

Transcending the “Malaise”: Redemption, Grace, and Existentialism  
in Walker Percy’s Fiction

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TRANSCENDING THE “MALAISE”: REDEMPTION, GRACE, AND  
EXISTENTIALISM IN WALKER PERCY’S FICTION

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## ABSTRACT

### TRANSCENDING THE “MALAISE”: REDEMPTION, GRACE, AND EXISTENTIALISM IN WALKER PERCY’S FICTION

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Since the 1960 publication of his debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy’s work has been widely read and critically evaluated by scholars. Though much has been done with Percy’s work, none have examined how shifts in American Catholicism and the changes of the Second Vatican Council impacted the ways in which Percy wrote about religion and approached the problems of the modern world. In the following pages, I will detail the important movements in American Catholicism, the pertinent changes made to the practice of Catholicism through the Second Vatican Council, and the Existentialist philosophies of Kierkegaard, Buber, and Marcel in order to demonstrate the ways in which Percy’s characters Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* and Thomas More of *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, transcend the “malaise” or “everydayness” that separates them from God and community.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Since the 1960 publication of his debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy's work has been widely read and critically evaluated by scholars. Although much has been done with Percy's work, no one has examined how shifts in American Catholicism and the changes of the Second Vatican Council impacted the ways in which Percy wrote about religion and approached the problems of the modern world. In the following pages, I will detail the important movements in American Catholicism and the pertinent changes made to the practice of Catholicism through the Second Vatican Council in order to demonstrate the ways in which Percy's characters Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* and Thomas More of *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, transcend the "malaise" or "everydayness" which separates them from God and community, and I will examine the differences between these two characters' understandings of the world in light of the changes made during the Second Vatican Council.

Before reviewing the scholarship which has preceded this research, it is important to understand the nature of "malaise" in Percy's writing, as it plays a central role in the development of Percy's plots. Devoid of an understanding of human nature and their

roles in the human community, Percy's deeply flawed characters often engage in a search for meaning which, if successful, will free them from the "malaise." This malaise is described by Binx Bolling in Percy's *The Moviegoer* as, "the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, and the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you are no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost" (120). The loss described by Binx, the protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, is not physical. Indeed, he believes that one is freed from the malaise only in instances of great personal tragedy:

But, as good as it is, my old place is used up (places get used up by rotator and repetitive use) and when I awake, I awake in the grip of everydayness.

Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible. Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength.

Now nothing breaks it—but disaster. Only once in my life was the grip of everydayness broken: when I lay bleeding in a ditch. (*Moviegoer* 145)

Binx believes that the malaise can be transcended only through pain and suffering, and this belief further separates him from the world and God. Similarly, Thomas More, who is an apocalyptic version of Binx Bolling, recognizes himself as alienated from his surrounding community and turns to science to aid him in his quest for transcendence over despair, the malaise. This conception of transcendence, however, serves only to lead Percy's characters further away from overcoming their crises of self. Percy's characters fail to recognize that the loss that they experience is not due to an external everydayness but to their own inability to see the moments of grace and redemption in their lives. Only through the eventual recognition of divine grace can these characters begin to recognize themselves as individuals in community with others rather than

detached observers of their communities. Despite their initial inclinations, nothing that Percy's characters do enables them to complete the search, despite their longing for meaning. They must be acted upon by God, and it is through this personal action that redemption, transcendence, is finally reached.

This analysis is not, of course, the first time that the malaise has been addressed by critical theorists. In his essay, "*The Moviegoer* and American Fiction: Wonder and Alienation," Tony Tanner examines Binx's description of the search and offers an explication of the characteristics of this search:

He [Binx] then defines the search in the following way:

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why he pokes around his neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

The terms are vague but the main point is clear. To be sunk in everydayness, to be bored, blasé, or complacently unaware of mystery, to have lost the sense of wonder—is to be dead. (12)

Tanner focuses on Binx's feelings of alienation from society, and capitalizes on Binx's keen sense of "wonder" and "mystery" as examples of "typical American suspicion or prejudice discharging itself" (13). Although this assessment does address typical American ways of thinking, which will become more important in my next chapter,



Tanner fails to mention Percy's clear homage to the Existentialist writers who shaped his writing.

In his book, *Walker Percy: Prophetic, Existentialist, Catholic Storyteller*, Robert E. Lauder explains Percy's notion of the malaise and the role it plays in advancing each of his plots: "In each of Percy's six novels, the malaise forms the background and the milieu in which his heroes and anti-heroes search for meaning and fulfillment. Two characteristics of the malaise are everydayness and inauthenticity" (Lauder 7). While it is important that these protagonists recognize the malaise that surrounds them, they are unable to escape it on their own because of the belief systems to which they subscribe. Furthermore, Lauder addresses what Tanner missed, the Existentialist philosophies of Kierkegaard and Marcel in Percy's novels (29-42). In addition, he examines Percy's own turn towards Catholicism and provides a short description of the Catholic novel, mentioning both American Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council (Lauder 47-58). These historical movements, however, are not critically applied to *The Moviegoer* or *Love in the Ruins* in a detailed manner.

Lauder is not the only critic who applies Existentialist philosophy to Percy's novels. In her book, *Understanding Walker Percy*, Linda Whitney Hobson explicates both *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins* in terms of Kierkegaard's three stages and addresses the importance of grace, necessary for the leap to faith which precedes Kierkegaard's final stage, the religious, in the novels (26-45, 68-92). Marion Montgomery, too, addresses the presence of Kierkegaardian philosophy in her critical essay, "Kierkegaard and Percy: By Word, *Away from* the Philosophical," and draws upon both Percy's fiction and non-fiction in order to demonstrate the central role which

Kierkegaardian philosophy played in Percy's works and further clarifies the idea that grace comes not from ourselves but from a higher power (99-109). This understanding, as we will see, is absolutely essential to understanding why both Binx Bolling and Thomas More are largely unsuccessful for the majority of their respective novels.

As Montgomery demonstrates, grace plays a central role in Percy's novels. As such, many other scholars also use Christian notions of grace in order to demonstrate the ways in which Percy's protagonists transcend the malaise. In her book, *The Signs of Christianity in the Work of Walker Percy*, Ann Mace Futrell discusses Percy's notion of grace as Calvinistic and sees it as arising out of his apparent affinity for the semiology of Charles Sanders Peirce (7). While Futrell provides an insight into Percy's treatment and semiotics of language, she fails to note that the view of grace to which Percy subscribes is one which, rather than being singularly Calvinistic, closely follows a model of grace common to Christianity. Futrell also fails to recognize that although Percy's semiology does arise out of Peirce's, his use of semiology and understanding of revelation and grace is one which arises out of his study of Existentialist philosophy.

Like Futrell, Franklin Wilson, author of "Walker Percy's Bible Notes and His Fiction: Gracious Obscenity," examines the presence of grace in Percy's works but fails to examine the Existentialist lens which Percy uses to craft his novels. In his article, Wilson examines the notes Walker Percy wrote in his Bible and develops a theory of Percian grace as that which arises out of moments of obscenity (199). He does not, however, take into account the Kierkegaardian "leap of faith" and so misses the actual moments of redemption for Percy's protagonists. This problem is rectified in Kieran Quinlan's critical book, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, which addresses

Existentialist philosophy, the Catholic perception of grace, the characteristics of a “Catholic Novelist,” and the way in which Percy received and portrayed the Second Vatican Council. This treatment, however, does not examine the appearances and apparent impact of specific changes of Vatican II on Percy’s fiction in an in-depth manner.

It is this gap in the research that I will be focusing on in my exploration of how Binx Bolling and Thomas More transcend the malaise. I will first provide a brief history of American Catholicism and the Second Vatican Council before explaining how each shaped Percy’s representation of the Mass in both *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins* and how Vatican II shapes Percy’s portrayal of revelation, redemption and grace. Finally, I will assess Percy’s work using both the Second Vatican Council’s description of the problems of the modern world and the philosophies of Kierkegaard, Buber, and Marcel, demonstrating that Percy’s work is not, as Futrell suggests, Calvinist, but rather a Catholic response to the feeling of detachment and the repercussions of this detachment explored by the Existentialist philosophers and addressed in the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **AMERICAN CATHOLICISM AND THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL**

Before one can understand the writings of Walker Percy, it is important to understand the events in American and global Catholicism that led up to the writing of both *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins*. From its beginning, America had a Roman Catholic presence, but the status of the American Catholic Church changed radically between 1492 and 1960 and led to the question of how American values and Catholic identity could be reconciled. In addition, the Second Vatican Council, called by the new Pope John XXIII in 1959 and convened in 1962, greatly changed the ways in which Catholicism was practiced globally. The influences of both these national and ecclesial shifts can be seen throughout Percy's novels *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins* which, although they deal with some similar questions, reveal radically different treatments of Catholicism.

#### *American Catholicism*

In *Catholics in America: A History*, Patrick W. Carey examines the major shifts that occurred in American Catholicism from the discovery of America to the present day. According to Carey, although Roman Catholics first arrived in North America along with

Christopher Columbus in 1492, they “existed in numerous isolated and loosely organized religious communities shepherded primarily by missionaries who were, until 1790, without the benefit of the episcopacy and other major ecclesiastical institutions” (1). As a result of the lack of episcopal presence and the subsequent isolation from the larger Church, colonial Catholic communities did not experience the success their Protestant neighbors enjoyed and frequently experienced “antipathy” (Carey 14) within the colonies until the signing of both the Declaration of Independence and the American Constitution (Carey 15). Although these documents granted Catholics religious freedom and the ability to participate fully as American citizens, it was not until the nineteenth century that American Catholicism grew significantly.

Along with the rise of immigration in the nineteenth century came an influx of Catholics to the United States. According to Carey, “By 1850 Catholicism was the largest single denomination in the country, and although it still represented only a small percentage of the country’s total population, it had developed a strong institutional presence from coast to coast” (30). This new Catholic population comprised many different ethnicities including “Anglo Americans ... the French and the Spanish ... the new Irish and German immigrants ... a few Indians [Native Americans] ... [and] some French Canadians” (Carey 30). As the Catholic population became more diverse, the unifying power of the Latin Mass and the uniform traditions of the Catholic Church throughout the world served as both a comfort and a cultivator of community for the newly enlarged population. In addition, “The rapid increase of Catholic immigrants, the geographical spread of Catholicism, the manifestations of institutional strength and stability, the emancipation of Catholics in England and Ireland in 1829, and traditional

Protestant-Catholic theological antagonisms brought about a virulent hostility toward American Catholics, particularly after 1830” (Carey 31). As a result of this hostility, Catholics were forced to band more closely together in order to survive, and the adherence to the traditional values of the Church became more deeply ingrained in the culture. This devotion to traditional Catholic culture was not to be seriously compromised until the end of the nineteenth century.

As first-generation Catholic immigrants aged and their children became the predominant practitioners of Catholicism, American culture began to seep into the American Catholic Church. Traditional Catholicism began to give way to modern American values which seemingly clashed with the teachings of the Church:

Pope Leo XIII’s apostolic brief *Testem Benevolentiae* (1899) ... condemned an excessive accommodationist stance toward American and modern culture. On the one hand, the division was social, reflecting the developing postwar [post-Civil war] social differentiation within the American Catholic community between the newly arrived immigrants and the increasingly Americanized middle-class immigrants; on the other hand, it was intellectual, embodying two very different evaluations of the modern world. (Carey 55)

At this time, the poor, persecuted, and otherwise isolated immigrant Catholics who focused primarily on survival began to give way to the middle class Catholics who entered mainstream American culture and engaged in the pursuit of wealth. American acculturation was underway, and American Catholics were no longer easily distinguishable from the larger American population. This process of acculturation did not fit well with the pre-Vatican II Church although it would continue well into the

twentieth century, intensifying between the 1920s and 1960s. During this time, American antipathy towards Catholics remained.

