Walker Percy, Heidegger, and Reentry

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Walker Percy, Heidegger, and Reentry

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Bachelor of Arts
Grove City College, 2012

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Masters of Arts in
English

College of Arts and Sciences
University of South Carolina
2014

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Acknowledgements

The prospect of writing an acknowledgements page is intimidating, both because there are so many people to thank for their help in completing this thesis, and because the genre is more foreign to me than it should be. I need to start off by thanking my advisor, Brian Glavey, who has offered thoughtful commentary on several versions of this project and has helped shepherd it from its initial state to its current instantiation. To my second reader, Robert Brinkmeyer, I owe thanks both for the example his criticism has provided and for his thoughtful suggestions for further readings. I am also in debt to Eric Potter and H. Collin Messer of Grove City College, whose undergraduate classes introduced me to Walker Percy’s fiction and who have served as a sounding board for many of the ideas contained below over the past five years.

My parents and my sister Megan have been equally supportive and influential. I contend there are few better read bankers than my father, and even fewer who would support their son’s graduate school habit so whole-heartedly. His and my mother’s open ears, together with my sister’s constant desire to know more about my thesis and provide feedback, were invaluable as I sought to
hone my argument. Finally, and most importantly, I owe the greatest debt of thanks to my fiancé, Brenna Jones, who has read more or less everything I’ve written in the last four years and, despite my abusive and arbitrary use of commas, has still agreed to marry me. She has put up with rough drafts, lengthy digressions, anxious phone calls, and weekends spent in the libraries of USC and UNC that could have been spent with her. Throughout all of these moments, she has been a constant source of love and support, an anchor helping me weather the worst storms of self-doubt and frustration. For all of these people, and for the continuous support and care of the cohort and faculty at South Carolina, I am incredibly grateful. This paper could never have taken shape without the contributions of all of you. Never-the-less, responsibility for any errors, missteps, or egregious abuses of the English language found below should fall entirely on my own shoulders. They could only do so much and what they have done continues to amaze and encourage me.
Abstract

In this paper I focus in on the manner in which Percy’s fiction dramatizes the aesthetic reversal of alienation. Namely, I illuminate Heidegger’s influence on Percy’s work by tracking Percy’s marginalia in his copy of Existence and Being, an early English translation of several of Heidegger’s essays edited by Werner Brock. This entails attending to what Lewis Lawson called the “indirect communications” between Percy’s philosophical essays and fiction. I draw upon Percy’s arguments in a number of essays, particularly “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism” to demonstrate the extent of Heidegger’s influence on Percy early in his career. With this framework established, I then offer readings of both Will Barrett novels, The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming, attending especially to Percy’s repeated allusions to radar, electro-magnetic fields, and noxious particles, to illustrate the manner in which Percy’s representation of Will Barrett’s existential experience is informed by Heidegger’s concepts of Dasein and Stimmung. This reading attends in particular to the struggles of characters who are out of tune with the immanent world and who seek out alternative communities founded on a shared sense of isolation.
Building on Sarah Ahmed’s theorization that alienation arises when “affect aliens” sense that objects which excite or gladden others fail to make similar impressions on them, I unveil the ways Percy’s fiction participates in a project of “naming the despair” that presents the conditions of modern alienation to the reader while undercutting it through the establishment of intersubjectivity. In this respect, I build on the work of Jonathan Flatley in *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism*. I achieve this by zeroing in on the somatic reifications of Will Barrett’s existential plight, a move which allows a discussion of the ways Percy participates in contemporary debates over the Mind Body Divide and seeks to synthesize Heidegger’s metaphysics with cognitive science and semiotics. By incorporating a discussion of Will’s physical ailments, I explore the ways in which Percy makes his protagonist’s predicament felt and the ways in which readers and characters are invited into a community seeking out the root causes of the modern malaise.
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Introduction

Artisanal Toast. It’s the latest form of conspicuous consumption available in eateries and coffee shops across the San Francisco Bay Area. An August 2013 op-ed in *Venture Beat* hurled responsibility for the trend at the feet of San Francisco’s tech workers, blaming them for the proliferation of $4 toast shops. But when John Gravois started his investigation into the wave of cinnamon raisin slabs sweeping the city, he did so with an eye towards discovering the origins of the trend. At some point, someone had decided to slice hearty pieces of homemade bread, toast them, slather them in butter and cinnamon sugar, and pass them across the counter. Though most of the media outcry—that’s not an exaggeration, there was an outcry—blamed a small shop called The Mill, when Gravois asked, the owner of that shop pointed the finger further up the trail, to a little place in Outer Sunset called the Trouble Coffee and Coconut Club. And for some reason, Gravois decided he had to find this place. His initial cynicism about the irritatingly trendy toast, the latest form of the “artisanal/fair trade/organic-only” snobbery practiced by his city’s quasi-elite gave way to a curiosity about
the origins of the trend. So he traced the toast back to its founder: Giulietta Carrelli.

Had Gravois not found Giulietta, his story likely would have arrived at the same place the Venture Beat story did. If he had written it at all, it would have appeared in the form of a predictable lament for San Francisco past, a world where explorers and settlers rend the necessities of life from the earth and a few wealthy elites spend their money not on 5 dollar coffees and two hundred dollar yoga pants, but on the good things of life, things like Opera and theatre and libraries. Giulietta’s story isn’t a desperate, earnest paean for handmade things like the tales that grace the pages of Garden & Gun. It’s a story of survival. Since she was in high school, Gravois explains, Carrelli has suffered from a type of schizophrenia which manifests itself through depressed and manic moods accompanied by delusions and hallucinations (“Schizoaffective Disorder”). She’s susceptible to bouts of depression or mania and psychotic episodes, including paranoid delusions. When her troubles started she thought someone was slipping her hallucinogens, possibly acid or mushroom tea. But as her bouts continued, she began to realize that something else was going on. She didn’t have the name for it, “schizoaffective disorder,” until recently, but it cost her relationships, prevented her from holding a job or an apartment, and left her wandering the country. At some points, she would find herself in a new
environment, isolated, unable to communicate her alienation to anyone around her. The coffee shop, Gravois writes, is an “ingenious mechanism—a specialized tool—designed to keep Carrelli tethered to herself” (Gravois). The toast is just comfort food, something simple to make that she put on the menu and tried to make well when she first opened Trouble.

Carrelli’s story of survival is permeated by encounters with fellow searchers: a holocaust survivor, a sympathetic coffee shop manager, Gravois himself. It is a story about finding a mode of reentering the world and reentering community. If the effects of schizoaffective disorder left her alienated, alone, and unable to communicate, these relationships helped her develop coping mechanisms, escape self-destructive patterns of self-medication, forge routines. Carrelli has covered her torso in tattoos, she wears the same distinctive clothes on a daily basis, and she rides to work on the same paths every day. Now when she gets disoriented or forgets why she’s on a street, the community members around her recognize her. They can point her in the right direction, help her remember who she is and cope with the “troubles” she faces. “I’m trying to stay connected to the self,” Carrelli says, “I’m wearing the same outfit every day...I take the same routes every day. I own Trouble Coffee so that people recognize my face—so they can help me.” Like many people that contend with psychological disorders, Carelli depends on the strong and weak ties she’s
amassed in her community to structure her life. In that respect, she isn’t alone. Our lives are structured by patterns of weak and strong ties, by communities within communities. This is what putting down roots means.

The communities that structure our lives often operate beneath our radar, but for those who struggle to remain connected to the self, communal ties must be defined, reinforced, and consciously relied upon daily. For Carelli, the importance of these ties is more apparent because the consequences of neglecting her communal ties, of falling away from this web of relationships, are dire. When I first heard Carrelli’s story, the first thing that struck me was the unique way she talked about her experience. Repeatedly she describes her routines and her coffee shops as mechanisms for staying “tethered” or “connected” to the self. I’m not accustomed to hearing people speak about their lives as struggles to re-connect with the self, at least not in radio interviews with This American Life. You just rarely hear it outside of philosophical novels and theory books. Yet listening to Giulietta speak, it’s apparent that she conceives of her “troubles” as problems rooted simultaneously in her physiology and her existential experience. The two are part and parcel of the same thing. Though she never quotes Sartre or Kierkegaard, her responses in the article to questions about her experience seem so keenly calibrated to her existential experience that it is hard to ascertain ways
in which she differentiates between the physiological elements of her condition and her methods of representing her subjective experience.

Giulietta Carrelli’s story struck me in large part because I had spent the last year thinking about the types of problems she describes. My mode of inquiry was very different from hers. I was just reading novels. They weren’t novels about people with schizoaffective disorder per se, though plenty of the characters manifest behavior straight out of the DSM. Rather, I spent much of the last year reading stories about people who are prone to fall out of tune with the rest of the world. In the novels of Walker Percy, the protagonists and the women they love are just these types of people. The hero of *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, Will Barrett, occasionally slips into amnesia, he experiences fugue states, he becomes disoriented and develops ideas of reference. In some cases, he manifests what can only be described as abject paranoia about the approach of “noxious particles,” the advent of the apocalypse, and a mass exodus of the Jews from America. Though at times he plays the role of successful Wall Street Lawyer, devoted friend, father, philanthropist, or white collar criminal, he is always out of sorts with the world around him. His ties to his community and the physical, immanent world, are weak and limited. He is, in a sense, dead to that world. His task, like Percy’s other protagonists, is to find a way of reentering the world of the living. Like Giulietta, Will’s mechanism for reentering life is
largely dependent on tuning into the community around him. Though he too is sick, his journey throughout *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* is towards a more authentic mode of being, a way of living in the world that enables him to stay connected to the self.

Plenty of ink has been spilled in attempts to articulate Percy’s vision of the self and the self’s relationship to the immanent world and the realm of the transcendent. This type of criticism typically falls into one or two of three camps: the Catholic Theological Tradition, the Southern novel, or the Existential novel. Early criticism of Percy’s work was especially prone to this type of analysis, which is reminiscent of T.S. Eliot’s vision of the canon in “Tradition and the Individual Talent.” In Eliot’s view, the canon is an eternal collection of monuments that continues to grow as civilization moves forward in time. New works of genius draw on, and are judged against, the standard of the canon, but they also change the nature of the canon as they are incorporated into it (406). This is the model which has governed Percy criticism for years. A critic makes an argument rooted in one of the three canons. Percy is prophet rearticulating Catholic Doctrine. Percy writes about Quentin Compsons who do not commit suicide. Percy is a Southern practitioner of the European existential novel. After selecting which intellectual tradition(s) to place Percy’s work in, they analyze his relationship to other monuments in that canon and establish his place in it.
This mode of criticism has been incredibly productive, and has helped produce insightful readings of many of Percy’s works. Just like the positivist scientism Percy took issue with, this type of categorization is best accompanied by a thorough confrontation with the uniqueness of particular cases and relationships. Reading through Heidegger’s conceptualizations of *Stimmung* and *Dasein* can help us read for the ways the book dramatizes intersubjective relationships and establishes communities with the power to name and pursue the roots of the despair. It is a slight shift of focus, but it helps bring variants of the positivist epistemology Percy criticized into focus alongside the alternatives he offers. In this paper I strive to demonstrate the ways in which a better engagement with the Heideggerian dimensions of Percy’s fiction can enrich our understanding of the traditions which Percy’s fiction participates in. My method is informed by readings of Percy’s philosophical writings collected in *The Message in the Bottle* and the marginalia in his copy of Martin Heidegger’s *Existence and Being*. Reckoning with Heidegger’s influence on Percy’s thought forces readers to grapple with the type of art that emerges out of an anthropology rooted in immanence. Consequently, my readings in the latter chapters center around Will Barrett’s experience of his immanent world, particularly the ways he perceives himself as a radar receiver and a target for noxious particles. In doing so I demonstrate the extent to which Heidegger’s
concepts of *Dasein* and *Stimmung* form a framework for Percy’s conception of the self and its relationship to the immanent world. It could be argued that this is yet another tradition of thought, but I show in this paper that starting from the anthropology that undergirds Percy’s character development—a vision of *Dasein* as “being with” the world in varying degrees of authenticity depending on the *Stimmung* or attunement of *Dasein*—enables a more fruitful engagement with Percy’s representation of the relationship between alienation and modernity and reveals the mitigating effects intersubjectivity has on the subjective experience of the malaise. Most importantly, this paper lays the groundwork for a later project, in which I intend to elucidate more clearly the formal characteristics of Percy’s aesthetic which help to represent, or name, the subjective experience of immanence and the ways in which they demonstrate a particularly Heideggerian mode of thinking about Being-in-the-world.
Chapter 1: Reading Heidegger with Percy or How I Discovered the Heideggerian Dimensions of Percy’s Work One Spring Day in South Carolina in 2013 While Thinking About the Great Exhibition of 18--

Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?

