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Walker Percy's Rhetoric of Time, Apocalypse, and the Modern Predicament

I. Narrative in the Diagnosis and Treatment of Boredom

Among avowedly Christian writers of merit in the late twentieth century, Walker Percy is distinguished not only by his novelistic achievement but also by the range and sophistication of his intellectual interests. Valued by some readers primarily as a novelist and by others as a philosopher or even a guru, Percy has engaged in his fiction and essays with French existentialism, the civil rights movement in the South, the mid-twentieth-century revival of scholasticism, the theories and fortunes of psychoanalysis, the historical burdens of being a white southern male, the relationship between anthropology and the philosophy of language, the sexual revolution, the critique of scientism and technological hubris, the fascination of apocalyptic fantasy, the possibility that a distinctly southern culture and literature is dying, and the cultural and religious consequences of the Second Vatican Council.¹ There is no doubt, however, that Percy subordinated all of these

¹ Kieran Quinlan rightly notes that “Walker Percy is one of the few contemporary novelists who has made a difference in the lives of many of his readers” (13). James Atlas confirmed this statement when he interviewed Percy in 1980: “Percy has acquired a devoted, even fanatical following that responds to his work in a very personal way; readers are forever writing and calling him up to discuss their problems” (186).
engagements to his Catholic faith, or that his most devoted admirers turn toward this faith as the key that unlocks all the nuances of his thought. Like Muriel Spark, Percy was a convert who seems to have regarded his conversion as the precondition for his achieving an original writing voice. But he was far more forthright than Spark about his proselytizing impulses and his Catholic critique of culture, once describing his *modus operandi* in fiction as “ass-kicking for Jesus’ sake.”Yet Percy has also provoked more perplexity and more wide-ranging assessments than this straightforward commitment to “ass-kicking” would suggest—both among secular readers who admire his work and among Catholics who find the positive commitments of his faith blunted by the ironies and even the sheer range of his writing. If Percy’s emphasis on evangelization resembles Flannery O’Connor’s, how is it that he has largely avoided the polarizing response that surrounds O’Connor’s work—so that few readers would either make a case for Percy’s sainthood or simply revile him as a benighted reactionary?

The answer to this question, I believe, lies above all in the different stances that Percy and O’Connor take toward their audiences. Like O’Connor, Percy writes for an audience who believes that God is dead—but unlike O’Connor, he neither assumes the hostility of this audience nor believes that shock and violence are the most effective rhetorical strategies to appeal to it. Even when his characters’ “moments of grace” are accompanied by literal or metaphorical violence, the shock is muffled by the sheer geniality of Percy’s prose and its insistent posture that characters are real people to whom real things happen, not grotesques confronting divine violence. While O’Connor’s works do seem, in some readers, to sharpen the pleasures of self-righteousness, Percy’s suggest that his readers share the same essential “predicament” (to use one of his favorite words) as his characters—and indeed, as himself—and in doing so projects a reassuring sense of equality. Moreover, unlike Updike’s appeal to an American narcissism, which presupposes a theoretical human equality but frequently entails an icy misanthropy in practice, Percy’s evocation of a common predicament works, ironically, to strip his characters of their privileges, to render them everymen despite their marked departures from a generic, late twentieth-century American norm. All of Percy’s protagonists, like Percy himself, are white, upper-class males conscious of their familial legacies and increasingly unsure of how they should behave in a South that is losing its faith in blood and breeding, ideologies of white supremacy, and traditional codes of honor. Their efforts to read correctly the markers that determine other

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characters’ places in the social hierarchy probably strike contemporary readers as rarefied, comic, or sinister, but above all as anachronistic. Yet one of Percy’s most remarkable achievements is to make such characters sympathetic, so that readers discern in their befuddlement not an unpleasant mixture of elitism and self-pity but rather finely observed variations on the Percyan predicament—the mutually reinforcing problems of boredom and sinfulness, as well their somatic expression, clinical depression. Indeed, as befits a physician-turned-Christian writer, Percy conceives of conversion not only as a matter of salvation but also, secondarily, as a therapeutic breakthrough.

It is difficult to overstate the centrality of boredom—often described as a living death—to Percy’s work. “For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead” (99), says Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* (1961), and the theme continues through Father Smith’s conviction in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) that only dying people tell the truth, even though “Everyone else is dying too and spending their entire lives dying to themselves” (244). As Percy put it in “Questions They Never Asked Me” (1977), a “self-interview”: “[O]rdinary life in an ordinary place on an ordinary day in the modern world is a dreary business. I mean dreary. People will do anything to escape this dreariness: booze up, hit the road, gaze at fatal car wrecks, shoot up heroin, spend money on gurus, watch pornographic movies, kill themselves, even watch TV” (407). Boredom may lie at the intersection of “ordinary life” and “the modern world,” but Percy’s diagnostic emphasizes the second of these two terms. In *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), Percy maintains that the word “boredom” did not enter the English language until the eighteenth century, and, asking why this should be the case, proposes as one possibility the fact that “for the past two or three hundred years the self has perceived itself as a leftover which cannot be accounted for by its own objective view of the world” (70). According to this account, the “modern world” fully emerged in the eighteenth century, as Enlightenment and historical consciousness drove out myth and religion, forcing ethics to become secularized and the self to lose its formerly privileged yet also dependent position as a fallen creature of God. What began as the promise of liberation—that one can use one’s reason, know oneself, and transform the world—soon turned destructive: “If one had to set a date of the beginning of the end of the modern world, 1914 would be as good as any, because it was then that Western man, the beneficiary of precisely this scientific revolution and Christian ethic, began with great skill and energy to destroy himself” (*Signposts* 208).

In Percy’s view, Enlightenment promises of liberation cannot succeed, because consciousness and language, the very things that most distin-
guish human beings as a species, remain inexplicable if viewed through
the frames of positivist science and utilitarian philosophy. Consciousness
and facility with linguistic signs are the only things that allow humans
to place themselves in the world, yet their very existence is absurd, an
unaccountable “leftover.”

3 Scientists can explain distant phenomena in the
universe more fully than they can explain the most mundane daily experi-
ences (*Lost* 1), and their failure to legitimate experience as such leads both
to a preoccupation with the self and to an impoverishment of daily life.
Paraphrasing Kierkegaard, Percy critiques Hegel as the great exemplar of
such an attitude: “Hegel knew everything and said everything, except what
it was to be born and to live and to die” (*Conversations* 109). In the wake
of Hegel and all his successors who claim to have either transcended or
explained away mere experience, boredom flourishes. It is simultaneously
a heightened self-consciousness, “the self being stuffed with itself,” and a
“loss of sovereignty in which the self yields up plenary claims to every sec-
tor of the world to the respective experts and claimants of those sectors”
(*Lost* 71). Percy’s first rhetorical principle, then, is to assume that his readers
will find their own experiences “certified” in such a description, no mat-
ter who or where in modernity they may be. 4 It is as if all of his works ask
readers the questions that, he maintains, would be the most appropriate
questions to ask of extraterrestrial intelligences, should any ever turn up on
Earth—“Did it also happen to you? Do you have a self? If so, how do you
handle it? Did you suffer a catastrophe?” (109). Clearly, Percy expects most
readers to nod in recognition.

If such recognition is the necessary precondition for taking Percy’s
efforts to persuade seriously, then much of his work appears a repetitive
examination of different strategies to escape from boredom, to “redeem
the time.” The most obvious of these seek to abolish consciousness of time,
either by grasping a scheme of meaning that transcends time (such as sci-

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3. Geoffrey Galt Harpham has argued that inquiry into “language alone” has been the
dominant intellectual project of the twentieth century precisely because the term “stands as
a luminous and highly concentrated token of the multiple mysteries of human life” (236).
Percy anticipates this claim when he maintains, “What is involved in a theory of language is
a theory of man” (“Questions” 420).

4. “Certification” is defined by Binx Bolling in this way: “Nowadays when a person
lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he
will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates
the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it be-
comes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not
Anywhere” (*Moviegoer* 63). Though Binx refers here to the medium of film and to place in a
strictly geographical sense, I believe that the same logic describes Percy’s choice of fiction as
a medium and his notion that selves must “place” themselves temporally as well as spatially.
scientific laws and mathematics, or a totalizing philosophy such as Hegel’s) or by plunging as often as possible into pure immanent sensation (drugs, alcohol, promiscuity, or mindless consumption). Scientists and artists, according to Percy, can achieve a kind of temporary transcendence through their discoveries and creations, which seem to affirm some kind of truth beyond the flux of temporality, and though scientists suffer less from the inevitably transient nature of this exaltation than artists, this is a difference in degree, not in kind. Those who are neither artists nor scientists either suffer in silence or, embracing the palliatives of a consumer society, live in bad faith.

Yet though Percy focuses on the particular afflictions of modernity, he also holds that all was not well with the self in the serenely religious ages that preceded the Enlightenment. Even before there was what Weber calls “the disenchantment of the world,” there was original sin—that primordial rupture between human beings and God that forced humans into time (and death), predisposing them to selfishness and to the boredom and violence that are its inevitable consequences. This “disaster,” in which human consciousness “falls into the pit of itself” (Lost 212), loomed less large in premodern times not because human beings were qualitatively better (they weren’t), but because, at least in the Christian world, the knowledge that Jesus Christ had died to redeem all those who believe in him sufficed to make life meaningful and endurable, even in the midst of boredom. The Incarnation, in which God situates himself in human time and subjects himself to death, provides reassurance that even God has experienced something of the human predicament and loves us enough to deliver us from it. The waning of Christian faith, then, leaves humankind more vulnerable than ever. Condemned to be neither angels nor beasts, but “wayfarers” (a term Percy borrows from Gabriel Marcel), only the conviction of ultimate redemption can deliver humankind from the torments of boredom or from the unprecedented violence (for Percy, the two world wars of the twentieth

5. For Percy, the scientist suffers less because “[he] is the prince and sovereign of the age. His transcendence of the world is genuine. That is to say, he stands in a posture of objectivity over against the world, a world which he sees as a series of specimens or exemplars, and interactions, energy exchanges, secondary causes” (Lost 115). The artist, lacking both a comparable esteem from society at large and the posture of objectivity that scientists enjoy, is often incapacitated by everyday dreariness: “It is one thing to write The Sound and the Fury, to achieve the artistic transcendence of discerning meaning in the madness of the twentieth century, then to finish it, then to find oneself at Reed’s drugstore the next morning. A major problem of reentry, not solved but anaesthetized by alcohol” (123). Only in a few, rare instances—Percy mentions Simone Weil, Martin Buber, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer—do writers manage both to “become themselves transparently before God” and “to live intact through difficult lives” (157), and it seems significant that these exceptions are not writers of fiction. For an extended account of how Percy’s conception of transcendence and immanence informs his theories of fiction and of life, see especially Farrell O’Gorman (135–36, 141–49).
century and the threat of nuclear holocaust) toward which they tend in a technological age.