In 1928, American Catholic Alfred E Smith campaigned for and lost the presidential election (Carey 82). According to Carey, Smith's loss stemmed partially from an inability of the American public to reconcile American and Catholic values: "The whole question of double allegiance reasserted itself in the campaign: 'Can a Catholic be loyal to his church and, as president, to his country?' Charles C. Marshall ... articulated the fears of many in 1927 when he concluded that the dogmatic principles of the Catholic Church were antithetical to American constitutional ideals" (82). Essentially, if Smith remained loyal to the Church, he could not maintain the separation of Church and State set forth by the Constitution. For many Americans, a politician could not be both Catholic and American as the two were fundamentally opposed: the Church valued obedience to the hierarchy and America espoused personal, political, and religious freedom. It was not until thirty-two years later, in 1960, that an American Catholic, John F. Kennedy, would be elected president, and during the time in between these two elections, the struggles between Catholicism and American freedom would remain.

The shifts in American Catholicism leading up to the 1960 presidential election and the election of the first American Catholic President of the United States is further detailed by John T. McGreevy in his book, *Catholicism and American Freedom*. This text examines various Catholic movements and the way in which Catholic identity has been understood throughout American history, corroborating the statements set forth by Patrick Carey. McGreevy's sixth chapter, entitled "American Freedom and Catholic

Power,” after Paul Blanshard’s 1949 best-selling book of the same name, examines the struggles between Roman Catholicism’s emphasis on hierarchical structure and the American desire for freedom and individualism and further explicates the increasing secularism of middle-class Catholicism that Carey describes and is embodied in both *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins*. McGreevy says, “Blanshard claimed that ‘the Catholic problem is still with us.’ His solution was the formation of a ‘resistance movement’ to counter the ‘antidemocratic social policies of the hierarchy and ... every intolerant or separatist or un-American features of those policies’” (166). Essentially, Blanshard believed in a kind of American Catholicism that would do away with obedience to the hierarchical structures of the Church and uphold American values in their stead—freedom and democracy. According to McGreevy, however, Blanshard’s depiction of the “Catholic problem” was one held among many American intellectuals of the time period:

Blanshard correctly assessed the intellectual mood. Already Lewis Mumford had warned that “the Catholic Church by acting as a bloc” might destroy the “separation of powers established in the Constitution of the United States” and Reinhold Niebuhr had lamented the chasm “between the presuppositions of a free society and the inflexible authoritarianism of the Catholic religion.” (167)

The Church’s emphasis on the authority of and obedience to the hierarchy did not match with the American ideal, and this became problematic for Americans who were used to democratic practices. In response, many American Catholics began to move away from the Church in favor of other churches that meshed more easily with American values or to distance themselves in order to gain greater public approval, the latter having no greater evidence than in the 1960 presidential campaign of John F. Kennedy.



Although Kennedy's presidential campaign was considered a victory for American Catholics, it also sparked a great deal of controversy. In a 1959 interview with *Look*, the ability of a Catholic to fully embrace American political values was again questioned (Carey 110). This time, however, the answer given by the candidate was much different from that given by Al Smith: "Kennedy was reported to have said: 'Whatever one's religion in his private life may be, for the officeholder, nothing takes precedence over his oath to uphold the Constitution and all its parts—including the First Amendment and the strict separation of church and state'" (Carey 110-111). Essentially, in order to win the election, Kennedy had to distance himself from the Church and espouse instead a strict adherence to American values. Although this was viewed as problematic for many Americans, as Carey highlights, "*America* [the Catholic periodical] reacted to Kennedy's 'nothing takes precedent' statement by asserting that no religious person—whether Jew, Protestant, or Catholic—could or should reduce religion to the level of private conscience" (111), Kennedy did win the election, demonstrating to the public that a Catholic could win the election if he did not hold Catholicism over American values.

### *Vatican II*

In 1959, ten years after the publication of Blanshard's book and the same year Kennedy announced his intention to run for President of the United States, the newly elected Pope John XXIII "announced a Roman diocesan synod and an ecumenical council" (Adrianyi-Quintin 99). Although it could not have been known at the time, this council would revolutionize the Mass and bring the Church into the twentieth century.

Clearly, Pope John XXIII recognized the necessity of change in the Church to meet the demands and problems of the new modern world:

Before his departure for the conclave, he [Pope John XXIII] had exclaimed to the seminarians of his diocese: “The Church is young, it remains, as constantly in its history, amenable to change.” The statement is that of a program. As a church historian, familiar with the historical change of the Church in a constantly changing world, Pope John was convinced that the Church must adapt its preaching, organization, and pastoral methods to the fundamentally changed world, and for this he coined the much disputed notion of *aggiornamento*. In an effort to realize it, he convoked the council. (Adrianyi-Quintin 99)

Pope John XXIII’s statement that the Church was “amenable to change” is most important for understanding the Second Vatican Council as a response to modern problems. The next most recent Vatican Council, Vatican I, took place nearly one hundred years prior to the convening of Vatican II, from 1869 to 1870, and no conciliar statements occurred in the Church since. In that time, however, both World War I and World War II occurred, America experienced the Great Depression while the rest of the world experienced a similar economic recession, Existentialist philosophy had become more prevalent, ecumenism was becoming a more pressing concern in a world united by tragedy and loss, and secularism was on the rise. In order to meet the needs of this rapidly changing world, the Church would need to “adapt” and “let the fresh air in”.<sup>1</sup>

In keeping with his word, John XXIII’s council was radically different from its predecessors from the onset. The preparatory commissions “were not composed, like the

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<sup>1</sup> The accepted English translation for “aggiornamento”.

earlier ones [Church Councils], almost exclusively of theologians and canonists, ... but included up to about one-half bishops and religious superiors, hence future council fathers with a right to vote” (Adrianyi-Quintin 101). In order to address the need for ecumenism, Pope John XXIII “invit[ed] the separated Churches to send official observers” (Adrianyi-Quintin 100). In addition, “the council refrained from condemning errors by means of canons with a subjoined anathema” (Adrianyi-Quintin 106). The procedures with which the council was carried out, too, changed: “The real work of the council was transferred more and more to the commissions, and the general congregations were more and more filled with voting, which could be carried out far more quickly with the aid of a punch-card system than at the First Vatican Council” (Adrianyi-Quintin 106). Two thousand, five hundred, and forty council fathers took part in the opening session of the Second Vatican Council, “a number not even remotely reached at any previous council” (Adrianyi-Quintin 106), and in order for resolutions to be accepted and put into practice, “a two-thirds majority was required” (Adrianyi-Quintin 105). This democratic process was vastly different from the councils which preceded Vatican II and was a clear representation of Pope John XXIII’s commitment to renewing the Church.

The Second Vatican Council’s focus centered on four major issues: Ecumenism, the Liturgy, the Church as the whole people of God rather than the hierarchy, and Scripture and Divine Revelation. In the immediate centuries prior to Vatican II, the Church made few attempts to reconcile with Christian churches that had broken away from the Roman Church. In addition to inviting representatives from the separated churches, however, the Second Vatican Council addressed the need for a greater focus on

ecumenism, interreligious dialogue, and the unity of all persons of good will in *Gaudium et Spes*, stating that only in working together could peace among the nations and the respect of human dignity be observed:

Already existing international and regional organizations are certainly well-deserving of the human race. These are the first efforts at laying the foundations on an international level for a community of all men to work for the solution to the serious problems of our times, to encourage progress everywhere, and to obviate wars of whatever kind. In all of these activities the Church takes joy in the spirit of true brotherhood flourishing between Christians and non-Christians as it strives to make ever more strenuous efforts to relieve abundant misery. (85)

This focus on “brotherhood” among the religions opened the Church to new possibilities with both other faith traditions and Christian churches and provided a way in which the isolationist tendencies of the Church could begin to be resolved. The Second Vatican Council recognized the problems of the modern world as needing immediate attention. These problems could only be resolved through collaboration with all peoples, and the Church laid the initial groundwork for addressing these problems through *Gaudium et Spes*.

Arguably the most important changes for the laity and those that caused the most dramatic responses were those involving the Liturgy. As a result of the Second Vatican Council, major revisions were made to the way in which worship was practiced. No longer would Latin be required in all masses of the Latin Rite; rather, each church would use the vernacular of the country, provided that “translations from the Latin text into the mother tongue intended for use in the liturgy ... [were] approved by the competent

territorial ecclesiastical authority” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 36). In addition, the homily was to draw upon the Scripture readings of the day (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 35); concelebration of the Mass by several priests would be permitted on special occasions; and the culture of the country celebrating the Liturgy was to be represented in this celebration, provided that the cultural inclusions still maintained the Roman Rite, in order that the community be more fully engaged in worship. (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 37-40).

While these changes were the most visible, the emphasis on the Church as the whole people of God rather than being restricted to the hierarchy was also an important change for the laity.<sup>2</sup> The focus of the second document of Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, was on the call to holiness of the whole people of God: “Though they differ from one another in essence and not only in degree, the common priesthood of the faithful and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood are nonetheless interrelated: each of them in its own special way is a participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (10). In referring to all people as part of the priesthood, the Second Vatican Council made it possible for members of the laity to begin to view their professional and familial callings as paths of holiness. No longer was this call restricted to the hierarchy and religious communities. Each person’s path was important, and as each followed his or her personal call from God, he or she, too, participated “in the one priesthood of Christ”.

In addition to the updates made to the Liturgy, the new emphasis on ecumenism, and the view of the Church as the whole people of God called to holiness, the Council articulated a renewed understanding of Scripture and Divine Revelation in the Church. In *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council addressed, “Revelation Itself,” “Handing on

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<sup>2</sup> A change which, as I will later demonstrate, plays a central role in the denouement of *Love in the Ruins*

Divine Revelation,” “Sacred Scripture, Its Inspiration and Divine Interpretation,” “The Old Testament,” “The New Testament,” and “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church.” Here, the Church separated itself from Protestant churches that focused solely on Scripture as a means of revelation: “Consequently, it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence” (10). This statement re-affirmed the importance of tradition for the Church while attesting to the equal importance of Scripture, a direct result of “inspiration of the Holy Spirit” (11). Further, the Council established the importance of recognizing Scripture as being written by human beings and interpreting it accordingly:

To search out the intention of the sacred writers, attention should be given, among other things, to "literary forms." For truth is set forth and expressed differently in texts which are variously historical, prophetic, poetic, or of other forms of discourse. The interpreter must investigate what meaning the sacred writer intended to express and actually expressed in particular circumstances by using contemporary literary forms in accordance with the situation of his own time and culture. (12)

This section of *Dei Verbum* additionally made it clear that although Scripture was written nearly two thousand years prior to the Second Vatican Council, it was still relevant to the Church and should be used by members of the Church as a guide in their personal pursuits of holiness.

In addition to examining the Scriptures and prescribing a way in which to interpret them, the Church addressed the validity of both the Old and New Testaments. The Old Testament was a valid text for Christians and “should [be] receive[ed] ... with reverence” (15) as the books of the Old Testament served as a salvation history and “God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New” (16). *Dei Verbum*, then effectively re-asserted the validity and interconnectedness of both volumes of the Bible, making it clear that the Church needed to consider each text of equal importance in coming to know and understand God and God’s involvement in human life.

#### *Addressing Existentialism, Naturalism, and Secular Humanism*

Although Vatican II focused on a renewal of the Church, it also served as a response to problems which had arisen in the modern world. One of the most pressing issues of modern humanity, it said, was the despair with which Percy and his existentialist predecessors struggled: “Striving to probe more profoundly into the deeper recesses of his own mind, he [humanity] frequently appears more unsure of himself. Gradually and more precisely he lays bare the laws of society, only to be paralyzed by uncertainty about the direction to give it” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4). As people came to know more about humanity and the world, the Church stated, they became more disconnected from their own conceptions of themselves and less able to connect with one another.<sup>3</sup> Percy later addressed this problem explicitly in his 1983 work of non-fiction, *Lost in the*

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<sup>3</sup> A notion shared by the Existentialists although the two groups address the issue of detachment in very different manners.

*Cosmos*, in which he asked and attempted to provide an answer to the question, “How you can survive the Cosmos about which you know more and more while knowing less and less about yourself, this despite 10,000 self-help books, 100,000 psychotherapists, and 100 million fundamentalist Christians?” (1). In this case, Percy sought to explore the separation from the self experienced by the American people, a theme commonly addressed in each of his works.

