dimly aware that her step-daughter is alienated from men, arranges rendezvous with such virile characters as Sam Yerger, placing great hopes in their transformative powers. Of course, these encounters do no more good for Kate than Binx's fleeting affairs do for him. Kate is drawn instead to seek a man who has himself suffered from the malaise, who can know "how frightened" she is; a modified hero who may tell her how to live, but will "not laugh" at her. Binx is on the way to becoming such a man; first he must come to understand his alienation from the feminine, to reject thoroughly

\[\text{13As Emory Elliott makes clear in "Gesture and Style in The Moviegoer," Kate does indeed pursue Binx, employing an indirection worthy of Kierkegaard to awaken Binx from his aesthetic trance and turn his attention to the woman who loves him. (Lawson, ed., p. 34 ff)}\]
Emily’s aesthetic gamesmanship, and the heroic assumptions that underlie it. At the beginning of his story, he considers his “search” a solitary quest, and cannot imagine that Kate really understands it too — that she is not patronizing him (Emily-style), when she starts to question him:

“Is this part of the repetition?”
“No.”
“Part of the search?”
I do not answer. She can only believe I am serious in her own fashion of being serious: as an antic sort of seriousness, which is not seriousness at all but despair masquerading as seriousness. I would as soon not speak to her of such things, since she is bound to understand it as a cultivated eccentricity. . . . (M, p. 69)

In fact, Binx has no way of knowing this for sure. Kate may be perfectly sincere in her interest; in her persistent, acute questions she displays a considered understanding of Binx’s mental dynamics. Certainly she seeks the same answers as Binx and suffers similarly from a malaise. But Binx cannot at this point accept this possibility; his experience of women tells him that he will not find in their ranks a fellow-seeker. From his own mother, who used to patronize his intellectual interests as the work of “Dick Rover, the serious-minded Rover boy,” to Aunt Emily, who interprets his every deed in the light of The Student Prince, Binx has learned to distrust women. They are potential threats to his masculine seriousness.

Of course, Binx throughout his narrative is reluctant to admit that there are any other seekers at all, male or female; on his account, according to a poll “98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics — which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker.” He believes himself to be alone — and this suits him just fine. There is also something about Kate’s femininity that prevents him from empathizing with her:

Kate parses it out with the keen male bent of her mind and yet with her woman’s despair. Therefore, I take care to be no more serious than she. (M, p. 70)

Kate is scalded by Binx’s refusal to take her seriously:
"You're a cold one, dear."
"As cold as you?"
"Colder. Cold as the grave." She walks about tearing
shreds of flesh from her thumb... "It is possible, you
know, that you are overlooking something, the most
obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you
could not understand, as long as he refuses the company of a true fellow-searcher, and
refuses to recognize himself reflected in her. Until he can connect with the feminine on
grounds of kinship rather than lust, Binx can never open himself to God — he will in
fact view Him not as Bridegroom but as a rival.

Herself vulnerable and wounded, Kate is able to recognize these qualities in Binx
— better than he can himself. Using the emotional distance and irony that Kate lacks
(and could make good use of), Binx maintains his investment business, dates
regularly, leads a clean and orderly life, asking only that "old ladies" and such allow
him "to plan their futures." But when we dig below the surface of Binx’s cool
narrative, we find a dark realm of disconnection and alienation, a psyche poisoned by
"malaise," whose tenuous grip on the realm of physical existence depends entirely on
transitory sexual encounters, decorated with romantic trimmings from the movies. He
is indeed "cold as the grave," still trapped behind the siege-works surrounding "the
wintry kingdom of self."14

14This phrase is take from Walker Percy’s critique of "Uncle" Will’s Stoic code: "Its most
colorful mood was a poetic pessimism which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its
values — because social decay confirmed one in his original choice of the wintry kingdom of self... His finest hour is to sit tight-lipped and ironic while the world comes crashing down around him." (SSL, pp. 85-86)
Nursery of a Seducer: Womanizing and the Flight from Woman

Binx is not wholly unaware of his condition, and throughout the novel makes tentative, misdirected attempts to break out of his isolation. Because he is dimly aware that his problem lies in the realm of the anima, most of these attempts involve flirtations with attractive young women. As a close reading of the novel will show, each time Binx confronts "the malaise," the cloud of meaninglessness that he feels descending periodically on his world, he turns to thoughts of women as a solace — then calls someone up for a date, or goes tooling down the highway with one of his "Lindas," presumably en route to some cheerful, inconsequential sexual encounter. Binx's modus vivendi, while it may appear to be adolescent escapism, is far more than that; it is his attempt to reconnect himself with the world and the body, in Percy's terms to achieve "re-entry" from his "orbit of transcendence," and to place himself once again in the world of creatures. Typically such attempts are futile, as he acknowledges himself:

... the affair ended just when I thought our relationship was coming into its best phase. The air in the office would begin to grow thick with silent reproaches. It would become impossible to exchange a single word or glance that was not freighted with a thousand hidden meanings. Telephone conversations would take place at all hours of the night, conversations made up mostly of long silences during which I would rack my brain for something to say while on the other end you could hear little else but breathing and sighs. When these long telephone silences come, it is a sure sign that love is over. No, they were not conquests. For in the end my Lindas and I were so sick of each other that we were delighted to say good-bye. (M, p. 15)

These encounters fail to satisfy Binx, giving way to renewed despair, because the bond they establish with the anima is fleeting and purely instrumental, barren of love and life. The woman's body absorbs his anxiety, relieves his impersonal desires, flatters his ego, and leaves him free to wander. More like a booster shot of B-12 than the act of love, such encounters recall the relentless couplings of Mozart's Don
Giovanni, the restless search for satiety of Goethe's *Faust* (two important sources for Percy). Further, they habituate Binx to treating his own body as a mere instrument for relieving the anguish of his soul — rather than as the natural seat of the sacred (of the sacraments, in fact). Since he takes a god-like approach to his body — inhabiting it as Zeus would a swan or a bull — his carnal activities do not succeed for long in reestablishing his link with nature. If they do manage to make him "coincide with himself" in the way cats appear to do — or as his heroic forebears Judge Anse, Dr. Wills, and Alex Bolling seem to do in old photos — then their success is fleeting, and gives way quickly to the returning malaise. His connection to mother Earth disappears, and he floats once again in the upper atmosphere like George Meredith's Lucifer, alien from the world of men, frustrated in his attempts at transcendence by the "army of unalterable law."  

Binx's relations to women reflect his attitudes about earthly existence. By association, each woman is imaginatively linked with organic nature — his own mother most powerfully of all. As Binx recounts his encounters with these women, he never fails to attach descriptions of natural phenomena, colored by his emotions:

> It is a gloomy March day. The swamps are still burning at Chef Menteur and the sky over Gentilly is the color of ashes. The bus is crowded with shoppers, nearly all women. The windows are steamed. I sit on the lengthwise seat in front. Women sit beside me and stand above me. On the long back seat are five Negresses so black that the whole rear of the bus seems darkened. (*M*, p.17).

> The sky outside the color of death, the Edenic swamps burning like Hell, Binx takes a kind of refuge in a steamy, all-female environment, reminiscent of the nursery — down to the black women who customarily played "mammy" to white children. Stern suggests that the intuitive mode of knowledge (*intellectus*) that tradition has

---

labelled “feminine” has its roots in early childhood experience, in the world of union with the mother. This passage confirms such a connection in Binx’s case. By returning to the maternal, Binx is able to shed the armor of irony and egoism, and make himself vulnerable to intuitions of God; it is no accident that at the end of this bus trip he recalls his forgotten notion of a “search.” Such a brush with the anima entails a terrible vulnerability, a return to childlike perception and a willed helplessness — something especially unacceptable for a man reared according to the heroic code. Such a man, especially in a post-heroic age, is apt to experience his rigid self-conception as a kind of fragile levee, which once breached might never be repaired.

Binx experiences such anxiety on the bus, revealing his own troubled relationship to the feminine and hinting at its origins. Settling into this suffocatingly female environment, the first individual woman he notices is a “very fine-looking girl” sitting across from him. What makes this passage remarkable are the terms he uses to describe this girl. She is a “solitary Amazon,” a “strapping girl done up head to toe in cellophane” with a “helmet of glossy black hair” and “Prince Val bangs.” Binx perceives her as masculinized, stripped of any maternal attributes, inorganic — like the “wire mother” discussed in Chapter One, or the “phallic woman” of Freudian theory (a concept with which Percy was quite familiar, after three years of rigorous psychoanalysis). This progression, from the suffocating warmth of maternal closeness, to a cool contemplation of woman-as-soldier, mirrors Binx’s own experiences with mother figures. After his father flew eagerly off to his death in

16Stern, p. 96 ff.

17This same vulnerability characterized Binx’s first intimations of a search; lying wounded in a ditch in Korea, “pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me,” he gazes at a dung beetle and begins the search. The immediate evidence of his own mortality, and his sudden intimacy with the earth — and not metaphysical proofs, however valid, or inspirational tracts, however heartfelt — these are what provoke Binx to search for God. We will observe this pattern throughout Percy’s work — culminating most spectacularly in The Second Coming, when Will Barrett ends up dropping into Allie’s greenhouse and (ultimately) the arms of Mother Church.

18As we have seen, the image of the levee on the Mississippi as a symbol of civilization itself holding back primal chaos is central to W.A. Percy, even appearing in the title of his autobiography.
World War II, Binx was sent to complete his education with Aunt Emily, a veritable sword-mädchen of the southern heroic tradition.

Unnerved by this complex of ambivalent responses to the presence of women, Binx banishes the ghosts of childhood with a leap towards adolescent behavior: he makes eye contact with the “Amazon” and proceeds to fantasize about her. As if to defend himself, he falls back on his usual tactic, attempting to touch the feminine on terms of romantic “conquest.”

Our eyes meet. Am I mistaken or does the corner of her mouth tuck in ever so slightly and the petal of her lower lip curl out ever so richly? She is smiling — at me! My mind hits upon half a dozen schemes to circumvent the terrible moment of separation. (*M*, p. 17)

At last, an organic, traditionally feminine image enters Binx’s description of this woman. Once she has evinced some shadow of sexual interest (as Binx imagines it), her masculine attributes vanish and “the petal of her lower lip” unfolds like a rose. As the encounter moves into the sexual realm — familiar territory over which he can exercise control — Binx is able to give voice to the emotion that haunts him throughout the book. He dreads the “terrible moment of separation” from the anima, the alienation from life and the earth entailed in both the rigidity of the heroic code and the abstraction of the scientific intellect. He seeks contact with the feminine without the vulnerability entailed in an authentic encounter — in a self-giving act of love, the self-forgetting of aesthetic experience, or the self-abnegation of contemplative prayer. Unable yet to partake of the feminine, to admit his participation in it, Binx tries to savor it instead — as a Decadent might collect aesthetic experiences in a mental ‘cabinet of curiosities,’ safely labelled and classified, unthreatening to the edifice of self.19

In this strategy, Binx resembles no one so much as his Aunt Emily, who has harnessed and tamed the life-transformative force of art, transfigured it into a decorous

---

abstraction that grants “the men of our family” a certain cultural prestige. This is not to say that Emily does not truly enjoy works of art, music, or literature; far from it. She enjoys such works as self-contained, satisfying experiences that give a pleasing, if temporary form to the chaos of life outside the fortress of self, before one withdraws back within the gates. Binx shows his understanding of her aesthetic in his description of Emily’s piano playing:

We talk, my aunt and I, in our old way of talking, during pauses in the music. She is playing Chopin. She does not play very well; her fingernails click against the keys. But she is playing one of our favorite pieces, the E flat Étude. In recent years I have become suspicious of music. When she comes to a phrase which once united us in a special bond and to which I once opened myself as meltingly as a young girl, I harden myself. (M, p. 43)

Binx’s moments of true vulnerability in the story are few, and most of them lie well in the past — the day he lay wounded in Korea; the summer when he neglected “research” because he was enraptured by the sunlight with a sense of “wonder,” and — we now learn, his one-time love of music. In each case, he had been offered a tentative contact with the anima, a hint of his kinship with the created world of nature and humanity. Not surprisingly, both his war wound and his summer of “research” contributed to his discovery of the “horizontal search.” When it came to music, events turned out differently, however. Listening to music with Emily, Binx discovered, was not an invitation to communion with the composer and his vision, or with the world his work was depicting — but to a “special bond” with Emily, admission to her airless inner circle of cultural/aesthetic heroes. Feeling betrayed by the unwanted affinity he feels with Emily — and the lingering power of what she has taught him — Binx turns against the aesthetic impulse altogether, later in the novel declaring:

Beauty is a whore . . . Money is a good counterpoise to beauty. Beauty, the quest of beauty alone, is a whoredom. Ten years ago I pursued beauty and gave no thought to money. I listened to the lovely tunes of Mahler and felt a sickness in my very soul. Now I pursue money and on the whole feel better. (M, p. 156).
The “raptures” Emily allows herself to feel in the presence of music, the arts, or philosophy — each of which she talks about frequently, dropping names like a social climber — are not true to the word. Whatever else it denotes, the word “rapture” connotes a loss of control, a surrender to the work itself, an experience that might demand a change of life. Emily is immune to any such appeal; she wields Art as a sword that divides the cultured from the uncultured, then gleams impressively in the setting sun. For all that she can work herself up into an emotional state over an opera or etude, she never quite forgets to enjoy herself enjoying it, to savor — more than the music itself — her own aesthetic sensitivity. This behavior, as Binx sniffs out, is simply a premium grade of merde, no different in kind than Eddie Lovell’s love of renovated shotgun houses, or the humanistic values that Nell Lovell pronounced “pretty darned enduring” after seeing them confirmed in The Prophet.

In order to understand fully the roots of Binx’s alienation from the anima at novel’s opening, and his inability to lose himself either in aesthetic experience or romantic love, one must have a full appreciation of the nature of the heroic tradition with which he struggles in the person of Aunt Emily. Much critical work has been done tracing the resemblances between the fictional Aunt Emily and her real-life model, William Alexander Percy — especially the work of Lawson,20 which establishes that the younger Percy’s first published novel was in large part a critique of the world-view his adoptive father passed on to him. When we examine Emily’s aesthetics, we come up with yet another parallel between Walker Percy’s art and his “Uncle Will’s” life. Throughout the tender, heart-rending pages of Lanterns on the Levee, Will Percy’s autobiography, the closest this profoundly lonely author comes to communion with the world are certain fleeting encounters with natural or man-made beauty. In such

---

20Following Percy, p. 69.
passages as the following, the ice seems to melt away from the ramparts of the “wintry kingdom” he inhabited:

While I was missing so much, I collected some imperishable memories: Luxor in moonlight; Notre-Dame in any light; the hill-towns of Italy, particularly Perugia; my first nightingale at Nîmes; my first Greek temple at Pæstum; the brumal gold interior at St. Mark’s before it was cleaned; Shelley’s grave with camellias blooming against the wall of the Protestant cemetery and violets in gold shallows over the graves; the tall Egyptian women at dusk bearing on their heads to the Nile their water-jugs, the night air stirring the veils half from their faces and flattening their single garments in ripples against their straight proud bodies. (LoL, pp. 111-112)

Magnificent writing, surely — far more evocative than anything the younger Percy gave Aunt Emily to say in The Moviegoer. But as lovely as this series of descriptions is, lilting and musical, positively melting with affection for the world of men, it also suggests the problem in the elder Percy’s aesthetics — and in the metaphysics in which they are wrapped up. Like each passage in the memoir dealing with art and culture, the above is a mere catalogue of moments, none of which is elevated to the level of a significant experience, with the capacity to change the viewer’s life — snapshots from an extended Wanderjahr. While some of the events in Lanterns on the Levee transcend this level of recollection — particularly those depicting the author’s friendship with “Fode,” and the filial awe he felt toward his father — none of his recollections of aesthetic experience rise much beyond a sentimental appreciation of the pretty and the poignant.

Aesthetic appreciation, for W.A. Percy, seems to have consisted in particular delectations, succulent moments of experience that he was able to isolate from context, then savor in solitude. To be fair to him, he was very much aware of this and his other personal limits. Relentlessly self-critical, W.A. Percy all but condemns himself as a man unable to enter life, who must remain content merely to observe it:

[T]he place I have won here and there, early and late, though a good place and a proud one, was never first place
in any life, and what was mine to possess utterly and
sovereignly, without counterclaim, was only the jackdaw
pickings of my curious and secret heart. When your
heart's a kleptomaniac for bits of color and scraps of god-
in-man, its life hoardings make a pile glinting indeed, but
of no worth save to the miserly fanatic heart. Now is the
time, now when the air is still and the light is going, to
spread my treasure out... I gaze down the long slope
with its grass that bends and shivers and the memories, my
very own, drift through me like dim music, like that
appeasing heart-broken theme of the *Pathétique* or Gluck's
glimpse of the Elysian fields or the unbearable peace and
tears of the Good Friday Spell or Bach's *Komm' süßer Tod*,
only the music is blurred, with the anguish gone. It
has all been good and worth the tears. I see it as a dream I
long to hold, but not to relive. (*LoL*, pp. 336-337)

Will Percy's choice of metaphor is candid and revealing: his memories of life are
"jackdaw pickings," "hoardings" that he now treasures in classic "miserly" fashion —
he takes them out and gazes at them, then puts them back. Rather than episodes in a
tale of spiritual growth, incidents from Percy's past function here as fetishes, items of
interest that he savors from a distance, like a Decadent aesthete. Lest one think this
merely the impulse — indeed the prerogative — of a sickly autobiographer who sees
the onset of death glimmering on the horizon, examine with care Percy's description of
his aesthetic experience as a youth:

> Even at this age I had great affection for the world and
did not want to miss any of its beauties. This obligated me
to appreciate whatever men of taste and heart found lovely,
which in turn drove me to study, to school my eyes and
ears, to train the sensitive and unruly bondsman in my
body. (*LoL*, p. 107)

Note the choice of words: as a young man he felt “obligated” to feel aesthetic
enjoyment in the presence of works canonized and approved by “men of taste and
heart.” For all that Percy was indeed a sensitive man and a fine minor poet, these
words of his point another way; they suggest a certain conformism, a mimetic desire to
associate himself with items of cultural prestige, to consume aesthetic experiences, and
then to move on with his life.
In *The Moviegoer*, this epicureanism repeats itself, in a discounted form, in Aunt Emily's fetish for things of the 19th century and things German (one can imagine her collecting musical beer steins, keeping them on the mantle alongside programs from Bayreuth and an autographed copy of *The Decline of the West*). We see the same aesthetic habits in Binx, whose tastes are less elevated, focused as they are on young women and movies. His thirty-year ironic glide over the surface of experience is not a rejection of his aunt's creed, but an ingenious modern application of it. As Percy knew from his study of Kierkegaard, such a glide needs to be violently interrupted, if one's "search" is ever to lead anywhere but further into the dark wood of error. The action portrayed in the novel is a minute psychological record of how that interruption happened to Binx, what it felt like at the time, and what it meant to him later.

That there are serious spiritual consequences flowing from the aestheticism of W.A. Percy (and therefore, of Aunt Emily) should be clear from the following passage, occurring near the end of his memoir:

> [It is given man to behold beauty and to worship nobility. He is shaken when he sees these two, but not because he feels them alien. Only when he is in their presence does the air taste native and the place seem home. These only are reality to his profoundest self; he needs no proof of them and no explanation. They are, he is, and over him there passes the shudder of a recognition. These recognitions are brief moments, but moments we may live by for our brief years. Who gave us these perceptions gave too, no doubt, the heavens' laws and conjured up creation. I think if one would sit in the Greek theater above Taormina with the wine-dark sea below and Ætna against the sunset, and meditate on Jesus and the Emperor, he would be assured a god had made earth and man. And this is all we need to know. But we trouble our hearts with foolish doubts and unwise questionings — the fear of death, the hope of survival, forgiveness, heaven, hell... *(LoL, p. 320)*

Another passage of soul-stirring beauty, high-minded and deeply held — but there is something wrong here, a rhetorical sleight of hand the author employs to advance his agenda of melancholy Deism. We see in this passage precisely the same
rhetorical technique that the younger Percy lampoons in his portrait of Aunt Emily — the appeal to aesthetic beauty as a way of closing off metaphysical discussion. The certainty with which Will Percy concludes his credo falls like an iron curtain on further consideration of the possibility of God's providence, His intervention in history, or the immortality of the soul. Perhaps the central question men have asked since the dawn of human consciousness — how can the life of an individual make sense when he is doomed to die? — is left unanswered, ruled out of court, dismissed as beyond the ken of men; in compensation, we are given a patch of pretty (if purple) prose.21 The experience of aesthetic union with the author displaces any hope of kinship with Creation or union with the Creator: a fine example of Joyce's "Faustian Aesthetic."22 No wonder Binx is suspicious of beauty.

From the Levee to the Bayou: Binx Bolling's Return to the Feminine

Built as it was on what Allen Tate called a "minor myth,"23 rooted in temporary social conditions rather than eternal verities, the southern version of Stoicism was doomed to the extinction that W.A. Percy saw approaching it. A philosophy that rested not on universal truths but on the virtues of an aristocratic class, it had developed to help guide that class in the just exercise of paternalist power over social and moral "inferiors." The form that these virtues took was particular to a social class, and could not offer a code of behavior for poor or working-class folk — apart from suggesting coolly that they defer to the leadership of their betters. Any critique of the paternalist structure must therefore have appeared to the Stoic as an assault on decency and the finer things. This is borne out by history: to "Bourbons" like the Percys the incipient Populist movement was a struggle between the virtuous nobility and the rolling demos. The virulent racism wielded by such demagogues as Watson,

21In Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, Voegelin identifies this rhetorical strategy — the "forbidding of questions" — as the hallmark of a gnostic thinker, an "intellectual magician" (p. 23 ff).
22Sullivan, p. 104.
Vardaman and Bilbo lent that interpretation its air of plausibility. However, the moralizing Stoic account also masked the genuine economic inequities perpetuated against poor whites by the combination of wealthy white planters with cheap black labor.

If it depended upon elitism, the Stoic code also promoted a kind of individualism, largely by denying the common ground of human dignity between black and white, rich and poor, which existed at least implicitly in old Christendom (and which was underscored in Catholic slave societies such as Brazil by the universality of the sacraments). As Walker Percy himself sums up the code of "Colonel Sartoris," certainly an image of his Uncle Will,

> [It] was the nobility of the natural perfection of the Stoics, the stern inner summons to man's full estate, to duty, to honor, to generosity towards his fellow men and above all to his inferiors — not because they were made in the image of God and were therefore lovable in themselves, but because to do them an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself. (SSL, p. 85).

An ethic that draws all its force from regard for self, rather than a genuine realization of the transcendent importance of the Other, this Stoic creed must encourage isolation in the very best of times. In times of social change and the decay of elites, it is a recipe for disaster. One's universe of moral equals — with whom alone true reciprocal love is possible — is limited at the start to the tiny circle of social equals. The circle shrinks further when one excludes those who have lost honor by failing to practice the Code — a growing contingent, in an era of social disruption that subordinates honor to profit and undermines every hierarchy. The loneliness we might expect to see does pervade Lanterns on the Levee and afflicts each of Walker Percy's Stoic protagonists. These limitations of the Stoic code do much to explain the heavy emphasis we see in Lanterns on the Levee on male bonding through college friendship.

---

and common military service—melancholy substitutes for a comfortable sense of
kinship with Creation (the anima) and a personal relationship with the Creator.

When Binx Bolling surveys his past, trying to understand the root of his
“malaise,” his gaze turns naturally to the story of the father he barely knew, and the
mother who handed him over to Aunt Emily upon adolescence. Like Binx, his father
felt a distance from the family heritage of heroism, as Binx notes while looking over
some family pictures:

But my father is not one of them... His eyes are alight
with an expression I can’t identify; it is not far from what
his elders might have called smart-alecky. He is
something of a dude with his round head and tricky tab
collar. Yet he is, by every right, one of them. He was
commissioned in the RCAF in 1940 and got himself killed
before his country entered the war. And in Crete. And in
the wine dark sea. And by the same Boche. And with a
copy of *The Shropshire Lad* in his pocket. Again I search
the eyes, each eye a stipple or two in a blurred oval.
Beyond a doubt, they are ironical. (*M*, p. 27).

The irony was not enough to save him; in the end, the heroic ideal claimed the
elder Bolling, drawing him inexorably away from his home to die in a fight that was
not yet his own, an American fighting for the Canadians who were fighting for the
British to keep the Germans from helping the Italians to conquer Greece. In the eyes
of Emily and the family, he died to defend the cradle of Western culture from the
newest wave of barbarians; in fact, his death was a rote fulfillment of aesthetic
expectations in which he himself put little real faith—as Percy signals with his use of
conventions, such as “the wine dark sea,” Housman, etc. As Binx’s recollections of
his father make clear, his heroic death was in fact a prestigious form of suicide, an
honorable escape route from a hellish existence.

What made this existence worth fleeing from? Is there any alternative to flight?
These are the two questions that motivate Binx’s “search” throughout the novel.
Having abandoned the “vertical” path of abstraction, and undertaken the “horizontal”
investigation of the world of other people, Binx makes fitful progress in such moments
of vulnerability as we have already seen—wounded in Korea, entranced by the sunlight and "the wonder" during his summer of "research." But these moments provide only "clues," not answers. For those, he must make the final movement inward, into the depths of his past and his psyche; into the realm of childhood experience when a sense of union with the mother and with nature was a living reality or a recent memory, before the process of masculine identity-building (exaggerated by heroic and scientific abstraction) completed its concrete levee between Binx and the anima.25

On the very first page of the novel, Binx recalls the day his Aunt Emily started in him this process of ossification, when she broke the news of his brother Scott's death, then "comforted" Binx with this injunction:

"Scotty is dead. Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you are going to act like a soldier." This was true. I could act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do? (M, p. 11)

That is precisely the question Binx struggles to answer throughout the novel: must he act like a soldier? Was this the answer to life and death, and the mysterious world of women, the body, and nature—a stiff upper lip, a rigid sense of boundaries and a code of self-respect? Aunt Emily, a genuine femme fatale, comes to a boy whose father died trying to act like a soldier, admonishing him to do the same. More than admonish, she predicts, she "knows" that he will live like his father—and presumably die like him. "Now it is all up to" Binx to carry on the death-dealing tradition—or to fight his way free of it.

Binx is aware throughout the novel that a distance from the anima is part of his problem; recalling the futile attempts of Kate's fiancee Walter to return to nature, through trips to the swamp that ended in drinking-and-poker binges, Binx remarks simply,

I like women better. All I could think about in that swamp was how much I'd like to have my hands on Marcia or Linda and be spinning along the Gulf Coast. (M, p. 38).

He knows intuitively what Walter and the other men are looking for, what he himself has lost. Left for him to discover in the course of the action is how he lost the feminine, and how to regain it. But first he must imitate Hamlet, must find out what killed his father. For his mystery, as for Hamlet's, the unravelling begins with the mother.

We begin to learn about Binx's mother, Anna, from asides he makes while relating a discussion with Aunt Emily. Even as he "hardens himself" against the Chopin his aunt is playing, Binx remembers the subtle disdain Emily feels for Anna. This passage is sufficiently important to merit quoting it in full:

She asks not about Kate but about my mother. My aunt does not really like my mother; yet, considering the circumstances, that my father was a doctor and my mother was his nurse and married him, she likes her as well as she can. She has never said a word against her and in fact goes out of her way to be nice to her. She even says that my father was "shot with luck" to get such a fine girl, by which she means that my father did, in a sense, leave it to luck. All she really holds against my mother, and not really against her but against my father, is my father's lack of imagination in marrying her. Sometimes I have the feeling myself that who my mother was and who I am depended on the chance selection of a supervisor of nurses in Biloxi. When my father returned from medical school and his surgical residency in Boston to practice with my grandfather in Feliciana Parish, he applied for a nurse. The next day he waited (and I too waited) to see who would come. The door opened and in walked the woman who, as it turned out, would, if she were not one-legged or downright ugly, be his wife and my mother. My mother is a Catholic, what is called in my aunt's circle a "devout Catholic," which is to say only that she is a practising Catholic since I do not think she is devout. This accounts for the fact that I am, nominally at least, also a Catholic.

If we allow that on one level (at least for Binx) Anna is here a symbol of the anima, then the range of the other characters' responses to her becomes extremely revealing: Emily is disappointed that Dr. Bolling did not use his "imagination" to plan
out his mating behavior, that he did not go out in heroic fashion and win himself a wife, but simply took what came. In Emily’s vision, Creation is a prize to be won by right of conquest, the body and wilderness tamed by courage and technology. Binx too is vaguely disdainful of Anna, seeing her almost as a blind, inert force of nature, propelled by a randomness that she passes along to him. Agreeing with Emily that blind chance — rather than heroic will or divine Providence — decided who his mother and what his religion would be, Binx feels threatened by his father’s passivity. He determines not to emulate it, but to exert control over his own sexual life — hence his wistful desire that he could consider his affairs “conquests.” Of course, what Binx in fact does is date, in succession, each of the secretaries who apply to him for work, and later marry his cousin — which is what Emily has probably planned all along.

It seems that Mr. Bolling always looked upon marriage and nature from a nervous distance, feeling that he could neither commune with it nor conquer it. One of the “latter” generations Kreyling describes as “Pierrots,” he moves from a disinterest in women to an alienated terror of them, until — like Bayard Sartoris — he flees the dangers of womanhood for the relative safety of an “heroic” death.

What does he fear? What is it about life with the earthy, slightly banal Anna Castagne that makes a death in the wine dark sea seem like a honeymoon? We get the first clue from Binx as he looks into a land sale. This is no ordinary real estate deal, although Binx tries to minimize it:

---

Kreyling explains the importance of this point for the heroic tradition: “Marriage between close genetic and caste types will keep the mythic and material resources close to home. The martial interest, then, becomes as important as the martial interest. The hero must not only conquer the foe outside the close familial bonds of his group. He must also find and wed the ideal woman inside those bounds” (p. 25). Judged by this standard, the union of Bolling and Castagne is a spectacular failure.

Binx’s contempt becomes much clearer to us later in the same conversation, when Emily says of his father: “He was the sweetest old thing. So gay. And did the girls fall over him.... He had the pick of New Orleans.” Binx’s immediate, devastating thought is “And [he] picked Anna Castagne.” (M, p. 50)

Kreyling, p. 125 ff.
It is a matter of no importance. Mr. Sartalamaccia wants to buy some land, my patrimony in fact, a worthless parcel of swamp in St. Bernard Parish. (M, p. 61)

A little further down, Binx admits his curiosity:

In truth it would be interesting to see how much my father paid for it. Any doings of my father, even his signature, is in the nature of a clue in my search. (M, p. 61)

Given the close association in American literature between woman and land, and Binx's already dismissive attitude towards his mother, this "worthless" patrimony of swamp land can be seen as a correlative for Anna Smith (née Bolling). Later on, when we finally meet her, it is in such an environment (a feral swamp), where she seems perfectly at home. On another level, this parcel of land represents the anima — or as much of it as his father was able to take hold of, before his escape and violent death. Whatever communion Dr. Bolling achieved with Creation, it is to be found here in the swamp; whatever it took out of him ("how much he paid for it") can be found here too — or so Binx believes. In any case, when Binx goes out to investigate, he has no intention of going alone to face the ghosts; he will bring Sharon with him, a fine and manageable young woman — a secure bridgehead connecting him to the world of the body.

We soon begin to find out just how much Dr. Bolling paid for his careless, almost disdainful attitude towards marriage. Beginning with a description of his own insomnia, Binx plunges into one of his "few recollections" of his father, of "his nighttime prowling." Having abandoned the marital bed to sleep outdoors with his children on a porch, Dr. Bolling "tossed like a wounded animal, or slept fitfully . . . and went back inside before morning, leaving his bed tortured and sour." (M, pp. 71-72) Soon he fled further from Anna, camping outside in the rose garden in a sleeping bag. Finding marriage an ineffective bridge to the anima, he tried to reenter nature by sleeping in its bosom, instead of his wife's. The tactic failed:

Just at the hour of dawn I would be awakened by a terrible sound: my father crashing through the screen door, sleep-
rang bag under his arm, his eyes crisscrossed by fatigue and by the sadness of those glimmering dawns. ... He dreamed, I know, of a place of quiet breathing and a deep sleep under the stars and next to the sweet earth. (M, p. 72; italics mine)

Since Binx was a small boy when his father died, and Binx knows so little about him, this "knowledge" can only come from empathy or projection. This "dream," of union with the feminine, of a return to man's rightful place in a friendly Creation, belongs as much to Binx as to Dr. Bolling. Disturbingly, it is precisely a woman who makes it impossible of fulfillment:

My mother, without meaning to, put a quietus29 on his hopes of sleep even more effectively than this forlorn hour. She had a way of summing up his doings in a phrase that took the heart out of him .... She agreed [with him]. "Honey, I'm all for it. I think we all ought to get back to nature and I'd be right out there with you, Honey, if it wasn't for the chiggers. I'm chigger bait." ... To her it was better to make a joke of it than be defeated by these chilly dawns. But after that nothing more was said about getting back to nature. ... I can see him, blundering through the patio furniture, the Junior Jets and the Lone Ranger pup tents, dragging his Saskatchewan sleeping bag like the corpse of his dead hope. (M, p. 72)

Burdened by heroic expectations and Stoic isolation, the senior Bolling turns his wife into a femme fatale. If he does still see in her an emblem of nature, then it Paglia's castrating mother. Trained in the dualism of the heroic code, Dr. Bolling cannot create a healthy bond with a woman. Since he is unsure of his own masculine identity in a world that finds him superfluous, even the slightest resistance on his wife's part threatens his sense of integrity, unmans him with a simple joke. (For contrast, try to imagine Jules Cutrer responding this way.) Since he has never been trained to take account of a woman's masculine side or animus — her abstract intellect, independence, and capacity for irony — discovering these qualities in a woman simply spoils her in his eyes, making her into a virago and a threat. Conversely, he does not

29 Note the word choice here: "quietus" is a synonym for the coup de grace, an act of euthanasia.
take his own anima into account, and instead views union with Creation as a project to be achieved through action; eventually, he reverts to type, to the only approved form of action for a man of his upbringing. He returns to the earth as a young, heroic corpse.

Soon after Binx recalls this episode, he ventures with Sharon to visit his patrimony, that patch of maternal swamp he is planning to sell to a developer, Mr. Sartalamaccia. He describes the place using details that recall a crime scene:

>a bushy back lot it is, tunnelled through by hog trails and a suspicious car track or two. Every inch of open ground sprouts new green shoots and from the black earth there seems to arise a green darkness. (M, p. 76)

Given that Binx seems to blame his mother for his father’s demise (and perhaps for his own malaise), it makes sense that as he approaches maternal images and places he is filled with suspicion. If we apply the equation of \( \text{mom} = \text{swamp} \) even more rigorously, we can see in the “bushy back lot, tunnelled by hog trails and a mysterious car track or two” a suggestion of corruption, of a maternal womb befouled and dishonored by bestial intruders. This suggestion of adulteration (if not literal adultery) is reinforced by Binx’s discovery that it was his uncle Judge Anse, and not his father, who acquired the land and built this camp, that even this little conquest of the feminine was not really his own. This reinforces his sense of the elder Bolling’s impotence, diminishing the “heroic” value of Binx’s patrimony almost to nothing.\(^{30}\) The land is not even a “clue” anymore, just a piece of land.