If Percy is largely successful in persuading readers that they share a general predicament of boredom and meaninglessness in the twentieth century (and this particular claim has been seconded by many non-Christian writers), he is, perhaps, less successful in persuading readers that conversion is the only effective remedy. In this Percy seems like a twentieth-century successor to Pascal, whose reflections on the misery and greatness of human beings continue to prove more resonant to more people than does his wager that hope for happiness must lie in faith. Pascal was, to be sure, aware of the gap between convincing people that faith might be reasonable and leading them to believe in its truth, and Percy confronts the same gap in his writings. His preferred strategy in negotiating it is indirection. Because the experience of boredom is inextricable from the experience of a time that cannot be redeemed, Percy guides the reader toward his Christian doctrines not by beginning with calls to repent and believe—indeed, the characters in his fiction who do so, such as Father Smith in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, are often presented with a certain destabilizing irony—but by suggesting that one’s first step should be to reconcile oneself to time.

Edward J. Dupuy, one of Percy’s best critics, has suggested that this step is also the fundamental project of autobiography, and in this sense, Percy’s novels and essays can be considered as reflections on the autobiographical dimension of all narrative. Drawing upon the work of James Olney, Georges Gusdorf, and Janet Varner Gunn, Dupuy holds that “[t]he autobiographer redeems his time through the interplay of past and present, which takes place in memory” (22), setting into motion a self-conscious repetition of events that reveals their significance. For both Percy and Dupuy, this redemption must involve an acceptance of temporality and one’s enmeshment in it, so that the self’s here and now becomes not just a limiting condition, but also a source of possibility. Such a project contrasts with certain prominent features of modernism—the spatializing of narrative form and the preoccupation with recurring, mythic structures that always already account for everything. For this reason, argues Dupuy, Percy’s work can be considered postmodern in some respects:

Autobiography and Percy as autobiographer . . . seem postmodern because they are not primarily concerned with the past but with the now. The autobiographer retrieves the past, and is thus preoccupied with it, but always from the perspective of the present. Percy’s characters, for their part, want nothing to do with the great southern archetypes of dignity and honor and
duty. Instead, they come to a realization of the possibility of acting now. Allie says in *The Second Coming*: “What was my (your, our) discovery? That I could act. I was free to act. . . . How does one ever make the discovery that one can actually be free to act for oneself? I don’t know. I don’t know how many people, if any, do it” (40). For both Percy and autobiography the past serves primarily as a repository of foreclosed potentialities. The possibility for action in time depends on these potentialities becoming actual. (20–21)

Here Dupuy’s argument aligns with Peter Augustine Lawler’s judgment that postmodernism should be seen as “human reflection on the failure of the modern project to eradicate human mystery and to bring history to an end” (1), and with Lawler’s assessment that Percy’s work exemplifies such reflection, because it affirms that “[h]uman beings have religious longings that cannot be satisfied by social or political reform” (109). The possibility for free action that Percy illuminates has little to do with politics, let alone with mastery of the world, but rather with the sudden discovery that one is free to love and be loved, wherever and whenever one finds oneself.

If Percy’s project is seen as postmodern in this way, one of the features of his writing that has exasperated many readers—his characteristic lack of novelistic closure—becomes more explicable. With the exception of *The Second Coming* (1980), Percy’s novels tend to end with their plots resolved but with their characters left nonetheless in a state of ambiguity—in some cases, possibly having converted or on the cusp of a conversion to Christianity (as in *The Moviegoer* and *Lancelot*), but without decisive clues that would confirm such a judgment, and with an overarching sense of irony that even had such an event taken place, life goes on. It is understandable that such ambiguity would frustrate both Christian readers who want a clearer affirmation of Christian dogmas and all ordinary readers who seek the pleasures of closure. Yet Percy’s endings in fact represent both the predicament that he diagnoses and the necessity of accepting temporal change. The only genuine closure in human life is death, and novels traditionally impart their sense of the meaning of a human life through their selection of an end that retrospectively determines this meaning—either death or something that functions as its structural equivalent, such as marriage. Peter Brooks’s insight that “plot is the internal logic of the discourse of mortality” (22), derived from his reading of Freud’s *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, states the problem well: readers who demand closure from Percy’s novels, seeking to read backward from their ends a definitive meaning (and thus

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6. I have criticized Percy on these grounds myself, but that was in another country. See my *Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South* (154–55, 166–68).
to redeem the time of reading), are also seeking the “death” of the narrative and enacting through their demand for it the belief that only death can confer meaning on life. Yet the corollary of such a view is that death (as well as the end of a narrative) is desired—the desire of narrative is not to elude its end but to arrive at it in its own individual fashion. Redemption thus becomes identical with individualized, meaningful death. On the other hand, in Christianity the world is already redeemed by Jesus’ sacrifice (even as human beings still live after the event), and Christians’ greatest difficulty consists of keeping faith with that redemption, perceiving its ultimate closure and promise of more abundant life not only in the hereafter but also in the very flux of banal dailiness. Until the moment of death, the story remains open: even those who have become Christian may fall away, and even the most confirmed atheist may come to believe. The greatest difficulty for Percy’s wayfarers is not merely to accept Christianity—or at least the necessity of something like it, since Percy is more explicit about this in some novels than in others—but to continue to live in the ordinary, dreary world after having arrived at this knowledge.

Percy’s novels suggest two broad strategies for characters who arrive at this point. Although rhetorically they are opposed to each other, they are shown to be complementary in practice, so that over the course of a novel, the same protagonist often oscillates between the two. The first involves embracing a sacramental understanding of the world, in which what had seemed irredeemably dreary appears in its true light as a splendid, gratuitous gift, charged, in Hopkinsesque fashion, with the glory of God. (Here, Percy follows the example of his mentor, Caroline Gordon, who explicitly conceived of fiction as a sacramental undertaking and declared, “I am

7. Although Percy was critical of Freud (in “Questions They Never Asked Me,” for instance, he expresses exasperation at Freud’s “rather stupid hydraulic model of art as the sublimation of libidinal energies” [405]), both he and his characters—above all, Dr. Thomas More—respect Freud’s preference for the long, hard work of analysis. More seems to be speaking for Percy when he says in The Thanatos Syndrome (whose very title expresses its debt to Beyond the Pleasure Principle), “Though I admired and respected Dr. Freud more than Dr. Jung, I thought Dr. Jung was right in encouraging his patients to believe that their anxiety and depression might be trying to tell them something of value. They are not just symptoms. It helps enormously when a patient can make friends with her terror, plumb the depths of her depression. . . . True, in the end Dr. Jung turned out to be something of a nut, the source of all manner of occult nonsense. Dr. Freud was not. He was a scientist, wrong at times, but a scientist nonetheless” (67). Part of More’s professional difficulties spring from the fact that “[o]ld-fashioned shrinks are out of style and generally out of work,” having been “mostly superseded by brain engineers, neuropharmacologists, chemists of the synapses” who reject “such a quixotic quest as pursuing the secret of one’s very self” (13). More’s most authentic mentor is identified in this novel as Harry Stack Sullivan, for his view that “[p]eople can get better, can come to themselves, without chemicals and with a little help from you” (17).
a Catholic, I suspect, because I was first a fiction writer." 8) Percy’s Chestertonian claim that “The only cure for depression is suicide” (Lost 75) is informed by the possibility of such sudden illuminations—only the “ex-suicide,” who knows that his depression is justified by the real conditions of the world and has seriously entertained the possibility of nonbeing, can also know that “he has nothing to lose by being alive. It is good to be alive” (Lost 79). More fortunate still are those characters in Percy who already possess such an attitude. Some are committed but unselfconscious Catholics (often lax in practice) who take life easily, enjoy ordinary domestic pleasures, and do not concern themselves much with what Binx Bolling calls “the old longings” (Moviegoer 9). Binx’s Uncle Jules, for instance, is “the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified.” He is “an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him” (Moviegoer 31). Binx’s mother also falls into this category: her Catholic faith appears to her son as “a bargain struck at the very beginning in which she settled for a general belittle-ment of everything, the good and the bad” (Moviegoer 142)—but a bargain that has worked well for her. Such minor characters do present a potential problem that is related to the novels’ lack of closure: if Percy’s recommended alternative, Catholicism, is not explicitly shown carrying the day against both modern anomie and rival belief systems—for instance, the cheerful evangelical Christianity in the background of The Second Coming and The Thanatos Syndrome—then the indirection that Percy employs can lead all too plausibly to conclusions that he would not have endorsed, that turning to Catholicism is merely a matter of therapeutic and aesthetic self-fashioning.

However, such portraits of Catholics ensconced in serene domesticity and aware, whether they verbalize it or not, of the sacramental in daily life, are juxtaposed in Percy’s fiction with a preoccupation with apocalypse. The modern world may be coming to an end, but for many of Percy’s characters, who believe that meaning can be recovered only in the aftermath of a general destruction, this end cannot arrive soon enough. Percy seems to give a qualified endorsement to his characters’ desires by selecting a passage from Romano Guardini’s The End of the Modern World as the epigraph to The Last Gentleman: “The world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean” (105). Yet it is important not to overstate the violence implied by Percy’s apocalyptic intimations, or

to equate it simply with the annihilation of humanity. As Gary M. Ciuba puts it, “Composed of all the unquestioned assumptions about reality, the world is the accustomed manner of looking or, for the unseeing seers at the beginning of Percy’s novels, the way of not looking. The end of the world is really the end of a worldview” (5). The expiring worldview is that of secular modernity, and Guardini suggests that as it goes, “the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies” (124). Meanwhile, Christianity will not itself become new—that is, it will not respond to contemporary exigencies by replacing its scandalous dogmas with something more appealing—but it will stand out more sharply against a non-Christian, secular world. The “animosity and danger” that Guardini forecasts are a consequence of this contrast, but so is the possibility for a more undiluted witness to the truth—and perhaps also a greater opportunity for unbelievers to be persuaded of it.

