



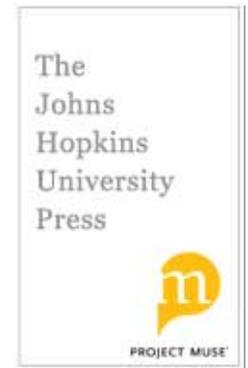
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Abstract

In 1974, Walker Percy interpreted his own novel, *The Moviegoer*, as both an illustration and a test of Kierkegaard's existentialist theology. As part of this reading, Percy confessed reservations about Kierkegaard's schema, asserting that a Thomist understanding of faith as eminently reasonable was preferable to Kierkegaard's understanding of faith emerging from deeply private despair. Many critics have followed Percy's lead and argued for a Thomist Catholic resolution to an otherwise Kierkegaardian novel. Yet Percy made the novel, perhaps intentionally, truer to Kierkegaard's schema than critics have recognized. This article recognizes new signs of Binx's despair, and the possibility that his leap into faith is absurd rather than rational.

Keywords

Absurd, despair, faith, Kierkegaard, Walker Percy

In a 1974 interview, Walker Percy was coaxed into offering a Kierkegaardian reading of his own novel, *The Moviegoer*. In his response to Bradley Dewey's question about Kierkegaard's influence in the early novels, Percy reveals that the essay "The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle" had provided him with a philosophical schema for the novel—and for his life as a faithful Catholic. "If I had to single out one piece of writing which was more responsible than anything else for my becoming a Catholic, it would be that essay of Kierkegaard's," he declared (Dewey, 1974: 282). Reading the essay, Percy realized that one of his own insights had been anticipated a hundred years before by a profound theistic philosopher. Kierkegaard had seen before him that any hopeful humanistic system or, to use Percy's word, "scientistic" system, inevitably excludes the individual who adopts and hopes to live by that system. This person commits hopefully to the humane, psychologically realistic meaning-making scheme, but soon despairs unconsciously

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because of the system's existential limitations: any system that denies God's active presence cannot solve the problems of time (the absurd brevity of a lifespan) and death (its inevitability). Soon enough, therefore, our unfortunate person finds herself strangely outside the system, still needing a reason to take one breath after another. For Percy and Kierkegaard both, this is the existential problem, to find that meaning arrived at through humanist, rationalist, or scientific calculations simply won't do for the individual. Such meaning still leaves one facing death, the absurdly ephemeral nature of one's life, and the enervating purposelessness that invades one's thoughts. Percy felt that Kierkegaard's essay held out hope that there was an exit to this rationalist dilemma, that one might direct one's attention from the "geniuses" who plead for certain arguable ideas of the way to live, to attend to the "apostles" charged by God with giving despairing people the "news" that God offers eternity and purpose and peace.

So, in Percy's reading, which we will soon examine more closely and critically, *The Moviegoer* is the story of a young man who has intuited his existential predicament, whose memories of a near-death experience on a Korean battlefield have prodded him to begin a "search" for some consequential meaning. Binx Bolling will encounter difficulty in this search because as the novel opens he is an avatar of Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage, a womanizing disciple of the scientific consumer society. Though Binx is usually a pleasant and decent young man, he spends most of his time pursuing sexual and consumerist fun in an effort to avoid enervating thoughts of his death. He is Kierkegaard's natural or primitive man, existentially curious in a half-conscious way, but mostly anxious, busily contriving methods for avoiding thoughts of his actual mortal predicament. He avoids boredom (Binx prefers "malaise") at all cost, because boredom indicates that the methods are failing and that frightening awareness is around the corner.

Avoiding existential awareness is the point of Kierkegaard's aesthetic and ethical stages—a point that even Percy's most Kierkegaardian critics often miss. Kierkegaard argues that most people live in one of these two conditions, committing misdeeds because of forgivable existential angst. Devoted to aesthetic fun or ethical commitment, these people manipulate others rather than love them, and avoid relation with the God who is the source of love. The religious stage, which follows the so-called leap of faith, a leap out of the deadly aesthetic or ethical stages, involves fuller awareness of the existential situation and relation with the God who revokes the death sentence. This God also provides authentic personhood, at least while passionate relation persists between believer and God. And authentic personhood makes it possible for believers to love their neighbors creatively and patiently.

Binx definitely moves through this schema, but how far and by what motive energy? By the end of the novel, Binx's aesthetic methods have ceased to provide him with the existential distractions he seeks. Though his Aunt Emily tutors him in the ways of the ethical and taunts him about his ethical failings, Binx does not seriously consider adopting Kierkegaard's second stage, the life of ethical goodness. Left cold by his aunt's pride and the hollowness of her ethical vision—and,

Percy hints, by her racist condescension—he leaps directly into the religious stage, the life of faith.