\(^{30}\)If we look (as William Rodney Allen suggests) to All the King’s Men as one of the important sources for The Moviegoer, we notice an interesting psychological parallel. In that novel, Jack Burden discovers too late that his biological father is in fact Judge Irwin, that the man whose name he bears could not hold on to so much of the anima as to keep his own wife and household. Jack’s very flesh is inherited not from Mr. Burden but from Judge Irwin; similarly, Binx finds that his patrimony never really was his father’s, that the only piece of land (of the feminine) he possesses has come to him from a Judge Anse, under false pretences designed to hide his father’s impotence. But the significance in Percy’s novel is quite different. Binx’s discovery does not devastate him, or render the land worthless. In fact, it removes the swamp from the heroic universe altogether, turning it quickly from a potent symbol of his father’s “doings” to an accidental inheritance, of which he is free to dispose at a profit. See William Rodney Allen, “Walker Percy’s Allusions to All the King’s Men,” Notes on Mississippi Writers, 15: 1 (1983), p. 7.
And yet the land itself, we discover with Binx, is worth something after all. It is valued in fact at $50 per foot, which Mr. Sartalamaccia is willing to pay him. Freed of patrimonial associations and the melancholy inwardness that goes with them, Binx is able to turn back to business. As he says towards the end of the novel, businessmen are "better metaphysicians" than romantics; rather than value the world (as Emily does) based on the emotive effect individual experiences exert on the isolated self, they must deal directly and constantly with the desires, preferences, and demands of others. By their very profession, they must treat the physical world with respect and regard it as real; a gnostic businessman would quickly go broke. Once this piece of land is viewed under the aspect of business, Binx can see that someone else (Mr. Sartalamaccia) values this land for tangible and pragmatic reasons (like that good copper pipe), which do not depend upon melancholic romantic associations. What is more, he can share this joy with the contractor and with Sharon, thereby achieving a temporary communion of shared values with other people — a rare occurrence for Binx — however trivial the occasion. Furthermore, here is a corner of the anima that belongs to him — which has in fact increased in value. His uneasy trip into the adulterous swamp turns into a happy pastoral scene: "Mr. Sartalamaccia is hopping in a sort of goat dance and Sharon stands dreaming in the green darkness of glade. . . . Our name is Increase." (M, p. 79) He has made a first step, however tentative, on the road to reconciliation with the feminine. He still has far to go, and the path runs by way of confrontation with the woman who gave him birth.  

31 In an intriguing but somewhat reductive Freudian reading, Lawson suggests that we view Binx's search for the feminine as a quest for return to the mother, to the Edenic pre-natal (or at best, infantile and oral) stage. Lawson argues that the blank white screen of the movie theater may be equated in Binx's mind with the vague, white field of vision experienced by an infant at the breast; the critic suggests further that Binx is attracted to movie-going by the passive nature of cinematic experience — analogous to the infantile state (Walker Percy's Feminine Characters, p. 7 ff.). While the novel does function on this level, the allegorical implications that I have traced here suggest how many more layers of intertwined metaphysical and psychological meaning can be found and sustained in the novel.
Binx blunders into this meeting with his mother in a kind of providential accident. He is out with Sharon on a happy, largely successful swimming date. Intimacy has already begun to flower, and Binx is optimistic about his prospects with this “sumptuous elf” whose cheek is “downy and spare as a boy’s.” As he watches her go out into the water, he experiences a complex of emotions that illuminate his dawning self-awareness:

She wades out ahead of me, turning to and fro, hands outstretched to the water and sweeping it before her. Now and then she raises her hands to her head as if she were placing a crown and combs back her hair with the last two fingers. The green water foams at her knees and sucks out ankle deep and swirling with sand. Out she goes, thighs asuck, turning slowly and sweeping the water before her. How beautiful she is. She is beautiful and brave and chipper as a sparrow. My throat catches with the sadness of her beauty. Son of a bitch, it is enough to bring tears to your eyes. I don’t know what is wrong with me. (M, p. 107)

Here Binx undergoes an epiphany, an insight into his own psyche: for him, sadness is associated with women. Their fertility and grandeur threaten to overwhelm him, and must be undercut with ironic commentary: after evoking The Birth of Venus to describe Sharon’s swim, Binx ends by comparing her to a sparrow. Their beauty itself is a source of sadness — like Aunt Emily’s music, “the sweet sad piping of the nineteenth century, good as it can be but not good enough.” Theirs is a beauty against which Binx has not “hardened himself,” of which he can partake as a connoisseur, but which remains alien to him. The “terrible moment of separation” that has lasted most of his life — perhaps since that day his aunt commissioned him to act like a soldier — drags on and on. Acting according to habit, Binx takes her off to his mother’s fishing camp for “the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh,” for some happy-sad fornication at Bayou des Allemands, an evening visit

32This ironic choice of expletive points towards Binx’s profound ambivalence towards manifestations of the anima.
to the feminine without luggage or commitment. But something intervenes to spoil his
plans — the presence of his mother.

Immediately, as soon as Binx realizes that Anna is at home, morbid images and
allusions to death invade his narration. The camp is “ablaze like the Titanic,” ordinary
crab-shells piled up on the table are “carcasses mount[ing] toward a naked light bulb,”
and Binx’s half-brother (significantly named Jean-Paul) appears like a monster: a
“big fat yellow baby piled up like a buddha . . . smeared with crab paste and
brandishing a scarlet claw.” (M, p. 111) Grotesquely enough, the baby has just eaten
some lungs. Then we encounter Binx’s crippled brother Lonnie, and learn that the
summer before another brother, Duval, drowned (probably at this very camp). If we
had any doubt of Binx’s anxiety about his mother, this catalogue of death which leaps
into his mind even before he sees her should allay it. With or without (mostly without)
justice, he associates her with death itself.

Lonnie, the ailing boy of fourteen with whom Binx feels a special bond (“like me,
he is a moviegoer”), is the only ray of light that penetrates this darkness. As Binx tells
us, “he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men’s
indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ.” Binx the nominal Catholic declares,
“I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business.” In
that offhand comment, Binx points to the central redemptive truth of the novel: by
identifying his sufferings with those of Christ, Lonnie has given enduring moral
significance to the realm of the body, has in his own life healed the split between
materiality and meaning that haunts the heroic cosmos and its heirs. Lonnie’s
endeavor deserves some analysis.

33Stern connects the loathing of physical existence felt by the dualist with a hostile experience
of the mother. Recall Karl Stern’s analysis of Sartre’s Nausea. (Stern, p. 125 ff). That novel was an
important influence on Percy, who admired its psychology, while rejecting its Manichaean ontology
(MB, p. 286).
Lonnie offers his corporal sufferings in reparation for the misdeeds and apathy of other men. Such an intention binds him intimately to the whole human community; this in contrast to the wintry, inwardly-directed ethics of Stoicism. The God to Whom he offers these sufferings is incarnate, sacramental, and passionately concerned with the salvation of each individual soul; the “high gods” to whom Will Percy must answer are vague and impersonal, and regard puny humanity with a cool and disinterested gaze, if they regard us at all. Crippled, utterly incapable of manly action — deprived even of adolescence, much less adulthood — Lonnie does not respond with the melancholy resentment of the “latter generation” (e.g., of Bayard Sartoris); rather, he cheerfully finds a way to make maximum use of his broken state, scattering spiritual benefits on strangers, but most especially on his older brother: “I am still offering my communion for you,” he tells Binx. Perhaps that is what saves Binx, after all.

Before Binx can find that salvation, he must learn the nature of his despair at the source. The extended, interrupted, diffuse confrontation with his mother that takes place that night and the next morning tells us much about the complex of emotional forces that drove Binx’s father to despair, which condemn Binx to a life of malaise. Only by examining his own ambivalent feelings about his mother can he hope to find a ground of kinship with the anima, create a loving relationship with a woman, and open himself to the Grace that Lonnie incessantly obtains for him — the Grace to eschew the deadly hubris of heroic masculinity, and start on the road to Christian faith — a faith that culminates in a bridal relationship to Christ.34

34Hauke explicates the development of this idea from its Old Testament roots to the New: “Hosea is the first to represent, in an exceedingly bold and previously unheard-of manner, God’s relation to the people in terms of the image of marriage. According to the biblical text, this representation was not invented by the prophet himself but goes back to revelation by God... . ‘And I will betroth you to me in righteousness and in justice, in steadfast love and in mercy’ [Hos 2:19].” This marriage metaphor was personalized — applied to the individual soul — in the Song of Songs, whose language flowered in a Christian context into the mystical theological speculations of St. Bernard of Clairvaux.
It becomes clear immediately that Anna can unwittingly deflate Binx's aspirations as swiftly and efficiently as her husband's. Binx recalls, with resentment, the way she reacted to his youthful intellectual interest: "She approved of it as a kind of wondrous Rover Boy eccentricity." This patronizing response recalls Aunt Emily and her *Wanderjahrs*, but it is motivated by the opposite impulse. While Emily in her lugubrious way seeks to make every banal little thing tragic and emotionally meaningful, Anna "steers clear of all that is exceptional or 'stimulating.'" Even God is simply "one of her devices . . . to be put to work like all the rest." In fact, both Emily and Anna are up to the same game — using the paraphernalia of culture and faith to create purely mundane ways of life. While Emily generates highbrow "merde," Anna produces her own toxic substance, "everydayness," which for Binx lies at the very heart of the malaise.35

Binx traces this habit of Anna's, her "general belittlement of everything," to the death of Duval, her favorite child. But from what we know of her relationship with Binx's father before that event, we can see that Binx is mistaken. It has been Anna's way all along to deprecate with humor all heroic masculine ambitions, to hobble their misguided aspirations towards gnostic transcendence. Perhaps that is why Dr. Bolling chose her to marry, as a countervailing force to the grandiosity of his own family. Whatever his motives, the maneuver failed, as we learn in greater detail as Binx questions Anna to find out more about the syndrome that killed his father.

Binx finally speaks to Anna at length in the early morning, in a "cool milky world" reminiscent of infancy, where he is keenly aware of her maternal

---

35Nixon asserts that this is further evidence that *The Moviegoer* is a *sexist* novel — since two of the three major women characters serve as barriers to Binx's thrust for transcendence. I hope that this chapter refutes this charge, by demonstrating that it is the very masculine tradition carried on by the males of the house of Bolling that poisons their relationship to nature and God, constituting in itself a false (gnostic) transcendence that is equally as dangerous as mere immanence. (Lawson, ed., p. 55) For comparison, see the analysis of *The Last Gentleman* in Chapter Three, and compare the philosophies of Rita and Sutter.
characteristics, her "large breasts" and "bulky hips." Just as they were in the nursery, they are alone together now in "the great white marsh." Even as Anna "veers away from intimacy," urging Binx to go off with the men to fish, he steers the conversation back to the subject of their own particular family romance, especially his father. What begins as a discussion of fishing ends in a story about the failure of intimacy and communion in Anna’s marriage. We learn of Dr. Bolling’s “famous walk[s] . . . up the levee. Five miles, ten miles, fifteen miles.” Given the importance of the Mississippi levee in Lanterns on the Levee as the border line between masculine and feminine, it is significant that Dr. Bolling made his walks there — and equally significant that Anna declined to accompany him:

“I went with him one Christmas morning I remember. Mile after mile and all of it just the same. Same old brown levee in front, brown river on one side, brown fields on the other. So when he got about half a mile ahead of me, I said, shoot. What am I doing out here humping along for all I’m worth when all we going to do is turn around and hump on back? I said good-by mister, I’m going home—you can walk all the way to Natchez if you want to.” (M, p. 122)

Anna Bolling could not or would not help her husband mediate a healthy relationship with the feminine, in either a religious or a sexual sense. His depression and isolation remained untouched by their marriage, and he set off alone on the long road that led at last to a fiery end in the wine dark sea.

Only one moment of intimacy between husband and wife stands out in this story — a period of time when Dr. Bolling suffered a severe case of long-term nausea, leaving him unable to keep down food. As Anna later diagnoses it, “he thought eating was not — important enough.” Provoked to pity, Anna starts reading to him and

36Lawson in Lawson, ed., p. 22.
37As William Rodney Allen points out (p. 34), Dr. Bolling’s walks are part of his religious quest — hence the Christmas journey. Also note Anna’s word choice; to describe her husband’s walks, in which she refuses to participate, she uses the word “humping.” Added to the fact that he sleeps apart from her, this perhaps suggests that their sexual relationship is troubled, if not expired.
feeding him. Subject to a particularly deadly form of dualism, which is literally starving him to death, Dr. Bolling permits his wife to become his mother.\textsuperscript{38} Under such a regime, he does thrive for a time, like a growing child gaining twenty five pounds — as if maternal love were the very thing for which he hungered.

If we follow King’s account of the “Southern Family Romance” that characterized the heroic ethic, Dr. Bolling’s reaction is not so surprising. As King writes:

\begin{quote}
[n]other way of understanding the role of the mother in the Southern family romance is to observe that sexuality or erotic appeal was denied her. In extreme form she was stripped of any emotional, nurturing attributes at all.\textsuperscript{39}
\end{quote}

But the elder Bolling was unprepared for the psychic cost of re-enacting a lost maternal relationship with his wife as an adult; trained in a tradition that finally shared the Manichaean distrust of the anima, he could not for long endure the smothering embrace of mother or nature. Binx’s father retreats to his room again to stare at the ceiling and starve. Only the beginning of the Second World War wakes him from this spell — offering as it does the chance for an heroic way out, for an affirmative way to reassert his masculine identity. Like a pair of \textit{femmes fatales}, Anna and Emily eagerly send him off — his wife impressed with how “cute” he looks in uniform, his aunt “so proud” that at last he has conformed to the family code. Not long after, he is dead, having as Binx says “found a way . . . to please them and to please himself. To leave.” (\textit{M}, p. 127)

It is unclear from the story whether Anna could have done anything differently, anything that would have made their marriage satisfactory to Dr. Bolling, allowed him to settle down at peace with Creation (and the feminine), even to forge a relationship to its Creator. Perhaps his heroic inheritance was too strong, his curse as a member of

\textsuperscript{38}Significantly, this took place around the time Dr. Wills, imagining an epidemic of endometritis, “took out just about every uterus in Feliciana Parish.” (\textit{M}, p. 123) Clearly, the feminine was in retreat and under attack — all over the parish, at least.

\textsuperscript{39}King, p. 35.
the latter generations forbidding him the love of women, demanding (as it did of Bayard Sartoris and Quentin Compson) a young and tragic death. However we interpret it, it is clear how Binx understands this event — as a warning. Return to the feminine may not mean a literal return to the nursery; he must look elsewhere. Binx takes the hint, and ends his visit to the camp with another visit with Lonnie.

As important as the intercessory prayer Lonnie promises is the example he sets. He himself is a model of a man who has assimilated the theological truths to be found in the anima — in his openness to God’s will, his self-giving, the anguish he endures in his body and “offers up” so that other men may have life. Deprived of adolescence by his illness, never himself to become a physical father, Lonnie becomes a spiritual mother to others, especially Binx.\footnote{For theological background, see Henri de Lubac, \textit{The Motherhood of the Church} (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982), p. 81.} He gives Binx the critical model he needs — of love grounded in the body, moving through self-sacrifice, to work the transcendent good of another. By emulating Lonnie, Binx will be able to love Kate as she needs to be loved. But first he must die to himself, surrender the barriers to which he has clung, dynamite honor’s levee and dive at last into the flux of creation.

This “death” takes place in stages, during his and Kate’s fateful renegade trip to Chicago. It is prefigured, ominously enough, as the train pulls out: “Our roomettes turn out to be little coffins. . . . The cemeteries look like cities. . . . [W]e ride at a witch’s level above the gravelly roofs.” (\textit{M}, pp. 148—149) Binx’s “passion” begins with a prophetic dream, in that state of “fitful twilight which has come over me of late, a twilight where waking dreams are dreamed and sleep never comes.” He undergoes a nightmare about Dr. and Mrs. Bob Dean, two aging sex therapists who advocate “tender regard” for the partner and gentle manipulation — two skills Binx has developed in his years of seduction. After this dream he experiences “a wave of prickling . . . such as I have never experienced before” — a heightened version of the
"eschatological prickling" that preceded Binx’s first encounter with Aunt Emily at the opening of the novel. Like a trumpet announcing Judgment, this prickling heralds a radical change in his life. The visceral disgust that Binx feels at the Deans is also directed at himself; perhaps only intuitively at first, he begins to understand how much he has cheapened his Lindas and Sharons with their feckless sexual play, reducing them to the realm of the Deans, of “sensitive zones, pigmented aureoles, out-of-the-way mucous glands, [and] dormant vascular nexuses.” (M, p. 152) Having long envisioned sexual love from a godlike perspective, as a transaction in which he (purely masculine, pure spirit) inhabited for a while a being who was pure flesh, Binx is now ready to surrender this safely unsatisfying role. He must move towards a relation with a moral equal, a fellow searcher, whom he cannot evacuate of spirit; further, he must learn to identify with his own body, to see himself, too, as a union of spirit and flesh. As we will see, he begins to make this identification after his fitful attempt at making love to Kate.

The next thing to go — the next limb of the old man that has to die — is Binx’s lingering faith in science and secular progress, in the power of abstraction to free men from their entailment in Creation. Watching a man from St. Louis clip out a story, Binx confesses:

The search has spoiled the pleasure of my tidy and ingenious life in Gentilly. As late as a week ago, such a phrase as “hopefully awaiting the gradual convergence of the physical sciences and the social sciences” would have provoked no more than an ironic tingle or two at the back of my neck. Now it howls through Ponchatoula Swamp, the very sound and soul of despair. (M, pp. 152—153.)

This realization Binx makes is important; he has surrendered the defense of irony, which has long masked from him the truth about “scientific humanism” and similar attempts to engineer a perfect (uncreated) existence on earth. Instead of just smirking over the rhetoric or hubris of such gnostic endeavors, Binx at last sees them as they are, “the very sound and soul of despair.”
Almost in desperation, Binx reaches out to Kate, and makes an unexpected
marriage proposal. In response, Kate points to another aspect of himself we will have
to shed, if he wants to share her life — his “ingenious little researches,” his “death-
house pranks.” For the first time, and from now on, Binx must take Kate seriously:
instead of analyzing her suffering from an abstracted distance, he must empathize with
it and take responsibility for her. He must honor her strivings for moral seriousness
and metaphysical truth as Emily never has — and never dismiss them as the symptoms
of her illness, or “schoolgirl socialism,” or the light-hearted questings of her
“Studentage.” He will begin to accept Kate as a fellow searcher, a moral equal whose
own experience of “the malaise” is as real and significant as his own. (This is what
Binx should have been doing all along, of course, even as her friend. Note that except
for Lonnie, Binx has no real friends throughout the novel — only business contacts,
family connections, and dates. His dismissive attitude towards other people and their
aspirations makes empathy and intimacy virtually impossible.)

Kate asks for more than this — which is only fair, since Binx has not asked
merely to become her friend, or advisor, or fellow-pilgrim on the road, but her
husband — a role that includes all these duties and more. The “more” that is entailed is
theological in substance, as Kate makes clear when she asks for it:

“What I want is to believe in someone completely and then
do what he wants me to do... Will you tell me what to
do?... You can do it because you are not religious. God
is not religious. You are the unmoved mover. You don’t
need God or anyone else — no credit to you, unless it is a
credit to be the most self-centered person alive. I don’t
know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will
do what you tell me.” (M, p. 157.)

Whether or not Kate realizes it, what she demands of Binx is the very service
prescribed by St. Paul in Ephesians 5 as the duty of a Christian husband — that he
represent God to his wife, that he show forth in his charitable exercise of authority
some trace of the divine Masculine. All her life, Kate has been thwarted in her quest for Transcendence—by Jules' unseriousness, Emily's patronizing encouragement, and Binx's analytical irony. She cannot pull out of her despair until someone takes it with requisite seriousness, and sees in it not a psychological symptom but a metaphysical clue. Kate is looking not merely for someone decisive to guide and reassure her—although, on a purely emotional level, she certainly needs such a person for a while—but for an emblem of divine certainty and meaning that can give form to her life. By agreeing to take on this role, Binx agrees to leave his exile forever, return to the world of other people, and unite his fate to another's. Lest it seem grandiose, just another piece of his egotism, for Binx to agree to "play God" for Kate, instructing her what to do and where to go, let us recall what else St. Paul demands of a husband:

Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the Church. He gave Himself up for her to make her holy, purifying her in the bath of water by the power of the word, to present to Himself a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort. Husbands should love their wives as they do their own bodies. He who loves his wife loves himself. Observe that no one ever hates his own flesh; no, he nourishes it and takes care of it as Christ cares for the Church—for we are members of His body." (Ephesians 5, 24-28)

41Louis Bouyer explains this Christian mystery as follows: "the male, insofar as he is such, is defined by the following paradox: he essentially represents that which goes beyond him, which he is incapable of being in and of himself, in which he cannot even take part except by his participation through grace in the sonship of the eternal Son, who himself represents the Father from whom he proceeds and from whom all things proceed: God in the inexhaustible vitality of his absolute transcendence. . . . Woman, on the contrary, simply represents the creature in its highest vocation, by which it is conjoined with God himself in his creation and even in his fatherhood. She is potentially, in her virginity, all that she represents, and she becomes it effectively in her motherhood when she gives it reality within herself." (Woman in the Church, pp. 48—49). See also Hans Urs von Balthasar: "In love, as in fidelity, the woman has an easier time of it. As we have said, she is creatureliness itself with regard to God, and with regard to Christ she is the very image of the Church. The woman is not called upon to represent anything which she herself is not, while the man has to represent the very source of life, which he can never be," "Meditations on Ephesians 5." Christian Married Love, Raymond Dennehy, ed., (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1981), p. 68.
This text suggests that a husband represents God to his wife only as Christ represents the Father—under the form of a suffering servant. He is called to mirror the profound charity that binds Christ indissolubly to His bride, the Church—which is also called His mystical body. As von Balthasar explains, in this way he may participate in the mysteries of the Trinity itself:

[Int]he sexual act, the man does give from what is his and, if he is to stand under the norm of Christ, he ought not only to give something of what is his, but must rather surrender his very self, just as the eternal Father surrenders his very self and everything which he is in order to beget the Son. If the husband does this, he will come all the closer to Christ, who by his self-surrender fashions his Mystical Body for himself... On the Cross and in the Eucharist [Christ] gives of his Flesh and his Blood so unreservedly that in what results from this self-surrender—that is, in the Church as a separate being outside himself—Christ finds himself again. This rediscovery of himself in the Church would not be possible if Christ had only half-given himself and half-kept himself back. If we reflect from this perspective on the husband's part in the sexual act, we will see that he can do justice to the commandment to love his wife as his own body only if he hands himself over to her unconditionally, so that from now on he can recognize in her all that he has surrendered; that is, his entire self.42

Recognizing that the analogy here is imperfect—that a husband in no way creates his wife as Christ did the Church—we still find here a profound solution to the dualism that has haunted Binx throughout the novel. On this theological interpretation, the marital act overcomes the breach between soul and body, the "terrible moment of separation" from the feminine that Binx so dreads, reiterating the inextricable union of body to soul, husband to wife, and Church to Christ. Marriage is offered explicitly as the remedy for dualism; far from being a realm of meaningless decay or the destruction of "spiritual" values, the flesh is the theater wherein divine realities are represented, and marital love-play is a reflection of the mutual indwelling

42von Balthasar, p. 67.
love of each member of the Trinity. True marital love overcomes the egoism of fallen humanity by teaching the married person to identify with his (or her) spouse. It counters the Manichaeanism of a masculinized heroic or scientific culture with an insistence on the sacramental importance of matter, the centrality of the feminine to the mystery of salvation. Certainly the isolate, grandiose pessimism of a William Alexander Percy would have little appeal to a man who sees his body as inextricable from his soul, his wife as inseparable from his own body, and his body and soul together as the ultimate objects of salvation and resurrection. Nevertheless, this role does preserve certain essential elements of the heroic masculine tradition — arguably, those which that tradition originally borrowed from the figure of Christ. Indeed, if their relationship promised him no trace of heroic validation, Binx would have to find it incomprehensible and unsatisfying. Rather than abolish Binx's nature — which is formed by the heroic tradition — the Grace that touches his life transforms that nature, purifying the heroic impulse and restoring it to health.

If this is indeed the consummation to which Kate calls Binx on that fateful train-ride to Chicago, that fact is only implied and then quickly obscured. If he has made such a commitment, he has done so casually, even thoughtlessly. In response to Kate's feverish plea that he direct her life, he answers simply, "Sure." As if to cement this fragile bond with some action of consequence, perhaps the only one left — Kate leads him off to bed. Before they make love, she is careful to delineate exactly what they are doing. This is not to be a "mature and tender relation between adults etcetera etcetera —" but rather "some plain old monkey business." To make the point even more clearly, she equates what they are undertaking to what she saw in her maid's pornographic comic book. Knowing the nature of his previous relations with women

43Kreyling, p. 4
44Kreyling sums up Percy's achievement with regard to this aspect of his literary heritage: "Walker Percy's fiction seeks to reimplant the hero at the center of a world order, revoke the feeling of being extraneous that has hampered him, and assert his necessity once again" (p. 165).
— mutual sexual exploitation, covered over by a thin veneer of “mature and tender” emotions — Kate insists that it be different this time, that Binx acknowledge in advance what it is they are about to commit — a sin. Partly because it gives her courage, partly to distinguish herself from all Binx’s other women, Kate wants clarity right up front. In the event, this bracing honesty renders Binx almost impotent, as he admits:

We did very badly and almost did not do at all. Flesh poor flesh failed us. The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit (for despising is not the worst fate to overtake the flesh), but until this moment seen through and canceled, rendered null by the cold and fishy eye of the malaise — flesh poor flesh at this moment summoned to be all and everything, end all and be all, the last and only hope — quails and fails . . . Christians talk about the horror of sin, but they have overlooked something. They keep talking as if everyone were a great sinner, when the truth is that nowadays one is hardly up to it. There is very little sin in the depths of the malaise. The highest moment of a malaisian’s life can be that moment when he manages to sin like a proper human. (M, pp. 159-160)

We see from Binx’s tortured reflections on the event that Kate’s insistence on honesty has borne fruit; at last Binx has realized why his encounters with Sharon and Linda and the like were always framed by despair, long silences, and loneliness. His previous attitude towards the “flesh” has been neither pagan nor Christian but post-Christian — deprived by science and rationalism of the sacramental sense, yet still haunted by the ghost of Christ that invites the soul to look for meaning in the flesh, in the act of love at least.45 The body has been banished from the realm of moral

45 As Percy points out elsewhere, this is merely a reflection of the broader confusion caused by the slow, uneven displacement of Christian values by post-Christian ones: “One might even speak of a consensus anthropology which is implicit in the culture itself, part of the air we breathe. There is such a thing and it is something of a mishmash and does not necessarily make sense. It might be called the Western democratic technological humanist view of man as higher organism invested in certain traditional trappings of a more or less nominal Judaeo-Christianity. One still hears, and no one makes much objection to it, that ‘man is made in the image of God.’ Even more often, one hears such expressions as ‘the freedom and sacredness of the individual.’ This anthropology is familiar enough. It is in fact the standard intellectual baggage of most of us. Most of the time, it doesn’t matter that this anthropology is a mishmash, disjecta membra. Do you really believe God made man
significance, that its desires may be satisfied all the better; this could only be accomplished by dividing it permanently from the soul, declaring that "inward" dispositions alone (such as sincerity and tenderness) are of moral import. But cut adrift from their anchor in the body, such dispositions are nothing more than emotions, passing moods incapable of ultimate meaning and impermeable to criticism.

For instance, while riding in his Dodge on one of his innumerable daytime outings with Marcia, Binx reports that at the time he felt that either of them "would have died for the other." (M, p. 100) This suggests that they partook of Christian agape, the highest form of charity — when, in fact, neither of them gave the other very much of himself at all. When they rode together it was into the very depths of the "malaise," and their relationship went nowhere; the malaise divided them, making even slight gestures of intimacy the occasion for "fearful politeness." Rather than investigate the moral nature of his bond with Marcia, Binx (perhaps flippantly) put the blame on his Dodge, and replaced it with his current MG; up to his encounter on the

in His image? Well, hm, it is a manner of speaking. If He didn't and man is in fact an organism in an environment with certain needs and drives which he satisfies from the environment, then what do you mean by talking about "the freedom and sacredness of the individual"? What is so sacred about the life of one individual, especially if he is hungry, sick, suffering, and useless? Well, hm, we are speaking of "values"; we mean that man has a sacred right and is free to choose his own life or, failing that, a creative death. And suppose he is incompetent to do so, may we choose it for him? Well—"

SSL, pp. 228-229.

46We find this gnostic disdain for the flesh depicted poetically by W.A. Percy. Cf. Enzio's Kingdom and Other Poems (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1924), where the philosophy underpinning the character of Aunt Emily found its noblest expression. See this passage:

"...I am damned as heretic,
And worse — and irony for Kamel — lecher!
I am not chaste, and so I spoil for hell!
These priests that never do the deed, but dream of it
Till their minds are porous — foetid — maggot's meat —
They grieve for me, who feed the monster I
Am caged in decently, I hope, and keep
My mind robust and cold as mountain wind. . . .
They do not even see the pity of it. . . .
How mockingly are our sweet bodies made
In that the very pang and leap of love
Is circumstanced in filth and sorry loathing!
And how wit-cursed the incarnating force . . ." (p. 113).
train with Kate, he has treated each encounter with “the malaise” as a situation to be engineered, rather than a clue to be followed. Indeed, until this moment he has in fact been “missing it” completely — just as Kate suggested days before: “It is possible, you know, that you are overlooking something, the most obvious thing of all. And you would not know it if you fell over it.” (M, p. 70) Here in the roomette, the scene of his masculine failure, Binx does indeed fall over it; he meets the wounded feminine in the person of a fellow pilgrim, his intellectual and moral equal. He does give of himself, imperfectly to be sure — as symbolized by the shaky consummation of the act — but to a greater degree than he ever had before. As he admits later, “I never worked so hard in my life.” For a man who up to now has treated sexuality as a realm of amusement and emotional distraction, this admission constitutes progress. For once he does not watch Kate’s suffering from an analytical distance — but shares it. Apart from the time he spends with Lonnie, this is the first occasion in the story when Binx experiences empathy.

A little later on, Binx pronounces a post-mortem on his previous sexual habits and the ideology that underlay them. “Wrassled out,” sated by his experience of the night before, he admits, “What a sickness it is . . . this latter-day post-Christian sex.” An unhappy compromise between a pagan “easement” and Christian fornication, the new model of sex is a kind of religion, “the cult of the naughty nice.” In that sect, sentimentality replaces morality, tenderness dislodges charity, and sex is neither sacred nor profane, but simply obscene; acts that somehow still feel sacred are treated as profane, while profane acts are approached with sublime expectations or decorated with the trappings of a sacrament. (Percy concludes elsewhere, citing Kierkegaard, that post-Christian man is a natural pornographer.) Binx knows he cannot go on

47 Even her sexual behavior is “bolder” than he is used to, with his “blushing little Lindas from Gentilly.” Though he dismisses her assertiveness as “theorish,” something Kate has picked up from Sex and the Single Girl or some such book, at the time it “frightened [him] half to death.”

48 See LC, pp. 175-191.
living in this way—station between Christianity and paganism; he must choose one or the other. With this realization, Binx admits that “post-Christian sex” has been at the heart of his own despair—and yet another part of the “old man” lies mortally wounded, languishing in the tangled sheets of failed passion: Here lies Binx the sentimental seducer.

The morning after their night together, Kate and Binx plunge into the “wrenching rinsing sadness” of Chicago, where Binx is overwhelmed by feelings of alienation and anonymity that he (characteristically) blames on the geography: “The Lake is the North itself, a perilous place from which the spirit winds come pouring forth all roused up and crying out alarm.” (M. p. 161) Soon enough, however, Binx admits that there is more at work here than the abstraction of the “cities of the North”; in fact, it was on a trip to Chicago that his death-haunted father turned to Binx for solace:

[W]e came my father and I to the Field Museum, a long dismal peristyle dwindling away into the howling distance, and inside stood before a tableau of Stone Age Man, father mother and child crouched around an artificial ember in postures of minatory quiet—until, feeling my father’s eye on me, I turned and saw what he required of me—very special father and son we were that summer, he staking his everything this time on a perfect comradeship— and I, seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life. . . . (M, p. 162)

Significantly, the elder Bolling makes this silent appeal to his son before an icon of the distant past, an ancient family gathered at its hearth; trapped as he is by family and tradition, Binx’s father knows no other way to cement a bond with his son, save through a shared contemplation of the mythic past. His attempt fails, as perhaps he knew it must. Binx confesses:

I, through a child’s cool perversity or some atavistic recoil from an intimacy too intimate, turned him down, turned away, refused him what I knew I could not give. (M, p. 162)

The terrible coldness and isolation that Binx associates with Chicago were Dr. Bolling’s curse, which young Binx had been able to sense, but first understands
completely during this terrible epiphany. This time, the sadness bears no relation to
his mother; in the Field Museum it is Binx who rejects this lonely man's hesitant
attempts to find a kind of love. This guilt is Binx's: he, too, has played a part in
driving his father off to die. That he could not do otherwise does not entirely miti-
gate the feeling; the setting here is mythic and so are the morals. Like Oedipus, Binx has
sinned against his father without meaning to, and stands self-condemned. But the
sentence is neither final nor fatal; by the very act of remembering his guilt, Binx begins
to be liberated from it. (We see here a trace of Percy's experience with Freudian
analysis.) Having recollected and interpreted this scene, Binx feels better "[p]repared
. . . for the genie-soul of Chicago."

Binx does not remain in the world of myth and hazy memory, nebulous guilt-
clouds and free-floating angst; he quickly plunges back into history and human
interaction, led half against his will by Sidney Gross, the Jewish businessman he met
on the train. Binx has already told us of his "Jewish vibrations," declaring:

[W]hen a man awakes to the possibility of a search and
when such a man passes a Jew in the street for first time,
he is like Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the
beach. (M, p. 75)

According to Catholic theology, Jews are a footprint of the Divine Masculine — a
trace He has left in history, a standing lesson, challenge, and rebuke to the Church that
took up their role, taking as a title (among others) the New Israel. It is especially
appropriate that a Jew leads him back from myth into history — just as Jewish
messianism conquered the cyclical Hellenism of the Roman Imperium. The "vertical
meaning" of Sidney's Jewishness shines forth even in the utterly mundane atmosphere
of the Hot Stove League, where he appears "princely-looking . . . not like the others,"

49References to Jews as proof of Divine intervention in history recur throughout Percy's novels
and non-fiction — particularly The Thanatos Syndrome and Lost in the Cosmos (where he asks the
pertinent question, "Where are the Hittites?"). He also views the Jewish experience of exile as a better
paradigm of the human condition than the apparent comfort of old Christendom. See Chapter Five for
a fuller exploration of this question.
with his wife, "a fine-looking woman, yellow-haired and bigger than Sharon, lips curling like a rose petal, head thrown back like a queen." (M, pp. 162—163) On the next leg of their trip, Binx looks at Kate anew, and again there is a Jewish connection:

I see her plain, see plain for the first time since I lay wounded in a ditch . . . a quiet little body she is, a tough little city Celt; no, more of a Rachel, really, a dark little Rachel. (M, p. 164)

If Binx means this, and equally meant it when he said that he was spiritually a Jew, an exile, (M, p. 75) then this declaration about Kate can mean only one thing: that he has at last accepted her as a fellow pilgrim, a wayfarer whose search is the moral equal of his own.

Although he has ostensibly spent his life denying the heroic expectations imposed by Aunt Emily and the tradition of his fathers, Binx has in fact never fought free of them. Displacing them instead onto the heroes of films, Binx has found his "arch-reality" in movie theaters and on romantic excursions that recapitulate the romantic exploits of screen Casanovas; nevertheless, his very quest for moments of arch-reality, his felt need for icons of masculine excellence and constant reference to them, are symptomatic of his ongoing preoccupation with heroic expectations. Why else would he approach Harold with such heavy baggage, and decide that this happily married successful man somehow "squanders his heroism," making "his own experiences sound disappointing"?

Binx makes two more stops in Chicago. Both seem perfunctory at first, but in fact, each visit becomes the occasion for Binx to confront and put to rest one of the major self-contradictions in his character that underlie his malaise. First he visits Harold Graebner, the war hero who saved his life back in Korea. Unlike Binx's dead father, or the faded memory of his imperious ancestors, here stands a living hero in the flesh — a success in war and peace, who came home triumphant to a grateful country and married a "madonna." Binx is profoundly ambivalent about Harold and his
success, as we see from his complex overreaction when Harold asks him to stand
godfather to his newborn — and he refuses, out of a mixed sense of unworthiness and
quiet envy. (Here after all was a man who had it all, who would have satisfied both
Aunt Emily and his mother, while Binx has satisfied neither and possesses almost
nothing.)