Although the Church viewed the inability to recognize and connect with the self as a major issue, it also recognized secular humanism and naturalistic views of the world that needed to be addressed by the Second Vatican Council. These new belief systems could potentially further separate humanity from God and religion:

... these new conditions have their impact on religion. On the one hand a more critical ability to distinguish religion from a magical view of the world and from the superstitions which still circulate purifies it and exacts day by day a more personal and explicit adherence to faith. As a result many persons are achieving a more vivid sense of God. On the other hand, growing numbers of people are abandoning religion in practice. Unlike former days, the denial of God or of religion, or the abandonment of them, are no longer unusual and individual occurrences. For today it is not rare for such things to be presented as requirements of scientific progress or of a certain new humanism. In numerous places these views are voiced not only in the teachings of philosophers, but on every side they influence literature, the arts, the interpretation of the humanities and of history and civil laws themselves. As a consequence, many people are shaken. (*Gaudium et Spes* 7)



The Church recognized the prevalence of new philosophies like existentialism,<sup>4</sup> secular humanism,<sup>5</sup> and naturalism<sup>6</sup> in each facet of modern life. While these philosophies could bring one closer to God and frequently did, they also had the power to “shake” the faith of people who, at one time, firmly believed in God. Through belief in Christ and his teachings, the Second Vatican Council asserted that answers could be found to questions such as, “What is man? What is this sense of sorrow, of evil, of death, which continues to exist despite so much progress? What purpose have these victories purchased at so high a cost? What can man offer to society, what can he expect from it? What follows this earthly life?” (*Gaudium et Spes* 10). If addressed in a context devoid of God, these questions easily resulted in the feelings of dissociation and despair.

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<sup>4</sup> In his essay, “Existentialism is a Humanism,” Jean-Paul Sartre defines Existentialism: “Existentialism is merely an attempt to draw all of the conclusions inferred by a consistently atheistic point of view. Its purpose is not at all to plunge mankind into despair. But if we label any attitude of unbelief ‘despair,’ as Christians do, then our notion of despair is vastly different from its original meaning. Existentialism is not so much an atheism in the sense that it would exhaust itself attempting to demonstrate the nonexistence of God; rather, it affirms that even if God were to exist, it would make no difference—that is our point of view. It is not that we believe God exists, but we think that the real problem is not one of his existence; what man needs is to rediscover himself and to comprehend that nothing can save him from himself, not even valid proof of the existence of God. In this sense, existentialism is optimistic. It is a doctrine of action, and it is only in bad faith—in confusing their despair with ours—that Christians are able to assert that we are ‘without hope’” (53-54).

<sup>5</sup> Sartre defines humanism in this way, “Man is always outside of himself, and it is in projecting and losing himself beyond himself that man is realized; and, on the other hand, it is in pursuing transcendent goals that he is able to exist. Since man is this transcendence, and grasps objects only in relation to his such transcendence, he is himself the core and focus of his transcendence. The only universe that exists is the human one—the universe of human subjectivity. This link between transcendence as constitutive of man (not in the sense that God is transcendent, but in the sense that man passes beyond himself) and subjectivity (in the sense that man is not an island unto himself but always present in a human universe) —is what we call ‘existential humanism’” (53).

<sup>6</sup> The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* writes of naturalism, “The term ‘naturalism’ has no very precise meaning in contemporary philosophy. Its current usage derives from debates in America in the first half of the last century. The self-proclaimed ‘naturalists’ from that period included John Dewey, Ernest Nagel, Sidney Hook and Roy Wood Sellars. These philosophers aimed to ally philosophy more closely with science. They urged that reality is exhausted by nature, containing nothing ‘supernatural’, and that the scientific method should be used to investigate all areas of reality, including the ‘human spirit’ (Krikorian 1944, Kim 2003)” (Papineau).

### CHAPTER III

#### THE IMPACT OF VATICAN II'S CHANGES TO THE MASS AS SEEN IN PERCY'S NOVELS

Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, was published in 1961, the year before Pope John XXIII convened the first session of the Second Vatican Council. In 1963, John XXIII died, and Giovanni Montini became the next pope, taking the name Paul VI. Under Pope Paul VI's leadership, the Second Vatican Council continued and came to a close in 1965. Six years later, in 1971, Percy published his third novel, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, a satire of modern humanity, its relation to God and religion, nationalism, and dissociation, among other things. Corresponding with the changes in the Church following the Second Vatican Council, Catholicism plays a more central role in *Love in the Ruins*,<sup>7</sup> and the Catholicism that emerges throughout Thomas More's "adventures" is very different than that of Binx Bolling. In this chapter, I will demonstrate the theological shift from pre-Vatican II, middle-class American Catholicism, represented in *The Moviegoer*, to the Church that arose out of the Second Vatican Council, represented in *Love in the Ruins*, relying specifically upon the changes to the Liturgy that came out of *Sacrosanctum*

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<sup>7</sup> As suggested by the subtitle

*Concilium*. Before examining these changes, however, it is important to examine the portrayal of Catholicism in Percy's debut novel.

The world of *The Moviegoer* parallels the world set forth by Carey and McGreevy in their discussions of pre-Vatican II American Catholicism. Binx Bolling, the main character of *The Moviegoer*, regards the Church as a known institution, one which is stable and ever-present, if disconnected from the world, and this attitude is reflected in Binx's description of Uncle Jules' faith:

Uncle Jules is the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified. He has made a great deal of money, he has a great many friends, he was a Rex of Mardi Gras, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him. (*Moviegoer* 31)

*The Moviegoer* was written before any of the changes of Vatican II emerged and took effect. Thus, Uncle Jules does not have to deal with any of the questions raised by Vatican II regarding the practice of his faith and is content to go to Mass and behave charitably. Moreover, he is content in his relationship to the Church in a way that Paul Blanshard and others of his school would not be. For Uncle Jules, the pursuit of worldly happiness<sup>8</sup>—friendship, the position of Rex of Mardi Gras, and Tulane football (*Moviegoer* 30)—are of the utmost importance in his life and fit easily within his religious beliefs. Uncle Jules embodies the “excessive accommodationist stance toward American and modern culture” that Pope Leo XIII warned of in *Testem Benevolentiae*

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<sup>8</sup> Or as Binx would say, the pursuit of everydayness

and, like Kennedy, he has effectively separated Church and State within his mind.

Although the questions of the Second Vatican Council were clearly felt by some like Pope Leo XIII before its convocation, they had not yet been officially addressed by the Church. This lack of an official statement allowed individuals like Uncle Jules to relegate Catholicism to a matter of “personal conscience,” as Carey suggests and attend Church on Sunday while engaging in capitalistic pursuits during the rest of the week. The Church of *The Moviegoer* is one that has not yet had to come to terms with the problems of modernity and so has not experienced the split seen in *Love in the Ruins* caused by the posited answers to these problems. Uncle Jules is a beneficiary of this Church.

Only Binx, it appears, is cognizant of the predicament of American Catholics.<sup>9</sup>

This awareness can be seen in his mother’s family, the Smiths:

After breakfast, there is a commotion about Mass. The Smiths, except Lonnie, would never dream of speaking of religion—raising the subject provokes in them the acutest embarrassment: eyes are averted, throats are cleared, and there occurs a murmuring for a minute or two until the subject can be changed. But I have heard them argue forty-five minutes about the mechanics of going to Mass and with all the ardor of relief, as if in debating the merits of the nine o’clock Mass in Biloxi as against the ten thirty in Bay St Louis they were indeed discussing religion and who can say they weren’t? (*Moviegoer* 159)

Although the Smiths are pious Catholics who regularly attend church and consider Binx as having “lost [his] faith” (*Moviegoer* 145), it is clear that like Uncle Jules, even those in

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<sup>9</sup> Or at the very least, is the only character willing to acknowledge this predicament

poverty like the Smiths are more concerned with the trivialities of faith like attending Mass on Sundays than with spiritual growth; this is the way in which they engage with religion. This detachment is indicative of the pre-Vatican II Church. As the Church at this time had not yet moved toward inclusivity, changing the language of the Liturgy to the vernacular and thus allowing a fuller participation for Roman Catholics, the expression of faith that the Smiths and other families were relegated to could only be expressed in such inconsequential matters as what time and where to attend Mass.

Only Lonnie, Binx's half-brother and his favorite of the Smiths, is free from this pseudo-religiosity. He is an afflicted child who is daily able to transcend his everydayness through his suffering: "For one thing, he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ. For another thing, I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business" (*Moviegoer* 137). As Lonnie is consistently sick, he is always able to recognize and transcend the malaise.<sup>10</sup> He knows that his suffering is only temporary and trusts that he will be rewarded in the afterlife. Binx's desire to trade lives with Lonnie stems from the fact that Lonnie's pain is a constant reminder of life. He must live each day as if it is his last as it very well might be. Binx recognizes that his own moment of transcendence arose from great pain, and he envies Lonnie's endless moments of physical pain as a result.

The Church of *Love in the Ruins* is represented initially as having similar problems to those of Uncle Jules and the Smiths; it is concerned with trivialities rather than focusing on spiritual growth. The Church frequently appears in More's thoughts and

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<sup>10</sup> As we have already seen, it is only through chaos and suffering, according to Binx, that one can move beyond the "everydayness" of modern culture and recognize his or her relationship to the world.

actions and is, like the rest of the post-modern, post-apocalyptic world Percy creates, represented as fragmented: “Our Catholic Church here is split into three pieces: (1) the American Catholic Church whose new Rome is Cicero, Illinois; (2) the Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance but not God; (3) the Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny, scattered flock with no place to go” (*Love* 5-6). It is clear from this description that the Church is no longer a single unit, focused on community and inclusion or even, as in the Church of *The Moviegoer*, a unified if spiritually remote group of believers. This is a clear movement away from one of the goals of the Second Vatican Council that, through the changes to the Liturgy, sought to create a “sense of community within the parish, above all in the common celebration of the Sunday Mass” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 42). This schism in the Church of *Love in the Ruins* seems to be indicative of a fear that the changes of the Second Vatican Council would not unify its believers but further encourage them to practice Catholicism in whichever way they deemed fitting, thwarting the efforts of the Council members.

This fear is further illuminated in More’s subsequent description of the American Catholic Church that seems to emphasize insignificant practices over doctrine. More reports, “The American Catholic Church, which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of the neighborhoods, retained the Latin mass and plays *The Star Spangled Banner* at the elevation” (*Love* 6). These practices are a clear rejection of some of the changes of Vatican II, such as the vernacular mass, even as others, such as the inclusion of cultural values and practices, are embraced. The way in which the American Catholic Church incorporates culture, is not what the Council had envisioned. By playing the American national anthem at the elevation, this branch of the Church that Percy creates

rejects the mystery of the transubstantiation, transforming the bread and wine not into the body and blood of Christ but into a cheapened symbol of nationalism, a clear indicator that the changes of the Second Vatican Council could be taken too far by some. Furthermore, by focusing on property rights, the American Catholics further reject Jesus' commandment to "Sell everything you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me" (*New American Bible* Luke 18.22). By emphasizing property over devotion to God and *The Star Spangled Banner* over the transubstantiation, arguably the most important part of the mass, the American Catholic Church has abandoned its roots, even as it clings to the tradition of the Latin Rite as if it were one of the roots of Catholicism. This depiction of the American Catholic Church effectively satirizes the American Catholic Church that arose out of middle-class Catholicism in the 1940's and 50's and warns of the potential abandonment of the dogma of the Church if the changes made by the Second Vatican Council are taken too far.

The satire of popular culture's inclusion in the mass is not all that Percy reveals, however. The Dutch schismatics, too, are problematic in relation to the Church: "The Dutch schismatics in this area comprise several priests and nuns who left Rome to get married. They threw in with the Dutch schismatic Catholics. Now several divorced priests and nuns are importuning the Dutch Cardinal to allow them to remarry" (*Love* 6). The hierarchy of the Church has been ingrained in them so deeply that even after abandoning God and turning to carnal practices, seen mostly clearly in the case of former Father Kev Kevin, a researcher at the "Love Clinic" in which several characters engage in sexual acts purely for the sake of scientific advancement (*Love* 123), they cannot make secular decisions about "holy" unions on their own. Like the American Catholics, the

Dutch schismatics of Percy's novel abandon the dogma of the Church. Like the American Catholic Church, the Dutch schismatic sect of the Church seems to be concerned with the less important rules of the Church. They do not believe in God, yet they seek permission from Church officials to divorce. This, too, seems indicative of the potential problems which Percy seems to believe may arise from the Second Vatican Council. It is not until chaos has ensued and More has experienced his moment of grace and subsequent conversion that the changes of the Second Vatican Council are reconciled in the novel.

