THE APOCALYPTIC VISIONS OF
FLANNERY O'CONNOR AND WALKER PERCY

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Introduction

According to John May in his book *Toward a New Earth*, "almost all contemporary American literature has an apocalyptic tone; the contemporary literary world seems genuinely to reflect a cultural climate that is itself genuinely apocalyptic."¹ May's study, like other similar studies, is a classification of the types of apocalyptic visions there are; these include the traditional Christian apocalypse, the anti-Christian apocalypse and the secular apocalypse, to name the most common. However, few comparisons have been made of the uses of the vision within each group--particularly within the Christian tradition.

One errantly assumes that different works of fiction which rely on the same Christian apocalyptic vision use it in the same way. There are, in fact, many different uses of the apocalyptic vision, even among novelists who come from almost identical backgrounds. Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy, two devout Catholics coming from the predominantly Protestant South and writing only ten years apart, bear out May's assertion of the apocalyptic tone within the Christian tradition. Likewise, they have the same apocalyptic vision and use it for the same effect, "to warn society about present ills and so avert the end."² Their techniques for
obtaining this end, however, are strikingly different. My discussion must necessarily begin with a definition of the apocalyptic vision they share. This will provide the background for an analysis of selected works of these two authors.
Notes


I. A Shared Apocalyptic Concept

Based on its use in the Biblical book of the Revelation of John, the term "apocalypse" has come to connote extra-earthly visions of fiery chariots pulled by multi-headed creatures as portents of a cataclysmic end of the physical world and the beginning of a new, spiritual world. However, in its most basic definition, "apocalypse" means merely "a prophetic disclosure or revelation."\(^1\) Between these two extremes lies O'Connor's and Percy's concept as it is revealed in their fiction.

In both the connotation and the denotation, apocalypse includes the element of a revelation. Kenneth Frielin in his article "Flannery O'Connor's Vision: The Violence of Revelation" has divided the causes of O'Connor's epiphanies into five categories: "the revelation of the significance of an emblem; the cliché's explosion of meaning; and, the final gesture either of freedom from life . . . or the recognition of fellow humanity . . . or the revelation of the presence of God. . . ."\(^2\) Whether the cause is a cliché, emblem, freedom, fellow humanity, or God, the epiphany is usually a reflexive revelation. Through these different methods, the true essence of his/her life is revealed to each character. Recognizing and understanding who they are
provide the opening for the apocalypse to occur in the characters' lives.

For example, in "Revelation" by O'Connor, Mrs. Turpin is forced to realize that she is not the generous, sacrificial philanthropist she thought herself to be. Being called "a wart hog from hell" by Mary Grace begins Mrs. Turpin's questioning about the accuracy of this accusation. She perceives it to be from God and that Mary Grace is merely his messenger. "There was no doubt in her mind that the girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal way, beyond time and place and condition." In fury she lashes out her question, "'What do you send me a message like that for?'" (p. 506). And she is given her answer in a vision of herself as she really is—a self-righteous, prejudiced woman.

Sheppard, too, in "The Lame Shall Enter First," sees himself for what he truly is. For several weeks he has devoted all of his energy to helping the homeless orphan Rufus Johnson. In fact, in his own words, "'I did more for him than I did for my own child.'" These words bring the truth home to him. He suddenly realizes he had been trying to build himself up with extra good deeds while shunning his most basic responsibility as a father. "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton" (p. 481).

Percy's characters also realize the importance of a revelation. Binx Bolling of The Moviegoer realizes that his
life is entirely without meaning. "My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search."\textsuperscript{5} The search, he later explains, is a search for some kind of meaning, some escape from the "everydayness of his own life" (p. 18). While the search itself provides some relief from the "everydayness" he despises, finding the object of his search will be a moment which will propel him out of his everydayness forever.

Will Barrett in The Second Coming claims that "\[
\text{a person nowadays is only 2% himself.}\]"\textsuperscript{6} When a rifle bullet barely misses him a minute later he realizes this generalization applies to himself, for "\[
\text{the missing 98% is magically restored}\]" (p. 17). Again, his restoration to his full being is only temporary, and he goes in search of the missing element which will enable him to be complete every minute of his life.

Both Barrett and Bolling have initially come to their realizations that something is missing from their lives because of the imminence of death. Barrett was almost shot in his own garage by an accidental, stray bullet. Bolling had first conceived of the search during the Korean War when he had been shot in the shoulder and was lying abandoned in a ditch. O'Connor also uses the imminence of death, and particularly through being shot, to reveal the essence of her characters' lives. In "A Good Man is Hard to Find," the
grandmother shows the best side of her nature just before she is killed. The Misfit realizes that her change is due to her impending death. "She would of been a good woman . . . if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life."

Another cause of the characters' increased understanding of themselves is through some kind of visual stimulus—a vision, whether God-given or not. Mrs. Turpin's vision of herself at the end of a long line into heaven is definitely from God. She has challenged God to explain himself, and explain he does, as "√a√ visionary light settled in her eyes" (p. 508). The pigs, who are in essence now her relatives, "appeared to pant with a secret life" (p. 508). Finally she realizes what her life is really like—not even her earthly "virtues" have any eternal value.

Perhaps the greatest example of the vision in O'Connor's works is the overwhelming sight imagery in Wise Blood. In Wise Blood there is a perverse twist to the usual meaning of sighted and blind. Those physically blind have more spiritual vision while those who can physically see are spiritually blind. Hawks is supposedly blind. While Motes and the reader are unaware that Hawks can really see, Hawks seems to possess unusual insight and power. When Motes discovers Hawks is able to see, the power he has vanishes. Similarly, by blinding himself, Motes shows that he has gained true spiritual insight. His blindness is a result
of realizing he can no longer run from God.

For Binx Bolling, movies are the visual stimulus he initially uses to try to give his life meaning. It works temporarily.

The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives. . . . What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in Stagecoach, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in The Third Man. (p. 14)

When the time and place of the movies have significance for him, he is even closer to escaping from "everydayness."

Before I see a movie it is necessary for me to learn something about the theater or the people who operate it, to touch base before going inside. . . . If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time. There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville. (pp. 63-64)

An impending death has an element of violence or trauma, as of course, death itself does. O'Connor's characters experience the imminence of their deaths, and more often than not this imminence results in their demise. The grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find" who reveals her best nature because of her approaching death, does die. She is not allowed to emerge from the experience and possibly retreat
to her former superficial existence, but is killed in her very moment of triumph over her "everydayness."

A shot also reverberates in *The Second Coming*. Barrett, too, is at his best when he feels the end of his life is near. It is at the moment that he is being shot at--either by himself or by someone else--that the 98% of himself he has "lost" is "magically restored."

In addition to being affected by the imminence of their own deaths, characters may also be affected by the very painful and prolonged death of another character. In *The Last Gentleman* Barrett must deal with the horrible death of his ward Jamie Vaught. Jamie has been ill for quite some time, and Barrett must watch him slowly deteriorate until he is not much more than a bruised, swollen, disease-racked body. In *The Second Coming* Barrett has watched his wife die a slow death as she progresses from walking to being pushed in a wheelchair to lying in a hospital bed. Both of these deaths have affected Barrett; he can no longer be the same apathetic person, and renews his search because of them.

Violence, either experienced or observed, accompanies the vision in O'Connor's works. Mrs. Turpin is hit in the head by a book immediately before Mary Grace calls her a "wart hog from hell." All afternoon Mrs. Turpin is racked with a headache as she attempts to establish the validity of the accusation. Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" goes through a drastic change because of the violence his
son Norton experiences. At the very moment Sheppard is receiving the revelatory vision of what his life is like, Norton is upstairs hanging himself. Sheppard must go through the pain and grief of his son's death in order to benefit fully from his vision.

Violence is so much a part of O'Connor's fiction that Joyce Carol Oates posits that "O'Connor's people are not quite whole until violence makes them whole." This is precisely the same thing that Percy's characters have discovered:

"Have you noticed that only in time of illness or disaster or death are people real? I remember at the time of the wreck--people were so kind and helpful and solid. Everyone pretended that our lives until that moment had been every bit as real as the moment itself and that the future must be real too, when the truth was that our reality had been purchased only by Lyell's death."(p. 69)

Perhaps the phenomenon of trauma making people whole is due to the very essence of the apocalypse for O'Connor and Percy. Although not always explicitly stated, for both of them the apocalypse has its foundations in the union of the eternal and the temporal--the offering of grace by God to man. In Percy's fiction it is obvious that the characters are searching for grace from God. Binx declines to name the object of his search for "fear of exposing my own ignorance" (p. 19), yet at the moment when Binx sees the Negro emerge from Ash Wednesday mass, the Negro's supposed acceptance of God's grace causes Binx to question if the end of his search
It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say. (p. 186)

Without any assurance either way, Binx must still wait.

Similarly, the presence of Christ the Lord on Christmas Day gives Tom More in Love in the Ruins the knowledge that his search is over. The personal incarnation, the union of the temporal and the eternal within More as he is absolved of his sins, is the moment for which he has been striving. Ever since his daughter died and he "lost" his faith, More has been waiting for that moment of restoration with his spiritual nature. The entirety of the novel bears this out as More tries to perfect his lapsometer which first diagnoses and then treats the chronic separation of man's physical and spiritual natures. Ultimately, however, More does not need his gadget, but only God's grace.

O'Connor's fiction is also obviously about grace being offered. It is difficult to interpret "Revelation," for example, in any other way than as a message from God showing Mrs. Turpin that the way into heaven is dependent not on her virtues but on grace. "The Enduring Chill" can also be most fundamentally interpreted as God's entrance into Asbury's
life. Grace in the form of the Holy Spirit descends on him as he is lying on his bed and gives him a start of a new life. O'Connor herself said,

The assumptions that underlie my fiction, however, are those of the central Christian mysteries. There are perhaps other ways than my own in which this story could be read, but none other by which it could have been written.9

Furthermore, O'Connor has acknowledged the relationship between the violence of her revelations and grace. "Our age not only does not have a very sharp eye for the almost imperceptible intrusions of grace, it no longer has much feeling for the nature of the violences which precede and follow them."10

Grace being offered within the framework of a violent revelation is indeed apocalyptic, and it is this concept which O'Connor and Percy share. What they do not share is its actual occurrence within their works in an unequivocal moment.