But Percy tells us that he does not believe in Kierkegaard's understanding of faith as absurd and offensive to the community. For this reason, Percy also denies the need for "the leap," with its a-rational connotations. He also harbors doubts about the radical subjectivity, the believer's personal passion, on which the leap is based. For Percy, it is a Thomist rather than a Kierkegaardian faith that prompts Binx to comfort the grieving Smith children and to counsel the extremely anxious Kate Cutrer Bolling in the novel's epilogue. As Percy himself puts it, "I was always put off by Kierkegaard's talk about inwardness, subjectivity, and the absurd, the leap into the absurd. I didn't think it was necessary to go that far." Percy goes on to call Kierkegaard's emphasis on absurdity and subjectivity "a trap" best avoided. His epigraphs to his foundational confession *The Message in the Bottle* (1959), he tells us, set up a dialogue between Aquinas's ideas of faith as knowledge and Kierkegaard's idea of faith as personal passion (Percy, 1989: 291). Percy intends Binx to embody the Thomist alternative, in this sense: finally feeling his predicament intensely—his consciousness that his life is short and lacks evident meaning—Binx supposedly makes a calm, reasonable existential calculation. His ephemeral existence is absurd and the only solution to that problem is the "news" of Christ the God-Man's offer of eternity. So Binx adopts Catholic practices, a faith involving disciplined, loving good works on behalf of those suffering near him, his half-siblings and his new wife especially. Kierkegaard apparently provided Percy with an acute understanding of the mortal predicament, of the futility of humanistic systems of meaning, and of faith in the Judeo-Christian God as existentially essential. But Percy willingly—or willfully—departs from Kierkegaard on the nature of faith and the processes that get the despairing person to faith's threshold. While reading Kierkegaard with intense interest, he adopted a Catholic theology as a preferable conclusion to Kierkegaard's existential Protestant eschatology. According to Percy, Binx eventually sees that there is no sensible alternative to making the move into God's presence, where he achieves a peace that Percy views as a product of "an Apollonian Catholic balance... as against [Kierkegaard's] Protestant anguish" (Dewey, 1974: 291).

In other words, Percy's reading of his own novel is, intentionally, a Kierkegaardian misreading. If the epilogue to *The Moviegoer* is consistent with Percy's stated theology, Binx adopts a faith and thus a way of life that Kierkegaard defines as the ethical rather than the faithful religious. That is to say, Binx is inspired by an *idea of God* to live with deep compassion and concern for others' well-being, a task which he undertakes earnestly. But for Kierkegaard that manner of living is different from and inferior to *standing repentant before God*, an absolute requirement in his theology (see for example 1987b: 216). The ethical stage does not heal despair, does not solve the existential problem. Kierkegaard insists that no one reaches faith's threshold except through fear and trembling, intense anxiety, a desperation so deep that a life of meaningful suffering seems infinitely preferable to either hedonic or ethical commitments. As Kierkegaard

writes in *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, no believer escapes the “pain and crisis of decision” (1992: 129). Not even Binx, as we shall see.

Critics, perhaps content with Percy’s description of his intentions with the novel, have passed over a number of intriguing and complicating questions about the novel’s Kierkegaardian content: Why does Binx employ terms throughout the novel that Kierkegaard invented, or at least inflected in his existentialist way? If Binx has been reading Kierkegaard, what has he learned? Why is the novel’s epigraph about *unconscious* despair, when Binx is quite clearly *conscious* of his own “search” and its cause, his intense sense of mortality? Why is there no apostle in the novel, declaring to Binx the truth of God’s gracious offer of reconciliation and relation through Christ? Since there is no such compelling apostle, how precisely does Binx come to the faith that Percy claims he comes to? Has Percy given Binx convincing cause to feel an intense despair that he does not share with his readers, so that Binx might achieve faith on Kierkegaard’s terms rather than those of St. Thomas Aquinas?

I believe that the answer to this final question is yes, and that therefore we have an interpretive either/or to consider. Either Percy has been cagy about his choice of Thomism (knowledge leading to rational choice to serve God) over-against Kierkegaard’s essentially Lutheran confession (grace leading to absurd and unexpected salvation and relief from despair), or *The Moviegoer* delves so deeply and honestly into the nature of avoidance and final acceptance of faith that the story tells truths that Percy would not admit to us. As I hope the following discussion demonstrates, *The Moviegoer* is not an unambiguously Catholic novel based upon select ideas from Kierkegaard’s schema, but, more than the criticism has shown, a powerful and crafty evocation of that schema, entire and coherent.

Percy’s 1974 reading of *The Moviegoer* runs as follows: As the novel opens, Binx finds himself thinking lucidly and uncomfortably about his own death. He recalls a near-death moment of his own, bleeding into Korean soil from a battle wound a few years before. Binx realizes that he must make a search for meaning that can account for his intense sense of mortality. Percy tells us that the “whole structure of Binx’s search” is based upon a proper understanding of the role of the apostle (in Dewey, 1974: 284). Unlike the philosopher or scientist, who arrives at truths *sub specie aeterni*, the apostle has the authority to announce the news of something miraculous, Christ’s death and resurrection, which has truly happened and which is profoundly relevant to the individual hearing the news. But Binx’s vertical search explores only those truths *sub specie aeterni*—those, he tells us, of Einstein, Schrödinger, Eddington, Tolstoy, and other scientific and literary geniuses. Binx finds no sense of existential meaning or description of coherent purpose in these writings. So he undertakes a horizontal search, which according to Percy, takes “the form . . . not of religion, but a kind of a debased religious fear of searching” (1974: 285). This “antic search” involves walks in his neighborhood, going to the movies, traveling the region. Binx does not search for God. Too many around him claim already to believe in God and yet clearly still suffer their own pathologies of purposelessness and ennui. This, as Percy confirms, is the source of his despair:

“It was a happy coincidence of Kierkegaard’s phenomenology of despair with what I wanted to do with Binx Bolling” (1974: 287). That is, no matter how clearly Binx understands the nature of the universe through the New Physics, or the nature of facing death through *War & Peace*, he finds himself unable to state a reason to live.

As Percy and Dewey gradually build this summary reading of *The Moviegoer*, they discuss their shared view that Kierkegaard proposes an “enclosed, interiorized, radically idiosyncratic selfhood.” Percy allows that this notion of selfhood “has always been a stumbling block to me. I think that Kierkegaard was simply wrong or carried his opposition to Hegel’s system—objectivity—too far.” Here he calls Kierkegaard’s emphasis on “emotion, inwardness” a “trap” (in Dewey, 1974: 290). He wonders whether Kierkegaard’s debate with Hegel didn’t lead to this extreme position, and notes that he, Percy, prefers the Thomist argument that faith is a form of knowledge available in the social realm. Percy’s preference is indeed good Catholic theology. As Jack Mulder notes in his monograph *Kierkegaard and the Catholic Tradition*, “the Catholic tradition thinks that reason actually makes faith possible” (2010: 21).