Although Percy’s protagonists yearn for the possibility of “seeing” in a new way, and thus are accurately described as “apocalyptists” in Ciuba’s sense of the word (5), their quests for a redeemed world—what Binx simply calls “the idea of the search” (Moviegoer 13)—are marred by confusion and even, on occasion, bloodlust. Actual moments of transfiguration, in which the sacramental erupts into consciousness, are often literally as well as metaphorically violent—such as when Binx counts among his “best times” (10) the moments after being shot in the shoulder during the Korean war and being injured in a car accident; or when Will Barrett, in The Last Gentleman, recovers his sexual desire (and saves a child to boot) in the middle of a hurricane (23–24), or discovers a Velázquez painting “glowing like a jewel” (27) only after a skylight in the Modern Museum of Art collapses, injuring a worker. These merely personal instances of the therapeutic effects of violence become more generalized in Percy’s later works: a character such as Lancelot Lamar looks forward to what he calls “the Third Revolution,” and Percy himself, clearly influenced by Walter M. Miller Jr.’s novel A Canticle for Leibowitz, imagines as a thought experiment in Lost in the Cosmos the possible lives of survivors of a nuclear war in the deserts of Utah.

The complementarity of these two strategies for overcoming boredom—celebrating the sacramental nature of creation and looking forward to apocalypse—is to be found, as I have suggested, in the fact that the salvation of the world is both an accomplished fact ever since Christ’s resurrection, immediately accessible to all who believe in it, and something whose consummation is yet to come. Dupuy’s reflections on the autobiographical nature of narrative again seem relevant here—the organizing faculty of memory, which imposes meaning on the past in a way that illuminates
the present, is analogous to the understanding of the Christian revelation implied here, and one way to grasp this might be to refer to Augustine’s meditations on time and the redemptive nature of both its passing and its perception as a continuous, threefold present in the *Confessions.* The committed Christian, in Percy’s view, can “repeat” his experiences in such a way that their wonder and newness remain ever present to him; his being-in-the-world provides a certain inoculation against the despairs of boredom, even though he remains subject, until his own death, to possible fluctuations in his faith, and even though the very nature of the process opens a gap between the narrating and the narrated self that his language both testifies to and struggles to close. The unbeliever or lukewarm believer, on the other hand, might require violence, just as O’Con nor predicted—but even these violences will be familiar to us, not necessarily fatal or humiliating, and presented in a spirit of fellow suffering, rather than in the garish, otherworldly light that characterizes O’Connor’s violence. Percy’s own freely acknowledged reworking of his own experiences in fiction, as well as biographical evidence of his own fluctuations in faith, demonstrates that he does not exempt himself from the struggles of his characters.

If, then, readers find themselves identifying the predicaments of Percy’s characters with their own, it would seem that there are two characteristic ways in which Percy’s strategies might misfire. First, readers might reduce the sacramental in Percy to the aesthetic, so that its efficacy becomes primarily a function of their form instead of their content. Sacramental intimations could then appear as examples of Hungerford’s “postmodern belief.” Conversely, readers might take the intimations of apocalyptic violence too literally, concluding that one need not just endure the “end of the modern world” but work to bring it about. Though Percy clearly attempts to balance the two impulses against each other and to forestall the effects that either one might bring about if left unchallenged, in his later work there is a definite shift in emphasis away from the sacramental pleasures of dailiness and toward the urgencies of apocalyptic violence embraced selfishly—as Ciuba puts it, toward the danger that characters will not read their lives in

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9. Book 11 of the *Confessions* explains the threefold present by noting that whether one reflects on the past, the present, or the future, one does so only in the present: “[W]hatever they [future and past things] are, and wherever there, they must be there in the present” (270). Paul Ricoeur’s masterly commentary on Book 11 in *Time and Narrative,* Volume 1, suggests what is at stake for theories of autobiography more generally: “Augustine’s inestimable discovery is, by reducing the extension of time to the distention of the soul, to have tied this distention to the slippage that never ceases to find its way into the heart of the threefold present—between the present of the future, the present of the past, and the present of the present. In this way he sees discordance emerge again and again out of the very concordance of the intentions of expectation, attention, and memory” (21).
light of the Book of Revelation, but rather that they will rewrite “Revelation so that it becomes the way the world looks after all but the ego has disappeared” (171).

In an earlier book, Fears and Fascinations: Representing Catholicism in the American South, I argued that in The Moviegoer, The Last Gentleman, and to a certain degree Love in the Ruins, Percy’s portraits of domesticity prove so attractive that some readers (and, indeed, some writers who followed Percy) might be tempted to reduce Catholicism to a Lyotardian micronarrative, a set of strategies for living pleasantly in a world perceived to be evacuated of metanarrative gravity (147–68). Beginning with Love in the Ruins, however, Percy’s work begins perceptibly to shift toward an emphasis on the apocalyptic, rendered in increasingly violent terms. Whereas Binx Bolling and Will Barrett were focused primarily on their own personal struggles with despair, Dr. Thomas More, though struggling with alcoholism himself, is concerned primarily with the civil strife that has engulfed the United States, and though he believes (wrongly, as it turns out) that his therapeutic invention, the lapsometer, has the potential to “save” America, he also simultaneously fears and hopes that the events its distribution has set in motion will create a literal explosion—“the end of the world” (3). In this chapter I will argue that particularly in Lancelot, The Second Coming, the “Space Odyssey” section of Lost in the Cosmos, and The Thanatos Syndrome, Percy runs the risk not of making Catholicism seem too cozy and domestic, but rather either of celebrating violence or of making readers turn away in the belief that his work celebrates violence.

II. Yearning for the End in Lancelot

The new departure in Percy’s work marked by Lancelot (1977) can be seen in the way its protagonist describes his project: “a quest for evil” (138). Whereas Percy’s earlier protagonists, either drifting aimlessly in their “sickness unto death” or, like Dr. More, consumed with visions of total transformation, still hope that redemption will be on the side of the good, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, whose own despair has been interrupted by the accidental discovery of his wife’s infidelity, is galvanized into his mock-Arthurian quest because he wonders whether the recovery of evil must precede the recovery of God. In the long monologue that he narrates to his old friend Percival from the “Center for Aberrant Behavior” (3), Lance locates the origins of his quest in his intimation that his wife’s infidelity is uniquely intolerable: “Is the sexual offense a special category and therefore unlike other offenses, theft, assault, even murder?” (15). He seems, in fact, surprised by the vehemence of his response to the discovery:
But let me ask you seriously: 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 that way? I don’t think women attach too much importance to it.

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: Margot seriously ill, Margot hurt in an accident, Margot stealing money, even Margot dead, murdered. The thought of Margot dead was painful but not intolerable. But Margot under another man. . . . (16)

Lance contrasts his own violent response, rooted in his conviction of sex as a supreme good, with the casual ubiquity and consequent devaluing of sex that he sees in the contemporary world. While he had enjoyed “dirty books” and frequented whores as a young student, it was still possible for him to view these experiences as portentous revelations: “Sometimes I think we were the victims of a gigantic hoax by our elders, that there was an elaborate conspiracy to conceal from us the one simple fact that the only important, certainly the best thing in life, is ordinary sexual love” (12). Yet the younger generation, coming of age in a time of triumphant license, seems to have demystified sex entirely. Even from the window of his cell, Lance can see that “the old Majestic Theater” has become “Adult Cinema 16” and is showing a film called “The 69ers” (22)—a publicly advertised consumer diversion, different in kind from the private discoveries of erotic literature. And Lance’s son, “who got enough of women before he was twenty” and now “appears to be a mild homosexual,” is representative of his generation, for whom “[s]ex doesn’t even seem to rate among the Top Ten experiences” (17).

Lance’s attitude here reflects Percy’s belief that sexual activity remains for many a vehicle for escaping temporal consciousness in a world of “left-over selves.” Yet even it is endangered by a mindset that makes it not a sacramental experience, but merely the instrumental act of a mind achieving its own mastery and satisfaction through its own and others’ bodies. Lance’s intimation that sexual transcendence can be recovered only by associating it with sin harks back to Binx’s reflections on his own unsatisfactory fornication with Kate: “Christians talk about the horror of sin, but they have overlooked something . . . [T]he 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” (Moviegoer 200). The distance between 1961 and
1977 can be measured by the fact that Binx’s sense of fornication as “sin” still has some cultural resonance, as his genial narration presupposes, while Lance’s yearning for sin has become all but incomprehensible in a time when “courses in how to fuck for schoolchildren” (220) have reduced the act to a matter of mental hygiene.

Once Lance associates sexuality with a lost sense of sin, he generalizes this loss to his entire historical moment:

But suppose you could show me one “sin,” one pure act of malevolence . . . But we have plenty of evil around you say. What about Hitler, the gas ovens and so forth? What about them? As everyone knows and says, Hitler was a madman. And it seems nobody was responsible. Everyone was following orders. It is even possible that there was no such order, that it was all a bureaucratic mistake.

Show me a single “sin.”

One hundred and twenty thousand dead at Hiroshima? Where was the evil of that? Was Harry Truman evil? As for the pilot and bombardier, they were by all accounts wonderful fellows, good fathers and family men.

“Evil” is surely the clue to this age, the only quest appropriate to the age. For everything and everyone’s either wonderful or sick and nothing is evil. (138)

Lance’s very presence in the Center for Aberrant Behavior seems to confirm his view, for having premeditatedly murdered Margot’s lover and blown up Belle Reve, his plantation home—certainly sinful actions according to any standard—he efforts to retrieve the murder weapon are interpreted as evidence of mental illness. He is not even “sick,” a condition still redolent of irreducibly human and animal consciousness, but “aberrant,” a mechanism with a surely explicable and correctable glitch. Moreover, Lance regards his quest as a failure. The very act of cutting Jacoby’s throat results not in a consciousness of evil but rather of a fascinated, amoral materialism that echoes his earlier description of sexual intercourse: “steel molecules entering skin molecules, artery molecules, blood cells” (254). For all the vehemence of his ranting and the optimism that it falsely suggests, Lance’s depression has returned, and his emotional range has become still more restricted: “I feel so cold, Percival” (253).