In each of O'Connor's works, all of the elements of the apocalypse meet near the end of the short story or novel. The concept of the apocalypse is not merely an abstract idea which her characters anticipate, but a violent irrevocable experience which takes the characters by surprise. The surprise element is magnified by the brevity of the experience. In just a short period of time the characters experience the apocalypse in its entirety. The longest time period over
which the apocalypse is spread is an entire day in "Revela-
tion." Most of the other apocalypses in O'Connor's works
occur within a matter of minutes. It is, in fact, an "apoc-
alyptic moment."

Furthermore, ambiguity about the occurrence of the
apocalyptic moment has no place in any of O'Connor's fiction.
The characters realize that this moment is significant in
its judgmental revelation and its offer of grace. Whether
or not the characters accept the grace is not always clear,
but they are aware that the moment demands a response and
therefore indicates a change in their lives. Moreover,
O'Connor describes the apocalyptic moment in such unambigu-
ous terms that the reader, too, can feel its significance.
The reader is not left to wonder, for example, if the
strange look on Mrs. May's face in "Greenleaf" is due just
to her pain or to a revelation. The reader is told that
"she had the look of a person whose sight has been suddenly
restored but who finds the light unbearable."

In addition, violence is crucial to O'Connor's apoca-
lypse. Occurring near the same time as the revelation, the
violence prepares the characters for what is about to come.

Percy's apocalypse, on the other hand, is best de-
scribed as a process. The elements of the apocalypse never
all meet in one precise moment, nor do Percy's novels end
with the definite closure found in O'Connor's works. Unlike
O'Connor's characters who are taken completely by surprise,
Percy's characters have formed an idea about the experience which will change their lives, and anticipate and work toward that experience step by step. The apocalypse is a looming presence in their lives which will at some point manifest itself. This point actually comes in only one of Percy's novels. In the other novels the characters may have progressed somewhat, but the complete moment of revelation and understanding is still to come. They are left still "watching and waiting" for the apocalypse, or at best for the assurance that the apocalypse has, in fact, already occurred. Because of the ambiguity the characters feel and Percy's reluctance to tell the reader anything the characters themselves do not know, the reader, too, is left without a real sense of closure as the novels end.

Furthermore, violence is removed from Percy's apocalypse. While the characters believe that catastrophe is the only way to be really "alive," the characters' expectations are disappointed when the moment, or the hint of the moment, occurs. Although violence usually begins the search in Percy's novels, it is not actually crucial to the revelation itself. The examination of the differences between O'Connor's and Percy's apocalypses composes the subject of this thesis.
Notes


II. Surprised by God:

The Apocalypse in Flannery O'Connor's Fiction

Flannery O'Connor once said, "From my own experience in trying to make stories 'work' I have discovered that what is needed is an action that is totally unexpected, yet totally believable, and I have found that, for me, this is always an action which indicates that grace has been offered."¹ Indeed, she is true to her self-evaluation in terms of the moment of grace; more important for this study, she places this moment of grace within the larger framework of an apocalypse. The apocalyptic moment is evident in all of her short stories, but is perhaps most pronounced in stories from the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*.

Mrs. Turpin of "Revelation" considers herself a good woman—"a respectable, hardworking, church-going woman."² She thinks of herself as above the "niggers and white trash" and is grateful she was not chosen to belong to either of those classes. As she and Claud sit in the doctor's waiting room she finds several things to thank God for, and even verbalizes her thanksgiving. So when Mary Grace hurl her book at Mrs. Turpin, digs her fingernails into Mrs. Turpin's neck, and says "go back to hell where you come from, you old wart hog," Mrs. Turpin is stunned. It would have been easy
for Mrs. Turpin to dismiss Mary Grace's accusation as a
lunatic stranger's opinion if it were not that Mrs. Turpin
believes that Mary Grace is a messenger from God--"the
girl did know her, knew her in some intense and personal
way, beyond time and place and condition" (p. 500).

To some this might initially seem to be an apocalypse.
However, Mrs. Turpin has not come to any understanding of
the message she was given and O'Connor is not content to
leave her characters in such a state of ambiguity. Mrs.
Turpin cannot understand why "she had been singled out for
the message" (p. 502). There were plenty of other people
in the waiting room who she believed deserved the harsh
message more than she did. Mrs. Turpin must realize the
message in a personal way in order to complete the apoca-
lypse Mary Grace has so violently begun.

Battling a debilitating headache all afternoon, Mrs.
Turpin tries to justify herself, her emotions ranging from
hurt to angry defensiveness. But she can neither justify
nor defend herself. Nor can the people to whom she turns
for assurance alleviate her sense that the message is
accurate. She refrains from telling Mr. Turpin about it,
yet his loving kiss does not abate her fear and anger.
The Negro's protestations cannot help her either. "Mrs.
Turpin knew just how much Negro flattery was worth and it
added to her rage" (p. 505). Some other means of dealing
with Mary Grace's accusation must be found.
Near sunset she ventures out to the pig parlor to gaze at her symbolic relatives. Here she demands an answer directly from God. "What do you send me a message like that for?" (p. 506). "Who do you think you are?" (p. 507). Finally she is given an answer to her questions through an unmistakable vision from God.

A visionary light settled in her eyes. . . . And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claud, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. . . . Yet she could see by their shock-ed and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away. (p. 508)

God has given her a painfully unbiased vision of herself through her own eyes. She herself must recognize where she fits in the processional and pass judgment on herself. She has confronted God and has been given an answer. Whether or not she accepts this vision, the impact of it stays with her even after the procession fades into the sky. Her acceptance or rejection of the judgment is still to come, but the judgment has come with undeniable force in an apocalyptic moment.

Sheppard of "The Lame Shall Enter First" joins Mrs. Turpin among O'Connor's many protagonists who have a mistaken idea about themselves. To make him realize his mistaken self-evaluation, however, takes a more violent
experience than Mrs. Turpin's. Sheppard believes he is considering only Rufus Johnson's and Norton's best interests when he tries to aid Johnson. Johnson, he feels, would benefit from a father-figure and from material advantages he has not previously had. Norton, he feels, needs to be taught lessons in sharing and selflessness. Sheppard takes Johnson in and showers him with affection, material goods, and trust, to the exclusion of Norton's emotional needs. "He could not go in and talk to Norton without breaking Johnson's trust. He hesitated, but remained where he was a moment as if he saw nothing."  

Sheppard's initial feelings of compassion for Johnson turn to hatred, however, when Johnson continually challenges him. The challenge which goads Sheppard the most is Johnson's persistent references to traditional religious tenets which Sheppard has rejected. Then the hatred turns to aversion: "The thought of facing Johnson again sickened him" (p. 475). In spite of this, Sheppard cannot admit defeat. He still must somehow "save" Johnson from his past and from the religious teachings Johnson glibly professes. The climax of their struggle comes when Sheppard challenges Johnson to believe actively the religious teachings he has previously only flaunted in Sheppard's scornful face. Johnson, of course, accepts the challenge. Johnson's entire being is transformed when he chews and swallows a page from his stolen Bible. "'I've eaten it like Ezekiel
and it was honey to my mouth!' . . . Wonder transformed his face" (p. 477). Johnson has rejected Sheppard's "salvation" through intelligence for salvation through the religious world of faith. Sheppard feels he has failed.

When he chooses the world of faith, Johnson is characterized as "a small black figure on the threshold of some dark apocalypse" (p. 478). It is Sheppard, however, whose world will soon be torn by violence and revelation. Johnson appears with the police one last time to confront Sheppard with the accusation that "'The devil has you in his power'" (p. 478). Sheppard examines his life to try to justify his "failure" with Johnson. Initially he is successful in his justification. "'I have nothing to reproach myself with . . . . I did more for him than I did for my own child'" (p. 481). These words, however, turn on him, and bring the revelation that his actions were self-centered: "he had ignored his own child to feed his vision of himself" (p. 481). Filled with consternation he closes his eyes to any further self-judgment. Nevertheless, it comes. "He had stuffed his own emptiness with good works like a glutton" (p. 481). Johnson's face leers assent as these words echo in Sheppard's mind.

His vision is suddenly transformed as he pictures Norton, now his "image of salvation." As he envisions his reunion with Norton, he is given "a transfusion of life" (p. 482). He plans to enter a new world through love for
Norton. But this, too, is a false salvation. He must enter a new world through grief: Rufus is dead. His world is drastically changed and his entrance into this new world is indeed by a violent, judgmental apocalypse.

The vicarious suffering in Sheppard's revelation is transformed to personal suffering in "The Enduring Chill" as Asbury represents yet another aspect of the apocalyptic moment—the union between the spiritual and the physical, the eternal and the temporal. Throughout his life, Asbury has constantly searched for a type of apocalyptic moment, a moment of total communication and communion between two humans' spirits. Breaking down barriers between souls in the name of Art, he believes, is the modern substitution for the traditional salvation experience. To join the eternal aspects of two humans often means overcoming the prejudices that exist between them. Asbury has spent his life searching for these moments of "total communion." He has managed to have a few incidents of communion, but each one is not significant enough in and of itself to give him satisfaction for long. He tries to repeat the communication, but each time it fails, and his search goes on for the one experience that will be so significant that it will fulfill forever his desire for communion with others.

Asbury does not give up searching for his moment even when he becomes violently ill and thinks he is about to die.
In fact, his illness and impending death seem to augment his desire for a significant experience. "There was something he was searching for, something that he felt he must have, some last significant culminating experience that he must make for himself before he died--make for himself out of his own intelligence." If, however, he cannot have any other significant experience, death itself holds enough mystery to be the significant experience.