-Walker Percy “The Delta Factor”

It was while preparing for a seminar on the Victorian novel and New Formalism that I found myself slogging through Heidegger for the first time. Sitting on my neighbor’s roof with a copy of Craft in Theory open to Heidegger’s essay “The Thing,” I read the words that ignited my interest in his influence on Percy. In the essay Heidegger writes

Man stares at what the explosion of the atom bomb could bring with it. He does not see that the atom bomb and its explosion are the mere final emission of what has long since taken place, has already happened. Not to
mention the single hydrogen bomb, whose triggering, thought through to its utmost potential, might be enough to snuff out all life on earth. What is this helpless anxiety still waiting for, if the terrible has already happened?

(405)

As my eyes scanned the page, I heard the echo of another passage: Percy’s post-apocalyptic rendering of a playground in Gentilly in the final chapter of *The Moviegoer*. I decided to ignore the rest of my reading for the seminar that would begin in 45 minutes, pulled my copy of *The Moviegoer* from the shelf, and returned to the roof to re-read the novel’s climax.

In the closing chapter of *The Moviegoer*, Binx returns to the playground in Gentilly on Ash Wednesday after being dressed down by his Aunt Emily. Having abandoned his search, Binx relays the depths of his despair.

Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize *merde* when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for *merde*, for every species of shit that flies—my only talent—smelling *merde* from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of *merde*, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and
prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall—on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (228)

It wasn’t an echo of Percy that I heard reverberating through Heidegger. I know how echoes work. Rather, I know they rarely traverse oceans or go backwards in time. What I had discovered reverberating through Percy’s writing was a variation on a theme. The passages shared a preoccupation with things and nothing, with catastrophe and despair, and with the apocalyptic image of their time: the atomic bomb. I was confused why both writers would refer to the bomb only to elude to a greater terror, some other conveyor of death that would make a person yearn for the bomb to fall. But I had to go to class.

Nearly a year later I found myself sitting beneath an 8x6 oil painting of a, former president of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The portrait depicts a greying man seated casually in a chair, legs crossed at the knee, cigarette in hand, almost laughing. It hangs in the special collections room of Wilson Library, an imposing neo-classical building in the heart of campus. Before
his death, Percy arranged for the special collections department inside Wilson to house his papers and library. I was staring at the inside cover of Percy’s copy of *Existence and Being*, the first collection of Heidegger’s essays translated into English. Nearby a UNC undergrad watched me study the inside cover. She was tasked with watching other people read old books, some type of penance for effacing library property. The inside cover and title page are littered with references to pages accompanied by short notes, serving as a sort of reader’s table of contents. Above a sticker which depicts Percy’s crest, the first note appears. It reads

Add (delta sign?) [unreadable]

Heidggr – Existentiala

236: motto

I didn’t know archival research was supposed to be harder than this, so I simply followed the first note. On page 236, in a lengthy introductory chapter titled "An Account of 'The Four Essays'," by the book’s editor Werner Brock, Percy notes a key phrase, perhaps the motto he was referring to. It appears in a discussion of Heidegger's inaugural lecture at the University of Freiburg in 1929. The lecture, titled "What is Metaphysics" includes a substantial discussion on Heidegger’s views on nothingness. For Heidegger, this nothingness presents an inescapable
problem for the self that is metaphysical in nature (Existence and Being 236). Heidegger posited that for a problem to register in the "metaphysical range" it must "[embrace] and [permeate] the whole realm of metaphysics" and it must cause the thinking being to call himself into question as well." It is through a discussion of nothingness that Heidegger demonstrates these criteria. Through a discussion of Greek metaphysics, Christian dogmatics, and Hegel's "Logic," Heidegger sets out to prove that "nothingness," when it is not "clearly conceived as a problem," is "taken to be the metaphysical counterconception to what actually and substantially is; but that, if envisaged as a problem, it is seen to belong to the "Being" itself of all that is". Rather than take the old dictum ex nihilo nihil fit [from nothing, nothing comes to be] or the Christian response, ex nihilo fit-ens creatum [from nothing comes created being], both of which Heidegger argues are insufficient discussions of nothingness, Heidegger suggests the phrase

ex nihilo omne ens qua ens fit [From the nothing all beings as beings come to be]. Only in the nothing of Dasein do beings as a whole, in accord with their most proper possibility—that is, in a finite way—come to themselves. (Paragraph 50).
Percy’s marginal annotation in the midst of this discussion draws attention to what I take to be the motto he mentions on the inside cover. He draws a line next to the phrase "Only through the transcending to 'nothingness' does man approach the things as what they are and only thus do they come truly into their own."

I had heard it again. The refrain I first heard sitting atop my neighbors roof, reading a copy of *Craft in Theory* came back, this time in the sunny special collections room of Wilson library. It’s impossible for someone who spends most evenings reading Percy or critics like Luschei, Webb, and Hobbs, not to think of a moment like this in terms of Repetition. Repetition is, for Kierkegaard, a sudden confrontation with a time past. The juxtaposition of a moment in history and it’s repetition in the present, a type of déjà vu, thrusts the interim time into focus. Nothing dramatic happened in the library that day. There were no fugue states or road to Damascus moments. Instead the implications of the Repetition of this refrain crept into my periphery vision. For a brief moment, Percy’s single pencil line looked like a type of key, a form of secret knowledge. I was dazzlingly, naively optimistic. But in that moment, the last year of chasing after a Heideggerian mode of reading Percy came back and I began to see the ways in which a fuller engagement with the topics that garnered attention from Percy in
Heidegger’s thought could enable a fuller reading of the growth of protagonists like Will Barrett.

I. Déjà vu’s

Heidegger’s influence on Percy has been noted by both his biographers, and those who study his work. Since the late 1970s, critics have considered the relationship between Heidegger’s project and Percy’s fiction. The German philosopher’s influence was, however, frequently treated as ancillary to those other thinkers who influenced Percy’s early writing. William H. Poteat mentions Heidegger in “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language,” but only to liken his notion of the Self to that of Buber, Sartre, and Marcel in a concluding remark (219). Similarly, in “Toward Home: The Last Gentleman,” Richard Pindell appropriates Heidegger’s definition of death, “that strange and unhomely thing that banishes us once and for all from everything in which we are at home” (63) to better explain Will Barrett’s reaction to Jamie vaught’s death in an unadorned, sterile hospital room outside Santa Fe. But Heidegger disappears from the discussion as quickly as he arrived. Thomas Leclair mentions Heidegger alongside Kierkegaard and Marcel as key philosophical influences in an article on Percy’s Lancelot entitled “Walker Percy’s Devil,” but goes no further. In “Binx Bolling’s New Orleans,” Max Webb briefly discusses
the ways in which *The Moviegoer* dramatizes Heidegger’s argument that “the origin of philosophy lies in experiencing the question, ‘why are there essents [‘existents’ or ‘things that are’] rather than Nothing?’” (6). Webb argues that Binx’s “little way” in gentilly, is nothing more than an “uncommitted and undirected holding action” (7) enacted between his first encounter with the overwhelming reality of the things in his immanent sphere in the Korean War, and his second awakening one morning in Gentilly. Yet Webb quickly moves away from the Heideggerian elements of Binx’s awareness and folds them into a discussion of the Russian Formalist idea of defamiliarization. Though he enacts a thorough exposition of Binx’s awakening into a more authentic mode of consciousness, he never engages fully with Heidegger’s concept of astonishment.

These established critics were adept at establishing relationships between parts of *Being and Time* or *Introduction to Metaphysics* and Percy’s corpus, but they quickly moved away from the explicit deployment of Heideggerian terminology and ideas of reference in the text to discuss other philosophers’ influence.

Martin Luschei’s *The Sovereign Wayfarer* contained the most useful discussion of Heidegger’s concepts among the major early works of Percy criticism. In the second chapter, “Some Light from the Existentialists,” Luschei explains how Percy borrows the term *Alltäglichkeit*, translated “Everydayness,” to describe the malaise which permeates modern life. Luschei places Heidegger in
dialogue with Kierkegaard to explain the manner in which modernity encourages a culture in which individual experience is tempered by the vast scope of possible knowledge and experience presented to them. In short, since passion and intensity are finite, an individual’s attempt to embrace the full range of possibilities available in modern life results in a dispersal of passion and intensity and a corresponding lack of interest in the particular nature of his immediate surroundings. Luschei, relying on authoritative interpreters of Heidegger’s work, argues that this condition is not irreversible. Though the self, or Heidegger’s Dasein, finds itself thrown into a world which is both disorienting and confusing, the capacity to reestablish a connection with Being, to adopt an alternative mode of “being-with-the-world” is open to man alone. It is this option, the possibility to resist or transcend the malaise, which is open to Percy’s protagonists (20-23). Though threatened by the prospect of retreating into a crowd, of becoming the anonymous “one” of Academic English, these protagonists are afforded the opportunity to adopt a different posture. Through a recognition of their own frailty and mortality, Percy’s protagonists become aware of the nearness of authentic existence. Though they arrive at varied points along the journey towards authentic existence, they each demonstrate a decision to adopt a different posture towards their surroundings (26). This decision is often less a decision than a compulsive response, but it requires them to reclaim their
sovereignty, to relate to the world as an individual rather than as a single data point in the tallies of social, natural, and physical scientists.

Anita Bryan’s Dissertation, *Coping With Modernity: A Heideggerian Reading of the Novels of Walker Percy* offers thorough Heideggerian readings of all of Percy’s fiction. In brief, Bryan argues persuasively from Percy’s philosophical essays, his novels, and Heidegger’s *Being and Time* that Percy deploys aspects of Heidegger’s theories of time, language, Dasein, authentic and inauthentic existence, guilt, boredom, thinking, technology, and modernity to address the problem he saw with modern life, and especially the suburban, country-club culture of the South. (iv)

For Bryan, Heidegger’s thought provided key components and terms which Percy put to work when crafting his theory of language, his thoughts on intersubjectivity, and his fiction. If the question for Percy and his critics is always “How can an individual learn to live and die in an authentic manner if they live in the suburbs, detached from the old Judeo-Christian and Stoic myths which guided earlier generations,” Bryan explores the Heideggerian register in which Percy answers that question. Like Luschei, Bryan identifies how Percy’s thoughts on the problems of everydayness, boredom, guilt, alienation, and abstraction are rooted in Heideggerian concepts. Yet rather than devote a few pages to
Heidegger’s influence in a chapter devoted to the impact of “existential thought” on Percy’s work, Bryan spends her entire book length manuscript applying Heidegger’s philosophy as expressed in *Being and Time* to Percy’s novels, offering detailed readings of each work.