Indeed, Percy decides to read Kierkegaard’s arguments through a distinctly Catholic understanding—one that prompts a literal misreading. Percy meditates upon his interest in the “Difference between a Genius and an Apostle” essay. He recognizes that the genius–apostle opposition is about types of knowledge, the arguable claims of geniuses versus the essentially holy and true “news” of the Christian apostle.¹ But unlike Kierkegaard, Percy views the incipient believer as a rational being in a rational world, essentially responsible for a relationship with God. “I think Kierkegaard said,” Percy remarks,

if the hearer of the [Christian] news asks the apostle, “On what grounds am I supposed to believe this news?” the apostle simply replies that “I have the authority to tell it to you and if you don’t believe me it is your fault . . .” You better believe it, and if you don’t believe it it’s on your own head. (in Dewey, 1974: 285)

Perhaps Percy here projects onto Kierkegaard’s theology a Catholic understanding of the apostle as priest in the line of the apostolic succession, and of faith as a form of reasonable knowledge to be learned from the pastorate. It seems so because he goes on to describe the priest’s role in *The Last Gentlemen* as paradigmatic of Kierkegaard’s description of the apostle (1974: 285).

But Kierkegaard scholars agree without exception that he denies the possibility of suasion, mediation, teaching, counseling, or preaching in bringing a person to faith. It is never “on your own head” if after encountering a Christian message you then fail to believe in God’s offer of relation. In Kierkegaard’s essay the apostle does declare faith to be a matter of the individual’s conscience (1995a: 341), but this is merely Kierkegaard reminding us where existential change occurs—in the inward reaches of the individual rather than in community or congregation. Indeed, Kierkegaard regards resistance and denial of the gospel “news” as normal, deeply human instincts. Resistance to and denial of God’s love are the very

ground of most human action, as his descriptions of the aesthetic and ethical stages make clear. Grace, on the other hand, Kierkegaard understands as coming from a loving God to a needy, suffering person. Choice is involved, but the believer *chooses herself before God* in the midst of terrible if unconscious despair, even as God chooses the believer. Then this believer has the chance to act from authentic impulse rather than through resistance or denial. Viewed in a properly Kierkegaardian light, any Apollonian route to faith, any route which is calm, reasonable, or becoming to the community, is actually a route to the penultimate ethical stage.

Ironically, Percy believed that he had gone to some trouble in *The Moviegoer* to expose limitations of the ethical life. Both Binx's mother and aunt epitomize the ethical life, and neither of them supplies Binx with a durable philosophy to live by. Binx recognizes in his mother an instinct or a wish to believe wholeheartedly in a loving God. But after experiencing the pain of her first husband's wartime death, son Duval's drowning, and son Lonnie's diagnosis with a deadly wasting disease, she is afraid to confront the relevant existential questions. She wants everything "colloquial and easy, even God" (1960: 142). She speaks of Lonnie's fasting and wish to receive extreme unction, signs of his fervent wish for God, as risible things, "a malignant joke on Lonnie and God" (1960: 142). Emily, during her furious chastisement of Binx in the novel's final pages, exposes her own beliefs as even more severely limited. Though Percy claims that during this scene he has both "admired" and "attacked" Aunt Emily's Southern Stoicism (in Dewey, 1974: 296), she comes off as righteous, self-satisfied, entitled, and (as we shall see), racist. As Percy notes, her arguments find little purchase on Binx, a point Percy makes in another interview in Kierkegaard's terms: "[Binx] has no ethical sphere at all. That's what Aunt Emily can't understand about him. He just doesn't believe in being the honorable man, doing the right thing, for its own sake" (in Carr, 1985: 66).

Percy shares the ultimate Kierkegaardian premise that "the only way to be yourself is to be yourself transparently before God" (in Dewey, 1974: 282). This is indeed the *telos* of Kierkegaard's schema, the believer's emergent wish to relate personally with a loving God, and prayer that God will inform the believer's conscience. Certainly Percy reads Binx as having achieved authentic faith: "Binx jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious" (in Carr, 1985: 66). But this is a problematic claim, since for Kierkegaard the life of faith is so ineffable and severe that he denied having achieved it himself.² Still, we should take Percy at his word and consider the nature of the faith that he insists Binx has adopted. First, there is a quiet, sanguine, Apollonian Catholic quality to Binx's personality, even as he deals with his own and Kate's and the Smith children's grief over Lonnie's death, about which they have just learned, and with Kate's neurotic anxieties about performing tasks on her own. As Kate notes, there is a sweetness to his manner that we have not seen before (1960: 240). Second, Binx has achieved a compassion that his Aunt Emily had lacked when he was a child grieving his brother Scotty's death. Unlike his aunt, Binx does not encourage any of the Smith children to act like soldiers amid their grief over Lonnie's death, as Emily encourages him to do

outside a hospital where his brother lies dead (1960: 4). Third, Binx feels no need to display his faith as faith. He seems to understand that pride in piety is useless, and that the Christian's real and sole task is to love God and others. He has concluded his search successfully by realizing, finally, that his dismissal of God as possibility and reality has been badly mistaken.