It is the experience that he is not looking for—in fact shuns—that is the significant moment. He shuns any experience that he has not created for himself, specifically the acceptance of the Holy Spirit which the Jesuit priest suggests. "The Holy Ghost is the last thing I'm looking for!" (p. 376). He also shuns any communication between himself and Dr. Block, claiming that Dr. Block is not intelligent enough to understand his illness and that he must die. These two factors work together to prepare Asbury for the apocalyptic moment he wants.

Dr. Block informs Asbury that he has discovered the cause of his illness: drinking unpasteurized milk has given him undulant fever. Dr. Block and Asbury's mother cannot understand how he drank unpasteurized milk, but Asbury knows. In an attempt to break the barriers between himself and the black dairy hands the summer before, he had defied his mother's orders and drunk some of the warm, fresh milk. Ironically, Asbury has created the background for the
apocalyptic moment to come; the creation was not from his intelligence, but from his ignorance. The realization that Dr. Block has been able to diagnose him and that his attempt at communication has worked in an unexpected way prepares Asbury for the apocalyptic moment. "His eyes looked shocked clean as if they had been prepared for some awful vision about to come down on him" (p. 382). The water-mark "bird" on the ceiling takes life and descends on him with the revelation that "for the rest of his days . . . he would live in the face of a purifying terror" (p. 382). He will not die; he has been given a new life—a life filled with the purifying force of the Holy Ghost. He no longer has to search for significant moments; his whole life will now be significant. His temporal, diseased body has been joined forever with the spiritual.

"The Comforts of Home" adds yet another dimension to O'Connor's apocalyptic vision. In most of her stories, grace is offered, and, if a response is given, it is an affirmative one. "The Comforts of Home" shows the reverse of this. Thomas is battling between "good" and "evil," and ultimately chooses evil, not for evil's sake, but because it allows him to act. His uncalculated acceptance of evil is his apocalyptic moment.

Thomas has inherited character traits from both his mother and father. "Thomas had inherited his father's
reason without his ruthlessness and his mother's love of
good without her tendency to pursue it."5 But he cannot
abide the extremes of either one. His father, he believes,
was immoral, and he will not entertain the outrageous
thoughts his father's spirit places in his mind.

Several ideas for getting rid of her had entered
his head, but each of these had been suggestions
whose moral tone indicated that they had come
from a mind akin to his father's . . . . Thomas
considered this below his moral stature. (p. 398)

Similarly, he loathes his mother's extreme virtue.

But when her virtue got out of hand with her, as
now, a sense of devils grew upon him, and these
were not mental quirks in himself or the old lady,
they were denizens with personalities, present
though not visible. . . . (p. 386)

This conflict within him had previously resulted in inactivi-
ty; "his plan for all practical action was to wait and see
what developed" (p. 388). But when Sarah Ham—or Star, as
she calls herself—enters his life, the battle takes on new
fervor. Star recognizes his inactivity in his resemblance
to a movie character. "I swear this cop looked exactly like
him. They were always putting something over on the guy.
He would look like he couldn't stand it a minute longer or
he would blow up" (p. 389). Star is prepared to use his
weakness to her advantage. She knows he will not have the
compassion of his mother, but neither will he throw her out
of the house.
Thomas knows he must act, though, when his mother chooses to bring Star back to their house after his ultimatum. He has warned that he would leave the house, but he cannot bring himself to do so. To leave the house is like leaving a part of himself, so when his father's voice encourages him to press charges against Star for stealing his pistol, he can justify a delay in leaving. Thomas no longer perceives his father's voice as evil, but as the voice of reason which must be obeyed. Nevertheless, he has begun his journey toward the final choice between evil and good.

Thomas searches for the sheriff—a man he had previously avoided. The sheriff, identical in character to Thomas' father, is a solution Thomas had wanted to avoid. Now he purposefully seeks the sheriff out, instead of the deputy even. He arranges for the sheriff to enter his haven and search for the gun. He can justify this act, for Star had committed a crime; he was not planting her in a situation she has not created.

Star has returned the gun to the desk drawer, so when Thomas discovers it, his father insists that he plant it in her purse—an action similar to those Thomas has thought below his moral stature. His choice has begun. Both Star and his mother are confounded by his sudden activity. Star realizes she has a new person to deal with, and his mother is shocked by his resemblance to his father.

His final acceptance of evil comes when he fires the
gun. And yet even then he feels he is doing "right."

The blast was like a sound meant to bring an end to evil in the world. Thomas heard it as a sound that would shatter the laughter of sluts until all shrieks were stilled and nothing was left to disturb the peace of perfect order. (pp. 403-4)

His act has not ended evil. He is propelled into a world void of the virtue he was trying to preserve. His world is now filled only with the nymphomaniac Star and the "glassy pale blue gaze" of the dishonest sheriff.

"The Comforts of Home" illustrates another technique found in O'Connor's works. A structural device is used to reinforce the apocalyptic moment. When Thomas kills his mother, whether inadvertently or purposefully, he has chosen the evil world his father represents. Having made the choice, Thomas can no longer be the center of conflict, and if the story is to continue, the emphasis must shift away from him. Throughout the short story, the narrative has been told through Thomas's point of view. When Thomas shoots the gun, the point of view immediately shifts to the sheriff, another person whose choice has not yet been made and whose perception is unclear.

While it is obvious that O'Connor's short story characters experience an apocalyptic moment, it may be argued that an abrupt, shocking conclusion is inherent in the short story genre. While this may be true, the phenomenon of the
apocalyptic moment is also present in O'Connor's two novels. Both protagonists are fighting against a call from God, and the apocalyptic moment comes at their moment of surrender to it—that moment when God is too difficult for them to fight against any longer.

Hearing his grandfather preach hell and damnation, and salvation through Jesus, Hazel Motes in Wise Blood knew as a young boy he would be a preacher. However, in spite of this early conviction, Motes cannot accept the terms of God. He is not willing to take the step of faith which would require that he "come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing..."6 Instead, Motes wants to stay within the limits of the very familiar. In this reluctance are the seeds of unbelief which he will embrace later. His unbelief grows when he joins the army and convinces himself that his buddies are right, "he didn't have a soul" (p. 17), and can therefore be "converted to nothing instead of to evil" (p. 17). He does not have to refuse to walk in faith; he can merely believe nothing.

His fight against belief is not over with this "conversion," but begins with new fervor when he is discharged from the army. With his preacher-grandfather's face he has inherited and the blue suit and dark hat he purchases, everyone mistakes him for a preacher. This identification immediately frustrates his attempts to escape the call of God, as he is constantly being reminded of it by everyone.
He meets another obstacle when he encounters Asa Hawks, a blind preacher who is begging and handing out tracts on the street. Motes is immediately drawn to Hawks, but feigns attraction to his daughter Sabbath. Hawks can see through Motes's pretense. "'He followed me,' the blind man said. '... I can hear the urge for Jesus in his voice'" (p. 31). He also knows Motes's heritage and his struggle against God. "'Some preacher has left his mark on you. ... Did you follow for me to take it off or give you another one?'" (p. 32). Hearing this question, Motes feels he must act out his denial of the church, and begins to preach "the church of truth without Jesus Christ Crucified" (p. 34).

Upon discovering that Hawks has blinded himself for his belief in Jesus Christ, Motes is even further mesmerized. It is inconceivable to Motes that any man would go to such extremes for the very tradition Motes has denied. All of the other obstacles have been easily surmounted, but the magnitude of Hawks's sacrifice is more difficult for Motes to overcome. He even begins to have doubts about his newfound beliefs as he questions Sabbath thoroughly about Hawks's life before his call to preach and the service in which Hawks blinded himself. Having attempted as a child an act similar to Hawks's blinding as expiation for his sins and having received no sign of satisfaction from God, Motes becomes obsessed with seeing for himself Hawks's blind
eyes—the seemingly successful act of faith. After all, "it was not right to believe anything you couldn't see" (p. 112).

When Motes finally sees Hawks without his glasses and realizes he is not blind, Motes's case seems closed; his way is indeed the way to "salvation." He can follow his new faith with no reservations. Feeling this city is too contaminated by Hawks and his own past, he decided to start his life and church over in a new city. All one night he lies in his car "thinking about the life he was going to begin" (p. 111). His car will carry him to a new life.

Motes does not anticipate receiving another obstacle to following his new-found faith—a sign from God. On his way to the new city "he had the sense that he was not gaining ground" (p. 112). It seems that he passes the same countryside over and over, especially the "666 signs" and the signs that read "'Jesus Died for YOU'" (p. 112). This un-nameable fear of never arriving gives way to a very real situation when a policeman pulls him over. After discovering that Motes does not have a license, the policeman pushes the car over an embankment. Motes is stunned. To destroy his car is to destroy a part of Motes, as the car was the physical symbol of Motes's inner attempt to escape. He no longer has any means of escaping; God has confounded Motes with an insurmountable obstacle. Realizing he has seen his judgment and the inevitability of surrender to God, he submits and returns home to begin a new life filled with the violence
and pain of physical blindness and other masochistic means of expiating his sins.

Structurally as well as thematically this is the apocalyptic moment in the novel. Throughout the novel Enoch Emery is a more obvious representation of Motes's struggle, with the plot line alternating between different facets of Motes's struggle and their often parodic counterparts in Enoch Emery's life.

Enoch Emery is constantly aware of the "wise blood" of his heritage, an underlying image in Motes's life. "That morning Enoch Emery knew when he woke up that today the person he could show it to was going to come. He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy" (p. 46). Motes, too, relies on his blood, but for much more than everyday affairs. Motes believes he can be "saved" by his blood instead of the blood of Christ.

Similarly, prophetic intuitions Enoch Emery has about the direction of his own life foreshadow events in Motes's life. When Motes strikes Enoch and draws blood, Enoch knows that "whatever was expected of him was only just beginning" (p. 58). In the very next chapter Motes discovers that Hawks has blinded himself as a justification of his faith. The real test of Motes's new "faith" is just beginning.