But now, when he sees Harold at home with wife and child, Binx is
overwhelmed by the ordinariness of the family; this new life, he realizes, must appear
a pale shadow beside the "arch-reality" of combat. By bringing back the memory of
that "terrible and splendid" time, Binx has in fact impoverished Harold's present life —
filled him with the same uneasiness that troubled Bolling heroes in peacetime.
Harold dimly realizes this, and turns hostile, getting rid of Binx and Kate as quickly as
possible. This whole experience lays to rest Binx's final remaining respect for the
fetishes of the Stoic code — his old reverence for moments of heroic "arch-reality."
While visiting Harold, he sees clearly that such moments are not the purpose of
everyday life — in fact, they bear no relation to it at all. Warlike, heroic deeds are
sometimes necessary, and always admirable, but they are not the focus of life; they are
subordinate to it. Venerating them, rather than the simple decencies of work, love and
prayer, is simply a form of self-dramatization. Binx looks at last on the juggernaut
fetish that crushed his father, and turns away from it to face a new world of love and
risk.

On his last stop in Chicago, Binx takes Kate to the movies; since this is the last
time we read of him indulging his old love for cinema, the imagery he uses to describe
the theater comes down like a definitive judgment on movie-going as he has practiced it
up to now:

the mother and Urwomb of all moviehouses — an Aztec
mortuary of funeral urns and glyphs, thronged with the
spirit-presences of another day, William Powell and
George Brett and Patsy Kelly and Charley Chase, the best
friends of my childhood. (M, pp. 166—167)
The artificial womb of the moviehouse— the venue where Binx was able to watch masculine heroes strut, swagger, and quip their way through life — is at last revealed as a tomb, a reliquary of old illusions and recycled plot lines, not essentially different from the endlessly recited tales of ancestral achievement that Aunt Emily so loves. Binx recites the plot of *The Young Philadelphians* with none of his usual relish, leaving it in its bare banality. As Binx and Kate emerge from the movie together, they sense that “a new note has crept into the wind, a black williwaw sound straight from the terrible wastes to the north.” Their sense of apocalypse is justified; the lives each of them have been living up to that moment are at last falling into ruin, while the hoped-for renewal that will follow is anything but certain. The last trumpet blows in the form of a call from Aunt Emily, now the avenging angel of family honor.

If we return to the metaphor of a passion that Binx must undergo, the action culminates in his excruciating final interview with Aunt Emily, back in New Orleans. Here he endures the final death of the old man, his very identity as a male Bolling in the eyes of the woman who formed him in manhood. Binx listens to her in silence, as Jesus listened to Pilate, allowing her to slash away at his self-respect:

“I did my best for you, son. I gave you all I had. More than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family ... the only good things the South ever had and the only things that really matter in this life. Ah well. Still you can tell me one thing. I know you’re not a bad boy — I wish you were. But how did it happen that none of this ever meant anything to you? Clearly it did not. Would you please tell me? I am genuinely curious.” (*M*, pp. 177-178)

As she asks this devastating question, Aunt Emily toys with a tiny sword letter opener, which Binx had damaged some years before opening a drawer, eyeing it suspiciously. Here we have a clue as to why Binx’s objections to her version of the heroic “cannot be expressed in the usual way,” why in fact he “cannot express them at all.”

There is the obvious phallic reference — to a small, limp, useless thing that Binx has damaged, and which Emily inspects with disapproval; in the light of Binx’s less
than triumphant performance with Kate on the train, he might be particularly pained by this allusion. On a less carnal level, the sword represents the heroic tradition and the masculinity of the family — which Binx has rendered null and limp. Half phallic mother, half sword mädchen, Emily stands before him and accuses him of failing in his manhood, of rutting like one of the demos, of the “common” folk who are “common as hell.”

Binx could defend himself, could offer that he was in love with Kate, that they are getting married, could claim that Kate told him Emily knew about the trip, or any number of other rationalizations. He could even admit his wrong and apologize, thereby reentering her moral universe. But Binx does none of these things, and instead offers up the last of his masculine identity, allowing her to strip him bare and shatter his honor — an occurrence that for a man of the old code was equivalent to death — then turn him out of the ancestral home. The old man is dead; the question is whether anything will be raised.

In the desolation that follows, Binx descends into a kind of hell, wandering the city on Ash Wednesday, his perambulations recalling the tortuous internal pilgrimage of Eliot’s narrator in the poem of that name. On the verge of despair, searching frantically for Sharon or a reasonable Sharon-substitute, Binx approaches the end of his strength. For the first time, we see him in the grip of tangible desperation, as he clutches at the rags of the old life that is ending. As usual, the natural world seems to echo back Binx’s mood:

A watery sunlight breaks through the smoke of the Chef and turns the sky yellow. Elysian Fields glistens like a vat of sulfur; the playground looks as if it alone had survived the end of the world. (M, pp. 182—3)

Then, like a harbinger of grace, Kate appears just in time. Suddenly the ruins he has seen in his imagination become “viny,” fertile with possibility. Nature and the world are redeemed for him by a woman’s grace. His reconciliation with the feminine
has begun in earnest; the most telling detail that points to this is Binx’s description of Kate and her car:

it is easy to believe that the light stiff little car has become gradually transformed by its owner until it is hers herself in its every nut and bolt. When it comes fresh from the service station its narrow tires still black and wet, the very grease itself seems not the usual muck but the thrifty amber sap of the slender axle tree. (M, pp. 183 — 184)

Up to now, Binx has allowed his malaise to masculinize women and turn them into machines — recall the “splendid Amazon” (M, pp. 17—19), whom Binx sees as a complex of cellophane, helmet, and gunmetal. Now, in the presence of Grace, Binx sees Kate humanizing a machine. Binx has at last come to the point where he can see a woman whole, neither as a threat to his very life nor a short-term fleshly diversion from the malaise, but as a living, thinking bridge to the world outside the mind.

In return, Kate expects certain services of Binx. Again she requests what she asked of him on the train: Will he tell her “the simplest things” and promise “never, never [to] laugh” at her? This time, Binx is ready to say yes and mean it, and they ride off together to an Easter that is promised — if not guaranteed — by the image of Lonnie, the image of Christ, risen from the dead at the end of time, healed of his wounds — and wonder of wonders, on skis.
Chapter Three: The Last Gentleman — And the Flight from Woman

In Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman, we see a continuation of his preoccupation with metaphysics, gnosticism, and their connection to sex and psychology. His hero, Will Barrett, is a young man subject to mental debilities that render him virtually helpless: a persistent sense of dislocation and isolation, an inability to relate to others, an alienation from every social group in which he might find a place, a recurrence of "fugue states" in which he abandons all social ties to wander the earth in an amnesiac fog, and a complex of persistent apocalyptic suspicions about "ravening particles" and other malign influences that have drained his world of meaning.

The detached, third-person narrator who presents Will Barrett speculates repeatedly that Barrett's condition might be simply the result of psychological factors, (and therefore) subject to treatment by the right doctor with the right method; but the narrative itself argues against this possibility, presenting as a representative of psychology only the ludicrous sophist Dr. Gamow. The one representative of science in this novel who carries some credibility, Sutter Vaught, derives his authority from his own agonistic experience of despair and his reluctant reflection upon it, not from his neglected practice of the scientific method. In many of Percy's works — from The Last Gentleman up through The Second Coming — we encounter subtle digs at psychoanalysis, parodic instances of what Percy saw as the arbitrariness and reductionism of Freudian theory; nevertheless, Percy makes rich use of certain insights of psychoanalysis in his construction of Will Barrett and his presentation of the character's internal plight, as Lewis Lawson argues:

The older Will Barrett who narrates the adventures of his younger self is obviously a student of psychoanalysis. Thus the case history of his younger self that he presents contains apparently disparate symptoms that fundamentally correlate: Will's existence has been shattered by the loss
of his father and mother. The loss of the mother causes the worse trauma, so painful that Will cannot even personify her, but thinks symbolically of her as Eden, the South, a golf course, a park: thus he haunts Central Park. But his attempt to regain that lost object is impeded by the fact that when he is in the park, he hallucinates the image of that other lost object, the father, who confuses Will with his absolute distinction between ladies and whores.¹

Lawson’s rigorously Freudian reading of *The Last Gentleman* is powerful, tying together details in the novel that have previously seemed disparate or arbitrary. I will draw upon and supplement it, with the insights that can be drawn from Karl Stern, the follower of Freud who employed that skeptic’s methods in the service of the Catholic faith, rejecting the reductionist motives of Freud’s psychologism, while adapting the concept of overdetermination to the medieval tradition of analogical reading. Stern explains his project in the following analysis of Freud’s speculations on the origin of the idea of God:

> Between the “real” something (father) and the “phantasy” (God) exists a nexus which one might call the analogical link. The entire theory [Freud] outlined is only justified because the two images — father and God — have common features. The entire psychoanalytic method of *Deutung* (interpretation) is based on such kinship. Moreover, while the genetic part of the argument is shaky (even if the psychological observation is true it does not, of course, disprove the existence of God) the kinship is an unshakeable fact. We call God “father,” He has paternal qualities.

> This particular aspect of the argument — the analogical link between things immediate and things transcendental — is essential to the Hellenic and the Jewish-Christian tradition. We can follow it through centuries. Saint Paul claims that all fatherhood on earth is named after God. Goethe says that “all that is passing is merely a parable” (of the eternal).

> For *Deutung*, exegesis as a method by which we point out links between different levels of occurrences, is nothing new. The fact that a story is relevant on different planes is the basis of all interpretation. All Scriptural exegesis is based on this method.

> This kinship by analogy, this parallel of significances has been re-introduced into the method of *Deutung* by

Freud, in his concept of overdetermination. A dream can be interpreted not only in one way but in a number of ways, all of them being perfectly valid, the various interpretations refer to various layers of personal evolution.\(^2\)

The contribution I hope to make here is to peel away the various layers of Will Barrett’s psyche, exploring the levels of motivation that Percy has created for the character, and how they work together in a synergy — linking the (seemingly) abstract questions of metaphysics inextricably with the most tangible, primal experience of the world, that of the infant at the breast. The key to this synergy, the nexus at which they meet, is the feminine or anima— as defined in Chapter One.

I hope further to show that Will Barrett’s abortive search for psychological resolution and a healthy romantic relationship is an allegory of his larger quest for religious meaning, a fact that will become even more powerfully important in *The Second Coming*. Percy has stated that he practices this type of allegory:

> I take pleasure in turning Freud upside down. Instead of something being a symbol for sex in the Freudian style, I use sex as a symbol for something else.\(^3\)

Of course, no reader of the Song of Songs will find this surprising; from the Jewish Kabbalists to St. Bernard of Clairvaux and beyond, images of marriage and sexuality have been employed by writers seeking to express incorporeal, eternal realities.

What is especially intriguing in Percy’s work is his attempt to appropriate and make use of the insights of psychoanalysis in the service of Catholic allegory. Herein lies Percy’s deep kinship to Karl Stern, who affirms that the traditional hermeneutics expounded by Dante and Aquinas contain a deep psychological validity — since, as Freud observed, most events do have significance on multiple levels. By rejecting Freud’s own unexamined materialism, Stern and Percy opened the interpretative process to transcendence, inviting readers to seek within the viper’s tangle of the

\(^2\)Stern, pp. 68-70.
\(^3\)Allen, p. 51.
“family romance” and the arid expanses of clinical depression for evidence of a Providential order. It is important to remember in this connection that Stern’s critique of modern philosophy never lapses into a counter-reductionism directed at unbelievers; nor does Percy’s theological motivation evacuate its earthly content, becoming a “pure” allegory after the manner of Pilgrim’s Progress or The Romance of the Rose. Rather, he exerts his considerable powers to incarnate the struggle for religious meaning his characters undertake, grounding it solidly in the deep roots of primal childhood experience.

To accomplish this, Percy employs the Freudian device of overdetermination in precisely the sense that Stern understands it, as he tells Will Barrett’s story, constructing the picaresque narrative of his life to resemble a deeply significant dream. While on the surface the events seem arbitrary, on reflection they are revealed as virtually inevitable, the necessary exfoliation and resolution of the multi-layered conflicts that formed Will’s psyche. They also serve double duty, as the playing out of the various metaphysical positions that interest the mature character (and the author). To the extent that Percy has succeeded in this effort, his protagonist’s personal development will appear susceptible of a strict Freudian reading such as Lawson’s; equally, it will yield to a ‘humanistic’ interpretation such as William Rodney Allen offers, exploring Will’s psyche in light of the hereditary depression that afflicted the Barretts (and the Percys); Will’s tale will work nicely on the level of philosophical drama, where Martin Luschei places it in The Sovereign Wayfarer; 4 the sociological interpretation proposed by Michael Kreyling will find support, as will the anagogical reading I propose. Presumably, more layers could be added to this interpretative Troy, proportionate to the novel’s inner complexity and aesthetic resonance — the only limits being plausibility and continued scholarly interest. (Perhaps one mark of enduringly

---

important literature is its density of overdetermination — the vast array of useful and enlightening readings which a text will accommodate.)

In accordance with his hybrid (or inverse) Freudianism, Percy does indeed investigate Will Barrett's stunted and thwarted sexual nature to illuminate the "something else" that more deeply interests him. And quite a curious cipher that nature turns out to be. As Lawson indicates, Will is "confused" by the world of female sexuality that his father has sliced neatly into "ladies" and "whores," leaving him unable to imagine a wholesome relationship with either type of woman. This dilemma is not unique to Will Barrett; as Richard King argues, the "Southern Family Romance" pervaded letters and life, perpetrating a psychological Manichaeanism. This rigid split between the life of the body and that of the spirit appears not only in the deep psychology that motivates Will Barrett, but in the icons of Western intellectual history to which Barrett cleaves — most obviously, in the figure of René Descartes.

Descartes and the philosophical tendency named for him are important for Will Barrett, as Lawson points out:

Deprived of the psychological objects that he needs — his father is dead and his mother is literally unimaginable — Will has accepted Cartesianism as his savior and embraced the material world as his object. He thinks of himself as an engineer and has recently bought an expensive telescope as an act of faith that technology will reconcile him to the objects that comprise his object.

Because his primal experience of the feminine is "unimaginable," Will has no immediate certainty of the benevolence of the physical world, or of where his place in it could be — whether there is indeed any bridge between his mind and the world of creatures. This may be why he suffers amnesia, fugue states, and other dissociative disorders: his link with concrete reality is so tenuous that it frequently breaks down

---

5King, pp. 35-39. Also Allen, p. 59.
altogether, and off he flies into an “orbit of transcendence.” Furthermore, the nature of that reality — of the creaturely world of immediacy, sensory experience, and particularity — is untrustworthy, full of danger. The feminine, far from its natural role as an assimilated aspect of a fully mature human psyche, is an alien and inchoate force, prone to abandonment or worse. The following account of the relations between men and women in the House of Barrett suggests the darker possibilities:

[In this particular family the men died young, after short tense honorable lives, and the women lived another fifty years, lived a brand new life complete with a second girlhood, outings with other girls, 35,000 hearty meals, and a long quarrelsome senescence. (*LG*, p. 21)]

The Barrett women are heartier than the men, it seems — and perhaps poisonous to them. At one point, after living with his stepmother and elderly female relations for only few months, events begin to bear this possibility out. The old women were

all but one over seventy and each as hale as a Turk. He alone ailed, suffering not only from hay fever but having fallen also into a long fit of melancholy and vacancy amounting almost to amnesia. It was at this time that he came near to joining the ranks of the town recluses who sit dreaming behind their shutters thirty or forty years while the yard goes to jungle and the bugs drone away the long summer days. (*LG*, p. 21)

Surrounded by sterile but powerful women who offer him no nurturance — indeed, whom he perceives as a threat — Will comes close to psychological death, to a complete self-immurement in childhood, in an environment that is a brutal parody of the nursery, surrounded not by a friendly garden but by a “jungle.” Only the military draft rescues him from this fate, offering him the same escape it offered William Alexander Percy in real life, a ticket to an all-male world where action is “easy” because it is thrust upon the actor, relieving him of the burden of decision. Because of his amnesia, Will fails at this too, but his escape from the steamy, suffocating

---

7Tolson (p. 332) suggests the likely autobiographical element in Percy’s depiction of Will, focusing on the author’s troubled feelings towards his mother — who died when he was a boy in what was widely suspected a suicide. Walker’s younger brother was nearly killed in the incident, as well.
greenhouse of the past is complete: he does not return home, but travels to the relative safety of New York. There, he can avoid the past and its inheritance, the forced associations and concrete limitations that as a creature he is subject to, and dwell instead in pure expectancy, in the illusion that through technique and scientific knowledge he can “engineer” his life. He can “embrace the physical world as his object,” as Lawson suggests — but only by deluding himself into a kind of angelism, the notion that he is not a part of that world, but stands above it as a purely transcendent spirit. By partaking of that illusion, we will see, Will renders his own alienation complete.

Returning to the figure of Descartes, the philosopher most often accused of angelism (see Chapter 1), we find the same curious congruence of psyche and theory that dominates his pupil, Will Barrett. In his chapter analyzing Descartes’ personal history and its relation to his mechanistic, dualist account of the world, Stern suggests that one likely contributing source of the “prostitute-madonna complex” is “early maternal deprivation,” which results in “the breaking up of the image of Woman into two.” He argues that such a factor was decisive in the psychic development of Descartes — who was only one year old when his mother died in childbirth. The implications of this loss are important, on Stern’s reading, for Descartes’ philosophical method. Stern places Descartes’ fundamental principle of methodical doubt firmly in a world which is all too familiar from clinical experience: the world of those to whom the certainty of being has early been shattered by maternal bereavement. For to all of us, the core and meaning of reality was at one time, before all cogitation, the certainty of carnal presence. Descartes, the adult and philosopher, postulates to “doubt sensible things because they have deceived us,” and it is in this connection noteworthy that in French the word déçu has the double meaning of “deceived” and “disappointed.” The certainty of the flesh which is the foundation of all certainty had to be conjured away — because it was here where the terror

---

8See also Lawson, Following Percy, pp. 154-155, and Maritain, p. 184 ff.
9Stern, p. 96.
and pain of abandonment lurked...Reality, perceived primarily through the flesh, meant dread, and therefore ratiocination, the pure cogito, became an impenetrable armor.

The ideal of the cogito, of the mathesis universalis, means denial, a defence against the flesh because the flesh is synonymous with anguish; and the clean fissure between mind and body is an isolation, a setting-apart and rendering innocuous of that which spells dread.10

In light of Stern’s analysis, the neatly surgical division that Descartes undertook upon the world — dissecting body from spirit for the sake of advancing knowledge and making man the “master and possessor of nature” — appears as another species of the gnostic hostility towards the flesh that was identified in Chapter One as a symptom of metaphysical ambition. That such ambition might frequently (or of necessity) be tied to such psychological symptoms as depression, dissociation, and the inability to love another, is hardly a surprising notion. Without suggesting (reductionistically) that gnostic world-views are merely side-effects of childhood traumas, we can assert safely that in Will’s case the two are intertwined and mutually supporting.

Will Barrett’s loss of his mother at a formative age has gravely affected his ability to believe that the material world is a friendly or welcoming place, one in which he can take root, as an organically related part of the whole. Instead, the universe appears to him as a cold laboratory of experience, where familiarity breeds terror — the fact that his forefathers attended Princeton makes it impossible for him to stay there — in which he cannot accept his role as a man among men, and a creature among the creaturely. Instead, he must “know everything before he can do anything.” Taken literally, this suggests metaphysical ambition: Will needs omniscience to escape from helplessness. The abandoned child looks for safety in the illusion of divine knowledge and control; only self-divinization can address the deep-seated suspicion of the material universe he

10Stem, pp. 100-101.
acquired as an infant from bitter disappointment at the breast, the source of biological
life.\footnote{See \textit{LG}, p. 136, where the morning after a failed romantic encounter with Kitty, Will
eavesdrops on her conversation with Rita: "It had come over him again, the old itch for omniscience.
One day it was longing for carnal knowledge, the next for perfect angelic knowledge. Tonight he was
not American and homy but English and eavesdropper. He had to know without being known." Perhaps
that last sentence also explains Will's romantic difficulties.}

Union with the feminine seems impossible; Will has no primal memory of it, and only abstract, anxious notions about what such a union would entail. At best, he imagines that the simple act of intercourse, ratified by the conventions of "romantic love," would do the job. As Sutter Vaught recognizes, this "mode of re-entry" does not last very long. Impatient with hypocrisy, Sutter strips away those sentimental conventions and reduces the act to simple pornography.

Will's attempts at knowledge by union (intellectus) fail — as dramatized by his impotence. Frustrated, he falls back on the abstract mode of knowing (\textit{ratio}) with which he is comfortable. He resorts to different masculine modes of investigation, turning variously to technique (psychoanalysis), device (telescope), and shaman (Sutter), in search of the information or invocation that will open the world up to him again, render it friendly and habitable, a place where he can bear uninterrupted consciousness, memory, and even the prospect of action.

Toward the end of the novel, Sutter will intuit the deep connection between Will's vagrant, celibate life, and his relentless metaphysical and scientific questions:

\begin{quote}
You know something, Barrett? There's one thing I've never been able to get the straight of, and that is what it is you want of me. I suspect it is one of two things. You either want me to tell you to fornicate or not fornicate, but for the life of me I can't figure out which it is. (\textit{LG}, pp. 297-298)
\end{quote}

Here Sutter misinterprets Will's intent. Will does look to him for direction on the issue of sexuality — but only as a function of a much deeper need, the need to establish for himself a vital link to the anima. Will senses that Sutter has — like his
father, Ed Barrett — seen down into the abyss of loneliness and exile. Unlike Ed Barrett, Sutter has lived to tell about it, emerging like Lazarus from the land of death. What secrets must he hold, Will imagines — perhaps even the counter-spell that will release him from his father’s curse. Will is looking for more than permission to escape from the terrible dilemma in which the “last gentleman” finds himself in an era when women have begun to elude the old categories.\textsuperscript{12} He wants an account of sexuality (and thus, of the physical universe) that is not a function of alienation and gnosticism, but a genuine path to permanent “re-entry.”

But Sutter does not have the answer — although he understands the question, as the clues Will finds in his notebooks suggest. He sees the connection between sexuality, psychic wholeness, alienation, and gnosticism — but he has no more notion what to do with this information than Will. Presented abstractly, as a piece of secret knowledge, these insights are of no more value than religious slogans or psychological jargon. Sutter does not have any such “knowledge carried to the heart” (to quote Allen Tate), as is evident by his stark conception of the sexual alternatives: blatant, unapologetic fornication, and a purely negative celibacy. Note that marriage and love are not an option for Sutter — as they were not options for Ed Barrett, who reduced women to ladies and whores.

It is possible to “fornicate,” to sully oneself through trafficking in the soiled flesh of unworthy women, cushioned from involvement by a categorical control over them. They are only whores, and so lack the social and metaphysical importance to weigh down the spirit of an incipient gnostic. Since their disappearance is not to be feared, but desired, a child of trauma may consort with them safely, without fear that they might reenact the primal trauma that the mother inflicted with her abandonment. They offer a few of the comforts of “home,” with none of the dangers.

\textsuperscript{12}Panthea Reid Broughton, “Gentlemen and Fornicators,” in Broughton, ed., p. 100.
It is also possible to deny the flesh, holding oneself aloof from sources of temptation, refusing the possibility of love in order to avoid the danger of contamination.¹³ Like the Manichaeans before them, gnostic moderns such as Sutter discover that a purely negative celibacy is the flip-side of pornography — and the logical resting place of a discouraged pornographer. This course is the one Sutter has chosen by the end of the novel, as a prelude to the suicide he contemplates.

Will’s own attitude toward sexuality at the novel’s beginning, and its implications for his metaphysical quest, are illuminated by his encounter with “Kerrell,” the “attractive and healthy brunette” from Ohio with whom he spends a weekend at a ski lodge, along with a cadre of other well-adjusted Ohioans:

And though he had reason to believe she liked him and would not repel his advances, the fact was that he could think of nothing to say to her. She was long of leg and deep of thigh and he liked having his head in her lap, but he experienced a sense of giddiness when she spoke to him. Once he took her for a long walk in the park. She picked up a cat. “Hello, cat,” she said, looking into the cat’s eyes. “I can see your name is Mehitabel. I’m Kerrell and this is Billy. Billy, say hello to Mehitabel.” Try as he might, he could not bring himself to speak to the cat.

Now at Bear Mountain he lay with his head on her thigh and she leaned over him and said: “I’m a people-liker and I think you’re my kind of people. Are you a people-liker?”

“Yes,” he said, his cheek going stiff, and thought what a pity it was he might not have sport with her without talking to her. (LG, p. 25)

There is more to this incident than meets the eye. While at first we notice, and chuckle at, “Kerrell’s” ludicrous behavior — her willful confusion of animal with human, and her baby-talk manifesto of humanitarianism — we ought not to miss Will’s reaction. Although he refuses to conflate human and animal life, or to treat Kerrell as a pure sexual cipher, he wishes he could. Unable to make a real connection with a woman (or the feminine), he wistfully considers the Cartesian option, which

---

¹³This course of action is the one pursued, for many years, by Lance Lamar in Lancelot. It is the defining characteristic of such Faulkner characters as Bayard Sartoris, Quentin Compson, and Gail Hightower, as Kreyling argues (p. 142).
would entail reducing Kerrell to the condition of nature — silent, wordless\textsuperscript{14} — and then becoming her "master and possessor."

Should he take that option, Will realizes, he would be acting in the American spirit, partaking in the gnostic project of creating a utopian realm without natural limits, which had partly motivated the conquest and exploitation of the American continent:

He muttered to himself: "Barrett, you poor fellow, you must be very bad off, worse than you imagined, to have gotten things so mixed up. Here you are lying in a brierpatch when you could be lounging with young people like yourself, people against whom no objection could be raised, your head pillowed in the lap of a handsome girl. Is it not true that the American Revolution has succeeded beyond the wildest dreams of [Mad Anthony] Wayne and all his friends, so that practically everyone in the United States is free to sit around a cozy fire in ski pants? (LG, p. 25)\textsuperscript{15}

This humorous reduction of the American project to its most banal, hedonistic level takes on a deeper meaning if we rigorously apply the sexual metaphor. Thus, the mastery and possession of nature (in the form of Kerrell) is equated with the conquest of a continent of virgin land — all of which Will can claim as his rightful heritage, insofar as he partakes in the gnostic, American revolutionary spirit.

As we discover later in the novel, another masculinizing posture is possible, one with the higher moral sanction of Stoicism and the heroic tradition — the role of master and protector. Throughout the narrative, Will's father, Ed Barrett, is repeatedly characterized as a "protector of the Negroes" — a title he earns in much the same way the Percys earned it (as recounted in \textit{Lanterns on the Levee}), by vigorous action taken to defend his racial "inferiors" (blacks) from his social "inferiors" (the poor white racists).

\textsuperscript{14}Given Percy's preoccupation, in \textit{Lost in the Cosmos} and throughout his work, with the importance of language as a mark of man's uniqueness and his transcendent vocation, Will's wish to "have sport with her without talking to her" takes on a very specific meaning. See also, of course, Allie in \textit{The Second Coming}.

\textsuperscript{15}See again Lewis Simpson's remarks in \textit{The Dispossessed Garden} on the gnostic nature of the American project, cited on pp. 7-8 above.
Will’s attitude towards blacks is formed by this pattern. Recalling Richard King’s thesis, that the Southern Family Romance created a perception of blacks among whites that alternated between the bestial and the passively maternal, we can draw some important connections. Remaining consistent in our application of the sexual metaphor, we can say that the Southern heroic code feminized most elements of society and the world, in service of the ravening spirit of “pure” masculine ambition: women, along with blacks and helpless whites, were assimilated to a condition of pure nature. Nature, in the post-Cartesian West, frequently appears as a hostile force that must be subdued, reduced to a condition of pure passivity. Only then can it be seen as beneficent. (This element in the Southern code, whose aggressive nature is only implicit in W.A. Percy’s writings and his nephew’s early novels, is exposed and savagely critiqued in Lancelot.)

If in Will Barrett’s South blacks have been reduced to failed mother figures, “feminized” by political and cultural powerlessness, then we can also look to his feelings towards that race for a clue to his relationship towards the feminine:

He knew very little about them, in fact, nothing. Ever since he was a child and had a nurse, he had been wary of them and they of him...No doubt these peculiar attitudes were a consequence of his nervous condition. (LG, p. 156)

What quality is it of blacks that makes Will uncomfortable around them? Quoting Val Vaught, Will calls it their fearful vulnerability to invite violation and to be violated twenty times a day, day in and day out, our lives long, like a young girl. Who would not? And so the best of us, Jamie said she said, is only good the way a rapist is good later, for a rapist can be good later and even especially good and especially happy. (LG, p.158)

The resentment that underlies these observations is obvious; the sheer burden of striving for the superhuman stature of the Southern hero weighs Will down, makes

\[\text{[16] King, p. 33.}\]
him impatient with those who would cooperate in making that stature accessible. Knowing at some level how unsatisfactory was the relationship his father developed toward the world of the flesh and of other people, Will resists the temptation to cultivate it — refusing the opportunity to become a patronizing white liberal, a paternalist white aristocrat, or even a fornicating Ohioan.17

Will turns away from the Southern/Cartesian tradition to an older Western heritage — that of the medieval Church, whose attitude towards the flesh was so respectful as to entail its occasional mortification. That Will chooses this option, throwing himself “into a brierpatch like a saint of old,” speaks of his fundamental decency, and of his own awareness that his need for union with the feminine runs much deeper even than Kerrell’s thigh.

Recall, too, the position in which Will finds himself during the key exchanges: with his head in Kerrell’s lap, like a child newly escaped from the womb. The proximate opportunity for intimacy here may be less powerful for Will than the proximity of maternal images. In the psyche of a man who experienced the terror of abandonment at the hands of his mother, the chance to reenter the womb may be more of a threat than a lure — especially when the woman making the offer also displays reductionist metaphysical tendencies (such as humanism and naturalism) that cut off the transcendent (or masculine) dimension of life. As we saw in our analysis of Aunt Emily in Chapter 2, Percy’s male characters consider such attitudes psychologically castrating; not surprisingly, they consequently experience real and figurative impotence in the presence of women who promote these positions. Until the hero has resolved his metaphysical questions — by coming to accept the true model of his masculinity as

17Later on in the novel, aroused by the flirtations of Muzh, the loose and easy daughter of sexual liberal Fomey Aiken, Will only finds release from desire when he reframes her as “a horsy, good-natured, sisterly sort. And so it was permitted to leave her alone and to excuse himself. What a relief.” (LG, p. 117) Her “sisterly” quality is her share in their common humanity, something which Will lost sight of in his close attention to the sexual main chance. This realization pulls him down from his transcendent perch and removes his strange obligation to master and possess her.
God the Father, and the real nature of his masculine vocation as a man with an immortal soul — he cannot relate to the feminine without a sense of terror or a desire for domination. By attaining such a resolution, when it occurs, a Percy hero finds that union with the anima is returned to him like a gift — as Kierkegaard writes of the “aesthetic” realm falling into the Knight of Faith’s lap.

Beyond these philosophical considerations, the figure of Ed Barrett, Will’s father, recurs throughout the novel whenever Will comes close to a healthy contact with the feminine, warding him off and menacing him. The sexual taboos Ed transmits to his son — rendered untenable by social change — are an emblem of his rejection of life. Ed partakes of the Southern hero’s gnostic desire to shed the limitations of the flesh, to freeze the flux of history, and become god-like in his ability to manipulate nature without being entailed in or weighed down by it.\(^{18}\) Ed wishes to exert control over his home town; he yearns for the heroic power of his grandfather, who restored order to the post-bellum chaos that engulfed his community. But his ambition goes further: he feels the need to impose his version of chastity on the individuals in that community, to force them to respect the old “decent” distinctions without which orderly society — and white supremacy — cannot be maintained. Since real historical existence resists his utopian ambitions, Ed prefers death to a life of impotence. Just before he goes off to commit suicide and shatter his son’s life, Ed reflects on the failure of the old mores, suggesting that between the races, a blend will come of the worst possible qualities drawn from each: “One will learn to fornicate in public, and the other will end by pissing in the street.” (\textit{LG}, p. 85).

The memory of his father’s suicide and the events that surrounded it haunts Will throughout \textit{The Last Gentleman} and \textit{The Second Coming}. Central to both novels is the function of Ed Barrett as an emblem of the gnostic view of life that in practice

\(^{18}\text{Kreyling, p. 5.}\)
amounts to a love of death, a fact that Will comprehends fully only in the latter novel. The figure of his suicidal (and potentially murderous) father stands in Will’s mind as a fierce guardian outside the garden of life, forbidding him re-entry, emptying the physical universe and the flesh of meaning, sentencing him to exile and eventual suicide. Only by conquering this figure in his own mind, by wrestling with this dark angel in the form of Sutter Vaught and his other avatars internal and external, can Will Barrett regain psychic wholeness and accept a benign interpretation of carnal existence — and therefore of sexuality.

My interpretation complements Lawson’s remarks about The Last Gentleman in the essay already cited, which strives to interpret the puzzling, ubiquitous references to Will experiencing *déjà vu*. Lawson points to a key passage in the novel, where Will characterizes his “spells” of *déjà vu* as

nameless and not to be thought of, let alone mentioned, and which he therefore thought of as lying at the secret and somehow shameful heart of childhood itself. (LG, p. 11)

Lawson suggests that we interpret the phenomenon of *déjà vu* as an instance of *maternal awe*, a distorted memory of the overwhelming power and immediacy of being that the infant experiences at the breast. Ideally, such associations should be reassuring, the basis of a healthy sense of the benevolence of the physical world, which will endure even as the infant discovers his individual existence; however, when a trauma distorts the maturation process, the infant begins to regard experiences of plenitude and intimacy with an admixture of fear, a sense of engulfment by a hostile or blind omnipotence. Will Barrett is a victim of the latter syndrome, which is compounded and raised to conscious awareness by the second trauma of his father’s suicide. If his infant yearnings for protection and physical union with the feminine have been bitterly disappointed, his budding adolescent desires were similarly
poisoned by his father’s renunciation of life, associated as it was with a jeremiad against sexuality.\textsuperscript{19}

Lawson argues that Will’s directionless journey through life is motivated almost entirely by such subconscious motivations, as he tries ineffectually to work through his conflicts with maternal and paternal figures, discover an acceptable code of sexual conduct, and find his place in the chain of being. This quest for resolution, in Lawson’s reading, will not end until he has plumbed the depths of his traumatized childhood and its implications for his philosophical beliefs. For the time being

Will will continue to be in awe of golf courses and shotguns (and Lugers), until he achieves through conversion a restitution of the original unity: then his experience of awe will be replaced by a sense of blessedness.\textsuperscript{20}

This experience of blessedness, of the self situated within creation looking upward to its Creator, is the end result of a successful reconciliation of the animus and anima within a single psyche. In Percy’s fiction, which always strives to subvert or invert reductionism, the primal, infantile experience of negative awe or positive blessedness serves as the symbol — and not the deterministic cause — of the corresponding philosophical stance struck by a given character. In Will Barrett, as in all of Percy’s masculine protagonists, the psychological wholeness that he attains is dependent upon the progress he makes away from gnostic metaphysics and towards incarnational orthodoxy. The battle between these two interpretative systems — and the emotional forces that give each of them impetus and resonance — decides Will Barrett’s fate.

The nature of this conflict can be seen early on in the novel, at the culmination of a series of events that begin to point Will towards making a truce with the anima. Even as Will makes the first steps in his amiably daft pursuit of Kitty (resolving, based on

\textsuperscript{19}Lawson, “Will Barrett,” pp. 62-64.  
\textsuperscript{20}Lawson, “Will Barrett,” p. 75.
the advice he reads in *Living*, to court her properly and chastely with a view to marriage), he is frustrated again and again. The very attempt to establish a relationship increases his confusion and disorientation, sending him finally on a long train trip to the sea (another traditional maternal image). He emerges from the train, still reeling from a nightmare notion that Rita — his rival for Kitty’s affection and a hostile, sterile mother-figure — is watching him. When he arrives at last at the seaside station, this is how he experiences it:

> It was dark. He found himself in a long street which was nearly black between the yellow street lights at the corners. The sea was somehow close. There was a hint of an uproar abroad in the night, a teeming in the air and sense of coming closer with each step to a primal openness. (*LG*, 77)

As Will passes down “the long street,” he moves closer in his imagination to the oceanic experience of the feminine. In the event, he is disappointed by what he finds:

> There it was. But it was nothing like Wrightsville or Myrtle Beach or Nag’s Head, lonesome and wide and knelling. It was domesticated. (*LG*, pp. 77-78)

The forces of technology and human cultivation have rendered the awesome merely picturesque. Will has not yet encountered the experience that will trigger recollection of the past and the reconciliation he seeks. Exhausted by the experience, he lays down “in the warm black sand of a vacant lot” and sleeps.

