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The Last Gentlemen: Southern Conservative Superfluity and the Work of William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor

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Dedication

To Meredith, for everything and more.

To Sallie Jo, that you might one day come across this and perhaps understand something about your daddy.

To Mama, God rest your soul, for teaching me to love books.

Soli Dei gloria.

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Abstract

This dissertation proposes that a robust, serious treatment of Southern conservatism can provide readers with effective ways to interpret works of Southern literature. Southern writers have always dealt with issues we might identify as "conservative," and scholars have shown us three typical ways of Southern writers approaching conservatism. First, some writers have treated conservatism as one of many characteristics of the South; their treatments of conservatism have been part of their descriptive project. Other writers have used conservatism for more didactic, political purposes, whether that be showing the South's sins or arguing that the South's conservative character makes it a distinct, and superior, part of the modern American Republic. I argue that we can see a fourth means for how some writers utilize Southern conservatism. Some writers feel a sense of deep and significant alienation from the South, yet they recognize something in it that keeps them from flatly decrying or repudiating it. Many of these writers find in the Southern conservative tradition a means for making sense of how to live in this alienating, disorienting world. But to find the good in the Southern tradition, these writers must critically engage and reinterpret the Southern conservative tradition, taking lessons from its core tenets and applying them to particular exigencies, challenges, and situations in which they find themselves. Ultimately, because these authors are arguing not for a return to the past, but for a critical reappraisal of the usefulness of the past in terms of present exigencies, they must face the possibility of their project's failure. Further, because Southern conservatism represents a way of thinking so radically at odds with the American vision of progress and infinite possibility, these writers must also face an-

other reality—even if they can succeed in re-interpreting the Southern conservative tradition for the exigencies of their current moment, they are inevitably superfluous, vis-à-vis the culture in which they live.

This project examines three such writers: William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor. These writers navigate their own sense of superfluity and their own idiosyncratic reinterpretations of the Southern conservative tradition in order to find spaces of existential stability and meaning in a changed and changing South. I set up the terms of the argument in the introduction, including providing a brief overview of what "Southern conservatism" is. I then proceed to analyze William Alexander Percy's memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*; works from both Peter Taylor's early and late periods (including his Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *A Summons to Memphis*); and two of Walker Percy's novels, *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*, in terms of how these writers reinterpretations of the Southern conservative tradition allows them to arrive at what intellectual historian and rhetorician Richard Weaver calls a "theory for living" within the contexts of a changed and changing South that marks individuals like these writers as increasingly superfluous.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

> "...a hall hung with splendid tapestries in which no one would care to live; but from them we can learn something of how to live." Richard Weaver, *The Southern Tradition at Bay*

In the second decade of the 21st century, the history of the American South continues to be written, at least in part, in terms of its distinctiveness vis-à-vis the rest of United States. A significant portion of this distinctiveness is connected to the South's conservatism. Despite immense demographic and economic changes over the past forty years, changes that have made Southern states look and work in ways that are more similar to their Midwestern and Eastern counterparts than not, our national punditry still regards Virginia and North Carolina's recent emergence as "purple" states an intriguing, and even surprising, electoral phenomenon. Yet on the local and state levels, even these two states are often as politically conservative as their neighbors in the Deep South. Even such simplistic analysis illustrates that the South, even in the second decade of the 21st century, continues to be "conservative," and to be a Southerner continues to demand contending with the effects of conservatism on a person's own life, no matter her or his individual beliefs.

To say that Southerners contend with conservatism in their own lives is not a particularly insightful or original thought, yet the ways in which Southern artists have dealt with the conservatism of their native section forms one of the most intriguing aspects of their work. This is especially true if we understand that conservatism is not merely a political phenomenon, but rather representative of a broad range of socio-cultural thinking. Contending with Southern conservatism has long been a feature of Southern literature, finding real significance after the Civil War. That conflict's undoing of the old order produced a South that necessarily had to question the direction of its social, cultural, and economic development. As liberalization of some sort was almost a certain, the central questions for the South after the Civil War were what, if any, aspects of the old conservative order would be retained. While

no subsequent event had an effect as profound as the Civil War, a steady series of challenges to the South's economic, social, and political orders would continue to cause Southerners to ask questions about how to deal with what remained of the region's conservative heritage. The literary artist plays a paramount role in both examining these questions and investigating the consequences of the answers.

Treatments of conservatism have appeared in three major ways in Southern literature since Reconstruction, ways that critics have long recognized and dealt with through a variety of sophisticated approaches. First, Southern writers have examined the South's conservatism as one of the many features that makes up the region's (often ironic) character. This descriptive approach seems to be the primary mode through which the majority of Southern writers explore the South's conservatism, and is seen in the work of its central literary figures—writers like Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor. Secondly, some authors have approached Southern conservatism by clearly articulating and caustically attacking its connections to social injustice; this progressive approach results in the politically-charged work of Lillian Smith, Richard Wright, and others. Thirdly, some writers have produced works that fully embrace the conservative aspects of the South, dogmatically putting Dixie, and its ideas, into stark contrast with what they see as Yankee ideologies: finance capitalism, centralized governmental power, and quixotic "social engineering" experiments, amongst others. This ideologically conservative approach is seen in the work of writers like Thomas Dixon and Donald Davidson.

This dissertation presents a fourth possibility for how Southern writers can and have dealt with the South's conservative aspects in their work: in some cases, authors have engaged Southern conservatism not as something epiphenomenal to the experience of Southern life or as something with primarily political consequences, but rather as a robust and multifaceted tradition that, when approached with sober and critical assessment, can positively shape how individual Southerners understand

their often precarious placement within their communities. For these writers, Southern conservatism provides a means for creating a space of existential stability and meaning—that is, by engaging Southern conservatism, they are able to find ways of making sense of their places within a South from which they often feel a deep sense of alienation. The sources and manifestations of these writers' senses of alienation are largely idiosyncratic. But despite this, they all show a thoughtful, critical connection with the foundational tenets of Southern conservatism—and not a passive acceptance of some particular iteration of the tradition tied to a particular moment in the South's history—as a way of resisting the existentially destructive consequences of their alienation.

To be clear, I am not arguing that theirs is necessarily *conservative* literature, work that attempts to promote partisan values or ideological purity. Their work may ultimately present Southern conservatism as something untenable in light of new and ever-changing circumstances. Nevertheless, works of this sort examine the South's conservative tradition as a primary, central concern—precisely because of its critical power, something I'll treat shortly. This differentiates them from writers of the descriptive mode, who treat conservatism as simply one of many features of Southern life. For these same authors, Southern conservatism is not foregrounded so as to show its very real evils and act as a means to calling for social justice; in this, they differ from those who take the progressive approach. And finally, unlike authors who demonstrate a more straightforwardly ideological engagement with conservatism, the writers I'm considering here are concerned with how the foundational logics of Southern conservatism show the tradition to be dynamic and useful in ever-changing circumstances, rather than something that advocates for return of various aspects of the *ancien régime*. This project deals with three authors who produce work that examines the existentially-useful foundations of Southern conservatism through this

radical[1] approach: William Alexander Percy, whose memoir *Lanterns on the Levee* is a standard text of the conservative South; Walker Percy, whose work is generally considered in terms of science, Roman Catholicism, and existentialist philosophy, rather than cultural conservatism; and Peter Taylor, whose fiction has often been problematically dismissed as merely presenting the decline of the Southern aristocracy in an overly-romanticized, politically disengaged manner.

In some ways, associating both Percys and Peter Taylor with the South's conservative tradition is an unsurprising critical move. After all, these three men came from large, established families of wealth and privilege, with ancestors who were officers in the Confederate army and powerful and influential political figures in the states of Mississippi and Tennessee. Further, all three writers were not far removed from these ancestors, and connected to them through living memory—either of the writers themselves or of members of their immediate families. As such, the influence of these ancestors upon the cultural worlds that produced the authors was robust and vital. It was inevitable that these three writers would have been deeply affected by the conservative tradition represented by their ancestors, and while they certainly could have chosen to not engage it in their work, or to treat it in ways similar to writers in the other three aforementioned categories, Taylor and the Percys directly engaged Southern conservatism in attempts at making sense of the effects of this tradition on both their own lives and the lives of others living in a rapidly-changing South.

There are clear and important rationales behind a desire to engage this tradition critically, instead of participating in an outright rejection or embrace of it. On the one hand, the Southern conservative tradition provides these men with some utility and value—existential, societal, political, economic, cultural, aesthetic, or spiritual—that they find worth defending and preserving. Yet, all three writers are also faced

[1]I here use "radical" in its appropriately most fundamental sense, of something that is at the root (*radix* in Latin).

with circumstances that make the unquestioned, continued, and stable existence of this tradition—or at least the particular instances of the tradition their individual Souths would have made readily available to them—exceptionally difficult. William Alexander Percy was a mature adult during the between-the-world-wars decline of the aristocracy and rise of the middle class. This phenomenon made traditionalism increasingly untenable as a force for shaping political, economic, and cultural change; such a situation was profoundly at odds with the world of his youth and young manhood. Further, his sexuality was in stark contrast with the prescriptions for manhood allowed by the Southern conservative tradition. For him to be both a conservative Southerner and a gay man, the author of *Lanterns on the Levee* would need to redefine aspects of Southern conservatism, especially in terms of high-class masculinity. Similarly, Walker Percy and Peter Taylor were faced with the appearance of a postmodern, and post-Southern, America, as well as a host of challenges to the traditional ethics of the South. For them to continue positing that the Southern tradition held value, they would have to reinterpret it in terms of these new conditions.

Of course, to understand how these writers utilize and engage this tradition, we must first have some sense of what Southern conservatism actually is. Thus, before moving any further, I will provide a broad definition of Southern conservatism and identify its most salient features. After sketching these, I return to examining the consequences of this tradition for writers like Taylor and the Percys, and explore how their uses of it provide us with a means for understanding their work and their roles as men of letters in the 20$^{\text{th}}$-century South.

Theorizing Southern Conservatism

Obviously, a full treatment of Southern conservatism is beyond the scope of the current project. As a tradition, as opposed to a political platform or clearly-articulated ideology, Southern conservatism has many different facets and a diverse

set of perspectives, making it difficult to create a universally-applicable definition for the tradition. Nevertheless, there are key ideals and presuppositions at the core of any Southern conservative perspective, whether it be political, artistic, or cultural. Drawing primarily on the work of three 20th-century American thinkers—Russell Kirk, the post-War popularizer of Edmund Burke; Richard Weaver, a rhetorician, student of the Agrarians, and Southern cultural critic; and Eugene Genovese, a Marxist historian who studied the South and the plantation economy extensively—I here sketch out the broad contours of the Southern conservative tradition and identify its key features.

As with any political or socio-cultural perspective, a precise definition of Southern conservatism is difficult to produce. This difficulty is exacerbated by the significant changes in the meaning of the term "conservatism" throughout the twentieth century, especially the late-century rise of Ronald Reagan's free-market oriented, bourgeois variant, which forms the most readily available example of conservative thought in our day. Reagan's political program differs immensely from that of writers and thinkers traditionally associated with southern conservatism, such as Allen Tate, Richard Weaver, and M.E. Bradford, among others[2]. Despite the difficulty in defining Southern conservatism, we can usefully understand it as a variant of a broader Anglophone traditionalism, shaped by the South's socioeconomic and political history.

English historian Michael Oakeshott provides a useful starting point for understanding the Anglophone traditionalism out of which Southern conservatism grows. In "On Being Conservative," a 1956 University of Swansea lecture that later appeared in his essay collection, *Rationalism in Politics*, Oakeshott insists that conservatism

[2]This difference is expressed by Bradford himself, who, in the preface to *Remembering Who We Are: Observations of a Southern Conservative*, notes that the "distinction between a conservative who is also a Southerner and a Southern conservative is. . . a very serious distinction" (Bradford, "Preface" xiv).

"is not a creed or a doctrine, but a disposition" (Oakeshott 407), a manner of thinking about the world and acting within it. At the base of conservatism is a fundamental awareness of human frailty, and consequently, a deep-seeded skepticism of systematic change, as changes are always initiated by flawed human beings. Despite this skepticism, the same belief in human frailty nevertheless suggests that change is necessary to correct social, cultural, and personal failings. Change, however, must always be evaluated, questioned, and critically examined. In this, the conservative is neither the reactionary, who desires a return to an idealized *status quo ante*, nor the progressive, who envisions and works to bring about some abstract social and political end.[3]

Oakeshott refers to change as "innovation," and brings several significant observations to bear on conservative considerations of it:

> First, innovation entails certain loss and possible gain, therefore, the onus of proof, to show that the proposed change may be expected to be on the whole beneficial, rests with the would-be innovator. Secondly, [the conservative] believes that the more closely an innovation resembles growth... the less likely it is to result in a preponderance of loss. Thirdly, he thinks that an innovation which is a response to some specific defect... is more desirable than one which springs from a notion of a generally improved condition of human circumstances, and is far more desirable than one generated by a vision of perfection... Fourthly, he favours a slow rather than a rapid pace, and pauses to observe current consequences and make appropriate adjustments. And lastly, he believes the occasion to be important... (411-412)

This description suggests that the Oakeshottian vision of conservatism is marked by a sober analysis of the gains that will result from "innovations" against the losses

[3]Traditionalist conservatism understands both the reactionary and the progressive to be operating from an essentially gnostic teleology, about which more will be said momentarily.

that are the inevitable result of abandoning the status quo. Further, it sees changes that respond to specific problems in particular contexts, and not those that seek to effect change at the level of abstract principles, as the most desirable and useful sorts of innovations—and the only really compelling reasons to pursue change.

Oakeshott's intellectual sibling, the American writer Russell Kirk, reasons that conservatism "offers no universal pattern of politics for adoption everywhere. . . social institutions must differ considerably from nation to nation, since any land's politics must be the product of that country's dominant religion, ancient customs, and historic experience." As such, conservatism "is no ideology" (Kirk, "Introduction" xiv-xv). In the words W. Wesley McDonald, Kirk's former research assistant, conservatism replaces ideology with a "highly developed sense of historical consciousness." This is in contrast with the thought of liberals and reactionaries, whose thinking is fundamentally ideological, particularly with respect to the past. McDonald notes that, for liberals, "the past consists only of the hoary old days of socially inequitable institutions, injustice, superstition, and ignorance. Traditions are regarded merely as obstatcles to be overcome in the march of mankind toward ever greater technical, scientific, and social achievements." The reactionary, who "opposes all change," is simply the other side of the same ideological coin. In McDonald's thinking, the historical consciousness that informs conservative thought recognizes the inevitability, and sometimes necessity, of change, and counsels the conservative in supporting or resisting it. McDonald explains that whether "the conservative should be an advocate of reform or an opponent of change depends on the specific circumstances. Change can either renew a society or bring about its ruination" (McDonald 86-87). Believing this, the conservative insists that those who enact social, cultural, political, and economic changes—Oakeshott's "innovations"—must recognize the great variety in human societies, cultures, and political and economic systems. Innovations built with regard for what Kirk labels the "principle of variety" thus avoid "the narrowing

uniformity and deadening egalitarianism of radical systems" (Kirk, "Introduction" xvii).

This "principle of variety" is necessary for understanding how conservative individuals understand both their respective societies and their relationships to them. Kirk notes that all the conservative "reasonably can expect is a tolerably ordered, just, and free society, in which some evils, maladjustments, and suffering continue to lurk" (xviii). This statement suggests that, for Kirk, a just society is not one in which all individuals have equal access to all forms of political and economic opportunity, and where steps are taken to remedy the unequal access experienced by certain groups. Kirk would interpret a society that programmatically attempts to rectify inequalities as *unjust*, as programmatic remedies almost certainly necessitate coercive actions to be taken against certain individuals. In this way of thinking, justice is inseparable from freedom and order. A "just" society is one in which all individuals are treated with a minimum of coercion, thus securing freedom, and with equality before the law—meaning that individuals have legal judgments and frameworks applied to them identically, despite differences in their backgrounds or circumstances—to ensure the sustainability of social order and harmony.

Of course, this thinking about the principle of variety can have profoundly negative consequences—students of the American South will recognize "tradition" and appeals to southern particularity as concepts used to justify black disenfranchisement, for instance. Nevertheless, Kirk's description of the conservative understanding of society effectively presents a recognition that all forms of social or political order are inevitably flawed. After all, any such system is as necessarily imperfect as the flawed humans who create it. Recognizing this, adherence to the principle of variety Kirk describes could very well provide conditions for resolving issues of evil, maladjustment, and suffering by examining the contexts that produce these issues, and understanding them as rooted in particular social, political, and economic realities. If

we understand the "principle of variety" in this pragmatic way, we see the flaw in interpreting conservatism as monolithic and lacking dynamism. Nevertheless, that this same conservative pragmatism often excuses a fair amount of inertia in permitting the existence of social ills is undeniable, and many of Kirk's critics argue against his traditionalist version of conservatism precisely because it may do too little to respond to changing circumstances.

In other words, the conservative adherence to tradition—the broad set of beliefs, norms, and historical circumstances which define societies in a particularistic manner—is both its most promising and limiting feature. Tradition both allows conservatism to engage the specificities and contexts of a moment in a dynamic fashion, while simultaneously creating conditions that can produce ossified, and even morally corrupt, perspectives. McDonald explores this tension:

> Maintaining this delicate balance between tradition and modernity creates especially complex and bewildering problems for the thoughtful conservative. The traditions venerated by conservatives, as [the late Cornell University professor of government] Clinton Rossiter rightly pointed out, are continually being overthrown by the intrusion of new institutions and arrangements... [Conservative axioms] reflect a predisposition against change [but] do not qualify as philosophical arguments. By themselves, they provide no standard, other than to caution against change, by which the statesman can discriminate between what must be preserved and what must be reformed. If the conservative position toward the problem of modernity amounts to no more than blind resistance to change, as Rossiter suggests, then conservatism truly is, despite Kirk's disclaimers, an ideology—a set of rigidly held, a priori abstractions. (McDonald 87, 88-89)

McDonald goes on to describe various criticisms of Kirk and Anglophone tradition-

alism from both the Left and Right. While there are clear and inevitable differences between these various critiques, all share trepidations over the axiomatic nature of the perspective of traditionalist conservative thinkers like Kirk. Lacking a coherent philosophical viewpoint—other than a pragmatic suspicion of change—traditionalism, McDonald notes, may very well be thought to conceal "its own form of ethical relativism" (93).

Much of the tension in Kirk's presentation of Anglo-American traditionalism can be explained by noting that he is providing a broad and general view of a perspective that has specificity and context at its core. Kirk's most significant work, *The Conservative Mind*, features explorations of how figures as disparate as both Presidents Adams, John C. Calhoun, Benjamin Disraeli, Nathaniel Hawthorne and John Henry Cardinal Newman are all representatives of the book's eponymous subject. This variety perhaps makes much more than axiomatic coherence in conservative thought all but impossible. To understand *the* conservative mind, it seems, it is necessary to understand the mind of a particular conservative, in his or her particular contexts. It seems preposterous to imagine John Adams and John C. Calhoun as political allies. Nevertheless, both exhibit clear propensities for valuing tradition, and its implications for the development of their particular societies. In this, Kirk would have us understand these two very different political thinkers as both conservatives, in that each is opposed to liberal notions of teleological progress and reactionary, unconditional resistance to change, and that such opposition is based in each man's understanding of how the past may be consequential for their individual presents and futures.

This particularlist, contextualized vision of conservatism has significant corollaries in the arguments the German political philosopher Eric Voegelin puts forth in a 1951 series of lectures, later collected and published as *The New Science of Politics*. Voegelin's thinking in these lectures bears significant consequences on this project; as it is quite difficult, a brief summation of Voegelin's argument here, and its ramifica-

tions for our understanding of Southern conservatism, is in order. In these lectures, Voegelin asserts that we cannot understand the political—the ways in which societies are organized—without understanding man as situated within particular contexts, especially metaphysical contexts that illustrate his connection to transcendent principles of order that exist throughout human history. Voegelin is here obviously echoing Aristotle's notion of man as ζῷον πολιτικόν (*zoon polticon*), the political animal, and is further asserting that a true politics—a science of man—must take into account the transcendent standards by which the *zoon politicon* comes to understand himself and his placement within an orderly universe outside of his own self. Voegelin thus describes his project as following the "Aristotelian procedure of examining symbols as they occur in reality" (Voegelin 114). By "symbols," he means abstract concepts (like freedom, liberty, democracy, "the people," etc.) that have particular references and meanings within the myriad historical realities of man and society throughout history. While Voegelin argues that such a project is the only means by which one can construct a truly neutral, methodological science of politics, he recognizes that such a metaphysical anthropology is difficult to articulate in modernity. For Voegelin, this difficulty is the result of a thousand-year progression away from understanding man as part of a transcendent order outside of and beyond himself, and rather towards a vision of man as self-sufficiently atomistic.

Borrowing the language of an early Christian heresy, Voegelin suggests that the rise of modernity—at least in the West—is the long transition from man as *zoon politicon* to man as Gnostic. His use of the theological term is based in two critical recognitions. First, theological Gnosticism was based on the idea of the innate goodness of the self, and the need of the individual to recover that innate goodness through the cultivation of secret knowledge—γνῶσις (*gnosis*)—that revealed the cruelty and wickedness of the demonic Creator of the universe. The theological Gnostic desires to divorce himself from the metaphysical orderliness of orthodox faith, which he sees as

necessarily restrictive and oppressive. Modern man engages in a similar project when his idealism, and his own abstracted vision of the good, become the sole basis for his political thought. Secondly, Voegelin identifies the work of the 12$^{\text{th}}$-century Christian mystic Joachim of Fiore as the source of this move towards gnostic modernity. For Voegelin, "Joachim broke with the Augustinian conception of a Christian society" in which man understood himself in orderly relation with both the state and God by applying

> the symbol of the Trinity to the course of history. In his speculation the history of mankind had three periods corresponding to the three persons of the Trinity. The first period of the world was the age of the Father; with the appearance of Christ began the age of the Son. But the age of the Son will not be the last one; it will be followed by a third age, of the Spirit. The three ages were characterized as intelligible increases of spiritual fulfillment. The first age unfolded the life of the layman; the second age brought the active contemplation of the priest; the third age would bring the perfect spiritual life of the monk. (178)

Joachim's tripartite structure of history gives us our familiar conception of Ancient, Medieval, and Modern; we will also recognize other familiar "variations of this symbol" like "Turgot's and Comte's theory of a sequence of theological, metaphysical, and scientific phases; Hegel's dialectic of the three stages of freedom and self-reflective spiritual fulfillment; the Marxian dialectic of the three stages of primitive communism, class society, and final communism," among others (ibid.).

Importantly, the Joachimite Age of the Spirit represents a time when the individual will have such direct contact with the Godhead that the orderly structures that have always governed such contact will become superfluous; each individual will become not only his own priest, but his own Church, and (adapting the language of Thomas Cranmer in the *Book of Common Prayer*) his own Mediator and Ad-

vocate. For Voegelin, such a project is nothing more than Gnosticism by another name. In its post-Enlightenment political version, the individual replaces this transcendent metaphysical order with his own abstract, idealized vision of society. For Voegelin, such an abstracted, essentially gnostic view of social order finds its most definitive articulation in mid-20th century totalitarianism. Rather than being a result of totalitarianism, Gnosticism is the natural end of a modernity that has exchanged transcendent visions of metaphysical order, with a solid grounding in the particulars of historical contexts, for the allure of abstract idealism—Gnosticism, in other words, produces totalitarianism.

As a variant of the traditionalist conservatism espoused by Kirk and Oakeshott, Southern conservatism necessarily resists the gnostic impulses of modernity; indeed it is feasible—and even productive—to think of Southern conservatism as anti- (or even ante-) modern. In this, it differentiates itself from the abstracted goods of both the American Left and Right, whether it be "social justice" or "individual liberty" and "the market." In the analysis of Southern conservatism, both of these perspectives are attempts at what Voegelin famously identifies as "immanentizing the eschaton;" that is, making the final, perfected stage of history something to be realized in the here and now, making real an idealized vision of society that the traditionalist sees as impossible outside of the finished work of God. For the Southern conservative, such work does not to consider the symbols which constitute a society, and thus fails to examine them as they appear in reality.

Having considered the abstract logic and conceptual underpinnings of Southern conservatism, I now turn to a rehearsal of its practical features. Kirk provides an excellent point to this consideration, as he devotes an entire chapter of *The Conservative Mind* to Southern conservatism. Through exploring the thought of his exemplary Southern conservatives, John Randolph of Roanoke—an individual who is of great importance for this present study—and John C. Calhoun, Kirk attempts to define

conservative "political policy in the Southern states." At the outset, Kirk identifies Southern conservatism as "rooted in four impulses: a half-indolent distaste for alteration; a determination to preserve an agricultural society; a love of local rights; and a sensitivity about the negro question—the 'peculiar institution' before the Civil War, and the color-line thereafter." While this fourth "impulse" is the most infamous feature of Southern conservatism, Kirk immediately makes clear that all four are inseparable:

> During the early years of the Republic, the former three problems much overshadowed the last; but by 1806, the dilemma of negro slavery began to creep into the foreground of national politics, and by 1824, John Randolph demonstrated that the problem of slavery was linked inescapably with loose or strict construction of the constitution, state powers, and internal improvements. From the latter year onward, therefore, the slavery controversy confuses and blurs any analysis of political principle in the South: the historian can hardly discern where, for instance, real love for state rights leaves off and interested pleading for slave-propery commences. (Kirk, *Conservative Mind* 131)

Antebellum Southern conservatives were obviously concerned about their economic investment in the perpetuation of the slave system, and this figures into their defense of it. But as Kirk argues, we cannot isolate the economic interests of these individuals from their broader political and social principles.

Interestingly, the work of Richard Weaver, whom McDonald acknowledges as one of Kirk's most significant critics, provides a useful expansion of Kirk's definition of Southern conservatism.[4] This is especially useful as Kirk seemingly eulogizes South-

[4]In discussing Kirk's critics, McDonald notes that criticisms leveled at Kirk's intellectual polestar, the Irish parliamentarian Edmund Burke, can be inferred as implicitly critiquing the American writer's presentation of conservatism as traditionalism enmeshed in modern contexts. Weaver

ern conservatism as more or less dying in 1865—"No political philosophy has had a briefer span of triumph than that accorded Randolph's and Calhoun's." (Kirk, *Conservative Mind* 160)—and sees it as by-and-large replaced by reactionary demagoguery.[5] Weaver's work, however, provides a means for understanding Southern conservatism as a vital political philosophy even after Appomattox, a fact largely due to his more precise treatment of tradition. By placing Weaver's work alongside

provides a serious attack on Burke's status as a conservative icon. While he is perhaps best remembered as a student of the South and its tradition, Weaver's academic work was primarily in rhetoric, and arguably his most significant contribution to this field was his 1953 *The Ethics of Rhetoric*. This book's discussion of Edmund Burke and the shortcomings of traditionalism provide a basis for understanding the limitations of Kirk's assessment of southern conservatism. In reviewing the "chief sources of argument recognized by the classical rhetoricians," Weaver identifies three: argument from genus, argument from similitude, and argument from circumstance. This last type is the hallmark of Burkean rhetoric (Weaver, *Rhetoric* 56-67). Weaver describes argument from circumstance as "the nearest of all arguments to purest expediency. This argument merely reads the circumstances—the 'facts standing around'—and accepts them as coercive, or allows them to dictate the decision" (57). For him, this kind of argumentation is essentially flawed, as it holds to neither clear philosophical underpinnings nor promotes some idea of the good. The argument from circumstance thus invites against itself the charge of mere pragmatism at best, and crass relativism at worst.

This recognition causes Weaver to question Burke's status as the fountainhead of modern conservative thought:

> Burke is widely respected as a conservative who was intelligent enough to provide a solid philosophical foundations for his conservatism. It is perfectly true that many of his observations upon society have a conservative basis; but if one studies the kind of argument which Burke regularly employed when at grips with concrete policies, one discovers a strong addiction to the argument from circumstance... [which is] the argument philosophically appropriate to the liberal. Indeed, one can go much further and say that it is the argument fatal to conservatism. However much Burke eulogized tradition and fulminated against the French Revolution, he was, when judged by what we are calling aspect of argument, very far from being a conservative; and we suggest here that a man's method of argument is a truer index of his beliefs that his explicit profession of principles. (58)

Weaver's general purpose in *The Ethics of Rhetoric* is not to evaluate conservative policies or ideas. But in exploring the structure of Burke's argumentation, Weaver damningly undermines Burke's status as the father of modern Anglophone conservatism. While crediting the "conservative basis" of many of Burke's ideas and positions, that his perspectives lack principle—other than a loosely-defined adherence to "tradition"—leads Weaver to conclude that Burke's thought is only consequentially, and not fundamentally, conservative. In his concluding remarks about Burke, Weaver notes that while Burke "has left many wonderful materials which [conservatives] should assimilate," these are the results not of conservative principles, but rather are merely "auxiliary rhetorical appeals" (83). For Weaver, Burke indeed takes conservative positions, and argues for them admirably—but that he substitutes pragmatism for principle makes the basis of his conservatism fundamentally suspect.

[5]Kirk lists the infamous Mississippi senator Theodore Bilbo as his exemplar of race-baiting Southern reactionary-ism, which Kirk seemingly sees as the lamentable norm in Southern thought in the 20th century.

the general conservative principles posited by Oakeshott and Kirk, their particularistic, context-oriented description of how these principles manifest in the South, and the idea of Southern conservative resistance to gnostic modernity suggested by Voegelin's thought, we arrive at a solid understanding of both the features and conceptual underpinnings of Southern conservatism.

Few works describe the social, political, and cultural history of the South as well as Weaver's *The Southern Tradition at Bay*. While this book makes overtures toward understanding the experiences of liberals and African Americans in the South, Weaver is by and large thinking through the "tradition" of the conservative white South, both before and after the Civil War. In the first chapter of this work, Weaver asserts that traditional Southern thought derives from a "fourfold root," and spends much of that opening chapter exploring this root in detail. Weaver's description is lengthy; fortunately, historian John J. Langdale provides us with a useful and tidy summary:

> The first [aspect of this fourfold root] was a feudal theory of society that was patterned after European models and which enabled the South to maintain a stable social order. The second was a code of chivalry which enforced distinctions and established a hierarchy of rulers and ruled. The third was the southern adaptation of the ancient concept of the gentleman which cultivated both the 'gentleman scholar' and the 'political soldier.' The fourth was the South's 'older religiousness,' which Weaver described as an orthodox pre-modern religious orientation marked by an acceptance of the mystery of existence and a resistance to rational inquiry into matters of faith. (Langdale 90-91)

Throughout the remainder of *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, Weaver expands upon his initial description of this fourfold root, and explores the practical, historical, and intellectual ramifications of it for southern culture. While this book is nearly unparalleled in its perceptive explorations of the conservative South, it is too large

and complex to be treated sufficiently in the present context. Fortunately, many of Weaver's central ideas from that work also appear in his essays; 1964's "The Southern Tradition" is especially useful.

In that essay, Weaver neither enumerates nor restates the "fourfold root." He does, however, explore various aspects of the "southern tradition" that reveal this root in useful detail. He describes the South as a "determinate thing," defined by a complex "unity" that forms the South into a "nation within a nation" (Weaver, "The Southern Tradition" 210). Perhaps the foremost aspect of this unity is what Weaver identifies as the persistence of European cultural norms in the South; these norms include pre-Enlightenment beliefs in hierarchy, order, duty, honor, mystery, and human imperfectability. The persistence of these traditional norms also helps explain the differences and antipathies between North and South: "The South retained an outlook which was characteristically European while the North was developing in a direction away from this—was becoming more American, you might say" (212), that is, more democratic, individualistic, and optimistic.

As it is presented in this essay, the South's European outlook is at the core of its other characteristics, and this fact is reinforced by the southern experience in the Civil War. After describing the South's "martial pride" both before and after Appomattox, Weaver notes that the experience of war and Reconstruction made Southerners

> the first Americans ever to be subject to invasion, conquest, and military dictation. In estimating the Southern mind it is most important to realize that no other section of America has been through this kind of experience. In fact it is not supposed to be part of the American story. The American presents himself to the world as ever progressing, ever victorious, and irresistible. The American of the South cannot do this. He has tasted what no good American is supposed to ever have tasted, namely the cup of defeat... This circumstance has the effect of making the mentality of

> the Southerner again a foreign mentality—or a mentality which he shares in respect to this experience with most of the peoples of the world but does not share with the victorious American of the North and West. He is an outsider in his own country. (217-18)

In this account, Southerners know deprivation and human frailty in a way antithetical to the American mythos; of course, it should be noted that Weaver's concern here is largely with the experience of the conservative, white South—Southern blacks, as well as the various native peoples who first populated the South, experienced humiliation. Despite this caveat, the fact remains that the experience of Southerners of all races has been fundamentally different than the American *ideal* of endless opportunity, progress, prosperity, and cultural and military invincibility.

Weaver makes clear that, as a result of this difference, the South presents an alternate ideal of what it means to be American, based in the South's understanding of human nature and epistemology. This understanding also has consequences for how the individual Southerner makes sense of his place in the natural world:

> The Southerner tends to look upon nature as something which is given and something which is finally inscrutable. This is equivalent to saying that he looks upon it as the creation of a Creator. There follows from this attitude an important deduction, which is that man has a duty of veneration toward nature and the natural. Nature is not something to be fought, conquered and changed according to human whims. To some extent, of course, it has to be used. But what man should seek in regard to nature is not a complete dominion but a *modus vivendi*. . . man is not the lord of creation, with an omnipotent will, but a part of creation, with limitations, who ought to observe a decent humility in the face of the inscrutable. (221)

While there is certainly a connection to a belief in the Divine in this statement, Weaver does not claim that the southerner needs a clearly articulated religious belief system, or even to profess any sort of "faith" outside of a belief in man being necessarily limited. At issue here is a sense of man's weakness and finiteness in an awesome and inscrutable universe; this forms the core of what Weaver terms "the South's older religiousness" in *The Southern Tradition at Bay*.[6]

A consequence of man understanding his place in this manner is how he makes sense of progress. The Southerner questions progress, and is thus connected to the broader skepticism put forth by traditionalist conservative thinkers like Oakeshott and Kirk, as well as Voegelin's anti-gnostic vision of society. While the positions of Kirk and Oakeshott can be understood as pragmatic deference to the "principle of variety" or calculated responses to the gain and loss that result from any "innovation," Weaver follows Voegelin in taking a more abstract approach, insisting that the Southern suspicion of progress "stems from a different conception of man's proper role in life" (222). Quoting Ransom, Weaver summarizes the Southern view of progress: Southerners are suspicious of progress precisely because "it can never define its end. It never sits down to contemplate, and ask, what is the good life?" Progress is "activity for the sake of activity... making things so that you will be able to make more things. And regardless of how much of it you have, you are never any nearer your goal, because there is no goal" (223). Progress is a tautology that does not take into account man's proper—and properly limited—place in the universe. For the Southerner, progress is only to be embraced if it supports the pursuit of the "good life," the Classical *summum bonum*. This, in turn, is necessarily connected to the broader conservative epistemology of the Southerner. Limited both by man's finitude and, consequentially, by his flawed ability to perfectly conceive of his place in the

[6]In this, Weaver shows the influence of his mentor John Crowe Ransom, whose *God Without Thunder: An Unorthodox Defense of Orthodoxy* promotes the necessity of man understanding his place in the universe austerely, whatever his individual religious (un)belief.

world, the good life must be contextualized in a particular individual's or society's contexts. The Southern conservative sees progress as arrested by this fact, in that he sees an essentially flawed and impossibly broken human nature at the center of all social, political, and economic systems and structures. Stated differently, Southern conservatives see man's total depravity—to co-opt an apt theological term—as the underlying truth of all human systems and interactions. In the end, Weaver thus helps us to see the Southern adherence to tradition, and the features of Southern conservatism Kirk describes, as consequences of this belief.

Weaver's thinking makes it clear that traditional Southern conceptions of the good differ significantly from their more broadly American counterparts, and suggests that conservative, Southern examinations often reveal the short-sightedness of American political, social, and cultural pieties. In this, the South's adherence to tradition gives southern conservatism a real critical power; interpreting this critical utility of the South's conservative tradition is at the core of a series of lectures given by the late historian Eugene Genovese. Delivered at Harvard in 1993, and collected and published as *The Southern Tradition: The Achievement and Limitations of an American Conservatism* in 1994, these lectures present a clear articulation of the conservative tradition of the South, and how it provides an alternative understanding of the American project.

For Genovese, Southern conservatism exists "as an embodiment of 'givens' that must constantly be fought for, recovered in each generation, and adjusted to new conditions. . . Southern conservatives, as 'traditionalists,' have espoused a 'tradition' that must be fought for, not a 'traditionalism' cast in stone and worshipped as an idol" (4-5). These "givens" are thus significant in that they provide Southerners with a set of beliefs about reality, but not necessarily with a set of rigid ideals. This distinction is important. In the Southern mind, rigidity results in ideology, which, according to Genovese, the Southerner understands "as a demagogic invitation to

tyranny and mass murder"[7] (22). We can thus make sense of these "givens" as broadly understood cultural norms and general principles that define a worldview to be conserved—but not specific policies nor clearly-articulated, specifically-desired social or political outcomes. Importantly, Southern conservatives apply these norms and principles to specific contexts and problems; in their thinking, this differentiates them from ideologues who destructively attempt to match specific policies and some clearly-defined *telos* to general, broadly-defined situations and contexts.

Of all the various norms that inform Southern conservatism, one of the most significant for the South's alternative version of the American project is its notion of community, which is defined through the traditionalist Southern notion of equality. Genovese notes that "southern [*sic*] conservatives, like other transatlantic traditionalists, strongly prefer a society of orders based on a hierarchy that recognizes human inequality—that is, inequality of human beings as individuals, not as members of a race." But whereas European traditionalists have cited this preference as a defense of monarchy, Southern conservatives have been republicans, and have "accepted the principle of the sovereignty of the people and associated themselves with the democratic insistence that any regime, to claim legitimacy, must rest on popular support" (27-28). Obviously, belief in popular sovereignty is at the core of all forms of American political thought. But unlike how they figured in the liberal, Hamiltonian mainstream of American thought, Southern conservative understandings of popular sovereignty and republicanism are marked by resistance to centralized authority, based in particularly Southern understandings of equality and natural law. According to Genovese, "Southern conservatives have tried to salvage a core Christian doctrine of equality while trying their best to smash its modern heresies." Genovese argues that this effort is understandable through reading the "contrasting yet complementary analyses" of community provided by Voegelin and the radical Marxist writer Roberto Mangabeira

[7]Again, we hear echoes of Voegelin's project in these articulations of Southern conservatism

Unger (30).

Genovese describes Voegelin's ideas as working through "premodern doctrines of equality," which were rooted in "the matriarchal idea of sons of a common mother and in the patriarchal idea of spiritual sons of the father." This view is limited, and rejects the "hopeless quest for an equality of condition among all people" that Southern conservatives understand as generating "ever more insidious manipulation of society by elites that pretend to be other than privileged groups" (30). For its part, Unger's radical thought sees centralized power as a deterrent to democratic participation, by replacing "the promise of self-regulating community" with "the imperatives of industrial organization and political centralization" (Unger, *Law in Modern Society*, qtd Genovese 31). In Genovese's presentation, the Southern conservative understanding of equality is thus based in the very modern notion of individual determination and a concomitant belief in the morality of the self-regulating community, which responds to its own exigencies, needs, and historical contexts. Importantly, this *modern* notion of community is filtered through the *premodern* notions of kinship described by Voegelin.

We thus see the Southern conservative views of both community and equality as inseparable. All individuals within a community are viewed as kin, and thus containing inherent worth. However, in such premodern notions of kinship, these individuals are clearly stratified: the role of the father is clearly defined and necessarily different from the role of the mother, and the position of the parents is similarly distinct from the that of children. Further, there are clear differences between the positions, roles, and influences of various families within a community; in the place of family, we may substitute any other number of groups, whether they be economic, political, vocational, or otherwise. But whatever their differences—their inequalities—individuals and groups linked in such a way have clearly defined duties and responsibilities to others in that community.

Southern conservatism, then, is marked by a tension between premodern notions of hierarchy and duty on the one hand, and modern notions of individualism and self-determination on the other. As a result of this tension, Southern conservatism rejects atomized individualism, believing that man is an individual *only* in the context of a community. Such a fact may create a coercive version of community—and in the South, the paternalistic ideal that defended slavery, Jim Crow, and the sharecropping system that disenfranchised both blacks and poor whites is clearly a coercive version of community. Yet, this fact also explains and allows for Southern conservative critiques of the excesses of capitalism, of the dehumanizing, instrumentalist features of modernity, and the possibilities for abuses of power inherent in government consolidation. This last feature is seen in the Southern insistence on states' rights. As Genovese notes, there are both clear vices *and* virtues in this traditional Southern doctrine. "Twice in American history, state rights became enmeshed in unpalatable causes—namely, slavery and racial segregation—both of which have properly been judged enormities and sent down to well-deserved defeats. Logically, however, the cause of state rights stands without them. Less obviously, state rights has also been enmeshed in the morally defensible cause of resistance to the concentration of power... At the least, southern [*sic*] doctrine invites careful reevaluation of the structure, functions, and proper limits of a bureaucratic organization..." (29). Genovese thus provides us with an insightful analysis of the broad and general beliefs about society undergirding Southern conservative thinking, as well as positing ways in which Southern conservatism has a critical utility in (post)modern America.

While certainly far from exhaustive, this brief examination of Southern conservatism provides us with the most pertinent details for understanding how this tradition is utilized in the work of writers like the Percys and Peter Taylor. In sum, Southern conservatism is not defined by a set of exterior policy goals or a clearly-defined *telos*, but rather by a group of beliefs about man and his place in the world.

The most significant of these beliefs is that man is essentially depraved. As a result, responsible expression of individualism must occur from within an organized, stratified community. The presumptions contained in such thinking cannot be defended in the same manner in all circumstances. Yet, for individuals wrestling with Southern conservatism, these beliefs are inescapable. Further, for Southern conservatism to exist, it must enact a reflective dynamism that takes into account both the cultural norms the conservative society wishes to sustain and recover, and the ever-shifting conditions, exigencies, and possibilities it encounters. Yet because it is presupposed on transcendent beliefs about human nature and community, Southern conservatism has a stable basis from which to criticize an unstable, ever-evolving American progressivism. Ultimately, it is these two aspects of Southern conservatism, its critical utility and its reflective dynamism, that make it an attractive and necessary part of the work of writers like William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor—individuals who find themselves in a largely superfluous social, cultural, and existential position in the 20th-century South.