Motes's apocalyptic moment is also foreshadowed by Enoch Emery's final action in the novel. Consumed with "the expectation that the new jesus was going to do something for
him in return for his services" (p. 104), Enoch Emery feels inspired to become Gonga the gorilla. Since providing Motes with a "new jesus" did not win him the acceptance he craves, he is sure that this is the way that he can find acceptance from others. As he puts on the gorilla suit in preparation for his ultimate attempt to gain acceptance, his actions predict what will occur in Motes' life. "Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn't need them anymore" (p. 107). In the next chapter, the symbol of Motes's flight from God's call, his car, is "buried" by the policeman and becomes, since Motes quits running, something "he wouldn't need . . . anymore."

The outcome of Enoch Emery's final action ends the parody of Motes's entire search. As he stands in the woods in the gorilla suit, confident that his god is finally going to reward him, Enoch Emery is ecstatic. However, his god does not provide the regeneration and acceptance he expects. He is left sitting alone and rejected and without any kind of "redemption." This is the last scene in which Enoch appears in the novel. After this conclusion to his search he is no longer necessary, for Motes's search, too, is about to end. In the next chapter, Motes's apocalyptic moment comes. Traveling to another city in search of a new life, Motes encounters the policeman who destroys Motes means of escape. But whereas Enoch Emery's search concluded in
utmost futility, Motes realizes the intervention of God's grace and returns home to receive the redemption he has searched for.

A further structural indication of the apocalyptic moment is the shift of focus at the end of the novel. After Motes's moment of revelation and his subsequent blinding, the emphasis shifts from Motes to his landlady. Motes's experience is complete, and he can no longer be the center of conflict. As in other of O'Connor's works, once the protagonist has gained spiritual insight, the point of view shifts to one who is still spiritually blind. Another sighted yet spiritually blind person begins her search for a revelation.

Like Motes, Tarwater is running away from the call of God. Orvell has made the observation that "where Wise Blood portrays the outward appearance of a soul reaching a religious commitment, The Violent Bear It Away is concerned chiefly with representing the inward nature of that struggle."7 Tarwater struggles with accepting or rejecting the Christian belief "that his freedom had to be connected with Jesus and that Jesus had to be the Lord."8 He is tempted to be the controller of his destiny and tries desperately to resist Jesus as Master.

Tarwater is aided in his attempt by a devil-figure who first appears when his great-uncle dies. Having been brought
up by his great-uncle, Tarwater had been under his influence regarding God for all of his life. This does not mean, however, that he had accepted everything his great-uncle had said. He had silently rejected following the path of an unspectacular prophet and had decided that his prophetic mission would consist of extraordinary events similar to those of Moses, Joshua, or Daniel.

When the silencing power of his great-uncle is gone, the devil-figure begins encouraging Tarwater to keep rejecting the signs which indicate that he has been called to an unspectacular mission. The temptations have the undertone that disbelieving his call will give him freedom from Jesus. Several times Tarwater is given a sign of his call, and each time he rejects it. The experiences become increasingly more violent and more personal until the final most personally violent moment in which Tarwater accepts the call.

The first time Tarwater is called is at his great-uncle's death. It is a subtle call, barely perceptible even to Tarwater.

Tarwater, sitting across the table from him, saw red ropes appear in his face and a tremor pass over him. It was like the tremor of a quake that had begun at his heart and run outward and was just reaching the surface. . . . Tarwater felt the tremor transfer itself and run lightly over him. (p. 309)

Tarwater feels different—"as if the death had changed him instead of his great-uncle" (p. 309), but he cannot admit
that this was his call. He seeks refuge in the thought that his uncle must be buried before his mission can begin.

The delay in acknowledging his mission gives the devil-figure time to begin his temptations. He finds fertile ground for the doubts he places in Tarwater's mind.

You go ahead and put your feet in his shoes. Elisha after Elijah like he said. But just lemme ast you this: where is the voice of the Lord? I haven't heard it. Who's called you this morning? Or any morning? Have you been told what to do? You ain't even heard the sound of natural thunder this morning. There ain't a cloud in the sky. (p. 328)

The doubts he suggests to Tarwater take root, and Tarwater runs farther from the call. One of his first acts is to burn the house and, he thinks, his great-uncle's body. Burning the body instead of burying it is not only in direct contradiction to his great-uncle's directions, but since "the boy knew he would have to bury the old man before anything would begin" (p. 310), Tarwater also believes he has avoided the step which would symbolize the beginning of his mission.

Tarwater soon learns that running from God is not easy. He has decided to go to the city to test the validity of the mathematical and historical facts his great-uncle taught him. Thinking he has successfully denied his mission, Tarwater does not remember his great-uncle's admonition: "'If by the time I die . . . I haven't got him [Bishop] baptized, it'll be up to you. It'll be the first mission
the Lord sends you'" (p. 308). Bishop, the idiot child, will also be in the city.

Tarwater meets Bishop the first night he arrives; upon seeing Bishop standing in the house, Tarwater has a distinct revelation about his mission.

Then the revelation came, silent, implacable, direct as a bullet. He did not look into the eyes of any fiery beast or see a burning bush. He only knew, with a certainty sunk in despair, that he was expected to baptize the child he saw and begin the life his great-uncle had prepared him for. (p. 357)

This time Tarwater does not deny he has had a vision, but emphatically refuses to accept the call because the mission is not glamorous enough. From then on, the call becomes a constant compelling force.

Part of the force is manifested through Tarwater's hunger which has accompanied him since his arrival in the city. Tarwater starts to think of this as a sign of his call, but the devil-figure convinces him it is an "unsuitable" sign since the Biblical prophets had always been fed. Tarwater then demands that the silence be broken with an unmistakable sign.

The sign comes. Tarwater is shown once again that his mission is to baptize Bishop. As Bishop, Rayber, and Tarwater are walking through a city park, Tarwater has the premonition that he is about to receive a revelation. When Bishop plunges into the fountain pool, the revelation comes.
"A blinding brightness fell on the lion's tangled marble head and gilded the stream of water rushing from his mouth. Then the light, falling more gently, rested like a hand on the child's white head" (p. 401). The vision is certainly the most overtly Biblical that Tarwater has yet experienced. The blinding brightness is similar to Paul's Damascus-road experience, and the light resting like a hand on Bishop's head is similar in tone to the dove resting on Jesus at his baptism. Yet the devil-figure refuses to let him accept this as a sign either, and disparages it as an event "that could happen 50 times a day without no one being the wiser" (p. 401).

The thought has begun to possess Tarwater that he needs to act in direct defiance to the command in order to establish once and for all that he is not willing to accept his call. The only action which will be final and irrevocable is to drown the idiot child he is to baptize. An action, not words, should make the refusal conclusory.

Even though Tarwater has decided he must act, he still has some reservations about doing so. Even after he rows the boat with Bishop in it out to the center of the lake, he contemplates what he will do. Finally he pulls Bishop out of the boat and drowns him. As he does so, however, the baptismal words are wrenched from his soul. Even while ridding his life of the emblem of the start of his mission, he has begun it. Nevertheless, he still will not admit it. As
he relives the experience later in the truck back to Powderhead, he defiantly denies his mission. "Deliberately, forcefully, he closed the inner eye that had witnessed his dream" (p. 432).

The revelation has increased in scope from a feeling to a visual image to an action; Tarwater's rejection has also increased from rejecting signs he considers not dramatic enough to unconditional rejection. In order for Tarwater to reverse his decision, the revelation must now be unmistakably clear and very compelling. It is this all-encompassing revelation which is the ultimate apocalyptic moment for Tarwater.

On his way back to Powderhead following the baptism-drowning of Bishop, Tarwater is confronted with his call once more. Even after justifying his action to the unsuspecting truck driver and deliberately shutting the incident out of his mind, Tarwater has still not succeeded in totally rejecting the call. He attempts to return to his home, yet, like Motes, he does not seem to make any progress: "he felt the distance between himself and his goal grow longer" (p. 434).

A car which picks him up helps assuage this feeling of immobility as it speeds down the road. Gradually the devil-figure has gained prominence in Tarwater's life. In a store he had caused Tarwater to spew out an obscene word, and now Tarwater meets him face to face. The man driving the car is
strangely familiar to Tarwater, but he cannot place him. He is the personification of the figure Tarwater has imagined as his "stranger-friend," the devil-figure who has been with him since his great-uncle's death.

Drugging Tarwater to sleep with whiskey, the devil-stranger takes complete control of Tarwater through a homosexual rape. Upon awakening from the deep sleep Tarwater realizes he has been raped and in a violent rage, burns the area in which the assault took place. This very personal violence opens the way to Tarwater's final revelation as he moves slowly toward his home.

The presence of the devil-figure accompanies him, and speaks to Tarwater of their joint ownership of the land. At this point Tarwater realizes that his "friend" only brings evil with him. He immediately perceives him as a devil-figure who has been trying to take control of him. At this moment he rids himself of his adversary forever.

He shook himself free fiercely and grabbed the matches from his pocket and tore off another pine bough. He held the bough under his arm and with a shaking hand struck a match and held it to the needles until he had a burning brand. He plunged this into the lower branches of the forked tree. The flames crackled up, snapping for the drier leaves and rushing into them until an arch of fire blazed upward. He walked backwards from the spot pushing the torch into all the bushes he was moving away from, until he had made a rising wall of fire between him and the grinning presence. He glared through the flames and his spirits rose as he saw that his adversary would soon be consumed in a roaring blaze. He turned and moved on with the burning brand tightly clenched in his fist. (p. 444)
Even this purging is not enough to rid Tarwater of the hunger and the premonition that his call is still incomplete. He realizes that he must willingly and deliberately enter the world of prophecy. This moment comes as he discovers that his first act of resistance was a farce—his great-uncle's body had not been burned in the fire, but had been buried by a neighbor. Tarwater has a vision then, a vision "that the object of his hunger was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him" (p. 446).