It is to Lance’s credit that even having achieved a kind of revelation of nothingness rather than of sin, he continues to declare both the depraved world around him and the nothingness that might protect one against it intolerable: “If God does not exist, then it will be I not God who will not tolerate [the world as it is]” (255). An essentially pagan stoicism, obvi-
ously indebted to Percy’s Uncle Will and given specificity by the southern ideology of honor and chivalry, becomes Lance’s own desired code after the apocalypse that he has experienced. In the Wilderness of Virginia, the deserted place where Robert E. Lee “lost,” Lance proposes to begin again with like-minded people, to promulgate “a tight-lipped courtesy between men. And chivalry toward women” (158). Such a social order will be founded upon a conscious rejection of truth, for rather than admitting the “truth” of nothingness, it will violently enforce codes of belief and conduct in a manner that suggests fascism. Here, too, Lance’s obsession with sexuality as the index of human meaning recurs, even though he no longer claims to endow it with transcendence. If “love,” for example, is nothing more than a euphemism for unredeemed carnality, which in turn is nothing more than a collision of molecules, then chivalry and romantic love must be enforced to deny this “truth,” which Lance calls “THE GREAT SECRET OF LIFE”: “[M]an’s happiness lies for men in men practicing violence upon women and . . . woman’s happiness lies in submitting to it. The secret of life is violence and rape, and its gospel is pornography” (224). As Lance explains it elsewhere in the text, “[w]omen must be saved from the whoredom they’ve chosen” (158), but the very word “chosen” reveals an ambiguity: if this “whoredom” is only the natural pursuit of women’s happiness, then the code that opposes it must constitute a fierce revolt against matter itself. Yet Lance also hopes that women, perceiving this truth, will join him in rejecting it: “Someday women will admit the truth, will refuse to accept it, and then they will be my best recruits” (252).

Is such a vision merely insane? Ciuba argues that Lancelot’s “merciless cult of good form lacks the splendor of apocalyptic renewal. Its martial values are paltry, middling, even minimal” (185) when compared with the new heavens and new earth described in the Book of Revelation. Yet while a confirmed Christian would assent to Ciuba’s judgment, Percy’s rhetorical gamble in Lancelot probably succeeds only if readers are initially willing to consider the possibility that for all its violence and possible insanity,

10. Percy’s extended engagement with William Alexander Percy’s code of southern stoicism begins with his first important essay, “Stoicism in the South” (1958), and extends through several novels in which particular characters serve as surrogates for Uncle Will or voice his beliefs—most obviously in the case of Binx’s Aunt Emily. O’Gorman is correct to note that “[i]n a very real sense, Walker spent the rest of his life reacting to Uncle Will” (35). On the parallels between the elder Percy and Aunt Emily, see Tolson (277, 287).

11. Percy confirms such hints in an interview with Elzbieta Olesky: “So, his solution for his alienation is a kind of fascism, or nazism [sic]. In a way, he admires the nazi; only he says: ‘The nazis were stupid’” (qtd. in Olesky 79). (The exact quotation from Lancelot is “Don’t confuse it with the Nazis. They were stupid. If in fact there was a need to clean up the Weimar Republic and if in fact they did that in part, they screwed everything up by getting off on the Jews. What stupidity! The Jews were not to blame” [156]).
Lance’s vision stands as a compelling alternative to the disenchanted United States of the late 1970s, in which Lance appears merely “aberrant,” since a genuinely transcendent alternative is not perceived to be widely available. Jerome C. Christensen describes such readers’ dilemma well:

I can, if I choose . . . reasonably explain away Lancelot’s rant by psychoanalyzing him, reducing his unsettling vision of America, of man and woman, to the wholly understandable consequence of childhood trauma. From that perspective all that stuff about the end of the world is merely more of the same. Repetition is the limit of action and knowledge. But the monstrous excellence of this book is that though Percy generously supplies the material and tools for such a reduction, he cannily prohibits any comfort in its execution. If I, rationalist, substitute a bright, tidy psychoanalytic explanation for Lancelot’s eccentric narrative, I merely repeat his obsessive quest for the determinate and thereby commit myself to a monologue mad like his but chilling and sterile. Every man has a Ma, but only Lancelot tells his disturbing story.

Repetition is the possibility of action and knowledge. That possibility is realized in the book through the development of the figure who listens to Lancelot’s story. (117)

The distinction between repetition as “limit of action and knowledge” and repetition as “possibility of action and knowledge” that Christensen identifies here is key. To read the Lance’s monologue as the unfruitful repetition of his murderous rage, and his planned “Third Revolution” as a repetition of violent reactionaries from the Ku Klux Klan to the Nazis, is also to commit oneself to unfruitful repetition: everything can be reduced to the eternal Oedipal triangle, and one can become less “sick” by becoming conscious of it, but there will be no breakthrough, no repetition with a difference that will lead to free action. The ultimate horizon, just as Brooks suggests, is death, but the knowledge said to come with the consummation of death can have nothing in it of love, nothing of the reciprocity and commitment that would render sexuality anything more than a struggle to use the other for pleasure, or contemporary life more than a series of diversions to keep despair at bay. Lance’s characterization of the “whoredom” of women may indeed be antifeminist, but one wonders uncomfortably whether an alternative description of promiscuity, in which men and women freely choose their sexual objects and exert control over their own sexual desires, escapes an instrumentalist and dehumanizing conception of sexuality any more successfully.
Unsurprisingly, Percy’s preferred alternative both to 1970s America and to Lance’s stoicism-cum-fascism is Catholicism, the “action and knowledge” of which are only intimated by Lance’s interlocutor, Percival, also known as Father John. Listening to Lance’s narrative, Percival rarely speaks, and when he does, the words are either repeated or paraphrased by Lance, so that until the final pages of the novel, Percival lacks a voice. Moreover, Lance infers from Percival’s “phony casuals” (instead of “priest clothes”) (5) and refusal to say a prayer for the dead that a woman requests from him on All Souls’ Day (11) that his friend is suffering a crisis of faith. Lance concludes—and “manage[s] to surprise” Percival by saying so—that Percival is “a screwed-up priest or a half-assed physician. Or both” (10). Percival, then, is no less a victim of the contemporary malaise than Lance, though his malaise partakes more of depression than murderous rage. Evidently intending both to minister to Lance and to oppose his arguments, Percival can do so for much of the novel only by repeating the word “love,” a possibility that Lance refuses to entertain: “That sort of love is impossible now if it ever was. The only way it will ever be possible again is if the world should end” (56). For Lance, Percival joins the ridiculous nuns “in J.C. Penney pantsuits” (5) as representatives of a post–Vatican II Church that has been infested by “the same fleas as the dogs [it has] lain down with” (157). Even so, Lance opines, Catholicism remains the only other option thinkable: “I could live your way if it were true” (155). At the end of the novel, Lance states, “There is no other way than yours or mine, true?” and Percival responds with a simple “Yes” (257).

Given the disadvantages under which Percival labors, any reading of the novel that discovers in it a clear affirmation of Christian belief must place enormous weight on the final exchange: Lancelot asks, “Is there anything you wish to tell me before I leave?” and Percival answers, “Yes” (257). The implication is that now Percival will do the talking, Lance will listen, and the fullness of Catholic faith—which Lance has already recognized as the only worthy alternative—will be affirmed in an unwritten sequel. This is, perhaps, Percy’s boldest rhetorical gamble yet, for as Reynolds Price asks, “[H]ow many contemporary readers of fiction are equipped or even prone to provide a sufficient counter statement?” (qtd. in Tolson 412). In order for the strategy to work, readers must come to identify not only with Lance but also—and in the end, even more—with Percival, who finally recovers his faith, appears before Lance in priestly garb, and announces that he is off to take charge of a suburban parish in Alabama. If Percy’s persuasion depends in part on convincing readers that Lance’s Third Revolution is indeed preferable to the social decay and anomie that hold sway, the
final step consists of making Percival’s Catholic alternative—dismissed by Lance as “more of the same” because it consists of “forgiv[ing] the sins of Buick dealers [and] administer[ing] communion to suburban housewives” (257, 256)—more attractive still.

Percy prepares the way for this possibility in part by exploiting the difference between what James Phelan calls in *Living to Tell About It*, his close study of character narration, “narrator functions” and “disclosure functions” (12). According to Phelan, narrator functions comprise the straightforward telling of material from a narrator to a narratee; disclosure functions, by contrast, are signaled by the redundant telling of material that the narratee already knows but the authorial audience does not. Because Percival is a childhood friend whom Lance addresses as “you” throughout the novel, Percy must construct a plausible rationale for Lance’s own redundant telling of material that Percival knows—for instance, that Lance and Percival were classmates at Tulane, or that Percival was a solitary, skinny drinker who converted to Catholicism before becoming a priest. Percy initially suggests a plausible rationale by having Lance plead amnesia, a condition not surprising in an inmate in a psychiatric hospital: “Don’t I know you? . . . I’ve been feeling rather depressed and I don’t remember things well” (3). Since the pronoun you implicitly places both Percival and the reader in the same position, the awkwardness of having Lance narrate information that Percival knows, readers are led to believe, will be mitigated. Interestingly enough, however, Lance quickly confesses this to have been a ruse before the disclosure function begins: “I was not quite honest yesterday when I pretended not to know you. I knew you perfectly well . . . [i]t’s just that it was quite a shock seeing you after all these years. No; not even that is true. I noticed you in the cemetery the day before yesterday. Still I hardly knew what to say to you. What do you say to someone after twenty years when you have already said everything?” (9). If the initial explanation of amnesia provided a reason why Lance would have to reconstruct so much of the past not to a therapist but to an old friend, Lance’s changed rationale actually builds upon the former one to establish a greater sense of intimacy. Not only does Lance now convince Percival that he is now telling the truth (that is, he does remember him), he also suggests that the very intimacy of their friendship can serve as a pretext for going over mutually known events. “Everything” may have been said, but for precisely that reason, a certain repetition is necessary to discover whatever insights might be new and valuable. The disclosure functions which then follow not only contribute necessary information to the reader’s interpretation of Lance and Percival; they also pave the way for the narrator function that predominates afterward, in which the particulars of Lance’s story are
new both to Percival and to the reader. Ironically, an initial lie framed by the context of mental illness helps to cement a more secure trust, to suggest that whatever Lance’s problems may be, insanity, properly speaking, is not one of them. To hold that he belongs in the Center for Aberrant Behavior, instead of in prison, is the real lie.