A more authentically Kierkegaardian misreading of *The Moviegoer* must begin at about the point where Percy's most Kierkegaardian current critics leave off. Martin Luschei and Linda Whitney Hobson apply Kierkegaard's three stages to the novel carefully, accepting Percy's guidance essentially whole. Many other critics and biographers have followed their lead. Cecil Eubanks is an admirable exception to this trend, as he usefully extends the standard reading by evaluating critically Percy's understanding of grace and Christian right action in the world. He recognizes that there is a thread of post-Catholic Christian theology that argues for the possibility of transforming action in the real world rather than the merely interiorized, subjective change in consciousness that Percy and Dewey mistakenly believe Kierkegaard proposes. What Percy, Dewey, and Eubanks do not seem to realize fully enough, however, is that throughout *Works of Love* and other "edifying" or "upbuilding" discourses, Kierkegaard does indeed argue for loving action emerging from faith, and for the healthy intersubjectivity that results from living by loving conscience.

As I read *The Moviegoer*, Binx enacts a journey from alienated subjectivity to a Christian passion for God and neighbor, a pilgrimage that he does not make on the Apollonian basis that Percy claims to prefer, but only as a result of both deep fear and deep shame. Out of this fear and shame, which critics have not emphasized, Binx makes Kierkegaard's genuine leap of faith, and in doing so learns a truer meaning of a term he has previously used only in a diminished, corrupted way: This term is *repetition*, and as Percy knows, it means much more than merely a titillating prompt to memory and consciousness of time, as Binx suggests when he describes the repetition of seeing an old film in a movie theater he frequented during college (1960: 79). For Kierkegaard, true repetition is nothing less than the fulfillment of God's promise to the believer, a promise of eternal loving attention, and the resulting personal wholeness that emerges from the believer's gratitude. As the pseudonymous Constantin Constantius writes in *Repetition*, "eternity... is the true repetition" (1983b: 221). This confidence in eternity is what Binx achieves, but only through personal crisis. Percy creates an intricate crisis in which Binx eventually comes to feel as despised as the demeaned and embattled "Negroes" of his city—and then, strangely, as hopeful as some of them appear to him to be.

Early chapters of the novel mainly depict Binx in encounters with others in a vapid social world. These meetings introduce us to a catalog of types of despair, only a few of which I have room to describe. Most of the people Binx meets relate to him not through love or any other personal passion, but through mere membership in fraternity, krewes, club, university, and family. Since these collective institutions tend to militate against the personal uniqueness through which one relates to God, and since institutions provide individuals with an alienated language, they

foster despair. So, for example, Binx meets up with fellow broker and cousin-in-law Eddie Lovell. Binx briefly thinks that Eddie's talk about "business, his wife Nell," and preparation for a flip sale of the "old house they are redecorating" offers a real future. "It comes over me:" Binx tells us, "this is how one lives!" (1960: 18). But soon enough Binx's nose for *merde* sniffs out Eddie's alienation. Eddie speaks piously about a dead client, but is obviously thrilled that this death landed him a commission on "nine hundred and fifty thou" (1960: 19). Like Binx, Eddie experienced his brother dying young—Kate's fiancé who dies mangled in a bloody car crash. But Eddie makes no mention of this existential horror the two men share (1960: 20). Thinking about death only heightens despair; better to be distracted.

Aunt Emily's manservant Mercer also emerges as one of Binx's despairing foils. Though some critics view Binx's condescension toward Mercer as one of his more obvious sins, Binx is neither condescending nor cruel when he notes that Mercer is a petty thief with "aspirations" rather than the devoted family servant others believe him to be.³ In fact, Binx feels some sympathy for Mercer, viewing him as another searcher like himself, forced to act unchosen roles in the Cutrer household. Binx simply knows that trying to find meaning through a book like Mercer's favorite, *How To Harness Your Secret Powers*, is bound to fail. This is the half-sympathetic sense in which Binx thinks of Mercer as a "poor bastard" (1960: 24). Ironically, of course, Binx's search is hardly more sophisticated than Mercer's. He listens to the *This I Believe* program and reads Einstein on the anonymous, mechanistic God implied by the laws of physics. It is no unplanned coincidence that after Aunt Emily cuts Binx down to her size late in the novel, Kate calls him a "poor stupid bastard" too, for listening as Mercer does to unloving and thus useless advice (1960: 227).

Though Percy develops further meetings with avatars of the overconfident ethical, especially meetings between Binx and Kate's father Uncle Jules, her fiancé Walter Wade, and honored family friend Sam Yerger, the women with whom Binx pursues amorous affairs are just as important. The secretaries should not be read as mere pawns in Binx's aesthetic game (though they are that) or as mere adjuncts to his despair. Percy only *seems* to believe that men alone have existential lives, or assertive women like Aunt Emily and Kate. Linda and Sharon and Sharon's friend Joyce are real people too, trying like all of us to discover an authentic way to live. Setting aside particular ironic details that might be explored, what is notable about these young women is that they seek meaning through partnership rather than membership. They believe in the form of love Kierkegaard calls *Elskov*, erotic love, and they tolerate Binx's amorous moves in the hope that he will become a more devotedly loving partner. Like every other despairing person in the novel, they lack authenticity in action, playing mildly dishonest courtship games. Also like Binx and his buddies, they need to experience *Kjærlighed*, love as God-informed conscience. Only then will they be released from their unconscious despair and from dependence on bending reeds such as Binx for existential meaning.