Only after he has acknowledged the true source of his hunger, is he ready for an unmistakable apocalyptic-type call for which the burning trees provide the background. The call itself is "as silent as seeds opening one at a time in his blood" (p. 447), but it is definite and unmistakable, and Tarwater has reached a point where he is ready to accept his call no matter what. The apocalyptic moment has indeed come for him, perhaps even more dramatically than he wished.
Notes


III. The Search Continues:
The Apocalypse in Walker Percy's Fiction

A cursory glance at the titles of scholarly articles on Walker Percy's fiction reveals that critics find his apocalyptic vision prominent in his works. As has been suggested, this vision is very similar to the vision O'Connor reveals in her works. Except in *Love in the Ruins*, Percy's use of the vision is strikingly different from O'Connor's. Percy's characters do identify and anticipate the elements of the apocalyptic vision and even seem to experience some of the elements, but at the end of the novel--unlike O'Connor's characters--they have yet to experience an indisputable moment of revelation and understanding.

*The Moviegoer*, Percy's first novel, portrays a character who is on a conscious search. Binx Bolling tries to clarify it by using analogies of vertical and horizontal scientific experiments, but what he is searching for is still uncertain. "What do you seek--God? you ask with a smile. I hesitate to answer, since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves and to give such an answer would amount to setting myself a goal which everyone else has reached."¹ Perhaps the best description of the object of his search is that he is looking for some kind of revelation

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about the meaning of life which will put him in touch with his surroundings and inner vitality and propel him out of his rut of "everydayness" forever. Yet while Binx goes through several attempts to experience this apocalyptical moment, even at the end of the novel he is searching, watching, and waiting for that moment to come.

Binx's search actually began with violence in the jungles of Korea several years before the novel begins. In the middle of the war, wounded in the shoulder, Binx suddenly wonders what life is all about—where he can find the meaning of life.

I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush... Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. (p. 16)

Despite this violent beginning for his search, there is a lapse of time until he actually begins his search in earnest; it is not a violent act that ultimately forces him into an active search, but an everyday event. Binx suddenly becomes acutely aware of his personal belongings as he was about to put them into his pocket for the day. "A man can look at this little pile on his bureau for thirty years and never once see it... Once I saw it, however, the search became possible" (p. 17).

Movies provide Binx with clues for his search. Even
before he begins his active search, movies have been an escape from everydayness for Binx.

The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie. Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives. . . . What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in Stagecoach, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in The Third Man. (p. 14)

Looking for other clues for his search, Binx is fixated on the Jews as "the sign." "Ever since Wednesday I have become acutely aware of Jews. There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say" (p. 74). Many things he knows about the Jews seem to parallel his own life. He feels homeless, in exile, just like the Jews, and like his own moviegoing, the Jews, a sociologist has found, are often solitary moviegoers. To understand the Jews is to understand himself.

Binx knows that the meaning of life must be found within the confines of his everyday existence. This restriction is not to be confused with what Binx calls "everydayness;" "everydayness" is not being aware of where one is—not caring whether one is in Chicago, New Orleans, or San Francisco—and not seeing the little things about life. Therefore, the more familiar Binx's surroundings are, the more possible it is for him really to live—really to know and care about his environment. "Rotations" (experiences that exceed expectation) and "repetitions" (events similar or identical to previous ones) are two ways he is made more
aware of his surroundings. If he is forced out of the known environment, he must learn minute details about the new place as soon as possible. For example, everytime he visits a new movie theater he must talk to the owner and ticket taker so that the place has some kind of significance for him.

At the height of his search, then, the last thing he needs is to have to readjust to a new situation. So when his uncle proudly bestows a business trip and a potential move on Binx, he is dismayed. "Oh sons of all bitches and great beast of Chicago lying in wait. There goes my life in Gentilly, my Little Way, my secret existence among the happy shades in Elysian Fields" (p. 82).

Max Webb thinks that Binx finds what he is looking for at an unexpected time during his business trip. "The trip is a turning point because Binx accepts responsibility for Kate's life as well as his own." For those who see Binx's search only in existential terminology, responsibility for others is a sign of a progression from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage. But even this ethical stage is not the conclusion to a search, even for existentialists. There is more to Binx's search than taking responsibility for someone else. Chicago is more of a turning point for Kate than it is for Binx, for here she places Binx in a god-like position; he is the person whom she will obey. Yet Binx still has no one in whom he can believe. He is, in Kate's
terminology, "the unmoved mover" (p. 157).

Other scholars feel that the change for Binx comes as he waits for Kate at his apartment on Ash Wednesday and has an "apocalyptic vision" of the end of the world. There is a slight change, one which does not bring a resolution but a redefinition and in fact, a renewal of his search. Having temporarily abandoned his search after facing his aunt's fury over taking Kate to Chicago, Binx is forced back into despair. He recognizes his life for what it has been—and is. He admits that he has relied totally on the catastrophic end of the world as the event which would enable him to live.

For a long time I have secretly hoped for the end of the world and believed with Kate and my aunt and Sam Yerger and many other people that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live as merrily as children among the viny ruins. (p. 183)

In this "apocalyptic vision" he realizes that the end of the world may not be the only completion of his search; there may indeed be another way to break from the "everydayness" which seems to have conquered him. With his question "Is it possible that—it is not too late?" (p. 183), he reopens the search.

Not only has he reopened the search, but he has also redefined it. Since all of his past attempts to experience life have been colored by his underlying belief about the
end of the world, he must give up this view and open the search to other possibilities. Binx knows, then, how to carry out his search. It will not be through repetitions and rotations within his life, but through other people who, like him, are searching for the meaning of life. "There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons" (p. 184).

Immediately after his search has been reopened, he watches an event which might bring the moment of revelation and understanding. A man emerges from Ash Wednesday mass. Binx is no longer afraid to call the object of his search God, but he is not sure this is the moment of revelation he has anticipated. "It is impossible to say" what the significance of the man's action is. Because the man is a Negro, "it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes" (p. 185). He is not sure if the Negro is to bring the revelation that he is on the right track in his search—a sign that others are searching too and have found God in the rituals of the Catholic mass—or if the Negro is merely at mass for social reasons and his search is still misdirected.

The book does not end at this point, however. Binx feels the need to explain what has happened in the next year and a half. The epilogue itself is a sign that the apocalyptic moment did not occur, for if it had, the search and
therefore the book would have been over. Furthermore, it seems unlikely that the apocalyptic moment occurs within the epilogue.

Kate visits Lonnie, Binx's crippled half-brother, the day before his death and is horrified by his condition. Binx, now a medical student, accepts Lonnie's condition, a fact which many scholars point to as proof of a profound change in Binx. However, all through the novel death has comforted Binx and he has been most "alive" in the middle of catastrophe.

Binx does seem to manifest his decision to "hand people along." After visiting Lonnie with Kate, Binx finds his younger half-brothers and half-sisters sitting in the car waiting for some news about Lonnie. Recognizing their heightened sensitivity to life brought about by Lonnie's impending death, Binx prolongs the conversation as long as they wish so they may fully experience the death and life. "Only the two girls are sad, but they are also secretly proud of having caught onto the tragedy" (p. 189). Similarly, he helps Kate in her battle to live when he gives her a definite task to do. Handing people along does not seem to indicate that a resolution has been found, but merely that the search continues.

Besides relating this episode, Binx also discusses his search—or discusses the fact that he does not have the "inclination to say much on the subject" (p. 187), and that
he cannot speak without being edifying. This does not mean that he has reached the end of his search. The redefinition of his search as an unabashed search for God could account for his tendency toward edification. He admits, moreover, that to edify, to "hand people along and be handed along" is no more than giving mutual "kicks in the asses" which he has previously praised in his taped segment for the radio program "This I Believe."

One final clue to the continuing nature of his search can be found in a sentence in the Epilogue. "Reticence, therefore, hardly having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end" (p. 188). If he had reached the end of his search, the creation of an artificial conclusion would hardly seem necessary. Percy's careful attention to all that goes into his novels, and the sentence's strategic placement in the epilogue indicate that this is a clue to the reader that for Binx the search, more directed, goes on. The apocalyptic moment of revelation and understanding which will bring an end to his search has yet to come.

In spite of its better defined search for the secret of life, Percy's second novel, The Last Gentleman has a more tenuous ending than The Moviegoer. Thomas LeClair posits that Sutter and Val represent the two extremes of the meaning of life—the philosophical/scientific and the religious.
LeClair does not suggest that Barrett has made a definite choice between the two by the end of the novel, but he does indicate that at the end of the novel Will has "turned ever so little toward God." However, even this closure, tentative as it may seem, seems more definite than the end of the novel warrants. There is no suggestion that the apocalyptic moment of revelation and understanding has come in any degree.

From the first pages of the novel, the reader is aware that Will Barrett is not an ordinary person. From his childhood years he has been aware that he does not know the meaning of life. The secret of life--both his own and life in general--seems to evade him. Watching his nursemaid in the kitchen he has a moment of déjà vu, and a "sense . . . that something else was going to happen and when it did he would know the secret of his own life." And when the man next door goes crazy, he knows "that if he could figure out what was wrong with the man he would learn the great secret of life" (p. 16).

He has yet to make any discovery when the book begins. Suffering from amnesia, "fugue states" and who knows what other mental and nervous conditions induced by "noxious particles" in the atmosphere, Will Barrett attempts to live at least an outwardly normal life.

He knew how to seek emotional gratifications in a mature way, as they say in such books. In the
arts, for example. He understood, moreover, that it is people who count, one's relations with people, one's warmth toward and understanding of people. Nor should the impression be given that he turned up his nose at religion, as old-style scientists used to do, for he had read widely among modern psychologists and he knew that we have much to learn from the psychological insights of the World's Great Religions. (pp. 17-18)

Every conceivable possibility for life's meaning remains open, and he waits for some catastrophe which will rule out most of the possibilities and therefore enable him to discover the meaning of life. His past experience has taught him that even the temporary "sweet beast of catastrophe" (p. 95) makes him aware of life. War, he knows, makes "the possible . . . actual through no doing of one's own" (p. 16). A hurricane has the same effect—it purges his senses and enables him to act. The ultimate "catastrophe" is, of course, the end of the world, which he even looks forward to, at least more than he looks forward to "living through an ordinary Wednesday morning" (p. 26).