Yet for all the care with which Percy develops such narrative strategies, readers must still draw their own conclusions at the end—will they concur with Percival’s repeated “yeses,” acknowledging his truer, more viable Christian alternative to Lance’s violent stoicism? Readers might detect an echo of Molly Bloom’s “yes yes yes yes yes” in Percival’s words and perceive through the allusion Percy’s affirmative intent, though the fact that these words are interspersed with Lance’s own jaded dialogue limits the likelihood of such an identification. As I argued above, the novel’s lack of definite closure here does affirm both Lance’s freedom and the fact that until his own death, all he can do is remain faithful to his choice, whatever it may be. The same is true for readers of the novel. Ultimately, Percy makes a wager similar to O’Connor’s in “A Good Man Is Hard to Find.” O’Connor opined, “I prefer to think that, however unlikely this may seem, the old lady’s gesture, like the mustard-seed, will grow to be a great crow-filled tree in the [sic] Misfit’s heart, and will be enough of a pain to him there to turn him into the prophet he was meant to become. But that’s another story” (“On Her Own Work” 112–13). The very implausibility of such a choice, the very fact that it is not determined by what has come before, might serve to show that it is the freest choice of all. If Lance, no matter how his life with Anna in the Shenandoah Valley may unfold, will have been affected enough by Percival’s proclamation of love to live henceforth as a believer, then perhaps this is his truest achievement. But that, too, is another story, and by no means a certain one.

III. Believing the Apostle:

*The Second Coming*

Biographical evidence suggests that at least some of the uncharacteristic ferocity of *Lancelot* can be attributed to a crisis of faith that Percy experienced during the novel’s composition. That this crisis was resolved successfully seems to be confirmed by *The Second Coming*, the most overtly didactic of all of Percy’s novels and the one that departs the most from his usual practices of indirection and suspended closure.12 Picking up the story of

12. On this crisis of faith, see Tolson (380–82, 387–88). On its recovery, see especially
Will Barrett many years after the events described in *The Last Gentleman, The Second Coming* reveals that he has married a Yankee Episcopalian woman, grown middle-aged and affluent, and survived his wife’s death. He finds himself once again experiencing fugues, intense memories of his father, bemusement at the craziness of the contemporary South, and what his psychiatrist calls “*wahnsinnige Sehnsucht*,” or inappropriate longing (303). Alternatives familiar from Percy’s previous novels are predictably presented to him: the stoic code of honor that secretly loves death and moves through an inexorable logic to suicide; the transient pleasures of sensory delight; and the inadequacy of most of what passes for religious belief in 1980, whether the vague Episcopalianism the novel satirizes, the practice of astrology or pantheism (lumped together under the rubric “Californian”), or the aggressively cheerful (and powerful) fundamentalist Christianity that flourishes in the South. Desiring apocalypse on his own terms, Will tries to escape his predicament by concealing himself in a cave until God either declares His existence or refuses to appear. (The gesture repeats Lance’s resolution in *Lancelot*—instead of implementing his “Third Revolution” at once, he declares, “I’ll wait and give your God time” [256]). Such bravado, however, fails: driven by toothache and malnutrition out of the cave, he falls into the arms of Allie, the daughter of his old girlfriend Kitty, who has escaped from a psychiatric hospital and is hiding out in the greenhouse she owns. The two fall in love, resolve to marry, and presumably live happily ever after.

Still more happily, Will ends the novel on the brink of a definite conversion experience—the book’s most significant departure from *The Last Gentleman*, and indeed from all of Percy’s previous novels. Tolson’s appraisal of the novel as a “philosophical fairy tale” in which Percy could indulge his impossible desire for perfection (432) is convincing: the resolution of the contradictions that had plagued Will in the earlier novel is so sudden and unexpected as to suggest an O’Connoresque descent of grace. At one point in the novel, Will begins a long litany that begins “Here are the names of death, which shall not prevail over me because I know the names” (272), then enumerates these “names” over the space of two and a half pages, whooping with joy throughout. His final words in the novel, as he ponders the prospect of married life, are “Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have” (360). These moments flaunt their narrative implausibility, but—as is not the case in O’Connor’s work or in *Lancelot*—there is no mystery as to how readers should interpret their effect.

Quinlan (162), who speculates that Karol Wojtyla’s accession to the papacy in 1978 may have particularly cheered Percy.
on the character, no implicit invitation to make a similar leap. This is the kind of closure that comes only with death, and if readers, like Will, “prevail” over “the names of death,” they do so simply by finishing the book.

Two features of the novel, however, pull against this overwhelming sense of closure. The first is that Will converts not to Catholicism but to Episcopalianism. Even in 1980, the Anglican Church was hardly known for its doctrinal uniformity, and in subsequent decades, disputes between traditionalists and progressives have grown bitterer—a situation hardly calculated to win Percy’s approval. In Percy’s other novels, Episcopalianism figures largely as the preferred religion of backward-looking, stoic southern gentlefolk precisely because of its rich aesthetic tradition, doctrinal fuzziness, and snobbery—Tom More’s wife, Ellen, for instance, has become in The Thanatos Syndrome “one of those Southern Anglicans who dislike Catholics—Romans, she calls them—and love all things English” (46). For men, Episcopalianism is also bound up with romantic, martial fantasies. Lance Lamar, for instance, is nominally Episcopalian and named for the Anglican divine Lancelot Andrewes (who would have a considerable influence on T. S. Eliot), but he explains that “the Andrewes was tacked on by him to give it Episcopal sanction”—his father really cared more for “Romantic English poetry, Southern history, Robert E. Lee biographies” and other books in which one “could detect no common denominator except a taste for the extraordinary and marvelous, the sentimental, the extraordinary experience . . . the extraordinary glory of a lost cause which becomes more extraordinary as it recedes in time and in fact Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia had long since become for him as legendary and mythical as King Arthur and the Round Table. Do you think I was named Lancelot for nothing?” (116). Such an attitude stands in contrast to the sacramental embrace of the mundane here and now that Percy celebrates.

Yet there are two Episcopalian characters in the novel who complicate this picture. The first, Jack Curl, is an Anglican priest who pursues Will throughout the novel for donations to a planned retirement community. He is made “uneasy” by talk about religion (138) and can speak of it only if he casts himself as a manual laborer, a “sweaty Episcopal handyman” and “godly greasy super” (125) who wears hideous jumpsuits. In one sense, his approach seems no different from that of such Catholic characters as Binx’s mother and Uncle Jules; his is a pragmatic, world-invested Christianity. Unlike these characters, however, Jack Curl is tainted by his blatant pursuit of Will’s money and fondness for soothing the troubles of the rich and powerful. For these reasons, as much as for the priest’s lack of earnestness about God, Will dismisses him: “Seldom can an Episcopalian (or an Anglican) be taken for a Christian” (189). Yet Will also retains enough respect for
Curl’s office to ask himself, when he hears that Curl has been picked to lead an ecumenical meeting, “Could Jack Curl reunite Christendom? . . . Why not? Isn’t it just the sort of damn fool thing God might favor?” (309).

The elderly Episcopal priest to whom Will addresses himself at the end, Father Weatherbee, is more admirable. Demanding that Father Weatherbee marry him and Allie despite the fact that neither is yet a Christian believer, Will states, in an interestingly hedged declaration, that he and Allie are “willing to take instructions, as long as you recognize that I cannot and will not accept all of your dogmas. Unless of course you have the authority to tell me something I don’t know. Do you?” (358). Will’s words here hark back to the 1975 essay “The Message in the Bottle,” in which Percy develops Kierkegaard’s distinction between a “genius” and an “apostle” and offers these criteria for determining whether an apostle’s authority is genuine:

Faith comes from God, but it also comes by hearing. It is a piece of news and there is a newsbearer. But why should we believe the newsbearer, the apostle? Must the apostle first prove his case to the scientist in the seminar room? No, because this would mean that God and the apostle must wait in the porter’s lodge while the learned upstairs settle the matter. . . .

How then may we recognize the divine authority of the apostle? What, in other words, are the credentials of the newsbearer? The credential of the apostle is simply the gravity of his message: “I am called by God; do with me what you will, scourge me, persecute me, but my last words are first; I am called by God and I make you eternally responsible for what you do against me.” . . . [W]hat if a man receives the commission to bring news across the seas to the castaway and does so in perfect sobriety and with good faith and perseverance to the point of martyrdom? And what if the news the newsbearer bears is the very news the castaway has been waiting for, news of where he came from and who he is and what he must do, and what if the newsbearer brought with him the means by which the castaway may do what he must do? Well then, the castaway will, by the grace of God, believe him. (146, 147, 149)

Percy makes the intended parallel between this passage and his preferred Episcopal priest Father Weatherbee all too clear, for not only does Father Weatherbee have a professed interest in the Apostolic Succession—a doctrine which aligns him with the Anglo-Catholic wing of Anglicanism (and which Curl rejects as something that “sounds more like the ancestor worship of his Mindanao tribesmen” [311])—but he also has spent fifty years as a missionary in the Philippines, where he found a happy simplicity of faith
among his congregation that Americans lack: “They believed the Gospel whole and entire, and the teachings of the church. They said that if I told them, then it must be true or I would not have gone to so much trouble” (359). These words confirm what Will had already suspected, that Father Weatherbee “seem[s] to know something—and that by the same token Jack Curl does not” (358). Father Weatherbee’s apostolic authority is genuine, and, it would seem, sufficient to convert Will, despite Father Weatherbee’s own bewilderment and his belief that Will is a “madman” (357). Clearly Jack Curl’s ambition of “reuniting Christendom,” however worthy a goal, takes a back seat to the more fundamental effort of bringing the good news to people, one by one.