The Southern Conservative Man of Letters as Superfluous Hero

The attractiveness of the Southern conservative tradition for writers like Taylor and the Percys is that it allows them to create a place in which they can exist as existentially stable and whole persons. In attempting to create such a place, these writers are admitting the almost certain futility of their position. Neither simply progressive nor reactionary, these writers do not present a political program, nor even a cogent political diagnosis of the South. Rather, they provide a presentation of the difficulty of belonging. Their work dramatizes the experiences of individuals who are clearly bewildered by the world, but who nevertheless either refuse, or find themselves unable, to abandon the complex, disruptive situation in which they live. By exploring the possibilities contained in the foundations of the South's conservative

tradition, these authors are admitting that they are neither the type of Southerner who wishes that Lee would have gone to the mountains, nor are they type that is willing simply to abandon the Southern past in the name of progress. Rather, they take seriously the sentiment contained in Richard Weaver's closing statement in *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, that the eponymous tradition is like "a hall hung with splendid tapestries in which no one would care to live; but from them we can learn something of how to live." The works of Taylor and the Percys profoundly illustrate Weaver's idea: while no sensible person would ever want to live in the past, the South's past and tradition might, nevertheless, provide some knowledge and wisdom for how to live. Despite their superfluity, these writers see the likely impossibility of using the Southern tradition as a corrective not as a discouragement, but as something that makes their task all the more necessary and important. Their task is that the Scottish writer Thomas Carlyle assigns to the man of letters: they are "not heroic bringers of the light, but heroic seekers of it" (Carlyle 136).

To label these writers superfluous is to bring to bear several related observations. In *Superfluous Southerners*, historian John Langdale explores Carlyle's description of the heroic man of letters: "despite being, [Carlyle] noted, 'a product of these new ages,' [the man of letters] was 'a singular phenomenon,' destined to 'continue as one of the main forms of Heroism for all future ages.' In view of his capacity to reassert that 'the spiritual always determines the material,' the man of letters, Carlyle insisted, 'must be regarded as our most important modern person' and, furthermore, as a contemporary surrogate for 'Prophets' and 'Priests' " (Langdale 3). While Carlyle's man of letters is a product of modernity, he is also, as Langdale notes, critical and suspicious of modernity's logic and consequences. Langdale observes that this differentiates the Carlylean archetype from the "man of letters" Ralph Waldo Emerson puts forth in his speech of that name: "Though inspired by Carlyle, Emerson's speech betrayed a radical rather than an instinctually conservative view of the man

of letters. Indeed, Carlyle had, in his lecture on the heroic qualities of the man of letters, notably cautioned against what he described as the 'windy sentimentalism' of 'saving the world,' which he declared should be entrusted 'confidently to the Maker of the world' " (4). The writers I'm considering here are the "instinctually conservative" men of letters of the type Carlyle posits, in that they recognize the necessity of engaging the world as it is, and ask after the spiritual consequences of modernity. Nevertheless, they also do not fool themselves into thinking that they could actually save the world, and thus resist the "windy sentimentalism" of the Emersonian scholar.

Writers like Taylor and Percys surely recognize that they stand little chance of showing both the fantasy of the Southern past and the promises of progress both to be empty. Their literary output shows a keen awareness of the fact that both of these positions are myopic, a stance that lacks the ready adherence of more straightforwardly ideological stances. As their work is marked by such awareness while nevertheless avoiding the jeremiad and pedantry, these writers understand themselves as largely incapable of enacting actual social change, providing them with only one recourse that is still informed by their essentially critical and "instinctually conservative" stance: to find idiosyncratic, highly personal ways of existing in the South's present. In that, Walker Percy, Peter Taylor, and William Alexander Percy are enacting a Carlylean superfluity that allows them to engage the world as it is and critique it in the service of searching for a means of existence.

The heroism of the Carlylean man of letters is tied to his superfluity. Their heroism derives not from their guiding mankind toward solutions; to the contrary, it is founded in resistance to systematic attempts at theorizing and positing rational, mechanistic solutions to human problems. For Carlyle, this was the goal of the 18th century, a world in which heroism "was gone forever; Triviality, Formulism and Commonplace were come forever. The 'age of miracle' had been, or perhaps had not been; but it was not any longer. An effete world; wherein Wonder, Greatness, Godhood could

not now dwell;—in one word, a godless world!" (Carlyle 147) The man of letters' very existence is founded in the need to push back against this spiritual paralysis, to resist the mechanistic, overly rationalistic world modernity produces, and to reinsert sincerity back into the world.[8] The genuine, and therefore heroic, man of letters is the individual "uttering forth, in such way as he has, the inspired soul of him; all that a man, in any case, can do . . . The hero is he who lives in the inward sphere of things, in the True, Divine and Eternal, which exists always, unseen to most, under the Temporary, Trivial: his being is in that" (134).

Stated differently, the heroic man of letters is not defending a disappearing past, but working to illuminate those "True, Divine and Eternal" things that hold sway and provide meaning throughout time. The South, and its conservative tradition, provides clear opportunities and means for illuminating these "True, Divine and Eternal" things, while criticizing those who fashion themselves as "heroic bringers of the light." However, the Southern tradition presents its own substantial limitations and problems, phenomena that exacerbate the precarious and superfluous position of the man of letters in the South. These include the South's complex and perplexing history of racism and anti-intellectualism, the successes of progressive, "New South"-type social and economic reforms in the late 19th century, and the rise of a bourgeois, suburbanized "No South" in the late 20th century. The South's history of racism presents the Southern man of letters with substantial moral issues, while the South's (stereotypical) suspicion of intellectuals makes his place as a Southerner *and* a man of letters precarious. Further, the economic successes provided by aspects of the "New South" and "No South" limit the utility of this individual's critiques of those societies, as for many (and perhaps most) individuals, material comfort understandably trumps

[8]The author of the article on Carlyle in the still-fascinating 1911 edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica* summarizes this aspect of Carlyle's thought, as well as its inherent recognition of the necessity of progress: Carlyle adored Goethe, we are told, as the Scotsman "seems to have seen in Goethe a proof that it was possible to reject outworn dogmas without sinking into materialism."

pursuit of the "True, Divine and Eternal."

In short, these writers face a distinctly Southern version of the American superfluity described by the conservative philosopher George Santayana.[9] In "Materialism and Idealism," an essay from his *Character and Opinion in the United States*, Santayana notes that the "luckless American who is born a conservative, or who is drawn to poetic subtlety, pious retreats, or gay passions, nevertheless has the categorical excellence of work, growth, enterprise, reform, and prosperity dinned into his ears: every door is open in this direction and shut in the other; so that he either folds up his heart and withers away in a corner—in remote places you sometimes find such a solitary gaunt idealist—or else he flies to Oxford or Florence or Montmartre to save his soul—or perhaps not to save it" (Santayana 67-68). Yet in Santayana's description of this "luckless American," we see a clear difference between men like Santayana and the superfluous Southern writers I'm examining here; the conservative tradition of the South presents a site of real resistance to the American gospel of "growth, enterprise, reform and prosperity" that is largely absent in other American regions. As such, while the American Santayana describes must flee to "Oxford or Florence or Montmarte," the Southerner who fits this description can just as well fight back against the American doctrine of progress in Mississippi, Tennessee, or Carolina as he can in the Old World.

However, as suggested a moment ago, a significant set of complications arise from the Southerner using his native tradition to resist the American ideal Santayana describes. The South's tradition does, indeed, differ from that of America generally. Langdale notes that "the ordeal of human bondage and the anguish of defeat rendered

[9]I base Santayana's inclusion as a fellow "superfluous" conservative on how Robert M. Crunden, editor of *The Superfluous Men*, describes the philosopher's thought in the opening essay of that collection, Santayana's "A Brief History of My Opinions." Crunden describes Santayana as marked by a "sense of displacement and noncomformity," something which "marks a major theme of cultural conservatism in the twentieth century" (Crunden 4). A "sense of displacement and noncomformity" seems to describe acurately the way in which Taylor and the Percys understood their respective places in both American and the South in the 20th century.

[the South] and its intellectuals decidedly more skeptical of human perfectibility than their Northern counterparts. Consequently, conservative voices, rather than pragmatic liberal ones, played the primary role in the South's cultural and intellectual reconstruction." He continues by suggesting that Southern conservatism, despite being rooted in a response to modernity, is also decidedly anti-modern.[10] Specifically, Southern conservatism is an "anti-modern rebuke of the pragmatist's gnostic project to accommodate modernity by resisting 'certitude' in the name of 'tolerance"' (Langdale 14). The Southern tradition insists on certitude and objective reality; even if these are ultimately unknowable, their existence is nevertheless trusted. There are several ways in which the Southern man of letters if affected by this insistence on certitude and objective reality.

First, as Carlyle notes, the man of letters is a product of modernity. While he is a critical figure, he is nevertheless formed by the Enlightenment, and is thus not totally divorced from its values and methods. The anti-modern (ante-modern?) Southern tradition stands in contrast to these values and methods, valorizing the ancient model of the Roman statesman over the example of a Dr. Johnson or a Robert Burns, two of Carlyle's exemplary men of letters. Consequently, significant antebellum Southern men of letters were like Thomas Jefferson and John Randolph of Roanoke, individuals who were able to combine that figure with the statesman. A more unequivocally literary figure like William Gilmore Simms, who arguably spent his entire career trying to prove his vocation's worth to the antebellum elite, was much less valorized and largely forgotten by the 19th century's end.[11] Southern conservatism, then, provides

[10]The South's fraught relationship with "modernity" has been a feature of the region since its beginnings. As Lewis P. Simpson shows in *The Dispossessed Garden* and other works, the modern, capitalistic impulse that founded Walter Raleigh's Virginia was never sloughed off by the South, even after it has begun to present itself as a latter-day feudal society; its most vile form of capital—slavery—was a constant and ready reminder of its modern, capitalistic beginnings.

[11]That Simms, who understood himself almost exclusively as a man of letters, nevertheless had a short-lived and largely insignificant political career reveals the importance the antebellum South placed on politics and statesmanship for legitimizing intellectual labor.

little room for the man of letters *qua* man of letters, the individual who attempts to illuminate the "True, Divine and Eternal."

Southern conservatism presents a second problem. While the tradition enables individuals to enact the project Santayana proposes in Charleston rather than "Oxford or Florence or Montmarte," its commitment to certitude and objective reality permits a host of ethical and moral issues, especially with regard to race. The stable and certain world is properly ordered, and thus not far removed from the Stoic worldview of gods-ordained hierarchies. In large part, the conservative South was built upon such hierarchies, and its politics and culture worked to sustain the proper ordering of and relationships between wealthy whites, African-Americans, and poor whites. In engaging the Southern conservative tradition, individuals had always been required to face the existential consequences of their own placement within this structure. This was exacerbated by the Civil War's end, as from the defeat of the Confederacy forward, the stability of the traditional structures was compromised. The political and economic uncertainties of the post-War period posed two distinct threats to the traditional structure. First, political pressures from northern liberals and Southern reactionaries threatened a reordering of the South's racial structures. Later, the economic chaos of the 1890s saw the emergence of populism and a nascent class-based consciousness that would join blacks and poor whites in solidarity. While obviously distinct, both of these threats posited a destruction of the traditional Southern order, and upset the certainty, stability, and hierarchy on which so much of Southern conservatism rests.

C. Vann Woodward's classic *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* illustrates the consequences of these two distinct threats to the stability and hierarchy of the South in the last third of the 19th century. First, when Southern conservatives saw threats to racial order and social harmony coming from both northern liberals and Southern "Negrophobe fanatics," Woodward asserts that

> conservatives reminded the Negro that he had something to lose as well as something to gain and that his Northern champions' exclusive preoccupation with gains for the Negro had evoked the danger of losing all he had so fair gained.... Like other conservatives of the period, the Southern conservatives believed that every properly regulated society had superiors and subordinates, and that each class should acknowledge its responsibilities and obligations, and that each should be guaranteed its status and protected in its rights. The conservatives acknowledged that the Negroes belonged in a subordinate role, but denied that subordinates had to be ostracized; they believed that the Negro was inferior, but denied that it followed that inferiors must be segregated or publicly humiliated. (Woodward 48)

Woodward's assertion makes clear that the perspective of what the South Carolina governor Wade Hampton called "the better class of whites" sought to continue the antebellum racial hierarchies, clearly repudiating and resisting the hierarchy-threatening goals northern liberalism. But at the same time, by denying that blacks "must be segregated or publicly humiliated," this same perspective decried the threats to social harmony presented by the violence of Southern reactionary fanaticism.

But the threats of economic chaos and class-based social disruptions that arose in the 1880s and 90s ultimately caused this same "better class of whites" to view racial politics quite differently. In the post-War South, the conservative vision of order, propriety, and hierarchy came into tension with changing economic and political realities that put Southern conservatives—largely drawn from the old plantocracy—into vexing positions with regards to their poor white and black fellow Southerners. Woodward notes that radical segregation depended on granting widespread "permissions-to-hate" blacks, and as the century closed, these permissions finally "came from sources that had formerly denied such permission," including "Southern conservatives who

had abandoned their race policy of moderation in their struggle against the Populists" (81). Thus, the worldview of late-19th-century Southern conservatives needed both racial and class hierarchies that ultimately required them to give tacit permission to the flourishing of "Negrophobe fanaticism," and its codification in the Jim Crow laws. The 20th century would continue to bring economic, social, and demographic changes that made clear the moral emptiness of this aspect of the South's conservative character; these changes also challenged the conservative South's conception of an objective social order. As a result, 20th-century Southerners who drew on their region's conservative tradition would have to deal with the ramifications of both the moral emptiness and waning significance of key aspects of this tradition.

Thus, if he is to draw on this tradition, the 20th-century Southern man of letters must face three distinct problems with Southern conservatism: its moral and ethical shortcomings, its basis in an increasingly difficult-to-maintain social order, and its overall suspicion of the existence of the man of letters himself. Despite these real concerns, the Southern conservative tradition continued to provide these individuals with a means to resist what Santayana derisively labels the "categorical excellence of work, growth, enterprise, reform, and prosperity" after the Civil War and throughout the 20th century. Richard Weaver reminds us of Santayana's suggestion that all men could be split into Don Quixotes and Sancho Panzas, with the first group, "because they serve ideals only, seem mad to men who take counsel of their circumstances" (Weaver, *Southern Tradition* 129). While they see the progressive's tilting at windmills as idealistic madness, these Sancho Panzas—Southern conservatives—faced the wrong way in the stream of time. Langdale observes that "whereas the pragmatic musings of [northern progressives like Oliver Wendell] Holmes and [William] James were anticipating and encouraging a world that was becoming, conservatives are invoking a past that is in the process of dissolving and which no longer encompasses a linear experience of time" (Langdale 14). In this, Southern conservatives were an-

nouncing their superfluity; all such rearguard actions did for the conservative was "forestall the extinction of his mode of thought" (ibid).

While Sancho Panza was not Cervantes' hero, for Carlyle, the man of letters, acting as a Sancho Panza, is *the* heroic figure of modernity. Yet, in order to act heroically, writers like William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor could not simply utilize Southern conservatism illustratively in order to forestall its death and extinction. Invoking a dissolving past is not enough; this past's tradition must be integrated into the present and brought into contact with it. To do so successfully and responsibly demands critically examining the South's conservative tradition and bringing its essential, core ideals into conversations with emerging sets of circumstances. To understand how they did this, we must note that such actions are precipitated by these writers being precariously positioned within their own communities, and engaged in a complex personal relationship with the tradition that gives credence, existence, and order to these communities and to the South. To illustrate how these authors understood the relationship of themselves, the Southern tradition, and their communities, I draw on the work of the late cultural historian of the South, Lewis P. Simpson.

Simpson asserts that the move of Southern literature is perhaps best illustrated in the personal fable. For a significant number of Southern writers, the South is defined both historically and autobiographically; to Simpson, there is a significant relationship in "the Southern literary imagination between history and self-biography," a relationship he analyzes throughout the essays in his 1994 collection, *The Fable of the Southern Writer* (Simpson xv). In that collection's opening essay, Simpson explores the career of John Randolph of Roanoke, whom Simpson identifies as "an archetypal version of the politics of the self in America, in which the self has lost any way to discriminate between its being a private entity on the one hand and a public entity on the other." Simpson further notes that in "manners, dress, and general de-

meanor," Randolph "sought to incarnate a lost ideal of public order" (8). As Simpson presents it, Randolph's career exhibits a recognition of the self as being intimately involved with one's society.

There are two consequences of this recognition. First, an individual like Randolph withdraws into himself when the social order becomes unaccommodating. Randolph cannot abandon himself, cannot be anyone other than who he is. Yet, as Simpson notes, "Randolph, in certain moments of shrewd political insight, transcended self-dramatization," exactly because he was "sensitized by his historical awareness of the complex interactions of self, slavery, and liberty in America" (9). In other words, precisely because he requires fidelity to his own self and his own beliefs, an autochthonous individual—one who is profoundly aware of his being produced by the contexts and particularities of his place—like Randolph must also be socially responsive.[12] After all, his autochthony derives precisely from the interaction of his own selfhood with both the social conditions of his day and their historical precedents. The second consequence of Randolph recognizing his intimate involvement with his society is in how he reacts should the social order become unaccommodating. For Randolph, or an individual like him, the withdrawal into the self is accompanied by a pervasive desire to find ways to reinsert himself into society, and to bring aspects of the past, tradition, and older versions of the social order to bear on his society. To accomplish this, an act of reinterpretation must take place, in which Randolph, or an individual like him, reinterprets both the social order and his own position within

[12]My use of autochthony is thus distinct from the Agrarian writer Donald Davidson's famous articulation of the "autochthonous ideal." Fred Hobson provides us with a brief, critical explanation of the term, explaining Davidsonian autochthony as "a condition in which the writer was in certain harmony with his social and cultural environment, was nearly unconscious of it as a 'special' environment, quaint or rustic or backward, and thus was not motivated by any urge to interpret or explain... Davidson was essentially calling for a lack of social tension between the literary artist and his social and cultural environment, and it is out of tension, not harmony, that great art often arises" (Hobson 80). Men of letters like Randolph and the three writers under examination here are aware of their superfluity and, as a consequence, must contend with the tension inherent in their autochthonous nature.

it. This is the only way for Randolph to "transcend self-dramatization" and engage a changing society honestly, while still displaying a fidelity to his own self. Similarly, authors who engage the Southern conservative tradition in the manner I am proposing must also "transcend self-dramatization" and actively re-engage tradition so as to re-situate themselves in society with respect to tradition.

Writers like William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor must, like Randolph, contend with their autochthony. Throughout their work, whether in fiction, drama, essay, memoir, or poetry, these three authors are exploring the consequences of their relationship with a society—the (post)modern South—from which they are both deeply alienated and inescapably connected. By drawing on the Southern conservative tradition, a worldview that men like Randolph largely contributed to codifying, these writers also themselves to be sensitive to the complex interplay of the self, community, and social, economic, and historical forces. In this, they too "transcend self-dramatization," and are able to find ways to be existentially whole individuals, loyal to their selves and their historical sensitivity, who nevertheless exist as members of their communities.

While each of these writers enact a process of "transcending self-dramatization," the consequences of this project are different for each writer. William Alexander Percy, the writer whose work I will consider first, is primarily known for his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*. Over the last several years, many scholars have revisited this work, and are seriously considering how it is more than merely a nostalgic paean to the waning days of Southern aristocracy. Instead, this recent work seriously considers Percy's discussion of class relationships, and how his memoir points to what Robert Brinkmeyer calls the "transgressive mobility [of poor whites] and the powerlessness of Southern culture to stop their movement" (Brinkmeyer, "Marginalization" 228), as well as its evocation of Southern intellectualism, race, and sexuality.

Percy's poetry, on the other hand, has been lightly studied.[13] Though it is often quite powerful and aesthetically realized, this dearth of critical attention is perhaps due to its overt traditionalism. Writing during the period of poetic high modernism, Percy's poetry lacks the features seen in work of the best of his contemporaries: it lacks the abstraction and intellectualism of Eliot, Pound, or Stevens, the distinctly American voice of Frost, or William Carlos Williams' marriage of the two. Instead, Percy's poetry often imitates European styles of previous centuries, often staying comfortably within traditional formal poetic constraints. While I'm not interested in arguing that Percy's "Sappho in Levkas" be seen as the equal of Eliot's "Ash Wednesday," I do argue that his poetry needs serious reconsideration, and that understanding its interpretation of the Southern conservative tradition provides a means for enacting that reconsideration.

If we read William Alexander Percy's poetry in the context of both the presentation of Southern conservatism in *Lanterns on the Levee* and his biography, we come to a robust understanding of how his writing expresses his struggles with autochthony, superfluity, and identity. This memoir reveals him attempting to utilize Southern conservatism to carve out a place for himself in the South—a traditional, aristocratic, and masculine place. When reading his poetry alongside *Lanterns*, we see that Percy is not only exploring the contexts in which his aristocratic self could find reassurance and actualization, but also those in which his very probable identity as a gay man could be realized, even if unspoken, in a society where male homosexuality was understood as aberrantly feminine. His poetry, by drawing on early modern European and Classical poetic forms and tropes, provides him with both sets of needed contexts. My reading of W.A. Percy is thus a consideration of how the poetry and memoir compliment and expand our understanding of each. I recognize

[13]Benjamin Wise's 2012 biography of Percy considers the poetry as a valuable resource for making sense of the writer's life, especially with regards to his sexuality. Hopefully, this suggests a new wave of critical consideration for Percy's poetic output.

that both venues insist upon Southern traditionalist conservatism as the central feature of Percy's overall aesthetic project, a centrality presupposed on his recognition of the tradition's dynamism and its ability to accommodate the fullness of his identity without compromise.

Of the three writers I am considering here, W.A. Percy's second cousin and adoptive son, Walker, is the best-known. A trained physician whose debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, was swiftly canonized, Walker Percy's novels and essays have long been sites of rich criticism. While his utilization of existentialist philosophy, his Roman Catholic faith, science, and the (post-)apocalyptic have long been considered in such work, scholars have paid less attention to how he draws on social and political conservatism. Nevertheless, Percy's work expresses an abiding engagement with conservative thought, especially with the conservative tradition of his native region. While his devout Catholicism certainly integrates conservative perspectives into his writing, works like *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins* show Percy engaged in a deep interrogation of Southern conservatism, its symbols and principles, and the consequences of the postmodern South's (and postmodern Southerners') abandonment of this tradition in all but superficial means. As Gary Ciuba has made clear, Percy's apocalyptic perspective is tempered by his "prophetic conviction" and its hope of "calling the people" away from destruction and meaninglessness (Ciuba 7). The reconsideration of Southern conservatism present in his work shows Percy as a prophet of the postmodern South, visiting it with apocalyptic damnation and pointing Southerners towards renewed possibilities for meaning-making—and thus clearly enacting the role of the Carlylean hero.

While Walker Percy's critical popularity has never seriously waned and William Alexander Percy is perhaps undergoing a critical renaissance, Peter Taylor has always been, and remains, more lightly studied than he deserves. Born in January 1917 in West Tennessee village of Trenton, the scion of two separate, powerful Tennessee

families named Taylor, and mentored by several of the Nashville Fugitive/Agrarian group, Peter was a published author before he graduated from Kenyon, where he studied with John Crowe Ransom and became friends with Robert Lowell and Randall Jarrell. In many ways, Taylor's work explores the patrician order of the Old South represented by his family, and readers are presented with a concerted effort at working through the tensions inherent in various visions of the Southern conservative tradition. Nevertheless, critical assessments like those of critic Walter Sullivan regard Taylor's writings as mere re-articulations of the social and cultural projects of his Fugitive/Agrarian mentors, yet lacking the aesthetic experimentation and general brilliance of Tate, Ransom, and company. In 1976, Sullivan remarks that "Taylor seems at once so fresh and so anachronistic that he offers little ground for generalization. His vision resembles that of an old maid aunt endowed with angelic powers of perception" (Sullivan, *Requiem* xxii), a sentiment that echoes another, earlier statement, in which Sullivan similarly laments that "Peter Taylor, skillful as he is, no longer shows us much that is new" ("The Decline of Southern Fiction" 89). This perceived lack of newness is at the core of Sullivan's most significant critical dismissal of Taylor, the 1987 essay "The Last Agrarian: Peter Taylor Early and Late." Here, Sullivan reads Taylor as a deeply nostalgic writer, whose aristocratic characters—and ostensibly the author himself—"take their stands and await their defeats" ("The Last Agrarian" 17).[14]

Such readings seem to haunt Taylor's reputation, as many of his books are out of print and critics pay infrequent attention to his work. I here push back against Sullivan-esque readings of Taylor as a nostalgic writer, instead insisting that Taylor, especially in his early work, is deeply critical of the effects of a nostalgia engendered by the Southern conservative tradition. This early work is a literature of existential

[14]The tenor of Sullivan's criticisms are somewhat ironic considering the similarities in his and Taylor's backgrounds, and the fact that Sullivan was mentored by another of the "Twelve Southerners," Andrew Lytle.

division, in which his characters attempt to deal with the ramifications of compartmentalizing their everyday existence and their personal, familial, and cultural adherence to the Southern conservative tradition that they cannot quit. But as we trace the development of Taylor's work, his characters find a way to undo this compartmentalization. Characters in Taylor's late works are able to arrive at a unified version of themselves, in which the Southern conservative tradition becomes not an existentially limiting albatross, but rather a usefully critical resource for making sense of their existence in late-20th century America. Taylor's working through Southern conservative nostalgia in order to arrive at an existentially useful version of the Southern tradition is a fascinating aesthetic arc to trace. His characters at first find themselves trapped by a recognition of their superfluity in the face of a rapidly-changing South; yet by the time Taylor's 1986 novel *A Summons to Memphis* closes, his protagonist has found a liberating strength in that same recognition of superfluity.

Coming to terms with and being empowered by this concept—superfluity—is something I see all three authors enacting, and investigating the consequences of superfluity for these writers is a central goal of this project. Langdale closes the introduction to *Superfluous Southerners* by noting that "superfluity" is usefully thought of as "a posture whereby the man of letters, as a custodian of language, could rebuke, but ultimately stop short of renouncing the world." (8) Langdale's suggestion is vitally important: as Carlylean men of letters, the authors I'm examining here could not save their world—the South—but they could not turn away from it, either. Fulfilling the superfluously heroic role of Carlyle's man of letters, they decry their communities without abandoning them. *Lanterns on the Levee*, *The Last Gentleman*, and *A Summons to Memphis* are powerful illustrations of an individual criticizing, and even repudiating, a community without denying his essential loyalty to that community. This loyalty is absolutely necessary, as it is through their utilization of the Southern conservative tradition, and its rejection of atomistic gnosticism, its emphasis

on rhetoric, and its suspicion of systematic, positivist approaches to human societies and problems, that William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor are able to perform this "heroic" role as arrestingly as they do. In this, they perhaps cast themselves in the superfluous role of "the last gentlemen," who translate the tradition of an older South for the (post)modern South. Yet to not engage this tradition in this manner would declare themselves not as last, but lost—lost to their communities and, perhaps more importantly, themselves.

Chapter 2

William Alexander Percy, Superfluity, and the Successes of the Southern Culture of Failure

> "But our world is definitely gone, and I feel superfluous, if not posthumous."
>
> William Alexander Percy to his cousin, Janet Dana, 28 August 1940

Of the three writers considered in this study, William Alexander Percy is the most obvious for inclusion. After all, his memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee: Reflections of a Planter's Son*, stands as perhaps the quintessential text of twentieth-century Southern conservatism. Yet even there, Percy is not merely presenting a simple, wholly affirmative vision of the Southern conservative tradition. Instead, we witness him carefully nuancing his articulation of Southern conservatism, translating this tradition in ways that allow him to present the South as a poetic community made intelligible through the existence and persistence of virtues, especially the Classical, Aristotelian virtues of justice, prudence, courage, and temperance. This is an important feat for Percy's existential wholeness, as this translation allows him to deal with many of the most significant tensions between this tradition and personal identity: Percy was a gay, physically small aesthete who lived in a society that prized strong, physically aggressive, and explicitly heterosexual masculinity. In both his South and that of his father (the "planter" of the book's subtitle), Percy's masculinity—a significant part of his self-identity—is profoundly superfluous. By translating various aspects of the Southern conservative tradition in ways I will explore directly, he overcomes this *personal* superfluity, positioning himself as a necessary member of Delta society.

Yet, as the epigraph to this chapter suggests, Will Percy's feelings of superfluity were not merely personal, based in his inability to live up to certain standards of manliness. It was not only his *self* that seemed lost in 1940, but rather, as he writes to his cousin and confidante Janet Dana, their entire society—that of high-class, traditionalist Southerners—that had become superfluous, buffeted by the forces of industrial modernity and the elevation of masses of poor whites into full democratic

citizenship. *Lanterns on the Levee* is a critique of that new world, especially inasmuch as Percy sees totalitarianism as an inevitable consequence of industrial, democratic modernity.[1]

There are real successes in *Lanterns on the Levee*, such as its indictment of materialism, its insistence on approaching socio-economic problems contextually, its unabashed intellectualism, and its evocation of the value of beauty and myth in making sense of humans and human communities. Yet many of these same successes can be used to justify and promote casual indifference or willful blindness to significant moral failings. Ultimately, does *Lanterns on the Levee* merely reflect the very sort of petty nostalgia represented by the book's original dust jacket illustration (an impressionistic painting of white-columned plantation home surrounded by live oaks), which Percy himself despised? And if we find the work compelling—as I do—are we ourselves hoodwinked by this same petty nostalgia, and in need of being indicted of our own blindness?

To answer such questions, we must recognize that the utility and attractiveness of William Alexander Percy's project, both in his memoir and his under-studied poetry, are not in its critique of modern society. Certainly, there are real problems with (post)industrial modernity, many of which Percy cogently identifies, even if his unwillingness (or inability) to engage the irony of his positions nullifies his critical power.[2] Yet, to my reading, nothing in *Lanterns* suggests that Percy sees his society, and the Southern conservative tradition on which it is built, as things that can be brought to bear as correctives to the reactionary excess and increasingly bourgeois

[1]For more on Percy's understanding of totalitarianism, see the chapter on Percy in Robert Brinkmeyer's *The Fourth Ghost*.

[2]I'm reminded of Eugene Genovese's statement about the "finest values of the Southern tradition": these all require "a total break with its legacy of racism" (Genovese 9). To do so obviously requires that Southern conservatives are clear about the tradition's sins and self-defeating ironies. Genovese, unlike Percy, is profoundly aware of these ironies, going so far as to suggest that a failure to engage such issues will destroy, "in a single stroke, the republicanism that Southern conservatives themselves insist is necessary to social order" (ibid.).

mediocrity of the South between the World Wars. To the contrary, the melancholy tone of the book suggests a resigned memorialization of defeat, without even the Lost Cause hope of *Deo vindice*. But if we view Percy as a version of the Carlylean man of letters—he who is not a "heroic bringer of the light, but a heroic seeker" of it—we come to see his project as an exploration of how to make sense of the self in a society from which one feels "superfluous, if not posthumous," and how to live as an existentially whole individual in such a world.

All of this brings us back to perhaps the most significant irony in Will Percy's work—that his elegant (if fraught) defenses of the traditionalist South idealize a society that had no place for men like him. Yet it is this seeming tension, between his own manhood and his laudatory evocation of the society of his fathers, that points to why Percy's work demonstrates such an affinity for Southern conservatism. For William Alexander Percy, the Southern conservative tradition exists as the warp upon which the complex woof of his sexuality, sense of familial honor, and aesthetic interests are interwoven, producing the messy tapestry that is his own self. All of these various aspects are key to Percy's identity, and through engaging the Southern tradition critically, he is able to ensure their coexistence in an existentially stable manner. Through reading *Lanterns on the Levee* in detail and giving a few intriguing glances at his poetry, we see how Percy enacts this process of translation.

Percy's translation of the Southern conservative tradition draws upon certain pertinent features of that tradition; chief among these is the Southern conservative understanding of community. As Eugene Genovese asserts, the Southern tradition makes sense of community as the *modern* desire for individual determinism and self-governance filtered through *premodern* notions of kinship, duty, and obligation. The Stoic philosophy of the Emperor Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus had a profound effect on the aristocratic South—and particularly the Percy family.[3] Stoicism's conception

[3]See Bertram Wyatt-Brown's excellent *The House of Percy* for a detailed exploration of the

of gods-ordained hierarchy emphasizes the order required by premodern notions of community, while its insistence upon personal honor makes the modern notions of individual determination feasible *within the circumscribed contexts of order*. While it would be inaccurate to say that the Southern conservative notion of community is necessarily Stoic, it is clear that Stoic honor gave Will Percy a means for responsively engaging the Southern community's traditional norms. Percy comes to translate these Stoic notions into an aesthetic, rather than moral or socioeconomic, vision, allowing him to articulate an understanding of community that understands the interplay of hierarchy, order, and individual determination as the working out of personal and communal tensions in an essentially poetic manner.

Percy also translates the South's traditional notions of virtue, unraveling the harmonious unity of pagan and Christian that Allen Tate describes in "The New Provincialism" as "a peculiar balance of Greek culture and Christian other-worldliness, both imposed by Rome upon the northern barbarians. It was this special combination that made European civilization, and it was this that men communicated in the act of living together" (Tate, "Provincialism" 538). Unsurprisingly, one of the most significant consequences of this "peculiar balance" was the West's virtue ethics, especially as these serve to govern "the act of living together." The end of Christian ethics is what St. Paul describes as working out one's own salvation, achieved through God's grace and man's pursuit of faith, hope, and charity. In contrast, the end of classical ethics is the Aristotelian notion of *eudaimonia*, achieved through the active cultivation of prudence, temperance, courage, and justice. These two systems are harmonized in the thinking of St. Thomas Aquinas, especially in the *Prima Secundae Partis* of his mammoth *Summa Theologica*.[4] Percy's vision of Southern virtue rejects the salvific aspects of Christianity while holding to its notions of suffering; it seeks to cultivate

connections between Stoicism and the Percys.

[4]Whether or not Percy read Aquinas, his familial and cultural setting ensure that he would have certainly been familiar with the Angelic Doctor's unity of pagan and Christian virtues.

exclusively pagan virtues, and thus hopes for *eudaimonia*, and not Eternal Life, as the ultimate reward.

While there are other ways in which Percy translates the Southern conservative tradition—like his presentation of the Delta as a cosmopolitan, rather than provincial, society that has been undermined by Yankee and poor white interlopers, whom he lumps together in a rather elegant rhetorical flourish as "Anglo-Saxons"—they grow out of these two reconfigured aspects. As we will see, Walker Percy and Peter Taylor *also* enact their processes of translating the Southern conservative tradition largely through their reconsidering the South's notions of community and virtue. Will Percy's project is thus important, as it points to the ways through which other, later writers would also take up the task of engaging Southern conservatism critically, translating various aspects of it for use in the specific contexts of their lives. Yet it is also powerful in another way, one that presents us with a means of reading Percy that finds him to be useful, attractive, and challenging despite his failures as a social critic: it is through these interconnected acts of translation and representation that Percy is able to find meaning and existential wholeness.

The Poetic Community of the Plantation

William Alexander Percy's clearest commentary on community is also one of the passages for which his critics would likely be quickest to chastise him—"Planters, Share-Croppers, and Such," the twenty-first chapter of *Lanterns on the Levee*. Here, Percy describes the social, communal, and economic conditions on Trail Lake, the 3,000-acre cotton plantation he managed after his father's death and for the rest of his life. In managing a plantation, Will continues a family tradition: his grandfather, "Fafar," and later his father Leroy, had managed the old "Percy Place" (another plantation, not to be confused with Trail Lake), after Emancipation by "offering [Fafar's] ex-slaves a partnership," with "simple" terms:

> I have land which you need, and you have muscle which I need; let's put what we've got in the same pot and call it ours. I'll give you all the land you can work, a house to live in, a garden plot and room to raise chickens, hogs, and cows if you can come by them, and all the wood you want to cut for fuel. I'll direct and oversee you. I'll get you a doctor when you are sick. Until the crop comes in I'll try to keep you from going hungry or naked in so far as I am able. I'll pay the taxes and I'll furnish the mules and plows and gear and whatever else is necessary to make a crop. This is what I promise to do. You will plant and cultivate and gather this crop as I direct. This is what you will promise to do. When the crop is picked, half of it will be mine and half of it yours. If I have supplied you with money or food or clothing or anything else during this year, I will charge it against your half of the crop... If the price of cotton is good, we shall both make something. If it is bad, neither of us will make anything, but I shall probably lose the place and you will have nothing to lose. It's a hard contract... but it's just and self-respecting and if we both do our part and have a little luck we can prosper under it. (Percy, *Lanterns* 275-76)

While such a contract is clearly rife with opportunities for abuse (thus the rightfully infamous reputation sharecropping holds in the American historical memory), Percy focuses on the stated goal of shared risks and shared profits, and of the notion of the plantation as "ours." In his mind, this ideal forms the foundation of "the most moral system under which human beings can work together" (278), and that it seems "to offer as humane, just, self-respecting, and cheerful a method of earning a living as human beings are likely to devise" (280). Setting aside the problematic economics of Percy's idealized vision of sharecropping,[5] it is nevertheless

[5]As the descendant of poor white sharecroppers whose family history records the abuses of this system, I find Percy's idealism at best laughably naive, and at worst despicable in its willful

clear that his description of this system also illustrates his understanding of community. In short, William Alexander Percy understood community as a poetic, rather than socio-economic, force. The most pertinent aspects of the "simple" terms of this agreement are its evocations of dignity, duty, and mutual obligation—abstract notions better understood through art than through economics. Inasmuch as this vision is poetic, Percy shows himself translating the traditional Southern conservative definition of community: he shifts its central aspect away from considering individuals in terms of an interplay between premodern notions of kinship and modern notions of self-determination, instead focusing on a tension between literal and metaphorical understandings individuals and their roles within communities. The New Critical thinking of another well-known Southern conservative, Allen Tate, provides a basic means for understanding Percy's notion of community.

In "Tension in Poetry," an essay from 1941's *Reason in Madness*, Tate excoriates what he calls "the fallacy of communication," an aesthetic flaw that produces confused relationships between poetic language and poetic objects. Poems that exemplify this flaw "arouse an affective state in one set of terms, and suddenly an object quite unrelated to those terms gets the benefit of it" (Tate 131). For Tate, such works are ultimately merely sentimental, communicating a connection between the poet and "persons for whom the lines are the occasion of feelings shared by them and the poet," and largely empty of meaning for those who do *not* share the poet's feelings (131). This poetic flaw results from "the irresponsible denotations of words," by which Tate means an escapist over-reliance on symbol, metaphor, and suggestion. Because of this stance, the poet, with only "a vague grasp of the 'real' world," is unable to make sense of existence except by sentimental experience. A corollary poetic fallacy

ignorance. Nevertheless, I must admit that I do find a system of shared responsibility, shared profits, small-scale ownership, and communitarian dignity—such as the ideal here presented by Percy, as well as similar ideals presented by the Nashville Agrarians and the Chesterbelloc Distributists—as profoundly attractive alternatives to the hyper-competitive, atomizing individualism of capitalism.

is that of what Tate labels "mere denotation," in which a poet will not or cannot draw on the metaphorical and symbolic meanings of words that have "been informed by experience" (134). If poetry of the "fallacy of communication" is banal in its sentimentality, the brutally literal poetry of this latter variety "contradicts our most developed human insights" (134) and is equally ill-equipped to explore the fullness of human life, belief, and memory.

Against these two fallacies, Tate points toward a poetic ideal: a *via media* in which there exists a tension between "intensive" (literal and denotative) and "extensive" (symbolic, metaphorical, and generally suggestive) significations in poetic language. While Tate of course sees it as the task of the poet to produce works that exemplify this tension, he also understands it as the responsibility of the critic to read poetry with an eye towards it. For Tate, poor criticism would be like that of the "Platonist" who takes Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress" as merely indicative of "immoral behavior," as this makes sense of the poem only in terms of its "extensive" significations, and thus performs the critical equivalent of the fallacy of communication (135). Good criticism recognizes the presence of immorality in the poem, but also holds this "extensive" meaning in tension with the literal significance of the words themselves, which provide "an insight into one phase of the human predicament—the conflict of sensuality and asceticism" (135). By recognizing and focusing on this tension, the successful critic has ignored neither the (very real) moral consequences of the poem nor its (very powerful) evocation of two inimical, though necessarily linked, human impulses. Holding these in tension, the critic comes to a fuller understanding of the poem, seeing how a great poet—like Marvell—asks us to examine the questions posed by the tension of extensive and intensive meanings.

Percy's poetry shows an attempt at engaging this sort of tension, and his presentations of community in *Lanterns* are a critical project much like the one Tate advocates for poetry. However, instead of making sense of intensive and extensive

meaning of *language*, Percy "reads" the *roles* of individuals within his community, observing and analyzing the consequences of how individuals live within these roles. Stated differently, the poetic logic of Percy's communal ideal sees individuals as having intrinsically-defined social roles; in this, of course, Percy is a typical Southern conservative. But he also attaches metaphorical and symbolic significance to these roles—and sees the tension between the symbolic and literal significance of these roles as the means by which individuals make sense of their place in a society. In this, we see Percy doing something atypical for a conservative Southerner. Instead of merely restating traditional, prescribed notions of community, he puts forth a *poetic* logic of conservative Southern community that allows an aesthete to be an arbiter and interpreter of that community's conservative norms. Because of this way of positing the Delta community, Percy is not excluded from membership nor finding himself in a vexed position within it. To the contrary, he becomes a necessary and normative member of a *poetically* conservative Southern community.

To see how this works, we should first consider the ways in which Percy uses poetry to present his specific community of the Mississippi Delta. While many of his *Delta Sketches* at first glance appear to be straightforward and sentimental idylls, a closer examination reveals a deep feeling of ambivalence about place running throughout these poems. In thus examining the "tension" of these poems, we see Percy attempting to rectify complex feelings about the Delta. And while the complexity of Percy's feelings about his ancestral community should not suprise us, understanding the way in which he explores this tension helps us make sense of the ways in which he understands *others'* places—both symbolic and literal—within the Delta.

The opening poem from *Delta Sketches*, "In the Delta," provides an illustration of Percy's use of poetic tension. A cursory glance might see this poem as bad pastoralism, merely describing the Delta in romantic, idealized terms. Consider the opening stanzas:

The river country's wide and flat
  And blurred ash-blue with sun,
And there all work is dreams come true.
  All dreams are work begun.

The silted river made for us
  The black and mellow soil
And taught us as we conquered him
  Courage and faith and toil.

The river town that water oaks
  And myrtles hide and bless
Has broken every law except
  The law of kindliness.