Determined to survive somehow in the ordinary world, he decides to "engineer the future of his life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge so arduously gained from five years of analysis" (p. 39). He begins his methodical existence only to be "sidetracked" by the subjective, unpredictable human element. He becomes attached to and involved with the Vaught family because of his attraction to Kitty, the twenty-one-year-old daughter. He is confronted by the dying Jamie who rekindles Barrett's
desire to find a meaning to life. Here, too, he meets proponents of the extremes in the possibilities of life's meaning.

When he meets Sutter Vaught, the oldest son, Barrett knows he has found someone who can tell him what to do and think. Sutter represents the objective path Barrett had chosen for himself before he met the Vaughts. Moreover, Sutter seems to have a definite set of values to which he clings and which Barrett wants to adopt, if for no other reason than that they are definite. All his life Barrett has lived poised to act at the slightest hint from someone, and now he has met a detached scientist who can tell him exactly what to do. Sutter, however, is an unwilling "god," and Barrett struggles to obtain answers from Sutter throughout the novel.

On the other extreme is Val, who is more than willing to tell Barrett what to do. A Catholic nun who espouses traditional Catholic doctrine, she asks Will to accept responsibility for Jamie's baptism. A Protestant, albeit an indifferent one, Barrett has a perverse sense of satisfaction in initially refusing her request and, in his refusal, rejecting the religious beliefs she espouses.

The two sides meet at Jamie's deathbed when Barrett must make the choice. Barrett fulfills Val's request, and calls a priest, only to find himself strangely more "religious," even more Protestant, because of this action.
"Never in his entire lifetime had he given such matters a single thought and now all at once he was a stout Anglican, a defender of the faith" (p. 310). But Barrett has not totally accepted religion as the source of meaning, for he cannot give Jamie any of the affirmation Jamie wants when the priest begins to talk to him. Several times Jamie looks to Barrett for answers to the priest's questions. Barrett cannot give them to him. Fortunately, Jamie realizes that Barrett has called the priest only to placate Val and his assent to the baptism is with "a sort of ironic acknowledgement" (p. 314).

While Barrett does not adopt Val's position, he refuses to accept Sutter's suicide answer either, and begs Sutter to reconsider it himself. Barrett feels that Sutter still has something to offer him. Barrett has progressed from his need to be told what to think, but he still has a desperate need for Sutter's presence: "'Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett ... need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you. Jamie had Val too'" (p. 318).

Instead of Jamie's death enabling Barrett to find the meaning he so desperately wants to discover, it merely focuses the positions more sharply and leaves Barrett still vacillating. Barrett decides that there must be a middle ground--a position somewhere between Val's dogmatic doctrine as the way to find God, and Sutter's belief that suicide is
the only way to recover oneself and God in the process—a position between "God and not-God" (p. 277).

As the novel ends, Barrett is racing to ask Sutter "a final question" before setting out entirely on his own search with neither Val nor Sutter to tell him what to do. He has been able to define the two extremes of his search for meaning, but he is no closer to one than to the other. The resolution is still to come.

In Percy's first two novels, the apocalypses the characters have anticipated do not occur by the novels' ends, not even in *The Moviegoer* though epilogues traditionally provide resolutions, nor are the searches totally within the religious context. In his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, Percy breaks both of these patterns. Thomas More's search is entirely within the religious context: although his theories about life could easily be interchanged with either Binx's or Barrett's, he openly searches for God—for the reunion of his physical nature and his spiritual nature. Moreover, he does reach a moment of revelation and understanding—the apocalypse occurs.

Thomas More's family has been wandering for years trying to find a place for their Catholicism among the Protestant English-Americans. "In the end we settled for Louisiana, where religious and ethnic confusion is sufficiently widespread and good-natured that no one keeps track of such
matters." Tom More also has an individual search, and he even knows what has pushed him out on his pilgrimage. During his daughter's illness, he refused to take her to a special clinic because he "was afraid she might be cured" (p. 354). Since he no longer felt "alive," like a human being with normal responses to situations, the knowledge that Samantha's death would bring a renewal of his life through feelings kept him from taking a chance of a miraculous cure. This division of his soul from his body which can be overcome only by an immense tragedy is part of a disease he refers to as "angelism-bestialism." The symptoms of angelism-bestialism are total abstraction of thought (angelism) yet finely-tuned, even lustful, body sensations (bestialism).

One way "to live without feasting on [Samantha's] death" (p. 354), is to hold Christ accountable for his assertion that "if you eat me you'll have life in you" (p. 131). However, because of the angelism-bestialism More no longer feels contrition for what he knows is sin. "'The problem is that if there is no guilt, contrition, and purpose of amendment, the sin cannot be forgiven. . . . It means that you don't have life in you'" (p. 111).

More has given up the church. Samantha warns him against totally rejecting God, but More claims he has not completely lost his faith even though he realizes that his lifestyle indicates that his faith has no substance.
"Generally I do as I please. A man, wrote John, who says he believes in God and does not keep his commandments is a liar. If John is right, then I am a liar. Nevertheless, I still believe" (p. 6).

Set in the revolutionary, anarchistic "last days" of the world, More's search for his personal apocalypse is heightened by the apocalyptic setting. In a very traditional sense he awaits the apocalypse--the end of the world--but he also is searching for a personal revelation. More is attempting to find other ways to deal with the angelism-bestialism--other ways to feel "alive" than through death, either his own, another human's, everyone's, or Christ's. He is looking for a new Messiah, one who will "reconcile man with his sins" instead of dying for the sins and reconciling man to God (p. 145). More, a doctor, even projects himself as the "new Christ," since he is about to make the final breakthrough in a device which will be the "perfect medicine" for modern man.

His device is called a lapsometer. Several years before he saw the correlation between sodium in the atmosphere and man's behavior. The lapsometer diagnoses the problem. High levels of Heavy Sodium in the atmosphere enter the blood and cause angelism while Heavy Chlorine causes bestialism, and the "two conditions are not mutually exclusive" (p. 26). More has devised his own methods of treating the extremes, the most common being physical exertion, which
does not continue to work over a period of time.

Art Immelmann appears with an adapter to the lapsometer which gives it treatment value as well. More is fascinated by the new device and sees all kinds of good which can come from it—until Immelmann begins using it with evil intent. An allegorical devil, Immelmann begins passing out lapsometers to medical students as a gadget with which to play. He has turned the setting to a high degree of ionization which transforms everyone—some to angelism and some to bestialism. The town has already experienced a steady rise in vandalism and snipers, and More fears general anarchy since the president is due in town that evening.

He retreats to a motel with three women—two women with whom he is sexually involved and his religious nurse. What could be more idyllic for the person afflicted by chronic angelism-bestialism? He has two women who arouse him sexually, one through her almost innocent manner and the other through her music, and a third woman who can discuss intellectual and moral problems with him. Here, too, he feels that the four of them will be safe, for he can effectively immunize them from the ionic-charged atmosphere. He is not safe, however, for Art Immelmann tries to entice Ellen, his nurse, away from him. In a final burst of desperation, More prays aloud to his ancestor saint Sir Thomas More, and Art Immelmann vanishes into a cloud of smoke.

His burst of religiosity has not solved the problem
for More, however, for he is still affected by the ionically charged atmosphere, is still calling himself a "bad Catholic," is still waiting for the "approaching catastrophe." Furthermore, he still believes that it is his device that will save America. "I can save you, America! I know something! I know what is wrong! I hit on something, made a breakthrough, came on a discovery! I can save the terrible God-blessed Americans from themselves! With my invention!" (pp. 54-55). His only concern about the approaching catastrophe is that it will occur before he has made an appropriate sensation in the scientific world with an article on the lapsometer. He fears the catastrophe has indeed begun.

But the apocalypse does not occur. In the epilogue-type chapter, the state of the world and of Tom More five years later is revealed. Outwardly a few social forces have changed. He has married Ellen, his nurse, and has settled into an old slave quarter building. The black Bantus have become the upper class of society, but not through a cataclysmic revolution. Yet other things are much the same. "I can't say things have changed much. What has changed is my way of dealing with it" (p. 362). His way of dealing with the world is no longer to get drunk first thing in the morning, but to work, and "while you work, you also watch and listen and wait" (p. 359).

As the chapter "Five Years Later" begins, it is Christmas Eve day. More is not waiting with the other Catholics
for the renewal of the initial incarnation of Christ in himself, but for the second coming of Christ at the end of the world.

This morning, hauling up a great unclassified beast of a fish, I thought of Christ coming again at the end of the world and how it is that in every age there is temptation to see signs of the end and that, even knowing this, there is nevertheless some reason, what with the spirit of the new age being the spirit of watching and waiting, to believe that—(p. 365)

More believes the end of the world is not too far away.

More decides to go to midnight mass. There he goes to confession and is ashamed of his sins when the priest calls them nothing but "a few middle-aged daydreams" (p. 376). Feeling contrition, doing public penance, and therefore having forgiveness, More can partake of communion at mass. Once again he has Christ in him, and Christ is true to his word—More does, then, have life. All of his other fantasies about the world and his saving it have disappeared. "It is Christmas Day and the Lord is here, a holy night and surely that is all one needs" (p. 378).

The moment of revelation he has waited for has indeed come. His personal apocalypse has occurred, and More is ready to begin a new kind of life.

In Lancelot, his next novel, Percy illustrates the exact opposite of the definite resolution found in Love in the Ruins. However, his return to his earlier technique is
only partial, as he maintains the open search for God.

Robert Coles summarizes the search in Lancelot concisely: "Lancelot is a sustained reverie of yet another of Percy's seeker's—though the Holy Grail in this particular story is as hard to grasp or describe as the legendary one of the Age of Chivalry." On the literal level of his narrative, Lancelot seems concerned only with discovering the truth about his wife's behavior. He is not content to know that Margot had an affair nine years before—that is easily verifiable; he must know if she is being unfaithful now. "I had to be sure about Margot, about what she had done and was doing now. I had to be absolutely certain."7

Lancelot's search, however, has far more significance to Lancelot than his wife's infidelity, and this significance is difficult to understand. His attempt to discover Margot's infidelity is, in fact, a search for an abstraction—a phenomenon that he perceives to have vanished from the modern world—sin. Sin, in turn, will prove the existence of God. "But what if you could show me a sin? a purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation? ... If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God!" (p. 52).