Working through each of these sources over a year felt a little like being dropped off in the heart of a new city over and over again. I would venture out a little ways in each direction, find new bearings, and return to where I started. One year in, I had a vague idea of the terrain. I knew Heidegger’s terminology served as a cornerstone in Percy’s thinking. I knew that this role had been widely acknowledged and that widely read critics like Lewis Lawson and Martin Luschei had studied the Heideggerian terms that surface in Percy’s writing. I knew other scholars had incorporated Heideggerian language into their analysis of certain passages and that at least one person, Anita Bryan, had attempted a systematic reading of Percy’s canon through the lens of Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. For all that, I still felt like the newcomer to a city. I had a vague idea of the layout of the argument, but it seemed as if no one had mapped the way Percy’s anthropology, and consequently the way he developed characters, was influenced by Heidegger. It seemed to me that very few had attempted to rethink the nature of alienation and the reentry problem, two questions which are interwoven throughout Percy’s work, in light of Heidegger’s thought.
Specifically, it seemed that few, if any, of these writers had succeeded in reconciling Percy’s understanding of a species of alienation unique to the modern condition and Heidegger’s concepts of Dasein and Stimmung. I remained convinced that researching the intersection of Percy and Heidegger’s modes of thought would enable me to better explain, or perhaps simply name, the species of despair which preoccupied Percy throughout his life and which he brings forth in each of his protagonists.

The “motto” inscription was the first of perhaps 150 similar descriptions on the inside cover of a first edition printing of Existence and Being, a book published in 1949 which likely came into Percy’s possession sometime in the early 1950s. He published “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism,” a short discussion of the ways in which Anglo-American Empiricism and European existentialism offer potentially complimentary, and equally valid, insights in the June 1956 edition of Philosophy and Phenomenological research. In that article he makes frequent use of Heidegger’s terminology. He pays special attention to the existentialia of Dasein, and uses Heidegger’s terminology as his principle term for referring to the self. He also seems to posit a relationship between Dasein and its environment which appears to lean heavily on Heidegger’s conception of the various modes of being, Stimmung, which present themselves as options for the self. While Percy sidesteps the argument over whether the existentialia were
psychological, as Kierkegaard argued, or ontological, following Heidegger, he appears very familiar with Heidegger’s concept of Dasein and the various ways of being with, or tuning into, an environment. He knew all this by 1956, when *Existence and Being*, the little book of Heidegger’s essays and an accompanying introduction by Brock, was among very few English translations of the German philosopher’s work.

In her dissertation, Bryan assumes that Percy’s knowledge of German allowed him to read *Being and Time* during his convalescence. She follows Percy’s biographer Jay Tolson in this respect. Yet as I perused Percy’s copy of *Existence and Being*, it occurred to me that this thin book may have been Percy’s entryway into Heidegger’s thought. In the prefatory note of *Existence and Being*, Brock discusses the impact of *Being and Time* on philosophical study, but laments that it was not yet available in English. He writes "Although the essays presented here can make the reader acquainted with only a few aspects of the work of this contemporary thinker, it is hoped that they will prepare the ground for a more profound study of his thought, once "Being and Time" itself has been translated into English" (16-17). His goal, he explains, is to include a much lengthier introduction to these essays, so that they will be better understood by a public largely unfamiliar with Heidegger’s work. Brock’s lament about the limited availability of Heidegger’s work and his acknowledgements elsewhere that
Heidegger’s German is particularly innovative and hard to translate, an observation backed up by George Steiner in his work *Martin Heidegger*, should give us pause when proceeding on the assumption that Percy worked his way through Heidegger’s text in the original German. While his German may have been sufficient or even fluent, I found myself asking if it were not more likely that Percy had begun his study of the philosopher’s works through Brock’s introduction. While impossible to prove, Percy’s marginalia in his copy of *Existence and Being* suggest that his reading interests and the ideas he espouses in “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism” were at the very least, strikingly similar.

II. A Philosophy of Life: *Dasein* and *Stimmung*

Brock devotes the early portion of the book to a brief explanation of Heidegger’s goals in *Being and Time* before moving into a discussion of the concept of *Dasein*. Heidegger's starting-point is not the perceptible things, but what he terms human "Dasein", a phenomenon fundamentally, i.e. in its ontological structure, not contemplated and not analysed [sic] by the Greeks or ever since in later philosophic tradition. His endeavour [sic] in this respect is to give an analysis of the "existentialia" and of the "existentialistic" structure of human
Dasein in a way in which the Greek thinkers developed the "categories of a thing that "is". (27)

Percy draws special attention to Brock’s discussion of the difference between *dasein*, literally being there, and everything else that exists, "*vorhanden*." Being has no genus, a point Percy rewrites in the margins. It has no class, it is always "my own "Dasein" (28). Percy also stars Brock’s argument that

It [Dasein] chooses and decides and may gain or may lose itself, insofar as Being is concerned. ‘Those things which are ‘*vorhanden*’ are of a genus. They are a bicycle or a dog, ‘their essence is always ascertainable.’” (29)

But *Dasein* differs from those objects which fall into the category of “*vorhanden*”, and here Percy chooses to underline, mark with a circle in the margins, and draw an arrow to Brock’s sentence: ”In contrast to them, the characteristics of 'Dasein' are not 'qualities,' but possible ways of 'Being','” Again he underlines: ”'Da-sein' is to express not its 'essence', but its 'Being'; it means "Being there." "The fundamental characteristics of 'Dasein', corresponding to the categories of 'Vorhandenheit', are therefore termed 'existentialia'” This is the terminology Percy appropriates in his essay "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism." The self’s submergence in place paired with its awareness of itself as “Being-with-the-world” makes it utterly unlike the rest of the natural world, *vorhanden*. The self’s
astonishment at the predicament of its own existence is precisely the subject of “Symbol as Hermeneutic.” The self’s existential experience, the sensation of “being there,” is exactly what Anglo-American empiricism overlooks and where Existentialism begins its inquiry.

Percy’s reading practices and marginalia in *Existence and Being* suggest that he turned to Heidegger and Brock to bridge the gap between empiricism and existentialism. He litters the margins with check marks and stars once again during an in depth discussion of *Dasein* and its relationship to human life. While many readers of Heidegger up to the time of Brock’s writing had largely gotten stuck on his ontological definition of the *Dasein* (which Brock argues was simply a starting point) Heidegger intended to account for the "'existentialia' of Dasein...such phenomena as dread, care, and Being-towards-one's-death, the call of conscience and resolve," (37). It is here that Percy begins his underlining

The philosophic study of human Dasein, though here undertaken from the unusual angle of a descriptive analysis of 'existentialia', seemed the more to fulfil a requirement of the age, as Nietzsche and particularly Dilthey and his school had long demanded a "philosophy of human life", as Simmel's philosophy had tended in the same direction and as Scheler had proclaimed the task of a 'Philosophical Anthropology' during the very years when 'Being and Time' was prepared and published. (37)
Long time readers of Percy know that his chief concern in both his fiction and his philosophical novels is the question of how an individual can live in the modern world, how he or she can reenter life from the stratospheric heights of scientific and philosophical analysis and live as a human being. In Heidegger, Percy found a fellow thinker who sought to seek out the roots of the modern malaise and offer an alternative “philosophy of human life,” one which enabled Dasein to engage with the immanent sphere authentically, that is without abdicating his or her sovereignty.

The refrain, the strange repetition or preoccupation in both Percy’s and Heidegger’s writing, seems to hinge on this dichotomy between authentic and inauthentic existence. In Percy’s work, this dichotomy could be conceived as the difference between orthodoxy and heresy. The orthodox person lives authentically, the heretic, inauthentically. In his fiction and in his essays, however, Percy prefers a less black and white diagnosis of the malaise. Collapsing these categories leads to a facile conflation of the religious and metaphysical dimensions of Percy’s thought and fails to account for Heidegger’s influence on the author’s “philosophy of human life” which gives rise to his protagonists and their varied struggles. Authenticity and Inauthenticity are best understood as opposing directions on a continuum, not poles or static states of existence. This continuum charts various modes of “being-in-the-world.” The
word Heidegger uses for these modes of being is *Stimmung*. The German word carries a number of connotations. It is often rendered as “mood” or “climate,” but it also bears a likeness to the German word for tuning an instrument. Just as an instrument can be in or out of tune depending on the frequency it vibrates at, the *Stimmung* of *Dasein* can be inauthentic or authentic to the extent that it exists in radical astonishment at the peculiarity of its own existence. The existence of something rather than nothing is, to an authentically-calibrated *Dasein*, an overwhelming and shocking fact. It is the starting point for all future inquiries, metaphysical and otherwise. It is also the starting point from which each of Percy’s characters begin a pilgrimage into a richer engagement with the world around them, though the extent of their orthodoxy is left ambiguous.

Though other existentialists developed similar categories and modes of thinking, Percy’s reading practices in *Existence and Being* suggest that he was fascinated by Heidegger’s terminology. Brock’s discussion of a *Verfallen* mode of being-in-the-world is marked in both pencil and pen, suggesting that Percy seems to have come back to this passage at least twice. Percy’s comments also appear in the margins and the passage is referenced in the “reader’s table of contents.” In this passage, Brock explains that Heidegger conceived of this

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1 The word means doomed, expired, to go to waste, to decay.
stimmung, as a "mode of 'unauthentic'' Existence and the structure of its inner 'movement’” (56). The fallen state Heidegger describes "means primarily that Dasein is entirely concerned and occupied with the "world" of its care. But an undercurrent of its meaning is that Dasein lost itself in the publicity of the "one like many" and "in the "world" which belongs to its Being" (56). Brock goes on to explain that the temptation of thinking of one's individual self as one of many is profoundly appeasing, but leads to a state of 'self-estrangement' (Entfremdung) in which its own innermost 'potentiality of being' becomes concealed to it. However, this self-estrangement which denies to Dasein its autheniity and best potentialities, as it were, locking it up from what it genuinely can be, does not hand it over to something which it is not itself, but presses it into unauthenticity, a potential mode of Being of itself; in it Dasein catches itself up and entangles itself (Sichverfangen). This way of inner movement of Dasein in its own Being is termed the 'fall' (Absturz): the Dasein falls from itself to itself, namely to the groundlessness and irrelevance of unauthentic everydayness. (57)

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2 Circled in Percy’s Copy
3 Circled in Percy’s Copy
Brock explains that this *Verfallen* state is grounded in a state of Dread, an overwhelming and life-defining fear which decouples the self from its potentiality, truncating its possibility for authentic existence.

III. Dread and Bottoming Out

Percy’s underlining suggests he was fascinated by this sense of indefinite yet viscerally real dread which accompanies Heidegger’s fall. For *Dasein* existing in a *Verfallen* mode of Being, the ultimate fear is that what is threatening is nowhere\(^4\). It is somehow there—and yet nowhere, very close and oppressing—and yet nowhere. What is dreaded reveals itself as 'it is nothing and nowhere'; but the atmosphere of profound averseness and oppression implied in the 'nothing and nowhere' indicates that what is dreaded is yet "something", namely "the world as such". (60-61)

This, I suggest, is the “transcending to nothing” which Percy took an interest in. The dread that emerges when contemplating the possibility of non-existence, of nothing, of annihilation, enacts a type of reversal. It is a step above and beyond mere disenchantment with the modern world. The wholesale rejection of the world, the end point of a festering revulsion to all things physical and immanent

\(^4\) Arrows are drawn to this point in Percy’s Copy.
contains within it the seeds of an alternative, and, for Percy, more authentic, mode of being. This alternative \textit{Stimmung} is characterized by radical astonishment at the existence of things.