(Percy, "In the Delta" 273)

These lines might support the unreflective, cursory reading mentioned a moment ago. But such an interpretation is flawed, in that it focuses too closely on the first two lines in each stanza. While these initial lines evoke the literal, physical characteristics of the Delta (and do so in language that is perhaps overly romantic), the final lines of each point to the effect of this place upon its people. This poem suggests that the people of the Delta are produced by the land and its demands; theirs is a character created by toil, virtue, and the sort of benevolent harshness that permits breaking "every law except/The law of kindliness." Percy joins place and people through the use of a simple abcb rhyme scheme, suggesting the inseparability of this union and emphasizing the unavoidable ways in which place works to define and proscribe individuals; in the first stanza, for example, dreams are connected to the harsh Southern sun. Such connections are unsurprising in what is essentially a pastoral poem, but

Percy rejects the rhapsodic evocations of pastoral leisure and beauty we might expect. The Delta is not a place of leisure and comfort, but rather a place of labor, conquest, and "dreams" not of rest, but of the chance to begin toiling yet again. If "In the Delta" is a pastoral poem, it is one that recalls the "Et in Arcadia ego" of Vergil, reminding us that even in the most beautiful of places, the harshness of existence is inescapable, a part of the beauty of the landscape, and a defining aspect of the lives of those who people a place.

If the opening stanzas of the poem point out the painful tension between beauty and the reality of human existence within a pastoral landscape, the final stanzas express a curious invitation:

> O friend, who loves not much indoors
>
> Or lamp-lit, peopled ways,
>
> What of a field and house to pass
>
> Our residue of days?
>
> We'd learn of fret and labor there
>
> A patience that we miss
>
> And be content content to be
>
> Nor wish nor hope for bliss.
>
> With the immense untrammelled sun
>
> For brother in the fields,
>
> And every night the stars' crusade
>
> Flashing to us their shields,
>
> We'd meet, perhaps, some dusk as we
>
> Turned home to well-earned rest,
>
> Unhurried Wisdom, tender-eyed,
>
> A pilgrim and our guest.

(274)

Here, the poem calls to those who are outside of the Delta, who presumably exist within urban modernity. The Delta offers them a place of escape, but an escape *from* the "indoors" and its connotations of leisure, comfort, and security, heading instead toward fretting, labor, and the harshness and companionship of the South's "immense untrammelled sun." The latter half of "In the Delta" thus suggests that "hope for bliss" is something naive, and perhaps even an expression of vice. Contentment, born of the reality of toil and an acceptance of human finiteness ("Our residue of days"), is the only responsible desire, and the only one that brings us to "Wisdom," the chief and source of all virtues.

Thus, we have a poem that points *extensively* towards what Percy understands as the flawed promises and abstract ideals of modernity, that pushes against its creature comforts, and indicts it for lacking virtues like wisdom and courage. Yet *intrinsically*, the poem makes clear the harshness, struggle, and pain that are inherent to the Delta, where virtue is attached to difficult, concrete means of existence. Percy's poem transcends the limitations of the minor idyll it originally appears to be, and demands its readers consider the ways in which their own visions of life are sentimental, seeking to ignore the harshness of existence and the ways in which place helps to determine how we interpret our lives.

This poem thus presents a vision of place that helps us make sense of how Percy understands the Delta, and particularly the Delta plantation, as a community. Before recounting the "terms" of Fafar's agreement, Percy describes the conditions that produced it:

> After the first fine frenzy of emancipation, although Negro politicians and carpetbaggers were riding high and making prosperity look like sin, the rank and file of ex-slaves, the simple country Negroes, found themselves

> farring exceedingly ill. They had freedom, but nothing else. It's a precious possession, but worthless commerically. The former slave-holders had land, but nothing else. It's as precious, nearly, as freedom, but without plow and plowmen equally worthless. On ex-slave and ex-master it dawned gradually that they were in great need of one another–and not only economically, but, curiously enough, emotionally... To each plantation drifted back puzzled, unhappy freedmen who had once worked it as slaves and who were discovering that though slaves couldn't go hungry, freedmen could and did. (*Lanterns* 275)

Set where it is before the rehearsal of the compact that defines Percy's ideal economic community, this description suggests that he understands the post-War plantation community as built upon individuals navigating a series of tensions. These tensions are especially pronounced for the freedmen. Percy implicitly recognizes that they have achieved something long desired—freedom, and the accompanying power of individual self-determination. However, the achievement of this *interior* goal is very quickly placed into tension with an acute, *exterior* need to return to a relationship largely resembling the *status quo ante*, wherein self-determination was circumscribed and freedom was non-existent. Percy's interpretation of these historical circumstances is blunt, and even simplistic: these ex-slaves must eat, and the economic conditions of the Delta in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War have placed a fundamental limit on their ability to do so. As a result, an external economic reality forces these individuals into a reconsideration of the value of their long-awaited achievement, and the freedmen must consider and navigate their newfound identity in light of this tension.

Importantly, Percy notes that these considerations are not only economic, but also emotional. Emotions need the contexts of human interactions to be coherent, and are thus only comprehensible inside communities. Obviously, it would be a mistake

to completely ignore how the particular emotionality Percy references points to his comfort with a paternalist notion of race. But there is also something more complex at play here, involving not only Percy justifying his racial views, but also an implied evaluation of his own fraught place within his community. As noted earlier, the facts of Percy's self-identity place him outside the norms of the Delta community; logically, he would be better served living outside of the Delta, in a community where a queer aesthete could thrive. And while Percy does, indeed, often visit such places—New York, Samoa, and some European communities—he always returns to the Delta. In this, he is much like the speaker of "In the Delta," an individual who wishes to give up comfort—perhaps both physical and existential—in order to gain something both more profound and more poetic. As Fafar's ex-slaves gave up certain aspects of self-determination to live with some level of economic (and, in Percy's mind, emotional) stability, Percy chooses to live in a way that places his internal self in tension with the external norms of his community. This essentially poetic approach to his place within the community allows him to emotionally justify his continuing to live in the Delta, just as he posits an emotional need for the freedmen to return to the plantation. As an aesthete, Percy cannot simply accept a socioeconomic rationale for his decision, nor for that of the freedmen. Percy's conception of community allows him to position himself—a gay aesthete—with stability inside of a society that rejects the worth of this identity. His poetic logic presents a vision of community governed not by considerations of the external factors of power, economics, and kinship, but rather by individuals engaged in an *internal struggle* for personal meaning that is proscribed by *and in conflict with* those features. It allows him to ignore those things that would exclude him from the conservative Delta community, and instead permits him to understand himself as a full member of it, and also to regard this community as an essential shaper of his own self.

Rightly or wrongly, the Stoic Percy seems to see such external features of com-

munity as inescapable, and perhaps even immutable. For him, the factors of real importance for living in a community are the ways in which these inescapable, immutable features allow for the individual to explore his own internal worth and value, both to himself and his community, something discovered through the tension between extrinsic and intrinsic forces. Of course, Percy's poetic vision of the plantation allows him to justify black disenfranchisement and romantically idealize an economic system rife with abuses, however noble its stated foundations. We should not ignore or attempt to explain away these real issues with his vision of community. But at the same time, we also must not ignore the ways in which Percy re-figures Southern conservative community to make sense of his own self, and the virtues he possessed and valued. These virtues make community life possible, and are based in a religious perspective that Percy similarly reconfigures from the typical Southern conservative vision.

Die Götter, Virtue, and the Pagan South

Despite his devout youth, the adult Will Percy is, at best, an agnostic believer whose faith seems more pagan that Christian. Nevertheless, he holds onto perhaps the central aspect of traditional Abrahamic faith—the reality of evil and the inescapability of human sinfulness—though he articulates it in essentially pagan terms. Percy also relies on the "inscrutability of nature" upon which Richard Weaver asserts "Southern piety is basically an acceptance" (Weaver, "Aspects" 196), especially as it suggests the need for virtuous suffering, an ethical position that permits him to assert the need for myth and the importance of aesthetics in everyday life.

As intimated by "In the Delta" and developed in *Lanterns on the Levee*, Percy sees suffering and self-denial as virtuous, inasmuch as they allow us to resist evil and form our characters. While he never defines "evil" in a philosophical, abstract sense, the content of his memoir makes clear his notion of evil. For Percy, evil encompasses

things which undermine community, destroy reciprocity and prevent the realization of mutual obligations within a community, and contribute to the existential degradation that results from atomistic notions of the self. While it may be inaccurate to say that Percy sees post-Enlightenment modernity as *ipso facto* evil[6], he clearly sees many actions produced as a consequence of this worldview as evil. In *Lanterns*, Percy criticizes versions of evil that he understands as logical outgrowths of the zeitgeist of modernty. The Ku Klux Klan and James K. Vardaman are evil because their virulent race-hatred denies what Percy sees as the mutual obligations of white and black Southerners to one another, obligations that in his mind are ideally achieved by the sharecropping agreement. Klansmen and Vardaman's poor white supporters care only for the white race—and more specifically, for the lives of *individual white men*, whose primary obligations are to themselves. Whites of this sort are products of modernity's atomistic conception of the self. Totalitarianism and Yankee industrial capitalism are evil, as they dissolve all meaningful existential agency, either by subsuming the individual self to the collective or breaking men into hyper-individualized selves whose exercise of control is little more than choosing what to buy next. Both of these systems result from modernity's worship of rationality and leveling efficiency. Percy recognizes that there may be a perverse sort happiness that accompanies these modern notions; but because they are evil, and contribute to the destruction of the truest parts of a man's self, they must be resisted, even if that results in suffering under the "immense, untrammeled sun."

To assert and attend to the truest part of the self, evil must be resisted, even if such resistance is marked by Quixotic futility. For the Stoic Percy, suffering and failure are parts of character-formation and, ultimately, the performance of duty. This is virtuous suffering, and its various aspects are mutually reinforcing—the character

[6]Whether or not he does is a question that cannot be answered by the works Percy left to posterity.

that allows us to perform our duty insists that we resist evil, and the act of resisting evil is part of our performance of duty. Virtuous suffering also permits opportunities for edification, as "In the Delta" also suggests. We learn through suffering, are made better by it, and use it to approach human flourishing. Percy presents us with a neat calculus: endurance of suffering is the key to acquiring virtue, virtue is necessary for performing duty, and through the performance of duty, the individual finds fulfillment.

Percy holds to a notion of the inescapability of sin (which I've suggested is at the core of much Southern conservative thought), but it is a decidedly *pagan* vision of sin. As a result, he has no place for Christian virtues like St. Paul's faith, hope, and charity. Instead, Aristotle's prudence, temperance, courage, and justice are the primary means of salvation, and his saints—"*die Götter*" (the gods) is, as we will see, perhaps the more appropriate, decidedly pagan term than "saints"—demonstrate these virtues. Percy thus unravels the harmoniously dual character of the traditionalist South, presenting the Delta as pagan; where he does show us traditional Abrahamic faith, it is to illustrate the limitations of faith for overcoming evil, or of virtue being demonstrated *in spite of* the restrictions religion places on its exercise. If we can say that Percy retains a Christian faith at all, its signal event would be Crucifixion, rather than Resurrection and Ascension. It is in the battle itself, and not in victory, that he finds peace. Percy sees as *die Götter* those who fight principled battles while being cognizant of the inevitability of defeat, and he emulates these and their acts of principled, though superfluous, resistance. That he enacts such attempts, despite an almost-certain awareness that success is impossible, is significant for understanding Percy's greater project: his casting himself as a necessary part of the Delta community from which he is doubly superfluous, but that he cannot (or at least will not) abandon.

Percy presents us with his gods in the sixth chapter of *Lanterns*, "A Side-Show Götterdämmerung." The chapter opens with the statement that the "most moving

book ever written" is not some great tragic classic, but rather a forgotten pulp novel, *In Silken Chains*. Percy admits that the novel was desperately obscure in his own day:

> No one ever read it except Aunt Nana and me, and we never finished it. The heroine's beauty—raven hair, magnolia skin, purple eyes—made you feel like the string section of the orchestra, and she was in deep trouble, I don't remember what about, but it was not her fault. Aunt Nana had been reading this gem to me for weeks and we had just reached an unspeakably poignant climax when Father appeared in our midst. "Nana, what in the world do you mean by reading such trash to that child?" Aunt Nana was crushed, I was desolated, he was adamant. We asked wearily what please could we substitute, and he unhesitatingly answered: "*Ivanhoe*." He did not often lay down the law, but then and there he ruled as authoritatively as Moses... Aunt Nana and I dutifully settled down to *Ivanhoe*. It produced unpredictable results: Aunt Nana wept herself into an illness over Rebecca, and I, far from being inspired to knightly heroism, grew infatuated with the monastic life, if it could be pursued in a cave opening on a desert. (Percy, *Lanterns* 56-57).

Shocked that his son is being exposed to a salacious—and decidedly feminine—romance, LeRoy Percy foists upon Will the masculine romance that Twain wryly insists started the Civil War. By opening this chapter with a juxtaposition between masculine and feminine characteristics, Percy is foregrounding the conflict between traditional notions of manliness and femininity as an important aspect of his self-formation; this conflict points to a thematic tension that runs throughout both the memoir and Percy's life (he is, after all, an aesthete *and* a war hero). The comment about his boyish fascination with becoming a monk is also quite pregnant with significance, as he is not interested in the monasticism of intentional religious community,

but instead in being a solitary desert anchorite. In this, we hear subtle echoes of the loneliness and recognition of superfluity that permeates *Lanterns on the Levee*.[7]

Percy directly proceeds to add another layer of complexity to this already-rich passage, and presents us with another important juxtaposition. Though he leaves readers room to understand his fascination with anchoritic life as a flight of childish imagination, Percy makes the following quite interesting statement in the subsequent paragraph: "No one ever made the mistake of thinking [Father] wasn't dangerous, and to the day of his death he was beautiful, a cross between Phœbus Apollo and the Archangel Michael. It was hard having such a dazzling father; no wonder I longed to be a hermit" (57). Percy then proceeds to list his father's virtuous qualities, insisting that LeRoy Percy was "the best pistol-shot and the best bird-shot, he made the best speeches, he was the fairest thinker and the wisest, he could laugh like the Elizabethans, he could brood and pity till sweat covered his brow and you could feel him bleed inside. He loved life, and never forgot it was unbearably tragic" (57). In this list of virtues, we see Will praise his father's physical courage (a cornerstone of Greco-Roman virtue and citizenship), his gracious, heartfelt pity for others (arguably the central moral principle of the Gospels), and his wisdom and joy (qualities encouraged and valued by both Classical paganism and Christianity). Percy is making clear that his father's masculinity—those aspects of himself that, in an appropriately Aristotelian sense, made him a necessary member of his community—is thus an exemplary harmony of Christian and Classical virtues (thus the beautiful description "a cross between Phœbus Apollo and the Archangel Michael"). Through his juxtaposing this against his boyish attraction to the ermetic life—something explicitly *un*-communal, though nevertheless virtuous in the Christian sense—Percy admits his

[7]Though Percy's silence about his sexuality in *Lanterns* makes any interpolation of his queerness into the book a vexing undertaking, this passage also seems to serve as a subtle commentary on his awareness of, and his sexuality's contributing to, his superfluity; after all, traditional discourse around male homosexuality posits it as an essentially feminized, "inverted" version of manhood.

initial lack of the Classical virtues.

However, a later comment complicates this presentation, and forces us to reconsider what, exactly, Percy is doing in presenting LeRoy Percy in this way. In a later chapter, Will Percy remarks that, as a boy, he had "resented [his father's] unchurchliness" (141). The indication is that LeRoy Percy was himself *not* an orthodox believer. In this light, the description of LeRoy as "a cross between Phœbus Apollo and the Archangel Michael" takes on different significance. St. Michael the Archangel is a celestial warrior and protector of the people of God, whose icon traditionally places him in armor, sword in hand, warring against evil. Of all the familiar figures of the Catholicism that produced Will Percy, St. Michael is perhaps the one most amenable to pagan virtues like strength and courage. As defender of the people of God, he is a paternalistic figure, tirelessly defending his charges in adherence to duty and obligation. When understood from this perspective, St. Micheal appears as much a member of a pagan pantheon as a Christian figure; LeRoy Percy resembles Michael in his courage and sense of communal duty, just as he resembles Apollo in his knowledge, wit, and other martial qualities. In presenting his father, an exemplar of the traditionalist South's virtues, as a pagan hero, Percy subtly undoes the unity of Christian and Classical that Tate described as the central feature of Western civilization. The adult Will Percy thus understands his youthful attraction to Christian virtues, especially those represented by ermetic life, as a character flaw. As a boy, he lacked the Classical virtues, and it is exactly those that need cultivation for Percy to lessen the existential burden of of his doubly superfluous existence and become a necessary member of the Delta's poetic community. To learn how to cultivate these, he must look to his *Götter*.

In the next chapter, "A Small Boy's Heroes," Percy recounts stories of the men of his father's social circle, and provides multiple anecdotes that illustrate the qualities that include them in his pantheon. While many of these passages are the most

plainly nostalgic in the entire memoir, the chapter's ending posits an intriguing further reflection on aristocratic virtue. Recalling a regular occurrence during childhood summers, Percy makes the following declaration:

> Sipping the dregs of a julep among the patriarchs of Chartres with the Queen of Sheba in her summer dress shedding immortal grace—in what better way could a little boy learn that the austerities of living are not incompatible with the courtesy and sweetness of life?... Perhaps [the Southern pattern of life] is all contained in a remark of Father's when he was thinking aloud one night and I sat at his feet eavesdropping eagerly:
>
> "I guess a man's job is to make the world a better place to live in, so far as he is able—always remembering the results will be infinitesimal—and to attend to his own soul."
>
> I've found in those words directions enough for any life. Maybe they contain the steady simple wisdom of the South. (75)

Several things are noteworthy here. First, Percy reminds us of the productive coexistence of "sweetness" and toil in life, as we saw in "In the Delta," further evidencing his ideal of virtuous suffering. Secondly, LeRoy Percy's description of "a man's job" is itself an evocation of the Aristotelian notion of mindfully living for the *polis* ("make the world a better place"). The task of a man attending "to his own soul" sounds broadly Christian, but does not align with any particular adherence to dogma; a man may very well attend to his own soul in the manner of the Stoic or the Aristotelian just as well as in the manner of the Christian. The lesson here is threefold: "a man's job" is contained in his duty, primarily expressed in the contexts of community; he must accept the inevitable persistence of evil, as "the results" of his performed duty "will be infinitesimal;" and as a result, he must craft a vision of his own self governed by duty and limitations. Percy's virtue ethics and self-conception are based in

his desire to do this "man's job," and cultivating the virtues that empower him to resist evil in spite of his superfluity. Both of these find realization in his elevation of paganism over the South's Christian traditions.

By presenting the aristocratic South as a pagan, rather than harmoniously Classical-Christian, society, Percy is positing a virtue ethic that allows for him to practice the "steady simple wisdom of the South" in a manner that does not compromise his complex self-identity. In Percy's mind, Classical, pagan virtues empower individuals to contest evil while recognizing that it cannot be defeated. They thus provide a means for improving the world, however infinitesimally such improvements may be. These virtues also provide a means for the individual to attend to his own soul: while he recognizes evil's persistence in the world, he is able to prevent himself from being spoiled by it because of the virtues he has cultivated. Pagan virtues provide Percy with a means for living decisively in the world; his pursuit of Christian virtue would have divorced him from his world.

The utility of pagan virtues for living in the world is sharply contrasted with the ineffectiveness of the Christian faith for doing "a man's job." While Christian doctrine posits the defeat of sin and death through the work of Christ, Percy presents the faith itself as fundamentally lacking in its ability to effect a practical defeat of evil. To his mind, the useful virtues provided by Christianity are not faith, hope, and charity, but rather courage and endurance. For Percy, Christianity provides us with an example of virtuous suffering, and not much else. By presenting the faith in this way, Percy translates Christianity itself into a form of paganism, similarly to how he posits St. Michael the Archangel as a pagan god. We see this translation illustrated by two key moments from the education narrative of *Lanterns*—by which I mean Chs. VI–XI, "A Sideshow Götterdämmerung" through "At the Harvard Law School"—in which he presents two of his teachers, Sister Evangelist and Father Koestenbrock.

Sister Evangelist was Percy's first formal teacher. She was the mother superior at

the local convent school, to which he was sent not to learn some body of knowledge or group of doctrines, but to overcome his various weaknesses: Percy admits that he was "a sickly youngster who never had illnesses. . . who was sensitive but hard-headed, docile but given to the balks, day-dreamy but uncommunicative, friendly but not intimate—a frail problem-child, a pain the neck" (76-77). His parents recognized that formal schooling would act as the proper corrective, not because of teaching, but rather because of the productive, virtuous suffering young Will would encounter within the supervised, controlled community that defines a school. Unable to afford boarding school, and recognizing that "though [he] needed the rough and tumble of a public school, [he] didn't need as much as [he'd] get," his parents chose the Sisters of Mercy convent school as the last desperate option.

The logic Percy provides here further reflects his general move to regard the aristocratic, traditionalist South as pagan. In suggesting that his parents sent him to school because he needed to *improve through suffering*, Will Percy presents his parents as electing to put him through an initiation ritual (at least superficially) similar to that of ancient Sparta; a boy, lacking discipline, purpose, and toughness, must be made useful to his community by having those qualities—the cornerstones of pagan manhood—cultivated in him. Obviously, a convent school is not a military academy, much less the obscenely demanding education of Sparta. Nevertheless, Percy explicitly describes his parents' choice of his schooling in terms of his weaknesses—both his physical frailness and his sensitive nature—and their trust that the "rough and tumble" of schooling will correct these. Importantly, no religious considerations are mentioned in the choice to send him to the convent school, even though all indications are that his mother, like her mother, was a devout Catholic. Thus, in Percy's presentation, his parents' choices about his education involve his need to cultivate pagan virtues, a logic he makes all the more powerful by the specific silence about religious instruction, despite his attending a Catholic school.

Despite her vocation, Percy's initial description of Sister Evangelist posits her as an instructor in courage, justice, and prudence rather than faith, hope and charity. She is "a midget of a nun with the valor and will-power of an Amazon, who taught every class, held prayers, occasionally larruped the wayward with the thin cane pointer she always carried, bullied, cajoled, and beguiled us unflaggingly and devotedly" (77). Obviously, Sister Evangelist's possession of these cardinal virtues does not mean that she holds them in exclusion from her Christian virtues; after all, St. Thomas had formally married these two sets of virtues in the *Summa* more than six centuries earlier. Yet Percy chooses to present Sister Evangelist as an "Amazon," a fierce female exemplar of the virtue he needed to do the "man's job" he learned about at his father's feet, at the exclusion of presenting her as a woman religious.

Sister Evangelist is also an example of an individual warring against evil, despite its inevitable persistence; in this, she, too, is one of *die Götter* that Percy looks to emulate. "The first thing" Percy learned at school was "the existence of evil," with evil constituted by the "oldest and biggest boy in the school. . . a monster of evil—cruel, nasty, bullying—with face and body so like Mansfield's Richard III that they published his qualities. All of us knew what he was and feared him" (77). And even though Sister Evangelist was herself afraid of this boy and the "obscene pantomime[s]" he would make behind her back, she would nevertheless "whirl into him dauntlessly and whip him until he whined" (ibid.). Sister Evangelist is herself fearful of this boy, and cognizant of the inevitable persistence of his evil; nevertheless, she resists him, and thus proves a powerful example to Percy and others "with third-rate bodies who insist on living uncowed in a world of evil" (ibid.). Percy suggests that her example of resistance against the boy's evil served to show him "[s]urvival virtues" and "defense weapons" to be employed in the service of such uncowed living (78).

Immediately after his initial description of Sister Evangelist's Amazon-like pagan qualities, Percy provides an intriguing discussion of the more directly religious aspects

of her life. Yet the way in which he presents Sister Evangelist's religiosity further illustrates his articulation of the traditional South as an essentially pagan community marked by individuals taking principled—if inevitably superfluous—stands, however impossible the odds. "Determination," Percy tells us, "ranked high among Sister's virtues, and among other things she determined that mine was a likely soul and she was going to save it" (78). Sister Evangelist's name suits her, and Percy notes that he goes as far as to begin imagining becoming a priest. However, Percy makes clear that he "shouldn't blame Sister Evangelist for my unbridled mystic fervor at this time; evidently my ground was plowed and harrowed waiting for her sowing." Percy's was eager for something to be sown in him, and Sister's was the message that reached him. He makes clear, however, that it wasn't some particular doctrine or religious truth he was looking to grow into: "I wanted to be completely and utterly a saint; heaven and hell didn't matter, but perfection did" (79). Even at a young age, "the Satan of [his] disbelief was at [his] elbow scoffing, insinuating, arguing, day and night," and his youthful piety—his desire to be "perfect"—was not based in religious conviction, but rather born out of an instinctual drive toward virtuous suffering. When he mentions "determination" as one of Sister Evangelist's chief virtues, he is positing her not as one who spreads the Gospel, but rather as being an evangelist for determined, purposeful struggle, and for endurance in the face of impossible odds; the Amazon is also a Spartan. This quality continues into her old age, and Percy describes later meeting with Sister Evangelist who, even at 100 years old, was still determined to save his soul and still exhibited the "Machiavellian heroism and saintly mendacity" she felt she needed to accomplish this feat (80).

Father Koestenbrock, who privately tutors the teenaged Percy, presents us with an interesting parallel to Sister Evangelist. Like her, Father Koestenbrock's vocation would lead us to anticipate traditional Christian virtues as his most definitive moral dimension. However, Percy's presentation of Koestenbrock shows that his, too, is a

virtue ethic that exemplifies virtuous suffering and the performance of duty. However, unlike Sister Evangelist, Father Koestenbrock's virtue ethic is *in spite of* his faith, rather than a result of it—he does not try to save Percy's soul. To the contrary, Koestenbrock seems to be the very antithesis of the piety one would expect from a priest: "He was not a saint and nothing shocked him. I used to peep at him through the confessional grille and he seemed half asleep... He never was interested in my sins" (86). Percy postulates that Father Koestenbrock's attitude toward sin, and his general nature, perhaps "came from his being Dutch, a Dutch nobleman" (86-87). Koestenbrock's aristocratic heritage makes him deeply attractive to Percy as a teacher and authority figure, especially as the priest provides the young Percy with an aristocratic example significantly different than that provided by his father. Like Percy himself, Father Koestenbrock was an aesthete and a man of profound loneliness. Both of these aspects of the priest's character suggests that his, too, is an essentially pagan form of virtue.

Percy describes how his teacher could be easily "led to analyze Ruben's *Descent from the Cross* and Raphael's *Christ and Saint Veronica*... I don't understand how his love of Haydn taught him to sing high mass, but something did, and more understandingly and moving than ever I heard it sung. The magical melodic line of his Pater Noster with its earnestness and pleading could keep you holy for a week" (87). Through talk of analyzing religious paintings and tying the Pater Noster to Haydn, Percy suggests that Father Koestenbrock's piety forms an extension of his aesthetic interests, rather than a result of simple faith. As an aristocratic aesthete, Father Koestenbrock provides Percy with an example not provided to him by his other *Götter*, one that allows him to affirm a significant part of his identity that his father, for instance, cannot understand. Importantly, Koestenbrock's aesthetic interests do not stand in the way of him performing his "man's job." To the contrary, they actually help him do his duty, inasmuch as they provide him with a means of serving his

community, evan as his religious vocation tends to stand in the way of communal obligations.

These obligations take the form of a felt need: the priest feels that his congregation needs a new church building, and ensuring that they have one will be the way in which he makes the world a little better, thus performing his "man's job." But the congregation is poor, and Percy implies that the Church hierarchy will not pay for the new building; for many years, "the building fund remained stationary." The Church hierarchy, then, fails to perform its duty of providing for those in its charge, while Father Koestenbrock lives up to the paternalistic duty implied in his ecclesiastical title. Koestenbrock pays for the building of a new church himself, using "every nickel" of the patrimony his "prudent Dutch father" had "hoarded" to "protect the old age of his son" (90). Koestenbrock's decision makes an old age of penury certain; while this might be a interpreted as a pious act, Percy makes clear that there is also an aesthetic component of the priest fulfilling this obligation.

Koestenbrock, as "gay as Papa Haydn and busy, busy from morning to night... [selected an elderly German contractor] with a fiendish temper and an unquenchable thirst. Then began two years of heroic battle: the two old gentlemen fought all over the place, about every item and detail, they throve and battened on the conflict, you could hear them high up in the scaffolding in outbursts of bilingual denunciation that would have done credit to Michelangelo and the Pope. At last the building was completed... a little Dutch Gothic church, well built, homey, and in good taste" (ibid.). The goal was not simply to provide his congregation with a new building, but with something beautiful and well-crafted. His love of beauty—an ostensibly pagan sensibility that the poor whites of the Delta would certainly view with virulent, iconoclastic suspicion—empowers his performance of duty. This was surely a powerful revelation for the young Percy.

Father Koestenbrock is inspiring to young Will Percy in another way as well—

he feels an intense loneliness and alienation from his community. Percy discusses discovering that Koestenbrock was an alcoholic, and how this forced him into a reconsideration of the notion of morality: "Drunkenness was bad and Father wasn't bad—my first lesson in reconciling the irreconcilable... Father was not immoral, he was good. Suddenly, I experienced the beginning of wisdom. Father was lonely, he never would be or could be anything else. Realizing that hurt me a lot. But I thought Father was single and unique in his loneliness: it was only the beginning of wisdom" (89). Simplistic, legalistic notions of sin and morality must be discarded, and the alienated suffering felt by those like the Dutch priest and, by the obvious implication of the "only the beginning of wisdom" line, Percy himself, must be gleaned for their hard-earned wisdom. In such loneliness, there are lessons to be learned, like those the speaker of "In the Delta" invites us to experience. Beyond this, there is even a strangely Quixotic sort of hope; in the last time he sees Father Koestenbrock, Percy asks him his opinion of the Klan:

> "I do not think of it," he replied. "The Church has been here a long time; it will be here a much longer time, after all these klans and foolish things are forgotten. And it is good for the Church... The Knights of Columbus, worthy souls, became filled with their own importance during [World War I] and did a great deal of foolish bragging. The Klan will bring them to their senses. It is a very good thing for the Church." He rose to go. We knew we should never see each other again. (91)

Suffering is a virtue, as it chastises and improves, burning away our vices while bringing us back to a renewed consideration of our core values. Loneliness is a privileged position, as it brings us into contact with time and opportunity for the reflections necessary to come to such significant conclusions. *Lanterns on the Levee* stands as a testament to William Alexander Percy's loneliness, and the complex reflections on

virtue his loneliness produced.

While his memoir is poor social criticism, it is a masterpiece of reflection on community, virtue, and the complex relationship of these to identity. Individuals like his father, Sister Evangelist, and Father Koestenbrock are key figures in Percy's reflections. These individuals fulfill their duties and meet their obligations, struggling against the reality of evil and the pettiness and mediocrity of modernity. In describing their struggles, Percy emphasizes their virtues; importantly, his emphasis casts these as essentially pagan. By presenting them as pagan, especially to the exclusion or minimization of Christian aspects, Percy posits a virtue ethic that re-figures the Southern conservative tradition in ways that allow him to be loyal to the complexities of both his identity and his community: a gay, irreligious aesthete can be a leading member of the inter-World Wars Delta, a community that would seem largely hostile to such an individual. The pagan virtues he learns and cultivates from his *Götter* allow him to do his "man's job," especially in his consciously superfluous resistance to what he sees as the mediocre, bourgeois evils of modernism—the Klan, Vardaman, totalitarianism, and Yankee industrialism. Without translating the Southern conservative tradition, William Alexander Percy could not fulfil his obligations, and could not have fought these battles, while remaining true to his own complex identity.

Percy and the "Culture of Failure"

How, then, are we to make sense of Percy's project—of his remaining true to his complex identity *and* his community? Lewis P. Simpson's comments on John Randolph of Roanoke prove useful here. Recounting arguments made by Robert Dawidoff, Simpson states that "Randolph became a fateful personification of the union of the personal and the political. More cogently than Jefferson and Madison and the liberal, cosmopolitan founders of the Republic, he exemplified the inner motivation of his age" (Simpson 3). Randolph, like Thoreau, "symbolized the injunctive need to

represent the politics of self implicit in the Declaration of Independence, which, endorsing the political sovereignty of the individual, implies the self-evident right of the self to determine what kind of order, or nonorder, it wants to be in" (8-9). Thoreau took up this challenge and became the prophet of American desire to "find yourself," and to exist free of the supposed existential limitations imposed by tradition and prescriptive social order. But Randolph "transcended self-dramatization," and recognized that the individual can never truly abandon community. As a result, the self must necessarily be defined against and in terms of the larger social, communal, and political contexts that surround him.

For Randolph, this played out most forcibly in his recognition of the inescapable connections between the vicious institution of slavery and the virtuous concept of liberty, defined corporately in the political doctrine of states' rights. Randolph recognized that the historical experience and situation of America meant that the wicked system of chattel slavery was perhaps the only viable defense against the victory of centralized economic and political power, and its abusive abrogation of liberty and self-determination. In articulating a resistance to centralized power, Randolph provided much of the logic for the concept of states' rights, used throughout Southern history to justify various forms of black disenfranchisement. That Randolph would provide the logic he surely knew would justify and perpetuate a system he saw as "the antithesis of the sacred right of the individual to be free" (10) perhaps shows him, like Percy, as blind to irony. Yet Simpson notes that Randolph was "haunted by the education in self-failure that inescapably accompanies the peculiarly intense identification of self and history in America." If he was blind to irony, he was aware of this blindness, as well as the ways in which facing these ironies would cause existential self-division, forcing him to choose between loyalty to the community and loyalty to his own self. According to Simpson, this forces Randolph to unwittingly initiate a "Southern culture of failure" that is seen throughout Southern letters (12).

Will Percy is certainly connected to this culture of failure, and is similarly haunted by this "education in self-failure," as the preceding discussion makes clear. Nevertheless, he refuses to retreat into his self, and in his memoir and poetry, he presents us with a self-consciously superfluous vision of the "union of the personal and the political" in the South of the inter-World War years, just as Randolph did in the years of the early Republic. And as Randolph proves, in one significant respect, to be the superior to Jefferson and Madison, Percy also provides a more cogent example of the "inner motivation of his age" than perhaps his most significant liberal contemporary, W.J. Cash. Whereas Cash's *The Mind of the South* seeks to understand the foundational logics of the South as a region in order to explain and critique its myriad systemic flaws, Percy's work forces us to confront the complex and often messy interior logic of the individual Southerner. In his case, this interior logic is derived from a recognition of the very real dangers of the reactionary demagoguery used to control poor whites, and the connections between this and the dehumanizing, community-destroying effects of industrial, capitalistic modernity. Like Randolph before him, Will Percy must "transcend self-dramatization." Whereas Randolph's act of transcendence led him to an indirect—though conscious—defense of a practice and economic system he found wicked, Percy's leads him to defending a social order that has no place for men like him, and requires a sophisticated, cosmopolitan individual to translate a provincial culture in complex, and even unrealistic, ways.

This, then, is how William Alexander Percy presents himself to us in memoir and poetry: not the simple, nostalgic writer of an encomium for the South's past, but a complex individual who recognizes that he is in a doubly superfluous position with regard to the South's traditional past and modern present. Unable to exist in the aristocratic Old Southern order without denying parts of himself, and flatly rejecting the bourgeois order of the New South, Percy is an outsider to both the society that produced him and the one that replaced it. Unmoored between these extremes, we

might have expected Percy to have become a prototype of the existential malaise demonstrated by a later generation of American of writers, perhaps a Kerouac in self-willed, wandering exile from Mississippi. Instead, he chooses to remain in the Delta—perhaps out of a committed Stoicism that says that the gods had immutably placed him there, perhaps due to the economic advantages that accompany being from a well-established, propertied family, or perhaps because of simple filial affection—despite the challenges this choice presents for his fully realizing certain aspects of his identity, specifically his sexuality and his art. Percy, like all of us, wants to to live as a unified, existentially whole person, and he knows that to make a Manichean choice between flatly aligning himself with either the Old or New Southern order is no way to do so.

From the home he will not abandon, the scion of one of the Delta's most important families refuses to capitulate to the crass, bourgeois mendacity of the New South. In the tradition that produced him, Percy found the best weapons to fight what the South, and the West in general, was becoming, even if that fight was Quixotic. Critics have long recognized that this is Percy's goal in *Lanterns on the Levee*, while nevertheless questioning his success in this endeavor. I've shown that his project is complicated by the fact that he cannot simply use his critical tool—the Southern conservative tradition—as he finds it, because of the ways it, too, casts him as superfluous and shows him enmeshed in a Southern "culture of failure." Percy must engage in a complex translation of this tradition, especially with regard to its conception of community and its evocations of virtue, while leaving its first principles—those things that most devastatingly strike at the heart of the New South's atomism and materialism—intact.

Percy, of course, knows he cannot win his battle against the New South and emerging (post)modern American order; like Randolph before him, Percy has received an education in failure. Thus the appropriateness of the closing scene of "Jackdaw

in the Garden," the penultimate chapter of *Lanterns*. There, he is overcome at the "piteousness" of New Yorkers, scurrying about Manhattan, made into "lesser insects" from the vantage point of the top of the Empire State Building: he knows this is the future, and that his world is truly lost—not just superfluous, but also posthumous. Like Carlyle's hero, William Alexander Percy cannot bring the light, but he simply seeks it. For William Alexander Percy, this was a Sisyphean task; but through attempting it, he came into the hall Richard Weaver speaks of at the close of *The Southern Tradition at Bay*. It seems likely that one of the "splendid tapestries" Weaver says is found in that hall contains the scene Percy describes in the chapter's final sentence: "But the autumn air is tinged with gold, the spotted sun sleeps in the garden, and the only treasure that's exempt from tarnish is what the jackdaw gathers" (343). From this, he has learned Weaver's elusive "something of how to live," and provides us with an example of how to make a self. Whatever the failures of Percy's critical project, in this regard his work is resounding success, and we should be both challenged and edified by it.

Chapter 3

Early Peter Taylor: Nostalgia and Vice

> History has many cunning passages, contrived corridors/ And issues, deceives with whispering ambitions,/ Guides us by vanities. Think now/ She gives when our attention is distracted/ And what she gives, gives with such supple confusions/ That the giving famishes the craving. Gives too late/ What's not believed in, or if still believed,/ In memory only, reconsidered passion. Gives too soon/ Into weak hands, what's thought can be dispensed with/ Till the refusal propagates a fear. Think/ Neither fear nor courage saves us. Unnatural vices/ Are fathered by our heroism. Virtues/ Are forced upon us by our impudent crimes.
>
> T.S. Eliot, "Gerontion"

In "Aspects of the Southern Philosophy," Richard Weaver remarks that "If the time ever comes to write the definitive history of the Southern people, it may prove impossible to find a better epigraph than the line from *Gerontion* [sic]: 'Virtues are forced upon us by our impudent crimes'"(Weaver, "Aspects" 206). This is a keen observation, and by remembering the preceding line of Eliot's poem—"Unnatural vices / Are fathered by our heroism"—we come to a fuller understanding of what Weaver is pointing out. Throughout his work on the South, Weaver articulates its peculiar position as both the defeated section of a nation founded on a myth of invincibility, and as the traditional section of a nation built on Enlightenment principles of progress and human perfectability[1]. The South's vices—its racial history, anti-intellectualism, and perhaps too-certain morality—find their basis and justification in its own heroic myths, while its virtues—loyalty, honor, a distrust of dehumanizing, nihilistic systematization, and a deeply-held sense of ethics and propriety—are

[1]One of the great ironies of American history is these very un-southern principles were most clearly articulated by the ur-southerner, Thomas Jefferson.

implicated in and complicated by the region's impudence and bold promotion of its own cultural superiority.

This awkward marriage—between virtues that often put the South at odds with the rest of America and vices defended as part of an heroic patrimony—had significant consequences for the region in the 20th century. Weaver notes that "for the North the South is too theatrical to be wholly real" (206), an observation that points toward the logic underpinning a statement from *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, that the mid-20th century South "is damned for its virtues and praised for its faults" (*Southern Tradition at Bay* 391). What is true for the South as a region is also true for many of its individual denizens, and the work of Peter Taylor is a rich site for understanding the consequences of this confusing interplay of virtue and vice for (post)modern southerners. In his fiction and drama, Taylor presents characters who look to the southern past, and its tradition and stability, as sources of meaning in a bewildering southern present. But as many of these characters are unable to approach the southern past in any way other than nostalgically, its resources are of little utility; their worship of southern "heroism" casts the southern tradition as a set of existentially limiting "unnatural vices." Even so, the southern tradition does contain a set of resources for affirmative, critically-engaged living, a fact Taylor's writing also illustrates. But this work makes clear, access to the virtues of the southern tradition depends on coming to terms with its "impudent crimes." I consider the ways in which Taylor explores the virtues and vices of the southern tradition over the next two chapters.

The Southern Tradition and Peter Taylor, Early and Late

Because of the persistence of certain themes and concerns throughout his entire corpus—family history, propriety, manners, social decline, the fading of class distinctions, the changing roles of women and African Americans, the social, familial, and personal consequences of romance and chastity, amongst others—as well as a

general consistency in narrative technique,[2] readers may very well perceive Taylor's thinking as relatively stable over the course of his fifty-plus year career. However understandable, this approach to Taylor's work is flawed, as there is a clear and significant evolution in Peter Taylor's earliest to latest works, something that is especially pronounced with regards to his thinking about the South. While it is true that many of his most significant themes and aesthetic techniques are consistent throughout his career, Taylor's thinking about the South and the southern tradition changes. By breaking Taylor's work into periods, we are able to trace this evolution and how it interacts with his other primary concerns, ultimately producing a robust understanding of the various aspects of Taylor's project. This is especially true for his exploration of the southern tradition, its virtues, and its constitutive relationship with his characters' identities.

A brief example will suffice to illustrate the utility of periodization. Midway through "In the Miro District," one of the author's most important stories, the narrator responds to his grandfather's interruption of a drinking binge by endlessly interrogating the old man about his experiences with Nathan Bedford Forrest in the Civil War, as well as the grandfather's witnessing of a group of nightriders killing his law partner in the early 20th century.[3] The narrator, reflecting on this pivotal moment in his youth, recalls his grandfather sitting silently, refusing to respond to any questions. The narrator then reflects on the meaning of this memory:

> I hear myself going on and on that Sunday night. As I babbled away, it was not just that night but every night I had ever been alone in that

[2]I say general, as I recognize that there is some experimentation in Taylor, and his development of a digressive narrative technique at the height of his career in the late 1970s is real. But even then, even a casual reader would recognize the writer of 1994's *In the Tennessee Country* as the writer of 1940's "A Spinster's Tale"

[3]This moment recalls the experiences of Taylor's paternal grandfather, Col. Robert Zachary Taylor, who fought with Nathan Bedford Forrest and was later nearly killed by a group of nightriders. Taylor biographer Hubert H. McAlexander notes that this experience "assumed a central place in the Taylor [family] annals" (McAlexander, *Peter Taylor* 9)

> house with him. I had the sensation of retching or actually vomiting, not the whiskey I had in my stomach but all the words about the nightriders I had ever heard from him and not known how to digest—words I had not ever wanted to hear. (Taylor, "In the Miro District" 166)

This passage presents what seems to be a central move of much of Taylor's fiction with regards to the South: many of his characters find themselves necessarily unable to digest the words and stories of the South, its patrician past, and the attendant social and political complexities that grow out this aristocratic world. This moment from "In the Miro District" reveals a clear tension between the unavoidable nature of such knowing and, simultaneously, not wanting to know these stories, a tension that appears over and again in Taylor's work. It is also vital to point out that these stories, these *rhetorical* moments, are complex and nuanced explorations of the South's virtues and vices, concepts an increasingly abstract and dialectical America—the world in which characters like the narrator of "In the Miro District" live—find to be alien impediments to social progress and self-fulfillment.