Kate is the exception in this parade of unloving family and friends. Like Binx, she is alert to lies and pretensions and other forms of inauthenticity. She too can smell the *merde*. As she caustically says to Binx, “You’re like me, but worse. Much worse” (1960: 43). What she means is that she and Binx share the habitual disposition that sick young Lonnie mentions later in the novel: they find themselves desiring death. Kate has her family alarmed because she has been experimenting with wine and sodium pentobarbital, a combination known to work well as euthanasia and suicide agents. We can guess why Kate wants to die. She cannot feel love for the men who claim to love her, dead fiancé Lyell Lovell and living one Walter Wade. She tells Binx how she betrayed Lyell as he lay newly dead on the Natchez Trace after their head-on car crash. She pretended that she didn’t even know him and boarded a bus for anyplace else. She speaks of Walter as a ridiculous fellow. Her betrayal of Lyell is the greater shame, and probably (to play the game of literary diagnosis) the primary cause of her current psychological distress. Her central symptom of feeling no love and little compassion comes straight from Kierkegaard, who views balked neighbor-love (and the spouse or beloved is the nearest “neighbor”) as the most tragic social result of the existential sickness unto death (1995b: 51).⁴ Yet she seems to love Binx, as he loves her. The two are quasi-siblings, and there is a quality of profound filial love in their relation, even as they learn to love each other more intimately. In the rising action of the novel, then, we recognize Kate as a special character in our diagnosis of Binx’s malady and our search for its cure.

Binx seems to sense that Kierkegaard knows the cure. One of the great problems of this novel and its Kierkegaardian character is Binx’s conscious and idiosyncratic use of terms from the first existentialist’s writings. “Rotation” and “repetition” are two such terms, while “despair” is used more generally and without the precise definition the other terms received. Percy holds up the word “search” as though it were Kierkegaardian, but it definitely is not. In his fictionalized indirect discourses, Kierkegaard’s characters are never conscious of their full existential state, never engaged in a deliberate search for deeper meaning. They tend rather to epitomize and defend the goodness of either the aesthetic or the ethical life, and do so without knowing that there is yet another credible life available to leap into. Even the heroic Abraham of *Fear and Trembling* does not choose the leap of faith; he chooses to obey the God who speaks in him, and that is what makes him heroic.

It must be the case that even before the novel begins, before Binx is prompted by memories of the Korean War to begin a “search,” he has been reading Kierkegaard (1960: 10). But he must read selectively, and with very incomplete understanding. Even before the novel begins, Binx has clearly read the “Rotation of the Crops” essay of *Either/Or*, published in 1843. We know this because on the novel’s fourth day Binx takes Lonnie and Sharon to a drive-in movie, experiencing there what he calls a *rotation*, or in his words, “the experiencing the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (1960: 144). Kierkegaard does not use the term *rotation* in that nominalized form, but here Binx reads the Dane accurately. In his essay, Kierkegaard presents papers found in an abandoned desk in which an

aesthete known as A argues that those like him, living by hedonic pleasure and intricate gaming, must constantly seek fresh experiences. In just this way a farmer rotates crops on a particular field in order to preserve or restore certain nutrients in the soil (1987a: 281ff.). *Rotation* is not a bad word for what Kierkegaard observes among the aesthetic-minded. But it seems that Binx has read this essay with no ironic distance, as he takes satirical advice as sincere. In *Either/Or* and elsewhere, Kierkegaard satirizes merely aesthetic repetitions and rotations because they are compulsive and flippant, bound to fail because they are soon depleted and existentially null anyway.

Binx has also obviously read or heard about Kierkegaard's 1843 book *Repetition*. We know this because on the second of the novel's eight days Binx takes Kate to a movie and she torments him by clumsily adopting and employing his own favored terms, *repetition* and *vertical search*, the former obviously Kierkegaard's and the latter apparently Binx's own coinage (1960: 82). Unfortunately for Binx, the terms sound childish and fetishistic as Kate applies them, and he realizes that the shallowness is not only a product of Kate's limited understanding. Binx hears his own philosophy sounding shallow, a cause of his half-conscious despair and a sign that he is about ready to make a stage-leap.

So Percy cleverly shows that even an interest in Kierkegaard can be an aesthetic strategy of existential avoidance. One can contrive a vertical existential search and, ironically, employ that search in the mission of avoiding existential awareness. Knowing some Kierkegaard—indeed knowing any kind of knowledge—is useless in getting Binx the help he needs with the crucial Kierkegaardian question raised in this the middle section of the novel: How is he going to discover the living God and leap into God's loving and eternal relationship? The answer is that he must begin to regard the leap of faith as real, along with its actual cause, despair. And he does. No part of the novel is more important in this regard than Binx's trip to Chicago, that "Misery, misery, son of a bitch of all miseries" of a city (1960: 98).

I am not aware of the critic who has understood the Kierkegaardian importance of the Chicago episode in the novel, an understanding that requires us to set aside Binx's own silly reasons for disliking the city.⁵ It is not that Chicago has an unknown "spirit-presence," or that Binx "may find himself No one and Nowhere" in a place so far from home. It is not that Chicagoans have alien "personal rays" (1960: 99). It is not that for Southerners a Northern city confers a "wrenching rinsing sadness," or that the winds off the lake "[cry] out alarm" (1960: 203). Binx's antipathy for Chicago has to do with his own youthful bad faith. The city reminds him of a necessary act of love that, sadly, he would not perform on his father's behalf. This moment in 1930s Chicago is the source of Binx's deepest shame, a shame so tormenting that he has to write mental poetry about a mythically alien Chicago in order to avoid understanding it.

Shortly after Binx's brother Scott's death, Binx recalls, he and his father went to the Field Museum for an outing. As they "stood before a tableau of Stone Age Man, father mother and child crouched around an artificial ember," Binx's father, reminded of Scott and his formerly intact family, suddenly feels a desperate need

for love. He appeals to his son. “I turned and saw what he needed of me,” Binx recalls, “very special father and son we were that summer, he staking his everything this time on a perfect comradeship.” Young Binx knows that he cannot heal his father’s grief, that the demand is unreasonable and the act unrealizable. But the point is that Binx would not even try to return his father’s love with the simplest, easiest gesture—a hug, a smile. “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” (1960: 204).