In \textit{Martin Heidegger}, another early commentary on the philosopher's work, the author, George Steiner, argues that Heidegger's philosophy of existence and methodology are grounded in radical astonishment. As he puts it, "just this fact that being is gathered together in Being, that in the appearance of Being being appears, astonished the Greeks and first astonished them and them alone."

Steiner restates Heidegger's articulation of the role of philosophy as being "incessantly astonished at and focused on the fact that all things are" (27). "The endeavor to think Being" is philosophy's task. It attempts to be perennially astonished by the fact that Being is, that it indwells all being (27). Dread is undercut by \textit{Dasein}'s recognition of itself as both a part, and observer of, the immanent, physical world. The attempt to transcend to the roots of Dread, a literal seeking after "nothing," becomes the mechanism by which \textit{Dasein} can experience the type of astonishment Heidegger identifies as the cornerstone of authentic being and thinking. At the pinnacle of Dread, an alternative mood or attunement presents itself and \textit{Dasein} reverts to an authentic mode of being-in-the-world. The kind of nothingness that would make a character like Binx
Bolling long for the bomb to drop and finish the levelling and desensitizing work of modernity, was the type of realization

At the end of the trail, there wasn’t a single Heideggerian echo, reverberating through Percy’s fiction. Walker Percy was a thorough reader of continental and existential philosophy, and his engagement with Heidegger, like his appropriation of Kierkegaard and Sartre in his fiction, was always a refraction, bent to serve the purposes of his project. But I had found, in both his marginalia and his early philosophical writings, a new line of thought to pursue, one which promised a richer reading of Percy’s protagonist, Will Barrett. Understanding the ways in which Percy incorporates Heidegger’s conceptual frameworks is important both to understanding the progression of Percy’s thought, better understanding the turn from inauthentic existence which Will Barrett begins in *The Last Gentleman* and completes by the close of *The Second Coming*. Will is, first and foremost, a southerner with an “excellent radar.” Over the next two chapters, I examine Will’s radar through Heidegger’s concepts of *Dasein* and *Stimmung*. Though Will has the capacity to tune into the world in ways which his contemporaries cannot, his fine radar is often jammed by conflicting signals. His “attunement” is off. This Heideggerian approach to both novels offers a fascinating way of reading Will’s various modes of existence, foregrounding the manner in which competing *Stimmungen* impact Will’s
knowledge of Being and ultimately enable him to forge communities and reenter life.
Chapter 2: Mapping the Affective World of Will Barrett

There is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a literature of alienation. In the representing of alienation the category is reversed and becomes something entirely different.

-Walker Percy “The Man on the Train”

Will Barrett suffers from an acute nervous condition, one which causes him to slip into fugue states, “fall out,” and rediscover himself, hours or days later, suffering from amnesia in a strange location. He feels good only in bad situations. He imagines being pursued out of New York City, where he had been sojourning away from the south, back through the New South by a pack of “ravenous particles” which continue to pursue him until he leaves to head west. Through all of this, he prides himself on his “objectivity” and attention to “evidence.” Will Barrett is not well. But, as both The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming demonstrate repeatedly, he is not entirely wrong. Though Will’s sanity is called into question, he is also consistently likened to a radio receiver, capable of tuning into frequencies which are simply white noise to his companions. This ability distinguishes him from the long line of melancholic,
wealthy white male southern sojourners in the north from which he descends. If Barrett belongs to the tradition of “Quentin Compsons who did not kill themselves” as Percy once suggested, it is this ability, this capacity to not only detect signals but to distinguish them from entropy which enables him to survive.

The family likeness Barrett shares with his precursors in southern fiction has been widely noted, as has The Last Gentleman’s explicit engagement with traditions within existential and Catholic thought. Yet the role Will’s melancholia plays in unearthing the root causes of his nervous condition have been overlooked, in part because his ways of conceptualizing his predicament are easily disposed of as figurative language or the “worlding” of a mentally unstable central character. Ravenous particles, deja vus, the sense that gravity is increasing, the repeated suggestion that radio signals are bleeding into one another or are overcome with static, these are the ways Barrett describes his own predicament. They all position him in a field in which particles and signals bombard him. Attention paid to Will’s various literary precursors and Percy’s participation in the southern, Catholic, and existential tradition has created a productive vein of discourse in the last forty years, but by turning attention to

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5 See Conversations with Walker Percy p. 300
6 The narrator mentions that Will took many classes in electronics while he served in the Army. This could explain why, when he is attempting to articulate his symptoms or worlding, he uses the types of terms I’m interested in, terms which deal with fields and particles and forces.
the ways Will theorizes his predicament in rather explicitly Heideggerian and affective terminology enables a rethinking of the ways these three traditions overlap. Particularly, affect theory provides a way of thinking through Will’s melancholic reaction against the increasingly modernizing world of the American south, as well as his inability to successfully navigate his reentry out of the transcendent world of thought and scientific inquiry, into the immanent world of his immediate sphere.

In this paper, I use Jonathan Flatley’s conception of affective mapping as a guide to read the first of Walker Percy’s Will Barrett novels: The Last Gentleman. Doing so does more than provide a novel way of reading Will’s melancholic response to the modern world. Reading the novel to uncover the mechanism by which Will’s sensitivity and abnormal reactions to the world around him becomes a site of productive knowledge creation brings Percy’s philosophical conceptualizations of language, fiction, and alienation into the foreground. In short, deploying Flatley’s style of reading for affective mapping technologies exposes both the historical roots of Will’s melancholy and what Lewis A. Lawson

7 I think that thinking through the way Percy describes Will’s alienation and melancholy is very much in line with Heidegger’s concept of Strimmond which Flatley describes. Percy’s copies of Heidegger are among the more thoroughly annotated books in his papers collected at UNC. Flatley also provides a way of discussing Will’s relationship to modernity which could be productively used to better explain the relationship between the three strains of criticism. I haven’t found anyone doing this, but I have found plenty of people trying to synthesize the way one or two areas of Percy studies overlap.
calls the “indirect communications” between Percy’s philosophy and his fiction, clarifying the nature and symptoms of Will’s malaise and the ways his melancholizing serves as the starting point for his recovery. Most importantly, it enables an exposition of Will’s plight that focuses on the ways his alienation emerges from his inherited habit of thinking of himself as a transcendent mind incapable of reentering an immanent world.

I. Map Collecting

In the opening pages of Affective Mapping, Jonathan Flatley asserts a short, perplexing statement: “not all melancholias are depressing” (1). Aristotle noted a strange concentration of melancholics among philosophers and statesmen. Robert Burton argued that he got his knowledge by melancholizing, or purposefully deploying melancholy. Flatley argues that some melancholias are productive of knowledge. Not only can melancholia descend on an individual and cause them to depart from every day activities, it can trigger an intense

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8 The trajectory of Will’s gradual transformation throughout The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming has been discussed by Marion Montgomery in With Walker Percy at the Tupperware Party as a journey from heresy, Gnostic dualism, towards Orthodoxy, as articulated in the Thomist view of the goodness of the created world. While this is an important movement within the novels to take into consideration, one raised to prominence by the pervasive presence of the Catholic Church throughout the text, I focus instead on the ways in which the novels function as a dramatization of the reentry problem which Percy addresses most directly in Sutter’s casebook in LG. Percy’s essay “The Loss of the Creature” and Lost in the Cosmos devote significant time to this problem as does his essay collection The Message in the Bottle. I focus in this paper on the reentry problem because I believe it is the more central problem dealt with in The Last Gentleman, whereas The Second Coming sees Will consider doctrinal quandaries after he enacts a quasi-successful reentry.
interest in the outside world by inciting a desire to understand the root cause of one’s condition. Flatley goes further, arguing that if melancholia, as posited by Freud, is a deeply felt attachment to a lost object, and if, as Benjamin argued, it is a shared condition of modern life, evidence of the historicity of subjectivity and symptomatic of a more widely felt revulsion to modernity, then melancholia can act as an impetus for “affective mapping” projects carried out in communities. Flatley writes “melancholia forms the site in which the social origins of our emotional lives can be mapped out and from which we can see the other persons who share our losses and are subject to the same social forces” (3). He argues that the subjects of his study, James, Du Bois, and Platonov, explore “the place[s] where modernity touches down in our lives in the most intimate of ways.” Acting as cartographers, they map the affective terrain of modernity by melancholizing. Their art does not supplant the melancholic affect, but provides a guide to its root causes in history.

In “The Man on the Train,” Walker Percy articulates a similar vision of community among those who suffer from alienation as a result of their

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9 The essay was originally published in a 1956 edition of Partisan Review under the title “The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes,” a title which sheds considerably more light on the nature of the essay and emphasizes the ways in which this conception of “aesthetic reversal” depends on Kierkegaard’s use of “Alienation,” “Repetition,” and “Rotation.” Percy later collected the essay
immersion in modern life. The essay diagnoses the despair of two different commuters returning home after work. One, commuter A, sits quietly, “seeing the passing scene as a series of meaningful projects full of signs which he reads without difficulty” (84). Commuter B, though he can pin down no empirical reason for feeling as he does, is alienated “although he has satisfied the same empirical needs as commuter A” (84). For Percy, it is exactly this discourse of needs fulfillment which gives rise to the commuter’s Alienation. When the commuter “reads books on mental hygiene which abstract immanent goals from existence...he comes to despair.” (85) Commuter B has an alternative option. In Percy’s essay, it is art which affects what he calls “the aesthetic reversal of alienation.” The afflicted commuter spends his time reading a book about an alienated man riding a train. Before he could not speak his despair, but the author gives a name to it¹⁰, not through re-presentation, but through “the polarizing crystal” of art which “makes a quantitative division among existential traits accordingly as it transmits some more or less intact, reverses some, and selectively polarizes others, transmitting certain elements and canceling others”(85-86).

¹⁰ For a further discussion of the significance which Percy attributed to the naming function, see “Metaphor as Mistake” in The Message in the Bottle.
Placing Flatley’s conception of melancholy as affective technology over Percy’s discussion of alienation and its reversal requires several clarifications, especially before applying this map to the text of *The Last Gentleman*. First, melancholy in Flatley’s conception cannot be collapsed into Percy’s conception of existential alienation. Alienation in Percy’s philosophical writings and his fiction is triggered by the breakdown of intersubjectivity. Whether or not the characters are aware of this plight, they find themselves incapable of intersubjectivity and move towards solipsism accompanied by a rejection of the immanent, physical world. Alienation, then, is a subspecies of melancholia in which the lost love object is one’s connection to the outside world and to other subjects. Though their views of the particulars of its origins are somewhat divergent, both authors locate the historical roots of this melancholy in the advent of modernity\textsuperscript{11}. They also both posit it as an affect, though Percy does not specifically employ this terminology. Flatley explicitly acknowledges his debts to Heidegger, specifically in the use the term *Stimmung* for one’s way of being in the world. Often translated as “attunement,” *Stimmung* for Heidegger is the filter through which

\textsuperscript{11} Percy’s primary quarrel is with modern epistemology, specifically modernity’s tendency to establish the self as a transcending mind over and against the self as organism in an environment, reducing the act of choice to biological determinism and the needs of the self to biological/psychological need fulfillment. He does not however suggest there was a time when intersubjectivity was easy. I don’t think it would be overstating the point to say that for Percy, humanity’s predicament is this sense of lost intersubjectivity. See “Loss of the Creature,” “Metaphor as Mistake,” “Message in the Bottle” in *The Message in the Bottle*. 