The question remains: even granting the very Catholic kind of Anglicanism that Father Weatherbee professes, why Anglicanism at all? Kieran Quinlan, professing uncertainty here, suggests several possibilities: perhaps “it was just too cumbersome for Percy to have Will jump through all the hoops in one novel”; perhaps “Percy deemed that the most theologically obtuse of all his protagonists was unworthy to become a member of the church of the great St. Thomas Aquinas”; or perhaps in the novel, as in Lancelot, “the Catholic faith is most present by its relative absence: the radical inadequacies of all alternatives reinforce its supreme necessity” (173). I am inclined to agree most with the third possibility, not only because such a stance is consistent with Percy’s statements elsewhere but also because it provides an obstacle to complete closure in the novel. Will may be about to convert, but he will not have arrived at what Percy perceives of as the fullness of Christian truth, which can be found only in the Catholic Church. Moreover, readers unaware of Percy’s Catholicism may well perceive a different message altogether—as did Richard Gilman, who, reviewing the novel in the New Republic, identified its “religious sense” but considered it to be “without creed or dogma” (31). Indeed, as Quinlan observes, The Second Coming “seems to have had an especial appeal for those sympathetic with a New Age style of Christian gnosticism [sic], an outcome that hardly would have pleased its by now ultraorthodox author” (172). The Second Coming may well be Percy’s most orthodox novel, if its sense of urgency and its presentation of a genuine conversion are the measures of orthodoxy, and I share the sense of many readers that it is also

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13. In Lost in the Cosmos, Percy asserts that “Catholic Christianity” is the “most preposterous” religion in the triad of Judaism, Protestantism, and Catholicism because of the counterintuitive nature of its claims, but he also holds that “in the end it is precisely this preposterous remedy, it and no other, which is specified by the preposterous predicament of the human self as its sole remedy” (253, 254). As preposterous as Will’s conversion is, it may not be preposterous enough.
his most tendentious. Even here, however, there is just enough of a gap to make its intended good news genuinely contestable, to emphasize the genuine freedom of its readers and the genuine leap that belief requires.

IV. Living after the End:
“A Space Odyssey”

With *Lost in the Cosmos*—a parody of the self-help book genre, an introduction to semiotic theory, and a compendium of “thought experiments,” several of which are recycled from his previous works, Percy provides the most concise and in many respects most entertaining summation of his thought. From the standpoint of an inquiry into the use of narrative as rhetoric, its most interesting feature is “A Space Odyssey,” two variations on a short fictional narrative that play out the logic of apocalypse that characterized earlier works by Percy to its limit. Whereas Percy’s protagonists often longed for an apocalypse that either did not come or arrived with a whimper, here the theoretician proposes the real thing—a nuclear holocaust that leaves only a few survivors and their descendants on the earth—as a test of whether Percy’s theories of the self, language, and redemption would still operate in the most extreme conditions imaginable. Predictably, the theories are verified—not even a literal end of the world, as opposed to a metaphorical one, can transfigure recalcitrant human nature.

In the first part of “A Space Odyssey,” a group of astronauts on a mission to discover intelligent extraterrestrial life in the universe mysteriously loses contact with Earth and begins to fear that a nuclear war has destroyed human civilization. Discovering evidence of extraterrestrial intelligence on a planet orbiting Proxima Centauri, the astronauts attempt to land but are prohibited from doing so, because the planet’s inhabitants determine, after a lengthy conversation with the astronauts’ captain, that human beings are afflicted with self-consciousness and will probably bring nothing but violence and sexual disorder to their planet.

In the second variation on the narrative—which borrows its setting, premises, and even the name of its central character from Walter J. Miller, Jr.’s science fiction novel *A Canticle for Leibowitz*—a similar group of astronauts who lose contact with Earth return to discover that nuclear holocaust has occurred in their absence. Landing in the desert of Utah, they discover an unlikely group of survivors: Abbot Liebowitz [sic], a Brooklyn Jew who has converted to Catholicism, presides over a Benedictine abbey, and suspects himself, in the absence of contradictory evidence, to be the Pope; the two African American monks who with him comprise the abbey; a young
Californian astronomer named Aristarchus Jones who wears special clothing to protect him from ultraviolet light; and a group of children suffering from deformities and disabilities as the result of radiation.

Percy’s habitual presentation of privileged southern males who can skillfully read the social distinctions implied by clothing and mannerisms becomes amusingly obsolete in this narrative, for race, disability, Judaism, and southernness have ceased to mean much at all: a Jew might be the Pope, and the resemblance of Jones’s protective garb to the robe of a Ku Klux Klansman (243) reveals not the persistence of racism but the fact that even the most entrenched images associated with racism now signify differently. The only stereotype that seems to survive concerns the extraordinary intelligence of Jews: Abbot Liebowitz hopes to “revive the University of Notre Dame around a nucleus of Jewish scientists whom [he] shall lure from Israel” (249). Indeed, the disappearance of all other social distinctions seems dependent upon the survival of Jews and Catholics, the particular people called by God and the universal church that descends from them. As Liebowitz puts is, “the two, Jew and Catholic, are inextricably attached to each other like Siamese twins at the umbilicus, whether they like it or not, and they both detest it, until the end of earth time” (249). In the irradiated deserts of the West, what matters is that the apostolic succession goes on, that the Church keeps its promise to endure, while the fact that a Jew leads it also points to God’s continued covenant with his chosen people.

Percy offers two “options” for readers to choose regarding the future of this fledgling society. The first option, proposed by the astronomer, involves the survivors removing to the Jovian satellite Europa, breaking completely with the past, and initiating a kind of behaviorist utopia to be named New Ionia and grounded in a combination of Skinner-style conditioning and Jungian theory. He invites the monks, though he also envisions “a sexually free and peace-loving society where the sciences and arts can flourish freed from the superstitions and repressions of religion” (246), and he refuses to invite the malformed children, because “[i]t would make no sense to perpetuate genetic defects” (247). Such a plan is not so different from the arrangements that prevailed among the astronauts on their spaceship, in which an equal number of men and women were enjoined to practice free love and bear children outside the context of a nuclear family. The first variation on “A Space Odyssey,” however, suggests that such an arrangement cannot last: three of the original men were killed in “quarrels over the women” (214), and one of the women, though she was deemed “culturally liberated” by “the screening procedure,” now wants to revert “to the old monogamy” and marry (216). Clearly, the implica-
tion is that marriage is preferable to sexual anarchy—and, as if realizing that in its absence other measures must be taken to prevent such disorder, Aristarchus resolves to codify his teachings in a “Little Green Book” and to demand group exercises of “self-criticism and honest appraisal of others. . . . No more lies, no more self-deception, no more secrecy, no more guilt, no more shame” (257). Needless to say, such a regime must prescribe “punishment, even exile, for aggressive, jealous, hostile, solitary, mystical, or other antisocial behavior” (256)—with the result that those who are dissatisfied learn to keep their unhappiness to themselves.

In the second “option,” the survivors eventually move to Lost Cove, Tennessee, begin to multiply and to attract immigrants, and soon reestablish some markers of southern identity. Denominational divisions reappear among the Christian members of the group, as do racism, anti-Semitism, anti-Catholicism, agrarian ideals, and homemade whiskey. The five Jews in the colony—“one orthodox, one reformed, one conservative, one humanist, and one Yemenite Israeli” (259)—are too fractious to establish a temple. Even one of the two African American monks has “discovered his roots in nearby Alabama, resigned his priesthood, and joined the Shiloh Baptist Church” (259). When contact is made with a “Celtic enclave across the old Carolina line, a growing community with a reputation for violence and snake-handling” (260), the old, long-suppressed social hostilities erupt into plain view, as the Celts propose an alliance of white Americans and Christians against the African Americans, Catholics, and Jews. In the words of the Marcus Aurelius Schuyler, captain of the spaceship and Percy’s inevitable spokesperson for old-fashioned southern stoicism, “Jesus Christ, here we go again” (261).

The juxtaposition of these two options reprises the alternative that Percy presents at the end of *Lancelot*: only Catholicism and some form of fascism (an unusually “light” version in this case, with its emphasis on behaviorism and self-interrogation) are viable solutions to the predicament of the self in modernity, and of the two, only Catholicism has the benefit of being true as well as more tolerant—a colony that was created under Catholic auspices welcomes Jews and unbelievers, and exiles nobody. Neither option, however, obviates the need for the self to go on living, to confront everyday problems even as it embraces everyday grace. Human beings may be already redeemed, but not even a nuclear holocaust can obliterate their tendency toward sin and disorder. Even committed Catholics, such as Percy’s African American monk, sometimes fall away; even committed agnostics might, even if they do not come to accept Christian belief itself, might come to admit how necessary it is. Percy’s choice of Marcus Schuyler—a man “like a Christian who had lost his faith in everything
but the Fall of man” (229)—as his central focalizer both in the New Ionian
and the Tennessean options, in fact, suggests that an unbeliever might be
more cognizant of the radical nature of Christian teaching than many pro-
fessed Christians.

Marcus’s habitual boredom in New Ionia, where nothing except sex,
Shakespeare’s Henry IV plays, and Mozart’s string quartets move him, is
contrasted with his genial, if no less ironic, disposition in Lost Cove. As
Peter Augustine Lawler puts it, “He knows why he has affection for the
priests and their Church. He knows, as he did not before, the limits of his
independence. His freedom depends on the cave; his skepticism depends
upon belief, and his pleasurable experiences of the goodness of life depend
upon his love for others. He knows he is more alike than different from
other human beings. He lives well with all sorts of misbegotten selves,
because he knows that he himself is far from free from trouble or disorder”
(103–4). In this conviction of the basic shared experience of flawed human
beings, there is even a basis for democracy, in contrast to the false egalitari-
anism that fascism violently creates—and a basis for love and desire, which
in turn nourish science and art. In New Ionia, there is nothing to strive for
and nothing to love. In Lost Cove, love exists—and one must accept the
existence of hatred, too, as its corollary—“Wherever there is love of par-
ticular troubled selves for others, there is hatred too”—but this makes for
a view of the human condition as “more comic and genuinely mysterious”
(103), not for despair. Percy’s two post-apocalyptic visions of the future
in Lost in the Cosmos manage to escape, more clearly the texts that precede
them, the temptations of losing the self in violence and building a new, but
inhuman and loveless, order.

V. Fascinations with a Culture of Death:
The Thanatos Syndrome

After the unprecedented novelistic closure of The Second Coming and the
attempt to follow apocalyptic thinking to its limit in “A Space Odyssey,”
Percy’s final novel, The Thanatos Syndrome, has struck some readers as a
belaboring of material that Percy had brought to more successful fruition
elsewhere. Kieran Quinlan, for instance, calls it “repetitious of his earlier
themes” and full of “careless errors,” and speculates that “as he moved
toward the conclusion of his life, Percy might have wanted simply to rein-
force his ideas without worrying too much about ‘art’”—he had, in fact,
praised A Canticle for Leibowitz “for precisely this achievement” (198). A
reader familiar with Percy will certainly find little in the novel that sur-
prises, but what is new about The Thanatos Syndrome is not its ideas but its form: unlike the earlier novels, it is a concerted attempt at genre fiction, with the rapid, suspenseful plotting that characterizes thrillers. If Quinlan is correct that Percy attempted a more lowbrow style out of a sense that “literary” fiction may have become an obstacle to his theological arguments, then perhaps his repetition is deliberate as well—an effort, so to speak, to get new readers up to speed while relying on the plot to maintain their interest.