Viewing this moment ethically, we probably excuse Binx, realizing that no child is responsible for bearing, sharing, or managing a parent’s grief. The boy Binx is bearing his own load of grief, living now without his brother. But Kierkegaard asks that we view nontrivial human acts as transcending ethical norms, as creative *works of love*. It is hard to imagine a loving conscience that would allow Binx to act this way. The adult Binx seems to realize that if he had acted out his filial love more honestly, even with that hug or smile, he might have comforted his father at little personal cost. Binx might also realize that “cool perversity” and “atavistic recoil” are precisely the pathologies he has carried with him through his adult years.

This memory is enough to render Chicago a misery for Binx, but Percy ups the ante. He takes care to amplify Binx’s shame. Chicago is also the home of Binx’s Korean War comrade Harold Graebner and his wife, who have just named their new baby as Binx’s godson. On the previous Friday, Binx receives an invitation to the baptism, but finds himself unable to phrase a proper rejection (atavistic recoil again), one he himself could consider sincere. His draft is a failure:

The words are without grace.

Dear Harold: Thank you for asking me to be godfather to your baby. Since, however, I am not a practical Catholic, I doubt if I could. But I certainly appreciate—
Certainly appreciate. Tear it up. (1960: 88)

He never does answer the invitation. Binx’s behavior toward the Graebners in their suburban Chicago home is equally graceless. Just before the visit, Binx and Kate find themselves unable to take seriously their roles in the brokers’ conference, so they retreat to the bars of the Loop for a series of drinks. Unwisely, the two then decide to visit the Graebners. Harold is at first delighted to see Binx, but after Binx delivers a *pro forma* and basically insincere apology for failing to attend the baby’s baptism, performed just the day before, Harold becomes agitated and hostile. A bit drunk and therefore slow on the uptake, Binx realizes, “Harold is actually getting mad at me” (1960: 211). Binx fails to view himself as his war buddy must—drunk, insincere, and flippant about the Graebners’ spiritual practices. Binx does not seem to realize how rude it is to have skipped the baptism the day before, then arrive in Chicago with no real excuse for not attending. Harold apparently feels this neglect as a deep betrayal. He remains so angry and hostile that Binx feels physically threatened, so he and Kate leave. And again, in Chicago, Binx is unconsciously ashamed of himself.

Percy thus craftily unites Binx's fear with his shame. Both emerge from his Korean experiences and contacts: fear from his near-mortal wounding in the Chongchon Valley, and shame from his routine failure to love, illustrated sharply by this betrayal of his wartime friend, the man who risked his own life to save Binx's. The setting of Chicago brings into play Binx's betrayal of his father, which is both more ambiguous and much more deeply shaming. Connecting fear with shame is not existentially important, but a sign that Percy has taken some care to load Binx with intolerable emotions in a way that we read as intended. And Binx's fear and shame are intended, for they are the source of his despair, his sense that he is powerless to change himself. He does not feel these intolerable emotions because he has transgressed ethically, violated some communal expectation such as the canons of the church or a code shared by war veterans. It is because he knows—even as he works furiously to avoid knowing—that his shame is his failure to love those he should love. Since for Kierkegaard God provides the love that allows believers to see and serve the neighbor, this is indeed a cause of despair defined as deadly distance from God. This despair is the motive energy for Binx's leap of faith.

Percy has also taken care to illustrate the consequences of such bad faith in action—not, as Aunt Emily believes, by taking Kate along on the Chicago trip, but before. Between Uncle Jules's assigning the Chicago trip to Binx and his disgraced return to New Orleans, Binx, in his heightened angst, lies repeatedly about serious matters. He tells Sharon that he needs her assistance in writing letters to clients, but the project is a sham—and so, presumably is the financial advice (1960: 102ff). Binx simply wants time alone with Sharon, and his clients are not currently on his conscience. That same evening Binx finds Kate in deep emotional distress and, bizarrely, proposes marriage to her (1960: 112).⁶ But he does not mean it: the next morning he pursues Sharon even more enthusiastically, creating a sham business luncheon on the Gulf Coast in order to get her out of town with him (1960: 118). This coercion is chastened when Binx, after a long, amorous day at the beach, takes Sharon to the remote family fishing camp for the lovemaking that has been his true project all along—and finds the cabin “ablaze like the Titanic” and full of family. Binx gets what he really deserves and what Kierkegaard and Percy say he unconsciously desires—the Titanic-like sinking of the aesthetic hopes he has pursued so dishonestly, and a more genuine project for his works of love: a beloved, vulnerable family.

The fishing-camp scene thus illustrates this contrast between the aesthetic “Small Way” and the life of faith, the work of love. During this episode the mortally ill and precociously theological Lonnie Smith implies his own hope in eternity. However, critics who view him as a Kierkegaardian knight of faith or Christian apostle may be missing crucial details from both Kierkegaard's works and Percy's novel. As Kierkegaard describes the knight of faith in *Fear and Trembling*, he is simply another citizen with a peaceable personality, certainly no pietist or preacher or special witness to the Christian truth. The knight of faith acts ethically because he loves his neighbor, so he appears just like those living out the

demands of the ethical stage. But he has been transformed inwardly; he is at peace with himself and confident in his eternal future (Kierkegaard, 1983a: 38ff.). Lonnie, on the other hand, is clearly and understandably anxious about his mortality, eager as his half-brother Binx to seek distraction through moviegoing—not to mention through premature ceremonies of extreme unction (1960: 142). Lonnie also envies his dead brother Duval on Christian spiritual grounds, a sign of anxiety since for Kierkegaard the life of faith renews purpose in living today rather than deferring meaning to a desirable afterlife. Curiously, Lonnie's confession of a "disposition to envy" also has an ironic role. It causes Binx to pretend a Kierkegaardian faith. Binx knows the response Lonnie will consider fitting: "Why shouldn't you be [envious]? He sees God face to face and you don't." Lonnie needs to hear this doctrine, but it is less a declaration of faith the half-brothers share than an intricate fibbing game between buddies. As Binx realizes, just as the other Smith children have water skiing for diversion, Lonnie has theological disputation (1960: 163). Lonnie is no apostle and Binx no convert to his message. If anyone makes an apostolic declaration of the gospel news, it is Binx declaring this news to his unhearing self: it is possible, as Kierkegaard hopes, to see God face to face.