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the Dasein (self: literally “being there”) experiences the world. In Percy’s novel, Will Barrett’s “radar” enables him to sense the “particles” and “waves” resonating through the immediate sphere around him, but his attunement is habitually out of sync. His alienation stems both from his struggle to parse the entropy in his environment and his inability to accept the systems proffered by his fellow southerners, his father, Sutter, and Val.

It is helpful to incorporate Sarah Ahmed’s discussion of Husserl’s immediate sphere in her article “Happy Objects,” to better understand Will’s particular struggle. Ahmed argues that the way we discuss happiness suggests “that happiness starts from somewhere other than the subject who may use the word to describe a situation” (29). In this discussion, she employs the term affect to label the “sticky” substance which binds people to socially circulated goods (objects that make an individual happy). But Ahmed also incorporates a discussion of the communities that determine the value of these goods. To facilitate this discussion, she employs a framework developed by Husserl which helps her to argue that “happiness can thus be described as intentional in the phenomenological sense (directed toward objects), as well as being affective [experienced as a result of](contact with objects)” (32). As in Percy and Flatley’s formulations, this substance seems to emanate/circulate within a field which the self is submerged within, a field which Husserl and Ahmed call the “sphere of
practical action” (32). Ahmed’s essay’s locus is the family and the “affect aliens” who fail to recognize the goodness of certain happy objects circulated by the family. As with Heidegger’s terminology, this discussion of the family’s circulation of social goods within the “sphere of practical action” provides a conceptual bridge between Percy and Flatley, allowing for a more precise discussion of Will Barrett’s relationships with the several Families who enter his world and the “ravenous particles” which he believes contribute to his various medical disabilities.

II. Ideas of Reference: Hollow Men, Noxious Particles, and Ultimate Truths

However well or unwell Will may be, he is repeatedly positioned in the novel as a knight for whom the loss of intersubjectivity gives occasion for a quest. His disease is the impetus for his task. Early in the novel, the narrator gives a brief history of Will Barrett’s “nervous condition” in strangely positive terms. Will

Suffered spells of amnesia and even between times did not quite know what was what. Much of the time he was like a man who has just crawled out of a bombed building. Everything looked strange. Such a predicament, however, is not altogether a bad thing. Like the sole survivor of a bombed
building, he had no secondhand opinions and he could see things afresh.

(11)

He believes he is bombarded by “déjà vus” and “ravenous particles.” He slips in and out of fugue states throughout the novel. He frequently endures bouts of amnesia, and though he can “snow” many people, in group situations he feels overcome by sadness in happy circumstances, sadness triggered by the expectation that he meet unspoken expectations of joviality. Yet the very strangeness which alienates him from the world is not the result of the dullness of his perception or a particularly abstracted mind. He can sense things which others cannot, as demonstrated by his success in helping Jamie Vaught navigate the last days of his life, his brief career tutoring young, withdrawn Jewish youths (19), and his ability to help a mute mental patient in Connecticut talk. Will tunes “his amiable Southern radar to these rarefied and arcane signals which until he came along had roamed their lonely stratosphere unreceived” (19). Occasionally, his radar’s sensitivity overwhelms his senses. These moments, when he is assaulted by “déjà vus” or “ravenous particles” and enters a fugue state, fascinate him. His dislocated state makes him all the more fascinated in the world\(^\text{12}\).

\(^{12}\) Percy discusses this phenomenon in his essay “Loss of the Creature” also contained in The Message in the Bottle.
It is one of these experiences in the museum which triggers Will’s decision to return to the south, an initial step towards reentering the immanent world. While visiting the Metropolitan Museum, he begins to sense the presence of “ravenous particles...stealing the substance from painting and viewer alike” (26). The particles prevent Will from looking at the paintings himself, and so he watches a man watching the painting, “standing on his shoulders” as a way of “getting around the ravenous particles.” He stands behind a pillar “shivering and sweating” as the painting becomes increasingly invisible to him. He feels the particles closing in, “gravity increased so that it was all he could do to keep from sinking to all fours.” Suddenly, a skylight crashes down at his feet, coating the museum patrons in “white, glass powdered to sugar,” transforming them into “pillars of salt.” Immediately afterwards the realization that everyone is safe incites the other patrons, all strangers, to hug one another and shed tears of joy (28). Barrett gains a second benefit from the “cataclysm.” The falling skylight enables Barrett to momentarily escape his intense isolation and alienation, allowing him to see a painting “glowing like a jewel.” The event disposes of the particles temporarily and intensifies his interest in his affliction.

Throughout the early portions of the novel, Will positions himself as an objective observer of the world around him. Will “had to know everything before he could do anything” (4). He is “an engineer in a deeper sense” (41), determined
to understand the world and engineer his life accordingly. But as the narrator informs the reader after the incident in the museum,

He had, of course, got everything twisted around. Though he took pride in his “objectivity” and his “evidence,” what evidence there was, was evidence of his own deteriorating condition. If there were any “noxious particles” around, they were, as every psychologist knows, more likely to be found inside his head than in the sky. (28-29)

Though shot through with sarcasm and irony, the manner in which the narrator’s satire functions is bafflingly ambiguous. Will’s diseased state is rather apparent, but by invoking the authority of “every psychologist” the narrator calls his own assertion into question. Though Will’s expertise is lacking, and his

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13 For a further discussion of the “involuted irony” which Percy’s characters and narrators frequently employ when leveling their most pointed critiques, see Mary Thale’s “The Moviegoer of the 1950s.” Thale focuses her attention on Binx Bolling’s way of redirecting suffering and hatred for the “sure well-fed world of the 1950’s” to comedic ends (86). She argues that Binx’s ironic tone enables him to avoid the “heaviness which so often pervades the philosophical ‘search’ novel” (85). Binx speaks directly, but he delivers his blows in an ironic tone which can be mistaken for humor. This tone reveals a “deeper gulf” between him and the dead suburbanites his life parodies than an indignant or contemptuous tone would. It also stages the gulf between Binx’s detached, critical mind, and his desire for a way of transcending “everydayness.” Thale’s analysis succeeds by diagnosing a key component of the modern malaise in Percy’s fiction, a “rage-turned-to-irony for the world that is” (89) which Binx expresses through his criticisms of his neighbors and family members. The narrator of The Last Gentleman uses similar jokes and backhanded statements to deliver the most incisive remarks, but I’ve
concepts for explaining his condition seem to be grafted onto the field of psychology and ontology from his limited education in electronics received during his service in the U.S. Army (17), they locate the problem in the outside world, the “sphere of practical action,” and thereby outside the purview of psychoanalysis. As questionable as Will’s judgments and conceptual maps may be, they are the foundation of his subsequent searching throughout the novel, even after his analyst informs him that he is approaching the brink of yet another mental breakdown.

After his experience in the museum Will tells his analyst that rather than continue in therapy, he intends to test his radar receiving capabilities in the world outside. After enduring “almost five years as an object of technique, however valuable,” Will tells Dr. Gamow “he thought maybe he’d go to the other side, become one of them, the scientists” (35). Dr. Gamow responds with a summary of Will’s symptoms, warning him that his decision to follow the Vaughts out of New York and back to the South will result in a relapse. “May I review for you one or two facts?” the analyst asks,

yet to find an effective way of dealing with the narrator’s direct commentary on the text. Yet the mere fact that the narrator’s comments are constantly called into question through this baffling deployment of irony, involuted or otherwise, participates in the text’s larger critique of “expertise” and “technique,” words which Percy frequently associates with the most dangerous abdications of sovereignty demanded of the self by scientific “authorities.”
Number one, you have had previous fugue states. Number two, you give every indication of having another. You always quit the analysis and you always buy something expensive before taking off. The last time it was a Corvette. You still have a defective ego structure, number three. Number four, you develop ideas of reference. This time it is hollow men, noxious particles, and ultimate truths. (38-39)

The clinical tone Dr. Gamow affects in this cataloguing of Will’s deficiencies disturbs him. It reminds him of stolen glances at Dr. Gamow’s notes, the curious sensation of seeing oneself described as a “well-developed and nourished young white male…with a pleasing demeanor.” The Doctor’s reduction of his existence to a specimen and subject of analysis unnerves him but he does not reject Gamow’s premises or his observations and Barrett resolves to “engineer the future of [his] life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge [he has] so arduously gained from five years of analysis” (41). If the sense of being “hollowed out” which Will continuously tries to explain, or his fear that he is pursued by particles, or the notion of seeking out “ultimate truths” seems crazy, it appears to Will to be a an equally valid, and highly preferable alternative to the Doctor’s years of analyzing slips of the tongue and dream associations. In taking responsibility for his analysis, Will takes a step towards unearthing a cause of his alienation and experiencing an alternative mode of
being-in-the-world, but several of the hypotheses and cures which he develops begin to fail him as soon as he heads south.

Will agrees to accompany Jamie and the Vaughts to the south as Jamie’s tutor, convincing himself that he is engineering his future according to the soundest of all wisdom. Stopped on the side of the road in Northern Virginia, Will gazes at himself in a steel mirror, locates himself in his new surroundings, and recalls his task:

My name is Williston Bibb Barrett, he said aloud, consulting his wallet to make sure, and I am returning to the South to seek my fortune and restore the good name of my family, perhaps even recover Hampton plantation from the canebrakes and live out my days as a just man and little father to the faithful Negroes working in the fields...I shall marry me a wife and live me a life in the lovely green environs of Atlanta or Memphis or even Birmingham, which, despite its bad name, is known to have lovely people.

(151)

No hollow sensations or hollow men. No noxious or ravenous particles. No search for “ultimate truths.” Safely outside New York and back on Confederate soil, Will frames his return as escaping to the simple, agrarian life, of his forefathers as well as a rejection of Northern thinking, which he enacts through
his recuperation efforts on Birmingham’s behalf. Fleeing from the north is for Will both an escape from the transcending mindset of modernity and the life he leads between his sleeping hours in the YMCA and his working hours in the basement of Macy’s department store. But Will’s escape southward is just that: an escape. His change of place does not provide a means of navigating his reentry problem, largely because upon his return, he is bombarded with the same forces which chased him out of the North.

The South he imagines returning to, like the autochthonous ideal of the agrarians, is little more than an image: enticing, yet ahistorical, unfounded in reality, dangerously misleading\textsuperscript{14}. Along the Tidewater, this image is “pickled and preserved and decorous,” but everywhere else Barrett visits on his trip home is modernizing. On a clear night on a “raw red hillside” of Georgia, Will steps out behind the motel where his camper is parked and watches a construction gang hard at work. The night air “throbbed with machinery,” the “floodlights over the hill spoiled the night like a cast in a black eye,” and Barrett thinks to himself how common this type of scene has become in the south. He notes that, unlike the historic, cultural centers of the south,

\textsuperscript{14} See Louis D. Rubin’s introduction to \textit{I’ll Take My Stand}
Backcountry everything was being torn down and built anew. The earth itself was transformed overnight, gouged and filled, flattened and hilled, like a big sandpile. The whole South throbbed like a diesel. (169)

Immediately it comes over him again, “the old itch for omniscience” (170). The mere contact with the forces modernizing the south ignites the old desire to break out of the contingencies and limits of knowing within the immanent sphere into a transcendent realm where knower can abstract himself from known. He transforms immediately from “American and horny,” to “English and eavesdropper,” because he wants to “know without being known” (170). He listens in on Rita and Kitty Vaught’s conversation, in which Kitty idealizes her return south. Playing the eavesdropper, he hears a near perfect facsimile of his return-to-the-old-planation fantasy delivered by Kitty and mocked by Rita, but he does not register its importance to him. He is possessed again by the desire for transcendent knowledge and he all but forgets the trajectory of reentry he had planned before he can register Rita’s critique.