The next day, as Will jogs around the reservoir — a thoroughly domesticated body of water — he meets Rita herself. Instead of confronting Will, Rita attempts to coopt him, to enlist him in a technological/mystical scheme to treat Jamie Vaught’s terminal disease with an Indian herbal remedy, and deflect his interest in Kitty by appealing to his sense of male heroism. (In a maneuver worthy of Aunt Emily Cutrer, Rita compares Will to Achilles, and offers him a vehicle called Ulysses.) She pleads

---

21Donald Davidson’s emblem for the deadened world of modernity, in his long poem of that title, which Percy certainly knew.
with Will to back away from Kitty, to let her accompany Rita to Europe on a
Wanderjahr. As an adherent of secular humanitarianism — and an older, childless
woman with unspecified designs on the woman Will desires — Rita embodies a self-
reflexive femininity. (In the novel's broad allegorical scheme, she stands as an
emblem of pure immanence, closed to transcendence.) She is both unsatisfying as a
mother-figure and unattractive to him sexually. Her dabbling in pagan religions
throughout the novel is a reflection of her worldly faith, her possible Lesbianism a
practical expression of her rejection of men and the transcendent masculine alike. Like
Kerrell's blithe materialism, Rita's earnest humanism strikes Will as a spiritual and
psychic threat.

The field of feminine associations grows denser in the next scene, as Will enters a
Central Park that "swarm[s] with old deja vus of summertime," and sensations like a
"close privy darkness" and "the smell of Alabama girls (no Mississippi) who bathe and
put on cotton dresses and walk uptown on a summer night." (LG, p. 84). After
encountering a gentleman bearing a homosexual proposition — put, humorously
enough, in the form of an inquiry about Plato — Will walks into the green darkness,
as if to follow his deja vu to its source. In what becomes a pattern, even as Will enters
the world of the feminine, a memory of his father intrudes. In this case, Will finds one
of Rita's little notes to Kitty; but its content recalls Ed Barrett to his mind:

Man is certainly stark mad. He can't make a worm, but he
makes gods by the dozens. (LG, p. 81)

This quote from Montaigne, in Rita's hand, seems merely pretentious. But put in the
mouth of Ed Barrett, who "quoted Montaigne on a summer night, but in a greener,

---

22 This allusion may have deeper significance, in connection with the homoerotic images which
pervaded William Alexander Percy's writing. Remembering that misogyny underlay the theory of
Greek homosexuality—it was proposed that women were animals, so that heterosexual intercourse
constituted bestiality—we might interpret the young "Platonist's" intervention as another
manifestation of gnosticism, blocking the path towards the feminine.
denser, more privy darkness than this," it takes on a deep philosophical significance. In fact, it asserts the central precept of modern gnostic metaphysics. Interpreted at face value, Montaigne's aphorism denies the whole supernatural order, suggesting that it is an ineffectual human artifact, a mere by-product of hubris or fantasy. Here, in ovo, is the atheist reductionism of Feuerbach, Nietzsche, and Marx — including the implication that man, as inveterate god-smith, might well succeed at deifying himself someday.23 It is no accident that this quotation calls to mind Ed Barrett's fierce explication of a life-denying sexual code, pronounced ex cathedra from the porch to the pseudo-sacred strains of Brahms, just before Ed walks off and (we find out later) murders himself. In this economical scene, Percy suggests powerfully the mortal price of denying the rightful claims of either the earthly feminine or the transcendent masculine — and also the deep interconnection between unbelief, Manichaean attitudes towards the body, and this century's "love affair with death," of which he makes so much in The Thanatos Syndrome.

Will, thoroughly confused by his inconclusive memory — he is not yet prepared to face the fact of his father's suicide — flees the park in search of Kitty's company. Reflexively, he tries again to make contact with the world of the flesh, this time through the flesh of a lover.24 When he finds Kitty at her apartment with Rita, 

23See Eric Voegelin's comments in "Reason: The Classic Experience:" "If man exists in the metaxy, in the tension 'between god and man,' any construction of man as a world-immanent entity will destroy the specific meaning of existence, because it deprives man of his specific humanity." Voegelin makes his warning more specific, pointing out that gnostic interpretations of man "misuse man's bodily existence for the purpose of reducing the metaleptic tension, through causal explanation, to the organic and inorganic strata of being in which it is founded. Or, since the discovery of the nous and its symbolization of the metaxy are facts in the history of humanity, they can psychologize the symbols engendered by the tension into projections of an immanent psyche." Voegelin characterizes such accounts of human nature as "psychopathological." This essay appears in Eric Voegelin, Anamnesis, p. 104.

24See Broughton, p. 100: "Percy's other protagonists try out a variety of methods for putting themselves back in touch with the physical world. But because he sees the malaise chiefly in terms of sexual deprivation, Will imagines that he may regain the world only by losing his virginity." Broughton's comments here and throughout her essay are useful, as far as they go. They become far more intriguing if one applies the sexual allegory I have suggested here throughout, replacing "the feminine" for "the world." Then the dualism of which she accuses Percy becomes less of a psychological tendency which the author has failed to confront, than an intellectual tendency with
partaking half-seriously in a manufactured religious ritual in which neither of them troubles either to believe or disbelieve, he draws her away to Central Park for a night of presumed passion, defended by Sutter's pistol (with which Kitty has equipped him) against the faraway doom that thunders down from Harlem and reddens the sky.

In the course of his indirect and awkward advances to Kitty, Will makes an important realization, whose implications are hidden from him until later in the novel:

He was thinking about the reciprocal ratio of love: was it ever so with the love of women that they held out until the defeat of one's first fine fervor, not merely until one feigned defeat, but rather until one was in truth defeated, had shrugged and turned away and thought of other matters — and now here they came, all melts and sighs, breathing like a furnace. (LG, p. 89)

Whether or not this observation is correct concerning the intricacies of the female sexual response, it is an accurate presentation of the feminine mode of knowledge (intellectus), of which we spoke in Chapter One, in the course of which one gives up all attempts to divide and analyze the object of thought — rather surrendering to it, absorbing it as a whole, seeking to know it by union, empathy, and connaturality. Will has made similar observations earlier in the novel, though without the explicit connection to sexuality: for instance, when he describes (p. 30) how a collapse of a glass ceiling in an art museum makes it possible for the first time actually to see a painting — which before had been evacuated of meaning or obscured by "ravening psychological effects, against which he is struggling with relative but imperfect success. If the answer to Percy's dualist dilemma is not (as Broughton suggests) a Dionysian mandala, but rather an emblem of the Incarnate God, then his difficulties become at once more comprehensible and more interesting. He is struggling to articulate a theological mystery that is at bottom impenetrable to reason.

25 The way Kitty is talking, from the side-effects of the Huichol tea and ceremony, bodes ill for any prospects for reentering the solid, physical world through her mediation: "The Huichol believe that things change forms, that one thing can become another thing. An hour ago, it sounded like nonsense... The hikuli plant is the deer. The deer is the corn." Rita has been introducing Kitty to a pantheist, neo-pagan mysticism, in the course of what seems to me like a seduction attempt— aborted only by Will's timely arrival.

26 Stern, p. 54 ff.
particles. In each case, the object of knowledge will not yield to direct, forceful approach — such as the scientific method or systematic art appreciation would commend — but only becomes attainable once the imperial self has been humbled by frustration or near-catastrophe. This device recurs throughout Percy’s fiction — finding perhaps its crowning moment in *The Second Coming*, when Will falls, half-dead, into Allie’s garden, in the bosom of which he will begin to discover the object of Faith.

Returning to the lovers in the park, we find them in a place of ill-omen — a womb-like ravine in the woods, which looked by day “very like the sniper’s den on Little Round Top that Brady photographed six weeks after the battle: the sniper was still there! A skeleton in butternut, his rifle propped peaceably against the rocks.” It is significant that as Will approaches the womb (both literally and figuratively), he imagines the place to be inhabited by a young southerner with a gun (like him), who happens also to be dead. Will lays down his pistol — in more than one sense, as he suffers a spell of impotence.

What brings on this impotence? A number of factors, each of them revealing in its implications for Will’s personal development. On the conscious level, Will is confused about the ethics of sexuality. He still feels subject to his father’s prohibitions against treating a lady like a whore or vice versa; yet here Kitty is, acting like both at once and yet neither, violating the rigid social categories on which Ed Barrett relied. While he is not driven to despair by the collapse of these barriers, Will is enough of his father’s son to feel anxiety in their absence. With no clear sense of the Christian incarnational ethic, Will is torn between two competing post-Christian codes of sexual conduct — each one a severed piece of the Christian synthesis, surviving unnaturally on its own:

1) The mechanistic-reductionist ethic that speaks of “the fine fervor of a summer night, in a jolly dark wood, wherein one has a bit o’ fun.” As a lord of creation, a
spirit that transcends the body and its laws, the Self is free to seek out pleasure wherever it may be found. Lovers are like virgin territories, to be mastered and enjoyed without undue guilt. This masculinizing heresy is the “angelism” in “angelism/bestialism” of which Percy so often speaks, which Will Barrett will see best embodied in the lifestyle of Sutter Vaught.

2) This “dread tenderness of hers,” the pantheistic sexual mysticism that Kitty has learned from Rita to dabble in. Symbolized by the odd, pagan religious practices in which she took part, this inchoate sexual vitalism\(^{27}\) recurs later in the novel in the writings of Mort Prince and his crew of liberal intellectuals and dilettantes. While employing the rhetoric of Christianity — Kitty assures him that “Love is everything” — this tradition in fact claims intellectual descent from the Troubadour love-poets, and their crypto-Albigensian elevation of passion and desire at the expense of procreation and marriage.\(^{28}\) This inchoate, feminine\(^{29}\) mysticism is the bestialism to which angelists sometimes revert (as when, in *Lost in the Cosmos*, an astrophysicist visits Taos, New Mexico, chasing the ghost of D.H. Lawrence.) While its followers invest sexuality with all the trappings of religious importance, their metaphysics evacuates those trappings of meaning — rendering sex every bit as trivial as it appears in the

\(^{27}\) The finest elaboration of this concept I have found is that of Fr. Seraphim Rose, who writes in *Nihilism*: “In Vitalism...a quite understandable lament over the loss of spiritual values becomes father, on the one hand to subjective fantasies and (sometimes) to actual Satanism, which the undiscriminating take as revelations of the ‘spiritual’ world, and on the other hand to a rootless eclecticism that draws ideas from every civilization and every age and finds a totally arbitrary connection between these misunderstood fragments and its own debased conceptions. Pseudo-spirituality and pseudo-traditionalism, one or both, are integral elements of many Vitalist systems,” (Forestville, CA: The Fr. Seraphim Rose Foundation, 1994), p. 43.

\(^{28}\) Denis de Rougemont, *Love in the Western World* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), pp. 76-86. Percy makes an unmistakable reference to this book later in the same scene, asking, “Was this it at last, the august secret of the Western World?” (p. 93.)

\(^{29}\) This is meant in the sense which Bouyer uses in *Woman in the Church*, where he distinguishes the masculine and feminine contributions to orthodox spirituality: “All the false mystical experiences, all the doubtful ecstasies which are ultimately only egoistic ecstasies, make women their favorite prey and find in them all the fertile soil they need to prosper and proliferate. On the other hand, one might ask oneself whether the true mystical experiences which owe to man (recall St. John of the Cross) the unbending critical verification of their authenticity, would ever have retained his attention, or even have become part of his experience, without the intervention of women.” (p. 66)
angelist code. Hence, these seemingly opposed creeds are merely two faces of the same debased, gnostic coin.30

On a less conscious level, at the stratum of poorly-integrated memories and half-articulated desires, Will is also frightened by the prospect of physical intimacy with a woman. The suppressed trauma of maternal loss that affected Will in his youth returns to trouble him when Kitty appears to

envelop him in turn by the warm epithelial smell of her nakedness. What a treasure, he thought, his heart beating as rapidly and shallowly as a child’s. What suppleness.
“Hold me,” whispered Kitty with her dismaying tenderness. “My precious.”
“Right.” Now holding her charms in his arms at last, he wondered if he had ever really calculated the terrific immediacy of it. (LG, p. 91)

Regaining at this moment the heart of a child — and a troubled child at that — Will experiences “maternal awe” in the sense Lawson uses it. While intimacy with another person is troubling enough for him, it is the immediacy of the anima, of the physical world experienced in the most carnal way, which threatens Will’s very identity. Although he has inherited Ed Barrett’s gnostic tendency to see the flesh as alien and devoid of meaning, he lacks the courage of his father’s convictions — as he later admits, “I’ve never really got the straight of this lady and whore business.” (LG, p. 144) He cannot accept the pantheist-feminine gospel that Kitty parrots from Rita, since he experiences its denial of the masculine as a form of spiritual castration. Nor has he yet discovered the orthodox, sacramental doctrine of sexuality,31 which could

30Kilty’s own words confirm this complementary relationship between the sexual codes of science and superstition; she follows her mystical musings about “love” with a declaration that this sexual encounter is also “a little experiment by Kitty for the benefit of Kitty.” (LG, p. 92) She sees no contradiction there, and indeed there is none. If American megalopolises of the 21st century ever boast sex-cults complete with temple prostitutes, we can rest assured that they will be vaccinated, classified as “sex-workers” by the state, and equipped with the latest FDA-approved contraceptives.

31He has had some exposure to this doctrine, through the unlikely agency of Perlmutter, his colleague at Macy’s who uses the theologically apt expression “like being in heaven,” to describe making love to his wife. (Aply Will misinterprets this phrase as a simple euphemism for orgasm, and it recurs a little later as Will struggles to “sustain the two of them, her in passing her test, him lest he be demoralized by Perlmutter’s heaven, too much heaven too soon.”) Being a Perlmutter of
explain how he might relate to the physical world without either loathing or superstitious awe. He therefore stands defenseless in the presence of the anima, unready to make the connection that he has sought, listening to his sinuses swell up and close.

That physical affliction is the only thing that saves Will from sexual "failure."

His own biological debilities pull him back down into the human condition, providing the same temporary "re-entry" as he experienced earlier when the glass ceiling collapsed around him, and when he was trapped in the hurricane with Midge Auchincloss. Having been thus restored to earth, he feels "just bad enough...so it [is] just possible" for him to make love.

At just this point Kitty's nausea kicks in, rendering her unable to continue. From one point of view, this deus ex machina that saves the "honor" of hero and heroine fits perfectly well into the ironical/Providential pattern of seemingly arbitrary events that structures this picaresque novel. When we look again to the philosophical allegory that motivates the narrative, we find something else. Kitty's vomiting is brought on by the hikuli tea she drank during Rita's mildly pagan ritual. Would it be stretching a point to suggest that Percy here intends to suggest that pantheist spirituality poisons the very fleshly life it purports to consecrate? Or further, to argue that the dualistic "nausea" that the likes of Sartre feel for matter is motivated by horror at the sheer power of materiality (in the absence of God) to snuff out the spirit — again demonstrating the complementary nature of the masculinizing and feminizing heresies? Given the degree

Brooklyn, it seems that this young man is Jewish—which is appropriate, given Percy's ongoing preoccupation with the Jewish people as an historical sign of Providence. (This theme arises in The Moviegoer with Sidney Gross, and will recur in Love in the Ruins, The Second Coming, and most powerfully in The Thanatos Syndrome.) See Chapter One, n. 68. Remember also that the Song of Songs and the tradition that flows from it — into the Middle Ages and modern Catholic piety — are of Jewish provenance.
of overdetermination and implicit philosophical controversy we find in Percy’s work, these interpretations seem plausible.

As they recover from this failed encounter, Will and Kitty talk at cross-purposes about the trappings and conventions of sexuality, making explicit the different codes that motivate their behavior. Will speaks of the siege of Petersburg, and the almost miraculous chastity of his soldier ancestor, who refrained from violating the sexual honor code even in the face of death. He is entranced by the consistency that was possible in those days, when the social mores mirrored and supported those of the Southern hero. He thinks wistfully of the dispensation those mores provided from the thorny problems raised by sexual congress with women:

“But what is curious is that...[my ancestor] did not feel himself under the necessity, almost moral, of making love...in order that later things be easy and justified between him and Miss Trumbull that...that even under the conditions of siege he did not feel himself under the necessity, or was it because it was under the conditions of siege.” (LG, p. 94)

In that old dispensation, he imagines, the problem of masculine/feminine relations was entirely resolved by a strict social and sexual regime, the Southern heroic code elaborated by his father. With the collapse of that regime, the meaning of sexuality was radically unhinged and allowed to pose a direct challenge to the integrity of the masculine self — undermining the neat dualism on which the Southern hero, as much as the Faustian scientist, had come to rely.32

Meanwhile, Kitty becomes interested in the sentimental trappings of the Southern past, which colors her own very modern, bourgeois dreams of romance. If Will is still trapped in the deadly transcendence of the masculine honor code, Kitty is plunged deep within immanence — the vitalist immanence of Rita’s faux-paganism, and the banal immanence of modern consumerism (where her heart and her treasure really dwell).

32Broughton, p. 99.
At the end of their conversation, Will proposes marriage to Kitty, less out of love than out of a sense of propriety and noblesse oblige. He determines (thanks to Kitty’s sickness) that the violation of the honor code has been his, and he must make good by marrying her. While on one level this seems ludicrous in the Central Park of the late 1960’s, in fact this offer on Will’s part marks the first significant commitment he makes in his life to anyone, and the first of his failed attempts to find some mode of connection to the anima.

This scene and its sequel together constitute the pivot of the novel, marking the beginning of Will’s personal development — which will take place in fits and starts, in the course of a dialectical movement that escalates throughout the episodic narrative, pitting Will’s deepening involvement with Kitty’s form of immanence against the existential and scientific transcendence that he expects to receive from her brother Sutter. In fact, one could plot Will’s quest for a “normal life” along two axes — his romantic interludes with Kitty, and his conversations with Sutter. Will careens between the two, lurching toward carnal knowledge at one moment, toward secret knowledge of himself and the world at the next. His quest is inconclusive — within the bounds of this novel — because at bottom he cannot see how everyday sexuality and ordinary life in a democratic order can be reconciled with the spiritual and martial heroism that his father (and in a different way, Sutter) exemplify.

Yet it is this latter urge towards transcendence that fascinates and compels him, which provides an alternative to the unreflective despair of consumerist immanence

33In “The Man on the Train,” Percy makes remarks which explain the crucial role played in his fiction by such articulately Manichaean characters as Sutter Vaught: “There is a great deal of difference between an alienated commuter riding a train and this same commuter reading a book about an alienated commuter riding a train... The nonreading commuter exists in true alienation, which is unspeakable; the reading commuter rejoices in the speakability of his alienation and in the new triple alliance of himself, the alienated character, and the author.” (MB, p. 83) Despite his reluctance to answer Will’s questions, and his conviction that his insights will do the young man no good, Sutter does make it possible for Will to face the memory of his father’s suicide and the persistent doubts he feels about the immanent life he is contemplating with Kitty.
— of glum car salesmen in Confederate colonel’s hats, and the “horsy conjugal way[s]” and “sad poilu love” of Kitty as their projected marriage approaches. This latter phrase is important, as it contains a direct allusion to *Lanterns on the Levee*, whose author, William Alexander Percy, was the source of Percy’s own acquaintance with the heroic code, as we saw in Chapter Two. Note the following passage from the elder Percy’s work, recalling his experience in France during World War I:

> I listened to the ominous dull thunder from the front. I was tired. Then I heard upstairs above me a couple in bed making loud love. It should have seemed ribald and amusing; it seemed only obscene and pitiful. That poor poilu home on two days’ leave and his shapeless, hard-working wife! This was love, this animal-sounding thing. I remembered that love had once seemed tender and beautiful. It wasn’t anymore. The sounds died down. I hoped they had enjoyed themselves and wondered if they were crying now, clinging to each other whimpering. I closed my eyes and the sleepless hours began. (*LoL*, pp. 214-215)

At the very least, the lines above display an aversion to marital sexuality — one that fits in well with a dualist world-view, which regards earthly life as bleak and degrading, redeemable only through heroism and renunciation. Broughton attributes this attitude to Walker Percy himself, suggesting that he assumes that marriage in itself is an accommodation to the ways of the world. For Will Barrett marriage offers a sort of both/and possibility: an option both to remain a gentleman and to satisfy his “coarse” desires. For Percy it exemplifies Kierkegaard’s ethical stage as an acceptance of responsibility in the human community. And a normal married life may also offer the religious man a sort of “cover” so that he may pass incognito through the world. But marriage in itself, to Percy, cannot be transcendent. And that is why Will Barrett still needs Sutter Vaught...to remind him that this world is not sufficient unto itself.34

Broughton’s judgment of Percy is too harsh. I would argue, rather, that Percy explicitly rejects the moral dualism of his uncle, but has not yet (as of this novel) found

34Broughton, p. 112.
the proper artistic means of depicting an alternative that takes account of sexuality. Indeed, *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot* are both novels about the vast difficulty of imagining and cleaving to the old sacramental, incarnational vision of man in a post-Cartesian world whose scientific dualism is reinforced by an Albigensian ethic of love. It is only with *The Second Coming* — and at the end of a harrowing struggle — that Percy achieves his one persuasive emblem of sacramental sexuality as a means of grace. But it is an emblem that has been implicit in his work all along, at least *in ovo* — in the form of a male protagonist who manages to break free of his masculinizing world-view and make contact with the feminine in his own soul.

However, Broughton’s point is well-taken insofar as she demonstrates that, in *The Last Gentleman* at least, marriage is not presented as a means of this reconciliation between transcendence and immanence. Rather, the aftermath of Will’s confrontation with his past, as he stands before his father’s house and recalls at last the details of Ed Barrett’s suicide, is a vision of immanence and transcendence reconciled — but through the curious symbol of a hitching post that has been enveloped by “an elephant lip” of an oak. This image suggests the compatibility of opposites — of artifact and environment, organic life with inanimate matter, man’s will with nature’s way, the animus with the anima — without their collapse into meaningless conflation. Distinctions between the two are not blurred, but the oppositions are overcome — as they are in the classic Christian doctrine of the Incarnation, key to which is the affirmation that human and divine natures co-exist in Christ without conflict or confusion, in what the Church calls a “hypostatic union.”

thanks to the presence of Kate Cutrer), because it maintains the polarity of difference while affirming an essential union between the elements. Broughton reports, based on a conversation with the author, that "Percy designed the passage as an answer to the epiphany of matter Sartre presents in *La Nausée.*" If that is true, as it seems likely, then it is interesting to note that the oak in this scene has an antecedent in the work of another existentialist philosopher with whom Percy was familiar, Martin Heidegger. In the short piece entitled *The Country Path,* Heidegger speaks of a rural lane that leads past a tall oak, beneath which sits a wooden bench, on which he used to sit while studying the great masters of philosophy in his youth. He goes into great detail about the oak and what it signifies:

The hardness and smell of the oakwood began to speak clearly of the slow and lasting way in which the tree grew. The oak itself proclaimed that all that lasts and bears fruit is founded on such growth alone; that growth means to lie open to the span of the heavens and, at the same time, to have roots in the dark earth; that everything real and true only prospers if mankind fulfills at the same time the two conditions of being ready for the demands of highest heaven and of being safe in the shelter of the fruitful earth. The oak continually repeats this to the country lane, whose track runs past it. The kingdom of all living things which grow around the country lane offers a whole world in microcosm. The very ineffability of their language proclaims, as Meister Eckhart, that old master of life, says, God, first God.  

If we interpret Percy’s key image with Heidegger’s insight in mind, the image suggests a fruitful play between the polarities of feminine and masculine, immanence and transcendence, a play which alone can maintain the integrity and relevance of either principle. Throughout the novel, Will Barrett has scorned the vague sacrality Rita treasures. Now he must turn around and critique the dualist insistence that opposites

---

37Broughton, p. 110.
39It is hard to know which unbalanced vision of God, is more meaningless to man — the inchoate, immanent Ground of Being intuited by the pantheist, or the disincarnate, inattentive Watchmaker posited by the deist.
are irreconcilable, that the exercise of spiritual freedom is finally impossible to man in his embodied state. On this interpretation (to which Ed Barrett cleaved), the only choices open are the numbness savored by the anesthetized consumer — in Cap’n Andy’s house with Kitty\textsuperscript{40} — or the spiritual desolation savored by purely masculine spirits, occasionally salved by forays into the immanent, either through heroic action or sexual conquest. Will has a glimmering of the desolation wreaked by this dualism after reading most of Sutter’s notebooks:

> Where he probably goes wrong, mused the engineer sleepily, is in the extremity of his alternatives: God and not-God, getting under women’s dresses and blowing your brains out. Whereas, and in fact my problem is how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on a Wednesday afternoon. Has not this been the case with all “religious” people? (\textit{LG}, p. 277).

Will tries repeatedly to reject Sutter’s critique of ordinary, worldly life, throughout his acquaintance with the morbid figure of the self-consuming doctor-cum-pathologist\textsuperscript{41}. He senses (correctly) that Sutter’s creed is finally as poisonous as Ed Barrett’s, and tries in consequence to resolve his own internal conflicts on the level of psychology — as manifestations of sexual frustration, or social isolation, or even the trauma he suffered at his father’s suicide. Turning away from his own intuitive desire for re-connection with creation\textsuperscript{42}, or misinterpreting it as sexual desire pure and simple, Will manages to miss Sutter’s genuine insights almost entirely, and to seek a secular salvation in the profoundly compromised life that a marriage to Kitty promises.

\textsuperscript{40}Will can sense the void that lies at the heart of this lifestyle, and seeks to understand its nature through repeated demands of Sutter: “Why was that man screaming that you told me about? ...What was wrong with him?” (\textit{LG}, p. 214) Sutter cannot answer the question, because he regards the ordinary life and spiritual honesty as irreconcilable.

\textsuperscript{41}Percy regularly refers to the function of a novelist as like that of a pathologist (\textit{SSL}, p.204 ff) In giving Sutter this profession, he is conferring upon him a certain symbolic authority.

\textsuperscript{42}“Creation” serves better here than “nature,” since (as Will recognizes dimly in his first conversation with Forney Aiken) the opposition of nature to culture implicitly suggests that human life is an endeavor to transcend the immanence of nature — when, in fact, man is both a co-creator and a creature under God; a partaker in the anima, as much as the master and possessor of nature. (\textit{LG}, p. 104)
simple, Will manages to miss Sutter’s genuine insights almost entirely, and to seek a secular salvation in the profoundly compromised life that a marriage to Kitty promises.

Will seeks to escape from Sutter’s polarities, not by accepting the need for a sacramental, hypostatic union of opposing principles, in a vision of human life and his own identity that takes full account of the irreducible mystery of human existence under God. Rather, he seeks to impose an existential and intellectual compromise — a metaphysical androgyny — in the course of which he hopes to keep Kitty as a means of sexual love and connection to the world, and Sutter as a shaman figure who provides insights into the “something more” for which he yearns. He cannot imagine a romantic union that would provide spiritual fulfillment, but instead relies on division of labor to allow him to patch together a life — rather in the mode of Dr. Frankenstein.

The result, if Will achieved it, would indeed be monstrous, as Sutter intuits. Reluctant as he is to have any truck with Will towards the end of the novel — partly out of frustration with his obtuseness, mostly out of a refusal to become his brother’s keeper — Sutter cannot hide his contempt for the botched-up job of a life that Will envisions for himself:

The engineer frowned, thinking of the buzzards circling the doleful plain and Cap’n Andy striding the “bridge.” But he quickly brightened. “We’ve even agreed on the same denomination.”

“Denomination. Church. Kitty has become quite religious. She is convinced of the wisdom of our having the same church home, to use her expression.” The engineer laughed tolerantly, shaking his head at the ways of women, and wiped a merry tolerant little tear from his eye.

“Jesus,” muttered Sutter.

“Eh?” The other cocked his good ear.

“Nothing.”

“You don’t fool me, Dr. Vaught. Don’t forget that I’ve read your casebook. Though I do not pretend to understand everything, that part didn’t escape me.”

“What part?”

“Your awareness of the primary importance of the religious dimension of life.”
What Sutter sees, and Will cannot, is that the very words the younger man uses to denote God’s presence in the world vitiate it; by reducing a transcendent mystery to a “dimension of life,” another consumable product designed for the satisfaction of human needs, Will renders the notion of salvation meaningless. Sutter had warned that Will might do precisely such a thing, when he wrote in his notebook: “[H]e will receive the news [of salvation] 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.” (LG, p. 276)

What sort of salvation can Sutter himself envision? He can see none. He cannot accept the Christian mysteries for the solid, gnostic reasons that he details in his casebook in a letter to Val:

I could never accept the propositions (1) that my salvation comes from the Jews, (2) that my salvation depends upon hearing news rather than figuring it out, (3) that I must spend eternity with Southern Baptists. (LG, p. 241)

Sutter rejects the possibility of an historic, incarnational faith — especially one that is based upon revelation rather than speculation, and which is open to all, even the most uneducated. (This trio of objections to Christianity bears a remarkable resemblance to those raised by William Alexander Percy in Lanterns on the Levee, as detailed in Chapter Two.) Sutter is trapped in orbit, he himself admits, in the “transcendence of abstraction,” from which orgasms are only a temporary and futile means of “re-entry” into the sphere of the feminine. At one point in his chilling casebook, Sutter draws the conclusion that lies implicit in his provocative aphorisms and poisoned life, that for him, “There is no re-entry from the orbit of transcendence.” From here it is only one logical step to the final entry in his casebook: “Next time I won’t miss.”

The figure of Sutter stands before the reader as a mystery, a haunting prophet and antichrist who offers Percy’s most persuasive apologetic for Christianity, but who himself can only engage in the lowest form of sexual misconduct and self-destructive
The figure of Sutter stands before the reader as a mystery, a haunting prophet and antichrist who offers Percy's most persuasive apologetic for Christianity, but who himself can only engage in the lowest form of sexual misconduct and self-destructive violence; the man who alone can proffer Will a hand along out of the purple fog of memory and desire that has swathed his life until the present, but who will not offer that hand, apparently out of sheer ill-temper. What is one to make of Sutter? Is he simply a literary cipher, a purposely puzzling figure whose oddities have been constructed by a rhetorically crafty author to offer maximum camouflage to the doctrinal message that lies hidden within this novel?

No. While Sutter does serve such a function, much as Dostoevsky's unattractive characters frequently serve as the conduits (even the mouthpieces) for the author's own most treasured insights, there is more to Sutter — and it is this more, this residuum of mystery, which makes him a character who has the power to compel Will Barrett and the reader. To discover the nature of that residuum, we must examine Sutter's own peculiar mysticism, the search he himself undertakes for a more substantial union with the feminine than is possible in the soiled sheets of motel rooms or hospital beds. His search is religious, but in the gnostic rather than the Christian sense of the word.

Much like Wise Blood's hero Hazel Motes, Sutter regards the human condition of embodied spirituality as a nightmare dreamt in a prisonhouse. As Motes proclaims in one of his ineffectual recruitment speeches:

"No truth behind all truths is what I and this church preach! Where you come from is gone, where you thought you were going to never was there, and where you are is no good unless you can get away from it. Where is there a place for you to be? No place." 43

---

43Flannery O'Connor, Wise Blood (New York: Signet, 1983), p. 84. Motes offers the answers promised by classical gnostic speculation (as paraphrased by St. Clement of Alexandria), proclaiming "the knowledge of who we were and what we became, of where we were and wherein we have been flung, of whereto we are hastening and wherefrom we are redeemed, of what birth is and what rebirth." (Cited in Voegelin, Science, Politics, and Gnosticism, p. 10.)
Like Ed Barrett and most of Percy’s male protagonists, Sutter is keenly aware that the
human condition is inadequate to human aspirations, that — absent a mysterious
irruption of grace into the world — the desire for transcendence is incompatible with
the immanent condition of man. Like the other devotees of the “demonic masculine” of
whom we spoke in Chapter One, from Sade and Schopenhauer to Sartre and Paglia,
Sutter experiences the anima (immanence, creatureliness, femininity) intrinsic to the
human psyche as a threat. He ends by rejecting the anima in virtually all its
embodiments — only to seek out communion with it finally in death.

We may sympathize with Sutter when he rejects the self-satisfied worldliness of
Rita even if we are shocked by the terms in which the exchange is presented:

“I do not desire death, mine, yours, or Jamie’s. I do not
desire your version of fun and games. I desire for Jamie
that he achieve as much self-fulfillment as he can in the
little time he has. I desire for him beauty and joy, not
death.”

“That is death,” said Sutter. (LG, p. 194)

In this scene, and throughout the novel, Rita is the evangelical voice of closed,
immanent existence, of the feminine immunized against true transcendence, stripped by
scientism even of its own natural mystique, domesticated and rendered null. Like the
technologized sexuality that she cultivates in their marriage, Rita’s studiedly
reductionist metaphysics affects Sutter as a form of suffocation or castration. (As the
narrative continues, Kitty begins to have the same impact on Will, who reenacts
Sutter’s flight into the desert.44)

---

44At this point in the novel, it is immanence, rather than transcendence, which poses the
greatest threat to Will’s sense of well-being. Even his awareness of connaturality with women, those
fraternal feelings which guarded him against fornication with Muzk Aiken, become a source of
temptation here: “These beautiful little flatfooted girls greeted you like your own sister! What do you
do about that? He had forgotten. It made him blush to think of laying hands on them. Then he
remembered: that was how you did lay hands on them!—through a kind of sisterly-brotherly joshing,
messing around it was called.” (LG, p. 163) This easy intimacy, he notes a few lines down, goes
along with a thoroughly dismissive attitude towards the spirit, which empties life of meaning: “And
poof! out the window went the whole intellectual business, kit and caboodle, cancelled out, polished
off, even when you made straight A’s...Naturally in such an intersubjective paradise as this, he soon
got the proper horrors.” (LG, p. 164)
purposeful destruction of the only important aspect of human nature — its vertical
dimension, its transcendence, its animus. It is here that we may with precision locate
the genesis of Sutter’s heresy. Because of his a priori rejection of the incarnational
solution to the duality of transcendence and immanence, Sutter cannot envision the
world of physical creation as friendly to the spirit. In fact, he behaves as if the spirit
itself, the human psyche, were an uncreated mystery that can exist best independently
of the fleshly dross that impinges upon it the demands of banality and sociability. In
contrast, Christian doctrine regards body and spirit to be equally of the essence of
man, whose being is incomplete (even in heaven) without the flesh.

Sutter is disgusted by any compromise with the spirit of worldliness, which
thwarts the transcendence of man in order to satisfy his immanent needs. In his
asceticism, he bears a deceptive resemblance to a Christian saint. The difference is that
Sutter finds no point of convergence with the Subject of transcendence, the divine
masculine for Whose sake one might cultivate an attitude of contemptus mundi. Recall
the exchange (cited above) between Sutter and Will on the “religious dimension of
life”:

“Jesus,” muttered Sutter.
“Eh?” The other cocked his good ear.
“Nothing.” (LG, p. 299)

“Jesus” and “Nothing”: this is precisely the choice Sutter faces, and he has decided
upon the latter. By accepting a real Subject toward Whom transcendence might draw
him, Sutter would be compelled to admit his own immanence, his moral equality with
the banal, the worldly, the cowardly souls who surround him. Just as Ed Barrett
preferred to die rather than allow his identity to be dissolved by social levelling, so
Sutter prefers emptiness and destruction to existential levelling.