At the end of *Love in the Ruins*, it is clear that Thomas More has come to embrace the changes of the Second Vatican Council and has learned how to integrate these changes into his own life in a meaningful way. After his moment of conversion, More is approached by Moon Mullins, who is described as, "... a fellow Knight of Columbus, Holy Name man, ex-Pontiac salesman" (*Love* 394). In this encounter, Mullins tells More, "'You want to know where it all began to go wrong? ... It started when we abandoned the Latin mass'" (*Love* 394). In response, More, the previously self-described "Bad Catholic" of Percy's novel, brushes off this statement, promising only to "think about it" (*Love* 394). As the novel was written shortly after the Second Vatican Council, Mullins' assertion that the Latin Rite should not have been done away with was a question with which many American Catholics likely struggled. Percy's speaker easily dismisses this concern, however; this is the last mention of the Latin Mass in the novel. Therefore, it is reasonable to believe that More does not give the matter any thought but recognizes the Latin mass as a trivial element of Catholicism that does not affect the dogma. Indeed, it does not even significantly affect Mullins' commitment to the Church;



following his encounter with Mullins, More notes, “Most A.C.C. (Cicero) Catholics have moved away. Monsignor Schleifkopf was transferred to Brooklyn. Moon and others who stayed have drifted back to Father Smith” (*Love* 394). Thus, the issue of community has been resolved. Few members of the separatist branches of the Church remain, and the Roman Church has gathered its previously “scattered flock”. It is this restored community of believers that, finally, is in line with the teachings of Vatican II and that seems to indicate a more positive world than that of the beginning of the novel.

Beyond the split from the Roman Catholic Church and the emphasis of less significant practices over Church doctrine, we can also see the rejection of Jesus as divine, representative of the newly formed American Catholic Church rejecting the Vatican II statement that all people are called to holiness and “participation in the one priesthood of Christ” (*Lumen Gentium* 10). Upon a trip to the Little Napoleon, More observes, “In the dark mirror there is a dim hollow-eyed Spanish Christ. The pox is spreading on his face. Vacuoles are opening in his chest. It is the new Christ, the spotted Christ, the maculate Christ, the sinful Christ. The old Christ died for our sins and it didn’t work, we were not reconciled. The new Christ shall reconcile man with his sins. The new Christ lies drunk in a ditch” (*Love* 153).<sup>11</sup> Rather than being called to holiness, the Spanish Christ of More’s world is resigned to sinfulness. Human beings are not called to be Christ-like in their actions; rather, they have created an image of Christ that allows them to remain sinful and materialistic. To be more like Christ, as More so crassly phrases it, one need only get drunk and lose consciousness in a ditch. This

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<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, this Christ seems to indicate the Gnostic split between the divine and human Christ. For the Gnostics, Christ cannot embody both natures, and the divine nature is held captive by the corrupt human body.

representation of Christ, a rejection of the doctrine of the Church, is not reconciled until the end of the novel.

After his moment of conversion, More seems to embrace his call to holiness through marriage. Prior to *Lumen Gentium*, it was the belief of the Church that the highest call to holiness was the priesthood. As a result, the laity was not to receive communion unless they had been to confession, could not touch the host, and were not considered to be part of the “one priesthood of Christ”. While More seems to follow the earlier belief that one should attend confession before receiving Communion, he is advised by Father Smith that his sins are inconsequential in the big picture, “Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, ... things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams” (*Love* 399). In saying this, Father Smith calls More to holiness within his own roles as a doctor, husband, and father. Although More does a public penance as an act of contrition, a practice which “John XXIV recently revived ... a practice of the early Church” (*Love* 399)<sup>12</sup> and which seems to suggest lingering doubts about Vatican II, his faith in himself and his ability to become a good person is restored. Indeed by the end of the novel, More states, “To bed we [More and his wife, Ellen] go for a long winter’s nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folk belong” (*Love* 403). More’s insinuation of marital activities and subsequent statement that he is where “all good folk belong” is

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<sup>12</sup> Why Percy chose to use John XXIV, a fictional pope, when Paul VI was serving as the current Pope is unclear but could suggest a need for further evaluation and change in the Church.

indicative of the partial success of the changes of the Second Vatican Council. Although earlier practices have been revived, More is able to pursue holiness within his marriage. At last, he has ended his tenure as a “bad Catholic” and is able to refer to himself as a “good man”.

## CHAPTER IV

### REVELATION, REDEMPTION, AND GRACE

The changes in the Mass and its subsequent reflections upon More's society are not the only elements of Catholicism, nor are the changes to the Mass the only evidence of the theology of the Second Vatican Council seen in *Love in the Ruins*. In her book, *The Signs of Christianity in the Work of Walker Percy*, Ann Mace Futrell addresses the issue of grace in Percy's works. Futrell's understanding of Percy's use of grace is predicated on the belief that Percy's theology "is clearly Protestant from the lineage of American Calvinism. Whether he writes a discourse on civil rights, as he has done a number of times, or an essay on modern language theory, Percy's theological position remains the same: man is divided within himself, alienated from God, separated from other men—lost, isolated alone" (Futrell 7). Although Futrell acknowledges Percy's conversion to Catholicism, she argues that as a result of his use of "the semiotic system of Charles Sanders Peirce" (7),<sup>13</sup> Percy's fictional characters, as well as the non-fictional voice he

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<sup>13</sup> In her critical assessment, Futrell explains Peirce's semiology: "In his semiotic, Charles Peirce uses the term "language" or "logos" in the broadest sense, of "cosmic" speech, that is, any sign in the universe from which man derives meaning and intention. By this view, language is not speech only and certainly not a single linguistic system, but all things that come into man's consciousness as identifiable enemies. It quickly becomes apparent that "intentional" meaning given in natural phenomena in the universe must, like the intentional language of man, have a Speaker who intends meaning and who directs it to minds that perceive such "speech". ... in Peirce's universal semiotic, there is a Creator God who established his own "semiotic" at creation to reveal to man, not only His existence, but His nature as well." (61).

creates, engage in a search for God that is fueled by Calvinism. This position, she contends, is that, "...man is lost to himself, to God, and to others and stands in critical need of redemption, which comes only through a recognition of that fact and a response to his need for God via the church" (Futrell 8). This, it would seem, applies directly to Percy's characters, and Futrell certainly advances her case for Percy's use of Protestant theology throughout the body of her text by examining his search for transcendence as one that can be viewed as a traditional Calvinist approach to the pursuit of grace:

In Protestant theology, therefore, the quest for knowledge of God is always that—a quest, Entzminger explains, because one can never know God fully; thus life itself, in Calvinist terms, is a journey for the purpose of knowing God ... The process of regeneration in the Calvinist tradition is marked by two stages of ascents. On the first level, "prevenient grace" allows one to choose; this is God's action, God's election, Calvin calls it, a grace offered freely by God and permitting man to act, to persevere in faith ... The second level, then, is man's act of will, choosing to respond and living out (ethically) the Word given both by scripture and the inner word. (Futrell 134-135).

Percy's characters, Futrell argues, seem to follow the first level of Calvinist ascents. They are unable to live ethically on their own accords, and it is only after they are acted upon by God that they are able to come to know God and engage fully in the community of believers. Although this argument is suggestive and while Percy's use of Peirce's semiotics does seem to be readily apparent, it is not so clear that Percy's revealed theology of grace is simply aligned with Protestant, Calvinist theology. In fact, the moments of grace and subsequent redemption of Percy's characters, specifically Binx

Bolling and Thomas More, reflect a Christian approach to grace which cannot be attributed specifically to Calvinism, and the search in which these characters engage reflects not Calvinist beliefs but Existentialist philosophy.<sup>14</sup>

Perhaps one of the most noticeable themes in Percy's fiction is that of an eventual moment of grace and subsequent redemption for the protagonist. This is true of both Binx Bolling and Thomas More, and it resonates with the Second Vatican Council's pronouncement on Revelation as an act of grace:

'The obedience of faith' (Rom. 13:26; see 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6) is to be given to God who 'reveals, an obedience by which man commits his whole self freely to God, offering the full submission of intellect and will to God who reveals,' (4) and freely assenting to the truth revealed by Him. To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving 'joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it. (*Dei Verbum* 5).

It is only through an act of grace, therefore, that humanity can come to know God and can fully give of itself. Before a human being can be redeemed, he or she must be acted

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<sup>14</sup> In his article, "From Suicide to Ex-Suicide: Notes on the Southern Writer as Hero in the Age of Despair," John F. Desmond, like Futrell examines Percy's theory of semiotics. Contrary to Futrell's conclusions, Desmond asserts that this theory is demonstrative of Percy's tendency towards Existentialist philosophy, "However, Percy also affirmed that the self cannot name itself definitively; it is "unformulable" because "once the self locates itself at the dead center of its world, there is no signified to which a signifier can be joined to make a sign. The self has no sign of itself. No signifier applies. All signifiers apply equally." Percy identifies this dilemma with the fall into self-consciousness. "From the moment the signifying self turned inward and became conscious of itself, trouble began as the sparks flew up." "The exile from Eden is, semiotically, the banishment of the self-conscious self from its own world of signs" (Lost 107-108). This "catastrophe" is the semiotic version of Kierkegaard's existential situation of despair—the failure of the power to name truth. Yet the hope of redemption is alike in both models. In Kierkegaard, the creature struggles against despair to discover itself as spirit "transparently under God" and embrace the freedom to act" (90).

upon by God, “the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart and turning it to God,” language very similar to that which Futrell labels as a specifically Calvinist notion of grace. Human beings cannot come to revelation on their own, and without a call to answer, they will surely wander the world forlorn. This call, the Council states, is one which is given to everyone, through the Scriptures and other, more personal acts, and Binx and Tom are certainly recipients of both moments of grace.

Grace is a theological term which scholars of both theology and Percy frequently address in their writings, and a good working definition of actual grace for Karl Rahner and many others at the Second Vatican Council is “active,” effective presence of God “concretely acting” to save here and now (Galvin 64-75). Although this definition seems to indicate a joyous occasion, Franklin Arthur Wilson, author of “Walker Percy’s Bible Notes and His Fiction: Gracious Obscenity,” proffers the notion, “That Percy employs various obscene things, images, and events to depict the incarnation of the Holy” (199). That is to say, Percy uses the ordinary and the grotesque in order to demonstrate that especially in moments of obscenity, one can find grace. Wilson furthers this notion in his article when he examines the roles of the dung beetle in *The Moviegoer*, the death of Samantha in *Love in the Ruins*, and the consuming of the Eucharist in both novels. According to Wilson, the presence of the dung beetle begs the question, “But why employ a dung beetle as the catalyst in Binx’s search?” (199). While under a chindolea bush during his service in the Korean War, Binx sees the dung beetle and begins to contemplate the search for meaning: “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” (*Moviegoer* 11). Wilson’s subsequent argument is that out of the obscene, God finds new ways to act in the lives of human beings. Just as he used Jesus’ death on the cross,<sup>15</sup> God uses the dung beetle to enable Binx to begin the journey that ultimately leads him to self discovery and to God: “Binx's upside-down orientation enables us to view the dung beetle as a sign of Christ's participation in human suffering and death, grace enmeshed in the obscenities of human misery” (Wilson 201). The dung beetle then, is a visible representation of the invisible God and God’s continuing presence and connection to human suffering. It serves as a sacramental and therefore cannot be representative of a Calvinistic emphasis on God’s transcendent otherness. The beetle is not God but a sign of God’s presence in Binx’s life.