It is interesting to pair the psychic vomiting of the narrator of "Miro District" with the physical vomiting of Landon "Lanny" Tolliver, arguably the central character in Taylor's mid-1950s drama, *Tennessee Day in St. Louis*.[4] Here, Lanny's 15th birthday falls on "Tennessee Day," an unofficial day of remembrance and celebration put on by the Tennessee expatriate community of St. Louis, Missouri, in honor of their native state's culture and history. Though Lanny has lived his entire life in St. Louis, he is acutely aware of his family's roots in the west Tennessee village of Thornton, and has turned this awareness into a boyish obsession with the history of his ancestral town, the roots of the Tolliver family, and, most significantly, with the legends of the Old South and the Lost Cause of its Confederacy. When the nonagenarian "Cousin"

[4]The book version of the play was published by Random House in 1957; this volume lists the copyright "as an unpublished work" as being 1955. Act I of the play was originally published in the Winter 1956 number of the *Kenyon Review*.

Cameron Caswell, retired US Senator from Tennessee, visits with the Tollivers in advance of the celebration, Lanny is overjoyed at the chance talk with a man whose boyhood was spent on an antebellum plantation, and who wore the Gray as a teen.[5] Ignored by Senator Caswell and the other adults, Lanny, late in Act II, takes his leave of the family to go up to his room, ostensibly to continue his reading the history of "Sam Davis... the boy-hero of the Confederacy [who] was hanged for spying, near Nashville" (Taylor, *Tennessee Day* 81). As Act II closes, Lanny is found in his room, having attempted to kill himself by overdosing on an elderly aunt's sleeping pills; the suicide is prevented only by Lanny's older brother forcing him to vomit. While Taylor presents the causes of Lanny's attempted suicide as appropriately complex (including suggestions that the bewildering psychosexual drama of puberty is partially to blame, as Lanny is confused by his lust for his brother's female companion), it is clear Senator Caswell's reluctance to engage Lanny in exploring southern myths, as well as his family's inability to connect with Lanny over southern history in any but the most cursory ways, have exacerbated the boy's feeling of intense alienation from his family and ancestry. Rather than live with such confusion and alienation, he choses death. Expressing a personalized version of the Lost Cause, Lanny's attempt to kill himself effectively brings him into communion with Sam Davis, Tennessee, and the southern tradition in ways his family will not or cannot.

In these two important moments, Taylor provides us with two young men, both working through the consequences of "ingesting" the narratives of the South. One of these characters is sickened by these stories, while the other nostalgically craves the legends of a place and time that seem more real and satisfying than his present.

[5]Again, Taylor deftly weaves his own family history into his work, as Cousin Cameron's life before, during, and after the War combines the real experiences of both his maternal and paternal grandfathers. Further, Lanny's hyper-awareness of his Tennessee heritage is a likely reflection of the experience of the young Taylor himself; as noted, because of the efforts of his mother, the author spent his formative childhood years as a self-consciously southern scion of Tennessee landed gentry, confusingly relocated to the steadfastly industrial and Midwestern city of St. Louis.

In the case of the narrator of "Miro District," the resistance to consuming these words is based in an awareness of the myriad demands on his individual identity that result from his recognizing the connections between family history, personal history, and the South's cultural history. In Lanny, Taylor gives us a character whose nearly-destructive embrace of the southern tradition results from his feelings of isolation and estrangement from his present. Whereas the narrator of "Miro District" is sickened by the stories and legends of the South because they challenge the libertine identity he, like so many other young adults, has created for himself, Lanny needs the southern tradition *precisely because* it provides a way of living that connects him to something significant, meaningful, and beyond his own self.

While the southern tradition is thus a central element of both works and an essential factor in defining these two characters, there are profound differences in the tradition's ultimate consequences for them. *Tennessee Day in St. Louis* presents the southern tradition as existentially poisonous, exemplified both by Lanny's attempted suicide and several other moments in the play. In contrast, the traditionalism of "In the Miro District," represented both by the grandfather's stories and his very existence, is distressing because it acts as a challenging corrective to the shallow hedonism shown by that story's narrator, and is thus existentially useful. Thus, this brief examination of these two stories suffices to illustrate that Taylor's thinking about the South and the utility of the southern tradition evolves in significant ways over the two decades between the publication of *Tennessee Day* and "Miro District." These two works are exemplary of an overall tendency in Taylor's work, something that we can more readily understood by breaking his career into three roughly-defined periods—early, middle, and late.[6]

[6] Breaking Taylor's work into periods is necessarily imperfect, in large part because the majority of Taylor's output consists of short stories originally published in magazines and literary journals only later collected into books; sometimes decades would pass between the periodical and book publication of a story. Further, the habit of publishers to reissue stories from previous, out-of-print collections leads to situations that can further confuse these efforts. For instance, the 1985 collection

In Taylor's early period, the South, especially as it represented by the fictional town of Thornton, is an inescapable and limiting presence. The second, middle period of Taylor's career is marked by an overall abandonment of direct engagement with the South, as Taylor turns instead to deepening his exploration of other important questions and themes. The fictive center of this middle period is not the rural west Tennessee village of Thornton, but rather Chatham, "a middle-sized city... [that is] not thoroughly Middle Western and yet not thoroughly Southern either" (Taylor, "The Other Times" 7-8). By picking up the early period's examination of various themes without the messy burden of the South, the middle period allows Taylor to examine the ramifications of a more general traditionalism for individuals in a modern, increasingly untraditional America. This, in turn, prepares his work for revised thinking about the South and its conservative traditions in the late works. Unlike the early period's palpable feeling of entrapment with regard to the conservative southern past, the works of the late period investigate how these seemingly limiting aspects can be reinterpreted into both existentially empowering phenomena and rich sources of resistance to an otherwise deadening (post)modern, bourgeois American culture.

To analyze the ways in which Taylor reinterprets and translates the southern conservative tradition, I focus on Taylor's early and late periods, and their analyses of the personal and social consequences of southern conservatism, in this and the next chapter respectively.[7] Taylor's early period ranges from his earliest-published works

The Old Forest and Other Stories contains the title story, originally published in 1979, alongside works from as early as 1945. Finally, within each period, there are (unsurprisingly) individual works that do not fit neatly into that period's general characteristics. Despite these difficulties, breaking Taylor's long career into identifiable periods is a useful tool for tracing how his thinking about the existential usefulness of the southern tradition changes.

[7]Certainly, the transitional works of Taylor's middle period, especially stories from his 1959 collection *Happy Families are All Alike*, provide useful contexts for understanding how his thinking changes, and the works from his final years, the short-story collection *The Oracle at Stoneleigh Court* and the novel *In the Tennessee Country*, provide a set of intriguing commentaries on Taylor's final perspectives on the utility of southern conservatism. Yet, as this is but a single chapter of a larger work, I have chosen to by-and-large ignore these for the purpose of the present discussion, electing to focus only on the works that provide us with Taylor's typical explorations of the limitations and

and covers his first four published books: *A Long Fourth*, *A Woman of Means*, *The Widows of Thornton*, and *Tennessee Day in St. Louis*. These works show Taylor's characters holding an uncritically nostalgic understanding of the southern conservative tradition, as they are incapable of seeing any other way of life as possible—except, of course, for an equally problematic, uncritical embrace of the present, which posits their history, beliefs, and ultimately these characters themselves as superfluous. Quite understandably, they reject this choice. While such a rejection makes sense existentially, and is perhaps even necessary, their nostalgic understanding of southern conservatism is clearly limiting and self-destructive.

The way in which the characters in Taylor's late period deal with a similarly difficult choice provides an important contrast. I consider the late period to roughly cover those works published after 1973's collection of short dramas, *Presences*. This period includes Taylor's arguably most important works, three of which I consider here: the long stories "In the Miro District" and "The Old Forest," as well as Taylor's Pulitzer Prize-winning 1987 novel, *A Summons to Memphis*. Much of the drama in these works deals with characters recognizing that a nostalgic view of the South and its traditions is untenable, while at the same time finding the pettiness and irreverent hedonism of the (post)modern, bourgeois present to be morally and aesthetically reprehensible and a profoundly unsatisfying means for investing their lives with meaning. These characters learn how to view the southern tradition not as merely presenting a vicious nostalgia that mourns the southern past, but rather as a source for virtue, a library of various means for understanding and classifying life experiences, and a set of connections to history and community. In other words, the southern tradition points to the possibility of depth, nuance, and meaning for their lives, where the lived present provides them only with shallow mediocrity.

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possibilities of the South and its conservative narratives, myths, and traditions.

Early Taylor and the Vice of Southern Nostalgia

In examining stories from his early period, we see Taylor presenting a nostalgic view of the southern conservative tradition as problematic, and even vicious, for two reasons. First, while the characters in these stories may depend on some form of this tradition as a basic, constitutive element of their lives, their inability to conceive of it except nostalgically makes them incapable of living affirmatively in the present. For these individuals, the present in which they live can only be understood negatively, as a period that is not the southern past and that lacks positive qualities. Secondly, these characters find themselves without a vocabulary to critique and criticize the present in any effective manner, a lack that results from their inability to see the tradition they depend on for meaning non-nostalgically. Lacking, or perhaps even being dispossessed of, critical and affirmative vocabularies makes these individuals loyal to an unattainable ideal. The impossibility of returning to the time and place they perceive as properly conducive to living creates an existentially vexing and painful longing—a destructive nostalgia.

This destructive nostalgia takes multiple forms in these stories, as we see characters drawing on different aspects of the South's conservative tradition: its notions of socio-economic principles, of its manners and conceptions of propriety, its notion of human limitation, and its sense of duty and virtue, or some combination of these. We see one of the clearest examples of the negative existential consequences of nostalgia in characters' reliance on 19th-century socio-economic ideals. Though they live in the rapidly-industrializing, increasingly (sub)urban era between the two World Wars and readily engage in the capitalistic economic practices of their time, these characters still hold to southern conservative social views, visions that have their basis in the agrarian and planation economies of the previous century. The ruinous personal consequences of this erroneous conflation—that social structures built on the plantation model continue to be useful in a commercial, (sub)urban socioeconomic period—are

seen in Taylor's first novel, 1950's *A Woman of Means*, as well as stories like "Their Losses," "A Wife of Nashville," and, perhaps most devastatingly, 1951's "What You Hear From 'Em?"

Originally published in *The New Yorker* and later collected as the second story in *The Widows of Thornton*, "What You Hear From 'Em?" tells of Aunt Munsie, an elderly black woman whose titular question concerns Thad and Will Tolliver, men whom she helped raise in the West Tennessee village of Thornton. Now in middle age, Thad and Will are successful businessmen in Memphis and Nashville. With her question, Aunt Munsie is not simply asking how Thad and Will are, but whether they have yet made the decision to return to Thornton—and have thus also decided to abandon their personal and commercial successes in favor of the intimacy with community, past, and tradition that she understands the town to represent. The story's plot vacillates between Munsie's questioning the Tollivers and various residents of Thornton, and the gradual revelation of a "conspiracy" to pass an ordinance against keeping pigs within the town limits. The immediate consequence of this ordinance would be the elimination of another vestige of a suburbanizing Thornton's rural past: Aunt Munsie pulling her slop wagon through the streets of town. Ostensibly concerned for her safety, the ordinance passes only through the support of either Thad or Will Tolliver, or perhaps both; Taylor is purposefully vague on this point. At first unable to believe that such an law exists, Aunt Munsie is crushed when she learns of its reality, and readers witness an almost instantaneous metamorphosis in her character at the story's end, as the independent, morally and intellectually sophisticated Munsie is reduced to being merely "like other old darkies" (Taylor, "What You Hear From 'Em?" 251).

While increasingly suburban and removed from the agrarian, plantation-based economy of the previous century, the ideals of many of the Thornton's citizens, including Aunt Munsie, are still based in agrarian models. Taylor is clearly drawing on

two standard tropes of southern literature in this story: the black mammy and her abiding love of her white "children," and the bewildering process of socio-economic change and progress. As a result, this story has often been read as a paean to Agrarian principles, with Aunt Munsie figuring as a victim of industrialization. Ward Scott provides a typical reading, going so far as stating that this story's "archetypal conflict" is readily found in "*I'll Take My Stand* as the battle between agrarianism and industrialism," and goes on to quote from nearly every essay in that volume as a part of his discussion of "What You Hear From 'Em?" (Scott 27).

While they have their individual merits, such readings have two significant flaws. First, they too-neatly connect the author's thought to that of his Nashville Agrarian mentors. Secondly, these readings glance over the complexities of Aunt Munsie's identity, as well as the ways in which the actions of the Tollivers and the citizens of Thornton are themselves representative of a particular interpretation of the southern tradition. By examining the story in light of these considerations, we see Taylor doing something much more sophisticated than providing credence to the critiques present in *I'll Take My Stand*. Rather, we see him investigating the problematic nature of community and tradition in identity formation. While Aunt Munsie needs a particular version of the southern tradition to have any identity that is at all self-affirming, the community's version of this tradition circumscribes who Aunt Munsie can be. Taylor's purpose in this story is thus an exploration of how Thornton, and by extension, the southern tradition in general, are simultaneously existentially empowering and limiting, especially when considered nostalgically.

An important aspect of how "What You Hear From 'Em?" deals with tradition is the story's blending of race, time, and location in Aunt Munsie. Her character is largely defined in terms of her relationship to the Tolliver family and, through them, the town of Thornton's other white citizens. As Taylor shows these white characters to be themselves defined by propertied self-interest, we can usefully see

Aunt Munsie's character as constructed in terms of her personal appropriation of the southern conservative tradition. We begin to see this in how Taylor describes Munsie's interactions with Thad and Will on their occasional visits. As she regularly asks the citizens of the town the "what you hear from 'em?," a question the author makes clear is both ritualistic and exclusively concerned with when Thad and Will "were going to pack up their families and come back to Thornton for good" (233), she asks an even more pointed question whenever Thad and Will visit. In these moments, Munsie is pointedly direct: "Now, look-a-here. When you comin' back?" (234). The two questions, one to the citizens of the town, another directly to Thad and Will Tolliver, are thus both concerned with the same thing—the permanent return of the Tolliver boys to Thornton. These questions, and their shared concern, are of central importance to Munsie's character, and to her place in the community. When taken together, they suggest that her connection to Thornton is presupposed upon her connection to the Tolliver family, and vice-versa. In Munsie's thinking, to separate the Tollivers and Thornton is to diminish both and, as a result, ultimately herself.

That Munsie's thinking takes this form is further evidenced by Taylor's description of Thad and Will's answer to the question, as well as her home, the place where the questioning occurs. When asked about returning,

> whichever it was would tell her he was making definite plans to wind up his business and that he was going to buy a certain piece of property, 'a mile north of town' or 'on the old River Road,' and build a jim-dandy house there. He would say, too, how good Aunt Munsie's own house was looking, and his wife would say how grand the zinnias and the cannas looked in the yard. . . The visit was almost over then. There remained only the exchange of presents. One of the children would hand Aunt Munsie a paper bag containing a pint of whiskey or a carton of cigarettes. Aunt Munsie would go to her back porch or to the pit in the yard and get a fern

> or a wandering Jew, potted in a rusty lard bucket, and make Mrs. Thad or Mrs. Will take it along. Then the visit was over, and they would leave. From the porch Aunt Munsie would wave goodbye with one hand and lay the other hand, trembling slightly, on the banister rail... Often as not Thad or Will, observing this, would remind his wife that Aunt Munsie's porch banisters and pillars had come off a porch of the house where he had grown up... [Thad or Will] would close the gate, resting his hand a moment on its familiar wrought-iron frame, and wave to her before he jumped the ditch. If the children had not gone too far ahead, he might even draw their attention to the iron fence which, with its iron gate, had been around the yard at the Tolliver place till Dr. Tolliver took it down and set out a hedge, just a few weeks before he had died. (234-35)

Taylor's narration provides the questioning with an almost ritualistic air, in which the question and answers, the exchanged gifts, and the physical characteristics of Munsie's home are invested with symbolic meaning. First, Thad and Will's answer clearly suggests noncommittal evasion. After all, even if they are "making definite plans," there are any number of things that may interfere with these plans ever coming to fruition, thus insulating them from either having to lie, or needing to make explicit the painful-yet-obvious truth, that they are *not* returning to Thornton. Yet the background behind these noncommittal plans is itself significant. While the desire to build a "jim-dandy" house on the edge of town clearly resonates with a desire for a suburbanized "new," the Tolliver boys would need to build a new home in order to move back to Thornton, as the old homeplace itself has burned down. Importantly, the Tolliver house does, in a way, still exist—but only through Aunt Munsie's absorbing of its detritus and cast-off parts into her own home. In both her person and physical surroundings, Aunt Munsie thus exists as the only connection Thad and Will have with their familial and cultural past.

In her gifts to Thad and Will, Aunt Munsie subtly condemns their choice to leave Thornton. The plants are significant: the first is a fern, which reproduces by casting spores out to be blown by the wind, and the second is a wandering Jew. While referring non-specifically to any one of a number of creeping perennials, this plant's name references a longstanding figure in European legend and art, an individual distressingly marked as both untrustworthy and perpetually exiled. Both plants can also be divided, with a parent plant split into sections and re-potted, with one plant thus becoming two or more. While such rustic gifts are unlikely to be necessary (or even desired) in the Tollivers' posh Memphis and Nashville homes, the fact that Munsie forces the plants on the Tollivers—she has to "make Mrs. Thad or Mrs. Will take it along"—points to the uncomfortable judgment Aunt Munsie has made about the Tollivers: in their leaving Thornton, Thad and Will have both divided themselves and placed themselves into unstable, wind-blown exile.

Aunt Munsie's view of Thad and Will as exiles reveals much about her social and economic principles, just as their inability to truthfully admit that they will never return to Thornton and their nostalgic visits with Aunt Munsie show Thad and Will's principles. John Taylor of Caroline's social vision provides a useful perspective for understanding the differences in these principles. As a member of the early 19th-century "Tertium Quid" or "Old Republican" movement, Taylor of Caroline's political thought blends what historian Adam L. Tate identifies as "anti-Federalism, Virginia's legal culture, the 'Principles of '98' taken from the Virginia and Kentucky Resolutions, and the thought of British conservative Edmund Burke to create a constellation of ideas that has been classified as southern conservatism" (Tate 8). While sharing these political ideals with other southern conservatives, both antebellum and later, Taylor of Caroline's social thought nevertheless posits a relatively liberal view of human nature, with notions of depravity and man's imperfectability subsumed by ideas of freedom and liberty. Taylor of Caroline thus intriguingly presents a social vi-

sion that seems to share many common features with the classical liberal principles of Enlightenment thinkers while lacking the radicalism of men like Voltaire and Thomas Paine. In this, Taylor of Caroline obviously echoes aspects of Thomas Jefferson's thought. And while Taylor of Caroline arguably surpasses Jefferson's commitment to agrarianism, many of the practical consequences of his thought are largely capitalistic. Differing from the Yankee, Hamiltonian goal of business elites supported by a centralized bureaucracy, Taylor of Caroline posits a view of capitalism that is democratic, suspicious of centralized power, fiercely defensive of individual liberty, and based in the marketing of agricultural commodities. In combining Jeffersonian politics, agrarianism, and capitalism, Taylor of Caroline puts forth an agrarian, libertarian republicanism; such a vision could prove intriguingly useful for individuals like Will and Thad Tolliver.

This utility is limited by Thad and Will's merely nostalgic view of Thornton and the southern tradition, something we see illustrated by their reaction to the burning of the old homestead. We are told that Dr. Tolliver's home burned because it, like so many other houses of Thornton's leading families, stood empty and uncared for. The reasons for their emptiness are not that "nobody wanted to rent them or buy them but because the heirs who had gone off somewhere making money could never be got to part with the 'home place.'" What is true for the Tollivers is true for other leading Thornton families, as "the Tolliver house had caught fire from the Major Pettigru house, which had burned two nights before... Some even said the Pettigru house might have caught from the Johnston house, which had burned earlier that same fall" (Taylor, "What You Hear From 'Em?" 238). Thad and Will, like the scions of the other prominent families, find Thornton to provide an important source of meaning as a nostalgic ideal—we are told that Thad "nearly went crazy" when he heard about the fire, even though he "had hardly put foot in the house since the day his daddy died."—even if it does not provide any economic or social fulfillment.

Taylor of Caroline predictably defended "possession of family, farm, and leisure" as central to the well-being of a republic, and the "ideal of the independent landowner retained its prominence in Taylor's thought because it best secured private happiness. Happiness, therefore, had a material foundation" (79). In this story, it is clear that Thad, Will, and others like them have readily embraced the (sub)urban, commercial economy and its bourgeois values, even as they still hold onto the *ideal* of "family, farm, and leisure." But if Thad and Will Tolliver have predictably abandoned the realities of "family, farm, and leisure" in favor of a nostalgic ideal of these things and the realities of materialism and commercial success, Aunt Munsie is an unexpected champion of a traditional agrarian republicanism. Aware of their real successes in business, she nevertheless describes Thad and Will as failures: "No matter how rich they were, what difference did it make; they didn't own any land, did they? Or at least none in Cameron County. She had heard the old Doctor tell them—tell his boys and tell his girls, and tell the old lady, too, in her day—that nobody was rich who didn't own land, and nobody stayed rich who didn't see after his land firsthand" (242-43). A black woman who was born into slavery, Munsie is an unlikely defender of this social vision. Nevertheless, she incredibly reconfigures a tradition that seems to offer her nothing but a subservient, marginalized place in society into a source for self-determination and existential power, especially as it concerns her relationship to other whites.

As her use of the southern tradition in her own identify formation is in many ways tied to how she understands and classifies the white citizens of Thornton, it should be of little surprise that this, too, has its origins in how Munsie understands her relationship to the Tollivers. Even though she cannot "be got to reminisce about" her past, it is clear that a formative moment in her past was when "the old Mizziz had died and Aunt Munsie's word had become law in the Tolliver household. Without being able to book read or even to make numbers, she had finished raising the whole

pack of towheaded Tollivers just as the Mizziz would have wanted it done. The Doctor told her she had to—he didn't ever once think about getting another wife, or taking in some cousin, not after his 'Molly darling'—and Aunt Munsie *did*" (244). While never anything like a wife to Dr. Tolliver, Munsie becomes a mother to Thad, Will, and the other Tolliver children, something recognized by her biological daughter, Crecie, who announces Thad or Will's arrival by saying "Mama, some of your chillun's out front" (240). In her mind, Munsie is a sort of Tolliver, in that she has completely claimed the maternal role once held by the "old Mizziz." This role becomes so vital to her own self-identity, that, in her own heart, "Aunt Munsie knew that even Lucrecie didn't matter to her the way a daughter might," because of the preeminence she places on her mothering of the Tollivers.

Importantly, this impulse is rooted in Munsie's experience of marginalization: "She could never be go to reminisce about her childhood in slavery, or her life with her husband," things that marked her as who she is: a poor, illiterate black woman in a society that affords no real agency to individuals like her (244). Even though, as previously mentioned, Munsie also refuses to reminisce about how she became the maternal figure in the Tolliver family, the story makes clear that this role provides her a sense of identity and existential power. As illustrated by multiple discussions with her daughter, Munsie classifies Thornton's whites, and in doing so further reveals her self-affirming affiliation with the Tolliver family. While there are clearly "quality" white people, like the Tollivers and Miss Lucille Satterfield, these individuals have largely been displaced by two other classes of whites: "has-been quality" and those whites dismissively described as "others." Importantly, how Munsie understands the difference between these two classes is based in how they, in turn, understand Munsie:

> There was this to be said, though, for the has-been quality: they knew who Aunt Munsie was, and in a limited, literal way they understood what she said. But those others—why, they thought Aunt Munsie a beggar,

> and she knew they did. They spoke of her as Old What You Have for Mom, because that's what they thought she was saying when she called out, 'What you hear from 'em?' Their ears were not attuned to the soft 'r' she put in 'from' or the elision that made 'from 'em' sound to them like 'for Mom.' Many's the time Aunt Munsie had seen or sensed the presence of one of those other people, watching from next door, when Miss Leonora Lovell, say, came down her front walk and handed her a little parcel of scraps [for Munsie to use to slop her pigs] across the ditch. Aunt Munsie knew what they thought of her—how they laughed at her and felt sorry for her and despised her all at once. But, like the has-been quality, they didn't matter, never had, never would. Not ever. (239)

Munsie refers to these "other" whites as "'white trash' and even 'radical Republicans'" (240), terms that illustrate her self-affiliation with the worldview of the elite, "quality" whites. Even if there is an implicit, subconscious recognition of her selfhood being intimately connected with maternity, these "other" whites cannot make sense of what kind of mother Munsie is. To them, she is not the woman who raised their social betters, the Tolliver children, but rather merely "Old What You Have for Mom," a peripatetic beggar, a sort of "wandering Jew" herself. But Munsie knows her self and her self-worth, and those whites who matter know these things as well.

By attaching herself to the Tollivers and their position in Thornton, Munsie is able to transcend her "natural" position in the community: a marginalized, elderly, illiterate black woman who was born into slavery and continues to live in similar conditions of poverty. Despite this, Munsie, confident in her self-worth, brings herself in from the margins of Thornton society and literally inserts herself into the center of town life, as she pulls her wagon "down the very center of [the town's main street]," with the ostensible powerlessness of her agedness undermined by her "spry step" (236). She demonstrates her felt power similarly, stopping all town traffic with merely

"one hand with the palm turned outward" (238). Though not a Tolliver in name or condition, Munsie has, in her mind, existentially remade herself into the equivalent of a Tolliver. Ironically like the Tollivers and the other members of the old plantocracy, it is Munsie who gets to decide those at the center of society—herself and the "quality" whites—and those at its periphery—the "white trash" or "radical Republicans" who do not recognize her worth, power, or authority.

Obviously, all of this is tenuous. The power and existential agency Munsie has crafted for herself is based upon her astounding reconfiguration of the paternalism of the southern conservative tradition. Through casting herself as a Tolliver, Aunt Munsie has been able to transcend the limitations of her objectified position as an illiterate, poor, elderly black woman, and claim her own existential subjecthood. Of course, Munsie's continued success in this endeavor is clearly dependent upon the "quality" whites' continued engagement with this tradition. But as is apparent in the characters of Will and Thad, these whites are abandoning this tradition's notions of duty and agrarian stability—Taylor of Caroline's trio of "family, farm, and leisure"—and thus turning from republican virtue to the self-love that lurks at the core of laissez-faire society. Having left behind the agrarian republican vision Thornton provides in all but the most ineffectual and passively nostalgic ways, these "quality" whites no longer hold onto the fullness of this version the southern tradition. Forced to recognize this, Munsie realizes she has lost all the existential power she had created for herself through reworking this tradition. At the story's devastating climax, she tells her dog that "I ain't nothin' to 'em in Memphis, and they ain't nothin' to me in Nashville... A collie dog's a collie dog anywhar. But Aunt Munsie, she's just their Aunt Munsie here in Thornton. I got mind enough to see *that*" (249). Munsie is ultimately dispossessed of her subjecthood, and in the end, she becomes a simple stereotype: "she even took to tying a bandanna about her head—took to talking old-nigger foolishness, too, about the Bell Witch, and claiming she remembered the

day General N. B. Forrest rode into town and saved all the cotton from the Yankees at the depot" (250).

This story provides several implications for the ways in which Taylor understands the southern conservative tradition in his early work. Again, the southern conservative vision Taylor puts forth in "What You Hear From 'Em?" is understandable in terms of John Taylor of Caroline's libertarian republican social principles. But as Garrett Ward Sheldon and C. William Hill, Jr. make clear in their excellent study of these principles, *The Liberal Republicanism of John Taylor of Caroline*, this libertarianism is manifested through a connection between an "agrarian economy and liberal-republican polity" that is served by "a free market rewarding talent and industry" (Sheldon and Hill 74). For these principles to be effective in crafting a "good society," both the agrarian economy and the liberal-republican polity are of equal importance. A simply laissez-faire economy divorced from connections to the land may quickly devolve into petty self-love. As Sheldon and Hill make clear, in this way of thinking, an agrarian society "provided more than just virtuous, independent republican citizens; an agricultural society, [in Taylor of Caroline's] view, enjoyed psychological and even religious benefits" (77). But what are the consequences for an increasingly non-agricultural society that continues to depend on this economic vision—not out of adherence to its virtues and "psychological and even religious benefits," but rather for the nostalgic indulgence of its most powerful citizens? Peter Taylor shows us the logical end of such a situation: individuals acting as Thad and Will Tolliver have, moving to the big cities, pursuing their own interests and making money, all the while hanging onto nostalgic myths of agrarian virtue through the passive ownership of "the old homeplace," whatever the consequences for others.

It is incredible and moving to witness Aunt Munsie reconfiguring the southern tradition to claim agency over her own self, especially as its most significant historical feature, slavery, was explicitly and clearly constituted to marginalize individuals like

her. Nevertheless, she cannot survive the revelation that this tradition continues to exist only in the anachronistic and nostalgic vision of the "quality" whites. While the story points out that Thad and Will Tolliver are both disconcerted and emotionally vexed by a changing Thornton's challenges to the social, intellectual, and economic consistency of southern conservatism, Aunt Munsie is totally undone. Ultimately, Aunt Munsie's nostalgic reclamation of her own past provides her no way to hold to her own selfhood, and the tragedy of "What You Hear From 'Em?" results from one nostalgic fantasy of the southern tradition being undone by another. Though the realities of southern history make it unsurprising that Aunt Munsie is the one left broken at the story's end, Taylor shows us that it is not only his expicitly marginalized characters who are undermined by such nostalgia in an even earlier story, 1946's "A Long Fourth."

"A Long Fourth" takes place over a Fourth of July weekend in the mid-1940s; Harriet Wilson's son, identified only as "Son," will be enlisting in the Army the following week, and is returning to Nashville from New York for a final family gathering. Son will be accompanied by a young woman, Ann Prewitt, who is rumored to be radical in her politics and known to be the editor of a birth-control magazine. Understanding this as almost certainly a love match, and viewing this gathering as incredibly important—after all, Son might not return from World War II—Harriet is anxious to see the long holiday weekend succeed, with success defined by adherence to the norms of traditional upper-class southern propriety. While her anxieties are most clearly focused on Son's impending enlistment, Harriet is also deeply troubled by possibilities of propriety being violated, whether by a member of her family, her household staff, Nashville society generally, or perhaps even herself.

Harriet is especially vexed by B.T., a black servant who seems to have been born and raised on the Wilson property, who has been brought up by Mattie, his aunt, who has herself spent her entire life in the Wilsons' service. Despite his talent for working

around the Wilson property, B.T. shows either no interest or no ability in housework. Beyond this, the Wilsons find B.T. to stink, a condition Harriet says is "constitutional with him" (Taylor, "A Long Fourth" 200). As a result, Harriet and her daughters, Kate and Helena, must do all of the work inside the Wilson home to prepare for Son's return. Harriet's early discussion with her husband, Sweetheart, voices her concerns about B.T.: "As long as we keep [B.T.] I'm completely deprived of the services of a houseboy when I need one. When Son and his young lady come I don't know what I'll do. The girls are angels about such things, but next week they should be entertaining Son and her, and not just picking up after her. It seems unreasonable, Sweetheart, to keep B.T. when we could have a nice, normal darkie that could do inside when I need him" (200). Clearly, at the core of Harriet's complaints are a sense of what a "normal darkie" should be, and that B.T.'s ostensible abnormality forces Harriet, Helena, and Kate from their proper social roles. For Harriet, B.T. should behave in a certain way, because to not do so prevents the Wilson women from acting out their proper roles, which in turn compromises the experience of "Son and his young lady" on their visit. In this brief moment, Taylor provides us with a microcosm of Harriet's social vision: all individuals have a particular role to play, and an individual's failure to perform his or her role properly imperils social structures more generally. Should anything be out of its right place, nothing can be in the right place.

Harriet's need for propriety and order is seen throughout "A Long Fourth," as are her accompanying confusions when the traditional order of things is violated. She is perplexed by her daughters, who smoke, drink, and stay out until all hours of the night. Taylor makes clear Harriet's confusion, noting that "when [she] and her sister were [Kate and Helena's] age they were married and had the responsibilities of their own families. What a shame it is, she thought, that my girls are not married" (201). Harriet is even more confused over how to understand and label Ann Prewitt, as "Harriet felt certain that Son would bring no one who was not a lady, but what real

lady, she asked herself, would edit a birth-control magazine?" (202) While there are several other examples of Harriet's perplexity, a particular violation of her expected norms forms the central moment of the story. The day before Son's arrival, Mattie is visibly upset. B.T. has avoided conscription on condition that he leaves Nashville to work in a munitions factory; should B.T. refuse to work in this factory, he will be drafted. Heartbroken that the closest thing to a son she has ever had will be leaving her on the coming Tuesday—importantly, the same day that Son reports for enlistment—Mattie turns to "Missie" Harriet for comfort.

At first, Harriet finds this moment to be touching, as it reflects and re-inscribes the traditional relationship between a black servant and her white mistress, for which Harriet is deeply nostalgic:

> The old-fashioned appellative 'Missie' told Harriet a great deal. She handed Kate her purse and put out her arms to receive Mattie, for she knew that her old friend was in deep trouble. The Negress was several inches taller than Harriet but she threw herself into her little mistress's arms and by bending her knees slightly and stooping her shoulders she managed to rest her face on the bosom of the white eyelet dress while she wept... 'My poor Mattie,' [Harriet] said (206).

Here, Harriet's notions of propriety are reinforced, and as a result she is able to hold to a steady, stable identity. Harriet is able to play the role of "Missie," comforting her "old friend" so long as Mattie assumes the child-like role Harriet's nostalgic version of the southern tradition assigns her. Mattie soon makes a grave mistake, however, in daring to insinuate that she and Harriet's relationship is something other than mistress and servant. Mattie suggests that Son and B.T., and thus she and Harriet, are at least circumstantially equal: "Miss Harriet...it's like you losin' Mr. Son. B.T. is gwine too" (208). For Harriet, whose very self is presupposed on stable notions of propriety based in the southern past, this statement is an unpardonable transgression.

For readers, Mattie's suggestion is innocuous enough, and certainly understandable. Overcome by grief and the recognition that she is, for all intents and purposes, losing the closest thing she has a to a son, she attempts a moment of heartfelt communion with her "Missie." Despite Mattie's very human, heartfelt reason for making this statement, Harriet is nevertheless enraged by what she sees as Mattie's temerity:

> The open comparison of Son's departure to that of the sullen, stinking, thieving, fornicating black B.T. was an injury for which Son could not avenge himself, and [Harriet] felt it her bounden duty to in some way make that black woman feel the grossness of her wrong and ultimately drive her off the premises... Between the moments when she even pictured Mattie's being tied and flogged or thought of Mama's uncle who shot all of his niggers before he would free them, and of the Negro governor of North Carolina and the Negro senate rolling whiskey barrels up the capital steps, of the rape and uprisings in Memphis and the riots in Chicago, between these thoughts she would actually consider the virtue of her own wrath. And recalling her Greek classes as Miss Hood's school she thought without a flicker of humor of Achilles' indignation. (209)

The woman who was a few minutes before Harriet's "old friend" is now the object of her violent fantasies, an individual she imagines as being "tied and flogged" and whom she associates with the anarchy that supposedly results from the elevation of a "Negro governor" and a "Negro senate." Mattie's transgresses the proper order, with whites as the paternalistic governors of blacks. Should this order be violated, Harriet makes explicitly clear that the proper and honorable response is the restoration of this order through violence.

The language of Harriet's fantasies at this moment provides us with a powerful, though subtle, statement of her understanding of the southern tradition, the ways in which it provides her with meaning and self-identity, as well as the limits of this

tradition. It is necessary to recognize that what Taylor refers to as the "virtue of [Harriet's] own wrath" is distinctly masculine, with its insistence upon violence as a restorative for honor. Importantly, however, these masculine qualities are derived from "the language and the rhetoric of her mother," indicating that her mother, like Harriet, simultaneously defended and undermined the well-ordered, hierarchical nature of southern traditionalism, as self-conscious "ladies" engaging in distinctly masculine fantasies and narratives. Harriet is thus taking on the role that should presumably be occupied by Son or Sweetheart, complicating her seemingly iron-clad notions of propriety and order.

Cultural historian Ted Ownby provides a useful schema for making sense of this tension. In *Subduing Satan*, his study of the role of religion and recreation in the rural 19th-century South, Ownby distinguishes between two competing visions of southern culture in that society: what can be thought of as a feminine "praying South" and a masculine "fighting South," with the first based in evangelical religiosity and the second defined by honorific violence. In describing these two visions of southern culture, Ownby notes that while "evangelicalism demanded self-control, humility in manner, and harmony in personal relations, Southern honor demanded self-assertiveness, aggressiveness, and competitiveness" (Ownby 12). Applying this schema to "A Long Fourth," the honor-based violence of Harriet's reaction is clearly undeniable, making clear that "the virtue of her own wrath" is distinctly masculine. But this is complicated by the immediate appearance of a feminine characteristic, interpersonal harmony, as Harriet's anger is directly squelched by a resolution that Son's "last visit must not be marred, and she resolved to tell no one—not even Sweetheart—of what had occurred" (Taylor, "A Long Fourth" 209). As such, we can understand Harriet's reaction to Mattie's transgression as a cyclical processing of competing facets of a tradition that Harriet has received from her mother and for which she remains profoundly nostalgic. At first, a self-controlled Harriet embraces Mattie to

restore personal harmony, only to meet with a perceived slight that threatens to undermine that nostalgically-defined harmony. Her reaction takes the form of violent, self-assertive aggressiveness, in which she finds herself positioned to play a role that is not intended for her, but that she nevertheless feels compelled to perform. Finally, Harriet squelches this aggressiveness in the name of domestic and familial harmony, returning to her neatly-defined roles as mother, mistress, and lady. Harriet is thus unwilling to abandon rigidly-defined, gendered and racialized propriety, though she also finds herself forced exist within a set of contradictions that make such propriety possible. In short, Harriet, who is dependent on precisely-ordered notions of propriety for the stability of her own identity, finds herself required to undermine some form of propriety—here, the division between masculine and feminine characteristics—in order to maintain another form, the properly subservient place of southern blacks. While she seems unaware of this tension, its consequences effectively serve to isolate Harriet by the story's close. In this, she, like Aunt Munsie, provides another example of a significant aspect of Taylor's project in his early work: that a nostalgic, unreflective acceptance of the southern tradition is both an often unavoidable aspect of and an exceptionally limiting influence over his characters' lives.

This destructive tension is present from the story's early moments, when Taylor informs us that Harriet's views are informed by three individuals: "Harriet was yet guided in some matters by well-remembered words of her mother who had been dead for thirty years. In other matters she was guided by the words of Sweetheart. In still others she was guided by what Son said. Her two daughters guided her in nothing. Rather, she was ever inclined to instruct them by quoting Mama, Sweetheart, or Son" (199). While Harriet's life and thought being informed by mother, husband, and eldest son is unsurprising and predictable for a woman convinced of the correctness of the hierarchical, well-ordered southern tradition—an order reflected by her refusal to learn from her daughters, and her instructing them with these same

sources of authority—it is also clear that Taylor is pointing out the limitations of Harriet's overly-tidy thought. On one hand, she seems to place equal value on all three sources as authoritative, despite the fact these sources are often in conflict, something that becomes clear throughout the course of "A Long Fourth." Harriet's need for order blinds her to the essential contradictions between Mama's legalistic dicta, Sweetheart's bored indifference, and Son's hedonistic, opportunistic solipsism.

With Harriet Wilson, Taylor presents an individual whose tragic flaw is that she cannot conceive of any means of existence other than the southern tradition she has received from her mother, that she understands as reinforced in her husband, and that she hopes to see replicated by her son. She also finds it impossible to engage the tensions inherent to this tradition in a critical manner. Harriet can only accept this tradition in totality, and can only accept that totality as static and unchanging. Stated differently, for Harriet's worldview to operate in a manner that can provide meaning for her life, she cannot recognize the inherent tensions and even contradictions in this way of thinking; to the contrary, the southern conservative tradition must provide a neat and stable system through which Harriet can define propriety and consistently label herself and others. Consequentially, she experiences deep existential distress in two distinct contexts. First, she is vexed whenever she comes into contact with situations that force her to inhabit the tensions and contradictions inherent to the southern tradition. Her interaction with Mattie is a clear example of this, especially in how Harriet and Mattie's interaction is revisited at the story's close, which will be addressed shortly. Secondly, Harriet is also troubled when she encounters ways of thinking or modes of living that do not fit into the narrow fetters of propriety or that resist consistent labeling, both of which we see when examining Harriet's interactions with Ann Prewitt.

Harriet meets Ann sometime after her encounter with Mattie, and the mix of emotions that interaction brought up are exacerbated by Harriet's reunion with her

son and meeting his traveling companion: Harriet "met [Son] at the door of the parlor and as she threw her arms about him she found herself unable to restrain her tears," an emotional response obviously linked to her reunion with a child that she knows will soon be departing, perhaps permanently (210). Harriet is initially attracted to "Miss Prewitt," and her first impression of the younger woman leads Harriet back to a consideration of the graveness of Mattie's error. "When she saw the ladylike young woman in a black traveling dress and white gloves (as an example of [Son's] taste), it occurred to her that she had even underestimated the grossness of Mattie's reflection upon him." Importantly, Harriet understands the "ladylike" traveling ensemble worn by Miss Prewitt as revealing nothing about Ann Prewitt herself, but rather provides an example of Son's good taste. At first meeting, Ann Prewitt means nothing to Harriet *qua* Ann Prewitt. Rather, by presenting evidence of Son's taste, Ann serves two purposes. First, she serves to reassure Harriet that her faith in Son's authority over her life is not misplaced, as Son here conforms to Harriet's nostalgic ideals. Secondly, Harriet sees Son's "ladylike" companion as diametrically opposed to the women B.T. brings home, whom Harriet views not as "Negro women who might have been useful about the place but [as] real prostitutes from Nashville" (207).[8] Taken as a whole in these ways, Harriet Wilson initially sees Ann Prewitt not as a fellow woman or even merely an autonomous individual, but rather as an embodied justification of her indefatigable nostalgia. This, in turn, brings the grossness of Mattie's ostensible transgression into greater sharpness, producing an outburst of "hysteria. Sweetheart rushed forward and supported [Harriet], and Son tried to hold one hand which she was waving about" (211).