But Sutter has not completely surrendered the desire for contact with the
feminine. He recognizes the impoverishment of the self-transcending condition, the
isolation and emptiness it implies; why else would he be troubled by the need to seek
But Sutter has not completely surrendered the desire for contact with the feminine. He recognizes the impoverishment of the self-transcending condition, the isolation and emptiness it implies; why else would he be troubled by the need to seek "re-entry" from the orbit of transcendence? Intuitively, he recognizes that the source of nearly every human satisfaction—except for the thrill of obtaining abstract knowledge—comes from the realm of the anima. The role of the hero or the scientific magus is a lonely one indeed, perhaps impossible to maintain forever. Further, Sutter is too self-aware to be deluded entirely by the notion that his intellectual attainments exempt him from the human condition. He knows that there is a wisdom entailed in immanent existence, especially when it is viewed within the context of the eternal realities of true, divine transcendence—hence his willingness to grant Val the majority of her points of doctrine.

How, then, does he reach out for contact with the anima? Through violence. Just as, earlier in the novel, Will found himself able to view the paintings in an art gallery only after a collapse of the ceiling nearly killed a workman, and could attempt to make love to Kitty only after his allergy has acted up, so Sutter finds in violence and distress the means for recovery of his place in the human condition. Unlike Will, who simply undergoes these experiences, Sutter seeks them out, courting opportunities for a violent assault upon his own well-being, in order to re-establish himself as a creature among creatures. As he writes in his casebook:

> the certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself. But death is outlawed now as sin used to be. Only one's own suicide remains to one. My "suicide" followed the breakdown of the sexual as a mode of reentry from the posture of transcendence.... I saw something clearly while I had no cheek and grinned like a skeleton. But I got well and forgot what it was. I won't miss next time. (*LG*, pp. 291-292)

Having decided, based on his masculinizing creed, that nature is a murderous mother, Sutter has chosen to meet her on her own terms, to embrace danger and even
death (in the desert with no water, or at the point of gun) in order to see clearly his own place in the world of creatures. Like Paglia's Sade, Sutter has glimpsed nature red in tooth and claw, and chosen to accept that vision, to find mother earth in the grave.45

Here is precisely the point of his confluence with Will, and the conflict between them. For the reasons detailed at the beginning of this chapter, Will nurses a profound distrust of the anima. His inability to cling firmly to his own place and time and identity within the order of creation — and his virtual amnesia regarding his biological mother — powerfully symbolize his exile from all that is motherly upon the earth. (If Stephen Dedalus chooses this exile at the end of Portrait of the Artist, in this novel Will has it thrust upon him.46) Will's profound ambivalence plays itself out in his relationship with Jamie, who in many ways serves as a projection of the decisive elements of Will's own character. It is not surprising that Will finds himself well-equipped to serve as companion and mentor to lonely, Jewish adolescent boys — since he partakes also in their sexual immaturity, their isolation/transcendence, and their exile. Insofar as Jamie is a projection of key elements of Will's character, it is fitting that the boy's Wanderlust serves as the justification for Will as he flees from Kitty and their prospective marriage. If the word "projection" applies to the relationship between these characters, then one might say that Jamie is the screen upon which Will's critical conflicts play themselves out: the tension between a yearning for home and a desire for rotation, between abstract delight in knowledge of the world and the simple desire for fellowship and love, between the need for nurturance and the need for escape.

Upon the screen that is Jamie, Will witnesses the spectacle of eternal salvation in the form of the sacrament of baptism. (It remains opaque to him, at least within the bounds of the novel.) If we take Catholic doctrine at its word, as Percy surely did,

45 Paglia, p. 461.
46 Sullivan, pp. 104-106.
then baptism is a visible means of grace, a necessary material form of incorporation into the Mystical Body of Christ, Mother Church, the Bride of Christ, the Body of redeemed Creation raised from the dead in Christ — the first and most critical emblem and means of reconciliation between immanence and transcendence, the beginning of the divinization of a human being. But for a conscious adult, who like Will must live on and encounter the temptations of the world, the flesh, and the devil, baptism is only the first step. It is no accident that the sacrament Percy chose to embody the salvation that Will is offered is baptism rather than marriage — depicting the redemption of a sickly adolescent who has not yet faced the challenges of sexuality through a sacrament generally associated with infancy. It is the infant in Will that must be addressed, for that is the site of the schism that haunts his life; his traumatic division from the anima is not the result of some sexual experience, although he seeks its resolution there, without success.

No, it is at the most profound level that Will’s deprivation lies; as a pre-adolescent, he lost his mother and with her the material world. When he reached adolescence, his father ratified that loss and strove to make it permanent, giving his childhood anguish the supports of reason and tradition, sealing them in amber. The waters of baptism could wash them away, but we do not see this happen. Will “misses” the miracle that takes place before his eyes, but it is indeed a miracle, one providentially designed to be appropriate to his level of psychic development. Because he has not yet grasped the key that has fallen into his hands, with which he could unlock the gate of his exile, Will’s story remains open-ended. At the novel’s end, he still treasures illusions about returning to marry Kitty, but also clutches at the contact with spiritual honesty that he has briefly made through Sutter. He has not understood the miracle he witnessed — and knows it. He will continue to question Sutter, we imagine, for some time to come.
Meanwhile, the reader has been presented with an image of grace that is purposely unlovely, which Percy has designed to avoid the sentimentality that ruins so much "Christian literature" (as Flannery O'Connor observed). Does this mean that we are left with nothing, save the stark alternatives of Kitty's banality and Sutter's blasphemy? Not quite. Percy has given us a glimpse of what salvation, on Will's terms, would feel like. Not surprisingly, he puts the answer in Jamie's mouth, and buries it within a literary allusion; nevertheless, given all we have said about the search for that blessedness that can only come to a creature when he has found his place in Creation, we can recognize this single anecdote as a glimmer of the beatitude appropriate to Will's state of psychic development:

"[T]his novel...was about this young man who was a refugee or a prisoner, I forget which. He was travelling the whole length of Russia in a cattle car, along with hundreds of others. He was sick with brain fever, whatever that is, I have only come across brain fever in Russian novels. It was summer and they were crossing Siberia, day after day, weeks even. The car was crowded and he had one tiny corner and a bit of straw and that was all. And though he was quite ill and even delirious at times, the strange thing about it was that it wasn't so bad. Through the slats of the car he could see the fields, which were covered by a little blue flower. And of course the sky. The train stopped often and peasant women would bring him bowls of blueberries and fresh warm milk — that was the peculiar thing about it, that even though he knew no one and the train only stopped for a few minutes at a time, somehow news of this young man traveled ahead of the train and they expected him. And though everybody else on the train became exhausted by the hardships of the trip, he actually got better. It was really good. I think it's the best novel I ever read." (LG, p. 199)

That beautiful image, of man as a wounded child of the earth, in exile yet free, alone yet tended by warm emissaries of maternal nature who offer milk and the fruits of the earth, bound to the straw and muck of life but able to see the beauty of the sky and even the transcendent stars, is the most compelling picture we have yet seen — in either of Percy's first two novels — of how salvation enacted upon this earth would look, had we but eyes to see it.
Chapter Four: *Lancelot — A Blood Wedding with the Feminine*

In Walker Percy’s fourth novel, *Lancelot*, we encounter a narrator whose psychic divisions are more clearly defined and more rigorously explored than in any of Percy’s other work. In this book, Percy directly addresses the questions that troubled his earlier narratives, turning subtext into text, mining the subterranean fault lines that rumbled beneath Binx Bolling and Will Barrett, to lay them bare in an explosion of speculation, rhetoric, and profound psychological observation. Concerns that gnawed at these earlier, meeker protagonists — chiefly, whether the spiritual aspirations of man can be reconciled with his mortal, physical existence — Lance Lamar attacks head on, coming upon an answer that his creator finds profoundly wrong but spectacularly tempting, a darkly beautiful synthesis of Stoic disdain, Southern honor, Cartesian angelism, Sartrean freedom, and Luciferian pride. According to Percy, more than one reader’s initial response to Lance’s call for a Third Revolution was to write the author with the inquiry: “Where do I sign up?”

In his biography of the Percy family, Bertram Wyatt-Brown offers this estimation of the book:

> Because of the agony that accompanied its writing, *Lancelot* was [Percy’s] most sophisticated and accomplished work of fiction.... Honor remains in his novels and essays a tempting way towards certitude and self-acclaim, but its mandates must be resisted and Christian affirmation asserted. Out of the tension that a rich but troubled legacy created in Walker Percy’s mind, he found the strength to slay the crouching beast — through the medium of art. *Lancelot* was his masterpiece.¹

I agree with Wyatt-Brown’s assessment.

I hope to explore this work with a view towards understanding the psychic divisions of its narrator and anti-hero, Lance Lamar, particularly with regard to sex,

indicating their roots in metaphysical and spiritual issues of ongoing interest to Percy, and demonstrating how Lance fits into the overall pattern of his work.

If the central spiritual and psychic affliction of the male protagonists in *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman* is the result (as I argued in previous chapters) of their alienation from the feminine, this theme repeats itself in magnified form in the dark soul of Lance Lamar, a man whose false notion of the nature of femininity leads him to:

- misunderstand or mistreat each of the women in his life;
- neglect the development of virtues necessary to adulthood;
- contract an unhealthy and mutually exploitative marriage;
- lapse into an almost infantile state of lethargic, alcoholic impotence;
- embark upon a plan of redemption that destroys the woman he desires;
- commit his future to building a Utopian realm based on the sexual subjugation of women;
- concoct a gnostic metaphysic and ethic based on the rejection of the feminine in all its forms;
- reject, finally, the offer of divine grace which alone could work his salvation.

Each of these perversions of the intellect and will — in fact, the whole phenomenon of Lance’s spiritual reprobation — can be traced back to his distorted conception of the nature, function, and proper dignity of the feminine, an error of sufficient gravity and religious import that we might better call it a heresy. While it will not be possible to decide to a reader’s satisfaction which came first, the psychic disturbance or the heresy — since even Lance’s childhood memories may well be distorted to suit his rhetorical project, the argument he makes to Percival — it will be possible to show the profound consistency that unites Lance’s morbid psychology and his unique version of gnostic theology. In this chapter I will investigate Lance’s
psychology, ideology, and rhetorical strategies, and reveal the reciprocal connections between his intellectual position and his intense emotions of misogyny.

Elzbieta Oleksy recounts these emotions incisively, attributing them to the masculinizing tradition of which existentialism is a part; I will follow the implications of her argument, and offer several key corrections. Drawing on the work of Cleanth Brooks, Lewis Lawson, and others, I will explore the gnostic elements in Lance's world-view, to suggest that his psychic apocalypse is a consequence of his rejection of the theological implications of the feminine. To locate the nexus where philosophical theme, character psychology, and literary style meet, I will follow Lawson's suggestion that Lance's affinity for Raymond Chandler novels and film noir betrays a profound sense of maternal corruption, and a subsequent yearning for a utopian place that can replace the tainted womb; finally, I will tie these lines of argument back into the Southern hero as depicted by Kreyling, a figure whose quest is to stand beyond history and time. This doomed quest finally expires, as Lewis Simpson points out, in California, where the frontier runs out.

Elzbieta Oleksy accurately locates the intellectual paternity of Lance's philosophic misogyny in the tradition of European existentialism, pointing to the work of Sartre and de Beauvoir, which feminists and others (including Karl Stern) have criticized for perpetuating and expanding the traditional equation of women with wordless, subhuman immanence, and men with articulate, superhuman subjectivity. I suggested in Chapter One, following Stern's argument, that the masculinizing tendency that culminates in existentialist thought finds its origins in the modern philosophical project.

---

6Kreyling, p. 4.
initiated by Descartes, the quest to liberate knowledge from the senses, the spirit from
the flesh, Sartre’s *pour-soi* from the *en-soi*. Oleksy goes further to suggest that
Percy’s own work has been flawed by this equation of subjectivity with masculinity.
This equation is the reason, she argues, why he never until *The Second Coming*
attempts to adopt a female point of view, and why he is virtually unable to create
meaningful relationships between men and women. Not only is his portrayal of
womanhood distorted in the novels prior to *The Second Coming*, but also his male
characters’ inability to forge and develop meaningful relationships results from these
distortions."

Curiously, this does not constitute for Oleksy a sufficient reason “to ban Percy’s
works from the feminist syllabus on grounds of sexism,” since she locates in the early
novels a strong implicit critique of the isolationist and “sexist” attributes of
existentialism. Indeed, as other critics have noted, existentialism serves Percy as
both an ally and an antagonist; while he relies upon this tradition for his ongoing
critique of scientism and reductionism, he also must struggle against it in order
ultimately to affirm belief in a sacramental, communal, dogmatic Faith.

While Oleksy is right to point out how ambivalently Percy makes use of
existentialism, she goes astray in her overall interpretation of his novels, precisely
because her understanding of the sexual symbolism that pervades the Western tradition
is formed by Derrida, who suggests that for women, in the face of the masculinized
language of the West, “both to remain silent and to speak (write) is to conform to the
tradition of the phallocentric logos, one through repression, the other through

---

8 Stern sums up this movement as follows: “It is only today, in the era of Sartre, that the
estrangement from matter and the maternal has reached a point of no return. At first sight this seems
paradoxical, because in Sartrian philosophy existence itself is equated with the archaic experience. In
thousands of metaphors nature is indeed conceived as maternal, with a breast—but with a breast from
which one turns in disgust.” (pp. 140-141)

9 Kathleen Scullin, “Lancelot and Walker Percy’s Dispute with Sartre over Ontology,” in
Gretlund and Norby, p. 111 ff.
contradiction." Oleksy traces to this notion — advanced by a critic Percy held in open contempt — the origin of the silent female characters who appear throughout the novels. Seemingly, Percy could not (until *The Second Coming*) think his way free of the univocal, "phallogocentric" Western tradition that dooms women to silence or madness. Further, Oleksy follows Cixous and other feminists in positing the existence of a virtually omnipotent conspiracy of mysterious provenance, whose power lurks in the very structure of language and thought, and whose purpose is the repression of women. Whether this conspiracy is an epiphenomenon of anthropology, a biological vestige, a social construct consciously or unconsciously maintained, or a blight laid upon the world by a malevolent Demiurge, she and her mentors do not specify.

Thus in Oleksy's reading, the cumulative meaning of Percy's corpus is turned on its head; instead of a progressive working out of the difficulties entailed in representing the creaturely nature of man to a world of men-who-would-be-gods in the light of Catholic revelation and tradition, Percy's works become an unevenly exfoliated critique of "the language and culture of patriarchy," in which Christianity (and especially Catholicism) is a central culprit.

It seems to me that Cixous and her followers — who rage against the very structure of language, culture and Being, because those metaphysical and moral realities resist their will-to-power — are closer to the mindset of Lance Lamar than they are to any of Percy's female characters. Like him, they encounter obstacles to their ego gratification and metaphysical ambition in the realities of human culture as it exists and Divine Law as it has been revealed; like him, they make a response based not on reason but on sheer will, saying with Lance:

---

10Oleksy, p. 62.
11See footnote LC, p. 87: "I do not feel obliged to speak of the deconstructionists."
12Oleksy, p. 62.
I couldn’t stand it. I still can’t stand it. I can’t stand the way things are. I cannot tolerate this age. What is more, I won’t. (L, p. 154)

Oleksy and other feminists are right to reject the Cartesian mindset and its system of sexual symbolism — as men are right to reject them, and for the same reason: not because they are offensive or politically inconvenient, but because they are false. By creating a radical alienation between reason and the senses, modern philosophy transforms the binary distinctions that pervade Western thought into radical oppositions, irreconcilable polarities that can only finally be overcome with the suppression of one of the two terms, as Cixous and Clément recognize during a lucid moment:

The paradox of otherness is that, of course, at no moment in History is it tolerated or possible as such. The other is there only to be reappropriated, recaptured, and destroyed as other.13

This statement, intended by its authors to score the whole of Western thought (and perhaps the whole of human thought as well), ought really to be directed at modern philosophy and the cultural movements that have been infused by it.

By isolating the self in the consciousness, cutting the Thomist interdependence of reason and the senses, and rejecting the sacramental universe envisioned in the medieval synthesis, seminal modern thinkers implicitly devalued those aspects of the self that had traditionally been designated as feminine — emotions, sensibility, intuitive knowledge (intellectus), faith, immanence, and the body — while identifying the traditionally masculine attributes of reasoning (ratio) and subjectivity as the proper locus of selfhood.15 In this grand simplification, all that is human became identified with all that is masculine and with the male of the species, while all that is feminine was assimilated to the level of nature — and declared subject not to divine teleology

---

14Stern, p. 77.
but to mechanistic entropy. Reactions against this masculinizing intellectual tendency took the form of irrationalist movements such as romanticism—which accepted the irreconcilable split between anima and animus, and acceded to the new (degraded) definition of anima, but chose to elevate it over animus nevertheless. The futility of such a rebellion against the (perceived) order of things is apparent to those who undertake it, and fuels the romantic agony that ends in decadence and despair. The mournful tone of so much Victorian writing—from Arnold to Adams, and arguably William Alexander Percy—can be traced to this self-defeating strategy of psychological (rather than philosophical) resistance to modernity. 15

Modern Western thought has removed the theological dimension which alone could provide an upward limit to the expansion of human animus (ego) and dethroned that divine masculine (God), Who resists the will to power with unlimited power. 16 It has demoted faith and prayer (each identified with the anima) from the highest acts of the soul to the level of subrational, sentimental or even bestial behavior. In so doing, the West has unwittingly worked itself into a new form of Manichaeanism. This fact is recognized and celebrated by Camille Paglia, the most eloquent and straightforward defender of modern dualism:

The Apollonian and Dionysian, two great western principles, govern sexual personae in life and art. My theory is this: Dionysus is identification, Apollo objectification. Dionysus is the empathic, the sympathetic emotion transporting us into other people, other things, other times. Apollo is the hard, cold separation of western personality and categorical thought. Dionysus is energy, ecstasy, hysteria, promiscuity, emotionalism—heedless indiscriminateness of idea or practice. Apollo is obsessiveness, voyeurism, idolatry, fascism—frigidity and aggression of the eye, petrification of objects. Human imagination rolls through the world seeking cathexis. Here, there, everywhere, it invests itself in perishable things of flesh, silk, marble, and metal, materializations of desire. Words themselves the west makes into objects.

15 Rose, p. 43 ff.
Complete harmony is impossible. Our brains are split, and brain itself is split from body. The quarrel between Apollo and Dionysius is the quarrel between the higher cortex and the older limbic and reptilian brains. Art reflects on and resolves the eternal human dilemma of order versus energy. In the west, Apollo and Dionysius strive for victory. Apollo makes the boundary lines that are civilization but that lead to convention, constraint, oppression. Dionysius is energy unbound, mad, callous, destructive, wasteful. Apollo is law, history, tradition, the dignity and safety of custom and form. Dionysius is the new, exhilarating but rude, sweeping all away to begin again. Apollo is a tyrant, Dionysius a vandal. Every excess brings its counterreaction. So western culture swings from point to point on its complex cycle, pouring forth its lavish tributes of art, word, and deed. We have littered the world with grandiose achievements. Our story is vast, lurid, and unending.17

Throughout her work, Paglia identifies the Dionysian principle with the feminine (especially the maternal) and the Apollonian with the rational, masculine subject. Thus far, she follows the traditional Western usage, which suffuses Catholic thought as well. Where she errs, and errs in a specifically modern fashion, is by asserting a priori the irreconcilability of the two principles, except in the realm of art. That this is her prior assumption rather than her rigorously argued conclusion can be seen by attending to her treatment of Catholic liturgy and theology; wherever she comes across a balanced admixture of Apollo and Dionysius — for instance, in the scholastically articulated doctrine attending and limiting the ecstatic sacrament of the Eucharist — she describes the result as impure, a hodge-podge, an anomalous "pagan" survival in the Jewish-Christian milieu. Her reaction is easy to explain: Paglia's notion of "true" Christianity is Protestant,18 and whatever evidence does not fit that notion is excluded as a "remnant" of the pagan past.

17Paglia, pp. 96-97.
18Thus far Paglia: "Christian saints are reborn pagan personae. Martin Luther correctly diagnosed a loss of aboriginal Christianity in the Italian Church. The Romanism in Catholicism is splendidly, enduringly pagan, spilling out in Renaissance, Counter-Reformation, and beyond," (p. 139). This quaintly 19th-century vision of Christian history fails to account for the persistence of the cult of the saints, the veneration of Mary, and the doctrine of the Eucharist in such disparate, non-Roman locales as Syria, Armenia and India, each of whose churches date from the time of the apostles.
However, when Paglia discovers an artist who creates an aesthetic resolution of the tension between masculine identity and feminine nature, she delights in the complexities and perversities that result — particularly when the effect is sufficiently lurid and titillating. (Hence her preference for decadent literature, particularly the emetic summas of de Sade, the erotic rhapsodies of Swinburne.) We should not be fooled by this particular eccentricity of taste into thinking Paglia a perverted crank; far from it, she has expressed more clearly and cleanly than any critic since Yvor Winters the destructive dualism that invaded Western thought after the decline of the medieval synthesis. The difference is that the lady prefers the chaos — displaying thereby a fine consistency. If man is indeed a demented centaur, a god yoked to a beast, then he may well be doomed to reel drunkenly from one heresy to the opposite and back again, until he drowns in blood. Certainly that is Lance Lamar’s view, as we will see confirmed in an analysis of the story he narrates.

One psychological implication of the thesis that the masculine and feminine elements in the human soul are irreparably in conflict is the univocal equation of individual women with the feminine and individual men with the masculine. If the level of religious allegory is removed that would attribute pure masculinity only to the transcendent God, and some measure of femininity to every created being, and then the sexual principles are declared to be irreconcilable (rather than complementary), it becomes all too easy to identify woman with immanence, materiality, and even death (as Schopenhauer did, and the Decadents who followed him). The intellectual misogyny that Oleksy rightly diagnoses at the heart of existentialist thought is part of its Cartesian, not its Christian, inheritance.

19 Winters, pp. 7-14.
20 For an exhaustive exploration of this allegorical tradition, from the Old Testament up to the present, see Hauke, pp. 216-296.
21 Stern, p. 107 ff.
22 Paglia, p. 408 ff.
Recalling Martin D'Arcy's analysis of sexual difference and its implications for human psychology and spirituality (elaborated in Chapter One above), one can indeed identify a realm of the feminine (or anima) where the self can be destroyed or dissipated, as Paglia fears. Indeed, the Western tradition is rife with warnings, which D'Arcy echoes, of the dangers contained within the lower reaches of the anima. If the anima is capable of leading man to the superhuman through faith, followed wrongly it can equally lead him into the subhuman realm, excluding reason in favor of imagination, even descending to "the irrational, the vital centre whence come the dark passions and impulses and instincts."23 This Dionysiac descent, in which rationality and personhood are extinguished, is the aspect of the feminine that misogynist thinkers feared.

Ironically enough, it is to this abysmal level of the anima that Lance Lamar descends through his marriage to Margot, a woman with whom he can relate only upon the most instinctual basis. Whenever Lance recalls to Fr. Percival the positive aspects of their doomed relationship, inevitably his attention goes back to sex — sex undertaken in public places, impetuously, passionately, without reference to procreation, mutual love, or chaste fidelity (the three goods of marriage, according to St. Augustine). Indeed, the carnal relationship that develops between this husband and wife perfectly illustrates Augustine's warning that — in the absence of charity — lust can corrupt even the marital bed.24 But lust is not the operative motive in Lance's desperate attachment to Margot; as he freely confesses, he had been virtually impotent for some years, and "moderately content" in the ensuing celibacy. The true nature of Lance's spiritual state before his "awakening" is hinted at in the following passage:

Do you know what it is like to be a self-centered not unhappy man who leads a tolerable life, works, eats, drinks, hunts, sleeps, then one fine day discovers that the

23 D'Arcy, p. 186.
24 Burke, p. 548 ff.
great starry heavens have opened to him and that his heart is bursting with it? She. Her. Woman. Not a category, not a sex, not one of the two sexes, a human female creature, but an infinity.... What else is infinity but a woman become meat and drink to you, life and your heart's own music, the air you breathe? Just to be near her is to live and have your soul's own self. Just to open your mouth on the skin of her back. (L, p. 129)

The pleasure Lance expresses here is pre-adolescent, oral, infantile. In some ways, it recalls the vision of beatitude that Jamie Vaught confides to Will Barrett (see p. 140, above), of a gentle, maternal love that grants the restless male pilgrim a place of refuge upon the earth. But motherhood carries very different connotations in this novel than it did in The Last Gentleman, and for good reason: unlike Will Barrett, Lance was not deprived of his mother at an early age. Rather, Lily Lamar dominated Belle Isle, stronger than Lance's father, adulterous — or so he asserts, without offering us conclusive evidence — a flirtatious and aggressive figure who exercises a powerful influence on her adult son's psyche. It is she who arises from his subconscious at the crucial moment in his apocalyptic plans, urging him forward (downward) into the Dionysian farrago of destruction. Lance looks backward to his memories of Lily Lamar as his guide to evaluating the material world and the feminine, and in so doing lays the foundations of Manichaeanism within his soul.

As William Rodney Allen has pointed out, Lily Lamar has an important literary antecedent in Warren's most famous novel:

In both Lancelot and All the King's Men, the protagonist, whose life has fallen into a dream-like state, discovers his father had been involved in corruption and that out of weakness and sexual timidity the father drove his wife to another man.25

Whatever we are meant to see as the true sequence of events, in Lance's mind at least (and perhaps in Jack Burden's), the son blames his father's weakness, impotence, and ruin on his mother, whom he perceives as castrating. (Lily was forever

coming at Lance with "boring fists." Lance recalls her shamelessly and openly betraying her husband, himself so emasculated and abstracted that he seemed not to mind. She happily leaves the cuckold to his guilty conscience and aesthetic reveries, as Margot later leaves Lance to his drinking and napping. Margot takes Lily's place as a mother-figure, functioning also as his emblem for material existence itself ("meat, drink, life and air"), and his tangible connection to the feminine in all its lower manifestations. Lily and Margot — each a domineering, sensual woman with an air of corruption, a cheerfully amoral dweller in the immanent world of consumerism — are in some ways the perfect match for Lamar men haunted by the honor of their family, a heritage of heroism utterly irrelevant in this latter age. Certainly, each woman allows her man to slough off the responsibilities that he finds so intolerable, and sink into the constant exercise of his lower faculties; even better (at least in Lance's mind), they take most of the blame for the man's decline. Since Lance, an heir of the modern tradition, sees animus and anima as irreconcilable, it is an easy matter for him to equate the women in his life with the darkly-feminine movement of his soul toward passivity, sensualism, and dissolution. He does not recognize these as possibilities that inhere within his own soul, but rather objectifies them in the persons of Lily and Margot, upon each of whom in turn he lays the responsibility for his spiritual state.

Before he married Margot, Lance lived in amiable abstraction, still engaging in paternalist politics under the guise of civil rights law and other vestigial elements of the heroic ideal. Under Margot's care, he virtually regresses from adulthood through a compulsive adolescent sexuality back into an almost infantile state, wherein his main pleasures come from a bottle and from frequent naps. While Fr. Percival (and we) can clearly see that Margot is not responsible for this decline, Lance is unable to make such fine distinctions. He equates Margot's renovation of Belle Isle with her attempts to

---

26King, p. 86.
coming at Lance with “boring fists.”) Lance recalls her shamelessly and openly betraying her husband, himself so emasculated and abstracted that he seemed not to mind. She happily leaves the cuckold to his guilty conscience and aesthetic reveries, as Margot later leaves Lance to his drinking and napping. Margot takes Lily’s place as a mother-figure, functioning also as his emblem for material existence itself (“meat, drink, life and air”), and his tangible connection to the feminine in all its lower manifestations. Lily and Margot — each a domineering, sensual woman with an air of corruption, a cheerfully amoral dweller in the immanent world of consumerism — are in some ways the perfect match for Lamar men haunted by the honor of their family, a heritage of heroism utterly irrelevant in this latter age. 

Certainly, each woman allows her man to slough off the responsibilities that he finds so intolerable, and sink into the constant exercise of his lower faculties; even better (at least in Lance’s mind), they take most of the blame for the man’s decline. Since Lance, an heir of the modern tradition, sees animus and anima as irreconcilable, it is an easy matter for him to equate the women in his life with the darkly-feminine movement of his soul toward passivity, sensualism, and dissolution. He does not recognize these as possibilities that inhere within his own soul, but rather objectifies them in the persons of Lily and Margot, upon each of whom in turn he lays the responsibility for his spiritual state.

Before he married Margot, Lance lived in amiable abstraction, still engaging in paternalist politics under the guise of civil rights law and other vestigial elements of the heroic ideal. Under Margot’s care, he virtually regresses from adulthood through a compulsive adolescent sexuality back into an almost infantile state, wherein his main pleasures come from a bottle and from frequent naps. While Fr. Percival (and we) can clearly see that Margot is not responsible for this decline, Lance is unable to make such fine distinctions. He equates Margot’s renovation of Belle Isle with her attempts to

---

26King, p. 86.
mysticism of matter that rejects all “masculine” elements in religion, including the
transcendence of God, the immortality of the soul, and the governing role of reason
over the appetites. It is particularly appropriate that Lance’s “sacramental” image for
this neo-primitive religion suggests a desire to crawl back into the womb, a willingness
to be engulfed and obliterated in matter — to embrace the fate so dreaded by other
modern southern heirs to the heroic tradition, a dread to which Kreyling calls attention:

The...repulsion felt towards women is sanctioned by the
myth that woman is not a conscious being, is in fact
inimical to the conscious (logic, reason, will, art) by virtue
of the involuntary ebbs and flows that control her life.
Man pursues the antithesis of woman in art or science or
the angelic fraternity of war and is denied fulfillment by
her intrusion.27

Given Lance’s modern account of the feminine (that excludes from its definition
faith, the cognitive faculty of intellectus, and the sacramental significance of matter),
the inevitable result of such a descent is a kind of death in life. Indeed, the longer he
remains a votary of this religion the more he literally decays, until he assumes the
following appearance, which he notes with alarm after his “awakening”:

[S]omething moved in the corner of my eye. It was a man
at the far end of the room. He was watching me. He did
not look familiar. There was something wary and poised
about the way he stood, shoulders angled, knees slightly
bent as if he were prepared for anything. He was mostly
silhouette but white on black like a reversed negative. His
arms were long, one hanging lower and lemur-like from
dropped shoulder...

Then I realized it was myself reflected in the dim pier
mirror.

What did I see? It is hard to say, but it appeared to be a
man gone to seed. Do you remember the picture of
Lancelot disgraced, discovered in adultery with the queen,
banished, living in the woods, stretched out on a rock,
chin cupped in both hands, bloodshot eyes staring straight
ahead, yellow hair growing down over his brows? But
it’s a bad comparison...not so much a case of my screwing
the queen as the queen being screwed by somebody else.
(L, 63-64)

27Kreyling, p. 142.
In the passage that introduces this description, Lance admits that his “life routine” had been “worn bare and deep as a cowpath.” The choice of simile is apt; in Lance’s mind women and their world are simply an extension of unreasoning nature, the dark anima. By succumbing to their bovine charms, he has begun even to move backward in evolution, towards the lemur. That Lance does equate women with nature is clear from the way he pictures Margot, in comparison to his first wife, Lucy:

Lucy I loved too, but Lucy was a dream, a slim brown dancer in a bell jar spinning round and round in the “Limelight” music of old gone Carolina long ago. Margot was life itself as if all Louisiana, its fecund oil-rich dark greens and haunted twilights, its very fakery and money-loving and comicalness, had all been gathered and fleshed out in one creature. It meant having her and not being haunted, holding all of goldgreen Louisiana in my arms. She was a big girl. (L, p. 119).

If this relationship starts out with Lance holding the whole fecundity of the earth in his arms, as it continues he shrinks and withers, as if Margot simply contained too much of the life force for him to stand; like his father before him, in the presence of the dark feminine, he does not master himself and contend with the situation, but rather sinks into reverie and unconsciousness. (He will atone for this later, not by self-mastery, but by his insane political ambition to master others, especially women.) He has defined the anima as subhuman, then submitted himself to its cult, thereby putting his own animus (and even his existence) in danger.

This danger is one that was sensed, vaguely, by earlier Percy heroes. In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, whenever someone proposes to the hero that he accept an immanentist creed — as Aunt Emily does to Binx, and Rita to Will — he perceives it as a threat, as if a spiritual castration were in the offing.\(^{28}\) It does not help

\(^{28}\)To give Percy due credit, at least one female character before Allie in *The Second Coming* experiences that anxiety, and for the same reasons as the male protagonists. As we saw in Chapter Two, Kate Cutrer chafes at Aunt Emily’s patronizing dismissal of her search for transcendent meaning, reacting more vehemently than Binx. Creating a vision of the feminine which adequately portrays its power and importance, without conveying the dread it inspires in modern Manicheans, has been a task with which Percy struggled throughout his career, succeeding best in *The Second Coming*. 
matters when such a proposal comes from a powerful woman to a man who feels dependent upon her; in moments like that, Percy’s heroes undergo a psycho-spiritual panic ("strange, eschatological pricklings"). However lofty and overtly masculinized these immanentist systems appear (Aunt Emily quotes Marcus Aurelius, Rita compares Will to a series of classical heroes), each asserts the final futility of transcendence, the evanescence of the self, and the triumph of all-devouring mother nature. And in the presence of each, Percy’s heroes experience the very anxiety towards the mother of which Paglia writes so eloquently.

Lance’s literal impotence, a mirror of his father’s fate as an addled cuckold, is a fine emblem of the state of his soul: deprived of any transcendent referent, he has regressed ever more closely to the condition of vegetable matter, over whose operation Jack Burden’s “Great Twitch” holds final sway. Indeed, at one point he tries to comfort himself with a mechanist theory of sexuality:

Why is it such an unspeakable thing for one creature to obtrude a small portion of its body into the body of another creature? Is it not in fact a trivial matter when one puts it this way? (L, p. 16)

Very likely, it was reflections of this nature that comforted Maury Lamar as he watched Lily go off on trips with Uncle Harry, then turned back to working on his romantic histories of rural Episcopal churches in the Feliciana parishes. But neither nostalgia nor materialist speculations on the power of Twitch are sufficient to salve Lance’s “secret wound,” as he makes clear:

But suppose I put it another way. Isn’t it unspeakable to me to imagine Margot lying under another man, her head turning to and fro in a way I knew only too well, her lips stretched, a little mew-cry escaping her lips? Isn’t that unspeakable? Yes. But why? When I imagined other things happening to Margot, even the worst things, they were painful but not intolerable...The thought of Margot dead was painful but not intolerable. But Margot under another man... (L, p. 16)
Lance recognizes the disproportion here between his cosmology and his ethics; the Dionysian cult that he has embraced does not proscribe adultery — indeed, the loss of individuality entailed in the submergence of ego within anima ought to render moot the identity of either partner. Where there is no personhood, there are no personal relations, only physical interchanges of energy. Then what motivates Lance's rage, the mighty force that drives the action to its grim conclusion? It is the last trace of animus that remains in Lance, devoid not only of faith but of reason, a shrunken core of ego that fits D'Arcy's cautionary description cited above: "[W]hen the reason is forced to abdicate or is tempted to lower its dignity, it descends to the level of brutal mastery or cold selfishness or becomes a mere prejudice, a rationalization, a judgement which is swayed by passion." 29

What elements of masculine identity do survive in Lance's degenerate psyche are determined by the heroic code of which I spoke length in Chapters One and Two. If Lance's sense of selfhood is threatened by his descent into the depths of instinct and mechanism, it is also salved by a sense of possession and control; this corner of the feminine — even as it has engulfed him — has been his, has borne his name, submitted to his sexual mastery. He, and no one else, evoked that "mew-cry," those ecstasies of pleasure. If Lance has indeed been indeed searching in Margot's womb for the "paradisiacal state" of which Erich Fromm speaks as the real object of Oedipal desire,30 key to that search is an unquestioned, public title of ownership. So long as that title is maintained, Lance can continue to delude himself that he has not lost his very soul, but has gained the whole world — or at least "all of goldgreen Louisiana." 31 Once he learns that he has lost even this hold on selfhood, thanks to

---

29 D'Arcy, pp. 185-186.  
31 In Honor and Violence in the Old South, Wyatt-Brown points out the social implications of Lance's position as a cuckold: "What was at stake in the promiscuity of a dependent woman was her protector's status, without which he could not remain an effective member of society. The unchaste wife or daughter did not betray herself alone. She exposed her male family members to public
Margot’s adultery, Lance becomes aware of his true condition, and his apocalyptic forebodings and images begin. To describe his emotion upon discovering the medical evidence of Margot’s infidelity, he employs an elaborate scientific metaphor:

I can only compare it, my reaction, to that of a scientist, an astronomer.... [F]rom the most insignificant observation the astronomer calculates with absolute certainty and finality that a comet is on collision course with the earth and will arrive in two and a half months. In eight weeks the dot [in the sky] will have grown to the size of the sun, the oceans risen forty feet, New York will be under water, skyscrapers toppling. (L, p. 19)

The imagery Lance chooses here is particularly appropriate: the complete loss of masculine ego in the mighty, unruly anima is symbolized by engulfment in liquid and falling towers. The impotent drinker awakens to the truth about himself, and the experience is eschatological; under the blazing light of revelation, Lance begins to plot his own apocalypse and rebirth, which he will engineer and control.32

Lewis Lawson suggests that Lance’s search for a “paradisiacal state” mirrors that of Chandler’s detective Philip Marlowe; Lance is exploring all the nooks and crannies of the “Great Wrong Place” that Margot’s body (and by extension, Belle Isle) has become, in search of the “Great Good Place,” the pre-Oedipal paradise that he remembers enjoying with his mother.33 But here is a profound flaw in Lance’s plan — and a weakness in Lawson’s reading. Lance’s conscious memories of his mother are profoundly ambivalent, and largely negative. He rarely defends her, and even seems to revel in the idea that she committed adultery (as he does in the memory of discovering his father’s corruption). On a semi-conscious level, where associations censure..., Since there was little recognition of a morality apart from community custom, the erring woman had to be condemned along with the husband, father, or brother who was unable or unwilling to control her or to avenge the seducer or rapist” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 37.