For Wilson, Binx’s experience and acceptance of grace culminate in Lonnie’s death and Binx’s subsequent treatment of Kate Coutrer, his eventual wife. The grace which arises out of these moments is signified in the change in Binx and is physically represented by a flower that Kate carries with her:

A similar dynamic emerges out of Lonnie Smith, Binx's anointed —literally Christed (*MG*, 189) — half-brother, whose suffering and death give birth to word-signs of Christ's promised resurrection. ... In such reverse light, people who are “dead, dead, dead” may yet find hope ... in the love which emerges like a dung beetle from the shitty misery of Lonnie's death. ... As Lonnie dies, Kate receives a word and a kiss from Binx. The anxious Kate walks down a street with nothing but a quarter in her hand and a cape jasmine pressed against her cheek. The sacramental bloom signals not only Binx's love, but also Christ himself, whose

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<sup>15</sup> A moment which must surely be considered as grotesque



obscene death reveals grace in the very fashion that dung brings forth both a fragrant flower and a disgusting beetle. (Wilson 202)

Wilson effectively demonstrates that Christ has entered into Binx's life in a real way. The obscenities of the dung beetle and Lonnie's death are transformed into good. Out of the rubble comes the tangible presence of Christ; Binx is finally able to relate to a woman as a companion and care for another human being in a way he had previously been unable to do, and the flower Kate bears with her is representative of the transformative power of Christ. As a result, Binx is finally able to live in community with other human beings, and he is able to transcend his own shortcomings that lead to his inability to escape everydayness: drinking, womanizing, and moviegoing.

Although Wilson makes a strong argument for his case, I would argue that Binx's moment of grace comes not only as a result of the dung beetle and Lonnie's death but from his own womanizing, as well. Binx's desire to conquer women and view them as trophies or notches on his bedposts reveals much about his own hedonism and his inability to enter into community: "Naturally I would like to say that I had made conquests of these splendid girls, my secretaries, casting them off one after the other like old gloves, but it would not strictly be true. They could be called love affairs, I suppose ... No, they were not conquests. For in the end, my Lindas and I were so sick of each other that we were delighted to say goodbye" (*Moviegoer* 8-9). Binx does not value any of these women and cannot describe them in meaningful ways. They are merely, "splendid girls, my secretaries". Binx describes each in the same manner and regards each as a possession, as implied by the possessive "my". For Binx, each rendezvous with a secretary is a pleasurable way to pass the time, and it is not until he realizes that he

desires more and begins to see one woman, Kate, as a whole rather than a part<sup>16</sup> that he can truly enter into community. Binx's moment of grace, then, comes when he is on the phone with Joyce, Sharon's roommate:<sup>17</sup> "At last I spy Kate; her stiff little Plymouth comes nosing into my bus stop. There she sits like a bomber pilot, resting on her wheel and looking at the children and not seeing, and she could be I myself, sooty eyed and nowhere" (*Moviegoer* 231). In this moment, Binx recognizes himself in Kate and as such, is able to enter into a more meaningful relationship, seen in Binx's subsequent question: "Is it possible that—it is not too late?" and his sudden desire to bring Kate with him to Sharon and Joyce's apartment (*Moviegoer* 231). In this moment, Binx recognizes that he can, in fact, be saved from everydayness, that in living life with Kate and recognizing their commonalities, he can transcend the malaise and participate in meaningful human experiences. This then, is the true moment of Binx's transformation from hedonistic atheist to self-sacrificing believer, and the statement he makes when he is with Sharon, "Love is invincible" (*Moviegoer* 125), is proven to be true, although it is the love of God rather than the pleasure-centered "love" which finally saves Binx from the malaise.

Binx's eventual moment of grace is inevitable as his doppelganger, Lonnie,<sup>18</sup> has already found grace and transcendence through Catholicism. Lonnie's moment of grace, unlike that of Binx, is easier to distinguish as Lonnie participates in the sacrament of extreme unction and is momentarily healed:

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<sup>16</sup> An embodiment of the "I-Thou" relationship rather than the "I-It" relationship

<sup>17</sup> Sharon is the latest woman in Binx's long list of secretarial "love affairs".

<sup>18</sup> Lonnie, as a doppelganger for Binx, he provides a glimpse into what Binx would be like had he already experienced grace and transcended the malaise: "He is my favorite, to tell the truth. Like me, he is a moviegoer. He will go see anything. But we are good friends because he knows I do not feel sorry for him" (*Moviegoer* 137). In recognizing his parallels with Lonnie, Binx demonstrates the similarities between the two even as they are radically different.

“He wasn’t in danger of death. The extreme unction was his idea. He said it would strengthen him physically as well as spiritually. Have you ever heard of that?”

“Yes. But is he all right now?” ...

“Dr. Murtag said he’d never seen anything like it. Lonnie got out of bed in half an hour.” (*Moviegoer* 142).

Lonnie’s moment of grace, like Binx’s, comes out of a moment of chaos. He is plagued with a “viral infection” (*Moviegoer* 142) in addition to the many illnesses he already endures, yet he believes in God and the power of the Eucharist with unwavering faith. Lonnie is able to realize when he is disconnected from God<sup>19</sup> and sets about reconnecting through a commitment to fasting and a concentration on the Eucharist (*Moviegoer* 163-164). This commitment is demonstrative of the presence of grace which has already entered into Lonnie’s life through the dailiness of his illness. Unlike Binx, he is able to recognize his shortcomings, an ability which quickly sets him on the path to redemption and transcendence.

Like Binx, Thomas More is unable to recognize the presence of God in his life. In *Love in the Ruins*, More creates “the More Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer,” after studying encephalography and asking the questions, “Why not devise a gadget without wires that will measure the electrical activity of the separate centers of the brain? ... But here was the problem: given such a machine, given such readings, could the readings then be correlated with the manifold woes of the Western world, its terrors, rages, and murderous impulses? And if so, could the latter be treated by treating

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<sup>19</sup> As seen in his self-admission that he is jealous of his deceased brother, Duval (*Moviegoer* 163)

the former?" (*Love* 28-29). More's device does just this, after his initial model is "improved upon" by Art Immelman. With it, he is able to diagnose the "deep perturbations of the soul" (*Love* 29) and is eventually able to temporarily treat them. What he is not able to treat, however, are his own "perturbations of the soul"; however, he is unlike Binx, as he is able to recognize these spiritual malfunctions and believes in the Church:

I, for example, am a Roman Catholic, albeit a bad one. I believe in the Holy Catholic Apostolic and Roman Church, in God the Father, in the election of the Jews, in Jesus Christ His Son our Lord, who founded the Church on Peter his first vicar, which will last until the end of the world. Some years ago, however, I stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally, I do what I please. (*Love* 6)

Like Uncle Jules, More initially follows the middle class conventions that allow him to separate his actions from his religious convictions. Robert Lauder helpfully assesses the same passage: "Contemporary persons either live in abstractions and are so out of touch with the real everyday events that surround them or have identified themselves as merely organisms and so have embraced bizarre sexual practices. Dr. Thomas More acts out both misconceptions" (82). More cannot engage in a real search for meaning because he has stripped himself of the religious assertion that humans were created in the image of God and ironically, engages in meaningless sexual encounters with a variety of women in order to create meaning. Although More is able to recite the Catechism, it does not

influence his daily life, as seen in the listing of his priorities, and as he is unable to assign meaning to his actions, he becomes “abstracted” from himself and the world around him. Like Binx, More is unable to enter into true community with his “fellowman.” As a result, he devises the MOQUL<sup>20</sup> as a quick, scientific fix to all of the world’s problems. This device, of course, falls into the wrong hands, those of the mysterious and clearly demonic Art Immelman, and is used to cause further strife in More’s community, although the device is unable to enact lasting effects, as is clear in More’s continuous need to stimulate his “musical erotic.” The only lasting solution then, is for God to act upon More through a moment of grace.

More’s moment of grace arises out of the recognition of God’s acting in his life in the remembrance of the moments preceding the death of his daughter, Samantha. Wilson states of More’s moment of grace, “In *Love in the Ruins*, the death of a child once again provides the catalytic context within which Percy engages the controversial notion of divine grace present in the obscene. The death of Samantha More, the perceptive child of Dr. Tom More and his (then) wife, Doris, forms the aching question by which More reflects on life and death” (205). Wilson goes on to say, “The ultimate mystery Percy illumines via the death of Samantha More is the offensive insight that divine love courts us amid the ruins of life. Tom More struggles with the mystery of love present in a world of death and, moreover, the perverse role of his own sin in dealing with death” (206). Wilson rightly views Samantha’s final deathbed conversation with More as the catalyst for his conversion. More does, indeed, finally come to grace upon reflecting on Samantha’s final words, and grace does serve as “the offensive insight that divine love

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<sup>20</sup> As Immelman names it (*Love* 168)

courts us amid the ruins of life”, but the entirety of More’s conversion cannot be attributed to this conversation alone.

Throughout the novel, More recalls his conversation with Samantha. She warns him against his inevitable fall and his potential to commit the unforgivable sin:

"Papa, have you lost your faith?"

"No."

Samantha asked me the question as I stood by her bed. The neuroblastoma had pushed one eye out and around the nosebridge so she looked like a Picasso profile.

"Then why don't you go to mass any more?"

"I don't know. Maybe because you don't go with me."

"Papa, you're in greater danger than Mama."

"How is that?"

"Because she is protected by Invincible Ignorance."

"That's true," I said, laughing.

"She doesn't know any better."

"She doesn't."

"You do."

"Yes."

"Just promise me one thing. Papa."

"What's that?"

"Don't commit the one sin for which there is no forgiveness."

"Which one is that?"

"The sin against grace. If God gives the grace to believe in him and love him and you refuse, the sin will not be forgiven you."

"I know." (*Love* 373-374)

Here, Roman Catholic theology emerges as an explicit, haunting reality through the afflicted Samantha. As More knows God and the teachings of the Catholic Church prior to Samantha's death, he is in greater danger than his wife because she is unaware of these things. She is an ex-Episcopalian atheist "with nothing left of her religion but a fondness for old brick chapels, St. John o' the Woods, and the superb English of the King James version, we had common ground" (*Love* 65) when More meets her. By the end of their marriage, Doris has abandoned even these affinities, and the atheism which grows out of her grief over Samantha's death and newfound affinity for Eastern religions that do not believe in God allow her to remain blind to grace and ultimately allow her to leave More for the heathen Englishmen who introduced her to these new belief systems (*Love* 64-65). More, himself, does not have this excuse, and his inability to accept God's grace in his life nearly causes him to become further abstracted from himself and the community. Although this conversation does, eventually, get through to More, it is a conversation which he recollects at numerous points throughout the novel. This continuous recollection points to the fact that more is at work in his conversion than the memory of a deathbed conversation. The conversation haunts More, suggesting its centrality to his conversion event.

More's final recollection of Samantha's advice to him comes at a time when he, like Binx, is forced to come to terms with his own mortality and shortcomings. Prior to the moment of clarity More is afforded, he is told of the Bantu take-over plan by Uru and

is advised, “You better go back, Doc, while you can” (*Love* 373). Like Binx, More is confronted with a moment of obscenity, but More’s dealings with obscenity are far more grievous than those Binx encounters. More faces the eradication of the life he has known and the potential war which has been threatening to occur throughout the novel. His moment of grace comes just as he realizes that he may no longer be allowed to live, and if he is, his life will be radically different. At the moment when More can sink no further, he, like Binx, is redeemed.

More’s redemption is connected in some ways to a woman but is far more complex than that of Binx. More, who has otherwise shown himself to be spineless, finally musters the courage to stand up to evil in the form of Art Immelman and calls upon his new-found faith to save him:

“You’re not traveling anywhere with this bastard.” I grab her by the hand and yank her away from Art. “Why you evil-minded son of a bitch,” I tell Art. ...

“Don’t touch her!” I cry, but I can’t seem to move. I close my eyes. *Sir Thomas More, kinsman, saint, best dearest merriest of Englishmen, pray for us and drive this son of a bitch hence. (Love 376)*

Although More goes through the motions of prayer throughout the novel, this is the first time that he prays for something meaningful and unselfish. His earlier prayers had revolved around his research being published, the winning of the Nobel Prize, and other material pursuits, although he notes that these prayers are “the prayer of a scientist if he prayed, which is not likely” (*Love* 7-8). More’s prayer for deliverance from evil, Art, is a recalling of the plea of the Lord’s Prayer, “deliver us from evil,” and is meant to save



both himself and Ellen, his secretary, evidence that he has moved out of himself and is finally able to recognize God's presence and power in his life.