Lancelot assumes that sex is "absolute and infinite," that it is the only "kind of behavior which is incommensurate with anything whatever, in both its infinite good and its infinite evil" (pp. 139-140); therefore, proving Margot's
adultery--sin in its "infinite evil"--will prove the exis-
tense of God.

The search spans a little less than a week. Lancelot
thinks he can discover her present infidelity through watch-
ing her come and go in the director's and actors' rooms at
the motel. After setting up Elgin there to watch for a
night, he is aware that he still has only clues to what they
are doing; he needs absolute proof.

Because Lancelot causes the motel to shut down, the
actors and director stay at his house where he has "bugged"
their rooms. Using a variety of cinematic devices and tech-
niques, Lancelot uncovers the sexual practices of the movie
director and stars through the tools of their own profession.
He discovers not only his wife's infidelity, but also his
daughter's triangular sexual involvement with a man and
woman.

Lancelot is not content with knowledge of their aber-
rant behavior alone. Feeling that the world is too full of
people who refuse to act in judgment on the sin in society,
he commissions himself to bring upon them an "apocalyptic"
fire. He will destroy the people who are truly evil, his
wife and her lover and Lucy's two lovers. These are the
ones who will be burned in the inferno. After sending the
"innocent" ones away, Lancelot begins carrying out his elab-
orate plans. Using the gas christmas tree under the house
as the explosive, he blows up the entire house, and barely
escapes himself.

Although the method of conducting his search is grandiose and expensive, the result is disappointing to Lancelot. "Why did I discover nothing at the heart of evil? There was no 'secret' after all, no discovering, no flickering of interest, nothing at all, not even any evil. There was no sense of coming close to the 'answer' . . ." (p. 253).

After blowing up Belle Isle, Lancelot is placed in the Center for Aberrant Behavior for a year where he has time to think about his past and his future. Destroying the old, he decides, has opened up all possibilities for a new life. Believing that there are three worlds—"the old dead past world, the hopeless screwed-up now world, and the unknown world of the future" (p. 63)—Lancelot plans his rebirth into society and his third "new world" where the search will continue. When he leaves the hospital he plans to move to a Virginia farm with another inmate and become "the new Adam and Eve." There he will "watch and wait" for the destruction of the Sodomic world. If there is a God, he reasons, "He will not tolerate Sodom much longer" (p. 255).

Like Binx's edifying "kick in the ass," Lancelot's watching and waiting is not passive: Lancelot has decided to "give your [Harry's] God time," but "if God does not exist, then it will be I not God who will not tolerate it. I will start a new world single-handedly or with those like me who will not tolerate it. . . . If it takes the sword,
we'll use the sword" (pp. 255-256).

Is this Percy's final word in *Lancelot* on the search for God? Has he retreated so far from his position in *Love in the Ruins* that God can manifest himself only through the total destruction of the human race? Critics agree that Percy's point is not to be found in the ranting Lancelot, but in the silent priest-psychologist, Harry. The most obvious clue is found in the epigraph to the novel:

He sank so low that all means
for his salvation were gone,
except showing him the lost people.
For this I visited the region of the dead . . .

Despite Harry's silence, the reader is aware of his opinion on Lancelot's mental condition and search, as well as the fact that he is conducting his own search for God. Dowie says that, "His silence is an active one, a time of assimilation and decision." 8

At the beginning of the narrative, Harry considers himself a psychologist-priest, a friend who has come to help an old acquaintance. His faith does not seem to be very important to him. In fact, he turns down an elderly woman's request that he pray over a grave on All Soul's Day. Lancelot accuses him--fairly accurately the reader is led to believe--of being "one of the new breed who believe that Satan is only a category, the category of evil" (p. 21).
Beneath this "psychologist" is a person who believes Lancelot has the same values they both had as children and college students. However, when Lancelot reveals his plan to destroy the world and begin again with Anna, Harry turns as "pale as a ghost" (p. 160). The plan proves to Harry that Lancelot is not mentally stable and that his entire value system has changed. Realizing that the raving Lancelot has not found answers, but is, in fact insane, Harry renews his own confidence in the traditional method of searching for God. Harry manifests his change the next day when he not only stops at a grave to pray over it, but also arrives in Lancelot's cell in the traditional priest's attire. Furthermore, Harry delineates his disagreement with Lancelot in his thirteen spoken words at the very end of the novel. Although he does affirm that Lancelot's perception of the world is accurate, he does not like Lancelot's method of dealing with the past or future, and he can only feel sorry for him.

Harry does not, however, seem to believe he has found the complete answer to his search either; he has taken "a little church in Alabama" (p. 257). Lancelot accuses Harry's action of not being a renewal, but of being "just more of the same" response to the world; however, Harry's silence to the accusation indicates his disagreement with Lancelot. He has revived his own search for God and will watch and wait for God to act.
There seems to be another search which overarches the entire novel—Lancelot's unconscious search for his identity. As the narrative opens, Lancelot has been in the mental hospital for a year, and has not spoken to anyone. Harry comes to see him, and forces him to remember his past. Although it is a painful process, remembering the past is the only way for Lancelot to recover himself; he tells Harry, "I am reliving with you my quest. That's the only way I can bear to think about it. Something went wrong. If you listen I think I can figure out what it was" (p. 137). Somewhere during the quest, he lost himself instead of finding himself. The quest began when he "came to himself," but when he felt nothing at the center of the apocalypse he created, he felt lost once again. What he refuses to see is that the failure lies within himself, not in other people or in God. Dowie is helpful in understanding this phenomenon: "Lance's quest is misdirected and hence doomed from the outset..... So taken up with his search for sexual sin in others, Lancelot misses the sinfulness of his own acts, sexual and violent."  

Harry does recognize Lancelot's insane misdirection and misapprehension of the significance of the apocalypse he created. Lancelot recognizes that Harry knows something and continually asks the priest to help him find out what he does not know. Lancelot has created an apocalypse, hoping to free himself from his past, but in reality he
tied himself more closely to it, indeed became a slave to his own gnawing sinfulness, and as a result has gone mad. Harry has realized that not only must Lancelot be told directly about his obsession, but that he himself must begin his search for God again.

In his most recent novel, The Second Coming, Percy seems to return to many of the principles of his first novel. A revival of the character from Percy's second novel, Will Barrett seems to reach the same tenuous "conclusion" that Binx does in The Moviegoer: it is possible that the answer lies in God, but he cannot be sure. In fact, many things about their entire searches are parallel. Like Binx, Barrett is actively searching. Barrett does not mask his search but very openly admits he is searching for God.

This is what you might call the ultimate scientific experiment in contrast to dreary age-old philosophical and religious disputations which have no resolution. I say "ultimate" because God is the subject under investigation. I aim to settle the question of God once and for all. 10

It takes Barrett quite some time to begin an active search, although he has known of the necessity of the search for a long time. His search can be traced to his father's attempted murder/suicide when Barrett was twelve. While he did not refer to it specifically as a search then, he does acknowledge that he had found "the small core of curiosity
and competence" from which he would work out the rest of his life (p. 58).

Another shot reminds Barrett of this event and of the search. He had just realized that everyone--including himself--is only partly alive, only 2% themselves, when "the missing 98% is magically restored" by a rifle shot ricocheting around his garage. This shot in the garage, a moment of déjà vu as he climbed through the golf club fence, and the feel of the Luger as he shoots it in another attempt to recapture the 98% of himself he misses, all culminate as he sits in his car outside the resthome and calmly realizes that he must ask the ultimate question about God that his father refused to ask. Speaking to his dead father, he accuses him of inaction. "Maybe that was your mistake, that you didn't even look. That's the difference between us. I'm going to find out once and for all. You never even looked" (p. 132). And so the search begins.

As he does in The Last Gentleman, Barrett constantly looks for clues about the nature of his search, but now he is fixated on the Jews as "the sign." Barrett thinks he knows exactly what the Jews signify; having accepted his wife's premise that the Jews are "'a sign of God's plan working out'" (p. 12), Barrett is only left to wonder what the lack of them, his erring perception of their mass departure from North Carolina, signifies in his search for God.

Barrett wants a definite answer to his question about
God's active role in history, and, therefore, the question must be phrased in such a way that there is no doubt what the answer is. Since this means that only Barrett and God—or Barrett and "no-God"—must be present, he goes to the most secluded place he knows about—the cave. It is here that his search, or more precisely his wait, for God takes place. The procedure seems infallible to Barrett; however, the plan does fail before too long. The Biblical words "Thou shalt not put the Lord thy God to the test" are almost audible as Barrett develops a searing toothache. Even Barrett sees the ironic discrepancy between his grandiose plan and the degrading end to it.

It is astonishing how such a simple and commonplace ailment as pain and nausea can knock everything else out of one's head, lofty thoughts, profound thoughts, crazy thoughts, even lust. . . . Let me out of here, he said with no thought of God, Jews, suicide, tigers, or the Last Days. (p. 223)

Obviously Barrett is not going to find the meaning to life through artificial circumstances. Nor will he accept an "answer" that he has not asked a question about. When he falls in the cave in his hurry to relieve the pain of his toothache and temporarily loses his flashlight, he can only think, "What kind of answer is this to an elegant scientific question?" (p. 224).

With such an undramatic end to his search, Barrett should have learned that an answer cannot be forced, but
once out of the cave he reactivates his search. This time he goes to the Georgia swamps to recreate the scene of his father's attempted suicide/murder. But on the bus, Barrett has an increasing sense of loss rather than gain as he nears Georgia, and decides to abort the plan. Although this time the choice to "bail out" is not based on pain, the event concludes just as painfully as the cave experiment: his foot is caught in the closing bus door and he is dragged unconscious several yards down the road.