Over the course of three pages, Taylor has thus summarily presented the existentially destructive effects of Harriet's ossified, anachronistic understanding of the

[8]Harriet's division of black women into "useful" and "prostitutes" provides obvious echoes of other aspects of the 19th-century South's understanding of black womanhood, namely their abilities as workers and their sexuality.

southern conservative tradition. Her anger at Mattie causes Harriet to display stereotypically masculine feelings of violated honor, something that can be repaired only through violence, whereas her first impression of Ann Prewitt results in being overcome by hysteria,[9] which results in her being rescued and "supported" by Son and Sweetheart. Harriet's breakdown is thus occasioned by her inability to understand herself and her relationships to others in any terms other than those permitted by her narrow conceptions of propriety and order, while she simultaneously finds herself needing to violate the gender differentiation demanded by such notions. Taylor presents Harriet Wilson as an individual necessarily and tragically divided against her own self. Her further interactions with Ann Prewitt, Son, and her daughters exacerbate this division, resulting in Harriet, like Aunt Munsie, being existentially broken at the story's end.

Harriet's first substantial interaction with Ann Prewitt requires her to reconsider the younger woman. Whereas Ann had initially appeared as the very image of the "lady," Harriet now observes that Ann "had extremely crooked teeth which had been brought more or less into line probably by wearing bands as a child. . . She wore no makeup and was redolent of no detectable perfume or powder. And before she sat down in the chair which Sweetheart drew up for her, Harriet perceived that the girl took no pains with her hair which hung in a half-long bob with some natural wave" (212). The "ladylike" Miss Prewiit, who had provided evidence of Son's taste and justified Harriet's deference to his authority, is now described in ways that defy Harriet's traditional versions of femininity. While this does not make Ann Prewitt offensive to Harriet, it does complicate Harriet's understanding of Son's companion:

> For though she found [Ann] extremely agreeable [Harriet] perceived that

[9]Taylor's use of hysteria is a masterful stroke, as the word's etymological connection to womanhood subtly reiterates Harriet's notions of propriety; Son's earlier absence caused her to respond to Mattie's statement with masculine violence, while his presence produces an explicitly feminine reaction that needs the rescue and "support" of men—Sweetheart and Son.

> the possibility of any romantic attachment between her and Son was out of the question. The tie between them was doubtless what the girls called an intellectual friendship. In her own girlhood people would have called it Platonic, but then they would have laughed about it. Mama always said there could be no such relationship between young men and young women. Sweetheart always showed the smutty and cynical side to his nature when such things were discussed. Yet in some matters Son surely knew better than either Mama or Sweetheart. She had of course, never, herself, known such a friendship with a man and just now she was really trying to imagine the feelings that two such friends would have for one another (212-13).

In this interaction with Ann Prewitt, Harriet is faced with both the insufficiency of her nostalgic vocabulary for describing human experience and other individuals, as well as voicing the story's first recognition of the essential and necessary tension between her three authorities—"Yet in some matters Son surely knew better than either Mama or Sweetheart." While Mattie's outburst results in Harriet expressing ever more acute loyalty to a nostalgic version of the southern conservative tradition in which everyone knows their place and plays their proper role, meeting Ann Prewitt requires Harriet to face the insufficiency of that tradition.

The result of these two experiences is a retrenchment of the stability of Harriet's identity; events throughout the rest of the story repeat the existential struggles brought on by her worldview's insistence upon narrowly-defined propriety and ossified means of defining and interpreting human experience. Taylor reveals Harriet's conviction that the "sorrow over Son's going into the Army would not be so great if she could believe that he and Ann were in love," and that this sorrow is intensified by her confusion over Son and Ann's "unnatural and strange relationship" (219). Harriet's only moment of happiness in the latter half of the story is when she is when

Helena begs her to "sing us your version—the real Tennessee version" of a traditional ballad, a nostalgic indulgence that allows Harriet to forget the increasingly unavoidable awareness of her superfluity (220-21). Political arguments between the young people are taken to imply the climax of the "incomprehensible antagonism" between Helena, Kate, Son, and Ann Prewitt; it is telling that these are arguments about the very nature of the South and its future direction (222-25). Finally, Harriet learns that Ann Prewitt indeed cares for Son romantically; Son, however, does not care for Ann in this way and brought her to Nashville for manipulative purposes.

Before she leaves to visit her family in Arkansas, Ann informs the Wilsons that Son

> always thinks a person behaves badly who doesn't amuse him. He cares nothing for anything I say except when I'm talking theory of some kind. He was very willing to bring me down here before your friends to express all manner of opinion which they and you find disagreeable while he behaves with conventional good taste. He even discouraged me bringing the proper clothes to make any sort of agreeable appearance. Yet see how smartly he's turned out... And I, alas, have been so vulgar as to fall in love with him." She turned to Sweetheart who stood with his hands hanging limp at his sides and his mouth literally wide open. "It's a sad story, is it not, Doctor? The doctor tried to smile. (232)

Sweetheart, who has appeared as easy-going and even apathetic throughout the story, is unsurprisingly mute this revelation, rising to neither defend nor upbraid Son. Harriet, meanwhile, is forced to recognize both Son's charade and Sweetheart's indifference. Ann Prewitt's presence called into question the utility of Mama's categories and means of labeling and defining human experience, and Ann's ultimate revelation similarly undermines Son and Sweetheart's authority over Harriet. So long convinced of the stability of propriety and the categories the southern tradition provided her,

Harriet is finally presented with their insufficiency. Tellingly, she endures the final moments of Ann's revelation counting Sweetheart's walking sticks. Harriet "counted them several times over, and each time there were still seven sticks in the rack." Ultimately, this is the only certain, unchanging, and stable form of order available to her (233).

After Ann's departure, Harriet prepares for bed, only to have her nightly prayers interrupted by screams from B.T.'s cabin. Sweetheart investigates, and finds that Mattie has run off one of B.T.'s women and refuses to leave the cabin. Sweetheart, sensing Mattie's distress, sends out Harriet to comfort the Mattie and convince her to leave B.T.'s cabin; an unsurprisingly distraught Harriet reluctantly complies. As she and Mattie sit in silence, Harriet attempts an apology for her earlier anger: "'Mattie,' she said at last, 'I was unkind to you Saturday. You must not hold it against me'"(235). Even in this attempted apology, Harriet reiterates the differentiation between herself and Mattie, merely admitting to being "unkind" and asserting that Mattie must "not hold it against her," requests that seem to do little more than attempt to restore the *status quo ante*. Taylor's pathetic presentation of Harriet throughout the story does not leave readers angry with Harriet for this seeming arrogance. To the contrary, we are left feeling deeply sad for Harriet. While her experience with Ann Prewitt has called into question the sufficiency of the southern tradition, Harriet's wish to return to this tradition's boundaries and norms in her interactions with Mattie reveal the inescapable nature of her nostalgia. This is not due to Harriet's arrogance, nor to her disregard for the fullness of Mattie's tragic experiences, but rather simply due to the limitations of Harriet's experience: even after being made to see the flaws of her nostalgia, she knows of no alternative for making sense of her own self.

At the story's close, Harriet is haunted by her last moments with Mattie in B.T.'s cabin. After her apology, Mattie looked at Harriet with "neither forgiveness nor

resentment," but rather with "defiance of the general nature of this world where she must pass her days, not of Harriet in particular. In her eyes there was something beyond grief. After a moment she did speak, and she told Harriet that she was going to sit there all night" (235). While Mattie does not forgive Harriet for her cruel insensitivity two days prior, Mattie's response is neither harsh or vindictive. Lying in bed later, Harriet finds herself unable to recall Mattie's words or tone. But this lack of recollection leads to a moment of revelation: "It seemed as though Mattie had used a special language common to both of them but one they had never before discovered and could now never recover... in Mattie's eyes there was an unspeakable loneliness for which she could offer no consolation" (235-36). In the dark of her room, Harriet finally understands the nature of the connection that she and Mattie mutually hold—the "language common to them both"—that Harriet's uncritical traditionalism prevented her from recognizing as possible heretofore, and also that the events of this weekend have excluded this connection from ever being expressed again.

Beyond this recognition, Harriet is also confronted with her own "unspeakable loneliness," as it seems as if "her children no longer existed; it was as though they had all died in childhood as people's children used to do. All the while she kept remembering that Mattie was sitting out in that shack for the sole purpose of inhaling the odor in the stifling air of B.T.'s room" (236). Isolated from Mattie, the individual who could most closely relate to her anxieties, and cut off from those individuals who formerly provided her with structured meaning, Harriet is ultimately isolated from everyone, perhaps even God. Fervently in prayer when Sweetheart returns to their bedroom, she hears him lower himself into bed. When Harriet opens her eyes—importantly, Taylor does not say whether or not she finishes her prayers—she is confronted with the fact that "it was dark and there was the chill of autumn night about the room," a chill made more ominous when we remember that this is the night of the Fourth of July (236).

To be certain, the source of Harriet's final isolation is not some willful error or prejudice on her part. As Taylor makes clear throughout "A Long Fourth," Harriet is acting out of a sense of propriety and in terms of a set of standards that are deeply entwined with her sense of self. Her existential vocabulary provides her with no resources outside of that she has received from Mama, Sweetheart, and Son, that is, from the southern tradition itself. Harriet has not willfully made an anachronism of her version of the southern tradition. Rather, her version exists as the default rhetorical mode that she uses to make meaning for her life; she is either unaware that there are other versions, or if she does, she has no access to them. This is the tragedy of "A Long Fourth," and the source of the deep pathos readers feel for Harriet.

Taylor explores how such nostalgic adherence to the southern tradition demands self-division in another early-period short story, 1945's "The Scoutmaster." Taking place in the home of a wealthy Nashville family, most likely sometime in the 1930s,[10] "The Scoutmaster" is narrated by an unnamed prepubescent boy; his narration is marked by an increasing awareness of the transition from childhood to adulthood, and of the recognition that adulthood is presupposed on reactions to and relationships with the past—not only the individual past of lived experience, but also the communal and social past of norms, expectations, and ideals. Despite his constant bewilderment at the adult world, at the story's close the narrator arrives at a nascent emotional maturity, which is effected by his recognition of the importance of facing the past in order to create an adult identity. This recognition grows out of the narrator's observation of different means of interacting with the past, especially on the part of the titular Scoutmaster, his Uncle Jake. These observations also force the young narrator to recognize his estrangement and alienation from his family members—not

[10]While no year is ever named and no definitive evidence of period appears in the story, James Curry Robison asserts that Virginia Ann, the narrator's older sister, uses "fad expressions of the period [the 1930s], three of which appear in the first five paragraphs" (Robison 26). Trusting Robison's statement that Virginia Ann is using 1930s expressions, I take that as the story's setting.

only the adults, but also his brother and sister, whose transitions to adulthood are presented here.

"The Scoutmaster" takes place over an unstated period of time, and the plot largely consists of two moments of estrangement, with a moment of crisis between. As the story opens, Aunt Grace has divorced Uncle Basil, and is living in Nashville with the narrator's family while waiting to hear about work. Eventually, she secures employment, and as she waits on a taxi that will take her to a train bound for Birmingham, the narrator is suddenly disconcerted, as he finds Aunt Grace to be a "stranger," no longer the "utterly useless if wonderfully ornamental member of the family," but rather one who plays a "function" he is yet unable to name (Taylor, "The Scoutmaster" 271). The second moment of estrangement occurs at the story's close. Here, the narrator is attending the Scout meeting led by Uncle Jake, and there he finds "that it seemed that [Uncle Jake] too was becoming a stranger" (294). Between these moments is the central crisis, which grows out of Aunt Grace's absence—Aunt Grace is presented as a confidant and mentor for her niece—and creates the conditions for the narrator attending the Scout meeting. While the rest of the family is away at a Thanksgiving football game, the narrator is tasked with "chaperoning" Virginia Ann and one of her beaux. With her family expecting her to show up at the game late, and knowing her brother will provide little in the way of chaperoning, Virginia Ann takes advantage of this chance for privacy. Naturally uncomfortable and instinctively aware of his insufficiency for this role, the narrator attempts to ignore Virginia Ann, holding onto his last moments of childish purity and ignorance of sexuality. When the family unexpectedly returns returns home and catches Virginia Ann—"they were only necking," Brother tells the narrator, "but they sure were *at* it" (292)—the adult family members are shocked at her breach of propriety. In order to provide themselves the privacy to punish Virgina Ann, Mother and Father send the narrator to the Scout meeting with Brother and Uncle Jake; while too young to be a Scout, the narrator

will attend as Brother and Uncle Jake's "visitor" (291).

In both the moments of estrangement and the central crisis, we see the narrator facing the end of his childish egoism; this is especially apparent in the interactions with Aunt Grace and Uncle Jake. There, the narrator is faced with the recognition that both adults are individuals with lives outside of their relationship with the him. This is straightforward enough, but by explicitly connecting the past to each moment Taylor insists that we do not see "The Scoutmaster" simply as a story about maturation. In both of these moments, the narrator is faced with recognizing not only that Aunt Grace and Uncle Jake are individuals themselves, but also that their identities arise from a personal, idiosyncratic experience of the past that is inaccessible to the narrator.

Throughout the story, Aunt Grace is presented as a woman who, in the narrator's words, "was wise or old-fashioned enough to sit with Mother and Father and discuss the things they could not abide in Virginia Ann and yet who was foolish or newfangled enough to enjoy the very things which Virginia Ann called 'the last word'"(271). To exist simultaneously in the traditional world of her own generation and the thoroughly modern world of her niece seems to be the familial role of Aunt Grace and women like her; this is the "one reason why there should be one member of a boy's family" like her, something that makes Aunt Grace more than "utterly useless but wonderfully ornamental" (ibid.). Taylor pairs this recognition with the unexpected appearance of Aunt Grace's ex-husband, who accompanies her to the railroad depot. As he rides in a car with them, the narrator witnesses their "pleasant conversation," and her "chatter and her excited laughter" (ibid.). Taken alongside his earlier recognition, the narrator's observations suggest that the ways in which Aunt Grace fulfills the role he has recognized has its origins in her own past, especially her relationship with Uncle Basil and the personal idiosyncrasies produced by that relationship and its history.

In the second moment of estrangement, Uncle Jake has assumed the role of the Scoutmaster, and the narrator's witnessing of "Uncle Jake's lips [pronouncing] the words "'loyal, brave, trustworthy, clean, reverent '" is the proximate cause of the his estrangement from the older man (294). For Uncle Jake, these words from the Boy Scout Law represent "those honorable things which were left from the golden days when a race of noble gentlemen and gracious ladies inhabited the land of the South. [Uncle Jake] was saying that we must preserve them until one day we might stand with young men from all over the nation to demand a return to the old ways and the old teachings everywhere" (295). Whereas the narrator comes to realize that Aunt Grace is a complicated individual whose past, and especially her failed marriage, did much to influence the roles she assumed in their family, he is here unable to make much sense of Uncle Jake becoming "more and more another stranger to me," other than recognizing that his uncle is "losing himself in the role of the eternal Scoutmaster" (294). While the narrator is here unable to explain the cause of this transformation, Taylor makes clear throughout the story that Uncle Jake is deeply affected by his own personal losses; these losses result in the self-dividing nostalgia that separates him into Uncle Jake and the Scoutmaster.

As noted, the central drama of "The Scoutmaster" is the narrator's coming to terms with the ways in which our relationship to our collective, social, and personal pasts influences our adult identities. That Uncle Jake's nostalgia requires him to divide himself—and thus show himself as a "stranger" to the narrator—posits an especially problematic example of the relationship between adult identity and the past. Conversations between Mother and Father reveal significant disagreement over the causes of Uncle's Jakes need to self-divide. However, when taken alongside evidence provided by statements of Uncle Jake himself, these discussions point out that Jake's nostalgia results from his inability to fully and effectively perform the roles of brother, father, and husband—roles to which the southern conservative tradition

lends significant importance and gravitas—and a desire to recover what he lost when those roles become no longer available to him. Nostalgia becomes the only way for Uncle Jake to enact this recovery, and his need to do so is so strong as to necessitate his dividing himself.

In commenting on the disparity in appearance between Uncle Jake and Aunt Grace, despite her being only five years younger than him, the narrator notes that

> it wasn't that Uncle Jake's own sad life told on him... but, Father explained, Jake had had a motherless daughter to raise and to nurse through a fatal illness at the age of nineteen, and that had kept him old-fashioned. Even if this motherless daughter had not been a prig and a fanatic—His daughter had died at nineteen from a skin disease she had caught in her social work. Her name had been Margaret, but he had always called her 'Presh' for 'precious'—even if she had not been such a one, Uncle Jake would have remained old-fashioned, Father explained, because just raising a child did that for one. (268)

While Father's assertion that raising a child keeps one "old-fashioned" has some truth in it, this does not explain the presence of Uncle Jake's nostalgia, something both Mother and Father are aware of and attempt to understand.

While Mother and Father both recognize the existence and results of Jake's nostalgia, they disagree on whether or not it stems from a sense of loss. Mother's interpretation connects Jake's nostalgia with his daughter's religious mania, noting that it "began as very much the same sort of thing as Jake's nostalgia. It was all tied up with notions of her mother's existence in Heaven. Toward the last her social work consisted mostly of preaching to those wretched poor people in East Nashville about her mother in Heaven. She could just not be bothered with any real view of things" (282). Presh's piety is both zealous and myopic, in that it consumes her thinking while preventing her from performing her role as a social worker in any real

capacity. Importantly, this decidedly negative aspect of her piety—and it is this that transforms it into "religious mania"—is based in the loss of her mother. By connecting Jake's nostalgia to Presh's religious mania, Mother affirms that Jake's nostalgia divorces him from any "real view of things," and also *seems* to imply that it, too, is rooted in the loss of his wife.

But when Father agrees with this tacit premise, and speculates on "Uncle Jake's fate and what it might have been if his wife had not died when Presh was only half grown," the narrator's Mother disagrees. The narrator records Father wondering aloud: "'If only Margaret, herself, had lived to make him and Presh a home, he might not have forever been looking to the past and being so uncritical of things in the present. He might have taken hold of himself.' Here Mother would disagree. Men's natures *weren't changed by circumstances*, she contended" (282, emphasis added). Mother's here rejects basing Jake's nostalgia in the loss of Margaret; while Presh is unable to relate to the present because of the loss of her mother, Mother sees Jake as *constitutionally* nostalgic. Contrarily, Father sees Jake's nostalgia as based in the loss of Presh and Margaret, and argues that Mother's thinking to the contrary illustrates that "The female is the cynic of the species."

Taylor implies that the truth of Jake's nostalgia lies between and beyond the arguments of Mother and Father. Obviously, Uncle Jake's nostalgia does separate him from a critical engagement with the present, which seems to the be one point on which both Mother and Father agree. However, they fundamentally disagree over the root cause of the nostalgia, with Mother presuming it is an intrinsic part of Uncle Jake's character, and Father presuming that it results from Jake losing his wife and daughter. But examining Taylor's presentation of Uncle Jake himself, we see that neither Mother nor Father understand the full complexity of Jake's nostalgia. An examination of the ways in which Uncle Jake thinks about his dead brother, Louis, brings us a better understanding of Uncle Jake than the one we and the narrator are

given by Mother and Father.

Louis haunts the entire story, and his absence and centrality to the family are announced by the narrator at the story's outset:

> In the hall there was a picture of Father at the age of six, still wearing what he called his kilts but large enough to be holding the reins of a big walking horse on the back of which was seated Uncle Jake. My Uncle Louis, too, in his first pants, was in the picture. He was seated on the grass underneath the horse's belly with his arms about the neck of a big airedale. (But Uncle Louis had died of parrot fever when he was only twelve.) Virginia Ann would show the picture to her beaux as they were leaving at night. It was always good for a laugh, especially if it was a new beau that had just met Father or Uncle Jake... (267)

Here, we see that the family enshrines the memory of Uncle Louis, and that this portrait provides a moment of mild, though certainly legitimate, tension between the older and younger members of the family (Father describes Virginia Ann's dismissal of the portrait as one of many things about his daughter that he simply "could not abide"). But more intriguingly, the photograph indicates a real difference in age between Louis and Jake; the photograph shows Louis in his "first pants," and Taylor describes "the lace on the hem of Uncle Jake's dress" soon after the initial mention of the photograph (267). Differences in dress between the brothers suggests a difference of at least a few years, indicating that Jake was still quite young when Louis died of parrot fever. This fact makes Jake's remembrances of Louis become far more important than simple reminiscence; understanding how Uncle Jake remembers his dead brother is key to understanding his nostalgia and, through it, his character.

The narrator recalls Jake's encomia of Louis:

> Whenever all the family were at the table Uncle Jake would often talk of

> the saintly nature of Uncle Louis. . . Neither he nor Father could remember ever having heard Uncle Louis speak an uncivil word or remember his misbehaving on any occasion. Once their father. . . had come through the strawberry patch behind the old house on the Nolansville Pike and found Uncle Jake and Father playing mumble-the-peg while Uncle Louis did all the berry picking. And when Uncle Louis saw his father stripping off his belt to give his brothers a whipping he ran to him and told him that he, the eldest brother, was to blame for not making them work and that he should receive the punishment. My grandfather had turned and walked to his house without another word.
>
> . . . Uncle Jake would say that [Grandfather] walked away toward the house in order that they should not see how moved he was by Uncle Louis's brotherly love and spirit of self-sacrifice. (275)

While he certainly may very well remember this event, it is obvious that Jake is interpreting his father's reaction. Furthermore, Jake's extreme youth at Louis's death suggests that his conception of his late brother's "saintly nature" is a purely retroactive construct. Other moments in the story corroborate this, and indicate that Louis has become more a symbol and type to Jake than an actual, remembered brother. For Jake, Louis is the exemplar of those virtues he recites at the scout meeting, and those virtues are the corrective to what he describes to the Scouts as "these latter days when the morals and manners of the country have been corrupted" (295).

By assigning Louis these roles, Jake has made his long-dead eldest brother into the embodiment of the southern conservative tradition itself and, as a result, the source of Jake's nostalgia. A careful reading of "The Scoutmaster" shows that Mother and Father's interpretations of Jake's nostalgia both contain kernels of truth. While Jake's nostalgia does have its source in the loss of Margaret and Presh—thus validating Father's account—it was not their loss that *produced* this nostalgia. Rather, Jake

uses nostalgia as a means of recovering and reenacting the significant roles of father of husband. Jake's wife and child were taken from him far too early, and his childish memories and adult interpretations of his dead brother provide him with a means of making sense of those losses.

Throughout the story, Uncle Jake shows himself to be uncritical of the present, counseling Virginia Ann's parents to be liberal with her at several moments. But even at even at these times, Jake's old-fashioned sensibilities are apparent; when Father complains of a contemporary song being overly suggestive, Jake defends it because it "had more of the old-time feeling in it" than other new music (273). That Jake is uncritical of the present is not a result of his accepting its pieties, but because the deaths of Presh and Margaret left him without a proper, well-defined role to play in the present. As his thinking is largely governed by the southern conservative tradition that praises the importance of marriage and fatherhood, Jake as a childless widower—a role which finds few precedents in the plantation mythos on which Jake's worldview is based—is alienated from the present. As a result, to find meaning the present, Jake must look to the past. With husband and father no longer available to him, Jake's nostalgic invocations of Louis and the virtues of the South's past provide him with an opportunity to play another meaningful role—that of Scoutmaster.

Jake's scout-meeting criticism of "the morals and manners of the country" in "these latter days" makes sense in this context. Just as the narrator realizes that Aunt Grace needed to play a role more complex than a "merely ornamental" family member, Uncle Jake needs to be more than a childless widower for his life to meaning. Through a complex arrangement of his personal past, loss, and reconfiguring memories of his dead brother into myth, Jake finds a means for creating real and substantial meaning. At the story's close, the narrator describes the Scoutmaster as "a gigantic replica of all the little boys on the benches, half ridiculous and half frightening to me in his girlish khaki middy," recalling the androgyny of the clothing worn in the hall photograph,

along with the uncanniness of seeing an adult as a child, something that also mirrors the hall photograph. Jake has thus not only become the titular Scoutmaster, but has also inhabited the ghostly absence of Louis, channeling his dead brother through a lens colored by traditionalist virtues and pieties. In the end, Jake's nostalgia is not caused by his losses, but rather provides him with a means for recovering from his losses, and their deeply confusing existential consequences. By becoming the Scoutmaster, Uncle Jake can recover his lost brother Louis, and through him his lost wife and daughter. As the product of a traditionalist society that seeks to place all of its members in well-defined roles, channeling an idealized version of his dead brother provides Jake with a context for existential meaning not available to him as a childless, widowed uncle.

In "The Scoutmaster," Taylor provides a robust, if complex, explanation of why one would cling to a nostalgic version of the southern tradition: because of the meaning it provides to an individual in the face of real and substantial loss. In these situations, the southern tradition seems to provide a source of meaning and stability, a means for recovering what was lost in some way. Because of what it seems to promise, this tradition is understandably attractive to individuals like Uncle Jake, characters for whom Taylor desires our pathos and not our derision. But Taylor is ultimately not presenting Uncle Jake, Harriet Wilson, and Aunt Munsie as merely pathetic characters. Instead of asking us to pity them, Taylor wants us to see these characters as tragic individuals, and to recognize that their flaw is not in their desire to use and engage the southern tradition as an act of recovery for something lost, but rather that they can only engage this tradition nostalgically. Uncle Jake presents a clear example of this, as for him, "loyal, brave, trustworthy, clean, reverent" are not virtues that have critical utility in a flawed present, but rather things merely to be preserved until the day that "men from all over the nation [demand] a return to the old ways and the old teachings everywhere" (295).

The existence of this tragic flaw points toward the profound concern of Taylor's early period: the ways in which a flawed reading of the southern conservative tradition limits his characters existentially. Aunt Munsie, Harriet Wilson, and Uncle Jake provide three examples, and stories like "The Dark Walk," "Two Ladies in Retirement," "Their Losses," "A Spinster's Tale," and "A Wife of Nashville," as well as the dramas *The Death of a Kinsman* and *Tennessee Day in St. Louis* provide more, presenting nuanced illustrations of both the need to engage this tradition and the destructive consequences of treating it with ossified nostalgia. It is important to recognize that Taylor is critiquing *this particular, ossified vision* of the southern tradition, and not the tradition itself. In the early period, Taylor's characters—and perhaps even the author himself—see the only alternative to the southern tradition as the bourgeois, capitalistic, self-serving version of modernity the South's waning aristocracy embraced between the World Wars. The consequences of this vision are equally deadening, as we see powerfully in Taylor's first novel, *A Woman of Means,* as well as stories like the three examined here, "Cookie," and "The Fancy Woman," works populated by characters who could benefit from a reintroduction of loyalty, bravery, trustworthiness, cleanliness, and reverence.

With these recognitions in mind, it is apparent that Taylor spent the first two decades of his career attempting to make sense of how a southerner—particularly an upper-class southerner—was to exist in a society increasingly distant and antipathetic to the South and its traditions, those things that had given their lives meaning. The characters who populate his early works are left adhering to one vexed worldview because of the limitations of what seems like the only available alternative. But as Taylor shows again and again in his early period, the way in which these characters cling to their past is itself destructive. This is a frustrating conundrum, and it is no wonder then that Taylor eventually abandons questions of the southerner's place in favor of exploring other themes in his middle period. The last work of the early

period, *Tennessee Day in St. Louis*, closes with Lanny Tolliver, the Old South-obsessed main character, slowly repeating "Give me time. Give me time," while a stage direction tells us that "candles burn on" (Taylor, *Tennessee Day in St. Louis* 177). This is a fitting close to the early period, as Taylor returns to these questions of the place of the southerner and the southern tradition some years later; the candles, it seems, continued to burn on, and in Taylor's late period we see a return to these questions—but with an important distinction.

In his late works, Taylor's characters find themselves required to engage the southern tradition. Yet, unlike Uncle Jake, Aunt Munsie, and Harriet Wilson, these latter characters often do *not* want to engage this tradition, but rather turn from it. In the place of nostalgia, they cling to other vices fathered by other sorts of heroism, most notably a very American loyalty to the self over the community. As circumstances require them to recognize self-loyalty as problematic, as what Eliot calls "impudent crimes," these characters look for other perspectives to provide them with meaning. A reassessed version of southern conservatism, in which the tradition itself is distilled down to its core perspective, divorced from nostalgia, and becomes a source of strength, stability, and meaning for Taylor's late characters. In short, the southern tradition becomes a source of existentially and morally useful virtue for these characters, providing them with a means for living as existentially whole and balanced individuals in an often-bewilderingly postmodern America and often-frustratingly nostalgic South.

Chapter 4

Late Taylor and the Southern Tradition's Virtuous Individualism

In the epilogue to *The Southern Tradition at Bay*, Richard Weaver remarks that the Southerner possesses a "consciousness of failure," a recognition of the superfluity of his worldview vis-à-vis American triumphalism. Weaver observes that such a feeling is so pervasive "that the Southerner, despite efforts at compensation, has been unable to convince himself" of the usefulness, correctness, or truth of his tradition. Weaver suggests that this failure results not so much in a South which denies its tradition, but in a region marked by unreflective retrenchment, producing a "hypersensitivity to criticism" that limits the achievements and utility of its tradition. To overcome this and engage the real and dynamic possibilities provided by the Southern conservative tradition, Weaver argues that the South needs a "metaphysic of its position," something that will provide the Southerner with a place from which "he could judge his achievements with some assurance that the judgments would be vindicated" (390). Recalling Eugene Genovese, one such "achievement" of the Southern tradition is a critique of deadening materialism, and an accompanying vision of a communal society in which individualism is neither myopically atomistic or destructively subsumed by the top-down decrees of the collective. The Southern tradition posits a society in which individuals understand their roles, the ways in which their lives affect those of others in the community, and the resultant duties each individual owes to others.

While this vision of the Southern tradition may, as Genovese argues, have provided 20$^{\text{th}}$ century man a means for critiquing and resisting both hyper-individualistic American worship of the market and collectivist Soviet worship of the state, the practical consequences of the Southern tradition in the 20$^{\text{th}}$ century were often profoundly negative. Peter Taylor's early works make clear that the Southern tradition too often clings to nostalgic views of Southern society, making the roles and duties demanded by that tradition outdated at best, and defenses of cruel injustices at worst. Yet, precisely because they lack the "metaphysic of position" Weaver asserts that Southerners

need to properly judge the tradition and its achievements, the characters of Taylor's early fiction are unable to do anything with the possibilities and perspectives provided by Southern conservatism. Nostalgic and possessing a "hypersensitivity to criticism," the characters of Taylor's early fiction are defeated by the tradition—either smashed by their own adherence to it or forced into self-division.

But as noted at the end of the previous chapter, Taylor is not dismissive of the tradition as a whole. To the contrary, as his late work makes clear, Taylor is largely concerned with examining the virtues present in the tradition, and exploring why it is difficult for some of his characters to utilize these virtues. Southern conservatism's virtues grow out of the broader philosophical underpinnings of the tradition itself: a repudiation of atomistic individualism, an emphasis on contexts, and a suspicion of systematic, abstracted means of understanding and interpreting existence. This suggests that Uncle Jake's invocation of loyalty, bravery, trustworthiness, cleanliness, and reverence in the closing moments of "The Scoutmaster" provide us with a set of virtues that fit neatly within the philosophical demands of Southern conservatism. However, in connecting them to "the honorable things" left from the South's "golden days," and arguing that the Scouts must "preserve them until one day we might stand with young men from all over the nation to demand a return to the old ways and the old teachings everywhere," Uncle Jake is making a vice out of these virtues (Taylor, "The Scoutmaster" 295). By casting them as relics for preservation, and not things to are available for utilization in the present, Uncle Jake fails to recognize an essential aspect of the Southern tradition—its rhetorical nature.

Taylor's late works show characters involved in recognizing this rhetorical nature, in that these works are concerned with exploring the relationship of the individual to the community, the various social, economic, and cultural exigencies that govern life within that community, and the ways in which these, as well as the communal past, affect an individual life. These concerns are rhetorical in that they are based in

interactions between community members, the suprapersonal contexts to which these interactions must respond, and the need of the individual to interpret and navigate these. Understanding the South's conservative tradition as useful and existentially empowering in the face of postmodernism's promotion of banal, hyper-individualistic mediocrity, Taylor's late characters find themselves translating Southern conservatism to make accessible the virtues at its core. One of these virtues, a traditionalist vision of individualism, is especially important for Taylor's characters in what are perhaps Taylor's three finest works: "The Old Forest," "In the Miro District," and *A Summons to Memphis*.

In these works, Taylor contrasts two distinct visions of individualism: the classically liberal vision of the preeminence of the individual self, and a conservative understanding of the self that Richard Weaver, in "Two Types of American Individualism," identifies as "[s]ocial bond individualism" (Weaver, "Two Types" 102). In this essay, Weaver contrasts social bond individualism—exemplified by quintessential Southern conservative John Randolph of Roanoke—with "anarchic" individualism, exemplified by Henry David Thoreau. Weaver takes exception to the fundamentally dialectical nature of Thoreau's conception of the self, as this way of thinking results in "an ideal, which is finally offered very winningly, but in complete isolation from the facts of life" (94). The final, ideal stage of individualism, as presented in "Civil Disobedience" and elsewhere in Thoreau's corpus, is merely that—an abstracted ideal.

Weaver pushes back against Thoreau's version of individualism, noting that any ideal must still respond to

> the task of conceiving how this or any ideal is going to be conditioned by historical existence, and then of saying something helpful about how this conditioned being can live, cooperate, and compete in civil order. Here, I am afraid, Thoreau is not so much a philosopher as a philosopher on a holiday. He is letting his thoughts follow his wishes and turning his

> gaze away from recalcitrant reality. It is characteristic of a dialectic not respectful of the facts to lead away from the existential world. (95)

Thoreau's dialectic of individualism leads to an ideal man who is isolated, and who finds that isolation to be, in and of itself, good. Such isolation is problematic in that is provides no instruction for making sense of living and human interaction with a "civil order," and because individuals can never be *truly* isolated; even if a person was able to remove himself from other human contact, he would still find himself necessarily responding to the inescapability of historical circumstance and existence. As such, Thoreau's ideal is not merely impractical, but also dangerous. Seeing atomism as both the most worthy version of the self and ultimately impossible insomuch as he cannot escape interacting with others, the individual makes sense of these unavoidable interactions *in terms of himself*, and of his own vision of the good. This is "anarchic" individualism precisely because it cannot provide a means for making sense of community, and its obligations, duties, and relationships.

Weaver contrasts this with social bond individualism, as exemplified by John Randolph of Roanoke's political thought, and his "scorn of what he called dialectic." Randolph sees the dialectician—an individual like Thoreau—as a mere "abstract reasoner," who "ceases to recognize circumstances, which are somewhat determinative in all historical questions" (88). Randolph, in contrast, approaches existence rhetorically, which causes him to "always [speak] out of historical consciousness because his problem are always existential ones" (89).[1] As Thoreau's dialectical approach to the personal self has political consequences,[2] so does Randolph's political rhetoric

[1]Of course, this suggests that rhetoric and dialectic are opposed, and not "counterparts" in the Aristotelian sense. Weaver, ever the Aristotelian, recognizes this and clarifies his point by noting that there are circumstances in which "rhetoric and dialectic may become dangerously separated, and then users of them become enemies ceasing to help each other as both strive to go it alone" (88). This, Weaver suggests, is the American position in the first half of the 19th century, and is arguably also the position of the circumstances in which Taylor's late works are set, and perhaps our time as well.

[2]Again, "Civil Disobedience" is the key text here.

have personal consequences. Weaver contrasts each man's approach to manumission to point out the differences between rhetorical and dialectical understandings of individualism:

> When Randolph wrote out the emancipation of his slaves, he made economic provision for them. In Thoreau's anti-slavery papers one looks in vain for a single syllable about how or on what the freedmen were to live. The matter for him began and ended with taking a moral stance. (100)

Thus, the essential difference between anarchic and social bond individualisms: the former proceeds from an abstract notion of what the good is, and what its purposes are, while the latter begins with a consideration of social and historical contexts, and the consequential obligations of each individual to another.[3] The process of Taylor's late fiction, of his characters arriving at a "metaphysic of position" with regard to the South's past, is driven by such a rhetorical transition from anarchic to social-bond invidualism.

"The Old Forest," a 1979 story later republished in a 1985 collection of the same name, is one of Taylor's clearest articulations of how these varying notions of individualism have consequences for making sense of the Southern tradition. This story is narrated by Nat Ramsey, now a middle-aged college professor, who recalls the events of four days in December 1937, and their profound consequences on the rest of his life. Nat, like other young men his age and social class in 1930s Memphis, is expected to marry a member of the Memphis débutante set. While self-consciously aware that "to the liberated young people of today this may all seem a corrupting factor in our old way of life" (Taylor, "The Old Forest" 33), Nat explains that even while seriously courting their country club girls, young men of his milieu would simultaneously go

[3]Of course, this is not to say that social bond individualism is not without its own moral failings. After all, thinking about "obligations" formed the rationales underlying notions of *noblesse oblige* and patriarchal duty that were used to justify slavery and other forms of black disenfranchisement.

"out on the town with girls of a different sort," whom Nat and other "well-brought-up young [men]... facetiously and somewhat arrogantly referred to as the Memphis demimonde" (31). These young women, who have normally had some sort of professional, vocational, or secretarial training in place of "finishing school," are bright, sometimes artistic, somewhat sophisticated, and perhaps most importantly for Nat and his cohort, sexually liberated: "you will understand that they certainly weren't the innocent, untutored types that we generally took to dances at the Memphis Country Club and whom we eventually looked forward to marrying" (32). During the time with which the story is concerned, Nat is formally engaged to the débutante Caroline Braxley, while going "out on the town" with Lee Ann Deehart, a member of the "Memphis demimonde."

A week before he is to be married to Caroline, Nat heads to his university to study for a Latin final; after a brief and flirtatious phone conversation, Lee Ann decides to accompany him. Along the way, they get into a car accident. While no one is injured, Lee Ann panics and takes off through the snow into the titular old forest on the edge of Memphis, not to be seen for several days. Fearing a scandal and a canceled wedding, Nat unsuccessfully attempts to hide the situation from Caroline while he looks for Lee Ann. The rest of the narrative concerns Nat's search for Lee Ann, first with the police, then with his father and other men of his father's generation, and finally, unable to hide the situation any longer, with Caroline. After Caroline and Nat locate Lee Ann, a confrontation erupts between the couple, serving as the culmination of Nat's four-day examination of the Southern tradition's complexities, failures, and virtues.

From the opening paragraphs of the story, the self-centered, shallow individualism of Nat and his fellows is immediately obvious. In contrast to a virtue-laden vision of individualism that understands interactions with others in terms of duty, Nat expresses an instrumentalist understanding of others. By dividing the young women

of Memphis into two distinct classes, young men like Nat are implicitly assigning these groups of women different roles. He describes how common it was

> for a well-brought-up young man like me to keep up his acquaintance, until the very eve of his wedding, with some member of... the Memphis demimonde. (That was merely to say with a girl who was not in the Memphis debutante set.) I am not even sure how many of us knew what the word "demimonde" meant or implied. But once it had been applied to such girls, it was hard for us to give up. We even learned to speak of them individually as demimondaines... (31)

The immediate implications are obvious. Some of these women exist for marrying, others exist for dalliances. While Nat's description of these women, and his later description of the interactions with them had by young men of his social class, does not suggest vindictiveness or harsh misogyny, there is clearly an understanding of these women's value and purposes not being inherent to the women themselves. Rather, their value results from the interactions they have with Nat and other men like him. If there is duty at play here, it is that these women are expected to play the assigned role of mistress or wife dutifully; what Nat owes to Lee Ann or Caroline is, at the story's outset, at best unknown, and perhaps, in his thinking, even nonexistent.

Caroline exhibits a similar attitude. Nat informs us that "Caroline liked any sort of individualism in men," a characteristic that results not so much from a positive valuation of the individualism of others as it does from the room it provides her to celebrate *her own* individualism: "She had already said to me before that Saturday afternoon that a successful marriage depended in part on the two persons' developing and maintaining a certain number of separate interests in life. She was all for my keeping up my golf, my hunting, my fishing. And, unlike my own family, she saw no reason that I shouldn't keep up my peculiar interest in Latin..." (36). While such an attitude is not necessarily selfish, it is immaturely self-focused, as evidenced by

Caroline's insistence that "No man is going to set foot in my house this afternoon, Nat Ramsey! *I'm* getting married next Saturday, in case the fact has slipped your mind" (37, emphasis in original). The exclusivity of "*I'm* getting married," instead of the inclusive (and more precise) "*We're* getting married" is, when combined with her insistence on "separate interests," revelatory about Caroline's views of individualism.

Lee Ann, too, exhibits a self-focused individualism at the beginning of the story. When she calls Nat on the telephone, she begins to tell him that

> she was bored to death. Couldn't I think of something fun she and I could do this dreary winter afternoon? I laughed aloud at her. "What a shameless wench you are, Lee Ann!" I said.
>
> "Shameless? How so?" she said with pretended innocence.
>
> "As if you weren't fully aware," I lectured her, "that I'm getting married a week from today!"
>
> "What's that got to do with the price of eggs in Arkansas?" She laughed. "Do you think, old Nat, *I* want to marry you?" (37, emphasis in original)

Like Caroline, Lee Ann understands her relationship to Nat in terms of how he fulfills a role for her. Here, she has no concern for his marriage or any other aspect of his personal life—her only concern is in how he can provide her with an afternoon's entertainment. The ways in which both Caroline and Lee Ann dictate Nat's role to him exemplifies a kind of selfishness on the part of each woman, paralleling his own thinking about them. While this selfishness lacks real ugliness, it nevertheless exhibits a shallowness in each character's understanding of themselves and others. Nat, Caroline, and Lee Ann are merely pursuing enjoyable experiences and an unreflective life.

Of course, there is nothing necessarily offensive or morally corrosive in such pursuits. But that Lee Ann's running away and Nat's looking for her result in significant

soul-searching on both of their parts, and that Caroline's interactions with both Nat and Lee Ann late in the story—something I will examine in detail shortly—show a powerful reexamination of her own life suggests that Taylor wants us to see that these perspectives are existentially deadening, and that "The Old Forest" is largely a search for an alternative perspective. While deeply concerned with the vexed place of women in this story (as he is in much of his other work as well), Taylor is here not writing a progressive critique of instrumentalizing, essentialist misogyny. To the contrary, Taylor's criticism here is a deeply traditional, conservative excoriation of the dehumanizing effects of an atomistic individualism that disconnects individuals from genuine, human interaction with others—a disconnection that results from uncertainties about individuals' selves, their place within a society, and the duties and obligations owed to others.