The final evidence of More's conversion can be seen at the end of the novel. More has given up drinking,<sup>21</sup> womanizing, and secular attitudes. He begins, once again, to attend Church and goes to Confession in order to set right his relationship with God. By the end of the novel, More and Ellen, whom he marries shortly after the encounter with Art "go [to bed] for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folk belong" (*Love* 403). This final scene signifies a shift in More's evaluation of himself. He is no longer a "Bad Catholic" but "good folk". He has rectified his relationship with God and entered into communion with his family and his Church. More's redemption stems from an undeserved, concrete encounter with God, and he is redeemed as a result.

Through the eventual recognition of shortcomings as a result of a moment of revelation and grace in their lives, Binx Bolling and Thomas More are able to engage meaningfully with their communities. Both must undergo a search of sorts, but through the presence of God in their lives, they are able to overcome their respective hedonistic inclinations and come into full communion with the Church. This follows directly with the statement about revelation and grace made in *Dei Verbum*. Before each character can accept his respective call to faith and obedience, he must first be acted upon in the manner described by the Second Vatican Council: "To make this act of faith, the grace of God and the interior help of the Holy Spirit must precede and assist, moving the heart

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<sup>21</sup> For the most part

and turning it to God, opening the eyes of the mind and giving ‘joy and ease to everyone in assenting to the truth and believing it’ (*Dei Verbum* 5). In order to undergo a conversion, then, Binx Bolling and Thomas More must experience the presence of God in their lives and be acted upon in tangible ways. For Binx, this is the sighting of Kate and the death of Lonnie; for More, it is the death of Samantha and his subsequent recollections combined with the apocalyptic chaos which pervades his life acts. Each novel is a clear embodiment of the call to faith espoused by the Roman Catholic Church, although the two come to terms with their faith under radically different circumstances.

## **CHAPTER V**

### **EXISTENTIALISM**

The questions posed as Calvinist by Ann Mace Futrell can be attributed not to Percy's "Protestant Calvinism" but to the Existentialist philosophers he studied during his stay in numerous sanitariums and relied heavily upon throughout the subsequent production of his writings. In order to understand the characterization of Percy's protagonists and the searches in which they engage, one must first become familiar with the ways in which he employs Existentialist philosophy in his novels. According to Lauder, Percy draws heavily upon the philosophies of both Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel in order to create both a starting point and an eventual goal for each of his main characters: "The three stages of Kierkegaard are in each of the six novels, and the main character is on one of the stages moving toward or away from religious commitment; the resolution of most of the novels, indeed all but one, involves a dramatizing of the I-thou relationship of Marcel" (29). As each character embodies only one of Kierkegaard's three stages, the aesthetic, the ethical, and the religious, without a full understanding or desire to embrace the other two, he becomes stunted, unable to progress or transcend the "everydayness" because he cannot conceive of the fully realized self. He does not have the tools with which to do so. Furthermore, both Binx and Tom

are victims of the “I-It” relationship with the world of which Martin Buber and Gabriel Marcel speak, and the objectification which arises out of the I-It relationship leaves them unable to enter into meaningful relationships with other human beings and with the world around them. As a result, they are victims of the problems of modernity as set forth in *Gaudium et Spes*, and can transcend these problems only when they move towards religious commitment, as Lauder says, and begin to think of their relationship to other human beings, the world, and ultimately, God in terms of what Buber and Marcel term the “I-Thou” relationship.

### *Kierkegaardian Philosophy*

Kierkegaard’s existentialist philosophy plays a major role in the works of Walker Percy and is key to understanding Percy’s definition of the “malaise” which plagues human beings. Percy’s debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, begins with an epigraph from Kierkegaard’s *The Sickness Unto Death*: “the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair” (Epigraph). In the novel itself, Binx mirrors Kierkegaard’s statement by saying, “To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (*Moviegoer* 13). Most people are not onto something, according to Binx, so they are unaware of the despair in which they are entrenched. Although Binx is able to enter into a search of sorts, it is not until he moves out of the aesthetic stage that he is able to escape his own despair. Similarly, Thomas More is aware that he is in a state of despair and disconnect, but in order to overcome that despair and move into a state of religious awareness and

freedom from the malaise he must move beyond the ethical or moral Kierkegaardian stage in which he is stuck after the death of his daughter Samantha.

Lauder's claim that each of Percy's characters is in one of Kierkegaard's three stages, therefore, is key to understanding the disconnect from the world or malaise which each feels and is representative of each character's inability to enter into full communion with those around him. As such, it is important to establish and characterize each of these three stages. In his 1843 work *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard characterizes the aesthetic:

The aesthetic view takes account of the personality in its relation to the environment, and the expression for this relation in its repercussion upon the individual is pleasure. But the aesthetic expression for pleasure in its relation to the individual is mood. ... The more the personality disappears in the twilight of mood, so much the more is the individual in the moment, and this, again, is the most adequate expression for the aesthetic existence: it is in the moment. Hence, the prodigious oscillations to which the man who lives aesthetically is exposed.

(234)

The aesthetic, therefore, is prone to mood-swings or "prodigious oscillations." His or her orientation to the world is entirely reliant on the way he or she feels in a specific "moment" or instance in time. As the sole focus of the aesthetic is pleasure, his or her mood is determined by the amount of pleasure generated by a particular, isolated experience. For the aesthetic, then, the "relation to the environment" is essential. If the environment of the individual is displeasing, he or she will be unable to transcend that moment because he or she will be too preoccupied with an emotional response to ask the larger questions of the search, and his or her mood will be affected accordingly. If the

environment is pleasant, the mood of the aesthetic is pleasant, if only temporarily, and this stage is clearly applicable to Binx Bolling.

In *The Moviegoer*, Binx's major preoccupation is that of the aesthetic, the search for pleasurable moments. Although he is aware of his despair, Binx attempts to remove himself from it through pleasurable pursuits, his most obvious being, of course, moviegoing, which allows him a moment of delight predicated on his aesthetic preoccupations: "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*" (*Moviegoer* 7). Binx never fully engages with humanity in a meaningful way, demonstrated by the statement that he has only read of other people "treasur[ing] memorable moments in their lives". As such, he must live vicariously through the fictional actions of movie protagonists. Their interactions with other characters are seemingly more meaningful than any Binx has ever experienced or can conceive, and he experiences a momentary euphoria upon seeing and recalling these interactions.

Binx's preoccupations with the aesthetic can also be seen in the assessment he provides of life in Gentilly where the meager demands for participation in society fulfill his need for momentary validation. For Binx, fulfilling requirements and living a life filled with sensory pleasures is extremely important: "Life in Gentilly is very peaceful. ... I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. ... It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen and to receive in return a receipt or a neat styrene card with one's name on it certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist"

(*Moviegoer* 6-7). Binx's tendencies toward the aesthetic are clearly visible in this passage. Each of the pleasures which he derives out of life in Gentilly, "carry[ing] out the duties of a citizen" and "receiv[ing] in return a receipt or a neat styrene card," rest upon his preoccupation with momentary satisfaction. By fulfilling his duties, Binx believes he validates his existence, and this provides for Binx a brief feeling of meaningfulness. Just as this moment and the feeling of contentment is transient, so, too, are Binx's feelings of belonging. This transience leads to a fleeting connection with the community which can be rectified only when Binx moves from the aesthetic stage toward the religious.

Although Thomas More, too, seems to be preoccupied with momentary pleasures, he can be more clearly understood as an embodiment of Kierkegaard's second stage, the moral or ethical. In *Either/Or*, Kierkegaard notes the similarities between the two stages but points to the concerns of the moral which do not arise for the aesthetic:

He, too, who lives ethically experiences mood, but for him this is not the highest experience; because he has infinitely chosen himself he sees the mood below him. ... When a man lives ethically his mood is centralized, he is not moody, he is not in a mood, but he has mood and he has mood in himself. What he labors for is continuity, and this is always master over mood. His life does not lack mood, yea, it has a total mood; but this is acquired, it is what one might call *aequale temperamentum*, but this is no aesthetic mood, and no one has it by nature or immediately. (234-235)

For the moral, then, mood is not dependent upon momentary pleasures as it is for the aesthetic. It is contingent upon the ethical person and his or her beliefs. The ethical,

then, is far more assured of him or herself than the aesthetic. Momentary pleasures or disappointments do not have a great impact on mood for those in the ethical stage.

Lauder further explicates the differences between the aesthetic stage and the ethical: “In the ethical stage, a person has the purpose and direction which the aesthete lacks. The ethical person is concerned with duty, not with what he wants to do but what he ought to do. The ethical person believes that there is a rational order in which everyone can find a place. The laws governing social behavior appear as a constant principle of conduct”

(32). Although it may appear at first glance that this description most clearly fits Binx rather than Thomas More, it most assuredly does not. Binx derives pleasure from being a good citizen, but his mood is never constant or fixed. Instead, each identification card he receives provides for him a temporary feeling of belonging and happiness which quickly devolves into despair when he leaves Gentilly for other areas like the Garden District:

“My uncle and aunt live in a gracious house in the Garden District and are very kind to me. But whenever I live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinions on a variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick for hours staring straight up at the plaster medallion in the ceiling of my bedroom” (*Moviegoer* 6). The Garden District most assuredly has all of the trappings of society that Binx finds pleasurable in Gentilly, but he cannot derive the same kind of pleasure out of this area of New Orleans because such a leisurely lifestyle does not force him to confront his feelings of detachment. This change in mood based on place and circumstance characteristic of the aesthetic can also be seen in Binx’s reaction to being told he must attend a brief convention in Chicago for his company: “Chicago. Misery misery son of a bitch of all miseries. ... 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” (*Moviegoer* 98-99). Binx’s swift change in mood and bemoaning of the weekend loss of his pleasant existence is demonstrative of the impact of the moment upon Binx. Brief occurrences shape him, and his inability to craft a total mood, flying first into rages and then sinking into deep depressions, denotes Binx’s aesthetic inclination.

Although Thomas More fits the aesthetic in many ways, it is the sense of duty to humanity and his pervasive mood of the acceptance of impending doom which leads one to conclude that he best fits the ethical stage. More’s mood is exemplified upon his first description of himself in *Love in the Ruins*, “Two more hours should tell the story. One way or the other. Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur, or it won’t and I’m crazy. In either case, the outlook is not good” (3). More’s mood changes slightly throughout the novel, dependent on his situation. This change in mood is indicative of the aesthetic stage, but his acknowledgement and subsequent resigning of himself to the inevitable end of the world denotes his partial entrance into Kierkegaard’s second stage. In no place is this acceptance clearer than the subtitle of the novel, “The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World”. The use of the first person narrative and the diary-like entries of the novel indicate that More is telling the story. Therefore, the acknowledgement that the story takes place “at a Time Near the End of the World” is a clear demonstration of More’s attitude towards the situation in which humanity has found itself.

Despite his resignation to the world’s end, More has a sense of duty, which is not possessed by Binx Bolling, that stems partially out of his attempt to succeed and be

recognized by society. The dual aim of his lapsometer, which comes out of his training as a scientist, is to stop the impending war that he believes will occur and to win recognition in the scientific community. Here we can turn again to More's summary of the scientist's prayer, "The prayer of a scientist if he prayed, which is not likely: Lord, grant that my discovery may increase knowledge and help other men. Failing that, Lord, grant that it will not lead to man's destruction. Failing that, Lord, grant that my article in *Brain* be published before the destruction takes place" (*Love* 7-8). As More is a scientist, this prayer is one he likely says. He has a duty to improve the quality of life and "help other men" with his invention.<sup>22</sup> Further, his prayer that if the world does end, he hopes only that his article will be published first reveals an "infinite [choosing of] himself," Kierkegaard's requirement of those in the ethical, although his lustful appetites for whiskey and women (*Love* 6) demonstrate that his involvement in the ethical is a bastardization of Kierkegaard's ethical stage, but as Kierkegaard claims, the shift to the ethical is not immediate. We, the readers, seem to have caught Thomas More during this shift.

As Thomas More is seemingly only just moving away from the aesthetic and into the ethical, his pleasurable preoccupations do play a large part in the development of the plot line. In no place is this clearer than the manner in which Art Immelman attempts<sup>23</sup> to convince him to abandon his concern for the welfare of humanity. After the Director informs More that he will not, in fact, be recommending the MOQUL for funding or the article about MOQUL to *Brain*, More enters the restroom where he encounters Art

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<sup>22</sup> Although as we have already noted, More claims to "love ... [his] fellowman hardly at all" (*Love* 6), this sense of duty can nevertheless be attributed to the shift from the aesthetic to the ethical that seems to be taking place at the outset of the novel.