This plot concerns a secret experiment in social engineering performed by Bob Comeaux and John Van Dorn. Drawing on the work of Dr. Tom More, Percy’s protagonist from Love in the Ruins, the two men have released heavy sodium into the water supply of the region of Feliciana, Louisiana and the city of Baton Rouge. People who consume the water experience “an average twenty percent increase in I.Q.—plus an almost total memory recall” (192), as well as the disappearance of anger and anxiety. There are also profound changes in sexual behavior and its consequences. Because women now experience estrus instead of a menstrual cycle, unintended pregnancy disappears. Homosexuality also disappears—the Gay and Lesbian Club at Louisiana State University, for instance, voluntarily disbands. On the other hand, people feel less sexually inhibited, and their characteristic sexual overtures resemble those of chimpanzees—“presenting rearward” (20) instead of facing each other. Facility with language, that distinct attribute of human beings, also deteriorates, so that people communicate in factual, “two-word sentences,” which Comeaux, speaking for an unimaginative scientism, touts as “a lot more accurate than once upon a time there lived a wicked queen” (197).

This is a familiar scenario, whose literary ancestors include Aldous Huxley’s Brave New World and whose philosophical touchstones include such thinkers as Alexandre Kojève, Richard Rorty, and Francis Fukuyama. Human self-consciousness, described by Comeaux as “not only an aberration of evolution but . . . also the scourge and curse of life on this earth, the source of wars, insanities, perversions” (195), is eradicated, leaving relatively happy, extremely intelligent animals able to live productive lives and to lose themselves in sexual happiness. Van Dorn, believing sexual energy to be the source of human beings’ greatest accomplishments, wishes to “combine the high sexuality of [Don Giovanni] and Einstein without the frivolity of the Don or the repressed Jewish sexuality of Einstein” (220), and though he considers the heavy sodium to be a crude means to this end, he is willing to experiment with it until a more total sexual liberation can be

14. On the continuity between these philosophers’ views, see especially Lawler (15–76).
achieved, because he believes, like Lance Lamar, that the social decay of the late twentieth century is intolerable. Comeaux, committed to respecting “the rights of the unwanted child not to have to suffer a life of suffering and abuse, the right of the unwanted aged to a life with dignity and a death with dignity,” is an advocate of euthanasia, responsible for disposing of “neonates” and “euthanates” at facilities called “Qualitarian Centers” (199), and his enthusiasm for heavy sodium springs from the same desire to maximize a so-called “quality of life,” even at the price of killing or rendering subhuman those who cannot attain it. Indeed, Percy has described the “only message” of *The Thanatos Syndrome* as the claim that it is “[b]etter to be a dislocated human than a happy chimp” (*More Conversations* 202).

As could have been predicted, the secret of such a vision of perfected humanity is that is based upon domination. Neither Comeaux nor Van Horn undergoes the experiment, understandably preferring not to be guinea pigs and to be able to control their subjects. Moreover, it is clear that both enjoy dominating people in other ways: Comeaux entertains the fantasy that the experiment will “restore the best of the Southern Way of Life” (197), complete with “darkies singing” (331) as they work happily in the fields; while Van Horn is a predator who molests children at his “traditional Southern academy founded on Greek ideals of virtue and to avoid the integration of the public schools” (214). The euthanasia that Comeaux advocates is merely the logical consequence of such an attitude: human beings must conform to the pattern established by the experts who know best, or they prove themselves unworthy of life. Helpless infants and suffering elderly people may be unable (and sometimes unwilling) to resist their extermination, but the heavy sodium experiment, performed without the consent of its subjects, precludes resistance altogether. Lawler has cannily connected the heavy sodium experiment in *The Thanatos Syndrome* to some of the more chilling implications of Richard Rorty’s pragmatism.

If, as Rorty maintains, one should cease to concern oneself with death, because “[f]ear is of something concrete, and so one cannot fear nothing or one’s obliteration” (Lawler 43), then not only is there no reason not to practice euthanasia in certain circumstances, there is also every reason to stigmatize dissenters who ground their arguments in a metaphysics of the human as dangerous: “We should say we have no transcendent or transhistorical truth . . . That way, anyone who has such metaphysical or theological opinions about the truth can be excluded from discussion in a liberal democracy. They can rightly be labeled mad” (Lawler 63). In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the character of Father Rinaldo Smith, who has sequestered himself atop a firetower (in imitation of St. Simeon Stylites) and refuses to speak to most people because he is disgusted by the fact that his hos-
pice is being shut down in order to build a Qualitarian Center, is in danger of institutionalization. Tom More, who knows Father Smith, sympathizes with his anti-euthanasia stance, and suffers from guilt for having indirectly enabled the heavy sodium experiment through his own scientific research, is the novel’s narrator and hero: he must race to stop the experiment, save Father Smith and his hospice, and, after he learns of his crimes, bring Van Dorn to justice.

Although these tasks are accomplished, in its lack of theological and even moral closure, The Thanatos Syndrome resembles Percy’s earlier novels more than The Second Coming. A certain comic ambiguity, for instance, undercuts the novel’s outrage against sexual predation, suggesting either that even the most heinous of crimes can be forgiven, or that a nation so addled as to look to Phil Donahue for moral guidance has no right to condemn Van Dorn. More significantly, Dr. More, who has lost his faith before the novel begins, shows no sign of regaining it. He assists Father Smith at a Mass when called upon on the spur of the moment, but emphasizes that he will not do so again, because “since I no longer was sure what I believe, didn’t think much about religion, participation in Mass would seem to be deceitful” (363). Such an ending is consistent with Percy’s familiar strategies of indirection and his conviction that even for those who, unlike More, have made the leap of faith, life’s intractable problems do not disappear; they are merely rendered comic and bearable. Yet if More resembles a typical Percy protagonist in this respect, it is striking that Father Smith, whose convictions are demonstrably Percy’s own for long stretches, is made such an unappealing figure. Like Lance Lamar, he can be read as simply mad, and even Dr. More, his ally and friend, never denies this possibility. Moreover, though his position as a believing priest would render him Lance’s opponent if the two were to engage in debate, the terms of the debate seem much the same as the agreement that Lance and Percival reach at the end of Lancelot: there is Catholic Christianity as a solution to the problems of modernity, and there is fascism, but nothing else.

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15. In Lost in the Cosmos, Percy had mocked primatologists who, denying the uniqueness of human language, were devoting considerable effort to teaching chimpanzees and gorillas sign language. In The Thanatos Syndrome, Van Dorn regresses to a prelinguistic consciousness after being forced to take his heavy sodium overdose as a punishment for his crimes, and as a result, is unable to stand trial. More eventually suggests that Eve, a gorilla who knows some sign language, teach Van Dorn. He moves in with her under the watch of a primatologist and soon fully recovers, though only after he has established a sexual relationship with her. Once he is able to stand trial, he is convicted—but because he writes a popular book called My Life with Eve, he is eventually pardoned and makes frequent appearances “on the Donahue show, often with Dr. Ruth” (344). Neither his imprisonment nor his unwilling participation in an experiment seems to faze him—what seems to be poetic justice at first loses its irony and suggests that even the crime of sexual abuse can be erased through shrewd self-marketing.
Indeed, Father Smith is far more explicit than Lance in identifying fascism as the unwittingly chosen remedy of a secular world to modern anomie. Having spent some time visiting family in Germany in the 1930s, Father Smith was impressed enough by his cousin Helmut, a member of the SS—“I had never met anyone ready to die for a belief” (247)—to have been willing to join him, had he remained in Germany. The parallel between the culture of the Nazis and the traditional southern love of military glory is clear enough: both are rooted in a sentimental (and, in Percy’s view, therefore cruel) romanticism, which stoically prefers noble death to muddled life. Father Smith goes on to argue, however, that the true implications of such a worldview are to be found in the Nazis’ programs of abortion, eugenic euthanasia, and eventually, the attempt to exterminate the Jews. Helmut’s father, a doctor who was contemptuous of Hitler, nevertheless became the murderer of children in Hitler’s eugenics program, and fled at the end of the war, apparently to Paraguay. Father Smith’s point is that noble love of country and the humanitarian zeal to end suffering, both forms of sentimentality, lead to atrocities. As he puts it in a ceremony to celebrate the reopening of his hospice, “More people have been killed in this century by tenderhearted souls than by cruel barbarians in all other centuries put together” (361). He paraphrases Flannery O’Connor’s words—“Tenderness leads to the gas chamber” (360)—and builds up to the following peroration:  

“Listen to me, dear physicians, dear brothers, dear Qualitarians, abortionists, euthanasists! Do you know why you are going to listen to me? Because every last one of you is a better man than I and you know it! And yet you like me. Every last one of you knows me and what I am, a failed priest, and old drunk, who is only fit to do one thing and to tell you one thing. You are good, kind, hardworking doctors, but you like me nevertheless and I know that you will allow me to tell you one thing . . . no, beg one thing of you. Please do this one favor for me, dear doctors. If you have a patient, young or old, suffering, dying, afflicted, useless, born or unborn,

16. O’Connor’s well-known reflections on this theme are from her introduction to A Memoir of Mary Ann: “One of the tendencies of our age is to use the suffering of children to discredit the goodness of God, and once you have discredited His goodness, you are done with Him. . . . In this popular pity, we mark our gain in sensibility and our loss in vision. If other ages felt less, they saw more, even though they saw with the blind, prophetic, un-sentimental eye of acceptance, which is to say, of faith. In the absence of this faith now, we govern by tenderness. It is a tenderness which, long since cut off from the person of Christ, is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber” (Mystery 226–27).
whom you for the best of reasons wish to put out of his misery—I beg only one thing of you, dear doctors! Please send him to us. Don’t kill them! We’ll take them—all of them! Please send them to us! I swear to you you won’t be sorry. We will all be happy about it! I promise you, and I know that you believe me, that we will take care of him, her—we will even call on you to help us take care of them!—and you will not have to make such a decision. God will bless you for it and you will offend no one except the Great Prince Satan, who rules the world. That is all.” (361)