Over the course of looking for Lee Ann, Nat is presented with three distinct ways of reconsidering how he understands her. On Monday, the first day of the search, Nat recognizes the rhetorical problem of the term "demimonde" itself: that it says nothing about these women, and rather serves only to help him create an abstract ideal of himself. On Tuesday, he is presented with an example of social bond individualism looks like, and observes the existential consequences of this different understanding of the relationship between the self and others. On Wednesday, Nat and Caroline finally find Lee Ann, and Caroline's emotional reflection on and explication of the events of the last several days force Nat to recognize himself as the beneficiary of social bond individualism, especially on the part of Caroline. Ultimately, Taylor uses Nat's experiences to show that the individual freedom is not the result of an anarchic devotion to the self, but rather through an engagement with others, a willingness to recognize the limiting circumstances of individuals, and then perform the necessary duties and obligations to facilitate and aid their lives.

On the first day, Nat goes around in the company of two Memphis police officers

to meet and interview several of Lee Ann's friends and acquaintances, women he recognizes as also part of the Memphis demimonde. This round of searching and interviewing goes for the entire day, with the only break being an hour for lunch, in which Nat is left by himself at his father's office. The description of the office is telling:

> Our offices, like most of the other cotton factors' offices, were in one of the plain-faced, three- and four-story buildings put up on Front Street during the middle years of the last century, just before the Civil War. Cotton men were very fond of those offices, and the offices did possess a certain rough beauty that anyone could see. Apparently, there had been few, if any, improvements or altercations since the time they were built... I was sitting on a cotton trough beside one of those tall windows, eating my club sandwich, when I heard the telephone ring back in the inner office. I remember that when it rang my eyes were on a little stretch of the Arkansas shoreline roughly delineated by its scrubby trees and my thoughts were on the Arkansas roadhouses where we often went with the demimonde girls on a Saturday night. (56)

Several things are at work in this passage. First, by commenting on the age of the buildings, the era in which they were built, and their use by cotton factors, Taylor is evoking the economic history of west Tennessee and the Mississippi Delta; that "Cotton men were very fond of those offices," explicitly built before the Civil War, suggests reasons other than location or aesthetics for their attractiveness. Rather, it is precisely because they evoke the South's past and traditions that these "plain-faced, three- and four story buildings" are so attractive. Clearly, Taylor is connecting the South, and its history and contexts, with Nat's search for Lee Ann. By invoking these contexts, Taylor suggests Nat's nascent awareness of social and historical contexts for

making sense of his relationships with others—that is, of the essentially rhetorical nature of these relationships.[4]

The phone call Nat receives is from "one of the city girls," an anonymous woman Nat cannot identify, but who nevertheless has a voice that "sounded familiar" (57, 56). Telling Nat that Lee Ann is "all right," so long as he and the police "lay off and stop chasing her," the woman proceeds to excoriate Nat: "Don't you have any decency at all? Don't you have a brain in your head? Don't you know what this is like for Lee Ann? We all thought you were her friend" (57). Chastised, the call leads Nat to reflect on his relationship with Lee Ann; reflecting on these while sitting in the historically and contextually pregnant space of the cotton factor office, Nat comes to several vital conclusions.

First, he thinks through the problem of labeling these women demimondaines: "Possibly, they got called that first by the only member of our generation in Memphis who had read Marcel Proust, a literary boy who later became a college professor and who wanted to make his own life in Memphis—and ours—seem more interesting that it was" (57). While uncertain, that Nat was himself a "literary boy who later became a college professor" makes it quite possible that he is here referring to himself, and that he is the originator of the term. If this is so—and it seems likely to me that it is, and a touch of very Taylorian subtly to present this vital fact in such a manner—then the context in which he begins these reflections takes on even more significance. Proust provides Nat with a set of historical circumstances and contexts in which he can pursue his own abstract ideal of himself, an ideal that is not subject to the actual circumstances and contexts of life in 1930s Memphis—in other words, a Thoreauvian identity.

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[4]This is something that begins to come into focus only after Lee Ann's disappearance; before this, the only mentions of historical phenomena are Horace's *Odes*—and these are not presented at all as social or historical contexts that affect communities, but are rather simply one of Nat's "anomalies" with which he had "annoyed" his parents (35), and thus simply further evidence of Nat's atomistic isolation.

That he has been crafting such an identity is brought into stark relief when contrasted against the cotton-growing river bottom and "Arkansas roadhouses where we often went with the demimonde girls" outside of his window, leading Nat to reflect who, in fact, the "demimondaines" actually were:

> . . . those girls came from a variety of backgrounds. We [Nat and the police] went to the houses of some of their parents, some of whom were day laborers who spoke in accents of the old Memphis Irish, descendants of the Irish who were imported to build the railroads in Texas. Today some of the girls would inevitably have been black. But they were the daughters of also of bank clerks and salesmen and of professional men, too, because they made no distinction among themselves. . . The girls were not interested in such distinctions of origin, were not conscious of them, had not been made aware of them by their parents. They would have been highly approved of by the present generation of young people. (58)

Suddenly sensitive to their backgrounds and placement in history—note that Nat also makes comments about them in relationship to the "present," that is, the place in the 1970s in which he is telling this story—and the socioeconomic contingencies of their lives, Taylor shows Nat coming to recognize the contexts that govern his interactions with the ostensible demimondaines, as well as the robust complexity of who they actually are.

With these contexts in mind, Nat begins to see the limitations of his defining these women as demimondes, and arrives at his second conclusion about them—an awareness of who they actually are, beneath his self-serving, surface-level conceptions of them. As he and the two policemen ride around and engage women of this social circle, Nat observes that "in each case I found myself admiring the girl not only for her boldness in dealing with the situation. . . but also for a personal, feminine beauty that I had never before been fully aware of." This beauty is "personal" to each woman, in

that it reflects something about her more profound than her physical attractiveness. He notes that "there seemed a contrast between the delicate beauty of their bodies, their prettily formed arms and legs, their breasts and hips, their small feet and hands, their soft natural hair. . . a contrast, that is to say, between this physical beauty and a bookishness and a certain toughness of mind and a boldness of spirit which were unmistakable in all of them" (59). By recognizing this contrast, and through it, that these women have characteristics and worth beyond their relationships with him, Nat shows himself moving closer to an understanding of individuals as existing within communities, and coming out of particular social and historical contexts. The members of what Nat has problematically labeled the Memphis demimonde are not isolated individuals, and in making this observation, Nat finds himself reconsidering how he understands his own individualism.

This reconsideration is brought into greater perspective on the second day of the search. On that Tuesday, Nat finds himself "following almost the same routine in the company of my father and the editor of the morning paper, and, as a matter of fact, the mayor of Memphis himself" (66) But while Nat is in a car with these men, it is not only these who are out looking for Lee Ann, but rather close to a "dozen or so men. . . Caroline's father, his lawyer, the driver of the other vehicle, his lawyer, my father's lawyer, ministers from three church denominations, the editor of the afternoon newspaper, and still others" (67). In other words, Nat finds himself accompanied by the previous generation of his own class—the fathers of those boys who thought of girls like Lee Ann as demimondaines. Nat's journey with these men thus represents an opportunity to understand their relationship to girls like Lee Ann, and thus their own conception of self. Examining the contrast between generations is inevitable, and leads Nat into a further reconsideration of his own individualism.

The differences are stark. As already discussed, Nat has problematically labeled these women so that he can create an identity for himself—the exotic demimondaines

connects Nat and his fellows to "Proust's Paris," allowing them to divorce other human beings from specific contexts in order to remake them in the service of an abstract vision of their own selves. In contrast, men of his father's generation demonstrate a perspective that is indicative of social bond individualism. Men like Nat's father

> were a generation of American men who were perhaps the last to grow up in a world where women were absolutely subjected and under the absolute protection of men... In referring to the character of the life girls like Lee Ann led—of which they showed a far greater awareness than I would have supposed the possessed—they agreed that this was the second or third generation there of women who had lived as independently, as freely as these girls did. I felt that what they said was in no sense derogatory or critical as it would have been in the presence of their wives or daughters. They spoke almost affectionately and with a certain sadness of such girls. They spoke as if these were daughters of dead brothers of their own or of dead companions-in-arms during the First World War. And it seemed to me that they thought of these girls as the daughters of men who had abdicated their responsibilities as fathers... It was a sort of communal fatherhood they were acting out. Eventually, they seemed to say, fathers might not be required. (67)

Even though a sense of exactly why these men interact with these women as such is unclear to Nat, he nevertheless finds himself recognizing that these interactions are the result of historical and social contexts. The paternalism of Mr. Ramsey and the specific ways in which it manifests itself result from his recognition of the circumstances of these women's lives, and the ways in which their lives are interconnected with and influenced by the lives of Mr. Ramsey and men of his class. Mr. Ramsey's regard for women like Lee Ann is thus based in a rhetorical awareness of both his historical influence and power on their lives, and the real prospect of his own

superfluity—that eventually "fathers might not be required." In this way, Mr. Ramsey's paternalist care mirrors the attitude John Randolph of Roanoke has towards manumission.

In presenting the nature of the relationship between Mr. Ramsey and his ilk and these young working-and-middle-class women, Taylor is pointing to a virtue born out of the Southern conservative tradition: that individuals should live in a manner that regards the effect their lives have on the lives of others, and how various socio-economic contexts influence this interaction. But Taylor also makes clear the ambivalence Nat feels in this situation, admitting that he finds this relationship "somewhat difficult to explain," though on that day, he "came as near as I ever had or ever would to receiving a satisfactory explanation of the phenomenon" (66, 67). Nat, living in a society in which women's roles have seen rapid and continual change, cannot make sense of his father's traditionalist, and perhaps even problematic, paternalism; his is a different set of rhetorical circumstances. Nevertheless, Nat comes closest to making sense of this relationship on this day precisely because he recognizes the virtuous core of his father's attitude: that an individual is defined by his obligations to others in particular social and historical contexts, not by the abstract ideal one possesses about these obligations, nor what one can take from others. Nat's confusion highlights the lesson learned. As he sees contexts change and paternalistic attitudes of his father's generation pass away, he nevertheless recalls that his father predicted changes would come: "I often think nowadays of Father's [prediction of his own superfluity] whenever I see [it] being fulfilled by the students in the university where I have been teaching for twenty years now, and I wonder if Father really did believe his prediction would come true" (68). Recognizing that, in a way, fathers (at least in the way in which men like Mr. Ramsey understood fatherhood), are no longer required, Nat is confronted with the truth of this older, contextually-aware, other-focused, and fundamentally rhetorical approach to making sense of ones self.

Though Mr. Ramsey's attitude manifests in an ultimately unsustainable and even ethically problematic paternalism, Nat realizes there is something more significant at work here. Though Nat may himself be unable to articulate what this more significant thing actually is, Taylor is nevertheless showing us a profound evolution in his narrator's understanding of individualism—an evolution facilitated by his encounter with the the Southern conservative tradition's notions of duty.

The third and final day of the search forces Nat into a consideration not only of duty as an abstract virtue enacted by men of his father's generation, but as something with significant consequences for his relationships—especially with Lee Ann and Caroline. As Nat and Caroline search for Lee Ann, they eventually present themselves at the boarding house where Lee Ann lived before her disappearance. There, in order to convince the landlady to grant them access to Lee Ann's room, Caroline pretends to be one of her girlfriends, come to pack a suitcase for her. Standing in that room, Caroline and Nat see a photograph that reveals Lee Ann's hiding place:

> The only thing in the drawer was a small snapshot. I took it up and examined it carefully. I said nothing to Caroline, just handed her the picture... She recognized the woman with the goiter who ran The Cellar [one of the juke joints]. The picture had been taken with Mrs. Power standing in one of the flower beds against the side of the house. The big cut stones of the house were unmistakable. After bringing up in the snapshot close to her face and peering into it for ten seconds or so, Caroline looked at me and said, "That's her family." (78)

This realization sends Caroline and Nat off to The Cellar to find Lee Ann, and provides Nat with the opportunity to rehearse what he knows of Lee Ann's past: that "she had a 'family' in Memphis, [but] no one had known her when she was growing up," and that she had been to at least three boarding schools during her childhood (78). Caroline speculates that Lee Ann's family intentionally "kept her

away from home," and as a result, Lee Ann was not "prepared for the kind of 'family' she had" after graduation, and thus chose to move to the relative anonymity of a boarding house (79).

Contained within Caroline's speculation is a vital recognition for making sense of Lee Ann's actions, as well as the broader contexts that caused these actions—contexts that have consequences for Nat and Caroline as well. Lee Ann was required, by her family, live apart from them for many years, to exist as a part of that community only through the accident of birth. When the end of boarding school brings Lee Ann back into this community, she feels alienated from it, and retreats back into the familiarity of isolated, atomistic individualism. Caroline eventually meets Lee Ann at The Cellar and interviews her privately. In that interview, Caroline learns that Lee Ann was abandoned in infancy by her mother

> to her grandmother but had always through the years sent money back for her education. She had had—the mother—an extremely successful career as a buyer for a women's clothing store in Lincoln, Nebraska. But she had never tried to see her daughter and had never expressed a wish to see her. The only word she ever sent was that children were not her dish, but that she didn't want it on her conscience that, because of her, some little girl in Memphis, Tennessee, had got no education and was therefore the domestic slave of some man (81-82).

Lee Ann lives as an isolated individual, incapable of understanding virtuous interaction with others, precisely because her mother pursued an anarchic vision of individualism, in which self-loyalty, and not duty toward others, is the primary good of human life. While the money she sends back allows Lee Ann's mother to feel as if she is doing some good, by making sure her daughter is not "the domestic slave of

some man,"[5] she does nothing that would substantially lead Lee Ann away from such a life. Rather, in taking the surface-level steps to provide her daughter with personal freedom, Lee Ann's mother has only isolated her, not made her free.

Lee Ann's running is her recognition of her tacit participation in such a form of individualism and an attempt to reject it in favor of something else. Nat, musing about Lee Ann standing in the snow in the Old Forest, realizes that she couldn't go "back to her room or to her pretty possessions there. That wasn't the kind of freedom she wanted any longer. She was going back to her grandmother" (81). In this, the central moment of the entire story, we see a rejection of an oppressive kind of freedom and the search for something more viable and existentially useful—a freedom based in notions of community and duties owed to others. Nat's search for Lee Ann is an unconscious mirror of this process, and the car ride he and Caroline take after her interview with Lee Ann points to the connection between this better, more virtuous notion of freedom and the Southern tradition itself.

Understandably upset by the events of the previous few days, Caroline's emotional dam finally breaks in the aftermath of her interview with Lee Ann. Weeping, she instructs Nat to simply drive and to go "as far and as fast as you can, so that I can forget this day and put it forever behind me!" (83) Without intention, Nat finds himself on the Bristol Highway, a road that

> went northeast from Memphis. As its name implied, it was the old road that shot more or less diagonally across the long hinterland that is the state of Tennessee. It was the road along which many of our ancestors had

[5]Readers should not misinterpret this statement, coming from a character Taylor is leading us to interpret negatively, as his decrying women's independence or making an anti-feminist statement. Rather, as forcing women into domestic slavery is an instrumentalizing move that fails to recognize the obligations inherent in social bonds, Taylor would find men who do this worthy of criticism as well. His works, which are full of indictments of men who attempt to make women into "domestic slaves" and praises of strong women, bear this out. As a result, readers should interpret Taylor's negative presentation of Lee Ann's mother as based in her anarchic individualism, something she ostensibly recognizes as problematic in some regards, and not in her being something other than a wife and mother.

> first made their way from Virginia and the Carolinas to Memphis... And it occurred to me now that when Caroline said go as fast and as far as you can she really meant to take us all the way back into our past and begin the journey all over again, not merely from a point of four days ago or from the days of our childhood but from a point in our identity that would require a much deeper delving and more radical return. (84)

Here, Taylor has Nat figuratively drive into the Southern past. In so doing, Nat and Caroline are resetting their relationship, returning to a point in time that precedes the events of the story, as well as both their individual histories and the social history of Memphis. This is done so that they may enact a "deeper delving and more radical return" that promises to result in a different notion of themselves as individuals, and how they are to interact with others.

It is not simply enough to think of Caroline and Nat as returning to the Southern tradition or Southern past. Caroline, addressing the "freedom" she perceived Lee Ann as possessing, notes that such freedom has long been available to Southern men: "They used to write 'Gone to Texas' on the front door and leave the house and the farm to be sold for taxes. They walked out on dependent old parents and on sweethearts or even on wives and little children. And though they were considered black sheep for doing so, they were something of heroes, too" (85). This kind of freedom, an atomistic notion divorced from social bonds and obligations, is the very thing Taylor has spent "The Old Forest" showing to be deeply flawed, and Caroline herself ultimately comes to understand this as a false sort of freedom. As they continue to drive, they go deeper and deeper into the Southern past, going "on and on, at first north and east through the wintry cotton land and cornland, past the old Orgill Plantation... and now and then another white man's antebellum house, and always at the roadside or on the horizon, atop some distant ridge, a variety of black men's shacks and cabins" (87). Caroline begins what Nat calls her "second monologue," in which

she says she "finally saw there was only one thing for me to do and saw why I had to do it. I saw that the only power in the world I had for saving myself lay in my saving you. And I saw that I could only save you by 'saving' Lee Ann Deehart" (87). Caroline has power only in terms of her willingness to relinquish her own freedom in pursuit of providing for the freedom of others. That she comes to this difficult realization in the shadow of plantation homes and slave quarters both contextualizes this within the Southern conservative tradition and declares this tradition problematic. After all, a tradition that argues for duty and obligation, but then expresses those in terms of a dehumanizing institution like slavery, is a tradition that fails to make sense of the consequences of its own beliefs, that lacks the "metaphysic of position" that Weaver calls for. But "The Old Forest" does end by evoking this sort of freedom-through-obligation as superior to the atomistic sort it decries. The tension between a real social and individual good and the tradition that produces it suggests that Taylor is calling on Southerners to not celebrate the Southern tradition, but something antecedent to it, and in so doing to make the "radical return" to the virtues at its core, however perverted these have become in the process of making a tradition. In this manner, the same writer who showed the destructive, vicious nostalgia of the Southern tradition illustrates how a reinterpretation of this tradition, and an examination of the contexts and exigencies in which it is articulated, can produce a means for sophisticated, nuanced, existentially robust virtue.

In contrast to Nat's search in "The Old Forest," the hero of "In the Miro District," Major Basil Manley, is one of the few characters in Taylor's fiction who seems to have arrived at Weaver's metaphysic of position before his story begins. A Confederate veteran who refuses to kowtow to his adult daughter's wishes for him to play the role of "the Confederate veteran," and thus become an ornament to her social life in the Acklen Park section of 1920s Nashville, the Major exemplifies many of Southern conservatism's traditional virtues, while actively resisting ossifying, myopic nostalgia.

However, by this story's end, he has suffered a fate similar to that of Aunt Munsie from "What You Hear From 'Em?," and dutifully performs the pitiful role he has so long resisted. This change is effected through the Major being rejected by his grandson, the story's narrator. This rejection is presupposed upon the grandson defiantly alienating himself from the challenges his grandfather poses to his adolescent hedonism. The narrator wants to *undermine* his grandfather in much the same way that his parents want to *control* the Major, both in service of their own desires. That Taylor presents Major Manley's undoing with tragic pathos points to the author's indictment of the bourgeois values of the narrator and his family; "In the Miro District" thus functions as a powerful statement on the virtues of the Southern tradition and the consequences of their loss.

In contrast to the bourgeois desires of his descendants, the Major's desires—to not play the noble Confederate veteran and to continue to live on his own in rural Hunt County, Tennessee— point toward his core virtue and its source. Taylor presents the Major as exhibiting a strong sense of personal integrity, based in his resistance to being controlled or ruled by others. This is not an anarchic notion of self-determination, but rather a version of personal integrity that regards a loyal defense of supra-personal entities as the chief end of self-determination. While this notion of integrity suggests a tension between personal and social motives, it makes sense in the context of the logic of the Southern conservative tradition. We should recall that the Southern tradition regards a defense of hierarchy and order as of equal importance with republican self-determination, in that both serve to acknowledge man's essentially depraved, un-perfectible state. Remembering this, we understand Major Manley's integrity as representing fidelity to both things larger than himself—the South, his ancestral home of West Tennessee, family, and the manners and propriety that result from all of these—and his own person and personal rights of self-determination.

In other words, Major Manley's identity is based in a refusal to be cowed. This re-

fusal evidences the complexity of his attitude toward the South and his understanding of himself as a Southerner. He sees South and its traditions—those things that define who he is—not as some monolithic, inaccessible entity that existed in the past and that can only be mourned, remembered, and retroactively defended in the present, but rather something nebulous and always already in flux. To be a Southerner is thus to be much like the very Southern city of Nashville itself. The narrator records his grandfather's understanding of Nashville and its environs, noting that the older man "did not take Nashville so seriously as [his] parents did," and

> was fond of referring to the city itself as the Miro District (because he said only an antique Spanish name could do justice to the grandeur which Nashvillians claimed for themselves.)... according to this same knowledgeable grandfather of mine, the entire state of Tennessee had once been claimed to be a rightful part of that province by both the French and the Spanish, in their day as its rulers... And I used to try to imagine why it was that when he was scouting through the low ground or hill country west of the Tennessee River during the Civil War, it made the War seem less hateful to him at time and less scary and less boring for him to know—or to believe—that the Spanish and the French had once held title to what was by then his own country or that the Indians had once held that land sacred, or for him to realize whenever he came in to Nashville that the site of the old citadel itself, Fort Nashborough, had once actually been known merely as Frenchman's Lick. (Taylor, "Miro District" 152)

Just as the Major refuses to allow himself to be marked only as a valiant knight of the Confederacy, he also will not recognize Nashville as simply the august and genteel Miro District, but must also envision it as the martial Fort Nashborough and the plebeian Frenchman's Lick. All of these are of equal importance in defining Nashville, similarly to how the Major insists his personal identity be understood in

its own fullness and complexity. One version of a self cannot exclude other, equally important versions of that self. This truth is perhaps especially important if there are individuals who would foist simplistic identities on that complex self.

This logic makes Major Manley fundamentally different than his ossifingly nostalgic daughter and son-in-law, who see the Southern tradition as a pretty, and socially useful, decoration to their "busy, genteel, contented life" (149) in the glamorous world of Acklen Park (a section of town that conceivably understands Nashville only as "the Miro District"). While they fixate upon the glory of the Lost Cause and their ancestor's role in it, the Major rejects his Confederate service as the sole marker of his status and identity. The narrator implicitly recognizes this rejection. When he sees his grandfather "at the wheel of his tan touring car, swinging into our driveway, it wasn't hard to imagine how he had once looked riding horseback or muleback through the wilds of West Tennessee when he was a young boy in Forrest's calvary, or how he had looked, for that matter, in 1912... at the time when he escaped from a band of hooded nightriders who had kidnapped him" on the shores of Reelfoot Lake in west Tennessee (153). Taken together, these three moments—riding as a boy in Forrest's calvary, escaping from the nightriders as a man, and driving in the tan touring car in old age—show various aspects of the Major's personal self-identity. The Major does not define himself in terms of these three moments from his personal history, but rather in terms of the thing these three moments point toward: his integrity.

The Major's integrity originates in his refusal to cede control over his own self over to others, even those whom he willfully serves. His encounter with Forrest, the only moment from the Civil War he will discuss, bears this out. On his way "to enlist in Forrest's critter company," the young Manley is passed by "General Forrest and some other officers" and forced off of the road. Forrest and his cadre "don't even look back at him until he yelled out after them every kind of filthy thing he could think of." The Major always ends this story by stating that "Likely I'm the onliest man

or boy who ever called Bedford Forrest a son-of-a-bitch and lived" (164). Though he was little more than a boy at this point, Manley refused to cede control over his own self to anyone else, even one of the most feared and imposing figures of the Civil War. Yet that he was "on his way to enlist," and was not dissuaded from this purpose because of his experience with Forrest's cadre, illustrates Manley's understanding of self-determination: it is virtuous insomuch as it is directed to the service of something beyond ourselves. To curse at Forrest and then refuse to enlist may have shown the young Basil to be his own man, but he would have been a man lacking integrity.

Even though it takes place many years later, the narrator closely associates his grandfather's experience at Reelfoot Lake with the older man's experience in the Civil War. Taylor wants us to understand these experiences as explicating one another and providing further evidence for how the Major understands his own self, and the virtue at its core. In 1912, the Major and his law partner, Captain Tyree, go to repossess land near Reelfoot Lake from a group of squatters. Kidnapped from "the Walnut Log Hotel at Samburg, Tennessee" (165) by a group of hooded nightriders (the very squatters they have gone to dispossess of the land), the Major and Captain Tyree are drug out into the swamp, beaten, and tied up. Later that same night, the Major witnesses Tyree's hanging. In the aftermath of his friend's murder, the Major "vowed to survive" and to "bring to justice those squatters-turned-outlaws," and daringly escapes (168). Significantly, both the resolution to survive and the escape are made in what the narrator identifies as his grandfather's "rage," a characteristic not unlike the fearless pride with which he confronted Forrest's cadre a half-century before.

This defiant "rage" undermines what it is the nightriders wish to exercise over Major Manley: control over both his physical and existential person. Through a sheer act of will that demonstrates his own indefatigable personal integrity, the Major ensures his own survival, and unmasks and prosecutes the squatters-cum-nightriders, laying bare their falsehood. These nine men "were proved to be previously convicted

criminals, not downtrodden backwoodsmen whose livelihood in fishing and hunting the government and the big landowners of Lake County wished to take away" (169). For the Major, the petty opportunism of these men is not separate from their attempts at controlling him, but is rather indicative of a desire to violate the integrity of social order.[6] Both here and in the experience with Forrest's cadre, the Major's integrity is proven by his uncompromising moral courage in the face of challenges by others. These challenges are based in the other's own petty vices, whether it be the dismissive arrogance of Confederate officers, who likely took him from nothing more than "some local farm boy," or the avarice of the nightriders. The pathetic tragedy of "In the Miro District" is that the final violation of the Major's integrity is based not in something as grand as either of these first two conflicts, but in a very mundane vice: the petty, bourgeois aspirationalism of his daughter and son-in-law, and its ultimate success in controlling the Major.

While the proximate causes of the Major's undoing are three transgressions of propriety by his grandson, the root cause is his daughter and son-in-law's desire for control. If they can control the Major, they make him into the ultimate ornament to their upwardly-mobile social lives—a Confederate veteran, a living embodiment of their nostalgic dreams. But for the veteran to ornament their lives properly, he must interact with his grandson, telling the boy stories of the old days, while the boy eagerly asks about the glories of the Lost Cause. The narrator tells us that he asked for Civil War stories "not because I cared much about the War but because... it was what my parents cared about and were always telling me I ought to get him to talk about" (164). For these reasons, the narrator's parents, who "saw everything in terms of Acklen Park in the city of Nashville in the Nashville Basin in Middle Tennessee in the old Miro District," sought to pair off the narrator and the Major. The result,

[6]I am convinced that, should the "government and the big landowners" have been the ones engaged in socially-disruptive falsehood, the Major would have raged against them as well.

in their eyes, would be the achievement of what they see in other grandfathers and grandsons: "When you saw one of those other grandfathers out walking with a little grandson along West End Avenue, it was apparent at once that the two of them were made of the same clay or at least that their mutual aim in life was to make it appear to the world that they were" (155). Envisioning themselves faithful to the glories of the South's past and responsibly raising up its future, the narrator's parents would show themselves worthy denizens of the Miro District.

Reflecting on the "pairing off young with old so relentlessly and so exclusively" from the present in which he is telling the story, the narrator makes clear the destructive results of this practice: the "men over fifty whom one meets [in Nashville] nowadays are likely to seem much too old-fashioned to be believed in almost—much too stiff in their manner to be taken seriously at all. They seem to be putting on a act... Either that or these grandsons of Confederate veterans are apt to have become pathetic old roués and alcoholics, outrageously profane, and always willing to talk your ear off in the Country Club bar—usually late at night—about how far they have fallen away from their ideals, about how very different they are from the men their grandfathers were" (156).[7] Presciently aware of what awaits him, the narrator wants to resist this outcome. However, as his youthful myopia prevents him from understanding the vexed position his grandfather would also suffer from such pairing (all such realizations are made by the adult telling the story, not the teenager in the story itself) the narrator senses a need to rebel against the Major as well as his parents.

Albert J. Griffith summarizes the tensions at play between grandfather and grandson, calling the Major a "maverick who refuses to conform to any of the expectations of his daughter and son-in-law... The grandson feels he and his grandfather have 'nothing in common'... and that they 'faced each other across the distasteful present,

[7]One would not be surprised to find Uncle Jake from "The Scoutmaster" amongst these men in the country club bar.

across a queer, quaint, world neither... felt himself a part of'"(Griffith 129). The narrator feels that he and his grandfather must predictably "have it out" between themselves, an inevitable consequence of their being forced into frequent companionship by his parents, though they "possessed very opposite natures" (Taylor, "Miro District" 149). This having it out does eventually occur, over the course of three moments in the summer the narrator turns 18: first, Major Manley catches the narrator and some of his friends on a drinking binge; sometime later, he finds them engaging in sexual dalliances with lower-class girls; and finally, the Major catches the narrator hiding a naked young woman of his own class in the grandfather's wardrobe.

Griffith reads the first two of these events as moments that "seem on the verge of binding the boy and his grandfather together in a new way," largely because of the charitable, yet firm-handed, discipline handed down by the Major (Griffith 130). But in Griffith's interpretation, the final interaction undoes the Major because of its class-based implications: "...the naked girl hiding in the grandfather's own golden-oak wardrobe is not a girl of the 'other sort,' as before, but a Ward Belmont girl, a respectable girl of the boy's own social status. This infraction of deeply ingrained social mores is to the grandfather the unforgivable sin, the final proof of 'how bad' the boy really is in terms of the grandfather's set of values" (130). Griffith is thus correctly suggesting "In the Miro District" is a drama of the tensions of generational interconnection, but is also flawed in arguing that Major Manley's undoing is merely the result of his social mores no longer having real impact on the ethical lives of his family.

Griffith, in other words, mistakenly reads Major Manley as another instantiation of Aunt Munsie, a character trapped by nostalgia. This reading is flawed, and arises from a lack of serious consideration of several other factors in the story: how the Major responds to the first two scandalous events, where the third takes place, and the grandfather and grandson's shared recognition of the lack of virtue at the center

of the parents' bourgeois life. When we consider these together, we see that the Major is not undone by his nostalgia, but something much more complex—the fragility of his own virtue, a profound part of himself that both connects and alienates him from others.

After the first two infractions, the narrator is disciplined by his grandfather. In each case, the discipline lacks vitriol, and is instead firm and even jarringly cool. These are moments wherein the Major does attempt to connect to the narrator, but not in the nostalgic way desired by his daughter and son-in-law. Rather, these admonishments provide the Major with opportunities to act with simple integrity, demonstrating to the narrator both what this virtue looks like and its logic. For instance, when he interrupts the boys' debauchery, the Major simply opens his pocket watch and makes a comment about it now being past supper time; after this, the narrator's two friends, "[d]runk as they assuredly were and difficult as they undoubtedly found it to rise... [did] manage somehow to rise from their chairs and without a word of farewell went stumbling out through the kitchen and out of the house" (Taylor, "Miro District" 160). The Major intercepts the narrator trying to pour another drink, which in turns leads to the younger man dropping and breaking a liquor bottle. The narrator notes that his grandfather's command—"Now you get that mess cleaned up"—had "literally a sobering effect upon me, as probably nothing else could have done," and in his new sobriety, the narrator begins to feel "sudden guilty feelings about my mother and father" (161). Through his correction, the Major symbolically points to his resistance to being controlled by others; his offhand comment about supper shows that he will not let a group of drunk teenagers change his evening plans. Further, that this interruption causes the narrator to feel guilt about his parents—his father is having prostate surgery—suggests that Major Manley's admonishment is not directed at the younger man's being drunk, but rather his violation of filial piety. In other words, the Major causes the narrator to see how he is violating the connection

to something greater than himself and his own appetites, the notion at the core of traditional Southern integrity.

Refusing, or perhaps unable, to learn this lesson, the second challenge results in the narrator deciding to reject Major Manley's set of virtues actively. While his parents are off in Memphis, the narrator plans a party with several of his friends, each bringing over a girl with whom he will have sex. Like Nat in "The Old Forest," the narrator here makes clear that the

> girls we had with us were not the kind of girls such a boy as I was would spend any time with nowadays. . . With one's real girl, in those days, a girl who attended Ward Belmont school and who was enrolled in Miss Amy Lowe's dancing classes, one might neck in the back seat of a car. The girl might often respond warmly and want to throw caution to the wind. But it was one's own manliness that made one overcome one's impulse to possess her and, most of all, overcome her impulse to let herself be possessed before taking the marraige vow. . . Still, from the time one was fourteen or fifteen in Nashville, one had to know girls of various sorts and one had to have a place to take girls of the "other sort." No one of my generation would have been shocked by the events of that evening. (178)

The Major's reaction to finding the young couples in bed the next morning provides further articulation of his understanding of both personal and social virtue. Using a walking stick to rip the sheets off of the couples and smack them awake on the buttocks, the Major gives the his grandson a decisive order: "I want you to get these bitches out of this house and to do so in one hell of a hurry!" (179-80) He repeats this order, but shifts the emphasis: "You get those bitches out of your mother's house and you do it in one hell of a hurry" (180). Through this repetition and shift in emphasis, we see the Major decrying his grandson's lack of integrity.

The first exclamation, directed only at the narrator for his act of indiscretion, points to the fact that he has violated the integrity at core of his self, while the second points to his obligation to someone other than himself—his mother. That the Major blames the narrator is made clear by how he interacts with the girls. Though he has told his grandson to get "those bitches" out of the house, the narrator comes upon his grandfather "reassuring [the girls]. By the time I reached the living-room doorway he was assisting them in their search [for lost personal items], whereas the three boys only stood by, watching. It was he himself who found that little purse. Already the four girls seemed completely at ease. He spoke to them gently and without contempt or even condescension" (180-81). This is certainly a different tone than that he takes with the narrator, suggesting that the Major lays the blame squarely at his grandson's feet (and perhaps, to a lesser extent, at the feet of those other boys who "only stood by, watching").

The violation the Major sees here is not of sexual mores so much as it is a violation of "manliness," the virtuous resolve to "overcome one's impulse" that the narrator describes himself having when "necking" with a "Ward Belmont girl." To Major Manley, to lack this form of self-control in all circumstances is to cede control over to something, or someone, else. Just as he refuses to permit Forrest's cadre or the nightriders of Reelfoot Lake to control him, the Major expects his grandson to be similarly self-controlled, especially when the agent attempting to gain control over one's self is not another person, threatening violence, but merely adolescent lust. By lacking this kind of self-control and permitting his libido to vitiate his filial responsibility, the narrator again shows his lack of integrity to his grandfather. But again, as before, Major Manley shows quick forgiveness to the narrator: "When he and I were alone in the hall, he said, 'And now I reckon you realize what we've got to do. We've got to do something about those sheets,' " and both work to clean up the mistakes of the younger (181). With this gesture, the Major provides his grandson with both

forgiveness and another opportunity for virtue.

Unfortunately, the narrator cannot understand what it is his grandfather is offering him. Blinded by his own juvenile rebelliousness and a justifiable resistance to his parents' bourgeois aspirationalism, the narrator thinks that the more of these experiences he and his grandfather share, "the better he would think he understood me and the more alike he would think we were" (182). The narrator cannot countenance this, seemingly understanding his grandfather as his parents' agent for governing his behavior and character, just as he understands himself as his parents' agent in ensuring his grandfather becomes the doting, charmingly ridiculous Confederate veteran. Taylor makes clear that the narrator desires control over his own identity, just as the Major does. But what the narrator does not understand is that his grandfather's governance is not an attempt at control, but rather a means for pointing the narrator towards integrity. While self-definition, which the narrator deeply desires, is an aspect of this integrity, he refuses to craft his self-definition with a regard for duty. The young narrator does not want to be virtuous; he only wants the fulfillment of his own lusts.

Sensing his grandfather's presence in his life as a threat to his base desires, the narrator enacts what he knew he "could do that would show him how different we were," liberating him to continue to pursue his youthful hedonism without impedance (182). This produces the third conflict between the narrator and the Major, when the younger man sleeps with a Ward Belmont girl in his grandfather's bed, and hides her in his wardrobe. Griffith's reading suggests that the Major sees his grandson's sleeping with the lower-class girls as acceptable behavior, while this infraction violates a proper Southern lady, and is thus unforgivably appalling to the old man. While Taylor does make a point to illustrate class differences in the women, and while the Major very likely does possess different means for understanding different classes of women, he is not undone because his grandson commits some inexcusable violation

of class-based sexual propriety. Major Manley is not Harriet Wilson. The South's tradition does not provide him with a rigid set of social conventions, but rather with a distinctive means for understanding how virtues like integrity form the core of his own self. As a significant portion of this integrity consists of living for others and things outside of the self, and as the Major finds himself in an increasingly atomistic society, he sees his grandson as a means to both practice and pass on his virtuous integrity. The Major is thus not undone because his grandson violates the sexual virtue of a high-class girl, but because his grandson's final act forms a repudiation of Major Manley himself.

By despoiling his grandfather's room, the narrator attacks the core of the Major's self, attempting to eliminate the old man's hindering his libidinal self-indulgence. Reduced by his family to being either an old man in the way or a quaint relic of the Old South, Major Manley is denied the ability to show his family his own multi-layered, complex self, and his similar conception of the South and its tradition. As these are the things in which his personal integrity—his virtue—is based, the Major is existentially broken when he can no longer share in celebrating them and their dynamism. Left with only two choices, accepting an ossified, ornamental position or none at all, the Major decides on the former, and becomes the foolish caricature of the Confederate veteran: "before spring came the next year Grandfather had closed his house in Hunt County and taken up permanent residence in Acklen Park. He lived there for the rest of his life, participating in my parents' lively social activities, talking freely about his Civil War experiences... [and] would even speculate about whether the whole War mightn't have been won if President Davis had not viewed it so narrowly from the Richmond point of view. Or he would raise the question of what might have happened if Lee had been allowed to go to the Mountains" (195-96). Being reduced to such an ornament takes away the Major's self-identity. The narrator remarks that when he, in the years following, would talk with his grandfather, "I

would have the uneasy feeling that he wasn't quite certain whether it was I or one of the others who was his grandson, whether I was not perhaps merely one of the boys visiting, with the others, from Sewanee" (197). In this closing statement, the narrator subtly recognizes the connections between his grandfather and himself. Rejecting the old man's instruction in virtue, he can never again have meaningful interaction with Major Manley, can only see his grandfather as a ridiculous caricature of his former self, and must recognize that he contributed to this transformation by the pursuit of his own vice. By noting that he has become interchangeable with "the others, from Sewanee," the narrator also recognizes that his acts of rejection have had negative existential consequences for him as well.

Taylor's second novel, the 1986 Pulitzer Prizing-winning *A Summons to Memphis*, reads very much like an expanded version of the great stories of his late period. While the novel shares concerns over the meaning of individualism in the context of a changing South, Taylor takes a different approach to this problem than we see in "Miro District" or "The Old Forest." In those stories, we see the younger generation pursuing hedonism, and finding themselves needing to contend with the South's traditional, socially-bounded notion of individualism as a result of their pleasure-seeking. Here, Phillip Carver, the narrator of *Summons*, laments what he perceives as his father's atomism, and its deleterious effect on the lives of the rest of the Carver family. As the events of the novel force Phillip into reconsidering his own memories, he comes to understand his father not as selfish and manipulative, but rather as tragic. Mr. George Carver's life has not been atomistic and self-serving; to the contrary, it has been Phillip's interpretation of his father's life that has exhibited such selfishness on Phillip's part. Phil comes to see his father's life as a navigation of the viciousness of atomism in pursuit of virtue and integrity, and Phil's realizations about both Mr. George and himself show *A Summons to Memphis* to be Taylor's most complex and realized vision of the Southern conservative tradition's virtuous

notion of individualism.

As the book opens, Phillip is a middle-aged Tennessean working as a rare books dealer in Manhattan. There, he lives with his lover, Holly Kaplan, a Jewish woman from Cleveland who is fifteen years his junior. While his professional and personal lives seem very distant from the world of Tennessee aristocrats, Phillip finds it impossible to leave that world behind. By-and-large, this impossibility is because of his older sisters, Betsy and Josephine, whose machinations regularly pull him back into the familial and social dramas of Memphis. As the novel opens, Holly and Phillip's relationship is failing, and they have decided on a trial separation. Before he can even begin adjusting to living alone, Betsy and Josephine call him to alert him that their widower father is engaged to be married to a widow, Mrs. Clara Stockwell. Unlike the much younger women who were the object of Mr. Carver's earlier dalliances, the never-married Betsy and Josephine see Mrs. Stockwell as a real threat to their inheritance. Invoking his sense of propriety—they "made it sound as though Mother were yet alive and perhaps living there in that sprawling one-story suburban house which Father had had built for their old age" (*Summons* 12)—Betsy and Josephine summon Phillip back to Memphis, with hopes that he can talk their father out of the marriage.

The summons forces Phillip to reflect on the history and reasons behind his sisters' feelings and schemes, along with why he has intentionally separated—or at least attempted to separate—himself from Tennessee, his family, and, consequently, the Southern tradition. The story of flying to, spending less than a day in, and leaving Memphis becomes the vehicle for Phillip's recalling the interactions between his father and sisters since his mother's death, his own youth in Memphis, and, most importantly, how the Carvers came to live in Memphis. The Carvers were a Nashville family, and deeply enmeshed into that city's social life, fashions, and mores. But after Mr. George Carver's business partner, Lewis Shackleford, made unscrupulous

financial decisions with the Carvers' money, the family is nearly ruined, and move to Memphis in an attempt to start over again. This move was ruinous for all the Carvers except Mr. George: the vivacious Mrs. Carver becomes an invalid; Georgie, the eldest child, becomes morose and volunteers for and dies in World War II;[8] Betsy and Josephine, once beautiful, eligible débutantes, rapidly metamorphose into tragi-comic, youth-obsessed spinsters and callow businesswomen; and Phillip is simply bitter, unable to forgive his father's interruption of his happy Nashville life.

The first three-quarters of the novel feature the digressive narrative technique Taylor utilizes throughout much of his best work. Between the call and getting on the plane to Memphis, Phillip rehearses the entire history of the Carver family's move and its consequences. While those memories present some of Taylor's best writing and some of his most mature evocations of many different themes, Phil's shift away from bitterness, and his all-important reconsideration of individualism, begin on the plane:

> On the plane to Memphis that Monday morning I dozed frequently, trying to make up for the wakeful periods of the night before. During those frequent naps I did not dream, and I woke after each nap clearheaded about where I was and what my mission in Memphis was. I thought primarily of what lay ahead for me—or of what I thought lay ahead—and it seemed to me that I did certainly have a mission to perform. I felt all the enthusiasm of an old-time evangelist. (132)

Phil's ruminations from the night before have converted him away from his bitterness against his father, and he now envisions his trip as being primarily to help his father avoid the consequences of the "vendettas" that Phil has "imagined [Betsy and

[8]Georgie is a ghostly presence over the entire novel. There is real and interesting work to be done concerning Taylor's many ghosts, and Georgie's presence in *A Summons to Memphis* is an intriguing starting point

Josephine] to be preparing" (132). Yet, despite this change of heart, Phil himself does not seek to *forgive* his father, thus making the religious language (evangelist of course recalling the Christian gospel) deeply ironic.