<sup>23</sup> And for a time, succeeds

Immelman. Immelman adjusts More's machine so it is able to treat as well as take readings about the soul,<sup>24</sup> and asks to demonstrate it on More, saying he will stimulate Brodmann 11" or the "musical erotic" (*Love* 202-213).<sup>25</sup> Immelman goes on to describe what this stimulation will do in a manner which greatly parallels Kierkegaard's aesthetic stage:

"Here is the abstract experienced concretely and the concrete abstractly. ... one loves women not in the abstract but in a particular example, this woman. Loves her truly, moreover. One loves faithlessly but truly."

"Truly?"

"Loves her as one loves music. A woman is the concrete experienced abstractly, as women. Music is the abstract experienced concretely, namely sound."

... "Stimulate this area and you stimulate both the scientist and the lover but neither at the expense of the other. You stimulate the scientist-lover. ... So that in the same moment one becomes victorious in science one also becomes victorious in love. And for the good of all mankind." (*Love* 213)

In so saying, Art appeals to both the aesthetic and the ethical stages that More volleys between. The aesthetic is embodied in More's preoccupations with women and music; both provide for More pleasurable outlets which temporarily relieve him of his worries

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<sup>24</sup> In the restroom, Immelman adds "a differential stereotactic emission ionizer. Beams in either your Heavy Sodium or Chloride ion" (*Love* 211). This addition allows More to treat the abstractions he diagnoses (*Love* 210).

<sup>25</sup> The very terminology Kierkegaard uses in *Either/Or*. The musical erotic is described in Volume One of *Either/Or*, "In other words, music is the daemonic. In the erotic-sensuous genius, music has its absolute object" (63). Music, then is a tool of the senses and grounds human beings in the material world rather than helping them reach a higher spiritual plane. The musical-erotic causes human beings to engage in objectification, clearly true of Thomas More who is a lover of music, whiskey, women, and science.

about the end of the world. This predisposition to indulge in the musical erotic is pointed out by Linda Whitney Hobson in her book, *Understanding Walker Percy*: “while he is listening to Lola play her cello and drinking gin fizzes, he is in the aesthetic sphere under the influences of the musical erotic” (91). As More already tends towards the musical erotic without electromagnetic stimulation, it is quite easy for Immelman to convince him of its goodness by reminding him of his love of the aestheticisms of music.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, Immelman goes so far as to elevate the status of music to the “abstract...concret[ized]”. Conversely, in appealing to More’s sensibilities regarding “the good of all mankind,” Immelman is clearly appealing to More’s rootedness in the ethical stage. Immelman knows that More hopes that his Lapsometer will stop the imminent end of the world and draws upon this knowledge in order to convince More to submit to the stimulation. Not only does More submit, he continues to stimulate the musical-erotic for the duration of the rest of the novel until he realizes that Art is evil embodied (*Love* 375-376).

Neither Thomas More nor Binx Bolling finds peace until each arrives at what Kierkegaard terms a “leap to faith” into the religious. Lauder assigns four characteristics to the religious stage: “The religious stage can be appreciated by a consideration of four notions characteristic of it: subjectivity, inwardness, the leap, and the absurd” (33). Although each of these “four notions” is essential to understanding the religious stage

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<sup>26</sup> In Bradley R. Dewey’s “Walker Percy talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview,” Percy describes More’s “In *Love in the Ruins*, the devil succeeds in tempting Dr. More with Kierkegaard’s musical-erotic. More knows exactly what he is doing. He knows who Immelman is (the devil) and that the devil is tempting him with the most beautiful of all things, namely, music and women. More enjoyed women and music in the musical-erotic sense, as beautiful objects of pleasure. I saw him really as a damned man—Kierkegaard’s esthetic damnation” (112). This would seem to indicate, then, that More is a participant in Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage and knows of its dangers. In order to experience a moment of conversion, a “leap to faith,” More must be acted upon by God; he clearly does not possess the ability to escape the musical-erotic of the aesthetic stage on his own.

and the shift in Percy's characters, the "leap to faith" is perhaps the most clearly presented in the novels and helps to explain the sudden, nearly inexplicable turn to God that the characters undergo. As Lauder observes, "The notion of the leap was essential to Kierkegaard's conception of Christianity. The religious stage involves a risk. Kierkegaard thought that there was no proof of Christianity. No argument, Kierkegaard felt, could turn a person into a Christian. To become a Christian, a leap was required" (33). Both Binx and Thomas More shift to the religious stage without any foreshadowing that this will occur. Throughout *The Moviegoer*, Binx is a womanizer who cannot connect with humanity in even the smallest of ways. In fact, as we have already seen, Binx is in the middle of a phone call to his secretary, pursuing her as usual, when he suddenly experiences his moment of revelation (*Moviegoer* 231). Binx is up to his usual business, and the reader is certain that there will not be a moment of redemption. He is a lost cause, incapable of hearing God's call, and then suddenly, inexplicably, he changes: "The final solution for Binx is Catholicism. Embracing the Catholic faith and committing himself to Kate, who suffers from neurasthenia, mark Binx's escape from what Kierkegaard called the aesthetic stage and his entrance onto the religious stage" (Lauder 64). Binx immediately ceases womanizing in favor of loving Kate, seems to adopt Christian theology, and becomes a good older brother to his siblings. Percy's move here is baffling to the reader unless it is read in light of Kierkegaard's leap. There can be no other explanation.<sup>27</sup>

Similarly, Thomas More's leap comes at a time when little explanation can be offered, although as with the consideration of which stage he falls into, Thomas More's

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<sup>27</sup> This seems to indicate, too, the embodiment of the absurd, the fourth characterization of the religious which Lauder offers.

conversion is slightly more complex and reflects, too, the inwardness of the religious stage. More's leap, as we have seen, comes after a recounting of his daughter's death and at a moment when it seems all is lost; More's world is very near collapse as a result of the chaos which has erupted (*Love* 373-374). The reflection on Samantha's death and his own potential sin against grace seem to reflect the inward thinking to which Lauder refers. More engages in an evaluation of himself: "I wonder: did it break my heart when Samantha died? But is there not also a compensation, a secret satisfaction to be taken in her death, a delectation of tragedy, a license for drink, a taste of both for taste's sake? ... Is it possible to live without feasting on death?" (*Love* 374). This contemplation is the most deeply that More considers the death of his daughter and his subsequent reaction to her death, and it is the consideration which eventually allows More to move from aesthetic/ethical to religious. This movement begs the question, however, "Why this time?". Why does this memory of Samantha's death allow More to reflect more fully on himself. He has been in some sort of danger for the entire novel, yet this is the moment of his conversion, a clear indication of More's leap to faith. He has not been convinced by Samantha's argument before. No logic or long discussions with his priest allowed him to become a true believer. Yet, he does. More begins to attend Church, makes his confession, begins to "eat" the Eucharist again, and marries one woman, Ellen (*Love* 395-400). As in the case of *The Moviegoer*, this conversion cannot be understood as anything other than Kierkegaard's third stage.

Although Kierkegaard is perhaps the heaviest Existential influence on these two novels, the I-Thou relationship, first explained by Martin Buber and later picked up and Christianized by Gabriel Marcel,<sup>28</sup> also plays a major role in recognizing that the abstraction from the world which seems to plague Percy's characters comes not from Calvinist theology but Existentialist philosophy.

Before examining the facets of the I-Thou relationship in the novel, it is important to understand the role it played in the shaping of Percy's semiology. In his article, "Charles Peirce and Walker Percy: *From Semiotic to Narrative*," J.P. Telotte states, "... to the Peircean triad of symbol, interpretant, and object, Percy adds another triangular relationship, one which describes symbolization's natural "*triad of existents: I, the object, you*" (MB, p. 281). The two triangular patterns are congruent and thus form a coherent existential description of the human language act" (71). The language which Percy uses to create meaning through symbol, then, is not that of Calvinist theology but of Existentialist philosophy; it is this "triad of existents" which I will explicate and subsequently apply to Percy's novels in the following passages.

In 1923, Martin Buber published *Ich und Du* (I and Thou), which attempted to discuss the world in terms of relationships. Buber believed that humanity entered into two relationships with the world: "The world is twofold for man in accordance with his twofold attitude. The attitude of man is twofold in accordance with the two basic words he can speak. The basic words are not single words but word pairs. One basic word is the word pair I-You. The other basic world is the word pair I-It; but this basic word is

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<sup>28</sup> Buber was a Jewish philosopher.

not changed when he or she takes the place of It” (53). Thus, humanity is able to engage with the world in the form of an I-You relationship and an I-It relationship which arises out of the duality of humanity. There is no other way for human beings to engage with the world.

The I-It is far more superficial than the I-You relationship. Buber makes this point very clearly when he states, “The basic word I-You can only be spoken with one’s whole being. The basic word I-It can never be spoken with one’s whole being” (54). The I-It does not reveal to humanity anything beyond the surface level. Unless one enters into the I-You relationship, he or she can never understand the fullness of being:

We are told that man experiences his world. What does this mean?

Man goes over the surfaces of things and experiences them. He brings back from them some knowledge of their condition—an experience. He experiences what there is to things.

But it is not experiences alone that bring the world to man.

For what they bring to him is only a world that consists of It and It and It, of He and He and She and She and It.

I experience something. (Buber 55)

Therefore, when a human being engages in an I-It relationship, he or she can only know that there are things and know something about them. He or she cannot know, however, what that thing means in relation to his or her being. The I-It is merely an “experience”, that is to say when one enters into the I-It, he or she gains a general knowledge of what an object or person is without gaining a true sense of knowing the essence of that object or person.



Only when one enters into the I-You relationship can he or she begin to understand the essence of an object or person. This relationship, however, is not one that can be entered into by a human being on his or her own:

The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed.

The You encounters me. But I enter into a direct relationship to it. Thus the relationship is election and electing, passive and active at once: ...

The basic word I-You can be spoken only with one's whole being. The concentration and fusion into a whole being can never be accomplished by me, can never be accomplished without me. I require a You to become, becoming I, I say You. All actual life is encounter. (Buber 62)

The I-You relationship cannot be entered into without the I being acted upon by a higher being—God. This acting upon, however, is not enough. One must also accept that he or she is being acted upon and open him or herself to this action. When one accepts the I-You relationship, he or she can “encounter” rather than “experience” the world; he or she can come to know its essence and truly understand where he or she stands in relation to the rest of the world.

It is this explanation of the I-You which Marcel later adopted and put into the context of Christianity and the modern world. Although Buber made clear the need for God's presence, he worked out of the framework of Judaism. Writing nearly thirty years later, Marcel believed that the differences between the I-It and the I-You could be explained through the terms “problem” and “mystery”:

Probably the easiest way to enter into the thought of Marcel is through his distinction between problem and mystery. In Marcel's view, there are four key differences between a problem and a mystery. A problem is something external to the self. It does not involve the individual personally, nor is it about the individual. A problem is about something other than the person thinking about the problem. A question in chemistry or mathematics is an example of a problem. A mystery is internal; it always includes the self who is reflecting on it. A person cannot deal in the mystery of death without including his or her death. (Lauder 36)

The problem, therefore, can be equated to the I-It relationship. It is an experience that can be solved without being acted upon by another, and it has a clear answer which can be discovered in the world. The I-You, however, is more akin to mystery. It requires deeper engagement with the individual, and an answer cannot be provided with the use of empirical data. Rather, the I-You is something which each human being must ponder and discover for him or herself through, to use Martin Buber's language, encounter rather than experience.