Father Smith’s conviction that the doctors “like him” and will permit him to speak a necessary truth echoes the claim in The Second Coming that the apostles and their designated successors have the authority to proclaim the truth, that all one needs to do is listen. Moreover, he suggests that one’s motivations do not necessarily matter—he will care for the sick and the unwanted, not out of love for them or even love for God, as a truly saintly Christian would, but simply because, as he tells Tom earlier, “dying people were the only people I could stand . . . Dying people, suffering people, don’t lie. They tell the truth . . . Everyone else lies” (244). The truly kind-hearted are the ones most likely to usher in what Pope John Paul II called a “culture of death,” and the political progressives who endorse abortion and euthanasia are already fascists in practice, though they would deny the claim vociferously, and though their historical moment resembles the Weimar Republic more than Hitler’s Reich.17

Because Father Smith emphasizes right conduct itself over the authenticity of the motives behind it, his stance does locate itself at some distance

17. Percy would amplify his argument about the links between humanitarian sentiment and Weimar-era euthanasia in “An Unpublished Letter to the Times,” written on 22 January 1988 and later published in Signposts in a Strange Land. In this letter, Percy cites the influential book Die Freigabe der Vernichtung lebensunwerten Lebens [The Justification of the Destruction of Life Devoid of Value], published in 1920 by Karl Binding, a jurist, and Alfred Hoche, a professor of medicine and medical ethics and points out that the Nazi genocide took emerged from a democratic and humanitarian climate, that the justification for Hitler’s eugenics program did not originate with the Nazis themselves. Though Percy professes not to imply that “The New York Times, the United States Supreme Court, the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Organization for Women, and suchlike” are “similar to corresponding pre-Nazi institutions,” he maintains that “once the line is crossed, once the principle gains acceptance—juridically, medically, socially—innocent human life can be destroyed for whatever reason, for the most admirable socioeconomic, medical, or social reasons—then it does not take a prophet to predict what will happen next, or if not next, then sooner or later” (350–51). Quinlan suggests that the editors of the Times might have found Percy’s view “rather oddball” (206), but it is interesting that many of the same questions Percy raises here reappear—albeit with a different emphasis—in Giorgio Agamben’s Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life, which includes an extended discussion of how Binding and Hoche’s book provided considerable justification for “the integration of medicine and politics, which is one of the essential characteristics of modern biopolitics” (143).
from the emphasis in much of Percy’s earlier work. Percy’s preoccupation with the particularity of the self, the uniqueness of its predicament, and the existential search for authentic being that consciousness of such a predicament provokes becomes less important than the demand that the self should do what is right. To be sure, in preaching against abortion and euthanasia, Father Smith is repeating the teaching of the Catholic Church, and in this sense one can also say that orthodoxy and right conduct are shown to go together, even in the absence of authentic motive. Such a move is implicitly Pascalian—even those who do the right thing for the wrong reason, such as Tom, who does not believe but agrees with Father Smith on abortion and euthanasia, might come to believe if they practice the actions of belief long enough. Yet it also suggests a sense of exhaustion and a belief in the futility of argument that is surprising to see in a novelist so theologically committed.

Percy prepares the way for this devaluation of argument with Tom More’s admission that unlike Comeaux, he doesn’t like to argue (34). Comeaux, who knows of Tom’s opposition to euthanasia, tries to engage him in argument but is repeatedly frustrated by Tom’s refusal to do so, which usually takes the form of agreeing with particular statements that Comeaux makes without accepting the conclusions that Comeaux draws from them. Comeaux reminds More of his fellow white-collar prisoners at Fort Pelham, Alabama (More has spent two years in prison for dealing drugs to truckers), “ideologues . . . [who] could argue plausibly for and against religion, God, Israel, blacks, affirmative action, Nicaragua” (34). More found the arguments themselves “boring,” because they never changed anyone’s mind, but he was nonetheless “interested in the rage”: “[W]hat is it the passionate arguer is afraid of[?] Is he afraid that he might be wrong? that he might be right? Is he afraid that if one does not argue there is nothing left? An abyss opens” (34, 35). Later, Father Smith suggests that argument cannot convince because in these dark times, words no longer signify: “It is not a question of belief or unbelief. Even if such things were all proved, if the existence of God, heaven, hell, sin were all proved as certainly as the distance to the sun is proved, it would make no difference . . . Because the words have been deprived of their meaning” (118). More concludes from Father Smith’s words that the man “has gone batty” (120), but the priest’s claims are already implicit in More’s earlier speculation that argument serves to conceal an abyss. They also explain why he is so nonchalant about More’s continued refusal to profess belief: “You have been deprived of the faith. All of us have. It is part of the times. . . . So don’t worry about it. . . . Do what you are doing. You are on the right track” (364, 366). It is perhaps this apparent indifference toward the question of
belief that leads Ralph Wood to ask whether Smith and More “are drawn to Christianity mainly as a transcendent means for making their own cultural critique,” which, in his judgment, renders the novel “disappointingly abstract” (“Thanatos” 858).

If Father Smith’s argument about the priority of right action over belief clashes with Updike’s proclamation of the very opposite, his suggestion that in the late twentieth century there may be little to distinguish believers from unbelievers (though much to distinguish moral from immoral action) is very Updikean. Indeed, it may be tempting to read into his remarks a falling away from Percy’s orthodoxy. That this would be a misreading, however, is confirmed by Father Smith’s conviction that only one word has maintained its proper signification: Jews. Jews are “unsubsumable” (352) under any other signifier, precisely because they are “the actual people originally chosen by God” (124). Whether they continue to believe in God does not matter: God may have withdrawn, but Jews still exist and through their particularity testify to the truth. This unsubsumability is a scandal to all those who would erect their own universal orders to challenge God, and this, Father Smith argues, is the original reason both for anti-Semitism generally and for the Nazi attempt to exterminate the Jews in particular: “an anti-Semite who despises Jews actually believes them deep down—that’s why he hates them!” (125). The implication seems to be that anyone who can recover the Word and its glad tidings must do so through the portal of the word “Jews”—as Father Smith maintains, quoting Jesus, “Salvation comes from the Jews” (124; John 4:22).

How is one to evaluate Percy’s heterogenous rhetorical maneuvers in The Thanatos Syndrome? Apocalyptic motifs, perhaps cheapened but also made more accessible to a wider audience by being packaged in a thriller, are combined with a declaration of the futility of argument on the one hand (with the corresponding suggestion that what one does is more important than what one believes) and a strident fidelity to orthodoxy nonetheless, starting with its beginnings in God’s original revelation to and choosing

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18. Here, Percy is in considerable agreement with Philip Rieff. Rieff sees what he calls “remission” as central to the maintenance of culture, but credible only when it claims a divine mandate. He attributes the Shoah to the destruction of belief in such a mandate: “Revelation . . . refers to the unalterable directive word of God. . . . Displacing and humiliating the absolute word and its open tradition of meanings, there has happened in history an absolutely human and faithless series of events commonly and mistakenly called ‘the Holocaust.’” In these acts, as in the crucifixion, the carrier elites of world-immanent ‘values’ have affirmed themselves and so reduced the theological differences between the Jewish and Christian motifs of commanding transcendent truths to tired old theological quibbles between retreating and dwindling carrier elites of the second culture, still blind to that freedom of decision exploited and perverted by swarming new elites going about their business of creative destruction” (My Life 57).
of the Jewish people. The critique of technology as a means to dominate despite its promise of liberation has a long history, but Percy’s working of new variations on it seems fresh, especially in light of the way such attitudes both spring from and reinforce a dominant therapeutic ethos in the culture of the contemporary West. On the other hand, by insisting on the absolute particularity of the Jews and their narrative, Percy risks—and even admits, through More’s incredulity—the danger that such a position will seem monomaniacal. As in Lancelot, Percy’s fundamental wager is to be prepared to listen to what the purportedly mad have to say, for it just might be the truth.

The unacceptability of that option to many readers is reflected in Kieran Quinlan’s rather gleeful prediction that Percy might come to be seen, at least “among some of his less discriminating readers,” as “appealing in the way that the New Age religions he has so forcefully dismissed do: for their ‘mythical liveliness.’” Thus would this champion of Roman Catholic orthodoxy join that ‘amorphous group ranging from California loonies like Shirley MacLaine to the classier Joseph Campbell’” (227; internal quotation is from Percy’s Signposts, 308). And indeed, the ambiguity that attends the commitments of Percy’s protagonists—reflecting a comfy, domesticated belief in some instances and in visions of egoistic apocalypse in others—can easily be misread. People seeking God must, of course, begin where they find themselves, but Percy leaves considerable room for his readers to conclude that such a belief, confessed in fullness and in truth, is less important than the therapeutic practices that it legitimates. Readers might agree with Percy’s diagnosis, yet conclude that Catholic Christianity can be only a palliative, not a cure—since even Percy admits it will not yield continuous bliss.

Quinlan’s judgment reflects, to be sure, his own conviction that Percy’s arguments are simply unconvincing, that he is “the last Catholic novelist” (218) because the historical moment that shaped his conversion is no more, and because “[a] resigned skepticism about ultimate questions rather than a dogmatic denial characterizes the present intellectual community. But in so far as this is the case, such positive assertions as the Catholic church makes seem at best of dubious validity” (225). The appeal to the authority of “the present intellectual community” is an appeal to a historicist mode of apprehending truth, and I have argued elsewhere about the limits of historicism.19 The “present intellectual community” is not exactly the same now as it was in 1996 (even if there is much continuity), and to make its convic-

tions the basis for what one ought to profess—in this instance, “a resigned skepticism”—is to acknowledge that one might believe something completely different hundreds of years from now, without necessarily having better or worse reasons for doing so. Quinlan slides between maintaining that the rhetorical strategies of argument may be more or less persuasive at different historical moments and suggesting that differences in persuasiveness amount to differences in truth. The fact that belief in Christianity has waxed and waned over the last two millennia (and it is by no means certain that secularization is the irreversible process it once seemed) obviously proves that some people have found it more or less persuasive at different times; the question of its truth is separate and primary. Percy affirms its truth, even when he is well aware that doing so makes him (and his surrogate, Father Smith) look ridiculous. If he persuades, it is likely to be because some readers will find its very defiance of conventional intellectual attitudes bracing, its leap out of the prison of historicism compelling. If he fails to do so, it may well be because of the all-too-plausible misreadings that Quinlan identifies and Wood fears—that either therapeutic play or cultural critique take precedence over the truth.