Instead of working toward forgiveness and reconciliation, Phil prescribes a "doctrine of forgetting," to which he, as evangelist, must convert his sisters. Phil thinks that forgetting is the only option, as "[i]t was too late to forgive, of course" (134). In his new vision, forgetting is the height of maturity; it is the "prerogative" of adult children "to forget the wrongs done us in our youth and childhood, in order to know ourselves truly grown up" (ibid.). While there is surely truth, and perhaps even wisdom, in this assertion, it is vital to recognize that Phil's new doctrine is structured with regard to himself, and himself alone. He forgets, because forgetting is what allows him to know himself "truly grown up," and the desire to forget comes as a result of recognizing that his father could not have understood him:

> "How *could* the man have known the difference [moving from Nashville to Memphis would make] since the whole action of the little boy's drama existed not within the house or within the confines of that little estate off Franklin Pike but rather at the young people's events of the annual horse show and at Miss Cecilia Wright's dancing classes. How could he understand the disappointment and shock the boy would experience at having the important transition to puberty and adolescence so abruptly interrupted? How could he have known, being the sort of man he was or not being, rather, a more intellectual and perceptive man than he was, not a man, that is, who could look back at his own adolescence and by so doing comprehend what his son was experiencing? (133, emphasis in original)

Phil's doctrine of forgetting is thus not a gospel of reconciliation, but rather one of mere settling, and even condescension. For him, the height of maturity, it seems,

is not an empathetic connection with others, but a recounting of the wrongs he has suffered, followed by a self-righteous recognition of others' lack of understanding. As a result, Phil's "conversion" largely serves to reaffirm his own atomistic conception of self—the very sort of selfishness of which he has long accused his father of harboring and that Phil now condescendingly commits to forget.

The viability of Phil's doctrine of forgetting is quickly challenged, as he sees his father waiting for him on the tarmac of the Memphis airport. This is a surprise, as normally one of his sisters normally retrieves him on his visits home. But here is Mr. George Carver, waiting not by the gate or baggage claim, but on the tarmac itself, ready to pick up Phil as he descends from the plane. As he considers the power his father had to display in order to gain such access, Phillip thinks that Mr. George

> seemed not at all the old man my sisters had been describing to me in their letters. Rather, he was the father I remembered from my early boyhood, a commanding figure very much in charge of events... He appeared as he had appeared to me when I was a very small boy in Nashville, a person of great power and stature. I saw a flash image of him on horseback, dressed as master of hounds and holding the horn to his lips. I saw the man of iron will and courage and perfect skill and limitless intelligence that I had believed in as a small boy almost without knowing what it was I believed. (138)

So determined simply and forcefully to "forget, forget" only a few moments earlier, Phil now finds himself returned to the boyish awe of his father, and is flooded by childhood memories.

These memories, however, almost immediately shift in an intriguing way. After a night spent ruminating on his own life, the presence of Mr. George requires Phillip to give similar consideration to his father's life; he begins to think through the consequences of his father himself not being a "Nashville-born man," but rather the scion

of a West Tennessee family (139). Rather than recalling his own life and the ostensible injustices done to him, Phillip begins to consider his father, and his father's past. Though Phillip has mentioned his father's past before this point, it has always been in terms of his own personal history. Here, Phillip begins to consider his Mr. George on his own terms, as a complex individual with his own set of existential quandaries, demands, and duties. This is an important departure from the ways in which Phillip recounted memories in the first many pages of the novel, wherein the past was always recalled as something explicitly considered in terms of himself.

As the main plot of the novel nears its (heartbreaking and anticlimactic) conclusion, Phil ceases to think about the specific "injustices" done to him by his father, but rather mediates on his father's past and person. When he does return to his "recently articulated theme of forgetfulness," he intriguingly articulates its necessity: "It was impossible to look upon [Mr. George's] radiant face and not forget real or imagined injuries he had done me" (145). Gone is the self-pitying and condescending notion that his father simply could not understand him. Instead, Phil looks upon his father *as he is*, as another complex human being himself, and sees in this other person's "radiant face" the sheer impossibility of *not* forgetting. Phil again notes that the maturing process is profoundly connected to forgetting—"A certain oblivion was what we must undergo in order to become adults and live peacefully with ourselves" (146)—but there is a significant shift in emphasis; forgetting must be in terms of the other, not in terms of ourselves.

In the aftermath of the novel's climax—the aborted wedding between Mr. George and Mrs. Clara Stockwell, orchestrated by Betsy and Josephine—the two Carver daughters move back in with their father, and Phillip retreats to Manhattan. Soon afterwards, Holly and Phil reconcile, and the couple began to talk "of almost nothing but our two families and of the problems of looking after aged parents in particular" (156). These conversations soon take on a much more pressing character, as Holly's

father falls gravely ill. As Holly is herself forced to examine her own past, she begins to develop her own perspective on the mutual obligations of parents and adult children, and encourages Phillip to reconsider his doctrine of forgetting:

> [S]he began teaching me at this point to seek a still clearer understanding of my own father. She wished me to do more than forget the old wrongs. She wished me to try to see him in a light that would not require either forgetting or forgiving. She frequently urged me to talk about him, as she certainly had not urged me to do in years, and to try to give her a whole picture of what his life had actually been... (159)

Holly's challenges to Phil's doctrine are significant in the continuing evolution of his thinking about the past and individualism. Somewhat ironically, Phil does continuing forgetting—but it is his own self he forgets, as his meditations on his own life cease, and he becomes "able to imagine more about Father's life than I had in the past ever had any conception of... his inner life, his inmost, profoundest feelings about the world he was born into and in which he was destined to pass his youth and most of his adult years" (ibid.).

Phillip's newfound ability to conceive of his father in a revelatory, intimate way leads him to a lengthy consideration of Mr. George's life. Phillip explains the peculiar circumstances of his father's birth, noting that in commemoration of this event,

> the bells in nearly all the churches of Thornton [the Carvers' ancestral west Tennessee village] were rung. Guns were also fired on the courthouse lawn at that hour, as well as at various intersections of streets in the town. [Mr. George's] mother—my grandmother—who died within an hour of his birth, must have heard those bells and heard that gunfire during the last moments of her life... the arrival of no royal heir, or perhaps of no ducal heir, or at least of no squirearchical heir was ever celebrated with more

> warmth in any town or countryside. He was the first and only child of his parents' union, and his mother was past forty at the time of her confinement. Word has not come down as to whether or not the church bells tolled her passing with a unanimity equal to the ringing on the heir's arrival. (160)

From his earliest moments, Mr. George was implicitly instructed to understand himself as "a little prince" and a "born hero" whose life was of significantly greater worth than that of others, even that of his mother (160-61). In short, Phillip's reflection causes him to recognize how his father was profoundly affected by an atomistic notion of the self. Taylor clearly points to the ridiculousness of this situation, by having Phillip describe his father as an "heir" of some sort—if not royal, and if not even ducal, then certainly squirearchical—a description that recalls the worst sort of nostalgic excesses of Southern conservatism, particularly its obsession with mythic genealogy.[9]

In Phillip's presentation of his father, Mr. George recognizes the ridiculousness of this situation, and desire a different vision of the self than that which this world grants him. Even as a boy, "George Carver yearned for an individuality and personal attainments that could be in no way related to the accident of his birth. . . He aspired to an individuality that could not be accounted for by the components of his own character and his own identity." (162) Mr. George ultimately aspires for a vision of individualism not defined *only* in terms of himself. This nascent desire is, however, fundamentally circumscribed. As a young man, George Carver can only understand this vision of individualism in one way—as not being subject to his past and its circumstances. Thus, despite his desire to be his own man, he cannot escape from

[9]I am reminded of a ridiculous-yet-moving moment in the filmmaker Godfrey Chesire's 2007 documentary *Moving Midway* in which the family matriarch displays the family tree. According to her researches, she—and consequently the filmmaker as well—is a direct descendant of Aeneas himself.

under the atomistic notion of the self provided him at birth. He pursues personal greatness and willfully transgresses the limitations imposed by his father in service of this desire: he chooses Vanderbilt over Princeton or Charlottesville, enters both law and politics against his father's will, and marries into Nashville, instead of west Tennessee, society (176-77).

Phillip recognizes his father's struggle to become his own man, stating that Mr. George "at last became a heroic figure in my eyes. It was his very oppositeness from me that I could admire without reservation, like a character in a book." (177) While Phil's newfound admiration for his father is real, and its basis in "oppositeness" deserves consideration. Mr. Carver left west Tennessee willfully and defiantly, while Phil begrudges his forced removal to Memphis; Phil followed in his father's footsteps at Vanderbilt, while the elder Carver defied tradition by choosing Vanderbilt in the first place. These facts, alongside Phil's comfort in Nashville and its social world and the unease he felt in Memphis (demonstrated by his narration of his early acquaintance with Alex Mercer, his first—and only enduring—Memphis friendship), indicate an individual who is unable to understand his individuality as unrelated "to the accident of his birth." This is a real and significant difference between father and son, and Taylor, in a masterful stroke, suggests that these men of opposite natures both still arrive at a selfish, atomistic notion of the self. Phil is dependent upon the accident of his birth precisely because it is *his* birth and defines *his self*; Mr. George rejects his circumstances because they interfere with self-creation.

Phil discusses his new-found realizations with Holly, and she again challenges them. It is through his interactions with her that Phil comes to the necessarily nuanced and complex vision of his father's life that will disabuse him of his own notion of the self, moving him closer to a more virtuous form of individualism. He tells Holly that

> All of Father's earlier aspirations and ambitions had required him to con-

> sider only the risk that might be entailed for himself, but when he uprooted his family in Nashville and took us to Memphis he was morally bound to consider the risks there were for the psyches of five other people... I believe it is a maxim beyond all contradiction—and I said so to Holly at that time—that high ambition and worldly aspirations are all very well and even commendable so long as other persons are not asked to share the risks created and confronted by the protagonist. (180)

In examining his father's life, Phillip comes to the conclusion central to the logic of the social-bond individualism provided by the Southern conservative tradition: the individual must consider his own self, desires, ideals, and aspirations in terms of the effects of these upon others, especially others to whom one is intimately responsible.

Having already begun to reinterpret the move from Nashville to Memphis in terms of his father's experience rather than his being wronged, Phillip's realization here points to his own continued move away from atomism. Though he does not say it explicitly, Phillip has come to understand his father's starting over in Memphis not as Mr. George pursuing some new set of aspirations for himself, but rather a recognition that *his family* could not continue on in Nashville, and thus *his family* needed to start over. To do this, Mr. George was willing to "begin life over in early middle age," something Phil finds "admirable" and a reflection of his father's "courage and stamina" (180). But despite his intentions and his own preparedness, Mr. George did not realize that as a father, "it came too late" to start over. Having arrived a new understanding of his father, Phil accepts that "Father's altogether human blindness could not be held against him" (180-81).

Holly expresses profound disagreement with Phil's new assessment of the situation, though he notes that the disagreement very likely "had something to do with the remorse or guilt she was feeling about her own father at the time" (181). This disagreement is put to rest after significant moments in each person's life: Holly's

father's illness takes its inevitable final turn ("there had been two operations, and it had been decided that there would be no more"), precipitating her own summons to Cleveland, and Phil witnesses the unexpected reunion of his father and Lewis Shackleford at the resort town of Owl Mountain. Mr. George unhesitatingly embraces and forgives the man who betrayed him those many years ago, producing indignation on the part of Phil. Soon after his return from Owl Mountain and Holly's return from Cleveland, Betsy and Josephine again summon Phillip to Memphis. In the aftermath of this summons, he and Holly again consider together the relationship of adult children and parents, and arrive together at a re-articulation, and even perfection, of Phillip's doctrine of forgetting.

Just as Betsy and Josephine had wanted Phil to come and stop Mr. George's marriage to Clara Stockwell, they now want him to prevent their father from moving back to central Tennessee and living with a convalescent Lewis Shackleford. Though Phil had initially been indignant at how easily the two men had reconciled, Holly encourages him to go to Memphis *to assist* his father's moving. Phil shows some lingering inner conflict, expressing that he himself did not know "what my own intentions were" during the flight back to Memphis. Nevertheless, further discussion with Holly leads to a final revelation:

> I accepted Holly's doctrine that our old people must be not merely forgiven all their injustices and unconscious cruelties in their roles as parents but that any selfishness on their parts had actually been required of them if they were to remain whole human beings and not become merely guardian robots of the young. This was something to be remembered, not forgotten. This was something to be accepted and even welcomed, not forgotten or forgiven. (194)

This itself differs from the earlier "doctrine" Holly articulated, wherein forgiveness is to be given if "called for, but forgetting was another matter altogether" (181).

Phil's doctrine of forgetting and Holly's doctrine for appropriate forgiveness have been tested against and sharpened by each other. Phil's conversations with Holly, alongside his reconsiderations of his father's life, have led him to a new doctrine: while there is maturity in both forgiving and forgetting, these mean nothing without also *remembering*—remembering that the injuries we strive to forgive and forget were done unto us by complex, flawed human beings. To remember this requires that we consider our own identities in terms of the identities of others, and the messiness of reciprocity and duty. Thus, a central virtue of the Southern conservative tradition—its notion of individualism—is something that Phillip ultimately realizes he must remember, accept, and translate for integration into his own life.

Despite engaging these considerations on the plane, Phil's incredulity toward Lewis Shackleford continues to muddle his thinking about the situation—should he help his father make the move or not? While Taylor has suggested that Phil himself as converted to a new doctrine, it would be too pat for this to mean that the son will simply help his father fulfill his own wishes, as that would simply mean forgiving and forgetting the palpable wrongs done to Phillip as a young man, wrongs that have continued to have significant effects on his adult life. Taylor is here requiring readers to accept the truth and complexity of Phil's new doctrine, as *we* must remember the complexity of Phil's character, and the myriad sufferings Lewis Shackelford's actions visited upon him. As a result, we must recognize that Phil's indignation toward the older man is by-and-large justified, and that Taylor is suggesting that our desire to see Phil help his father reconcile with Shackleford is based in a naive desire to witness an act of unequivocal forgiveness. This is perhaps the saintly ideal, but the Southern conservative tradition, as posited by Weaver and others, is suspicious of naive idealism. Taylor is here engaging that tradition, pointing out the complexity of Phil's own identity and the various forces pulling at it at this moment in life, and asking us to understand Phillip's actions with a charitable regard for his past, just as he has

come to see Mr. George's actions from such a perspective.

Phil's complex feelings are resolved for him when a phone call announces that Lewis Shackleford has died. Returning to New York for the last time, Phil's transition away from atomistic individualism is completed. He recognizes, for the first time, that Holly's past was very likely as complex as his, even considering the reality of her past lovers, something he surely knew, but nevertheless consciously denied. Phil recognizes that he and Holly are now "well beyond such petty jealousies," and the threats to their relationship that existed off-page at the outset of the novel have now dissipated because Phil is able to recognize and remember that Holly is herself a complex, messy individual, just as he is (206). And as Phil begins to consider Holly in a way that shows a renewed, non-atomistic vision of his own individualism, this continues in his relationship with Mr. George during the rest of the old man's life.

Phil ends the novel no longer living in the South, and with no indication he will ever return. Phil's newly-developed sense of individualism certainly has its roots in the Southern tradition, but he is only able to arrive at this at a remove. The end of the novel suggests that Phil has many happy and loving conversations with Mr. George up until his father dies; yet these are as always done by telephone—"On the long-distance telephone we were able to speak of things we had never been able to talk about face to face... The calls were indeed such a tremendous satisfaction for me that sometimes I would stay home from the ballet or the theater or from an exhibition at the Morgan Library, for instance, because I had the premonition that Father might telephone while I was out that evening" (207). Thus, while Taylor uses *A Summons to Memphis* as an exploration of how Phil moves from atomistic to social bond individualism, he intriguingly translates this traditional aspect of Southern conservatism by having Phil engage social bond individualism at a distance. Taylor has not written a novel of nostalgic return, but rather one in which the virtues of the old order impact and shape Phillip Carver in his present world as a Southern expat

in New York.

Taylor, still suspicious of nostalgia and its ossifying effects, thus closes perhaps his greatest work with the protagonist obviously changed by encounters with the South and its traditions. The fact that Phil comes to recognize and make sense of these encounters—to be actually *changed* by these encounters—only through engaging the South at a distance and debating its demands with a Jewish woman from Cleveland suggests two things. First, what we have in *A Summons to Memphis* is one of the great story tellers of the changing midcentury South laying bare the region's abandonment of its own traditions, and its sliding into the warped, existentially destructive hyper-individualism of 20$^{\text{th}}$ century America broadly. This destructiveness is exacerbated by the region's long-standing, equally toxic nostalgia. But this pessimistic feeling is counterbalanced by the second suggestion—Taylor shows us that despite these issues, the South's traditions continue to possess significant existential utility, precisely because the South's traditions provide a challenge to the dominant American notions of self-definition and identity. Phillip Carver, like Nat Ramsey and the narrator of "In the Miro District," comes to terms with that different version of identity, uncovering it from underneath the veneer of the flawed Southern present. As Taylor insists that the great vice of the South is its nostalgia, he shows us that its great virtue is in the interconnectedness of complex human individuals, and in recognizing the necessity of duty, obligation, and remembrance that results from these interconnections. Taylor illustrates that cultivating such a virtue brings Southerners ever closer to the "metaphysic of place" Weaver insists they need, and takes from that "hall hung with splendid tapestries" truly something of how to live.

Chapter 5

Walker Percy's Metaphysical War Against Southern Gnosticism

> "This is one of the painful conditions of existence which the bourgeoisie like to shut from their sight. I see no reason to doubt that here is the meaning of the verses in Scripture: 'Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth? I tell you, Nay; but rather division' and 'I bring not peace, but a sword.' It was the mission of the prophet to bring a metaphysical sword among men which has been been dividing them ever since, with a division that affirms value." Richard Weaver, *Ideas Have Consequences*

In an essay connecting Walker Percy's fiction to the thought of Eric Voegelin, Cleanth Brooks asserts that Percy's chief intellectual interest is the malaise of modern man. According to Brooks, this malaise is a direct product of Gnosticism. Though Percy only rarely uses the term, Brooks argues that the novelist's work is nevertheless full of assessments of the victory of a gnostic view of Creation, and man's place within it. Unlike the Judeo-Christian notion of Creation as essentially good and man as the hopelessly flawed, but nevertheless most vital member of this good Creation,

> the ancient Gnostics held that the Creation was the work of a demon—a cruel demiurge. The world—with its mutability, sexuality, wickedness, and violence—is woefully imperfect, but man has the potentiality to be perfect if he does not confound himself with this imperfect world...
>
> Two crucial aspects of Gnosticism are worth emphasizing here: (1) Man the creature is not responsible for the evil in which he finds himself. He has a right to blame it on someone or something else. The assumption that "In Adam's fall / We sinned all" is to the Gnostic pure nonsense. And (2) Man's salvation depends on his own efforts.

Brooks goes on to explain that these "two traits, Voegelin points out, continue to characterize Gnosticism, even in its present-day secularized form" (Brooks 56). As I noted in the introduction, Voegelin's assessment of modern, secularized Gnosticism

points to modern man's rejection of the old organic unity of the immanent and the transcendent. Gnostic man attempts to save himself not simply by breaking this unity, but rather by performing two separate, yet related, acts of rejection. First, he rejects the very existence of an infinite, transcendent, metaphysical order outside of his own self. Such an order suggests standards against which man would be required to understand himself; in turn, man may be forced into an awareness of his own brokenness. Second, gnostic man rejects the notion that the immanent—that world of which he is a part—is finite and limited. Rather, it is through his attempts at liberating immanence from the limitations imposed by its ostensible finiteness (a liberation effected via his cultivation of *gnosis*) that gnostic man finds salvation.[1]

Percy's work diagnoses the errors of Gnosticism in the postmodern South and, in some cases, provides a solution to Gnosticism's existentially destructive consequences. These consequences of gnostic logic are, for Percy's characters, the loss of what Richard Weaver thinks of as a theory for living, which is replaced merely by the uncritical practice of life. We should recall that "theory" is taken from a Greek word (θεωρια) that suggests a proper perspective for seeing, understanding, and contemplation; appropriately, our word "theatre" shares the same root. For Weaver, a "theory for living" is the sum of perspectives that show the individual man as a meaningful participant in things outside of himself, allowing him to transcend mere animal existence—the "uncritical practice of life." Percy mercilessly (and hilariously) wars against the gnostic logic that reduces Southerners to an uncritical practice of life; he diagnoses the errors of Southern Gnosticism, and, in some cases, provides a solution to its existentially destructive consequences. In *Love in the Ruins* and *The Last Gentleman*, these solutions are based in critical recoveries of certain aspects of the South's conservative traditions.

[1]Voegelin's famous indictment of attempts at "immanentizing the eschaton" is a description of attempts at enacting this same sort of "salvation" on a global, rather than individual, level.

In other words, Percy is illustrating the ways in which Southern conservatism can provide individuals with a sense of their own placement and participation within something beyond themselves and their own acts of consumption. Reflecting on their placement within a transcendent order—marked by notions of mutual obligation, a sense of finitude, and other characteristics of Southern conservatism—Percy's characters find ways to avoid the snares of gnostic alienation, and overcome their deep feelings of malaise. Stated differently, part of Percy's project in these novels is to show how a reevaluation of the Southern conservative tradition provides a means for developing the theory for living Weaver discusses.

Weaver's language of theory and practice is found in a brief passage in the introduction to *Ideas Have Consequences*. There, Weaver asserts that modern Western man's "life is practice without theory," a statement that provides a concise summation of the book's underlying principles, and suggests that Gnosticism is the functional norm of modernity (Weaver, *Ideas* 7).[2] In Weaver's presentation, the logic of modernity asserts that existence is understandable through mechanistic rationality. Man is simply an entity within existence, and is thus to be understood in these same terms. This amounts to a rationalist dismissal of transcendent Truth, from which logically follows the Gnostic divorce of the immanent and the transcendent. In this account, there is no meaningful mystery in life, but rather only the mechanistic interplay of biological, economic, and environmental factors. As these can be logically analyzed, modernity emphasizes life's empirically-understandable problems and their rational solutions. Modernity thus gives no place to a large-scale theory of how to live—to a macroscopic perspective on life and its significance based outside of the self—as empirical analysis and rational solutions view such perspectives as unnecessary. Man

[2]Weaver arrives at this statement through briefly tracing how the nominalism of William of Occam leads directly to the rationalistic individuality of Hobbes, Locke, and Bacon, which in turns leads to positivism, materialism, Deism, and other features of Enlightenment and modernity. He spends the rest of this slim, dense volume by-and-large diagnosing the existential, social, political, and artistic consequences of this fact.

is reduced to the unreflective, self-concerned existence of a beast, trapped in the Hobbesian state of nature, rather than being liberated from it.

The Gnostic South of Percy's novels cannot provide the theory—the perspective—necessary for the practice of life, as it has replaced Truth and external authority with the banal pursuit of bourgeois comfort. As a result, the individuals who populate Percy's fictive South merely practice animalistic existence, marked by consumption, lust, and self-satisfaction. Such existence is marked by an uncritical, and often superficial, loyalty to certain symbols and ideals. These include the Old South, Southern history, the practices of cultural Christianity (rather than devout commitment to the Faith), high culture, and even virtue itself. These, in turn, are not actually significant in themselves, inasmuch as the South's superficial and uncritical treatment of them serves only to perpetuate the necessary social, political, and economic contexts in which an individual can maximize his own consumption, lust, and self-satisfaction. This gnostic situation of Percy's fictive South is seen most clearly in his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*.

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy shows Gnosticism overcome through the protagonist, Dr. Tom More, recovering a part of Weaver's "fourfold root" of Southern conservatism, the South's "older religiousness." The novel takes place in Paradise, Louisiana, a city that is both a stand-in for and a neighbor to New Orleans (which gets a few passing mentions in the book). The setting is sometime in the late 20$^{\text{th}}$ century; a 15-year war in Ecuador (an obvious stand-in for Vietnam) has recently ended, and an unexplained series of "Christmas Riots" has taken place five years before the events of the novel. The Ecuadorian War and Christmas Riots wrought destruction on Paradise—and seemingly the rest of America as well.[3] Bombed-out cars and buildings litter the landscape, and nature has begun the process of reclaiming the large swaths of land

[3]More tells us that "Vines sprout in sections of New York... Wolves have been seen in downtown Cleveland." (17)

once part of suburban sprawl. Against this burned-out backdrop, a sort of civilization has rebuilt. The novel is centered on the golf-course community of Paradise Estates and a vast government-academic research facility referred to as Fedtown. In these locales, the business district of Paradise proper, and the swamp that stands between Paradise Estates and Fedtown, Percy has created an uncanny vision of the New South and its familiar suburban landscapes.

In this uncanny South lives Dr. Tom More, the narrator of the novel, who describes himself as "a not very successful psychiatrist; an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors, but a genius nevertheless who sees into the hidden causes of things and erects simple hypotheses to account for the glut of everyday events" (Percy, *Love* 11). More's self-description suggests that he is very much Weaver's modern man, engaged in the practice of life without a theory for living. More's alcoholism, anxieties, and "simple hypotheses" illustrate both a desire to craft a theory for life, and his inability to do so. Part of More's response to the chaos of post-apocalyptic life is his creation of what he calls the MOQUOL—the More Qualitative-Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer. This machine analyzes brain function to illustrate causes of malaise, showing an individual to either suffer from *angelism* (an excess of abstraction produced by elevating the transcendent over the immanent) or from *beastialism* (an excess of brutish physicality produced by elevating the immanent over the transcendent). The MOQUOL's analysis clearly points to a consequence of the victory of Gnosticism in the postmodern South, inasmuch as beastialism and angelism are both products of rupturing the old, stable order of immanence and transcendence.

The futuristic, science-fiction-like satire of *Love in the Ruins* proves vexing for a critic like Walter Sullivan, who, in his 1976 *A Requiem for the Renascence*, argues that the novel reveals profound weaknesses in Percy's overall artistic project. That Percy felt the need to "set his novel in the future and traffic with scientific magic—

even in a satirical vein—is indicative of his divorce as an artist from his own culture" (Sullivan, *Requiem* 69). Sullivan is unable to recognize that the novel shows Percy deeply invested in asking after certain aspects of "his own culture," and how these can diagnose and correct the existentially-destructive excesses of suburban American modernity. Against Sullivan's assessment, we should consider critic Gary M. Ciuba's statement that "Percy's most overtly eschatological novel is as much antiapocalyptic as it is apocalyptic. Only after exposing the possible perversions of the eschaton and comically undermining the very tradition in which it is written does this dire fantasy end by affirming love amid the ruins" (Ciuba 131). Ciuba recognizes the richly ironic character of the novel, and such considerations should direct our reading of *Love in the Ruins*. Through examining its ironies, we see Percy using this novel to argue for the necessity of the traditional Southern notion of religiosity for recovering community and resisting the painful self-divisions produced by the postmodern South's petty, bourgeois materialism.

Perhaps chief amongst the novel's ironies is a self-admitted "not very successful psychiatrist," with his own deep-seated psychoses, finding himself able to "cure" others of their malaise. It is also ironic that while these psychic maladies are products of the Gnosticism that follows from Descartes' inauguration of dualistic modernity, More's analysis and "cure" is effected through modern, mechanistic solutions. More seems to relish in this irony, valiantly describing his lapsometer as "the first caliper of the soul and the first hope of bridging the dread chasm that has rent the soul of Western man ever since the famous philosopher Descartes ripped the body loose from the mind and turn the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house" (191). The negative consequences of this "dread chasm" are readily apparent in the lives of Paradise Estates' residents.

Dr. More describes his neighbors as generally falling into two broad categories: secular, liberal scientists and academics who work in Fedtown, and religious, conser-

vative businessmen who own the shops and businesses in town. Paradise Estates also contains a large number of medical professionals, who seem equally divided between liberal and conservative viewpoints. More notes that this golf course community is "that rare thing, a pleasant place where Knothead [the right-wing political party] and Left—but not black—dwell side by side in peace" (18). He notes that while his liberal and conservative neighbors "make much of their differences—one speaking of 'outworn dogmas and creeds,' the other of 'atheism and immorality,' etcetera etcetera—to tell the truth, I do not notice a great deal of difference between the two" (15).[4] The lack of difference is largely a consequence of both groups' being fully modern. That is, that they practice a life of petty comfort and consumption, without developing a substantial theory for living. Such a theory would be based in something beyond themselves, and would thus force them to view their own self-satisfying life practices critically. So great is the hold of Gnosticism over these individuals, then, they are unable to even conceive of the existential limitations of a life of bestial self-satisfaction.

Stated plainly—what matters most to both Knothead and Left are creature comforts and having their pieties reaffirmed. These pieties allow both groups to envision themselves as concerned with significant, meaningful ideas and principles, while not requiring them to deal with the consequences of these ideas and principles. In reality, these pieties simply provide the residents of Paradise Estates with affirmative intellectual cover for the petty, materialist practice of their lives. A clear example of this is seen in both Knothead and Left attitudes towards African-Americans. In explaining the differences between these groups, Dr. More notes the overlap in their racial attitudes:

> The Negroes around here are generally held to be a bad lot. The older

[4]Writing in 2015, forty-four years after this novel's publication, I am struck by the sad hilarity of how accurate this statement continues to be in our own day. *Plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose.*

> Negroes are mostly trifling and no-account, while the young Negroes have turned mean as yard dogs. Nearly all the latter have left town, many to join the Bantus [a group of black revolutionaries] in the swamp. Here the conservatives and liberals of Paradise agree. The conservatives say that Negroes always have been trifling and no-account or else mean as yard dogs. The liberals, arguing with the conservatives at the country club, say yes, Negroes are trifling and no-account or else mean as yard dogs, but why shouldn't they be, etcetera etcetera. So it goes.
>
> Our servants in Paradise are the exceptions, however: faithful black mammies who take care of our children as if they were their own, dignified gardeners who work and doff their caps in the old style. (17)

While their various perspectives may lead them to interpret the condition of African-Americans differently, this is a difference without real significance for how they interact with blacks. Both Lefts and Knotheads are glad that Paradise Estates is lily-white, and both equally enjoy the ways in which the labor of "faithful black mammies" and "dignified gardeners" enable them to practice life in the pleasant environs of the country club. More further elaborates on how minor their differences in action toward blacks are: "When conservative Christian housewives drive to town to pick up their maids in the Hollow, the latter ride on the back seat in the old style. Liberal housewives make their maids ride on the front seat" (15). While their respective pieties and political leanings may produce different symbolic gestures, the actuality of their treatment of and expectations about blacks are virtually identical. While a Left may put her servant in the front seat to assuage white guilt and a Knothead stick hers in the back out of loyalty to the old order, both ultimately see African-Americans as servants to be utilized when necessary and hidden from view when not.[5]

[5]The novel provides no indication of either faction viewing the novel's black characters as any-

Such inconsequential differences in action and ideology help explain why Paradise Estates stands as "an oasis of concord in a troubled land" (17). Elsewhere, America has largely split along factional lines. More tells us that "[t]he center did not hold;" importantly, he immediately follows this revelation by pointedly stating that, despite this seeming dissolution, "the Gross National Product continues to rise" (18). In expressing the non-existence of the center, Percy lays bare the place where the pieties of Left and Knothead coincide—in the bourgeois pursuit of material comfort. This is the signal issue for residents of Paradise Estates, surpassing all belief, and perhaps even implying that beliefs themselves are to be treated as merely epiphenomenal and unimportant. In so doing, the attitudes of Paradise Estates denigrate the soul of man, and undermine possibilities for real, complex human community.

In place of complex community based in working out competing theories of life, the community of Paradise Estates rises from its denizens' shared consumption patterns. Percy illustrates this by pointing out how readily Northern transplants adopted to life in the South. Being a Southerner in Paradise Estates does not require confronting the complexity of the South's history and traditions, but simply in making the proper consumer choices. Dr. More tells us that his Northern neighbors "have taken to Southern ways like ducks to water. They drink toddies and mint juleps and hold fish fries with hush puppies. Little black jockeys fish from mirrors in their front yards. Life-size mammy-dolls preside over their patios." Adopting these consumption-based markers of Southerness ironically leads these ersatz Southerners—many of whom are Lefts—to embrace other attitudes of the Old Southern order. These individuals employ "servants" from "Happy Hollow,"[6] to whom they grant "totin' privileges" and

thing more than servants. When the Bantus revolt and seize Paradise Estates as a site for building their own civilization—a civilization that, in the novel's epilogue, comes to ironically mirror the white world it has replaced—they see neither Left nor Knothead as allies, claiming their homes equally.

[6]Percy chooses this name carefully, with its obvious echoes of the figure of the "Happy Darky," the gross caricature of marginalized African Americans as contented children we also see in embodied in

give "Christmas gifs," signs of the petty paternalism of the Southern racial order.

In this consumption-based New South, in which being a Southerner consists of little more than decorating your yard in appropriately "Southern" ways, we see the old order denuded—the outward signs of the traditional South are on display, but separated from the demands of its foundational logics. We should recall that John Randolph of Roanoke, the individual I've suggested is perhaps the archetypal Southern conservative, not only manumitted his slaves after his death, but also provided them with land, tools, and livestock in the free state of Ohio, because his understanding of community's mutual obligations demanded he do so. In his essay "Stoicism in the South," Percy's discussion of Faulkner's Colonel Satoris illustrates the novelist's awareness of the Randolphian ideal in the Southern tradition:

> The Colonel Satoris who made himself responsible for his helpless "freedmen," and the Lucas Beauchamps who accepted his leadership, formed between them a bond such as can only exist between one man in his dignity and another. It was a far nobler relationship than what usually passes under the name of paternalism. [The obligations demanded by this bond were fulfilled] because to do [African Americans] an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself. Whatever its abuses, whatever its final sentimental decay, there was such a thing as *noblesse oblige* on the one side and an extraordinary native courtesy and dignity on the other, by which there occurred, under almost impossible conditions, a flowering of human individuality such as this hemisphere has rarely seen. ("Stoicism in the South" 85)

However one might criticize the potential naïvete and romanticism of Percy's presen-

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the figures of the mammy-doll and lawn jockey—Flannery O'Connor's "Artificial Niggers." However, unlike their influence on the boy and his grandfather in O'Connor's great story, these figures provide no vision of suffering and mercy to the denizens of Percy's Paradise Estates.

tation of the relationship between blacks and aristocratic whites in this passage, there is nevertheless a central point that has significant consequences for our reading of *Love in the Ruins*. The obligations elite whites once felt toward blacks—obligations born out of recognizing the servitude and degradation southern blacks experienced *because of the actions of elite whites themselves*, rather than the actions of blacks—has been subject to "sentimental decay." In the post-apocalyptic South of this novel, the aristocratic white Southerner (and his Left-leaning, Northern-transplant neighbor) are no longer what Percy, in the same essay, identifies as "the champion of Negro rights. . . of fair-mindedness and toleration in general" (83). The significance of obligation and a commitment to "fair-mindedness and toleration" has been replaced by the banality of "totin' privileges" and "Christmas gifs."

All in all, many of the residents of Paradise Estates—both Left and Knothead—have adopted a practice of life that meets their physical needs and fills them with pleasures, while insulating them from any awareness of the myriad ironies that limit their existential maturity. In short, their practice of life is marked by the Gnostic split that readily accompanies the bourgeois order of postmodern America. In his work as a psychiatrist, Tom More is placed in a position to observe several other means by which this Gnostic split plays out, each serving to arrest the patient's existential stability and happiness. In very different ways, patients P. T. Bledsoe and Ted Tennis are oppressed by "angelism, that is, excessive abstraction of the self from itself" (*Love* 37). Bledsoe's life is consumed by his paranoid fantasies of being persecuted by "Negroes and Communists. . . as well as a Jewish organization that he called the 'Bildebergers' and that he had reason to believe had taken over the Federal Reserve system" (31). Ted, meanwhile, is a neurotic whose tendency to over-analyze every aspect of his life makes him unable to have sex with his wife. Bledsoe retreats into fantasies of moving to the Australian outback, fantasies he knows he will never fulfil. For his part, Ted wants More to provide him with a "Bayonne-rayon training

member," a sex toy that will serve *in place of* his own penis. This abstracted, idealized substitute for his penis will thus permit the excessively-transcendent Ted to "have sex" with his wife, while nevertheless avoiding an encounter with his immanent self.

Tom More's assessment of his neighbors thus presents him with two different, but equally destructive, existential consequences of the postmodern South's Gnostic character: the bestialism of uncritical material comfort, and the angelism of excessive, obsessive abstraction. These exist in equal measure for both secular liberals, like Ted Tennis and the housewives who put their maids in the front seat, and religious conservatives like P. T. Bledsoe and the housewives whose maids ride "in the old style." Importantly, both angelism and beastialism naturally result from understanding the individual self as the measure of all things; the postmodern South's Gnostic character not only divides man from himself, but from others as well. Such notions stand in contrast to the vision of life displayed on a ruined Rotary Club banner. It is a further irony of the novel that this banner, with its connections to the civic boosterism that greatly contributed to the bourgeois character of the New South, becomes for Dr. More a totemic symbol of a theory for life. Hanging in the dining room of motel in one of the novel's abandoned districts, the banner asks three questions of vital importance for Dr. More: Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships? More tells us that "the banner is rent, top to bottom, like the temple veil," suggesting that late apocalypse has perhaps invalidated these questions (9).

Even if those particular questions have, indeed, lost their practical power, More is profoundly taken with them. If considered seriously and critically, these questions require an individual to produce a theory of life, and judge his practice accordingly. By having the banner ripped in half, Percy illustrates that theory and practice have been separated from one another, paralleling Gnosticism's division of soul and body. Taken alongside Dr. More's general comments in the novel's opening pages, the refer-

ence a self-confessed "bad Catholic" here makes to the Crucifixion points toward the myriad existential divisions present in his world. In More's Paradise, spirit is separated from body, the individual is separated from community, and man is separated from the Divine. The rending of the temple veil in this New South leads More to reflect on a felt reality of his time and place: the "old Christ died for our sins and it didn't work, we were not reconciled. The new Christ shall reconcile man with our sins. The new Christ lies drunk in a ditch" (153). The peace and unity that reign in Paradise Estates are not indicative of existential divisions being undone, but rather of some individuals engaging in uncritical, and even dishonest, denials of the existence of such divisions, while others are simply lost and profoundly confused about the source of their malaise. All the while, More tells us, the new Christ is drunk in a ditch. Just as Brooks points out in his description of Gnosticism, for man in Paradise, his "salvation depends on his own efforts."

With this image, Percy suggests that religious faith has not been cast off in this post-apocalyptic New South. But though it exists, faith has been neutered of any of its power. The faith practiced in Paradise Estates does not demand anything of its practitioners, but has rather been remade in order to accommodate the Gnostic pieties of New Southerners. As an example, More tells us that the Catholic Church "has split into three pieces: (1) the American Catholic Church whose new Rome is Cicero, Illinois; (2) the Dutch schismatics who believe in relevance but not God; (3) the Roman Catholic remnant, a tiny scattered flock with no place to go" (5-6). In all American Catholic Church parishes stands a "blue banner beside the crucifix [showing] Christ holding the American home, which has a picket fence, in his two hands" (181). This ikon of a middle-class, Americanized Christ illustrates a faith remade to meet the pieties of Knotheads. The Dutch schismatics' denial of God makes faith meaningless, while their concern for "relevance" makes their beliefs, whatever they may be, palatable to many liberals. Protestantism is in its own vexed position, as

illustrated by More's estranged wife Doris, "a cheerful Episcopalian from Virgina." In his account, their marriage dissolves after she succumbs to what he thinks of as a "typical" weakness for cheerful Episcopalians—eventually, they "fall prey to Gnostic pride, commence buying antiques, and develop a yearning for esoteric doctrine" (64). Doris, who takes up with a gay English conman masquerading as a Hindu divine, leaves More and sets out "in search of myself... To the lake isle of Innisfree" (65). Taken together, such demonstrations of faith either deny transcendent Truth (the Dutch schismatics), replace it with idolatry (the American Catholic Church), or imagine it to exist in an ever-retreating horizon (Doris and her "yearning for esoteric doctrine").

None of these forms of faith are indicative of what Weaver calls the South's "older religiousness." However, this sort of belief is present in both the Roman Catholic remnant to which Dr. More remains committed, as well as the unorthodox Presbyterianism of his nurse, Ellen Olgethorpe. More admits his faith is imperfect, and tells us that he has "stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and have since fallen into a disorderly life. I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all" (6). Ellen, meanwhile, "though she is a strict churchgoer and a moral girl, does not believe in God. Rather does she believe in the Golden Rule and in doing right" (157). Ellen's atheism is distinct from that of the Dutch schismatics in that she has no interest in or need for "relevance." Even though she denies the actual existence of the Divine, she nevertheless recognizes the reality of transcendent Truth, and accepts its strictures for governing her conduct. Ellen's unorthodox, atheistic Presbyterianism is a significant instance of how the South's "older religiousness" need not promote, nor even accede to, religious dogma to have its power.[7] Ellen

[7]We should once again be reminded of *God Without Thunder*, the "unorthodox defense of orthodoxy" penned by one of Weaver's mentors, John Crowe Ransom.

Olgethorpe, the Godless Calvinist, is the most sane and moral character in this rich novel, and her sanity and morality are due to her ironic affirmation of the South's traditional notion of religiosity.

More's further comments on his and Ellen's convictions points us toward the end of the novel, where the eventual recovery of traditional Southern religiosity helps facilitate More's overcoming the postapocalyptic South's Gnostic split. Immediately after discussing Ellen's unorthodox faith, More notes that she simply

> does right. She doesn't need God. What does God have to do with being honest, hard-working, chaste, upright, unselfish, etcetera. I on the other hand believe in God, the Jews, Christ, the whole business. Yet I don't do right. I am a Renaissance pope, an immoral believer. Between the two of us we might have saved Christianity. Instead we lost it. (ibid.)