III. Bad Doctors Drink Bad Bourbon

Instead of returning to the old Plantation at Hampton, Will arrives at the Vaught home, “A castle fronting on a golf links set down in a beautiful green valley across a ridge from a city” (189). Unlike the south he left, the south he
returns to is “happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican” (185).

Accustomed to living in the “bombed out” (185) cities of the North, places in
which he can feel at home because he “was homeless,” Will reenters a south in
which everyone but him seems to be comfortable, successful, and victorious,
living in a perpetual state of “almost invincible happiness” (186). He is
“determined to be as happy as anyone” (186), but immediately his condition
worsens. He feels the assaults of those strange forces emanating in his
environment which he calls “deja vus.” His memory worsens, he wakes without
knowing where he is, his “knee” leaps up at inopportune moments and he
modifies his pockets to hold his “patella” in place (187).15 Most importantly, he
has to compete with others who’s “radars were as sensitive as his own” (187),
unlike the “post-Protestant Yankees” whose capacities for sensing things—the
moods of others, the significance of certain lost values, the deleterious effects of
the noxious particles—is, according to Will, horribly inept. Yet because Will’s
radar is remarkable “even for the South” (187), his amnesia intensifies, to the
point where “he forgot things he had seen before, but things he had heard of and
not seen looked familiar” (188). Gripped by his amnesia, Will alienates himself
by sliding back into his habit of “pondering, as usual, the mystery of the

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15 Certainly one of Percy’s longest sustained euphemisms. It runs through both
Will Barrett novels.
Here Ahmed’s discussion of happiness is helpful in elucidating the nature of Will’s alienation. Those objects in his immediate sphere which incite happiness in others—the newly constructed highway, the growing suburbs, the peculiar castle constructed on the fairway—intensify his sense of dislocation. If his return home was imagined as a return to the familiar, familial setting of the agrarian upper crust, he has discovered instead a new family of southerners, one possessed of a different sense of virtue and the good life than the old stoic order of his father. In “Happy Objects,” Ahmed posits that objects circulate socially and that their presence in our immediate sphere can affect us in the much the same way that Will’s “radar” or “receiver” interprets incoming signals from the world around him. The signals which others send about the objects in this sphere, the emergent new south, baffle Will. The “sticky” conceptual substance which bonds other southerners to “good” objects, has no effect on Will, alienating him further. Ahmed calls those who experience no attraction to the object, “affect aliens.” For these individuals, the loss of a loved object is doubly poignant because they are distanced from the object and their family members. In Will’s case, it is almost as if the attraction is more magnetic than “sticky” and his polarity has been reversed. When he returns to the south, the homogeneity of happy southerners in his immediate sphere intensifies the force of his alienation and quickens his expulsion from the immanent sphere. In this alienated state, the
only alternative, for Ahmed and for Will, is to form alternative communities to
the family. In Will’s case, he finds that he has rather serendipitously fallen in
with a fellow affect alien with whom he shares a number of similarities: Sutter
Vaught.

Jamie Vaught is the first to note the similarity. When he asks Will for his
thoughts on a quiet afternoon in August, Will tells him he is meditating on
whether it would be better to walk into Memphis in one’s right mind,
remembering everything, or whether it would be preferable to be an amnesiac.
Jamie recognizes the abstracted, melancholic, strain of thought and labels it.
“You sound like Sutter,” he says. Will’s dislocation and his fascination with
unearthing “the singularity of things” [emphasis added] links the two. Sutter,
Jamie’s older brother, is a gifted doctor turned coroners assistant. The oldest
child of the Vaught family, once married to Rita, Sutter’s melancholic
philosophizing, his habit of prescribing extended stays in the terminal ward to
depressed wealthy southerners, and his insatiable appetite for, and
preoccupation with, pornography and forbidden sexuality, cost him his marriage
and his job. Like Will, Sutter suffers from a sense that something is not right in
the new south but as a standout diagnostician who can all but diagnose a patient
by looking at them, Sutter can name the despair in a way Will cannot. This is
attractive to Will and as his time at the Vaught house goes on, he finds himself peculiarly drawn to Sutter.

Will’s relationship with Sutter is complicated from the start by the doctor’s unwillingness to take on a disciple and Will’s unease about the doctor. Upon hearing that Sutter drives an Edsel
to remind him of the debacle of the Ford Motor Company and to commemorate the last victory of the American people over marketing research and opinion polls…the engineer wasn’t sure he liked the sound of this. It had the sound of a quixotic type who admires his own gestures.

(188)

Will’s physical descriptions of Sutter are equally strange. His account of Sutter stresses his thinness, his near absence from the physical world. Barrett notes that “he was thin as a child is thin, with a simple scanting of flesh on bones…it was the sort of thinness a young man worries about. But this man did not…He did not hold himself in such a way as to minimize it” (206). Will’s curiosity about Sutter’s absurd little gesture and his physical abnormality leads him to explore Sutter’s apartment. In it he finds only a bottle of “three-dollar whiskey\(^{16}\)” in the

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\(^{16}\) The presence of cheap bourbon in the apartment, to a reader of Percy is more or less a smoking gun. This man is a bad doctor, seeking sensation and stimulation by means of anesthetizing his cerebral cortex with C\(_2\)H\(_5\)OH, not a
kitchenette and a hole in the wall which Will can use to see from his apartment into Sutter’s. Later Will discovers where the hole came from while playing the voyeur. Sutter returns to the apartment and, after bouts of quasi-philosophical melancholizing, sipping cheap bourbon, and arguing with Rita, discharges his pistol in the general direction of a picture of “The Old Arab Physician.” In the aftermath of the shot, the two men meet.

man, indulging in an aesthetic repetition as a method of reentering the immanent world. See his essay “Bourbon,” collected as part of “Life in the South” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*. He actually prescribes the experience of returning home after a long day and pouring a glass of bourbon as a way of counteracting the same “noxious particles” which pursue Barrett across the landscape of the north and the south. Also, see the closing moments of the final sci-fi fable in *Lost in the Cosmos*. The alternative endings, one good, one bad, show the protagonist downing, in one case a homebrewed jar of yellow corn liquor, in the other, something only described as “kelp wine.”

17 Possibly Abou Ben Adhem or Ishāq ibn ʿAlī al-Ruhāwī. Physician Ishāq ibn ʿAlī al-Ruhāwī whose work was built on the work of Hippocrates and Galen, was an early medical ethicist credited with developing a system of peer review that allowed patients to sue for malpractice if the doctor’s peers judged his methods to be questionable much as Sutter was banned from the hospital despite his successes. Al-Ruhawi’s best known work, *Adab al-Talib* (“Practical Ethics of the Physician” or “Practical Medical Deontology”) argued that doctors were guardians of both souls and bodies. For accounts of al Ruhawi’s role in medical history, see Prioreschi, Plinio (2001). *A History of Medicine: Byzantine and Islamic* p. 394. For details regarding his role in the development of medical ethics, see Levey, Martin (1967). “Medical Ethics of Medieval Islam with Special Reference to Al-Ruhāwī’s “Practical Ethics of the Physician””. In *The Last Physician: Walker Percy and the Moral Life of Medicine*, Carl Elliot suggests it is Ben Adhem and the image is a saccharine depiction of the old arab physician helping the poor. He also argues that this is a turning point in the novel, where the focus shifts from the relationship between Will and Kitty to the relationship between Will and
Sutter’s absurd, yet forceful, stands, his penchant for cheap liquor, his melancholic ramblings, his dismissal from his job, his way of standing, these details conspire to reveal that he is a bad doctor, capable perhaps of diagnosing the body but, because of his own nearly unembodied state, unable tune himself into the world in any real sense. Yet upon encountering Sutter for the first time face to face just moments after hearing the pistol discharged, Will is insistent on hearing Sutter’s diagnosis of his condition. Now a pathologist, not a doctor, Sutter informs him that he studies “the lesions of the dead” (218), but Will continues to petition Sutter

“But I have reason to believe you can help me.”

“What reason?”

“I can tell when somebody knows something I don’t know.”

“You think I know something?” (218)

Will’s radar alerts him to the fact that he has found someone with a type of knowledge, someone who is similarly unhappy though immersed in the “invincible happiness” of the south. Sutter, the “unwilling craftsmen,” agrees to listen to Barrett’s symptoms. In the interview that follows, the two discuss Will’s

Sutter and their shared interest in “what Will calls ‘the locus of pure possibility’” (32-34)
past, his childhood, his family, his \textit{deja vus}, and his theories about bad environments and hollow men. Yet when Barrett presses him for an answer, a type of directive or imperative to follow, Sutter rebels again. He rails, “Who do you think I am, for Christ’s sake? I am no guru and I want no disciples$^{18}$” (225). Still convinced that Sutter knows something that he must know as well, something about the root cause of his dislocation and his illness, Will refuses to leave, asking instead what it is that Sutter “cleaves to,” pouring himself a glass of the “horrendous bourbon” (225).

$^{18}$ In an interview with Zoltan Abady-Nagy in 1973 Percy attributes this quote to a discussion of Socrates by Kierkegaard. Percy uses it to explain the way \textit{The Moviegoer’s} ending ultimately refuses to be “edifying,” that is, provide a clear explanation of Binx’s resolution of his existential crisis and thereby give directive to readers. See \textit{Conversations with Walker Percy} p. 83. Martin Luschei notes in his reading of this scene in \textit{The Sovereign Wayfarer} that “Barret requests only formulae of living from Sutter for he is reluctant to assume the sovereignty of his own life. His real father and his surrogate father (Sutter) do not provide him the clues and signs for living in the world” (p. 143). Luschei’s reading more or less hits the nail on the head, but in subsequent paragraphs he elides the similarity between Sutter and Val’s melancholic musings and suggests that Will more or less moves on from Sutter at this point in the novel, and devotes himself to helping Val achieve her goal of baptizing Jamie. The limits of Luschei’s reading are explained in part by the fact that he was writing before the publication of \textit{The Second Coming}. Having only one half of Will’s story to work with led him to draw conclusions about the structure of the novel which necessarily differ from later critics.
IV. Polarizing Crystal, not Magic Eight Ball

After months of living in the Vaught house, and Will’s dogged pursuit of Sutter’s knowledge, the doctor finally gives him a prescription in the form of two instructions. The first is that if he encounters a new experience he “will be free to act” (271). The second is that if he ever finds himself in “too tight a spot…a situation where it is difficult to live from one minute to the next, come and see me and I’ll help you” (271). Shortly thereafter, the doctor absconds to New Mexico with Jamie, who is now quickly succumbing to his rare blood disorder.