Binx is still a few shaming trials from believing the news himself. Even though he lies, dissembles and coerces, Binx is a reasonably loving son, brother, and boss. He is no more broken or sinful than Kierkegaard expects people to be. However, he is in need of relief from suffering. Both Friday night in his boarding room and Saturday night at the fishing camp, he wakes on the floor, shivering with fear, tormented by the meaninglessness, the "everydayness" of his life (1960: 110, 145). As he had earlier in the novel, in a conversation with his cousin Nell, he feels that everyone is dead (1960: 99ff.). He knows that he needs to change, but not how this is going to happen. He reasons carefully about his existence, including the possibility that his life emanates from the Creator God (see, for example, 1960: 13ff. and 145–47). But when he hears the word God, "a curtain comes down" in his head (1960: 145). The bayou church he attends with Sharon and the Smith family strikes him as unusually beautiful and dignified during the sacrament of the Eucharist (1960: 160). The liturgy is a demonstration of Thomist truth, but he remains unchanged after the service. That same evening, after shedding Sharon, Binx allows Kate to talk him into a mutual pilgrimage to Chicago, where the two conspire to alarm and irritate and frighten and disappoint those who love them. Binx's night-terrors and habit of mutual manipulation with Sharon and Kate are the clearest signs that he lives in bad faith and really must change.

This change occurs sometime after the wonderful late-novel scene in the Cutrers' home. If Aunt Emily's Ash Wednesday lecture to Binx heightens his despair, then her African American servants are the agents of the grace he later receives. Emily wants to shame Binx into adopting more of the *noblesse oblige* that she connects with graciousness, including his adoption of a more dignified profession. She is not wrong to wish for Binx a vocation more dedicated to the care of others. But she also wants him to remain more loyal to her priorities, especially her strategies for managing Kate's depression—a more dubious project. Disturbingly, she wants

Binx to recognize his natural superiority to others, particularly local African Americans whom she believes have very wrongly formed a “minority group” in order to “blackmail the government”—a typical reactionary characterization of the Civil Rights efforts of the early 1960s. As both a white man and a Bolling, Aunt Emily argues, Binx should do better.

Binx is unmoved by Aunt Emily’s critique. He feels shame, but not the shame his aunt intends him to feel as she reminds him of his supposed duties. It is the shame of living amid injustice unaddressed. As Emily’s rant proceeds, Binx gradually turns his attention away from her and toward four others: Bessie Coe, Mercer, a chimney sweep named Clothard, and an anonymous man walking along Prytania Street outside. He begins to notice Emily’s cruel condescension toward people she regards as representing a particular race and class. Though blacks serve her loyally, she regards them as civic blackmailers and a cause of national mediocrity. Eventually, she points with her letter opener to the black man on Prytania, declaring that if he is the end of evolution then she is content to leave this broken world (1960: 223–24). It is a false and flippant remark. She fears death as much as anyone else, and would certainly not give up her life over frustrations with black neighbors she regards as feckless. Though she claims to believe in no afterlife, she imagines one in which she will look the “high gods” in the eye “without apology” (1960: 224)—the very theological pride Kierkegaard connects with the ethical. And flippant pride is distance from God, which is despair.

Binx finally does find reason to release his own pride, by turning his attention to the cruelly despised around him, Emily’s servants and the African American people in the near neighborhood. On the day of Aunt Emily’s chiding speech, Bessie Coe’s “querulous” voice sounds very human against the background of the “vacuum cleaners, dishwasher, [and] laundromat” that she serves. The Cutrer servants are usually seen gripping the machines that define their work. Mercer is also tied to a machine on this morning, a floor waxer. This is very alienated work for a man who discusses nuclear disarmament and understandably wants to harness his secret powers (1960: 225). As Emily talks on, Binx hears from outdoors the voice of Clothard, “the last of the chimney sweeps.” Notably, Clothard does not grip a machine, but rather a bundle of “palmetto leaves” he uses to sweep away ashes (1960: 226). The Christian imagery is unmistakable: palm leaves to greet the Lord with; ashes as the consequence of unredeemed death. Perhaps Binx now begins to feel that he is less a noble young Bolling prince than an alienated servant living a personal exodus and looking for a Moses to go down and set him free.

Of course it is another black man with a smudge of ashes on his forehead who that same evening prompts Binx to fuller spiritual consciousness. As Binx and Kate seriously and fearfully ponder marriage together, a “florid new Mercury pulls up”—Mercury implying a message from the gods—“and a Negro gets out.” This aspiring middle-class man with an “Archie Moore mustache” walks into the nearby Catholic church. Binx and Kate discuss her fear of making her own decisions, a discussion which takes a turn toward matters of free will. Kate wants Binx to be like God to her, to direct her every action. But this is flawed theology in Percy’s and

Kierkegaard's terms. Faith is supposed to confer perfect freedom and the confidence to act. Faith does not hand over the existential reins to a controller-God. Here, for the first time, Binx seems to have earnest questions to ask regarding faith. He sees the "Negro" emerge from the church, presumably with Ash Wednesday ashes on his brow. Binx notes, with existential import, that it is "impossible to say why he is here," this ash-colored stranger. Binx ponders a question that gets to the heart of rationalist and absurdist descriptions of faith: "Is [churchgoing] part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants?" (1960: 235).

The corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants refers to another similar distinction: between classical, rationalist imagery of glorious death and the Christian image of the beautiful, redeeming, life-giving child. We know Percy well enough to know which of these he sided with. What is intriguing is how Percy argues for an Apollonian faith based in reason when *The Moviegoer* epitomizes a more Kierkegaardian journey, emerging from anxious desperation, moving through ordinarily human shame, and arriving at a peace that passes all rational understanding. When Binx and Kate finally move as loving married couple into Eddie Lovell's redecorated shotgun house, it is a real repetition: mere house becomes true home, just as depressing everydayness becomes blessed eternity.

Because Percy withholds from us the story of Binx Bolling's arrived faith we will never know whether he leapt into faith because of intolerable anxiety and shame, or whether, on the other hand, he simply recognized and chose faith with an Apollonian awareness and the help of Kate's love. Binx may therefore represent either Percy's deep interest in Kierkegaard's existential Christianity, faith as offensive leap into life-granting absurdity, or his commitment to Thomistic knowledge and the life-granting apostolic message of the Church. More likely Percy presents a tension between the two spiritual economies, as he does in the epigraphs to *The Message in the Bottle*. In that essay, as Farrell O'Gorman points out, "Aquinas's claim that 'the act of faith consists essentially in knowledge' is juxtaposed with Kierkegaard's that 'faith is not a form of knowledge.'" O'Gorman also points out that "the Catholic tradition itself is not limited to Thomism or 'humanism,'" that Percy's work, along with Flannery O'Connor's, was "profoundly shaped by Christian existentialism's sense of the lonely individual in a society where traditional moral codes had collapsed and history did not seem even a potential guide to meaning" (2004: 83).

My aim has been to show that *The Moviegoer*, arguably Percy's best novel and most distilled expression of aesthetic, ethical, and grace-inspired faithful living, may be read as a more profoundly Kierkegaardian novel than critics have shown. But this project in no way excludes the possibility that Percy remained steadfast in his critique of Kierkegaard as mistakenly contemptuous of the church and its wisdom. Unfortunately, examining Binx's behavior really does not help us to settle this matter. As Kierkegaard points out, genuine faith in God's loving and attentive presence, a faith leading to hope in eternity and

authentic love for others, even as death and social bleakness nearly overwhelm it, appears to others exactly like secular stoic forbearance and ethical kindness. I take Percy at his word that Binx achieves faith, taking that to mean that Binx's love and care for Kate and his half-siblings is inspired by grace, especially his care to offer the children hope in their brother's continued existence and bodily wholeness after he dies, and in his care to offer Kate freedom and dignity as she copes with her persistent acute anxiety.

Still, respecting Kierkegaard's theology in *The Moviegoer* leads to consequences that may be clarifying. Gary Ciuba, Michael Kobre, and John D. Sykes, three of the novel's best interpreters, all point to the importance of Binx's heartening turn toward Kate and his siblings in the final pages of the novel. All three write eloquently and movingly of Binx's deepened love for others. All three note that Binx has achieved a more authentic identity and speech, signs of the life-granting character of faith. But these three critics also accept the notion that Kate helps bring Binx to his faith in and relation with God. Ciuba writes that "Binx's progress to God would be impossible without Kate" (1991: 94), Kobre that "Kate's love is literally Binx's salvation in the depths of his despair" (2000: 76), and Sykes that Binx and Kate perform an "act of faith in pledging themselves to each other" (2007: 126). These are Thomistic Catholic claims, predicated upon a God who is commensurable with human thoughts and acts. These remarks imply that human love and desire for personal goodness lead to faith. However, Kierkegaard argues vehemently that no person may be the agent of another's faith, no teaching brings one to faith, and no effort avails in seeking faith. Faith is a passion that can only emerge from existential despair, the enervating knowledge that life is short and purpose absurd. Faith is life-granting absurdity replacing enervating, mortal absurdity. Intentionally, it seems, Percy leaves the door open to the possibility that on a particular Ash Wednesday Binx finally recognizes the massive despair floating beneath the visible kind he talks about, that he makes the leap of faith because of God's gift of grace and the openness that despair has created in him; and that his more patient and creative love for Kate, the kids, his aunt, and all other neighbors is the result of his faith, not its cause.

Notes

1. Kierkegaard names only one exemplary apostle: St. Paul. Notably, for reasons we can only theorize, he did not name St. Peter, founder of the catholic/Catholic Christian church.
2. Kierkegaard implies throughout his work that he regarded his own faith as a terrifying challenge rather than a settled matter. See for example *Journal and Papers*, VI 6444 (Pap. X1 A541) (1849) in 1987b: 451–52.
3. Robert Lacy is perhaps the most adamant of those who find fault with Binx for his comments on Mercer. "Mercer is the most important black character in the book," writes Lacy, "and he is there primarily to act as an object of Binx's scorn—not for his blackness but for his resistance to the stereotype of Faithful Family Retainer" (2011: 51).

4. Kierkegaard argues in *Sickness Unto Death* (1983c) that separation from God is the “sickness unto death.” Without the God of pure possibility, and that God’s gift of eternal meaning, life is merely an absurdly brief prelude to eternal death.
5. Gary Ciuba notes that Chicago is a special “catastrophe” for Binx (his word and Percy’s), but does not emphasize the same scenes that I do. He focuses mainly on Binx and Kate as alienated lovers, Kate as Tillie the Toiler and Binx as Whipple. Ciuba views Chicago as important because it “localizes the terminal despair of failed intimacy” (1991: 83–85).
6. Cleverly, Binx proposes beneath a glowing sign on a Shell gas station. Binx calls the shell an “immaculate bivalve,” which implies a sign of truly divine love contrasting his own flippant regard for Kate at this moment, the immaculate heart (or inner life) of Mary (1960: 112).

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