33 Lawson, “‘Spiritually in Los Angeles,’” pp. 749-754.
are more persuasive than causal links, Lance seems to equate his father's corruption with Lily's sexuality, as the following key passages suggest:

I opened the sock drawer and found not ten dollars but ten thousand dollars stuck carelessly under some argyle socks. What I can still remember is the sight of the money and the fact that my eye could not get enough of it. There was a secret savoring of it as if the eye were exploring it with its tongue. When there is something to see, some thing, a new thing, there is no end to the seeing...There is no end to the feast.

At the sight of the money, a new world opened up for me. The old world fell to pieces — not necessarily a bad thing. (L, pp. 41-42)

The tongue imagery Lance chooses to describe this discovery finds its mirror later in the novel — in Margot's bed, as he undertakes his “sacramental” exploration of the “ark of her covenant.” (L, p. 117) The close association between these pleasurable discoveries — of evil and of the womb — becomes much clearer late in the novel, when Lance again describes the moment when he uncovered his father’s corruption:

There it was, the ten thousand dollars, dusky new green bills in a powdered rubber band neat and squared away like a book, and there it was, the sweet heart pang of horror. I counted it. The bills felt like stiff petals, not like paper, like leaves covered by pollen. My heart beat slowly and strongly. Strange: I was aware that my eyes were doing more than seeing, that they were unblinking and staring and slightly bulging. They were “taking it in,” that is, devouring. For here was the sweet shameful heart of something, the secret. For minutes there was an awareness of my eyes devouring the money under the socks, making little scanning motions to and fro, the way the eye takes in a great painting. Dishonor is sweeter and more mysterious than honor. It holds a secret. There is no secret in honor. If one could but discover the secret at the heart of dishonor. (L, p. 213, italics mine)

The money has become a flower, which has become a vagina. The “Lady of the Camellias” — whose flower is so prominent in Lance’s mind, since she wears it out of season, perhaps as an emblem of the eternal feminine — has finally given Lance “proof” of his mother’s infidelity, the tale of which follows hard upon the appearance of the money/flower. Soon thereafter, the Lady is transformed into (or revealed as)
Lance’s mother, Lily. The flower of purity and resurrection has transformed itself into an emblem of sensuality, which brings corruption and decay in its path. So swallowed up is Lance in his visual love-feast, that his very subjectivity disappears: “there was an awareness of my eyes” replaces “I was aware,” as Lance regresses into that union with the feminine (and especially his mother) that ultimately fills him with Manichaean dread.

Percy’s use of flower imagery to depict ambivalent feelings towards women and the feminine has precedents in modern and southern literature, as a Hart Crane translation of one of Laforgue’s Pierrot poems demonstrates:

True, I nibble at despondencies
Among the flowers of her domain
To the whole end of discovering
What is her unique propensity?

Camille Paglia points to a far more powerful passage employing flower imagery for this purpose in Huysmans’ Against Nature. This passage crowns a chapter in the course of which the misogynist, Decadent hero Des Esseintes has catalogued dozens of the most grotesque, hideous flowers that he could collect, in bitter scorn of nature. After examining each of his monstrous orchids, Des Esseintes falls asleep, and dreams that he is being drawn inexorably into the arms of an archetypal harlot:

He made a superhuman effort to free himself from her embrace, but with an irresistible movement she clutched him and held him, and pale with horror, he saw the savage Nidularium blossoming between her uplifted thighs, with

---

34Cited by Kreyling, who goes on to make comments relevant to our understanding of Lance Lamar and his literary precursors: “The Pierrot of Crane’s translations of Laforgue stands, or sometimes sits, in murky awe and repressed hatred of woman. The personal ‘I’ is reserved for the male, while the female is a type (Eve, Giocanda, Delilah) denied subjective ego...[P]oets who invested in pierrotic estrangement from the much too solid world of Columbine simultaneously acquired a pained ambivalence toward woman and more than a cursory fascination with death—usually suicide. Their adulation of Eve, Giocanda, Delilah, and Cynthia, goddess of the moon and all sublunary creatures, is dyed with darker emotion; they welcome the woman’s death, deny her subjective life, and view her sexual nature as, at best, a sort of involuntary spasm and, at worst, a weapon of torture.” (pp. 133-135)
its swordblades gaping open to expose the bloody depths.\(^{35}\)

Paglia goes on to explain the passage's significance, in the light of the modern sexual dichotomy which she expounds:

Thus Chapter Eight ends, with Des Esseintes having escaped, like Poe's hero in the maelstrom, from a forcible return to female origins, sucked into the womb of the rapacious all-mother.\(^{36}\)

Repeatedly, Lance expresses the profound anxiety he feels regarding female sexuality, in terms strikingly similar to Paglia's. Here is only the most earthy instance:

Christ what a country! A nation of 100 million voracious cunts. I will not have my son or daughter grow up in such a world.... My son is a homosexual now and I can understand why. He told me he was terrified of all the pussy after him. (L, p. 177)

Lance's sexual anxiety can be partly attributed to his recent impotence — but not entirely. As we established earlier, there is a deeper level at which feminine power assails his identity. The next vision he receives that night betrays the radical imbalance of power between masculine and feminine principles that he feels the need to redress. He remembers Uncle Harry, mostly naked except for a ludicrous Mardi Gras get-up. “His genital was retracted,” Lance notes, “a large button over a great veined ball.” (L, p. 213) Compared to the mighty camellia that so fascinated him and the world-shattering money/flower he discovered, this organ appears as pitiable, even vestigial. It also serves as a metonymy for Harry's condition: a sad old man, drained and inarticulate, he yearns for some form of communion with Lance that he cannot express in words. We are not told enough to fathom what Harry actually wanted, even if he knew. But in Lance's mounting delirium, the memory of Harry serves a very specific purpose: he is the emblem of the male principle in defeat, its substance wasted by too promiscuous contact with the enemy (not unlike Lance's condition, before his

\(^{35}\)Huysmans, p. 106.  
\(^{36}\)Paglia, p. 433.
"awakening"). When the Lady returns, this time revealed as Lily Lamar, she equips
Lance with a new, improved phallic symbol, a Bowie knife. Lance understands the
significance of this transformation: the masculine can survive traffic with the feminine,
but only on terms of violent domination, not the melting surrender that once engulfed
him, turning him into a "runny babbit" (L, p. 53) — that is, a stern, honorable
aristocrat no more, but rather an impotent hypocrite and a weakling, a man with no
boundaries and no definition.

Woman can be approached, but only once she has been wounded, tamed,
silenced by masculine violence until she is no longer a threat to his subjectivity, but
serves humbly as a repository of male honor and a safely domesticated link to the
natural. With that possibility in mind, Lance considers rescuing Margot from the
apocalypse he has planned, should she seem amenable to this transformation. In the
event, she refuses and is lost; given the prophetic determinism that Lance has
adopted\(^{37}\) to justify his action, this means for him that she was reprobate, beyond
redemption. A replacement must be found, and (for a time) Anna seems a likely
candidate.

It is only in the spectral environment of Belle Isle on the night of its destruction
that Lance, now drugged into a visionary condition, can finally confront his memories,
interpret them, and take decisive action to resolve them in a final conflagration. In
previous moments of his "awakening," Lance has seen glimpses of the "Great Secret
of Life" that this night he grasps in its theological fullness: the supremacy of dishonor
over honor (anima over animus, body over spirit), the fact that all is indeed
"buggery,"\(^{38}\) at least in the botched world as God has created it, centered on a sexual

---

\(^{37}\)Lawson, "'Spiritually in Los Angeles,'" p. 761.

\(^{38}\)It is no accident, of course, that Percy chose this archaic word, with all its doctrinal
connotations. As John Noonan writes, in medieval Europe the practice of sodomy became associated
with the Manichaean heretics from Bulgaria, who allegedly practiced this vice out of a repugnance for
procreation—hence the term "buggery." Cf. Contraception (Cambridge, Mass.; Belknap Press of
Harvard University Press, 1986), p 188.
duality that is nothing more than violation and masochism. In those glimpses — as a child looking at the money, on the night when he discovers Margot’s adultery — he has found this “Secret” both terrifying and exhilarating. On the one hand, the sheer power of the feminine (as he sees it) to corrupt and engulf the fragile arc of masculine personality filled him with deep anxiety (what Lawson calls “maternal awe”39). On the other, this very knowledge promised gnostic liberation — particularly to a man who eagerly watched for the destruction of the “old world” and the opening up of the “new.”

However, on this night as Lance finally sees his implicit cosmology made explicit, and draws its deadly conclusions, he feels no exhilaration and no anxiety — feels almost nothing, in fact, except a cold numbness40 that allows him to persevere until he has created this “new world” in a man-made apocalypse. The dark cosmos in which God has imprisoned man will be shattered and made anew, not by works of faith or even reason, but by sheer will. In effect, Lance echoes Ed Barrett’s willful declaration just before his suicide: “But I don’t have to choose that” (LG, p. 259) — a variation on the Luciferian “non serviam.” 41

In his moment of dark revelation, Lance sees the same bleak vision that Barrett spied from his porch: a world in which sexual taboos were collapsing, and with them the very social distinctions that gave the southern hero his purpose and identity. Long before, Lance had enthusiastically embraced one aspect of this change:

The very behavior I used to abhor in others I carried on with her and never a second thought or care in the world; touch her in public. Neck! Go to the A&P with her, heft the cold red beef flesh in one hand and hold her warm hand with the other and in the parking lot at four o’ clock

40Perhaps a foreshadowing of that icy circle in Dante’s Hell reserved for those who are violent to guests.
41Seering at Fr. Percival: “You say we are redeemed. Look out there. Does it look like we have been redeemed?” (L, p. 224), Lance also recalls O’Connor’s gnostic prophet Hazel Motes. Compare Wise Blood: “If you’ve been redeemed,” he said, “I wouldn’t want to be.” (p. 13)
in the afternoon neck! Spoon! We'd drive down the road like white trash in a pickup truck. (L, pp. 89-90)

Such a state of affairs could not long be endured. At bottom, Lance is driven by the same code that motivates Aunt Emily (M, pp. 176-177), Ed Barrett (LG, p. 85), and their real-life exemplar, William Alexander Percy (LoL, pp. 306-315) — each of whom specifically deplored the sexually-driven collapse of social differentiation. Unlike the other "despairing monumentalists"\(^42\) in Percy’s world of fiction and memory, Lance has betrayed that code, allowing a key element of his identity to be lost in the unredeemed feminine mire. In sharp contrast to their tight-lipped, Stoic resignation, Lance will reclaim that identity by violence.

If the “new world” in which Lance hopes to dwell includes the domination of feminine nature by force of masculine will (reason seems to play no part in Lance’s vision), another key feature is the transformation of time. As Lawson suggests, Lance takes the discovery of Margot’s adultery as a fulcrum that divides his life into two distinct periods — “Before and After.” However, in order to explicate the meaning of this division, he must return to the memory of another great discovery, that of the bribe money in his father’s drawer. Equating the two events, Lance creates for himself a sense of liberation from the tyranny of the feminine. The time Before is a long dream (or Big Sleep), dominated by the past that came before it; the time After is waking reality, dominated by the future that Lance has envisioned. The past is feminine and mechanistic, the future masculine and teleological. Nor does Lance limit these assessments of the meaning of time to his own experience; true to his gnostic habit, he elaborates from the personal to the cosmological:

\[\text{[I]t is the banality of the past which puts me off. There is only one reason I am telling you about these old sad things, or rather trying to remember them...It is because the past, any past, is intolerable, not because it is violent or terrible or doomstruck or any such thing, but just because} \]

\(^{42}\text{King, p. 36.}\)
it is so goddamn banal and feckless and useless. (L, p. 105)

Having established that Lance associates his own past with the dangerous power of the anima to engulf his identity, it should not surprise us that he employs an image with strongly sexual connotations to embody the structure of time as he sees it:

As you get older you begin to realize the trick time is playing, and that unless you do something about it, the passage of time is nothing but the encroachment of the horrible banality of the past on the pure future. The past devours the future like a tape recorder, converting pure possibility into banality. The present is the tape head, the mouth of time. (L, p. 106)

Even though Lance soon interprets this image otherwise, suggesting “I am aware of being the tape head” and “I am aware of this room being a tape head,” the image he chooses evokes as clearly as any camellia the female sexuality that obsesses him. Lance’s great fear is absorption and dissolution in the feminine, and he finds his liberation not in nostalgia (where his father looked for it) but in fantasies about the future. The past, where women dominated, is “banality,” while the future, which he will dominate, is “the new life.” His moment of conversion comes in his discovery that each of the flowers he has tongued or eyed (from Margot’s “unique propensity” to the money that incarnated his father’s impotence and his mother’s adultery) is really one flower — the devouring cannibalistic Venus who consumes the future and turns life into death. On one level he is actually relieved that another man has taken up the task of plugging this terrible chasm: “The moment I knew for a fact that Margot has been fucked by another man, it was as if I’d been waked from a twenty-year dream...In an instant I became sober, alert, watchful. I could act.” Lawson interprets Lance’s experience, this second birth he believes he has undergone, in doctrinal terms:

Lance has experienced the Gnostic eleutheria, the freedom from domination by this world and the freedom to do
anything in order to achieve and maintain total independence.43

Only by escaping time itself, by provoking a catastrophe that will change the order of being itself, can Lance attain to the transcendence he seeks, and burn off the dross of history in the blazing light of the heroic future. Thus he makes a claim to join the ranks of Southern and Western heroes — “Lee and Richard and Saladin and Leonidas and Hector and Agamemnon and Richthofen and Charlemagne and Clovis and Martel” (L, p. 178) — men whose cultural function is to “supplant history in the...imagination as the explanation of the nature of things...to establish unity where history supplies only contingency.”44 By rejecting the banality of the past, Lance ties himself to a tradition that transcends history, and virtually identifies himself with “Christ the King” while refusing to embrace or emulate “sweet Jesus.” Thus Lance adopts the critique of sentimentalized, liberal, and individualist Christianity advanced by serious traditionalists 45 to the service of his own peculiar creed, his astonishing hubris.

If Lance sees himself as a modern type of Christ the King, what is the nature of the kingdom that he proposes to establish? As we will see, in many ways it is the very opposite of the Paradise described in Genesis — which is fitting, since Lance believes that God botched creation, by unleashing the demonic force of sexuality (itself the Original Sin), which constitutes “something God did to man, so monstrous that to this day man cannot understand what happened to him.” (L, p. 222) Indeed, if (as I have argued throughout) the feminine must be seen allegorically as the sign of the creature in its relation to the Creator, then Lance’s attempt to establish a new dispensation that will suppress the feminine is revealed as a metaphysical rebellion of the highest order, an attempt to usurp God’s role as transcendent Creator. The nature of this rebellion

43Lawson, Following Percy, p. 216.
44Kreyling, p. 29.
becomes clear from Lance’s imaginative attempts to picture what his counter-paradise would be like.

Perhaps the central motif in Genesis is that of an untroubled garden, fertile and overflowing with life. This does not fit in with Lance’s vision:

I’ll prophesy: This country is going to turn into a desert and it won’t be a bad thing. Thirst and hunger are better than jungle rot. We will begin in the Wilderness where Lee lost. Deserts are clean places. Corpses turn quickly into simple pure chemicals. (L, p. 158)

If Lance once dove into Dionysian communion with Margot and (through her) “all of goldgreen Louisiana,” (L, p. 119) he has certainly learned his lesson, and now embraces the sterile purity of death, as preferable to the liquefying dissolution entailed in biological life. In obedience to this preference, he elects to stay in Belle Isle as it explodes, surviving by sheer accident — or perhaps by virtue of some demonic immunity, “like Lucifer blown out of Hell.” (L, p. 246) The realm he leaves behind — forever — is the order of being infected by its Creator with the energy of sexual desire, that dark force whose downward pull affects nearly everyone, especially

---

46 In Male Fantasies, Volumes I and II (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), Klaus Theweleit documents the writing styles, metaphors, and massacres of the proto-Nazi Freikorps who fought against Bolshevik armies in the Germany of the 1920’s. While his theoretical framework — that of Gilles Deleuze — is unsound, entailing a wholesale rejection of the animus as we have defined it here (including the faculty of reason), his observations about the aesthetic preferences of misogynist, militaristic males in the heroic tradition are illuminating to a study of Lance Lamar. As he points out, a male obsession with the dangers of “engulfment” in the “morass” of femininity can lead to a preoccupation with cleanliness, sterility, structure, and strict social differentiation— as the only alternatives to liquefaction and dissolution of the masculine ego. If drowning is the danger, then a desert is the safest refuge (pp. 392-402). One more interesting avenue of investigation suggested in Theweleit’s text is this: He discusses Elaine Morgan’s The Descent of Woman (New York: Stein and Day, 1972), a rather fanciful feminist attempt to reconstruct anthropology along more politically correct lines. One point which Theweleit cites is strikingly reminiscent of Lance’s speculations about human sexuality. Morgan suggests that face-to-face copulation, the development of the menstrual cycle to replace the simian estrus cycle, and the apparent violence of sexual penetration contributed to a permanent association between sex and violence in the male psyche. As Theweleit sums it up: “This view, if correct, implies a truly lethal juxtaposition of male copulatory behavior and the unlimited application of violence.” (p. 293) The striking similarities between these two theories suggests that Percy may have modelled Lance’s Manichaean account of sexuality on Morgan’s— particularly since each of the problematic aspects of human sexuality critiqued by Morgan are remedied by the villains of The Thanatos Syndrome through the infusion of heavy sodium. These observations ought to discomfit those who would put a feminist reading on Percy’s corpus.
women. Even Margot's daughter Siobhan suffers the taint: "At seven she was as sexual a creature as her mother...She could curve her lips richly but her eyes were as opaque as a doll's. She liked to show her body and would sit, dress pulled up, arms clasping knees, her little biscuit showing." (L, p. 117)

With what sort of Eve will the self-creating Adam consent to share his desert anti-Eden? Only such women as have been purified from the sexual taint, by dint of some natural frailty or violence suffered. He believes that his fellow-patient Anna has been restored by the gang-rape she suffered to the virginity that Lucy had maintained until their wedding night, and he confesses to "want the same thing of her I wanted from Lucy: to come close but keep a little distance between us." (L, p. 86) Lance desires a mate who will not threaten his identity with too potent a communion, someone like Lucy, "a dream, a slim brown dancer in a bell jar" (L, p. 119) — that is, someone in a sterile laboratory environment drained of air. Another motif that unites the women who fit Lance's cautious standard of feminine frailty is that of the scar. Note Lance's description of his first encounter with Anna, which gives us some idea of what he looks for in a wife:

Her thin brown face reminded me of Lucy, except she didn't have Lucy's funny quirky expression and the tiny scar on her lip. Her face was blank, lips slightly parted and dry, like a woman asleep. She had a scar all right, not like Lucy's, but a big white raised scar curving from forehead to cheek where she had been cut in the rape and beating. Her scar was like a whore's.

The same passage continues, ending in what are surely the most wrenching lines in any of Percy's novels:

Do you remember our both making the observation that all whores have scars, belly scars from hysterectomies and abortions, face scars from beatings, leg scars from car wrecks? (L, p. 109)

Lance observes the terrible abuse that women have suffered at the hands of male aggression — and by extension, that nature and the feminine have endured at the hands
of modern man— and endorses it approvingly. This is what he looks for in a woman— someone battered into virtual silence, wounded or barely alive. His first wife, Lucy, exhibited all these qualities but—as he notes coolly—"she died." Perhaps she was too frail for the contemporary world. Lance's gnostic answer is to remake the world, rather than adapt his desires. He will construct an Eden in which his new, half-articulate Eve can survive and pose no threat to him. Thus, instead of wedding an Eve who was taken from his own flesh (and thereby whom he must love as his own body, according to St. Paul),47 he will choose a woman whose own flesh has been breached and broken. She will not partake of his nature, and he will not love her as Christ does the Church: "[I]f there cannot be love— you call that love out there?— there will be a tight-lipped courtesy between men. And chivalry toward women." (L, p. 158) From the picture Lance paints, the women will need all the help they can get.

It is in this image of battered, speechless woman that we see at last the motivation for Lance's destruction of Belle Isle. Unable to win back Margot's affections on the old terms— in fact, quite unwilling to attempt anything like another Dionysian self-abandon— he embarks on his own project of historical restoration: he decides to return his current wife to the condition of his first. Apart from the scar, we see another common thread in the women Lance loves— or at least, those with whom he mates. Another image of woman recurs throughout the novel, until we cannot but believe that it is for Lance an internal image that he feels driven to reenact. Thus he describes his very first glimpse of Anna:

Her door was open. She was thin and black-haired but I couldn't see her face; it was turned to the wall, that wall, her knees drawn up. Her calves were slim but well-developed and still surprisingly suntanned. Had she been a dancer? a tennis player? She reminded me of Lucy. (L, p. 62)

47 Ephesians 5: 30-32.
Much later in the novel, in the very first sexual act that Lance performs after his "awakening," he encounters Raine in bed on the night of the planned explosion, even as the gas fills the house: "Her legs were short but well-developed. She looked like a fourteen-year old girl who had spent twelve years dancing." (L, p. 231) After a surge of (justified) hatred allows him to become aroused, he buggers her, then leaves her behind in the same fetal position in which he first discovered Anna and still remembers Lucy: "[S]he closed her eyes and curled around me like a burning leaf. I left her asleep next to Troy, the two nested like spoons." (L, p. 236)

This image recurs a final time at the very moment of truth, when Lance stirs groggily from Margot's bed to light a lamp, having finally brought her around to his point of view. Delirious with gas and grief, Margot has suggested, "We can start a new life," (L, p. 244) and Lance jumps at the chance, crawling on all fours to get a light so that they can plan a trip together. While he disclaims any serious intention to Fr. Percival ("I was delirious too"), on a certain level he has achieved what he wanted all along: he has tamed Margot, made her sickly and compliant. Even as the room explodes, he sees Margot in this light:

For a tenth of a second I could see her in the flaring, lying on her side like Anna, knees drawn up, cheek against her hands pressed palms together, dark eyes gazing at me. (L, p. 246)

Tragically, from his point of view, Margot cannot endure in this condition any more than Lucy could; indeed, her half-life is only one-tenth of a second. Clearly, he must discover a new partner, one who has already been victimized (and thereby "restored" in the perverse meaning he gives to virginity), and create for her a utopia in which her frailty can survive. In Lawson's terms, he must cleanse the maternal garden by fire, and find a paradise with neither serpents nor trees, where temptation is
impossible, and from which he can never again be expelled — since he is the creator.48

In Lance’s masculine anti-paradise, it is unclear that sexual intercourse of any sort will have a place. One of his earliest dreams depicts his future state:

We ate in silence, looking at each other. There was much to be done. We were making a new life. It was not the Old West and there was no frontier but we were making a new life, starting from scratch. There was no thought of “romance” or “sex” but only of making a new life. There was much to be done. (L, p. 37)

He later makes more explicit his plans for the proper place of sexuality in paradise:

There will be virtuous women who are proud of their virtue and there will be women of the street who are there to be fucked and everyone will know which is which.... A man, a youth, a boy will know which women are to be fucked and which to be honored and one will know who to fuck and who to honor.... Don’t talk to me of love until we shovel out the shit. (L, pp. 178-179)

Since Lance literally makes no provision for marriage and marital relations — and indeed, by the end of the novel has adopted a Sadean creed (“the Great Secret of Life”) that equates all intercourse with rape — perhaps we ought to take him at his word. Insofar as he has thought the matter through, in his utopia sexual intercourse will be limited to “whoremongers” trafficking with “whores.” (L, p. 179) What motivates Lance to adopt such a desperately impractical creed, one so much more restrictive than the Southern tradition demands, is a radical demand for clarity. By virtue of his long episode of Dionysian abandon, and the loss of self that entailed, Lance feels his very identity assailed by the elision of distinctions — social, moral, sexual, personal — and will go to any lengths to preserve them.49 The nuanced


49René Girard traces the social origins of sacrificial violence to the anxiety attendant upon the breakdown of firm distinctions among people. It is not surprising that the same dynamic might apply within the psyche as well. Cf. Violence and the Sacred, Patrick Gregory tr. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1977), p. 51.
Catholic doctrine on sexuality strikes him as particularly appalling, for its casuistic attention to context, intention, and subjective responsibility: "I won’t have it your way with your God-bless-everything-because-it’s-good-only-don’t-but if you-do-it’s-not-so-bad. Just say whether a sweet hot cunt is good or not." (L, p. 177)

Of course, such an inquiry makes no more sense to Fr. Percival than would the question of whether a shiny new Bowie knife is good or not — without any information on what Lance planned to do with it. (In the event, Lance makes good use of neither.) Lance is bright enough that he should be able to understand that his demand is impossible to satisfy; however, he has so overthrown the primacy of reason — long years before, perhaps in disgust at his father’s intellectual dilettantism — that he is not habituated to its use. Many of the objections he raises to Christianity (and even to liberal modernity, which is finally impossible to defend) are susceptible to rational response and debate — but Lance is far beyond listening to any such thing. He has radically collapsed the levels of his own soul as described in D’Arcy’s schema, until his animus is a truncated vestige of the great, speculative masculine selves with whom he identifies. Simpson points out this internal collapse:

[Although he dreams of the campaigns of the noble stoic Emperor Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Lancelot is a vividly degraded Stoic. Essentially he knows only the godhead of Twitch. Having undergone no spiritual metamorphosis like Jack Burden, he has simply returned eastward bearing the .44 of the Los Angeles private dick instead of the six-shooter of the cowboy.]

Since Lance has eschewed the use of a reason that might liberate him from Twitch — by Platonic speculation on the nous, or by leading him to embrace the anima in an act of faith — he has in fact constructed his identity on the shaky foundation of sheer will. While in its highest moments of hubris, this will expresses itself as a world-shattering rebellion against the Creator, in cold fact it is little more than a petulant.

---

50Simpson, “Home By Way of California,” p. 68.
futile resistance (such as Paglia celebrates) to nature itself, which Lance has defined as an omnivorous, omnipotent, cannibalistic womb. Lance’s City on a Hill is built on sand, on the brink of the abyss.

Of the three novels we have so far considered, Lancelot contains the fewest overt glimpses of the beatitude that is possible for an alienated man when he makes peace with the feminine. Because the narrative is entirely presented from Lance’s point of view, narrated by him to a (mostly) silent auditor Father John (Percival), our knowledge of the narrative is thoroughly filtered through Lance’s own narrative screen. Being intelligent, articulate and obsessed with his new spiritual vision, Lance weaves this screen tightly — as if an internal propaganda ministry were already censoring his broadcasts.51 Because his vision of the anima is so impoverished, Lance is virtually unable to offer us a glimpse of that beatitude which the young Will Barrett sought, which Binx Bolling characterized as

a place of quiet breathing and a deep sleep under the stars and next to the sweet earth. (M, p. 72)

Lance’s experience of the anima has been of engulfment, a Dionysian descent into the immanent during which his personality was nearly extinguished; it is unlikely that his carefully-constructed narrative should provide many glimpses into the healthier vision of the anima that Percy himself struggled to regain in the course of this troubling novel. That being so, it is easy for readers to come away from this novel with the impression that no salvation is possible for Lance (or perhaps for Southern man), that the gnomic series of responses Fr. John (Percival) finally offers at the end of the novel is simply a device, a weak attempt to impose an “open,” hopeful, Percyesque ending on the story of a soul that is closed.

51 Lance Lamar’s messianic self-conception is the most vivid example in all of Percy’s fiction of what Voegelin calls a “Second Reality” (Voegelin, What is History? p. 112 f), a self-consistent ideological construct that largely obscures or distorts the objective order of being.
Certainly, Fr. John does not offer us much to go on, much of a refutation to the dizzying gnostic *summa* to which he has subjected himself. Indeed, the novel ends just as he is about to begin his answer, to start explaining to Lance the “something you think I don’t know” (L, p. 256). Percy leaves us to imagine of what that response would consist, based on our knowledge of Fr. John’s character — gleaned entirely from Lance’s narration. For the reader, it is not enough simply to examine the deficiencies in Lance’s world view and character to determine what he needs to hear, then assume that this is what Fr. John will offer him. It is perfectly possible that the priest might (like Will Barrett) miss the point, or share some of Lance’s own blind spots, or prove as unpersuasive as the inarticulate Jesuit Ignatius Vogle in Flannery O’Connor’s “The Enduring Chill.”

Rather, we must briefly explore Fr. John’s character as Lance presents him to us throughout the narrative, to determine whether or not he is likely to offer Lance the sort of insights about the feminine that could help him correct his jaundiced vision — whether, indeed, Fr. John is any closer to an understanding of the anima than Lance.

I suggest he is, that Fr. John does indeed offer a glimpse into the anima, which if Lance were to pursue he might follow to the very edge of beatitude (then with the help of Grace, beyond). In his role within the text, that of a (virtually) silent auditor, offering support, implicit criticism, empathy and intuitive wisdom, Fr. John seems to be a practitioner of *intellectus*, the mode of knowing traditionally regarded as feminine. This mode depends more on the creation of a ground of connaturality with the object to be known than on the icy objectivity of Cartesian reason — which is one reason why Lance is so impatient with it. Thus, Fr. John tries to understand Lance’s sin by listening to his story, and sharing in his feelings; when Lance investigates sin,

---

52Stern, p. 42.
he does so with hidden cameras, and his results resemble the findings of a particle accelerometer.

Over and over again throughout the novel, Lance demands of Fr. John that the priest reduce his thought to sharp, rigid dichotomies, and complains bitterly when his demand is refused or disarmed:

You know the main difference between you and me? With you everything seems to get dissolved in a kind of sorrowful solution. Poor weak mankind! The trouble is that in your old tolerant Catholic world-weariness you lose all distinctions. Love everything. Yes, but at midnight all cats are black, so what difference does anything make? (L, pp. 130—131)

This demand for absolute difference, for the discovery of radically incompatible polar oppositions (good/evil, male/female, etc.) in every aspect of human life is Lance's defense against the melting and dissolution of his identity that he experienced in his Dionysian, alcoholic past. If Lance has reacted against the perceived tyranny of the anima by turning wholly against it, Fr. Percival has assimilated it as a normal element within his soul. While Lance constantly demands distinctions, Fr. John responds by asking him repeatedly about love, the principle of unity. (Of course, such questions leave Lance puzzled.)

The priest's very presence in the unrewarding environment of Lance's cell suggests that he is capable of profound empathy and charity. He responds humbly to Lance's dark suggestions that he may be troubled by sexual or romantic yearnings. Clearly, he has not transcended the human condition, by overcoming the regular friction between animus and anima that troubles the most balanced of souls. Equally, he has never descended into the depths of self-obliteration which Lance plumbed while under the spell of the bottle, nor has he felt the need to reject the anima in order to preserve his identity. For all that he seems a little melancholy, Fr. John appears to be a fairly healthy, balanced individual.
This is all the more surprising, given that "Percival" used to frequent whorehouses — indeed he was "only happy in whorehouses" — the site where the feminine appears most clearly as pure object, absolutely Other. What are we to make of this? Perhaps that in his youth "Percival" felt as alienated from the anima as every other Percy hero, and sought out some form of non-threatening connection with it. What allowed him to grow spiritually, to move from a state where he sought sex without intimacy, to one where he can attain intimacy without sex? We don't know very much about "Percival," but Lance does suggest that he was a young man given to sudden "leaps" — into rivers, into decisions, etc. — someone for whom the "leap of faith" and even the "leapfrogging" from unbeliever to missionary priest would not be uncharacteristic. What Lance misses in his description of his friend is the gift of self that Fr. John's willingness to leap entailed. Whereas Lance assumes that it must be — like "Percival's" fondness for Verlaine — "a bit of an act," a gesture made partly to impress onlookers, we see that there is something deeper going on. Fr. John would not have travelled to Africa, and certainly would not endure Lance's abusive tirade, if he had not assimilated the principle of Christian charity that calls for self-sacrifice. This is the level on which D'Arcy's Dionysian principle of self-immolation (so often distorted by Romantic writers) receives its baptism, and becomes a mode of sanctification.

The whorehouse trips that Lance recalls taking with "Percival" also offer us insights about the relationship between the friends:

Did it ever occur to you [asks Lance] that after we went to college we never touched each other. Do you remember walking down Bourbon Street behind two Russian soldiers who were holding hands? Do you remember sleeping in a motel bed in Jackson, Mississippi, with a whore between us? Why was it all right for us to simultaneously assault the poor whore between us but never once touch each other? (L, p. 94)
Of course, there is some homosexual suggestion in this passage, where the female body appears as a matrix of connection between two males who seem to desire intimacy with each other. Such suggestions on Lance’s part occur elsewhere in the novel, as in the repeated allusions to the poet Verlaine. However, in line with the inverse-Freudianism that Percy employed, let me suggest that here the sexual dimension mainly stands in for something else. Trapped in the isolation of the Stoic self, the young Lance could not conceive of real intimacy with a woman, nor of physical affection (however muted) with a man. Thus, the two dimensions on which connection with another person are possible appear as irreconcilable to Lance; in fact, the prohibition against acknowledging female subjectivity turns out to be more powerful than the cultural prohibition of homosexuality — hence his “understanding” of his son’s sexuality. Literal buggery is more tolerable to Lance than the figurative buggery enacted by modern society, in its blurring of absolute sexual and moral distinctions.

In this passage, we see that “Percival” does indeed represent for Lance a figure of the feminine, an Other with whom empathy and intersubjectivity are possible, and from whom he may accept these without shame or the threat of engulfment. Shelley Jackson suggests that Fr. John serves Lance as a maternal figure, offering him the nurturance and understanding he needs in a form that he can feel safe accepting. Certainly, Fr. John’s repeated affirmations at the end (“Yes,” he says, over and over again) mirror the “fiat” attributed to the Blessed Virgin at the Annunciation — that exemplary moment of feminine virtue responding perfectly to the overtures of transcendent Grace. As both a man and (now) a celibate, Fr. John is doubly free of the taint of female sexual energy that Lance finds so threatening — and hence he is an

53 It is no accident that one of the nicknames for Percival that Lance remembers is ‘Pussy.’ (L, p. 10)
acceptable audience before whom Lance can perform, a sort of Virgin with a few attributes of St. Michael.

But the connection Lance forges with Fr. John is of limited depth and duration. Lance still feels both sexual desire and — more strongly — the heroic imperative to establish a familial household as the core element in the new order he intends to found. Therefore, he turns to Anna for companionship in his strange new endeavors, and decides that he will go off and live with her. The perversity of his intentions towards Anna leaves the reader (and Fr. John) feeling uneasy about his plan, hoping that whatever Fr. John has to say will make some impression on him before the officials unleash him on society. But one is not optimistic about this prospect.