The difference between the I-It and problems and the I-You and mystery becomes more important when understanding how each can affect human beings. Lauder further explicates the difference when he states, "There is, of course, nothing wrong with dealing with problems and trying to solve problems. The danger is that we become so preoccupied with the problematic that it dictates our entire way of relating to reality. Having, that is trying to control and manipulate, is typified by the I-it relationship rather than the I-thou relationship" (37). Therefore, if one becomes so wrapped up in the I-It

relationship that he or she fails to engage in the I-Thou relationship, he or she can never move into a deeper understanding of the world. Rather, the world will become something without mystery. The only answers which will be provided will be those which provide an understanding of how the world works but not why or for what purpose. The I-Thou, however, opens human beings to an entirely different realm of possibilities: “Persons must refuse to settle for the one-dimensional world of the problematic. Activities such as hope, fidelity, and love open a person to the mystery of being. Each of these activities involves a special gift of self to another, and that self-giving reveals a dimension of personal existence that goes way beyond what can be said about a person viewed merely as a problem” (39). By engaging in the I-Thou relationship, then, human beings can become aware of greater possibilities in relation to the rest of the world. Like Buber, Marcel believes that the I must be involved in the I-Thou relationship. He or she must take an active role in the relationship and “give” of him or herself to one another. This relationship involves an element of trust, but it allows for deeper, more meaningful relationships as other individuals are no longer viewed as a problem or an “It” but as a mystery or “Thou.”

Both Binx Bolling and Thomas More are caught in the I-It relationship until their respective moments of transcendence as each character views others as parts rather than whole beings and approaches their respective searches as problems that can be solved using empirical data and experience rather than approaching the searches as mysteries. Binx’s I-It relationship to other human beings can most easily be seen in the way he describes women. At the beginning of *The Moviegoer*, Binx describes his secretary, Linda, with whom he is having affair: “Her eyes glow, her lips become moist, and when

we dance she brushes her fine long legs against mine” (5). Binx pays attention to each of Linda’s physical characteristics, but he does not know much about her as a person. She is, to him, another girl in a long line of secretaries with whom he has “love affairs,” and there are many more where she came from, as seen in Binx’s reference to his many failed romances with his secretaries, “For in the end my Lindas and I were so sick of each other that we were delighted to say good-by” (*Moviegoer* 9). If Binx related to any of these women in a way which transcended the I-It relationship, they would be more to him than “Lindas.” As they do not have any real distinguishing characteristics, however, it is clear that Binx has not yet begun to engage with them as beings but rather as objects, Its.

Thomas More views those in his life similarly. Like Binx, he describes those around him by their physical attributes or minute personality quirks, which are not representative of their beings. More’s description of Lola, one of the women whom he brings to the hotel to wait out the apocalypse, reveals his tendency to objectify other human beings, “Lola is a big, beautiful, talented girl who teaches cello at Texas A&M. We fell in love for a few hours last Christmas Eve” (*Love* 76). Like Binx, More believes himself in love with the women he romances, but this love is not lasting. He sees women only in terms of their physical attributes and superficial abilities. He is not able to combine these images and understand Lola as another being with whom he can enter into a meaningful relationship. Rather, he is content to have momentarily fallen in love with her while they expressed this “love” physically before parting and going their “separate ways” (*Love* 76). This objectification leads to More’s inability to enter into the I-Thou relationship with those he encounters on a day-to-day basis.

Binx and Tom also understand their searches only as problems rather than mystery. This is perhaps most easily seen in Tom's desire to quantify human problems, obvious in the very name he gives to his device, "More's Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer". This device detects the "problem" each human being has through an empirical reading. It can detect when a piece of the brain has an abnormally high or low concentration of electrical charges. As we have already seen, however, even when this charge is rectified, the solution is only temporary. The device does not see to the root of the "problem" because the problems of detachment, angelism,<sup>29</sup> bestialism,<sup>30</sup> and scientific humanism are not those which can be solved with the mere application of electrical stimulation. Rather, they must be transcended by a moment of grace.

The I-Thou relationship that Buber and, later, Marcel depict is one that further complicates the Kierkegaardian leap of faith which both Binx and Tom take part in. All three existentialist philosophers point to the necessity of being acted upon by another, the supreme and eternal Thou, God. The leap of faith is extended, however, when Buber and Marcel state that it is not enough to be acted upon; one must recognize and accept the call to grace. He or she must become an active participant in his or her coming to faith while passively allowing him or herself to be acted upon. The need for active participation can be seen most clearly in Tom's frequent inability to heed his call to the I-Thou relationship. As we have already seen, Tom's recollection of his final conversation with Samantha is one that occurs frequently throughout *Love in the Ruins*. It is not until Tom

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<sup>29</sup>Defined in the *Modern Catholic Dictionary* as, "A theory of human existence that minimizes concupiscence and therefore ignores the need for moral vigilance and prayer to cope with the consequences of original sin. In general, the tendency to regard human affairs with casual optimism, as though human beings were angels without bodily needs and without proneness to sin" ("Angelism")

<sup>30</sup> Bestialism is essentially the opposite of humanism and views man as a carnal being with "bodily needs".

heeds the call and becomes a participant in his redemption, allowing God to act through him, that he is fully able to engage with other human beings. After he recognizes this call, he is able to cast away the demonic Art Immelman, forsake his superficial romances, and enter into a real relationship with Ellen. Furthermore, he is finally able to repair his relationship with the Catholic Church and begin attending Mass and taking communion again. He believes himself to be a part of the community, as seen in his statement, “I will. We will. Father Smith says mass. I eat Christ, drink his blood” (*Love* 400). Were he still stuck in a series of I-It relationships, Tom would not recognize his place in the community. By the end of the novel, however, he recognizes that he is part of “We,” and as a result, he is able to engage in the ultimate Catholic moment of community—the Sacrament of the Eucharist.

Through Thomas More and Binx Bolling, Percy creates an Existentialist narrative which engages the problems of the modern world. The problems that Binx encounters, however, are far less complicated than those that More must deal with, and the difference between these problems arises partially out of the problems which modern man must deal with as listed in *Gaudium et Spes*. Although Binx engages in a traditional Existentialist search, More must overcome a society fraught with more than mere detachment and despair. The society in which More lives must also overcome angelism/beastialism, scientific humanism, and secularism in addition to the basic problems of Existentialism set forth by Binx. In this way, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* can be read as Percy’s response to Vatican II, an expansion of Binx’s search to transcend the malaise. As such, it is clear that Percy’s questions are not those of a Calvinist semiologist as Futrell suggests but of an

Existentialist Catholic who is attempting to understand the place that the Catholic Church and its teachings have in relation to the modern world and its problems.

## CHAPTER VI

### CONCLUSION

The rise of middle-class American Catholicism and the changes made by the Second Vatican Council played a major role in shaping both *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic At A Time Near the End of the World*. *The Moviegoer* serves as a reflection of Catholicism and the problems of the modern world leading up to the time of the Second Vatican Council, whereas *Love in the Ruins* reflects a post-Vatican II world. Although Binx and Thomas More ultimately transcend the Existentialist despair of the modern world, entering into Kierkegaard's third stage, the religious, and embracing the I-Thou relationship that both Marcel and Buber wrote of, their journeys are very different, and these differences are a reflection of the changes in Catholic theology.

*The Moviegoer*, which was published during the preparation period of the Second Vatican Council, deals with the problems described by Paul Blanshard. Binx Bolling is unable to believe in God or become a Catholic like his mother's family and his Uncle Jules because he sees no need for Catholicism. He learns from them that one can live a private religious life while maintaining a materialist, secular life, and so the religious element of their lives seem superfluous. Nonetheless, Binx is aware of a longing within himself. He recognizes that he is in a state of despair and feels detached from the world, a condition he describes as "malaise". He cannot transcend this malaise himself, however. Throughout the plot of the novel, Binx remains stuck in Kierkegaard's



aesthetic stage and what Marcel and Buber's describe as the I-It relationship. He is unable to complete his search because transcendence cannot come solely from within himself. He must experience a moment of grace gifted to him by the eternal Thou.

Binx's search for grace begins, as Franklin Wilson suggests, when Binx encounters a dung beetle. In this way, Binx's search for grace grows out of the obscene. It is his own Adamic embodiment of the prayer, *O Felix Culpa*, oh happy fault. Wilson's argument for grace from the obscene, however, can and must be extended. Binx's search does not end with his observation of the dung beetle but in a subsequent moment of weakness in which he is attempting to arrange a rendezvous with his most recent secretary, Sharon. While he is on the phone with Sharon's roommate, Binx spots his fiancé, Kate, and it is at this moment of his own obscenity, his own happy fault, that he is graced by God. Binx makes an immediate shift into Kierkegaard's final stage, the religious. He engages in the "leap of faith," which Kierkegaard states prompts the religious stage, and enters into what Buber and Marcel term the "I-Thou" relationship. Finally, this entrance into the religious stage allows for Binx's transcendence of the malaise. No longer does he need to attend movies in order to attempt to connect to other human beings. He is able to make connections for himself. For the first time in his life, he finds himself belonging to a community rather than observing a community. Binx's story, therefore, can be read as an Existentialist narrative, mirroring very closely the philosophies espoused by Buber and Marcel.

The ways in which the Church and humanity's relationship to the Church and the modern world is portrayed change dramatically in *Love in the Ruins*, and many of these changes mirror those of Vatican II. Unlike the unchanging Church of *The Moviegoer*, the

Roman Catholic Church to which Thomas More belongs has split into three separate units. Although the Roman Catholic Church remains, it is small and scattered, a remnant of the former Church. The American Catholic Church of *Love in the Ruins*, with all of its trimmings, has taken the place of glory that the former Church once held. Furthermore, many of the priests and nuns from the former Church have abandoned religion altogether, despite the fact that they remain faithful to their vow of obedience and submit their requests to the bishops who belong to the sect of Dutch schismatics. The Church that was once able to function in More's American society has been ripped asunder, and a new belief system has replaced it, one that allows for the cultural changes of Vatican II while simultaneously renouncing the adoption of the vernacular. This Church has abandoned the divine Christ, opting instead for the "Spanish Jesus," a sinful Christ to whom the American Catholics believe they can more clearly relate. Here, it is clear that the movements in American Catholicism and the changes of Vatican II greatly influenced Percy's writing. The ways in which he speaks of the Roman Catholic Church are very different in *Love in the Ruins*, although eventually, it is the Roman Catholic Church that is sustained while the other two sects are abandoned. Percy's acceptance, however, is not complete. Although Pope Paul VI had been elected in 1963, two years before the end of the Second Vatican Council, Percy chooses to name the Pope at the end of the novel John XXIV, suggesting some dissonance with the Council's decisions after John XXIII's death.

Like Binx, Thomas More's journey towards transcendence and his eventual return to the Roman Catholic Church seem to follow an Existentialist path. More embodies, at times, both the aesthetic and moral Kierkegaardian stages and moves eventually, through

a leap of faith, into the religious. It is clear, however, that the problems which Thomas More faces are far more complicated than those of Binx Bolling. Binx must only overcome his own feelings of detachment. Thomas More is faced with the scientific humanism, angelism/beastialism, and secular atheism of others in addition to his own feelings of detachment. Furthermore, Binx exists in an idyllic New Orleans while Thomas More is faced with the destruction of life as he has known it. This complication is a clear shift in Percy's writing, and as the modern problems which More attempts to solve are directly addressed in *Gaudium et Spes*, it is logical to conclude that this novel was written, in part, as a response to the Second Vatican Council. More's journey, then, is one that must overcome the modern problems in addition to his own shortcomings. Like Binx, however, it is only through an undeserved, seemingly random act of grace that More is able to transcend his despair and come back to the Roman Catholic Church. In the remembrance of his final moments with his daughter, just as the chaos around him has finally come to a boiling point, More finally allows himself to be acted upon. He does not commit the "sin against grace" about which his daughter warns him. Rather, he is able to make the "leap to faith" and overcome evil in the form of Art Immelman. After the conflict ends, More, like Binx, enters into a meaningful interpersonal relationship with a woman and turns towards the Church. He enters into the community that he has, for years, abandoned and takes part in the sacrament of the Eucharist, an emblem of his full and active participation in the I-Thou relationship with both his fellow man and the eternal Thou, God. As a result of the similarities between More and Binx and their respective journeys, it is safe to assume that More's journey is a retelling of Binx's,

although More's journey has been complicated by the problems acknowledged and decrees issued by the Second Vatican Council.

Walker Percy's works are not, as Ann Mace Futrell suggests, a Calvinist understanding of grace. Rather, it is an exploration of Catholicism as it relates to the world around it. The differences between *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins* can be understood in the context of the Second Vatican Council. Both men seek to transcend the malaise, to rid themselves of the sense of despair and detachment from the world by which they are afflicted. Their respective journeys, however, differ greatly from one another, and the changes in narrative between Percy's first novel and his third must be understood as a representation of the changes espoused in Vatican II.

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