Abandoned by Sutter and tasked with finding the two of them and sending word to the family, Will takes off across the country, suffering from one of his most severe cases of amnesia yet, but able, because of Sutter’s directive, to navigate the situations which arise along the way. He visits Jamie’s sister Val and sorts out what she would have him do when he finds Jamie and Sutter. He helps a band of rabble rousing actors and civil rights activists escape from his old hometown by standing up to the sheriff. He even manages to endure a night with his uncle before comforting Jamie in the final days of his life by sharing a room with him and contracting the local priest to perform Jamie’s baptism and last rites. He is able to achieve these things, all of which require his action in the immanent world, because of Sutter’s directives, and also because of a casebook Sutter leaves behind which contains his philosophical ramblings.
Sutter’s casebook is Will’s only link to the doctor for much of the final portion of the text. As he drives across country, Will spends his nights reading over Sutter’s entries, pouring over the arguments Sutter plans to attempt on Val to disabuse her of her faith. The book also includes Sutter’s notes on various autopsies, his research into the presence of semen in the urethra’s of suicide victims, and his observations about the relationship between sexuality, cheerfulness, lewdness, and Christianity in the American south. The writings switch back and forth between topics in a manic, erratic manner, but they never slide into incoherence. They are the writings of a thoroughly depressed madman, unable to affect his own reentry into the immanent sphere, but they are shockingly prescient. In one passage, he writes of Will specifically, explaining that the engineer’s epistemology, founded on his determination to achieve omniscience is faulty. Sutter writes

He wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g., “environment,” “groups,” “experience,” etc.) in such a way that he will be happy. Therefore I will tell him nothing. For even if I were “right,” his posture is self defeating. (353)
The doctor rightly diagnoses Will’s problem, he is determined to “know without being known.” Will wants to escape the limitations of immanence by way of a modern epistemology that seeks to study, order, categorize, and make discrete (an affliction Sutter all but accepts as the human condition and supplements through his preferred method of reentry, sex). Just as Sutter predicts, Will takes the information, throws it into his “immanent meat-grinder” of a psyche, and proceeds to nit-pick the problems in Sutter’s argument, once again accepting the diagnosis of what has been lost and what is wrong, but unwilling to agree with the answers Sutter offers.

It is, in part, for this reason that the novel’s conclusion is so frustratingly inconclusive. By novel’s end, Will has not modeled reentry from the realm of transcendence and he still exists in a state of alienation and melancholia. He has, however, progressed in the sense that he has forged a bond with Sutter that enables him at least a modicum of intersubjectivity, which he is unwilling to give up. In the final scene, Will chases after Sutter’s Edsel as it “took off, spavined and sprung, sunk at one corner” (409). Sutter acknowledges his shouting and stops the Edsel. As “Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds” (409), Sutter pauses, if only for a moment. The novel closes on Sutter allowing Will to approach the car before leaving for his ranch where he plans to kill himself. Will’s level of complicity in the plan is
unknown. Will’s desire to kill himself is unlikely, given the fact that his melancholic temperament is, for him, a prompt for further investigation of his strange existence in the world. That said, it’s not out of the realm of possibility, especially after the priest’s perfunctory baptism of Jamie using hospital tap water disconcerts him and seems to eliminate the possibility of returning to faith. The two men cannot agree on what role Sutter should play in Will’s life, they could not agree on how to deal with the priest, but in the final scene they leave together, bound to one another by nothing except their shared sense that they are unable to interact with the world in the way they are expected to engage.

*The Last Gentleman’s refusal to resolve, to allow Will Barrett back into the world, is unsurprising when juxtaposed against Percy’s conception of art as a polarizing crystal which he develops in “The Man on the Train.” The novel “makes a quantitative division among existential traits...it transmits some more or less intact, reverses some, and selectively polarizes others” in doing so, it participates in the practice of naming the despair without interpolating the reader. By “re-presenting” the readers experience of despair, Percy establishes a foundation for intersubjectivity while refusing to be, as he calls it, “edifying.” Barrett at novel’s end is directionless, considering following Sutter to the ranch but wondering whether he can return east to the Vaught family. If the novel ultimately refuses to resolve this quandary, it is because to do so would
undermine the novelist’s commitment to a particular epistemology, one rooted in
a sense of dislocation and characterized by an awareness of the strangeness of
the self’s existence in the immanent world. This epistemology, which Percy
elsewhere likens to the life of a pilgrim or “sovereign wayfarer,” is foundational
for reading the novel and for comprehending Percy’s efforts to map out a way
for readers trapped by transcendent epistemologies to reenter the world.
Chapter 3: New Modes of Attunement: Dread and Radical Astonishment in *The Second Coming*

*Why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone’s finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?*

- *Walker Percy Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self Help Book*

Over forty five years since its original publication, the ending of *The Last Gentleman* has been the subject of frequent debate. Early readings of the novel were complicated by the publication of *The Second Coming*, Percy’s second and final Will Barrett novel. In that novel, which chronicles the latter portion of Will Barrett’s life, Sutter appears once again, discounting the possibility of suicide. He is living in the desert, still in contact with Will and the Vaught family. Yet what is perhaps most interesting in relation to the goals of this paper, is that several decades later in life, Will is found in possession of his uncanny radar, tuned into the strangeness of his existence in the misty mountaintops of the Smokey Mountains; a seemingly ideal spot for a man who likes to live as an observer suspended above the immanent world. In this novel, Will returns to the question of his existence and his inability to enter into the world around him, this time without Sutter’s help.
As discussed in the previous chapter, Flatley appropriates Heidegger’s terminology and framework to explain a radical reorientation of Dasein’s relationship to Being and Vorhanden. But Flatley tracks the ways in which this orientation serves as a precursor for political action, specifically the way several early modernists dramatize the lives and relationships of communities formed around a shared sense of melancholia and direct their energies into collective action against the root causes of their dislocation and loss. For Heidegger, and, I suggest, for Percy, the implications of conceiving of the self as a being-in-the-world in various potential authentic or inauthentic modes of attunement is less a matter of political action and more a matter of ontology and self-knowledge. That is not to say that communal bonds and collective action are unimportant. It is to explain, in part, the reasons for Percy’s protagonists’ apparent reversion to old ways and old practices in his epilogues and especially in part two of The Second Coming. Acknowledging the lack of political engagement in the text is a way of pivoting attention towards the real work that communities and intersubjectivity do in the text, specifically the methods which they develop for triangulating the self, rooting out the causes of the malaise, and keeping it at bay over time.

In an interview conducted by Linda Whitney Hobson just a year after the publication of The Second Coming, Percy discussed the book’s engagement with
both his conception of consciousness and authentic and inauthentic modes of being. For Percy, setting Will down in North Carolina, in an age when “For the first time since the Civil War, the South is getting rich” and experiencing a “tremendous re-Christianization” through “high-powered evangelical Christianity” (218) enables him to dramatize this pursuit of the roots of a species of melancholia and malaise in a way that foregrounds the disparity between authentic and inauthentic modes of existence. Percy explains to Hobson that Will has experienced a loss of sovereignty which has occurred in the lives of most of us as well, even though we appear to be freer, to have more, to be more individualistic, to have access to more than any people on earth. Despite this, a loss of sovereignty has occurred so that we are more subject to invisible authority—scientists and so forth. (218)

The modernization, industrialization, and Christianization of the new south conspire to obscure the self’s right relationship to the world, one informed by Dasein’s knowledge of the necessity of its death and its placement within the world. Any semblance of ordeal has been removed from Will Barrett’s life. His attachments to the particular characteristics of place have been diffused to such an extent as to render them meaningless, and so he is disconnected, free-floating. Yet when the thought of suicide occurs to him, when he remembers his
sovereignty, he is thrust back into an alternative Stimmung. The attitude of a
satiated organism living in a world is replaced by the curiosity of a self, dreading
the prospect of its continued existence in a state of death-in-life and unable to
reckon with the possibility of his death.

Will’s dread is the key to the puzzle. Situated as he is among wealthy
retirees in the mountains of North Carolina, Will’s dread seems an especially
inappropriate way of tuning in to his environment. In Percy’s essay “The
Coming Crisis in Psychiatry,” he discusses Erich Fromm’s The Sane Society and
asks why, when an older variant of psycho-analysis was “conquering in the
provinces” it was being “called into question at its source and center” (251). In
the essay he challenges the paradigmatic theory of man as organism “with
instinctive drives and needs not utterly or qualitatively different from those of
other organisms” (251). Will’s predicament is a dramatization, an outgrowth of
this questioning engagement with the social sciences’ attempts to apply “the
biological method to man” (252). Will’s homelessness, his detachment from his
community, his obsession with death, these are symptoms of “the sickness of
modern man” observed by existentialists from Kierkegaard to Marcel but
insufficiently explained by psychiatry’s anthropology. They are the trademarks
of a mind which has abdicated its sovereignty and hangs, suspended, above the
world, unable to engage authentically with the immanent sphere. In The Second
Coming, Will reawakens, first to dread, then to ordeal, and finally to a new Stimmung. This reawakening presents a radically different theory of man to readers, one characterized by a posture of radical astonishment at the existence of Being.

I. Remembering Dread

The Second Coming opens on a golf course. A much older Will Barrett, successful Wall Street lawyer and Rotary Man-of-the-Year, discovers that something is very wrong. In the opening paragraphs, the narrator informs us

For some time he had been feeling depressed without knowing why. In fact, he didn’t even realize he was depressed. Rather was it the world and life around him which seemed to grow more senseless and farcical with each passing day. (3)

This species of malaise is familiar. It is the same deep despair which Binx Bolling, Thomas Moore, Lancelot Lamar, and a young Will Barrett fell victim to. Yet for the older Will Barrett, it appears as something new to be marveled at, studied and understood. Though, as the book goes on, other characters suggest that Will has never been truly healthy; prone to “fade-outs” and impulsive decisions to disappear. Will comes to in a bunker on the country club course he knows like his own backyard, and as if no time has passed since the death of Jamie Vaught,
he becomes aware of his own strangeness and of the strangeness of the
“senseless and farcical” world in which he lives.

Yet Will is closer this time to a discovery that will help unmask the root
cause of his despair. As he steps into the woods to retrieve a sliced ball,

He heard something and the sound reminded him of an event that had
happened a long time ago. It was the most important event in his life, yet
he had managed until that moment to forget it. (3)

The memory which he had buried for so long, and which he later recognizes as
“the most important event in his life” is of his father’s first attempted suicide.
The older Barrett first attempted to shoot his son and himself at the foot of a tree
on a Georgia hunting excursion and then misrepresented the event as an accident
in the wake of his and Will’s survival. Yet this does not occur to him in the
moment he steps off the fairway to retrieve his ball. Rather, his immediate
response is to become “even more depressed” because, for the first time “it
occurred to him that he might shoot himself” (3-4). The thought, which initially
“popped into his head” and which he later “entertained ironically” becomes an
obsessive preoccupation throughout the course of the novel.

_The Second Coming_, unlike its precursor which ends in a baffling bit of
ambiguity, is Percy’s attempt to see one of his protagonists experience an
alternative Stimmung. The epilogues of *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins* contain similar efforts, but in both cases the epilogue comes long after the plot arc of the novel draws to a close. *The Second Coming* is Percy’s clearest attempt to dramatize a comedic alternative outcome to the existential crisis. Juxtaposed against the absurd, the outcome of the successfully navigated existential crisis in Camus and Sartre, this comedic alternative barely seems to differ from the mode of life which Heidegger identified as a death-in-life. *Dasein* may appear to most outside observers to have sunk back into an uncritical engagement with the world of its care. This misconception is explainable in part through a reconsideration of the nature of *Stimmung* particularly the word’s relationship to the concept of tuning or attunement. The dread Will rediscovers brings him closer to a direct encounter with, or a transcending to, nothingness. This dread is not the result of his surroundings. He reawakens to dread in the quiet, sun filled air of his North Carolina country club. Rather his mode of attunement to these surroundings precludes the possibility of living authentically, that is, with the knowledge of the necessity of his death coupled with radical astonishment at his continued life. The comedic climax of the novel comes after Will descends to the edge of death in a search for the point of origin of his despair. The nature of this comedic conclusion—and it is comedic in the old sense in that it involves a wedding—can be best understood in light of Percy’s repeated attempts to liken
the protagonist to a broken or overly sensitive radio. It is his attunement which changes as a result of a new, ontologically rooted understanding of the self which is provided to him through the establishment of intersubjectivity.