It is a sign of the profound personal struggle this novel represented for Percy that in his next work, *The Second Coming*, he was able to present the feminine not in the form of an androgynous, dying adolescent boy or a celibate priest, but as a young, physically vigorous woman with real sexual desire and a sharply intellectual subjectivity. Having worked through the most vicious truncations of the feminine at the hands of Lance, Percy was apparently able to conquer many of the Stoic/heroic expectations that had previously held him back. It is to this work that we now turn.
Chapter Five: *The Second Coming — The Ecstasy in the Garden*

In Percy's fifth novel, the last that I will treat in the present study, we see the author striving to present for the first time in his fiction a clear, affirmative vision of what it would mean for a male character to accept and embrace the anima in all its complexity, and assimilate its contents as part of his own psyche — rather than as the unnameable, threatening or desirable Other. Conversely, we see here for the only time in Percy's work a female figure who becomes the center of consciousness for much of the novel. Many have agreed with Percy's estimation that Allie is his most completely satisfactory woman; certainly she is the most fleshed-out, fully dimensional feminine character to inhabit his work. Remembering what we established in Chapter One — that the minor characters in Percy's novels (and thus most of the females) serve mainly to mirror aspects of the protagonist's soul — we can see why it was artistically necessary for Percy to create Allie in such rich detail. If he wished to depict a man who has come to be "un-alienated" — who has reconciled the gnostic spirit of negation with his thirst for a place where he can be at home in the world and "coincide with himself" — Percy needed a female love interest who could lead the hero in that direction. Will Barrett's second story required a female *protagonist*, one who could serve as more than a weak or troubled dependent (like Kate in *The Moviegoer*, Lucy and Anna in *Lancelot*), a giggling cipher (like Kitty in *The Last Gentleman* and Moira in *Love in the Ruins*), or an embodiment of phony Southern tradition and sensuality (like Lola in *Love in the Ruins* and Margot in *Lancelot*).

In the course of this novel, as I will demonstrate, Will Barrett for the first time becomes reconciled to his status as a creature, a spirit incarnate in flesh. Consequently, the woman whom he comes to love (in an allegory of that reconciliation) must herself be balanced, intelligent and open to transcendence. Were she any less worthy, she would inspire in Will neither love nor learning, and he would go right on his
melancholy dualistic way—looking to her for fulfillment of his emotional and sensual needs, even as he despised her for weighing down his transcendent, masculine spirit. He would end like his father, or Lance Lamar, or at best Sutter Vaught.

More clearly than in any of Percy's other novels, *The Second Coming* demonstrates the spiritual importance of the anima, conceived of at its highest level (especially in Catholic Marian theology) as the receptive, life-giving power of the creature to respond positively to the Creator and to imbue the world of the flesh with meaning and value. In joining himself to Allie, Will does not risk the fate so dreaded by men in the heroic and Pierrotic traditions—the obliteration of his rationality, will and liberty. Rather, Will finds in Allie a powerful and positive counterbalance to the force of negation that unchecked animus has become in his soul, thanks to the materialist, Stoic heritage transmitted to Will from his father. Will sees in Allie a feminine sexual power that is not inimical but complementary to his spiritual aspirations, and that leads him at last to renounce the opposition between animus and anima, spirit and flesh, that has troubled him since his motherless infancy. He learns at last to see in eros a positive sign of agape.

For her part, Allie is not a figure of archetypal, “pure” femininity, nor a caricature of exaggerated, socially-constructed feminine traits. Rather, she is a three-dimensional character, a person with spiritual aspirations, a speculative rationality and a skeptical turn of mind. Oleksy suggests that we ought to see in her a reincarnation of the various mute or silent female characters who recur in Percy's fiction, whom male protagonists attempt to awaken into speech. If so, then Allie takes their stories to the next logical step, depicting what would happen if one of these women should talk back and extend the conversation into an ongoing exchange between equals. Oleksy gives this characteristic of Allie's a feminist interpretation—tying her rediscovery of

---

1Kreyling, p. 125 ff. As we saw in Chapter Four above, this is the fate to which Lance Lamar succumbed during his marriage to Margot.
language to the endeavor of "reinventing the world of knowledge, of symbols, of images" to accord with the aspirations to power of certain politicized women of the left.2

While this is on the surface a plausible interpretation, it seems to me an impoverishing one. Allie's recovery of speech resonates on many more levels than the political, as we see when we consider the role of language in the body of Percy's work. He believes — and tries mightily to prove in *The Message in the Bottle* and *Lost in the Cosmos* — that man's power to convey meaning through language is in itself the sign that marks the species apart from the mute world of nature, of mechanistic ("dyadic") energy exchanges. The "triadic" nature of human communication differentiates his symbol-mongering from the signal-transmission of chimps, birds and bees — and serves both to constitute his kinship to the transcendent God and to threaten him with alienation from himself. This "delta factor" makes it impossible for him ever entirely to "coincide with himself" in the manner of a cat, or to be satisfied with the satisfaction of his needs. Man must always look beyond himself, whether drawn by glimmers of the infinite or — more likely, for Percy — goaded by a sense that this world is "farcical," devoid of self-sufficient meaning, which can only come from elsewhere, from above.

The quest for transcendence on which Percy's characters find themselves, all unwilling, can take wholesome and unwholesome forms, as we have seen throughout his novels — resulting in everything from the heroic good works of Val Vaught to the angelism/bestialism of her brother Sutter and the Stoic nihilism of Ed Barrett. It is a quest that each of Percy's heroes and anti-heroes undertakes, and that most of his minor characters evade. Because the quest is a source of terrible anxiety and danger, the temptation is strong to avoid it, to pretend that the satisfaction of immanent needs

2Oleksy, p. 64.
(perhaps laid over with a veneer of religious practice or rhetoric) will suffice to quell the troubled human heart. As I noted in Chapter Four, such intellectually dishonest stratagems rarely fool the skeptical Percy protagonist for long; from Kate Cutrer to Sutter Vaught, their keen sense of smell detects such "merde" with ease. Frequently, they experience a sense of suffocation or terror when someone proselytizes them on behalf of such a world view; above, I used the term "spiritual castration" to describe this phenomenon, in which a putative authority figure attempts to sever the protagonist's access to the divine Masculine.

In *The Second Coming*, Allie is threatened with this fate, as authority figures (from Daddy to Sarge to Kitty Vaught and Dr. Duk) try to mold her into social roles for which she is ill-suited, threatening to explode her fragile identity into a "red giant," (SC, p. 90) a hollow shell that is defined only by external boundaries. In D'Arcy's terms, we might say that in Allie the anima has become distorted and domineering, and if unchecked will dissolve her vital core of selfhood into a Dionysian sea of otherness — other people's expectations, commands and definitions. To avoid this fate, Allie has turned in on herself, in search of the core (or animus) where self-interest, rational analysis and independent adulthood reside. Alas, to her parents this withdrawal seems like nothing but the final stage of a suicidal depression, and Allie is hospitalized and subjected to electroshock therapy in an effort to drive her back out into the world. Allie herself diagnoses the flaw in this treatment option:

I have to go down first. You're trying to keep me up.
Down?
I have to go down down down before I go up. Down down in me to it. You shouldn't try to keep me up by buzzing me up. ... I need to go down to my white dwarf....
A red giant collapses into a white dwarf. Hard and bright as a diamond. That's what I was trying to do when my mother found me in the closet going down to my white dwarf. (SC, p. 90)
Because she resists her parents’ and her doctor’s attempts to dissolve her individuality, making a key distinction between “the meow I and the inside deep-I-defy,” (SC, p. 89) Allie qualifies as an authentic existential hero, of the sort Percy admired in the works of Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Camus. Not so much by a conscious act of rebellion as out of necessity, in order to survive, Allie reinvents herself after her escape from the hospital, using the vital medium of writing to inscribe “INSTRUCTIONS FROM MYSELF TO MYSELF” (SC, p. 27) On a practical level, these journal entries are a means to evade the amnesia induced by electroshock therapy. Viewed figuratively, they represent Allie’s rational core (animus) attempting to impose order on her anima, the part of her most subject to manipulation and external control. We might say that the masculine elements in her soul are awakening, in order to define and defend reasonable limits between her will and what others have imposed upon her, between her identity and the social pressures that have threatened it. The woman who emerges from the awakening will be, for all her eccentricities and weaknesses, a fully-grown adult whose penetrating mind can see through social pretensions and linguistic frauds. It is precisely this quality of mind that Will celebrates late in the novel when he tells Allie: “You’re Sutter turned happy!” (SC, p. 263) To be more specific, we see in Allie someone who has assimilated the skeptical/Stoic/existentialist critique of society and convention, the ascetic search for authentic selfhood, without coming to the corrosive conclusions embraced by Sutter Vaught and other failed seekers, from Aunt Emily to Ed Barrett.

What has made the difference in Allie’s case? What allows her to reject mother and father, go forth into the wilderness, and reinvent language from scratch — without falling victim to the utopian fantasies of a Lance Lamar, the contemptuous despair of her uncle Sutter? Put briefly, the answer is: humility. Fully aware that she is wounded (fallen), Allie is unafraid to rethink her hesitant conclusions about the mysterious world of language and other language-users that she has re-entered,
unashamed finally to ask Will to “be my guardian.” (SC, p. 263) Unlike Sutter—who has embraced cynicism as a persona and a vocation, a shield that renders him invulnerable—Allie is willing cautiously to climb beyond the restrictions of her (reinvigorated) animus, to extend herself through the mystery of love to another wounded soul. Before she can do that, however, she must clearly demarcate for herself what her independent abilities are, what she wants from the world, which of its values are fraudulent and which legitimate. Only then, once her task of individuation is complete, can she enter an interdependent relationship whose complementary nature mirrors the balance within her newly ordered soul.

As Oleksy points out, Allie Huger is the culmination of a series of wounded, inarticulate or mute female characters who appear in most of Percy’s novels (such as Kate Cutrer, Lancelot’s Anna, the mute girl in The Last Gentleman and several women patients in The Thanatos Syndrome). Oleksy suggests that these figures “bring to mind what recent feminist criticism has to say on the subject of the repression of femininity.”3 I propose that the converse is true; that these women have indeed suffered repression, but it is the masculine aspects of their souls that have been stunted or thwarted by violence or disability—the verbal, self-assertive, analytical self,4 the animus. For a philosophical author such as Percy who makes language the key to his anthropology, the loss of verbal power is a vivid emblem of dehumanization and suffering—equal in seriousness to the suicidal fantasies that haunt most of his male protagonists. (It is no accident that so autobiographical an author draws upon his daughter’s deafness and his father’s suicide for the two central icons of pathos in his fiction.)

3Oleksy, p. 62.
4Here I use “analytical” as the converse of “synthetic,” to distinguish two modes of reasoning; see the distinction between intellectus and ratio articulated in Chapter One and in Stern, p. 53 ff.
In fact, the figure of a silenced woman — a human being cut off from half of her self — is the mirror image of the suffering Percy hero. For he is alienated by a Manichaean heritage from the world of nature, the body, knowledge by synthesis (intellectus), and all the other powers of the anima — a debility at least as serious as muteness, indeed often fatal. To achieve salvation, or at least its earthly analogue, Percy’s male character must overcome this spiritual imbalance and learn to see the positive value in the anima, the feminine. Similarly, Percy’s mute or wounded woman must awaken into the world of language, the human power that (Percy holds) raises man above the animals and marks him with a transcendent destiny.

In each of Percy’s novels before The Second Coming, this process of mutual salvation was imperfect, incomplete or aborted. This fact is clearest in Lancelot, Percy’s most Jungian novel; in it, the overly articulate and violently dualistic Lance thinks he has found a lifemate in Anna, who has been raped into silence and sexual passivity (“a kind of virginity”). Rather than seeking someone who can both represent the feminine and awaken its power within him — and thereby re-connect his sundered self — Lance has sought instead a passive icon of “pure” femininity, who can assist him in living out a fantasy of “pure” masculinity that amounts at last to demonism. While Lance learns in the course of the novel that there is a certain value to the feminine, he never learns to consider it as a part of his own soul, something that prepares him for union with other people and with God. Consequently, when Anna begins again to speak, she disappoints Lance’s fantasies and deflates them with a cutting remark that indicates how futile his dreams of political and sexual utopia have been. She is not “pure” femininity, but a human being, an amalgam of animus and anima; by implication, so is Lance. His desire to become purely masculine is thereby unmasked as the ambition to become a god, who creates and dominates his own
universe. Lance suffers from an extreme form of the gnostic impulse, about which Voegelin and Finlay write.⁵

Only in *The Second Coming* does Percy find the means to represent both aspects of the struggle for wholeness, that of the silenced woman as well as that of the alienated man, which is perhaps why many readers find it so uplifting. In depicting both poles of human alienation, and attempting to reconcile them within the space of a contemporary novel, Percy undertook his most ambitious literary project; this is perhaps why so many critics were disappointed. Without attempting to decide how artistically successful was the result, I hope to demonstrate in this chapter that *The Second Coming* does resolve many of the tensions and answer many of the questions raised by earlier Percy novels, and that his use of masculine and feminine imagery to represent principles within the human soul is more sophisticated here than in his previous novels. Consequently, the theological allegory is clearer, and the novel’s affirmation of a sacramental world view more resounding.

The split that divides Percy’s characters has always been connected, causally or symbolically, with violence. In *The Moviegoer*, the Stoic refusal to partake in the world of creatures is represented by a tiny sword in Aunt Emily’s hands, and enacted in the suicidal heroism that drove Binx’s father to die in the “wine dark sea.” In *The Last Gentleman*, young Will’s sexual confusion (most vividly experienced as he seeks out Kitty in Central Park) recalls for him Ed Barrett’s rigid sexual mores — and the night of his suicide. Without going into all the real and sublimated violence that marks Lance Lamar’s relations with women, one need only point to Anna, who has been deprived by an act of hideous violence of both speech and sanity. (The correlation between self-division and violence can be seen in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, as well.)

---

⁵Voegelin, *New Science*, p. 124; Finlay, p. 17.
In *The Second Coming*, violence is the continuing metaphor for this self-division, the means by which it is perpetuated, and finally, we will see, the means by which it is overcome. Violence — imposed from outside, or contemplated against oneself — dominates this story of a boy who was traumatized by his father's attempt to murder him, and a girl whose very ego has been almost erased through electroshock (with her parents' approval). Each character has suffered from the abuse of parental authority, and each has been violated and split off from vital internal resources, without which he (she) will languish and perhaps perish. Beginning the story at opposite poles, so to speak — one of them alienated from anima, the other from animus — they are drawn together by their complementary quests for completion. As each explores the extent and nature of the mysterious lack that troubles him (her), their mutual attraction deepens, and when force of circumstances drives them together, their union is hardly surprising to the reader. What I will explore in the remainder of this chapter is the nature of the *lack* that each feels, viewed psychologically and metaphysically; the process of discovery by which it is unveiled and addressed; and the theological allegory that underlies their mutual redemption.

The presence of violence and suffering, and their meaning within the moral universe of the novel, are key to the proper understanding of this story. Susan Derwin suggests, in her ingenious deconstructive reading of the novel, that the very nature and limitations of human language dictate that attempts to represent the self linguistically — to "name" it, in Percy's terms — must entail an act of violence, the brutal suppression of that part of the self that resists or refuses representation. In this light that interprets Will Barrett's memory of his father's suicide/murder attempt, and virtually every other act of violence in the story; for her, these acts are Percy's attempt to portray the ambivalence inherent in the use of language and in self-representation. Here is how she allegorizes Ed Barrett's suicide, and its meaning for his son:
The "unspeakable" process of naming is here taken back into the mouth in the form of the gun. The method of the father’s suicide dramatizes the interrelation of death and the constitution of the self: the orality of taking a double-barrel gun into the mouth reflects both the desire to reincorporate the lost part of the self that has been split through the creation of identity, to take it back into oneself, and the sado-masochistic aggressivity of the self vis-à-vis its expropriated other, which is stimulated by the need to keep the other out of bounds of the self.

Neither the phallocentricity of the suicide nor its ambivalence can be assimilated to distinctions of gender. Rather, the act of naming, to which both sexes are subject, is itself gendered. Both Will and Allie react against this phallocentricity.6

Derwin disputes the conventional reading of the novel as a redemptive tale of the rediscovery of language and the renunciation of death, pointing to the lingering images of violence that haunt the novel even after Will’s supposed conversion, and the inevitable violence that (for her) attends the use of language. The only redemption that occurs in the novel on her reading results from the skepticism towards language and naming that Allie acquires and passes along to Will (and presumably to the reader).

While I must dispute her conclusion — that is a direct result of her (apparently Lacanian) definition of language — Derwin’s essay offers important insights for the more “orthodox” reading that I am attempting here. According to Percy’s own theory of language — explicated in various essays, most exhaustively in Lost in the Cosmos — the fundamental anxiety and unhappiness that pervade human life derive from the unique problems created by a linguistic attempt to “name” the self, or “place” it “within a world.” (LC, p. 110) While he often celebrates the power of language to generate meaning and create communion between selves, (MB, p. 45) Percy also locates in man’s linguistic nature the root of his discontent:

The self in a world is rich or poor accordingly as it succeeds in identifying its otherwise unspeakable self, e.g. mythically, by identifying itself with a world-sign, such as

a totem; religiously, by identifying itself as a creature of God....

In a post-religious age the only recourses of the self are self as transcendent and self as immanent. (*LC*, p. 122)

While here Percy emphasizes the increase in human alienation caused by recent intellectual history — the arrival of a “post-religious age” — in other passages he makes it clear that this problem is perennial, rooted in man’s very (fallen) nature:

> The exile from Eden is, semiotically, the banishment of the self-conscious self from its own world of signs. ...

> The semiotic history of this creature thereafter could be written in terms of the successive attempts, both heroic and absurd, of the signifying creature to escape its nakedness and to find a permanent semiotic habilment for itself — often by identifying itself with other creatures in its world. (*LC*, p. 109)

This option of identification with creatures of a lesser dignity than man (birds, animals, nations), Percy calls “totemism.” In D’Arcy’s terms, this interpretation of the self assimilates the whole person to the anima, and seeks to extinguish the (transcendent) spark of human individuality in the mass of (immanent) nature or culture. Percy distinguishes primitive totemisms from modern attempts to construe the “self as immanent” by pointing out that the latter mode is certified by a “lay reading” of the results of science, an easy assumption on the part of educated, modern people that reductionist theories of man have been “proven” by experiment, and the claims of Jewish-Christian anthropology disproved.⁷ This second-hand science entails in the lay reader

> a perceived loss of sovereignty to “them,” the transcending scientists and experts of society. As a consequence, the self sees its only recourse as an endless round of work, diversion, and consumption of goods and services. Failing this and having some inkling of its plight, it sees no way out because it has come to see itself as an organism in an environment and so can’t understand why it feels so

⁷Tolson documents Percy’s own youthful flirtation with this point of view, especially as summed up by H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley in their catechism of scientism, *The Science of Life*. In his search for certainty amidst a chaotic family life, Percy turned to the apparent certainties of progress, rationality and positivism. Cf. Tolson, pp. 96-97. For a fictional parallel, see Jack Burden’s brief devotion to the “God of the Great Twitch” in *All the King’s Men*.
bad in the best of all possible environments. \textit{(LC, pp. 123-124)}

The other option Percy specifies, to view the self as transcendent by identifying it exclusively with the animus, I have discussed in detail in previous chapters, with attention to characters' attempts to deny their status as creatures and \textit{deify themselves} through gnostic or Stoic speculation, or Cartesian abstraction.

Over and over again in his novels Percy has depicted the plight of these would-be transcenders; only in \textit{The Second Coming} does he explore the inner world of one of the transcended. Wounded and hampered by the rigid social demands imposed upon her, by parents and lovers who have educated her to remain within the narrow boundaries of immanent, consumerist existence, Allie comes to realize that throughout her previous life "I was following instructions." \textit{(SC, p. 40)} Her decision to escape from the asylum results from an \textit{awakening} experience, which she recalls in an internal dialogue between animus and anima:

\textit{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? ... What was my (your, our) discovery? That I could act. I was free to act.}

This awakening from the sphere of pure immanence — of the self anesthetize, functioning not as a self in a world but as an organism in an environment — parallels closely the "discovery" Lance Lamar makes after discovering his wife's adultery. \textit{(L, p. 65)} Like Lance, Allie compares herself to Rip Van Winkle, \textit{(SC, p. 25)} and goes off to groom herself, to cut away the dross of the immanent past in preparing for a future in which transcendence will be possible again.

But such parallels are imperfect, and these two characters will awaken to very different versions of transcendence. First, Lance was himself responsible for his anesthetize condition, having drunk himself into oblivion; Allie was largely the victim of bad parents and inappropriate therapy. Whereas Lance responds to his "discovery" by retreating into his pigeonnaire to research the nature of evil through hidden cameras
and spying, Allie ventures forth into the world of other people, seeing them afresh with the curiosity of a highly intelligent child. If Lance retires to his bath to shave alone and brood on his own naked image in the mirror, Allie goes cheerfully to a hair salon to have her locks clipped by a friendly beautician. At the end of his story, Lance Lamar creates an infernal hearth, tapping into the deadly, explosive gas that lies under his house in order to blow the place sky-high; in her story, Allie transports and rebuilds a functioning hearth, and taps into the "cave air" that arises in her own ruined house, which she can use to grow orchids (those emblems of the feminine that disturbed Lance so much).

Even as she develops her internal resources, especially that animus that is essential to individual autonomy, Allie never turns away from the world of others. While Lance creates for himself a long heritage of heroes who became leaders, and dreams of a future in which he can command followers to recreate a world in accord with his demands, Allie seeks to establish her own independent existence and psychic identity so that she may interact with other people without being dominated by them. In the end, whereas Lance Lamar wishes to transcend his condition as a creature, Allie looks only to locate that part of herself that is free, which transcends explanation (and manipulation) by parent or doctor.

In this contrast lies the key to interpreting so many of Percy's characters — and perhaps the author himself. Each of his heroes, to one degree or another, is troubled by the modern, mechanistic views of man (from Hegel right on through Marx, Freud and Skinner) that threaten to reduce individuals to ciphers, predictable units devoid of free will, operating according to immutable laws. Percy characters who rebel against such schemes usually do so by adopting an arc of transcendence that exempts them from the general deterministic system. So the Stoicism of Aunt Emily, the scientism of young Will Barrett and Dr. Tom More, and the gnostic demonism of Lance Lamar. Each adopted world-view represents an attempted avenue of escape, of self-delivery
(or auto-salvation) from the world of meaningless immanence. If these escape attempts do not end in suicide or murder, they frequently involve violence of some kind, as characters attempt to demonstrate their freedom by refusing to take the path of rational self-interest, choosing like Dostoevsky’s Underground Man to thwart determinism by behaving irrationally. (At best, the violence they entail is internal, and amounts to the brutal suppression of aspects of the self, something of which Derwin spoke more sweepingly, e.g., Aunt Emily’s stern self-discipline.)

The problem with these attempts from an orthodox Christian point of view is that they are self-driven and ultimately self-centered. Rather than representing an openness to the Grace that alone makes virtuous actions and salvation possible (in both Catholic and Protestant theology), these schemes represent attempts by immanent beings to create transcendence from their own resources — a quest doomed to futility, absent an intervening miracle.

Arguably, that is what many of Percy’s characters are looking for: Sutter in the desert with Jamie and the emptied water bottles; Ed Barrett attempting a murder/suicide that does not come off; finally, Will Barrett descending into the bowels of the earth to demand (!) that God give him a sign of His existence. In none of these cases does the character receive a sign he can recognize as miraculous — yet in each instance, there is something mysterious that could point to Divine intervention. Neither Sutter nor Ed Barrett interprets the events in that light, and each one goes still further into his despair. Will Barrett, alone of Percy’s unbelieving characters, moves within the space of the novel from a gnostic to an orthodox Christian position — and key to his conversion is a sequence of events that can arguably be called miraculous.

---

In going down into the cave to await a sign from God, Will attempts to place himself in the prophetic tradition of the Old and New Testaments, using language that recalls the experiences of Isaiah and St. John the Baptist, among others: “My experiment is simply this: I shall go to a desert place and wait for God to give me a sign.” (SC, p. 193)

Interestingly, Will does not in fact go into a desert (as Sutter did) but rather makes a descent into the underworld, a trip that echoes the Western epic tradition. For Orpheus, Odysseus, Aeneas, Dante and Jesus (the primary type of the hero for two millennia9) a trip into the world of shadows inhabited by monsters and unredeemed souls was a key element in the story of their triumph over the forces of darkness and death. At the same time, Will Barrett’s trip partakes of the modern scientific spirit; like every good empirical scientist since the Renaissance, Will seeks empirical evidence obtained by experiment that can guarantee the veracity of his results, without the need for Faith. Witness his own words:

If no sign is forthcoming I shall die. But people will know why I died: because there is no sign. The cause of my death will be either his nonexistence or his refusal to manifest himself, which comes to the same thing as far as we are concerned. Only you [Sutter] know the nature of the experiment. I give you permission to publish the results in a scientific journal of your choice. (SC, p. 193)

The Faustian nature of Will’s endeavor becomes all the clearer from the Cartesian language he uses to describe it:

My project is the first scientific experiment in history to settle once and for all the question of God’s existence. ... We have had five thousand years of maybes and that is enough. Can you find a single flaw in this logic?
I’ve got him!
No more tricks!
No more deus absconditus!
No, I do not mean to joke. What I am doing is asking God with the utmost respect to break his silence.
No, not asking. Requiring. (SC, p. 192)

9Kreyling, p. 4.
By looking for religious truth in this manner, Will reveals that his attitude towards transcendence is gnostic, according to the textbook description given by Voegelin, which I cited above in Chapter One. It is worth recalling here:

The attempt at immanentizing the meaning of existence is fundamentally an attempt at bringing our knowledge of transcendence into a firmer grip than the cognition of faith, will afford; and Gnostic experiences offer this firmer grip in so far as they are an expansion of the soul to the point where God is drawn into the existence of man.¹⁰

Thus in attempting to compel God to answer, to offer a positive revelation of His existence, Will Barrett brings together all the masculine types that we have found throughout Percy’s previous novels: most prominently the Southern Stoic hero and the Cartesian scientist. Combining these two types and bringing their hubris into desperately sharp focus as he stakes his very life on this mad experiment, Will Barrett fancies himself fulfilling a third type, that of a prophet who will (even in death) proclaim the truth or falsity of God. In the event, Will does not fulfill any of the expectations created by these types. Receiving no public revelation, Will cannot imagine himself a prophet who will answer the religious doubts of others. Unlike the Southern Stoic hero, he does not through his force of will energize a community to restore the social order, or the Faith that undergirded it; he simply undertakes a solitary misadventure. Will’s sole contact with the Southern tradition in the cave comes through the traces of a Confederate sniper that he finds (or imagines) in the cave, traces that are mute and meaningless. His scientific quest fails, because the sign he receives from God, if it is a sign, is merely a toothache— an event capable of a purely natural explanation. (Hardly likely convince to unbelievers of God’s existence, this sign would not pass muster with the religious authorities at Lourdes.) Descartes would not be satisfied.

Will Barrett, however, does not opt out of the entire masculine tradition, rejecting heroic conventions and pretensions to transcendent meaning in favor of a feminist pantheism. Far from it. Percy goes out of his way to ridicule believers in such systems ("Californians" according to his shorthand), particularly in his treatment of Kitty and her absurd notions about reincarnation. Given Percy's ongoing preoccupation (especially in Lost in the Cosmos and The Thanatos Syndrome) with defending the transcendent dignity and destiny of man — and Percy's respect for objective science — it is hardly likely that he would have seen salvation as lying in an immanentist "Goddess" theology that minimizes man's distinctness from and dominion over nature.

As Kreyling points out, Will Barrett, like Percy's other heroes, still partakes in the broader tradition of the Western epic:

Walker Percy’s fiction seeks to reimplant the hero at the center of a world order, revoke the feeling of being extraneous that has hampered him, and assert his necessity once again.\textsuperscript{11}

As we see at the end of the novel, when Will organizes a group of patients from his deceased wife's nursing home to resume productive activity, after rescuing Allie from the schemes of parent and psychiatrist, he undertakes precisely this endeavor; he attempts on a small scale to restore a community that has been endangered or destroyed by modern ideologies (in this case reductionist scientism fueled by a paternalist humanism). There is one key difference, one spiritual advance that places the mature Will Barrett on a higher spiritual plane than Lance Lamar, who also hoped to do restore community after a fashion: Will has been transformed in the image of the Western hero after the type of Christ. If Kreyling is right to assert that the figure of Jesus exerted a determinative force on subsequent heroes in the West, it is equally true that

\textsuperscript{11}Kreyling, p. 166.
many later permutations of this figure perverted the meaning of the Incarnation and
Crucifixion. (For instance, in popular Southern usage the theological term
"Redeemer" was used to describe the white aristocrats who defeated Reconstruction
government and brought back white supremacy.) Certainly, we find such perversions
in most of the Southern narratives that Kreyling cites, wherein the hero is primarily
military and authoritarian in his endeavors. For the space of a novel, Will Barrett
brings the Christian, Western hero back to his roots, to the figure of the Suffering
Christ Himself. (SC, p. 236)

While many Percy characters have temporarily overcome the anxiety induced by
transcendence through violence or accidents — see Binx’s foxhole experience, Will
crouching under Ewell McBee’s sniper fire, Sutter with part of his cheek blown off —
Will is the first Percy hero whom one can say is in any sense a Christ-figure. Just as
in previous novels, the characters embodying the feminine tended to reside outside the
protagonist (viz. Anna in Lancelot), so in Percy’s earlier works Christ figures occurred
in the form of young adolescents (Lonnie and Jamie) to whom the protagonist related
as a friend or protector. Their sufferings had religious meaning, to be sure, if one
looked for it, but it was a meaning that Binx and Will were free to miss, since it
resided outside them. In the present novel, the hero himself undergoes a kind of
Passion. The rebirth he experiences under the care of Allie stands as an answer to the
question he posed earlier in the novel:

When [Leslie] was five years old and we were living in
New York, she got hit by a car in Central Park. I thought
she was going to die. She was in great pain. When she lay
in her hospital bed she looked up at me and asked me:
"Why?" "Why what?" I said, but I knew what she meant.
I opened my mouth to say something, but there was
nothing to say except that I didn’t know why and that I
would gladly have given my life to stop her from hurting,

12This is emphatically not to suggest that Will Barrett is a perfect or even particularly likeable
figure; but then, neither was O’Connor’s Misfit.
but she didn’t want to hear that. I gnawed at my arm at the prospect of her suffering. Is that love? (SC, pp. 196-197)

For a Christian, the answer is clearly yes — particularly for a Catholic who believes that the economy of salvation allows for substitutionary suffering by creatures.13 Far from being a meaningless side effect of the mechanistic function of a godless universe — as Percy’s Stoic heroes have believed — suffering can have a profound significance for human life, and not simply under the Classical rubric of pathos that leads to tragic knowledge. Rather, within the Christian scheme to which Percy subscribed, suffering is an essential part of the process of divinization, of the transformation of the individual into an alter Christus, another Christ, through incorporation into the Mystical Body, the Church. Seen in this light, Susan Derwin’s assertions14 about the inherent violence entailed in the creation of the self gain new validity: as she noted, even on the natural level there is always a mortification involved in the creation (or transformation) of a human self.

It seems clear that for Percy, insofar as a self recognizes its transcendent destiny and undertakes to attain it by submitting to Grace, that self must indeed commit violence upon itself.15 It must prune away the tendencies towards spiritual extremity that tempt it away from the middle path, and resist the polarities of “pure” anima or animus, of materialism and gnosticism, cleaving firmly to the embodied transcendence-made-historical that is the Jewish-Christian Revelation. Specifically, Percy’s

---

13 Perhaps the most concise statement of this theological precept can be found in the work of the great English Catholic Fr. Frederick Wilhelm Faber: “The law of the Incarnation is a law of suffering. Our Blessed Lord was the man of sorrows, and by suffering He redeemed the world. His passion was not a mystery detached from the rest of His life, but only the fitting and congruous end of it. Calvary was not unlike Bethlehem and Nazareth. It exceeded them in degree; it did not differ from them in kind. The whole of the Three and Thirty Years was spent in consistent suffering, though it was of various kinds, and was not of uniform intensity. This same law of suffering, which belongs to Jesus, touches all who come nigh Him, and in proportion to their holiness, envelops them, and claims them wholly for itself.” The Foot of the Cross (Rockford, IL: TAN Books, 1978), p. 13.

14 Derwin, p. 80 ff.

15 “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it” (Mark 9: 34-45).
protagonist must emerge from the “wintry kingdom of self” and renounce the lonely Stoic throne (SSL, p. 86); in a world of other people (and finally in a corporate Church) he may work out his salvation — and even find a profitable use for his heroic ambitions. However, this salvation is only possible for the Percy protagonist — burdened as he is with all the hubris of Stoic and Cartesian “transcendence” — if he undergoes a mortification, and a metamorphosis. Insofar as he defines himself according to what I called in Chapters One and Two “the demonic masculine” — the icy Apollonian self of Paglia, Sartre and de Sade — he must “die.” A rebirth is possible — even a resurrection of the hero — but only in the likeness of a very different hero, after the image of Christ.

This mortification and metamorphosis of which I speak begins in the depths of the earth, in the cave. We see the first obscure allusions to this process in the (otherwise puzzling) hallucination sequence. Beside him Will sees an ancient tiger:

As he absently explored the beast, hide now hardened and chitinous as a locust, his hand felt along the spine as if it were looking for the slit where the creature escaped. There was no slit, but the skin had loosened in preparation for the molt… Whatever is here is more than a dying tiger. Yet it is not a tiger giving birth or a tiger molting and being transformed like a cicada. It is the same tiger but different. He watched curiously until he saw the joke. Then he grew sleepy and lay down beside the beast. (SC, p. 222)

This creature “is more than a dying tiger”; indeed, it resonates on a number of levels. First of all, it is a cat, reminding Will of the cat whose comfortable self-identity he envied earlier in the novel:

Sitting there in the sun with its needs satisfied, for whom one place was the same as any other place as long as it was sunny — no nonsense about old haunted patches of weeds in Mississippi or a brand-new life in a brand-new place in Carolina — the cat was exactly a hundred percent cat, no more no less. As for Will Barrett, as for people nowadays — they were never one hundred percent themselves. … There was his diagnosis, then. A person nowadays is two percent himself. And to arrive at a diagnosis is already to have anticipated the cure: how to restore the ninety-eight percent? (SC, p. 16)
Thus a cat for Will is an emblem of organic, non-linguistic creation — man in his animality, a condition in which he cannot remain content because of the upward pull of language. This analysis of the human quandary — whose outline comes from a Sartrean notion of the "self-as-nothingness" (or "suck of Self" in Percy’s language) — typically finds its solution in Percy’s novels through episodes of violence such as Binx’s foxhole epiphany in Korea, young Will’s accident in the art museum, Sutter’s suicide attempts, and (in this novel) Ewell McBee’s sniper attack. As the narrator muses while the bullets fly:

[I]n the next instant he was transformed. It was as if the sting in his calf had been the injection of a powerful drug. Quicker than any drug, in the instant in fact of hearing and recognizing the gunshot, he was, as he expressed it, miraculously restored to himself. The cat of course had jumped four feet straight up and fled in terror, as any sensible animal would, reduced instantly to zero percentile of its well-being. But Barrett? The missing ninety-eight percent is magically restored. (SC, p. 17)

As he lies in the cave growing weaker from hunger, Will again undergoes this restoration, as the narrator notes:

The joke was that for the first time in the history of the universe it was the man who knew who he was, who was as snug as a bug in his rock cocoon, and the beast who did not, who was fretful, unsure of himself and the future, unsure what he was doing here. The tiger asked: Is this the place for me? Will I be happy here? Will the others like me? Will my death be a growth experience?