While in the hospital after his wreck, the doctors identify the nervous condition that has bothered Barrett for years. Heavily sedated to control the condition, Barrett seems less concerned about the search, but the search is nevertheless still unfinished. In his sedated state he is finally able to recognize the missing links of his past. His essence had been killed by his father when Barrett was twelve, even though Barrett's body survived. This knowledge enables him to begin thinking about his future.

Barrett has befriended a young woman who has escaped from a mental institution and taken up residence in a greenhouse. Allie, he has discovered, is the daughter of his former sweetheart, and is not crazy as everyone else believes. After he acknowledges the truth of his past, he can admit that he needs Allie and wants to marry her. But even then the meaning of life is unclear. Several possibilities for discovering the meaning remain open to him. One such
possibility is suicide. In a final conversation with his father's spirit, Barrett finally refuses to commit suicide and throws away the guns in a defiant act. What possibilities remain? In planning his future with Allie, Barrett begins to wonder if perhaps she is a clue to the meaning of life.

Will Barrett thought about Allie in her greenhouse, her wide gray eyes, her lean muscled boy's arms, her strong quick hands. His heart leapt with a secret joy. What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? ... Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have. (p. 360)

Barrett has modified the priest's assertion that God can be found in other people, and merely wonders if other people can be a clue to a God who is active in history. Barrett has at last opened himself to the positive possibilities of God. Throughout the early stages of his search, Barrett had always anticipated a negative response. "The question should be put as a matter of form even though you know the house is empty" (p. 139). By planning his future with Allie he is opening himself to the possibility that God has answered his question and does exist. No longer does he limit his perception of "acceptable" signs to the Jews leaving North Carolina (he has discovered that they have not left), or to a miraculous salvation from physical death. The signs, he realizes, may indeed be right "under our noses," and he must--and will--find out for sure if they are.
Notes


9 Dowie, p. 254.

Conclusion

I have suggested that O'Connor allows the apocalypse to occur in a precise, conclusive moment in her fiction, whereas Percy usually leaves the reader and the characters in, at best, an ambiguous state concerning the occurrence of the apocalypse. Sheppard in "The Lame Shall Enter First" has one moment of vision in which his entire life is changed from a self-centered to a grief-striken existence. Similarly, Asbury's apocalypse in "The Enduring Chill" comes in the moment as he lies on his "death bed" and sees the water-mark dove descend on him. His life is no longer a search for a significant moment, but is to be one continual union of the spiritual and the temporal.

In "Revelation" Mrs. Turpin's revelation perhaps takes the longest time of all of O'Connor's apocalypses. In the morning at the doctor's office she hears Mary Grace's accusation, but Mrs. Turpin does not understand the accusation until sundown. Then, however, her understanding comes in a momentary vision.

Each of O'Connor's moments is unambiguous both to the characters and the reader. There is no doubt in the characters' minds that they are confronted with an experience which will change their lives. Tarwater, in The Violent
Bear It Away, and Notes in Wise Blood, have understood the message of the apocalypse so well that they reverse their entire lives. They no longer run from God, but begin to follow dogmatically the God they have been avoiding. The horror the characters feel as they face their experience is revealed to the reader as well. The reader is not left to surmise that the look on Asbury's face is a result of his physical pain. The reader experiences the horror with him and is told not only what he sees, but also his reaction to it.

The unambiguous nature of the apocalyptic moment also gives closure to her novels and short stories. Often the reader knows what the characters will do after the apocalyptic moment, as in Wise Blood, The Violent Bear It Away, and "The Comforts of Home." Just as often, however, the narrative ends before a choice has actually been made. The reader does not know, for example, whether Mrs. Turpin will accept or reject the vision of herself, or how the new understanding will affect her life. But even when the decision is not made, there is no ambiguity that the apocalyptic moment has occurred and that the characters' lives will henceforth be changed. The narrative has ended at a significant moment in their lives. One era of their lives has ended; a new era has begun.

The closure at the end of her fiction is in direct contrast to the open-ended conclusions found in four of the
five novels Percy has written. Chronologically, Percy's works create a pattern which seems to indicate his preference for the ambiguity of the apocalyptic moment. In his first two works he leaves the characters wondering about two options which have been presented to them in the novel. Binx wonders if God is really present at the church or if the Negro's presence is only coincidence. No conclusion is reached; he merely lives out his life in the expectation that at some future point he will reach the object of his search. Barrett, too, is left between two options: "God and not-God," the positions delineated by Val and Sutter Vaught. There is no indication which way he will go, or if he will reject both Val's strict traditional doctrines from the church and Sutter's suicide and find the meaning of life somewhere between these two extremes.

In Love in the Ruins, Percy does carry the narrative to a conclusive point of decision for Tom More. More has chosen God as he is found in the Catholic church and feels he has everything he needs. This closure, however, only comes in the epilogue-type chapter entitled "Five Years Later."

However, there seems to have been something that was unsatisfying about this closure for Percy, for in his next novel, Lancelot, he goes to the opposite extreme. The novel not only ends before reaching the action Lancelot expects of God, but Lancelot is also an insane man whose entire value
system and search may be questioned. Harry, the silent priest-psychologist critics credit as the spokesman for Percy's point of view, is also on a search, and his point of view is believable. However, he too is left to watch and wait for the coming of Christ while pastoring a small church in Alabama.

The apocalypse is still a looming presence for Barrett at the end of *The Second Coming* as well. The end of this novel is much the same as that of *The Moviegoer*. The possibility of God's existence is there, but it is only the possibility; Barrett does not know for sure if Allie is a sign from God. He only knows he must "have" both her and God.

The pattern of non-closure and ambiguity about the apocalypse also reflects Percy's idea of its time span. In contrast to O'Connor's *moment*, Percy's apocalypse seems to be a process. Even though Percy's characters expect the apocalypse in one moment--most often in the second coming of Christ and the end of the world--and Tom More does have an apocalyptic moment in *Love in the Ruins*, the characters are being prepared for the apocalypse over a long period of time. In contrast to O'Connor's characters who are totally surprised by the apocalypse, Percy's characters expect the apocalypse, and in fact work toward it step by step. Tom More could not have had the moment of revelation in the confessional booth if he had not been through the apocalyptic-type days five years earlier and had not then settled
down to a "normal" life with Ellen. His "middle-aged daydreams" had in fact been actions five years before, and his confession itself will not change his outward actions, but only calm his inner confusion and totally reunite his soul and body once again. The confession is merely the outward symbol that his life has been changing for quite a while.

Similarly, Binx's and Barrett's searches for the meaning of life give them the perspective from which to view seemingly "ordinary" events and wonder if they are signs from God reassuring them of his active presence in their lives. As a resurrection of the character in The Last Gentleman, Barrett in The Second Coming exemplifies this best. His search in The Last Gentleman has led him only to the delineation of the answers at the two extremes, but not until The Second Coming does he really focus his search actively toward God, and so discover that perhaps Allie is a sign from God.

In addition to the striking difference between O'Connor and Percy in their actual portrayal of the apocalyptic moment, violence is more closely associated with O'Connor's apocalypse than with Percy's apocalypse. For O'Connor the violence occurs near the same time as the revelation and is crucial in preparing the character for it. Only through the homosexual rape does Tarwater realize the evil nature of his "friend" and become open to God's call. Every other time Tarwater had heard the call he had been able to ignore it.
When the violence reaches him personally, he can not refuse God any longer. He accepts his mission.

Despite the disease, the shootings, and the anticipated cataclysmic apocalypses found in Percy's novels, violence is far removed from the actual apocalypse. In *Love in the Ruins*, the only novel in which the apocalyptic moment actually occurs, Tom More is merely "scalded" in his soul as he realizes the essence of his existence. Fire, death, and chaos are very remote from his apocalyptic moment which occurs in the quiet confession booth during Christmas Eve midnight mass. This pattern is obvious in Percy's other works as well, even though the characters are not sure if the moment has come yet. In *The Second Coming* the absence of violence seems especially pronounced in contrast to Barrett's attempts to recreate the violent scene between him and his father. The book is filled with violence, yet at the end of the novel, when Barrett is making his assertions about the future with Allie, none of his thoughts are violent, nor do they come as the result of a violent moment. He is merely standing in a lounge with a priest discussing his wedding.

*Lancelot*, the most violent of Percy's novels, directly denies the association of violence with revelation; revelation does not come in the midst of a violent upheaval, but in the quietness of reflexive "watching and waiting." Lancelot has not absorbed this knowledge well enough to
transfer it to his next "apocalypse" when he plans to destroy the world to teach it about its sinful ways, but the priest-psychologist seems to have learned it. Harry's plans are to go to Alabama and work in a small church while waiting quietly for the apocalyptic moment from God.

By thwarting his characters' expectations (and perhaps the readers' as well) about the catastrophic nature of the revelation of God, Percy seems to illustrate God's proximity to man through what he calls a "guileful and cunning" methods. O'Connor's fiction also reveals the active role of God in humans' lives, but because she feels everyone is blind to the ways of God, exaggerated, even violent means must be used to reveal him. In spite of these differences in the two writers, the Christian message they advocate remains constant: something is wrong with human beings and a change, found only the the Christian message of redemption through God's grace, must be made.

Once again, however, differences dominate. Their portrayal in their fiction of the way to achieve God's redemptive grace is different, and may be attributed to their backgrounds. Raised in the Catholic church in the backwoods of Georgia, the heart of the Protestant Bible Belt, O'Connor's use of the sudden, dramatic, indisputable gift of grace through Christ has just as many Protestant as Catholic elements in it. Percy's use of a progressive search for God's grace with an ambiguous conclusion reflects
his background also. Converted to Catholicism through studying the Christian existential philosophers during his prolonged fight with tuberculosis, Percy's method of redemption is more traditionally Catholic yet reflects the influence of the existential movement. Although fundamentally agreeing on the necessity of the Christian message of redemption through Christ and the concept of the apocalypse, these two Catholic, Southern writers are, nevertheless, strikingly different in the way the apocalypse is used in their fiction to reflect the moment of grace.
Bibliography