II. Following Dread to Despair

The narrator of The Second Coming, like the narrator of The Last Gentleman peppers the text with asides, jokes, and observations at the expense of the protagonist. Immediately following Will’s realization that he is free to kill himself, the narrator launches into a direct address, asking the reader “What is one to make of such a person?...though it was probably the case that he was ill and that it was his illness—depression—which made the world seem farcical, it is impossible to prove the case” (4). In the passage that follows, the narrator calls the definition of depression into question. If depression is defined as a particular departure from a statistical norm, then any argument which seeks to discredit or denigrate Will’s consideration of suicide as (sick/demented/perverse/inadequate response of an organism whose needs have been sated) is “abstract and useless” (5). The narrator points out that with depression on the rise, it is feasible to consider a world in which “the proportion of undepressed to depressed people changes from ninety-nine to one to fifty-fifty” (5). In such a world, Will’s melancholizing would not be deemed aberrant behavior, but
merely an alternative mode of thought, a mechanism for pursuing a different type of knowledge. It is this approach to knowledge which Percy dramatizes through Will’s decision to wager his life in order to force God to appear.

Will makes the decision to push deeper into the despair. He is obsessed with his father’s suicide and manifesting signs of a peculiar mental disorder. The prospect of suicide is now a legitimate option, a bargaining chip. As he sits in his Mercedes, admiring the “weight and ugliness and beauty” of his Luger, he smiles, and shakes his head fondly. His father’s attempted murder-suicide appears to him in a new light. Alone in the car, he imagines himself speaking to his father, saying

Right, you said I will not put up with a life which is not life or death. I don’t have to and I won’t. Right, old mole, and if you were here in rich reborn Christian Carolina with its condos and 450 SELs and old folks rolling pills and cackling at Hee Haw, you wouldn’t put up with that either. (131-132)

The emergence of the new south triggered a physiological reaction in the younger Will of The Last Gentleman. The bulldozers and jackhammers that built the highways and cul-de-sacs of the modern suburban landscape intensified his detachment and his fugue states. Now, years later, he recognizes that his despair
is still connected to his attunement to the modern world, but once again he forges a communal bond which promises to help reorient him. His problem is hereditary, and his father’s attempt to take his life offers insight to Will about the track he should take.

For the older Barrett, anger and suicide offered an alternative to the death-in-life of the modern world. Still clutching the Luger and sitting inside his Mercedes, Will hits on the key to his father’s suicide. Will realizes that his father, a committed humanist with a stoic temperament who helped to liberate Buchenwald, was “possessed by anger, anger which in the end [he] turned on [himself]” (133). Will’s father faced the greatest horrors the twentieth century had to offer, and returned home to a society that was quickly forsaking the old order and old ways which had structured his family’s life for generations. His response was rejection. Still speaking to his father, Will continues to probe his motives. In the quiet of the car he says “You loved only death because for you what passed for life was really a death-in-life, which has no name and so is worse than death” (133). Like Will, the older Barrett is distraught by the absurdity of continuing to live in the modern world as if life is as it always was. Yet for the older Barrett, the only recourse was suicide. In a world that was quickly choosing to depart from his stoic, humanist code of honor, he chose an outright rejection of the world. He shot at Will as a warning and attempted to
shoot himself. Yet Will feels compelled to ask about an alternative, a different way of relating to the modern world. The “old mole…didn’t even bother to ask,” but Will, “if only from Episcopal rectitude and an Episcopal sense of form” decides that he must, at the very least, consider the possibility that his father’s suicide was, if justifiable, utterly wasted.

Will’s father’s developed an erotic attachment to death, a longing for annihilation and nothing as an alternative to the necessity of enduring death-in-life while inevitably hurtling toward one’s death. Though he failed to complete the act initially, years later he succeeded, this time in the attic while Will was at home. Still imagining himself speaking to his father, Will rants

And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself, the cold-steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck-you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world. (148-149)
In his father’s later, successful suicide, Will sees the “logical and ultimate act” of rejection, the endpoint of dread and a reasonable response to the prospect of nothingness. He even identifies himself with his father. His father, like Sutter, is attuned to the prospect of nothingness as he is and so the suicide appears as a road map, an act of defiance completed by a fellow member of the community of melancholiacs. The “brain cells which together faltered and fell short,” construed suicide as the ultimate little death, the only alternative to death-in-life. As a consequence they “flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world.” Will refuses to valorize his father’s suicide. His own grief at the loss of his father is coupled with his philosophical rejection of his father’s decision. The self-fellating imagery dramatizes the inward turning, rejection of the world that precedes suicide. Instead of union with another, intersubjectivity, his father chooses the solipsists way out. Will, on the other hand, experiences an intense curiosity at the peculiarity of his existence. His melancholia is not an erotic attachment to annihilation. It is, instead, the first step in his reorientation towards the outside world.

Will chooses another path. He writes to Sutter, explaining that he intends to improve on Pascal’s wager and force God to show his cards. He ventures down into Lost Cove Cave with a pocket full of sleeping pills and the intention to demand a sign from God or die. He even offers Sutter the chance to write up the
results of the experiment in a medical journal. The narrator makes it perfectly clear that Will has succumbed to a form of insanity, yet Will is arriving at exactly that point which Heidegger, and Percy, envisioned as a bottoming out. He is fully aware that the conditions under which he currently lives are intolerable. Like his father, Will exists in a state of death-in-life from which he cannot escape. To continue living is an unendurable prospect for him. Will’s dread is a suspicion that, at bottom, there is nothing for him to dread, but rather an arbitrary and pointless existence deprived of the old myths and the old means of living an honorable and accomplished life. His need to overcome this dread, to flush God into the open or come to terms with his absence, leads him into the cave. There, under the influence of sedatives and gradually starving himself, he slips in and out of hallucinogenic dreams, but receives no sign. Finally, he awakens after days of intermittent sleep to a toothache too painful to ignore. The painful sensation he experiences in the cave thrusts his body back into his thoughts. With little thought he is driven up and out, but in the process he gets lost, takes a wrong turn, and finds himself tumbling, seriously injured, through the vent that let’s cave air into the greenhouse home of Allie.
III. Astonishment

From the moment Wills crashes through the vines covering Allie’s vent, the novel takes a comedic turn. Will reemerges from the cave without receiving any answer or completing his suicide, but he does not care in his state. Allie, whose history as an escaped mental patient is punctuated by periods of withdrawal from community, refusing to speak, and becoming disoriented, is naturally more attuned to the peculiarities of life and language. When he falls through the vent, knocking himself unconscious, he is “a problem to be solved” (213), and she is an ideal person to solve it. Because of the amnesia induced by her electro-shock therapy, Allie views the world afresh when she arrives in Will’s town. Phrases on bumper stickers appear to her as mysteries. She must work to name things and identify her surroundings. She has to prioritize finding food and housing in a town filled with wealthy retirees and “leafers.” Though the amnesia gradually wears off, Allie is reentering life with the intent to retain her sovereignty. Rather than remain a pawn in her parents’ bid to gain control of her inheritance or a subject of Dr. Duk’s experiments and inquiries, Allie sets out to learn for herself how to live. Because she is incapable of using language initially, this newfound sovereignty is accompanied by a radical astonishment at the existence of things in her immanent sphere and her own capacity to name them, or receive the name for them. Her consciousness gradually expands with her
linguistic capacity, but she retains her sovereignty and her astonishment. Her mode of being-in-the-world is authentic, if, at first, primitive, and as it develops, she is gradually able to bring Will into tune with her and with his surroundings.

When will awakens he is still seriously injured, sick, and in need of professional help. Almost immediately, however, he finds himself able to connect with her in a way that he never has before. This starts simply, with the two of them sharing the daily responsibilities of the greenhouse, Allie tending the fire, Will confined to his bed but intently watching her. Quickly they begin to rely on one another. As Will tells her,

I accept what you’ve done for me and...I have other things to ask of you. I don’t mind asking you. There are things that need to be done and only you can do them. (244)

Will did not find his answer in the cave, but he tells Allie “At least I know what I have to do” (246) and he relies on her to help him do it. Will has forged a new bond with her. He can share in everyday tasks without slipping into abstraction. He doesn’t ponder killing himself for some time. He can focus on healing and helping Allie maintain the home they share. When he tries to support himself and leave the greenhouse, however, he collapses and Allie must again play the nurse. She hauls him back inside, strips him naked and removes her own clothes,
and warms him with her body heat. As he awakens to her, lying naked next to him, he is nearly overwhelmed by her immediacy and their intimacy. Though they don’t make love, they experience a connection that Allie thinks of as “a way of making love” (262).

In that moment of intense intimacy and immediacy, Will is not assaulted by his fugue states or his allergies or any other physical ailment. Instead he receives a rare moment of intersubjectivity and speaks to Allie using words like ‘shameful secret of success as a lawyer,’ ‘phony,’ ‘radar,’ ‘our new language,’ ‘this gift of yours and mine,’ ‘ours’ (this was her favorite), ‘being above things,’ ‘not being able to get back down to things’ (!), ‘how to reenter the world’ (?), ‘by God?’ ‘by her?’ (!!!!!), ‘your forgetting and my remembering,’ ‘Sutter,’ ‘Sutter was right,’ ‘Sutter was wrong,’ ‘Sutter Vaught.’ (262)

In this moment he can explain to her his theories about his radar and the noxious particles, his struggles to reenter the immanent world, and his preoccupation with Sutter’s philosophical outlook, but Percy’s summary rendering of this conversation, coupled by the utterly domestic conversations and events which bookend it in the text, make it an almost perfunctory step. These theories pale in comparison to his astonishment at Allie’s care for him, the details of the
greenhouse, and his engagement with the world around him. Will’s melancholy is replaced with a sense of wonder. What is astounding is his ability to use words like “ours” and “yours and mine.” He is tuned into his surroundings in a fundamentally different way, no longer attempting to study the world and engineer his life, Will is living out a new mode of Being-with-the-world.

As the novel draws to a close, Will continues to experience some symptoms akin to his earlier days. His condition is diagnosed as a rare pH imbalance and he is forced, momentarily, to take up residence in an elderly care home. He has a serious medical condition which, despite some suggestions that it may go away, continues to plague his life. Yet what truly enables him to reenter the world is not the medicine that balances his pH. Rather what heals him is his love for Allie, his connections with the elderly residents of the retirement home, and his desire to start his life anew. For the first time in his life he is radically astonished at the things, vorhanden, in his immediate sphere. The world appears mysterious to him. His concerns about the strange correlation between twentieth century man’s triumph over his environment and his descent into barbarism and violence remain but they are subjugated to the more central question of why he and Allie and the whole cast of minor characters that surround them exist at all.
Will’s fascination with the existence of things, juxtaposed against his melancholic preoccupation with nothing, is an alternative way of tuning into the world. This new *Stimmung* enables him to engage with the immanent. Rather than sitting in caves looking for signs of God’s existence, or pondering the “singularity of things,” Will revels in his capacity to connect with Allie. He marvels at her body’s quirks, her neo-logisms, her wonder at the world. His search is not over. In his final conversation with Father Weatherbee in the attic of the retirement home, he reiterates his questions about why there is so much melancholia, so much death-in-life, among the people of the wealthiest civilizations on the face of the earth (359). The threat of annihilation and the possibility that the center cannot hold is still very much in the front of Will’s mind. Yet this fear differs from dread because, unlike his father, he has decided to seek new answers in the peculiarity of his unique predicament. He asks, his heart leaping with “a secret joy” if it is possible that the answer he received in the cave was not ambiguous or merely absent, but rather that his love for Allie, and the entirely different mode of living it ushered in, was that answer. He asks “Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver?”
Works Cited