But how can you be dead and grow? Dead is dead. (SC, p. 222)

The joke here — really a piece of gallows humor on Will’s part — is that he feels he has switched places with the cat, achieved that acceptance of mortality usually attributed to animals even as the animal has acquired all-too-human angst in the face of death (and begins to “speak” like a nervous “Californian”). Will feels “restored” to himself, “snug” in his place, having achieved a kind of “re-entry” through violence from the orbit of transcendence undertaken with his grand, Cartesian experiment. The
immediate proximity of death has restored him (temporarily, as usual) to a comfortable acceptance of his mortal limits and of his implication in the world of the anima.

We might call this dangerous technique (so popular among Percy’s heroes) “re-entry through mortification.” His descent into the underworld represents his most serious employment of this technique, as he enters into a place that embodies the anima as he conceives it — a barren, empty place of chaos and death. So his modern (Stoic/Cartesian) imagination pictures the realm of the feminine. His “experiment” aims to determine whether, in the very depths of this deadly womb of anima, some glimmer of the animus can be found. Can the transcendent self make contact with the Transcendent Self (God) despite its own embodied, immanent condition?

He is asking the wrong question, which is why he gets no clear answer. What must change, if Will is indeed to learn anything useful from this experience, is his impoverished and perverse notion of the feminine, his ingrained Promethean disdain for the mortal condition and his gnostic distrust of the flesh. Rather than uncover clinically unassailable proof of the immortality of the soul, Will must correct his interpretation of mortal life, before he can see (as he does at the end of the novel) in something so fleshly as a lover’s arms and hands “a gift and therefore a sign of a giver” (SC, p. 360). He must learn that the incarnation of divine animus within human anima is possible — indeed, that has already taken place.

This interpretative shift begins in the cave, with the ironic sign of the tiger. For while on the literal level the dying tiger appears simply to succumb to the brutal mechanisms of an impersonal universe that so appalled the Stoics and Gnostics, seen allegorically this animal (and its anthropomorphized death) invokes the incarnation and sacrifice of Christ. The tiger appears repeatedly in English literature as a symbol of Christ, occurring in Lancelot Andrewes, William Blake and finally in Eliot’s
“Gerontion”\textsuperscript{16} — the likely source text for Percy’s allusion here. If Gerontion is an old man suffering from spiritual exhaustion, Will Barrett is a middle-aged man who feels older than his years, at a moment perilously close to death.

In keeping with Percy’s sly (Kierkegaardian) use of humor, sarcasm and the grotesque to screen his scenes of religious epiphany (such as Jamie’s baptism in \textit{The Last Gentleman}) from appearing as “edifying” literature, here the Christian associations are buried, or presented ironically. The possibility that mortification might be necessary for redemption, death for resurrection, is hinted at behind a screen of psychobabble: The tiger wonders whether his death will be a “growth experience.” The Son of God taking the form of a slave is transmuted into a tiger taking on human anxieties, even as its flesh descends into inanimate nature. If God became man so that man might become God (as St. Augustine said), in this case the tiger becomes as man so that man may become as tiger. Will lies down beside this exemplar, noting that the very skin of the tiger is loose like a garment — perhaps so that he might put on the skin (as St. Paul urged his readers to “put on Christ” Gal. 4: 27.) Having begun the descent as an inveterate gnostic, a consumer sunk in immanence troubled by nightmares of transcendence, Will has plumbed the very depths of creation, entering the inorganic womb of matter, to emerge as a human being marked with Christ’s salvific dignity, bearing the marks of a Passion, as Allie observes while she takes care of him:

\begin{quote}

The abdomen dropping away hollow under his ribs, the thin arms and legs with their heavy slack straps of muscle, cold as clay, reminded her of some paintings of the body of Christ taken down from the crucifix, the white flesh gone blue with death. \textsuperscript{\textit{SC}, p. 236}
\end{quote}

Thus the figure of the tiger, in its allusive power, spans the levels of being (to which Voegelin refers in “Reason: The Classic Experience”) from the Divine \textit{Nous} as

mediated through Christ the Logos, down to Inorganic Nature and even the Apeiron (or Depth) of undifferentiated Being. By observing this figure's metamorphosis, Will begins to learn what Gnostics fail to understand: that man dwells in the metaxy that lies between these two extremes, while participating in both. Will has long been conditioned by the Stoic heritage of his father and the Cartesian atmosphere of his education to see truth only at the two extremes, to look for the satisfaction of animus in self-deification — in the full knowledge that this must end in failure and the triumph of immanence (anima) in the form of death and dissolution.

When he explodes into Allie's bower, that crafty blend of culture and nature, artifice and Edenic fertility, Will finds in his nurse/lover a someone who has reconciled anima with animus, in whom their true human meanings — as points along the continuum of being within the metaxy of human existence, rather than polar opposites — have flowered and come to fruit. She stands for Will as a positive sign that this reconciliation is possible, and as a means to bring it about. Allie, an emblem of human femininity, is a living refutation of the doubts that so many Pierrotic Southern heroes felt about women and sexuality, and their compatibility with consciousness and spirituality. In fact Percy depicts Will and Allie's union in terms that seem specifically designed to quell the anxieties of the Quentin Compsons, Will Barretts and other Pierrots who populate so much modern fiction:

Though he hardly touched her, his words seemed to flow across all parts of her body. Were they meant to? A

\[18\] Aply enough, the first time Will sees Allie in the novel, he notes that "her skin was as white as a camellia petal, yet not unhealthy." (SC, p. 76) Contrast with this the use of camellias in *Lancelot*, where they stand for female sexuality as a corrupting, poisonous force.
\[19\] In "Rereading Allison Huger," Elinor Ann Walker points out the following from her analysis of Percy's early rough notes for the novel: "Until he gives them the names that appear in the final version, Percy represents the characters using only the signs for a woman and a man," in Lawson, ed., p. 105. This supports my contention that Percy was in part attempting to create a sexual allegory within the broad tapestry of this novel.
\[20\] Kreyling, p. 142.
pleasure she had never known before blossomed deep in her body. Was this a way of making love? (SC, p. 262)

Within this relationship at least, sexuality and language, the emblems of immanence and transcendence, function together reciprocally and in harmony. It is significant, too, that this observation is Allie’s; it is she who (before Will) comes to understand and accept this harmony, to treasure it in her heart. In fact, as Shelley M. Jackson points out, Allie herself seems to have a superior grasp of language to Will’s:

Allie’s sensitivity to language will be exactly that which will allow her to save Will by teaching him intersubjectivity and self-consciousness.21

Noting that in “Percy’s fiction, mother-child relationships are problematic to say the least,” and that this is a root cause of the isolation and abstraction of the male protagonists,22 Jackson suggests the discovery of alternative maternal figures — not all of them female, since she includes Fr. John (Percival) among them — is a key part of the Percy hero’s search for salvation. This is certainly true in the case of Will Barrett, as my analysis in Chapter Three (above) shows.

For his part, Will has come to learn that human femininity-(the anima) does not reside in the soulless depths of immanence and matter — such as he explored in the cave — but rather in the varied and exciting metaxy that connects and partakes in higher and lower levels (in Divine Being and in non-being) as symbolized by the polyvalent Tiger, and embodied in Allie. For her part, Allie subverts negative stereotypes of the feminine by displaying rational calculation, planning and craft,

---

21Jackson, in Lawson, ed., p. 96. She goes on to explain Allie’s unexpected linguistic advantage with reference to sexual differences in language acquisition noted by Carol Gilligan and Nancy Chodorow: “Unlike Will, Allie sees herself not in opposition to the world, but in a position of finding ways to commune with it. Gilligan claims that although males see the world in either/or terms, females look for similarities among seemingly disparate choices and for ways to make connections rather than choose one option to the exclusion of the others. Allie illustrates Gilligan’s theory very well. If Chodorow is correct, that females are less differentiated from the external object-world and their inner object-world than males, then females should be able to pair word and object, and create language more easily, even when, like Allie, they have poor parental models.” (p. 98) Whether or not these assertions can be verified scientifically, they certainly concur with the traditional understanding of animus and anima employed in this study, derived from Karl Stern.

22Jackson, p. 92.
especially in her painstaking endeavor to transport the stove to heat her greenhouse. Undertaking to do this under her own power (using only Will’s “creepers”), Allie asserts her existence as something more than a victim or a dependent — asserts in fact, her own participation in the animus, even as Will learns of his implication in the anima. Their converse spiritual movements of discovery allow them to meet in the middle ground (metaxy) where mutual love is possible. Using one of Percy’s own terms, Elinor Ann Walker calls this meeting a “zone crossing.”

In a lovely piece of dramatic irony, Allie no sooner has the stove assembled and functioning, before Will bursts in and renders it unnecessary — since that the cave air that has followed in his wake is sufficient to keep the greenhouse warm. Like a healthy living organism, the greenhouse will now maintain a regular temperature — one high enough to allow her to raise vegetables and flowers. Like the oak tree that grew around the iron hitching post, which provided Will’s first epiphany, (LG, p. 260) Allie’s stained-glass greenhouse is a metaphor for the successful reconciliation of alienated principles, of animus and anima within a single soul — her own. In a clever inversion of stereotype, here it is the woman whose rational planning allows her to dominate nature, and the man who unwittingly serves as a conduit for the healing, chthonic forces of the nurturing earth.

It is particularly appropriate, given Will’s terrible childhood separation from the motherly (see Chapter Three), that Allie is a strong maternal figure, as Jackson indicates:

Will’s rebirth from the womb of the cave, through the bat-infested birth canal into the Edenic setting of Allie’s greenhouse, serves its purpose in making Allie Will’s new surrogate mother. As Will lies unconscious, she washes him, changes his clothes, feeds him, and tends his

---

24 Walker suggests that Allie “already claims as her own what Will Barrett seeks” — namely, the awareness that materiality and meaning are reconcilable, indeed inextricably bound together in language itself. (Walker, p. 104)
wounds until he becomes conscious. While in his drug-induced unconsciousness in the cave, he dreams of a mother gently washing his face. Now his dream has become a reality.\(^{25}\)

The difference in their ages — and the unnerving, quickly dismissed suggestion that Will could be Allie’s father — help to counterbalance the maternal power that Allie must exert over Will, and make it possible for them to develop an erotic relationship on terms of basic equality. This equality implies interdependence and symbiosis: thus after Will submits to Allie’s care, he soon turns around to employ his legal expertise to defend her freedom and individuality from those who would again subject her to helplessness and wordlessness.

This brings us to perhaps the most appalling image in all Percy’s work: that of Allie strapped to an electroshock table, her very consciousness “fried” and her linguistic nature suppressed through brute coercion. Here is the embodiment of Stoic terror: the mind itself and its individuality crushed in the wheels of mechanism. So it would appear to the classic Percy hero.

However looked at from a different point of view, here is also a Christ image — as Allie sums it up, “Fried is crucified.” (SC, p. 103) Unlike so many other Percy heroines, Allie is herself both an emblem and a source of grace, thanks to the wisdom she has attained from her redemptive suffering.\(^{26}\) In his youth, Will could not imagine that grace, erotic love, and knowledge were all compatible in the same relationship, so he looked for these qualities separately among (respectively) Jamie, Kitty, and Sutter. Now, in the person of Allie (“Sutter turned happy!”), Will finds them in peaceful coexistence. As he learns more about the true possibilities of intersubjectivity and love from a mother-figure who will neither abandon him nor suffocate him, Will begins to

\(^{25}\)Jackson, p. 98.
\(^{26}\)Note, for contrast, the suffering of Anna, which Lancelot imagines has “purified” her of the taint of feminine sexuality. Because of his delusions, her very real suffering cannot be redemptive, at least not for him. It seems in fact to be wasted — just like the suffering of Lucy, Margot, Raine and Lance’s other victims.
free himself from the cold grip of abstraction and alienation that has gripped him all his life. In return for the gift of maternal care that she gives him, Will offers her paternal protection from her parents, who would like to return her to the tender ministrations of the electroshock machine — impoverishing her both of sign (language) and signified (materiality, specifically her wealth).

Will's fate at his family's hands would be a little better: he would sit in the comfortable hospital wing that they prepared for him, bound to a Ph machine and the pills that manipulate his moods and suppress his (ordinary, human) anxieties before they even arise. Thus buffered from animus and anima, he would be immune to suffering and incapable of redemption.

Will's final struggle against those well-meaning people who would abolish his suffering and quench his desire for transcendence within immanence is an extension of the resistance he displays throughout the novel to ideologies of worldliness — even those that come wrapped in religious rhetoric. In order to understand how he finally comes to acknowledge the possibility that transcendence and immanence can co-exist, we must realize why he has been so skeptical up to this point, and explore the anodynes to anxiety upon which he has long relied, and now has finally rejected.

***

As the novel opens, Will Barrett seems to be a man who has taken a radically different path from his father, avoiding the gnostic speculations, great melancholies and grand illusions of the heroic past and the allure of scientific omniscience. In a conscious rebellion against Ed Barrett's stark heritage of despair, he has chosen a path very like the one he sketched out to Sutter at the end of The Last Gentleman. If he has not married Kitty, he has indeed snagged an heiress, and in turn inherited her millions when she died. As Will sums up the matter, speaking as it were to his father's ghost:

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

I went as far as I could go, married a rich hardheaded pious decent crippled upstate Utica, New York, woman, practiced Trusts and Estates law in a paneled office on Wall Street, kept a sailboat on the North Shore, played squash, lived at 76th and Fifth, walked my poodle in the park, went up in an elevator to get home, tipped three doormen and four elevator men at Christmas, thought happily about making money like everyone else (money is a kind of happiness), made more money than some, married a great deal more money than most, learned how to whistle down a cab two blocks away and get in and out of "21" in time for the theater, began to enjoy (thanks to you) Brahms and Mozart (no thanks to you).... And I was never so glad of anything as I was to get away from your doom and your death-dealing and your great honor and great hunts and great hates.... God, just to get away from all that and live an ordinary mild mercantile money-making life, do mild sailing, mild poodle-walking, mild music-loving among mild good-natured folks. I even tried to believe in the Christian God because you didn't, and if you didn't maybe that was what was wrong with you so why not do the exact opposite? (Imagine, having to leave the South to find God!) Yes I did all that and succeeded in everything except believing in the Christian God — maybe you were right about one thing after all — what's more even beat you, made more money, wrote a law book, won an honorary degree, listened to better music. (SC, pp. 72-73)

The story is fueled by Will's mounting realization that his whole adult life (that arguably began in Santa Fe, with Sutter and Jamie) has been a headlong flight away from transcendent ambitions, a thoroughgoing attempt to dwell in the immanent — even to use the Christian Faith as a tool for remaining worldly. Rather than confront the heritage that poisoned his identity, the dominance his father exerted from the grave over the core of his individuality and freedom (animus), Will has tried to bury the spark of transcendence in a pile of possessions and petty secular concerns — just as Lance Lamar tried vainly to drown it in a bottle.

Will realizes, late in his life, the futility of his stratagems:

In two seconds, he saw that his little Yankee life had not worked after all, the nearly twenty years of making a life with a decent upstate woman and with decent Northern
folk and working in an honorable Wall Street firm and making a success of it too. The whole twenty years could just as easily have been a long night's dream. (SC, p. 73)

Like Lance Lamar and Allie Huger, Will awakens from a dream of immanence, and sets forth on a quest for meaning. The nature of what Will is looking for becomes clear from the rest of this passage:

[A]nd here he was in old Carolina, thinking of Ethel Rosenblum and having fits and falling down on the golf course — what in God's name was I doing there and what am I doing here? (SC, p. 73)

Why exactly is this middle-aged man's realization that his life has been absurd tied associatively in his mind with considerations of sex and Jews — each of which occurs to him on his way to invoking the name of God? Because he is still worrying the same mysteries that haunted him throughout his youth, as chronicled in *The Last Gentleman* and analyzed above in Chapter 3: the meaning of the feminine, considered psychologically, historically, and theologically.

That Ethel Rosenblum represents more for Will than a simple nostalgic or erotic fantasy can be seen from the image that first awakens the thought of her in his memory. He recalls a "weedy stretch of railroad right-of-way.... [A] wedge-shaped salient of weeds...shaped like a bent triangle." (SC, p. 7) Later in the novel, Will refers to this spot as a "nondescript weedy triangular public pubic sort of place, to make a sort of love or die a sort of death." (SC, p. 162) Having gone to considerable narrative trouble to create an image that evokes both a woman's pudendum and the Greek letter D (delta), Percy has marked for us the spot where his hero's troubles all converge.

The "Delta factor" of which Percy writes so often is for him the unique faculty of human language that marks man apart from the mechanistic processes of the universe, the mysterious sign of transcendence from which his unique nature (and most of its troubles) arise. (*MB*, pp. 3-21; *LC*, p. 108 ff) Just how can the emblem of the soul's transcendence be joined to the very mouth of immanence — the organ of human birth
towards which his male protagonists have felt such ambivalence, even terror? Can these two coincide — and can earthly, carnal life then be reconciled with the higher destiny that the transcending spirit demands? They can, but only through the mysterious figure of Ethel Rosenblum.

Ethel resonates on many levels for Will, as we see in his first recollections of her:

[N]ature had endowed her with such beauty and grace of body, a dark satinity of skin, a sweet firm curve and compaction of limbs as not easily to be believed. She was smart in algebra and history and English.... She could factor out equations after the whole class was stumped, stand at the blackboard, hip hiked out, one fist perched cheerleaderwise on her pelvis, other quick small hand squinched on the chalk, and cancel out great $a^2-b^2$ complexes zip zip slash, coming out at the end $\frac{a}{a}=1$. 1=1! Unity!

No matter how ungainly the equation, ugly and unbalanced, clotted with complexes, radicals, fractions, zip zip under Ethel Rosenblum's quick sure hand and they factored out and cancelled and came down to unity, symmetry, beauty. (SC, p. 7)

This powerfully attractive, intelligent woman embodies eros for Will, in each of the several senses in which the word has historically been used: the physical need for union, the intellectual search for clarity, and the existential yearning for God. Note the theological language that the narrator employs to describe something so simple as a Jewish girl doing math problems: she brings about "unity, symmetry, beauty," attributes of God traditionally considered knowable by reason alone. Not coincidentally, these are qualities for which a physicist or cosmologist looks in a scientific theory.

It is deeply significant that Will's remembered sweetheart is Jewish, a member of the people who first conceived of a monotheistic God that operated historically — and who for Percy are evidence that He did and still does so operate. Indeed, their very existence is a sign of Divine presence, Percy suggests (SC, p.19). While the narrator pokes fun coyly at Will's preoccupation with Jews and their supposed disappearance,
the author clearly means us to take seriously the notion that the Jews are a piece of physical, historical evidence that God exists and takes an interest in man’s life. Thus, they are a sign that the union of immanence and transcendence is possible, when God Himself takes the initiative. There is a long tradition in Jewish and Christian thought of referring to God’s people as wedded to Him, as His mystical bride. Hauke points to the extensive use of this symbol in the Old Testament, culminating in the the Song of Songs, whose significance I explored in Chapter One. By introducing the figure of a Jewish girl as the one who brings “unity, symmetry, beauty” out of chaotic multiplicity, as a kind of mandala of physical and spiritual fertility, Percy has consciously alluded to the richest symbolic tradition in the Jewish-Christian Revelation: the allegorical marriage of the individual soul with God. It is certainly no accident that the Jewish girl who attracts Will’s attention is of such an age that (given the time and social milieu) she is likely a virgin. This points both to the Old Testament typology of Israel of which we spoke above, and to the centrality of the Blessed Virgin in Catholic theology and ecclesiology.

---

27Hauke, pp. 254-255.
28See also Bouyer, pp. 141-143. Since Percy is a Christian and not a Jewish writer, he takes the further step of suggesting that the Jews are a sign that point beyond themselves, to the general redemption of man and his union with God through the Church, which is described variously as the New Israel, Christ’s Mystical Body, and His Bride. See Chapter One, pp. 46-52.
29Perhaps the very “mandala” for which Broughton was looking? Cf. Broughton, p. 112 ff.
30Josef Cardinal Ratzinger summarizes her centrality in this way: “[S]he is in person the true Zion, toward whom hopes have yearned throughout all the devastations of history. She is the true Israel in whom Old and New Covenant, Israel and Church, are indivisibly one. She is the ‘people of God’ bearing fruit through God’s gracious power.” *Daughter Zion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1983), p. 43. As the sole source of Jesus’ physical body and human nature, the exemplary type of the Virginal Bride and Mystical Body that is the Church, (Ratzinger, pp. 67-68) the figure of Mary also serves to guarantee the inclusion of the feminine principle within the Christian Revelation; to enshrine at the heart of Christian ethics, as the model of human response to the Divine, one historical decision made by a Jewish girl at a particular moment in time; to enshrine in Christian piety the intercessory figure of a mother, whose particular love for her particular Child symbolizes the preciousness of individual souls in the eyes of their Creator. (Stern, pp. 287-288) Even the dogma of Mary’s virginity, which seems to many a curiosity of religious anthropology, contains a message of profound relevance to Will — obsessed as he is with transcendence, immanence, and the question of a personal, Providential God. According to Ratzinger, this dogma raises and answers the question: “Is God a depth of being somewhere which, as it were, nourishes the deep roots of all things in some unimaginable way, or is he the one who acts with power, who knows and loves his creation, is present to it and effectively works in it from first to last, even today? The alternatives are simple: does God act or not? Can he
Will's preoccupation with Ethel Rosenblum, the Jewish people, and theological implications of their ongoing presence (or disappearance) does not mean that he finds it easy to accept the Christian Gospel in this or any form. He does not fail to denounce every church he sees or hears about through the novel, most notably in his litany of the names of death:

- Death in the guise of Christianity is not going to prevail over me. If Christ brought life, why do the churches smell of death?
- Death in the guise of old Christendom in Carolina is not going to prevail over me. The old churches are houses of death.
- Death in the form of the new Christendom in Carolina is not going to prevail over me. If the born-again are the twice-born, I'm holding out for a third go-round.
- Death in the guise of God and America and the happy life of home and family and friends is not going to prevail over me. (SC, p. 272)

What offends him so powerfully about these churches is their worldliness, the thoroughness with which the transcendent message of Christianity has been subsumed by Christendom (as Kierkegaard noted). The following passage indicates the nature of the problem, as Will sees it:

- He lived in the most Christian nation in the world, the U.S.A., in the most Christian part of that nation, the South, in the most Christian state in the South, North Carolina, in the most Christian town in North Carolina. (SC, p. 13)

Indeed, this "Christianity" is in the very air — or at least the airwaves — to a degree that he finds suffocating:

- As he drove along a gorge, he suffered another spell. Again the brilliant sunlight grew dim. Light seemed to rise from the gorge. He slowed, turned off the radio, and tried to tune in a nonreligious program. He could not find one. (SC, p. 13, italics mine)

act at all? If not, is he really "God?" The affirmation of Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary bears witness to the God who has not let creation slip out of his hands.” (Ratzinger, p. 61)
The situation is not helped by the personal attributes of the Christians with whom he is acquainted, for instance the acrimony and anti-intellectualism of his daughter Leslie, the cowardly bourgeois *bonhomie* of Rev. Jack Curl. Most repellent, however, among these attributes must be counted the gluttony of his deceased wife, Marion. For all her good works and preoccupation with Episcopal Church affairs, Marion’s fundamental worldliness is symbolized by her fanatical attachment to food. Marion certainly does not settle for bread alone, nor for the Word of God either, but also:

*Celeste* pizzas, Sara Lee cream pies, bottles of Plagniol, brownies, cream butter, eggs, gallons of custard ice cream ... Smithfield hams, Yamaiuchi’s wife’s shirred eggs, Long Island Ducks. (*SC*, pp. 157-158)

The results are predictable, as Marion’s becomes a body of death:

Cholesterol sparkled like a golden rain in her blood, settled as a sludge winking with diamonds. A tiny stone lodged in her common bile duct. A bacillus sprouted in the stagnant dammed bile. She turned yellow as butter and hot as fire. There was no finding the diamond through the cliffs of ocherous fat. She died. (*SC*, p. 158)

This grotesque passage, worthy of a medieval treatise on gluttony, conveys all the Stoic’s anxiety at the body and its power to dominate and finally extinguish the spirit, all the Gnostic’s disdain of the very flesh itself. Marion’s wealth and worldliness have rendered her Christian faith null and void, so far as Will is concerned. Her life does not offer an answer to the relentless, inner voice of cynicism that the voice of Ed Barrett maintains inside Will’s mind; in fact, she seems to confirm those doubts.

When Will decides that Christianity has been so thoroughly *digested* by immanence that it no long serves as a sign of transcendence, he finds himself drawn back to his father’s deadly heritage of auto-salvation through suicide.

In the corner of his eye a dark bird flew through the woods, keeping pace with him. He knew what to do. Pulling off at an overlook, he took the Luger from the glove compartment of the Mercedes. (*SC*, p. 13)
He receives a sign to remind him of this option, in the form of a "dark bird" — the inverse of a Dove, symbol of the Holy Ghost. This ghost is the "old mole" to whom Will speaks throughout the novel, in a self-conscious reference to Hamlet. Like that famous ghost of a dead father, Ed Barrett plays a demonic role in this story, standing always at Will's elbow, urging Will to complete his heritage of violence and death. This being so, we might be tempted to take his presence literally, and say that he is a soul risen from Hell to inflict still more violence upon the earth (as Hamlet suspected of his father's shade). The masculine would be revealed on such a reading to be a purely negative force — as radical feminist theologians assert.

This would certainly be a mistake. Because Ed Barrett's presence in this novel is not purely destructive, any more than Aunt Emily, Sutter Vaught, or Lance Lamar are purely negative characters, representing a tradition that Percy wishes to reject entirely. In the tradition of all Percy's Stoic/Gnostic characters, Ed Barrett serves as a crucial skeptical voice, refusing all pat, easy answers to the theological and existential questions that plagued the author, long after his famous conversion to Catholicism.

Thanks to the nagging voice of his father, Will does not remain in the worn path of immanence, living the good life and playing golf in a haze of moneyed apathy; nor will Ed's ghost allow him to slip into the shallow aesthetic humanism of Lewis Peckham, who entertains himself with deep questions and high art but is in fact quite satisfied to dwell on the surface of things, to "read Dante for structure." It is Ed Barrett's lingering presence that prevents his son from adopting a shallow Christianity as an easy answer to his anxieties, from breathing transcendent meaning in with the immanent air(waves).

Only by taking the path that he follows, by descending into the depths of creation in search of the Creator, by making his crucial experiment into an experience on the cross and remaking himself in the image of Christ, can he satisfy the cynic within, having fulfilled the requirements of the heroic tradition and transcended them. Having
discovered the complex, intertwined reality of immanence and transcendence (metaxy) that defines human existence, having made peace with the anima, Will at last can liberate the animus from his father's shadow. At last, the very core of his individuality can be separated from the figure who tried long ago to snuff it out; the terrible ambivalence that has afflicted him ever since now falls into the valley along with his father's Luger and shotgun.

But one thing remains. Free now of his old father, reconciled with the maternal and the material, Will still feels the need for a spiritual father, a source of authority more concrete and historical than the abstract notion of Divinity for which an ancient Stoic (or Platonist) might have settled. (Whereas he once looked to Sutter to fill this role, his own experience "in a desert place" has shown him the futility to which that leads.) The "dark bird" that has followed him all his life must be replaced by another symbol of transcendent authority, preferably one that is compatible with man's history and Will's own fleshly existence. (The Dove, symbol of the Holy Spirit, would seem appropriate, but it makes no appearance in the novel.) Will sees such an authority, or at least the glimmerings of it, in the figure of Fr. Weatherbee, the rather senile old priest he meets in the novel's final pages. He demands of the frightened old man:

"I cannot and will not accept all of your dogmas. Unless of course you have the authority to tell me something that I don't know. Do you?" (SC, p. 358)31

The source of such authority, Will recognizes, would lie not in intellectual refinement or speculative profundity, but rather in history and the flesh:

"[T]he Apostolic Succession involved a laying on of hands, right? This goes back to Christ himself, a Jew, a

31 It is a sign of Percy's playfulness that he has chosen an Episcopal priest who is preoccupied with the Apostolic Succession to be the object of Will's inquiries. According to the definitive teaching of Percy's own (Catholic) Church (specifically of Pope Leo XIII), the Anglican/Episcopal churches have lost the Apostolic Succession, thanks to doctrinal and liturgical changes during the 17th century. This is a point on which the Vatican has never retreated, for all its ecumenical fervor. So, in Percy's own terms, Fr. Weatherbee probably has no authority.
The Apostolic Succession, Fr. Weatherbee’s other pet interest (after model railroads), is one of the most tangibly incarnational doctrines in Christianity, being a sacramental (tangible, physical, and historical) analogue of the Jewish Levitic priesthood that was passed along by blood. A masculine sign of the historicity and specificity of Christianity (to mirror the feminine sign of virginity), the Apostolic Succession anchors the Church in time and place, ruling out forever any gnostic interpretations of the Incarnation.

More concretely for Will, the heritage of Apostles represents an alternative tradition to the blood lineage of suicidal Barretts, the Stoic lineage of military heroes (Marcus Flavinius, Robert E. Lee, Erwin Rommel, etc.), and the Faustian tradition of materialist scientists (Descartes, Skinner, even Freud). As de Lubac points out, the motherly aspect of the Church is mirrored by its heritage of fathers, of apostles who have handed along authority from one generation to the next — an authority that does not point inward, to the self as hero or god, but upward, to the Transcendent Father Who calls us back, through the means of an immaculate earthly Mother, a communal Church.

While Percy (mercifully) never goes so far as to draw out every fiber of the rich theological tapestry that underlies his complex psychological tales, it is clear from this study that his critique of modern, gnostic individualism is in part motivated by his faith in a religious communion that sees salvation as impossible for individuals; only within a community of signs (or sacraments) whose meaning is guaranteed by authority (tradition) can a soul incorporate himself in the body of the saved.

This inquiry began with Karl Stern, and perhaps it should conclude with him. At the end of *The Flight From Woman*, he points to Goethe as one whose work embodies

---

32de Lubac, pp. 85-93.
the conflict between masculinizing culture and the feminine principle in the soul. He writes:

In his twenties, when Goethe was already beset by the conflicts which led to the conception of Faust, he wrote the famous Prometheus poem. Prometheus, who surges upward with the gesture of usurping power, was, incidentally, not only a symbol of the young poet. The image of Prometheus forms a recurrent preoccupation of the last century. It plays a great role in the language of revolution — the prototype of Man who despises all aid from above, who strives upward himself to get his due. This is precisely the opposite of the orans of the Annunciation. Thus, we see that Goethe’s work spans the polarity of our existence. For the Promethean fever will be healed only by the attitude of childlike expectancy — Man’s readiness for Grace.33

Through the Grace that comes to him through Allie, Will has been transformed from an image of Prometheus to the image of Christ. At the same time, with his support, Allie herself moves beyond the negative, modern stereotypes of the feminine with which women have too long been burdened, to wield considerable powers of transcendent reason and immanent eros — two powers that at last appear to operate in harmony. As a post-type of Ethel Rosenblum and an ante-type of the Church, Allie exerts on Will the power to change his interpretative screen, from a gnostic to an orthodox one. Reflecting upon Allie, Will can look anew at the meaning of fatherhood and motherhood, marriage and language, abstraction and desire and commit himself to their peaceful coexistence — amidst all the uncertainty and suffering that attend fallen man in this “valley of tears,” the fallen Eden of the metaxy in which he dwells. At the novel’s end, Will wonders in conclusion:

Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have. (SC, p. 360)

33Stern, pp. 270.
At last he recognizes in the earthly feminine a sign of its divine, masculine paternity — and in the earthly masculine a sign of man’s feminine destiny, as creature and Bride. He sees clearly what Goethe saw more dimly:

Here the ineffable
Wins life through love;
Eternal Womanhood
Leads us above.34

By examining the function of sexual archetypes in the four Walker Percy novels considered here in the light of Stern’s technique of Deutung, I believe that I have created a critical apparatus that nimbly moves between widely divergent levels of interpretation — from literal to moral to allegorical to anagogical; that takes full account of the insights of psychology, literary history and biography; that intimately links our tentative understanding of childhood experience with the boldest speculative insights of the Western theological tradition about the relationship between the human and the divine; that employs the notion of “overdetermination” creatively to liberate the text both from reductionism and arbitrariness, by placing the individual experience of the artist firmly within the context of philosophical history and testing the truth-value of his insights against what we can know by reason and faith about the human condition. This apparatus, once developed and elaborated, can be employed in the study of other writers — both of those who embrace the Western tradition, and those who rebel against it; indeed, the very option of rebellion seems to be an inextricable part of that tradition. Insofar as the sexual allegory that I have employed here is a semiotically rich source of interpretative insights about human existence, the field for its employment is vast and open. But that work is for another time.

34As cited in Stern, p. 270.
Works Cited


_________. De nupt et conc. Cited by Burke, p. 552.


_________. “Gentlemen and Fornicators,” Broughton, ed., p. 100 ff.


222


Vita

John Patrick Zmirak, Jr. was born in Astoria, New York on December 27, 1964 to Theresa Marie Zmirak (née Williams) and John Patrick Zmirak, Sr. He was baptized at Immaculate Conception Church in Astoria, where he also received his first Holy Communion, made his first Confession, and was Confirmed. He attended Immaculate Conception School, then Mater Christi Catholic High School—now called St. John’s Preparatory School—where he won a scholarship. He was active in the Military History Club, the Queens Young Republicans, and various political campaigns.

In 1982, he enrolled at Yale University, where he resided in Branford College, receiving upon admission the Queens Yale Alumni Scholarship. An active member in the Party of the Right, he honed his debating skills and developed his political ideas into a more coherent form. He wrote frequently for the *Yale Daily News*, *The Yale Free Press* (where he served as Managing Editor) and *The Yale Vanguard*, which he edited. He also wrote for *The Yale Political Monthly*, *International Forum at Yale*, and other publications. After focusing his studies on existentialist philosophy, modern literature, and medieval history, he graduated *cum laude* in 1986 with a Bachelor of Arts in the Special Divisional Major “Christianity and Literature.” His senior thesis, a novel entitled *The Skywatcher*, was directed by J. Hillis Miller and Lars Engel.

In 1986, he enrolled at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, jointly in the Master of Fine Arts program in Creative Writing, and the Doctoral program in English. He received the Alumni Federation Fellowship for 1986—1990. Focusing on Southern Literature, Screenwriting and Fiction, he received his M.F.A. in 1990, completing the Master’s thesis *City of Man* (a screenplay) under the direction of Prof. Rick Blackwood. *City of Man* was subsequently chosen as a finalist in the national Universal Studios Chesterfield Writing Contest, 1991. That same year, he received

In May 1992, he left Baton Rouge to accept a position as Assistant Editor at *Success* magazine in New York City, where he rose to be Associate Editor in 1993. In January 1994, he returned to Baton Rouge to begin dissertation research. In October 1994 he joined the *Greater Baton Rouge Business Report* as Staff Writer. He kept that position until October 1995, when he joined the Mike Foster Campaign as Press Secretary, working under consultant Roy Fletcher. His screenplay *Blood of the Martyrs* was selected as a finalist in the Louisiana Screenwriting Competition. In January, 1996 he was elected as an alternate Delegate for Patrick J. Buchanan to the Republican National Presidential Convention. In March, he accepted a position as Editor of the *South Baton Rouge Journal*.

His essays, letters, and poems have appeared in *Chronicles: A Magazine of American Culture; The South Carolina Review; The Atlantic Monthly; The New Republic; The Papers* of the Lord Acton Institute; *The Weekly Standard; The Social Contract; Angelus; Faith and Culture; The New Triumph; The Baton Rouge Advocate* and *New Orleans CityBusiness*.

His blank verse play, *The Grand Inquisitor*, is scheduled for production in London in 1997 by the Anthony Plumridge Company.

He is a parishioner of St. Agnes Catholic Church in downtown Baton Rouge, and an active member of the Latin Liturgy Association.
DOCTORAL EXAMINATION AND DISSERTATION REPORT

Candidate:  John Patrick Zmirak, Jr.

Major Field:  English

Title of Dissertation:  Walker Percy's Return to the Feminine

Approved:

__________________________

Major Professor and Chairman

Dean of the Graduate School

EXAMINING COMMITTEE:

__________________________

Sarah Pierce

Date of Examination:

March 21, 1996