The two final sentences of this passage present a challenge to readers: in what way might More and Ellen have saved Christianity, and how did they lose it? To make sense of what Percy is doing here, we need to consider the narrative technique he employs in the novel. The main events of *Love in the Ruins* take place on July 1-4 of an uncertain year, and are followed by an epilogue occurring "Five Years Later." Percy opens the novel with the events of July Fourth, goes back to narrate the First through the Third, and then returns to the events of the Fourth. Importantly, each day is narrated in the present tense, and More's relating of the events of the First, Second, and Third are not presented as flashbacks. By paying attention to the narrative technique Percy employs, we realized that More's comments about he and Ellen having "lost" Christianity are amongst his earliest ruminations in the novel's interior chronology, even though they come about a third of the way through the text of the book.

This recognition provides us with related ways for understanding More's comment. In their different forms of belief, More and Ellen mirror the Gnostic division of their

postapocalyptic South. Traditional, orthodox Christianity expects both belief in a set of doctrines *and* pious living as a result of accepting those doctrines. More and Ellen each present half of that vision of faith. He recognizes this, and this recognition is behind his remark that, between the two of them, they might have saved Christianity. In other words, if More and Ellen could come together in some way, their individual beliefs could combine into a unity of both the transcendent and immanent aspects of faith. This would overcome the petty shadows of Christian faith we see, for instance, in Doris on the one hand and the American Catholic Church on another. This union would save Christianity. More's proclamation that he and Ellen had "lost" Christianity follows from his recognition that they could have "saved" Christianity through their union. On July First, he is convinced that his Renaissance popery and Ellen's atheist Calvinism are separated by an unbreachable gulf. As a result, the needed union of his metaphysical belief and her practical piety is impossible. Yet as the novel progresses towards July Fourth's cataclysmic events, we see Ellen and More increasingly joined together. By the time of the epilogue, we see constant instances of both literal and figurative union on their part; ultimately, they come together and "save Christianity," and through that find a theory for life that rescues them from the existential destructiveness of Southern Gnosticism.

More and Ellen's union is a direct result of the events of July Forth. That day's cataclysm is produced by the Bantus' revolution and the malappropriation of More's lapsometer by the twisted scientist and businessman, Art Immelmann. These events are themselves at least indirectly the products of Paradise's Gnostic logic. Immelmann wants to use the MOQUOL to exploit the existential weaknesses produced by self-division, thus providing him with power over others. Meanwhile, the Bantu leader Uru is actively revolting against the racism of Paradise Estates, racism that I've asserted results from the Gnostic logic of Paradise Estates' residents. Having witnessed the Bantus' conquering of Paradise Estates and facing the victory of the

"evil-minded son of a bitch" Immelmann, More finds himself alone with Ellen, who asks "Now what?" When More replies that he thinks he'll have a drink, Ellen's answer is firm, decisive, and intimate—"'No you won't. Let's go home,' she says, spitting on me and smoothing my eyebrows" (376-77).

However poorly he lives it, Dr. More's adherence to orthodox Catholic dogma has placed him firmly at odds to both the many instantiations of Paradise's Gnosticism and both Uru's and Immelmann's reactions to it: the enthusiasm for euthanasia and we see in Fedville's geriatric clinic, the reduction of sex to passionless mechanics on display in Fedville's "Love Clinic," Paradise Estates' mindless consumption and materialism, the Bantus' revolutionary fervor, and Immelmann's demonic lust for power. More may recognize himself at odds with Gnosticism, but he is himself bewildered by how to respond to it. Fortunately, Ellen's practical piety provides her with stability in the face of chaos, allowing her to provide succour to More and other characters. Her steadiness also forces More into a recognition of the ways in which his philandering and drinking are destroying him, undermining his own disagreements with Paradise's Gnostic excesses, and thereby separating him from his beliefs. Thus, as the novel's world falls apart, their seemingly incompatible notions of faith have joined them together in the face of chaos and cataclysm.

More and Ellen are still joined together when we encounter them in the novel's epilogue, five years later. They now have children and are presumably married, and are living in old slave quarters. There, they eke out a meagre existence through gardening and Dr. More taking on the odd client. In a situation very different from his early country-club existence, More still believes that his "lapsometer can save the world—if I can get it right. For the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man" (382-83). Here, we see More recognizing that an undoing of the gnostic split is not itself a means for the creation of a theory for living

(even if it is perhaps a precondition). But even though More recognizes the essential problem—that a "pasted together. . . half angel, half beast" is not a man in any real sense—he continues to believe in his lapsometer above all else. This continued belief in the tool's ability to cure the gnostic malaise he so well defines points to the ultimate irony in this heavily ironic novel: here, near the end of *Love in the Ruins*, More seemingly remains largely unaware of the role he and Ellen's adherence to forms of the South's older religiousness had in helping them survive the end of the world. The events of the brief epilogue, which are appropriately on Christmas Eve, force him to recognize his faith's role in his overcoming the still-extant Gnosticism of his South, and the way in which the transcendent concerns of the South's "older religiousness" point to a nascent theory for living.

More finds a solution—a theory for living—after making his Christmas Eve confession. Importantly, on this night, Ellen has decided to go to mass with him. When he goes into the confessional, More initially finds himself unable to be contrite, and seemingly takes an ironic pleasure in his continued malaise. The priest recognizes that More is trapped by the very Gnosticism he ostensibly rejects, inasmuch as his understanding of sin is excessively abstract—and thus not really his fault. As a result, he cannot be contrite:

> "Very well. You're sorry for your sins."
>
> "No."
>
> "That's too bad. Ah me. Well—" He steals a glance at his watch. "In any case, continue to pray for knowledge of your sins. God is good. He will give you what you ask. Ask for sorrow. Pray for me."
>
> "All right."
>
> "Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, show-

> ing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly our own families—unkindness to those close to us is such a pitiful thing—doing what we can for our poor unhappy country—things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams."[8]
>
> "You're right. I'm sorry," I say instantly, scalded.
>
> "You're sorry for your sins?"
>
> "Yes. Ashamed rather."
>
> "That will do..." (Percy, *Love* 399).

This conversion and moment of contrition come on perhaps too quickly, and this is arguably a flaw in Percy's composition. But despite what we may feel about the suddenness of More's change of heart, what the priest is doing here neatly complements Percy's overall purpose in the novel. The priest's remarks, which More will describe as "scalding" immediately thereafter, force More to face the necessity of both abstract doctrine and practical piety in genuine faith; this is the very kind of union that More had earlier thought would "save Christianity." The presence of Ellen, the exemplar of practical piety, at the mass subtly mirrors the union the priest forces More to recognize.

In the closing moments of the novel, donning sackcloth and ashes, Dr. More has been disabused of his own Gnosticism, and finds in traditional Southern religiosity an effective cure for what he has spent the entire novel diagnosing.[9] The priest says

[8]More had admitted to sins including "lusts, envies, fornication, delight in the misfortunes of others" (397). He knows these are "sins," but because they are mere abstractions, he cannot make out *why* he is responsible for them, why God would judge him for them. The sins and evils inside Tom More are not the result of the brokenness of Tom More himself; this is, then, a definitively Gnostic notion of sin.

[9]Of course, this is a somewhat unusual manifestation of Southern religiousness, inasmuch as Roman Catholicism is not a faith normally associated with the South; Ellen's heterodox Presbyterianism is also a very atypical Southern faith. Nevertheless, they both point to the core of the South's

mass, and More tells us that "I eat Christ, drink his blood" (400). This is profoundly significant, as while the novel is full of mentions of *eating* Christ and references to the Host, this moment is the first mention of both Elements. Importantly, this is also the first time in the novel we see More participating in the Eucharistic feast, placing himself in literal Communion with the Divine. There are further instances of union in the novel's last pages. More has told us that he and Ellen sleep in separate twin beds, furniture left over from his marriage to Doris. Yet as the novel closes, a new, large bed that they will jointly share has been delivered. The final scene is More and Ellen making love on this bed, "twined about each other as the ivy twineth" (403). Thus, the epilogue presents us with myriad references to unity and wholeness. Through the joining together of the immanent and the transcendent, the abstract and the practical—all of which are constituted in Weaver's notion of the South's older religiousness—the divisions and rifts of Southern Gnosticism are undone, and More begins to enact a theory for life. The confusion and pain seen in the ripped Rotary banner has been replaced by the beauty and existential wholeness seen "at home in bed where all good folk belong" (ibid.).

Faith points Tom More to recognizing his own brokenness not as something to be transcended through heroic action and human ingenuity—his MOQUOL cannot repair Gnosticism's mighty schisms. Rather, those are repaired by union with others, most especially God, but also community and family. Will Barrett, the protagonist of Percy's second novel—1966's *The Last Gentleman*—finds himself oppressed by a malaise similar to that suffered by Tom More. In this novel, Percy has Will overcome this malaise through engaging another traditional aspect of Southern culture: memory, which provides a means for structuring existence and understanding oneself

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older religiousness, an "attitude toward religion [that was] essentially the attitude of orthodoxy: it was a simple acceptance of a body of belief, an innocence of protest and schism by which religion was left one of the unquestioned and unquestionable supports of the general settlement under which men live" (Weaver, "Older Religiousness" 135).

as a part of an order that depends on concepts—like community, obligation, and history—greater than the self. By having Will figuratively travel back into both his personal and the communal of various Southern communities past, memory becomes empowering. As a result, memory allows Will to overcome his existential paralysis.

The Last Gentleman is an immensely complex and often bewildering novel, as Percy moves back-and-forth from dreamy questing to high satire to moments of near-mythological profundity. But if, in places, the novel produces a sensation of bewilderment and confusion in its readers, it is an appropriate sensation, inasmuch as it mirrors Will's experience. Will suffers from a myriad of psychological confusions, including fugue states and déjà vus, as well a debilitating need "to know everything before he could do anything" (*The Last Gentleman* 1). Through combining Will's crippling need for knowledge—for *gnosis*—with his fugues and déjà vus, Percy presents us with a character burdened by an essentially Gnostic vision of time, about which I will say more momentarily. This vision of time traps Will, placing him in "a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of a man he was or what he must do," leading his "supposing therefore that he must be all men and do everything" (ibid.).

Throughout the, Will moves back towards the South that produced him and towards a critical reassessment of Southern conservative notions of memory. Though the novel is divided into five volumes, it is helpful to conceive of it as arranged in three sections, each of which presents a different vision of Will's relationship with both the South and the Vaughts. The first section shows Will in New York, alienated from the South and from himself. After meeting the Vaughts, Will agrees to accompany them back South as a tutor for their terminally-ill teenage son Jamie (he has also fallen in love with with the Vaughts' beautiful daughter, Kitty). This arrangement leads to the second section of the novel, in which Will returns to a South very different from the one he left, enrolls in the University of Mississippi, courts Kitty, and faces the bourgeois thinking of the Vaughts and their ilk. Though he now feels more at

home, Will still finds himself oppressed by the same sorts of alienation he felt in New York. The third and final section shows Will recovering memory after visiting his ancestral home. Ultimately, it is this recovery of memory that helps Will overcome a destructive, Gnostic vision of time.

Edward J. Dupuy discusses Gnostic time in his study of the autobiographical elements of Percy's fiction, *Autobiography in Walker Percy.*[10] Drawing on the work of religious historian Henri-Charles Puech, Dupuy contrasts the Gnostic conception of time with Classical Hellenism's emphasis on "eternal return" and Christianity's focus on "irreversible" events that are "full of significance" (Dupuy 93):

> The Gnostic attitude toward time is neither historical nor cosmic, neither a straight line nor a circle. Instead, Puech argues, it is best viewed as a "broken line." Whereas Hellenism proffers a continuity between the temporal and the atemporal, and Christianity posits a movement in and toward fullness,[11] Gnosticism proposes a radical bifurcation between the temporal and the atemporal, between fullness and history. The Gnostic view is primarily dualistic... The Greek either stands in awe of time or grows weary of it, and the Christian waits in eager anticipation, but the Gnostic "condemns, rejects, [and] rebels." Time is, "in the last analysis, a lie." (94)

While the cyclical integration of Hellenistic time and the move from the weakness of the flesh to the perfection of the spirit in Christian time both indicate a unity of the transcendent and the immanent, Gnostic man understands time as broken, frag-

[10]This excellent study provides a strong reading of Percy's interest in Gnosticism, especially in *Lancelot*, and considers the ways in which Percy uses considerations of Gnosticism to respond to the spectre of fascism.

[11]While this is certainly the case in Western Christianity, the Eastern Church seems (unsurprisingly) to understand time in a way heavily influenced by Classical Hellenism. For a beautiful exploration of Eastern Christianity's conception of time, see the Russian writer Eugene Vodolazkin's 2013 novel *Laurus*.

mented, and ordered incoherently (if at all). Time, in this view, is a "lie" inasmuch as it proves to be epistemologically empty; Gnostic man, obsessed with cultivating secret knowledge, thus "condemns, rejects, [and] rebels" against a concept he understands as a false *episteme*. The practical consequences of this conception of time are that Gnostic man must either repudiate the meaningfulness of history or find the past and present as inseparably permeating one another. In both situations, a properly-ordered vision of history and temporality is impossible; this produces severe existential consequences in light of the South and its historical contexts.

This Gnostic vision time figures significantly in *The Last Gentleman*, and is an essential feature of Will's overwhelming sense of alienation. Yet early on, Percy intimates that such a vision of time haunts the South itself. In assessing Will's malaise, the narrator notes that he is like many other young Southerners, and that such malaise is not uncommon precisely because

> Southerners have trouble ruling out the possible. What happens to a man to whom all things seem possible and every course of action is open? Nothing of course. Except war. If a man lives in the sphere of the possible and waits for something to happen, what he is waiting for is war—or the end of the world. That is why Southerners like to fight and make good soldiers. In war the possible becomes actual through no doing of one's own. (*The Last Gentleman* 7).

This juxtaposition of infinite possibility and war recalls Faulkner's famous assessment of Pickett's Charge in *Intruder in the Dust*—that for "every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two oclock on that July afternoon in 1863. . . [and] it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet. . . " In essence, Faulkner recognizes that the Southerner's understanding of defeat results in a rebellion against and a rejection of that defeat, accomplished through a refusal to accept time as definitive and coherent. If time

is not coherently fixed and stable—if it is understood Gnostically—all things are still possible. Yet instead of being liberated by infinite possibility, the individual Southerner finds himself existentially overwhelmed. Thus, as Percy recognizes, the Southerner is trapped by his sense of time, and he passively waits "for something to happen."

The Gnostic conception of time, and the overwhelmingly infinite sense of possibility that follows it, are in profound tension with many other aspects of the Southern conservative tradition, specifically its Christianity and those Burkean aspects that deal with limits, restraint, and acting within contexts. The 20th-century Southerner may commemorate the South's past with the ostensibly Christian cry of *Deo Vindice*, but his understanding of the incoherence of time—especially the perpetual intrusion of the past into the present—is essentially Gnostic. If the past, in Faulkner's phrase, isn't dead, not even past, then time is incoherent, perhaps even oppressively so. The individual Southerner is unable to understand *when* he is within history, as the South's past is not truly *in the past*, but rather wherever the individual Southerner finds it to be useful and necessary for the past to exist.

This understanding of Southern history is deeply alienating and existentially limiting to the individual Southerner. While it often produces petty nostalgia—here, we should recall Uncle Jake from Peter Taylor's "The Scoutmaster"—in other situations the consequences are significantly more destructive. As the past perpetually intrudes upon the lived experience of the present, memory itself becomes existentially dangerous. To return to Faulkner, there is a strong argument to be made that his most famous character, Quentin Compson, is undone largely by Gnosticism's "bifurcation between the temporal and the atemporal," finding himself trapped by inescapable slippages between memory—both his personal memories of Caddy and the communal memory around Thomas Sutpen—and his lived experience of the present. For Quentin, the only way out is suicide. But even though Percy admits that Will Bar-

rett is "the Quentin Compson who 'didn't commit suicide"' (qtd. in Ginés 163), Will faces many of the same slippages between memory and experience. Nevertheless, the contexts of his very different South alter the consequences of such slippages significantly.

In addition to the contexts of his postmodern fictive South, Percy's treatment of memory is also an important consideration here. In this novel, Percy clearly pushes against the *passive* experience of memory that leads to either petty nostalgia or an apathetic lack of critical engagement with the past; for memory to be existentially useful, it must be actively considered and engaged. Yet even an active, critical engagement with memory and its consequences can be existentially ruinous if it fails to consider that memory has consequences for not just the individual, but also those others that surround him. To return again to Will's literary antecedent, Quentin Compson—while Quentin is doing nothing if not critically engaging the communal memory of Yoknapatawpha County and the South as a whole in *Absalom, Absalom!*, his is ultimately a self-serving engagement. This is arguably what Shreve is trying to force Quentin to recognize at the end of *Absalom, Absalom!* ("You cant [sic] understand it. You would have to be born there."/"Would I then?" Quentin did not answer. "Do you understand it?"). However active and critical it may be, Quentin's engagement with memory fails to help him make sense of the South, and, as his famous response to Shreve's ultimate question suggests, perhaps even his own self. For memory to have existentially utility, it must actively consider the self *in terms of things larger than the self*, rather than the other way around.[12]

The peculiarities of Will's South, and the ways in which these exist in tension with both his personal and the region's larger, communal memory, are made manifest in

[12]Percy's treatment of memory is thus essentially Proustian. This is ironic considering Percy's distaste for Proust—something exemplified by his letters with his friend Shelby Foote. Even if, as he claims in the letters, Percy never made it past the first few pages of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, Foote's evangelism about the book's greatness and perspectives perhaps had some effect on Percy's thinking about memory.

his interaction with the Vaught family, especially in the second and third sections of the novel. Upon his return South in the second section, Will faces a changed South: "The South he came home to was different from the South he had left. It was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic, and Republican" (*The Last Gentleman* 144). Defeat is not so much memorialized—as it is in Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County—as it is emptied of meaning. An example of this is Mr. Vaught's huge "Confederate Chevrolet" car dealership, in which salesmen walk around in "Reb-colonel hats and red walking canes" (206). We thus see the Confederate soldier no longer as a valorized symbol of communal memory, but a kitschy, petty symbol of mere regional identity and affiliation. This is a different sort of Gnosticism, in which significance and meaning are disconnected from symbols, exacerbating the confusion someone like Will faces.

Montserrat Ginés notes that "for all [Faulkner's Quentin and Percy's Will] have in common, there is one fundamental aspect that sets them apart: Quentin's obsession with honor, role playing, and virtue finally undermines his life. Will's preoccupation with the same abstractions are much less agonizing, probably because the old code is far more removed from his experience; he is in fact baffled by it" (Ginés 164). Ginés goes on to remark that Will is "eventually able to settle his debt with the past and rebuild his life, thus avoiding Quentin's tragic fate" (ibid.). The way in which Will settles "his debt" is through an active recovery of memory, something which he needs to return home in order to effect.

This recovery begins with another instance of the *déjà vus* that haunted Will in New York. The narrator notes that, as Will drives through Carolina, he realizes that even

> though he was hundreds of miles from home and had never been here and it was not even the same here—it was older and more decorous, more tended to and a dream with the past—he was home.

> A *déjà vu*: so this was where it all started and which is not quite like home, what with this spooky stage-set moss and Glynn marshes which is familiar nevertheless. It was familiar and droll and somehow small and curious like an old house revisited. How odd that it should have persisted so all this time and in one's absence! (126).

Will's return "home" thus takes him first to the seaboard South, that "older and more decorous," and even "droll" and "curious" antecedent to *his* South. He is here faced with an inverse of the disorienting *déjà vus* of his time in New York, sensations that, according to a previous conversation referenced by his therapist, emphasized Will feeling "hollow" (26). Though Carolina presents Will with a sense of uncanny familiarity, it nevertheless provides him with a feeling of wholeness. Here, even though "it was not even the same here," as his native Ithaca, Mississippi, Will reenters the flow of Southern history.

While this moment of *déjà vu* shows Will as facing a nascent awareness of his existence *within* the flow of time, it does not point toward a recovery of real existential stability, nor a means of escape from the Gnostic notion of time that affects the South generally. Time here is no more coherent and orderly for Will than it is for Faulkner's "every Southern boy fourteen years old." Will may have left the ahistorical, hollow *déjà vus* of his life in New York, but they have been replaced by the uncanny temporality one feels in "an old house revisited." Will is here experiencing little more than a passive sense of time, rather effecting an active engagement of it through memory, critically considered. That this passive sense of history is of little existential utility to Will is demonstrated by his retreat into the same sort of abstract dreaminess that controlled him in New York. Soon after these reflections on being "home," Will "unlimbered the telescope and watched a fifty-foot Chris-Craft beat up the windy Intercoastal. A man sat in the stern reading the *Wall Street Journal*... What about cotton futures, [Will] wondered" (126). Here in Old Carolina, just as back in New

York, Will suffers from the Gnostic impulses of alienation (his encountering others mediated through a telescope) and a desire to know everything ("what about cotton futures").

Percy's juxtaposition Will's reentry into history and his continued Gnostic confusion helps to illustrate the author's recognition of the South's flawed relationship with time. Even though Percy's fictive South does not memorialize the defeated Old South, it nevertheless utilizes it; Percy shows us characters that are still deeply affected by the Old South, with various forms of existential confusion resulting from their inability to process the Old South's significance. This inability is itself due to the Gnostic character of Percy's fictive South, in which the experience of time is broken and incoherently ordered. The "spooky stage-set moss and Glynn marshes" of Old Carolina are uncannily familiar to Will precisely because they are recognizable as spiritual antecedents to the golf courses of the New, patriotic, rich, Republican South where the Vaughts and their ilk live (and the plantation houses that would have dotted those Glynn marshes and been covered by that moss are definitive precursors to the large suburban mansions owned by the Vaughts, *et. al.*). While the actuality of place and the conditions of existence have seriously changed, the denizens of Percy's New South still find utility in the symbols of the Old—thus the logic of a "Confederate" Chevrolet dealership staffed by "Reb-colonel" stereotypes. Through these abstracted symbols, Percy's New Southerners open themselves up to infinite possibility; the Southern past can be interpreted in whatever way they want, to serve whatever purposes they need it to serve in the Southern present. Because these New Southerners are rich and victorious, rather than poor and defeated, they find ersatz solace and comfort in such open-ended possibility rather than feelings of regretful nostalgia.

In other words, the Vaughts, the Thigpens, and the numerous other victorious, Republican New Southerners who populate *The Last Gentleman* are Gnostics employing

a flawed vision of time and Southern history to arrive, ultimately, at a justification for a consumer culture in which meaning and notions of the individual self are largely created through consumption. While there is nothing particularly nasty or toxic about these individuals, they have lost sight of the metaphysics that ordered the traditionalist Old South, the symbols of which they now appropriate and reinterpret in the pursuit of bourgeois, individualistic comfort—something that the traditionalist South of "social bond individualism" would have found perplexing. In this, they are much like those individuals whom Richard Weaver describes as having failed to "realize the presence of something greater than self and see the virtue of subordinating self to communal enterprise—that is, see the virtue and not simply respond to coercion" (Weaver, *Ideas* 115). Whereas a Gnostic logic of time made Faulkner's Southerners subject to the Southern past, that same logic, applied to different circumstances, now places the Southern past in thrall to the whims of these postmodern New Southerners. Stated differently: whereas a previous generation saw "something greater than the self" and stood paralyzed in awe of it, Percy's New Southerners see that "something" not as "greater," but rather as merely existing to serve their own notions of self. While the relationship of the Southern past to present has been inverted, it nevertheless retains its essentially Gnostic character.

As Will continues his journey, he is presented with two significant alternatives for responding to this metaphysical lack in the postmodern South. These alternatives are embodied in the two oldest Vaught children, Val and Sutter. Both of them recognize the existential failures that follow from this lack—from no longer being able to recognize the "presence of something greater than the self." The tension between these characters, and Will's navigation between the two different poles represented by their very different responses to the South's existential failures, largely drives both the final third of the novel and points toward the resolution Will ultimately finds.

For her part, Val becomes a Roman Catholic nun working with poor black children

in south Alabama. Because of her totally giving herself over to something greater—the church and the welfare of black children—Val becomes estranged from her family. The Vaughts do not so much reject religion or show themselves as crass racists as simply being unable to comprehend the fullness of Val's metaphysical submission. The world of Confederate Chevrolet dealerships cannot make sense of such a radical, self-giving emptying of self; her practice of *kenosis* (the theological term for the emptying of self in service to the will of the Divine) is insurmountably distant from the Vaughts' worldview.[13] Val's act of *kenosis* is seen both in her rejecting a life of stability and upper-middle-class privilege for one of service, as well as her name change. After becoming a nun, she is no longer Val Vaught, but rather Sister Johnette Mary Vianney. Percy has chosen her religious name with great care, as it is a feminine form of St. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, the patron saint of priests. An early 19th-century French parish priest, St. John Vianney (as he is known in English) worked selflessly to restore the fullness of the Catholic faith—and its metaphysics—in the aftermath of the French Revolution. While the bourgeois complacency of the New South is certainly far removed from the anarchic violence of the French Revolution, Percy would assert that both are representative of a divorce from metaphysics based in a Gnostic misordering of the place of man within time itself.[14] Like her namesake, "Sister Vinney" finds herself presenting piety, devotion, and pastoral care as solutions to the negative existential consequences of this Gnostic misordering.

Sutter, the eldest Vaught child, is nearly the exact opposite of Val. A de-licensed-physician-turned-drifter, Sutter is a nihilistic *enfant terrible*. Where his sister empties herself into world around her, Sutter sees that same world as already empty

[13]The relevant passage for this Christian doctrine is Philippians 2:vii, in which Paul reflects on the consequences of Christ's Incarnation. This verse is rendered in the English Standard Version as "but emptied [ἐκένωσεν, ekenōsen] himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

[14]We should recall the creation of the *calendrier français révolutionnaire*, which, among other things, attempted to impose a hyper-rationalistic order upon Creation; this was a Gnostic project indeed, providing an illustration of the perceived "lie" of the natural movement of time.

of all but the most base, animalistic meaning. Despite their vital differences, Sutter, like Val, also recognizes that modern man has lost his way, and suffers from a profound existential malaise. Sutter recognizes this malaise as characteristically Gnostic, a recognition we see made explicit in his medical article, "*The Incidence of Post-orgasmic* [sic] *Suicide in Male University Graduate Students*," which is divided into two sections, "Genital Sexuality as the Sole Surviving Communication Channel between Transcending-Immanent Subjects," and "The Failure of Coitus as a Mode of Reentry into the Sphere of Immanence from the Sphere of Transcendence." As the title of the work indicates, Sutter accepts sex as "the Sole Surviving" means of engaging an otherwise meaningless, animalistic vision of existence marked by a Gnostic separation of immanence and transcendence. And while sex momentarily overcomes the malaise produced by Gnosticism, the title of the article's second section indicates that sex provides only a temporary reprieve. Sutter finds that the fleeting nature of the good of sex portends an ultimate attempt at escaping the meaninglessness of modern existence, finding a relationship between sex and suicide after examining "the urethral meatus of some thirty male suicides for the presence of spermatozoa" (50). The "presence of spermatozoa" in the "urethral meatus" indicates that the men Sutter studied chose suicide soon after sex. While suicide may not overcome the Gnostic confusions of life, it does escape them and render them powerless. Before he even meets Sutter, Will is made aware of the dark conclusions of Sutter's academic work. For their part, the Vaughts worry that Sutter will take his nihilistic principles to their logical—and ultimate—conclusion.

In the final third of the novel, Will finds himself caught between the conventional, bourgeois Vaughts, and their very unconventional eldest children, in the family drama surrounding Jamie's terminal illness. As this family drama moves us toward the novel's conclusion, we see Will situated between Val, Sutter, and their two very different responses to the South's Gnostic shortcomings. This final section of the novel

is inaugurated by another of Will's *déjà vus*, portraying the James Meredith riots at the University of Mississippi through Will's confused, dreamy perspective. Although several minor characters have mused on the the integration of the university, Will has been typically oblivious to the concrete reality of the situation under discussion. When integration actually occurs, his confusion is acute. Upon encountering a woman on campus yelling "He's here" and "Kill him!," Will can only wonder "Who?" (227). He follows this woman to the Confederate monument, where he sees "a group of students. . . carrying a long flagstaff. The flag was furled—he could not tell whether it was United States or Confederate" (228). Will tries to engage the group, but they, pursuing their single-minded goal, ignore him; as the group rushes past, they accidentally hit him in the head with the long flagpole. As he falls to the ground, Will experiences a sudden rush of confusing clarity: "The dawn of discovery, the imminent sense of coming at last upon those secrets closed to one and therefore most inaccessible, broke over him. 'But why is it–?' he asked aloud, already knocked out cold but raising a forefinger nevertheless, then lay down under the dark shrubbery" (228).

This is a blackly-comic act of violence with ironic consequences. Will becomes a victim of his ostensible *confreres*, white Southerners, who are dead-set on maintaining the old racial order through violence against a black man. As he loses consciousness, Will is presented with a key for making sense of his own self, the South, and his place within it: memory, actively engaged. Even his confusion ("But why is it–?") is instructive; why is this act of violence occurring, why does it reveal "those secrets" most necessary for understanding? These are questions for which Will must seek an answer, or at least seek to confront their moral and existential challenges. Violence here produces a fugue state in Will, as he finds himself sometime later in the cab of his truck, unclear as to how he got from underneath the "dark shrubbery."[15] In

[15]The contexts here—the beginning of a journey and amnesiac placement in a "dark shrubbery"—

experiencing an act of violence intent upon black disenfranchisement, Will is clearly within the tragic flow of Southern history, which he has felt ever since driving through Old Carolina. But here, he is not just experiencing the abstract, transcendent flow of a region's history and its regrettable consistency with regards to race-based violence. Rather, Will is confronted with an "imminent sense of coming" face-to-face with the ways in which *he himself* is a part of that flow of history. The unfinished "But why is it–?" shows Will attempting to make sense of why he finds this violence both uncanny, disorienting, and revelatory. Will answers this question when he recovers memories of his personal past, memories that point him to a means for resisting the South's Gnostic vision of time.

Soon after waking, Will finds himself traveling towards Santa Fe, New Mexico, in search of Jamie, who has disappeared. While this journey confronts Will with Val's faith and Sutter's nihilistic embrace of sex as ways out of the existential ruination of Gnostic time, he cannot embrace either. Instead, Percy shows Will pursuing the memories inaugurated by the flagpole-induced fugue state, with Will making a beeline to his home town of Ithaca, Mississippi. Through confronting the ways in which violence, racism, and personal tragedies connect his own personal history with the communal history of the South, Will is able to overcome the South's Gnostic time, which divides history from the self. Through an essentially conservative act—remembering—Will finds his long-awaited existential stability.

What Will remembers first is place, and Percy here engages the ur-trope of Southern literature with deftness and sophistication. As he comes ever-closer to Ithaca, Will is confronted with the exceptional differences between the South that produced him and the one to which he had initially returned:

> There had been the sense ever since leaving New York and never quite

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have obvious echoes in Dante. At the beginning of the *Comedy*, the poet finds himself "in a gloomy wood, astray / Gone from the path direct." These echoes will continue to mark Will's journey.

> realized until now of tarrying in upland places and along intermediate slopes and way stations (My Lord, where had he stopped? Where had he spent the last month? He cudgeled his brain) and now at last of coming sock down to the ultimate alluvial floor, the black teeming Ur-plain... It was a heedless prodigal land, the ditches rank and befouled, weeds growing through the junk: old Maytags, Coke machines, and a Hudson Supersix pushed off into a turnrow and sprouting a crop all its own...
>
> Straight across the Delta he flew and down into the tongue of the Yazoo plain to Ithaca, so named by a Virginian who admired Pericles more than Abraham and who had had his fill of the Bethels and the Shilohs and the Scotch-Irish. Yonder in the haze rose the brownish back of the Chickasaw Bluffs, and just beyond, the old wormy concrete towers of the Vicksburg battlefield. (239-40)

This South is not happy, victorious, and rich; to the contrary, scars of defeat, poverty, and misery are omnipresent. It is significant that Percy uses "Bethel" and "Shiloh" as the typical Bible-based names of Southern towns, inasmuch as they are both also locations of Civil War battles. These generic names thus retain a connection to Vicksburg, site of another battle. Thus, with regard to both the martial and religious aspects of the South's *mythos*, Ithaca—not named after a Biblical locale or battle site, of which Bethel and Shiloh are both—is isolated and idiosyncratic. But the town's name is also pregnant with meaning. Will has been driving a vehicle the Vaughts affectionately named Ulysses, and thus the return to Ithaca recalls the *Odyssey* and the long, tortuous process of homecoming—and its necessity. Will's observations while driving "down into the tongue of the Yazoo plain" also make clear that this South is also vastly distant from that of the Vaughts' suburbia. Percy thus subtly disconnects Ithaca from the South's Gnostic flow of time—from both the nostalgic Southern myth-making that is arrested by the past, as well as the bourgeois

consumerism that arrests the past for its own purposes—and also emphasizes Will's profoundly meaningful, Odysseus-like homecoming.

Ithaca clearly exists within the flow of Southern history.[16] But here, Will not only faces the reality of the South's history, but the ways in which his own personal history intersects with this larger story; Will's history within Ithaca is profoundly connected to his memories of his father, a suicide. "Here [Will] used to walk with his father and speak of the galaxies and of the expanding universe and take pleasure in the insignificance of man in the great lonely universe. His father would recite 'Dover Beach,' setting his jaw askew and wagging his lead like F.D.R." (243-44). Leaving the bank where he has gone to put a stop order on a lost check, Will is overwhelmed by memories of Ithaca and his connection to it, and feels an instance of genuine nostalgia:[17]

> Here's what I'll do, thought the engineer who was sweating profusely and was fairly beside himself with irritable delight. I'll come back here and farm Hampton, my grandfather's old place, long since reclaimed by the cockleburs, and live this same sweet life with these splendid fellows [that he has encountered when leaving the bank].
>
> "You gon' be home for a while, Will?" they asked him.
>
> "For a while," he said vaguely and left them, glad to escape this dread

[16]For example, the South's historical legacy of racism and racial violence is on display in Ithaca, something acutely illustrated by Will's bizarre re-encountering of a troupe of "actors" led by a "pseudo-negro" whom he had met at the beginning of his journey south. This group has been arrested on what is obviously a racially-trumped-up charge, and Will serves as their *de facto* advocate, assuring their freedom and urging them to lay low at his Uncle's place across the Mississippi River in Louisiana.

[17]I say here *genuine* nostalgia as that word has the Greek word for homecoming at his base. There is an element of dreamy romanticism to Will's musings, but they differ from the hollow, petty nostalgia of Taylor's Uncle Jake inasmuch as Will's nostalgia is connected to his own specific and definite connection to place. Further, as I've already noted, Percy is clearly making connections to the *Odyssey*—a story explicitly based on the notion of *nostos*, and the very work that introduces the concept to our literary history.

delight. (246)

Will recognizes the irony of his nostalgic fantasy, calling it a "dread delight." Will knows nothing of farming, and the "splendid fellows" are individuals with whom he shares nothing in common and who would likely be at best uneasy acquaintances. A return to Ithaca would thus be certainly dreadful.

Yet there would be delight in such a homecoming as well, as it would finally give Will something he lacks—*place*, and the existential stability that comes with it. Immediately after his nostalgic musing, Will experiences a realization that prefigures one of the novel's pivotal moments:

> It came over him suddenly that he didn't live anywhere and had no address. As he began to go through his pockets he spied a new outdoor phone in a yellow plastic shell—and remembered Kitty. Lining up quarters and dimes on the steel shelf, he gazed down Kemper to the old city jail at the corner of Vincennes. Here on the top step stood his great-uncle the sheriff, or high sheriff, as the Negroes called him, on a summer night in 1928. (246-47)

In this moment, two things happen: first, Will recognizes that he is placeless—that he "didn't live anywhere and had no address." Will's lack of place is the very thing that has produced his existential confusion and unmoored him from the flow of time. Secondly, in this moment, Will experiences a collapse of time into a single moment. While thinking about Kitty and his present obligations, he also thinks about a moment that occurred before he was born—his uncle's staring down a mob and preventing violence. Will "remembers" his uncle's actions while the "telephone was ringing in the purple castle beside the golf links;" Percy narrates this atavistic memory *in the present tense*: we are told that "[t]he sheriff put his hands in his back pockets so that the skirt of his coat cleared his pistol butt," and that he tells

the assembled crowd to "go on back to your homes and your families. There will be no violence here tonight because I'm going to kill the first sapsucker who puts his foot on that bottom step" (247). That Will is attending to his present obligations while recalling his ancestor's past performance of duty and talking on a "new outdoor phone in a yellow plastic shell"—a shiny example of newness and the invading forces of technology and bourgeois modernity—points to the future that will soon come to Ithaca, just as surely as it has already overtaken the upper-middle class world of the Vaughts.

In this moment, Will suddenly finds time as coherent and meaningful—and his fugue states cease. Never again in the novel does he he suffer from these gaps in memory that remove him from the flow of time and produce a profound sense of alienation and existential confusion. At this point, Will begins an active engagement of his memories of Ithaca. That is, he begins to reconsider them, with a critical eye towards the ways in which the past has both limited him and provided him with sources for meaning-making. Will's memories thus begin to have utility for his crafting a theory for life. We see this acutely a few pages later, when Will returns to his childhood home. Will walks there from the levee, recalling his path from memory and the interrelationships of places to one another. Will walks the "Illinois Central tracks" past the high school, and his "muscles remembered the spacing of the ties" that will eventually take him past "the Chinaman's" and "a better Negro neighborhood of neat shotgun cottages," eventually depositing Will "in the inky darkness of the water oaks" where he looks "at his house" (258). Having just reflected on his placelessness ("he didn't live anywhere and had no address"), Will has followed memory to home itself—that place he went to New York to escape from.

While his desire for escape, and his need to abandon a place that contains so much tragedy, is understandable, we should note that Will's self-alienation and neuroses began well before his father's suicide. As a child, Will "had had 'spells,' occurrences

which were nameless and not to be thought of." These "spells" would produce in the young Will "the strongest sense that it had all happened before and that something else was going to happen and when it did he would know the secret of his own life" (7). From childhood, then, Will has wrestled with a Gnostic sense of time. For the young Will, time was broken and fragmented, and he felt past, present, and future all coexisting in bewildering incoherence. But after his father's suicide, these incoherent experiences—these "spells"—become the fugues and *déjà vus* that reinforce Will's sense of alienation and loneliness throughout the novel. Having just overcome the power the fugues held over him, Will realizes he must finally deal with their source; to do this, he must finally come to terms with his father's suicide through recovering his memories of that night.

On the night Ed Barrett killed himself, Will was with him. Having dropped out of Princeton several years before the opening of the novel, Will had returned home to clerk in the family law firm. Mr. Barrett, like *his* father and grandfather before him, was a Southern conservative of the old sort, deeply concerned with *noblesse oblige*, and thus much like Faulkner's Colonel Satoris (or like Percy's own ancestors). Will remembers his father's holding court on many evenings that summer:

> Here under the water oaks or there under the street light, he would hold parley with passers-by, stranger and friend, white and black, thief and police. The boy would sit on the front steps, close enough to speak with his father and close enough too to service the Philco which played its stack of prewar 78's. . . From the open window came Brahms, nearly always Brahms. (259)

His father's catholic respect and consideration for those with whom he "parleys" is deeply affecting to young Will, and hearkens back to a description of generations of Barrett men made earlier in the novel. There, we are told that Will's great-grandfather "once met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barbershop and

invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street." Will's grandfather was also brave, but "he gave much though to the business of being brave. He too would have shot it out with the Grand Wizard if only he could have made certain it was the thing to do. [Will's father] was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and be thought well of by other men... In the end he was killed by his own irony and sadness and by the strain out living out an ordinary day in a perfect dance of honor" (6).[18] We can thus understand Mr. Barrett's "parleys" as both a fulfilment of his inherent duties as an aristocratic white Southerner of the old sort, and as a last-gasp holding to that identity.

I doubt I am making a novel critical assessment in noting that Mr. Barrett is perhaps a more fitting candidate for the novel's eponymous "last gentleman" than Will himself. But whatever the provenance of this idea, it is a useful one for making sense of what Percy is doing with regards to Ed Barrett's suicide, its effect on Will, and Will's general existential confusion. Here, in the middle of the Civil Rights era, Will sees his father attempting to hold onto an identity that is increasingly untenable. He cannot be the Colonel Satoris-like paternalistic friend of the black man, as that "friendship" nevertheless continues black disenfranchisement. Yet Ed Barrett nevertheless feels obligated to continue to pursue some form of this old arrangement, inasmuch as he is too "brave" to stand down and let the reactionary violence of poor whites upset the public peace; he, too, would have issued a challenge to the Grand Wizard of the Klan if he could have. Ed Barrett thus finds himself in a state of exceptional superfluity: while he has a theory for life, it no longer makes sense in the contexts and conditions of his life. While his senses of duty and obligation are strong, they are ultimately not to people, but to an aristocratic abstraction that no

[18]It is hard for us to not see Percy writing a version of his own family history here, what with his own father being a suicide and the stand LeRoy Percy took against Vardaman and the Ku Klux Klan, something I've discussed in Chapter 2.

longer exists—and can no longer exist. Not knowing how to translate these virtuous urges into new contexts, Ed Barrett can only lament his metaphorical placelessness.

Will, standing underneath the water oaks in the present, remembers the conversation that he and his father had had in the moments before Ed Barrett killed himself, perhaps the most important moments in Will's life: "It was on such an evening. . . that his father had died. The son watched from the step, old Brahms went abroad, the father took a stroll and spoke to a stranger of the good life and the loneliness of the galaxies" (259). Reaching out his hand and touching "the sibilant corky bark of the water oak" (259), Will finds himself actively remembering that evening, plumbing it for meaning that will help him understand his own sense of alienation. He remembers asking his father about his sense of loneliness and sadness when, it seems, they had "won" against the reactionary violence of poor whites, the same sort of disruption to the social order Barrett men had warred against for generations:

> "But they're gone, Father."
>
> "Why shouldn't they leave? They've won."
>
> "How have they won, Father?"
>
> "They don't have to stay. Because they found out that we are like them after all and so there was no reason for them to stay."
>
> "How are we like them, Father?"
>
> "Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hated us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay? They know they don't have to kill me."
>
> "How do they know that, Father?"
>
> "Because we've lost it all, son."
>
> "Lost what?"

"But there's one thing they don't know."

"What's that, Father?"

"They may have won, but I don't have to choose that."

"Choose what?"

"Choose them."

This time, as he turned to leave, the youth called out to him. "Wait."

"What?"

"Don't leave." (260)

Asserting that he is "just going to the corner," Ed Barrett ignores his son's pleas. But Will senses the dark intentions of his father, and feels in in the Brahms as well; it had "gone overripe, the victorious serenity of the Great Horn Theme was false, oh fake fake. Underneath, all was unwell" (260). Ed Barrett tells his son that "[i]n the last analysis, you are all alone," prompting Will to beg: "*'Don't leave.'* The terror of the beautiful victorious music pierced his very soul" (261). Ominously placing his hand on Will's shoulder as he passes, Ed Barrett walks up to his room and shoots himself in the chest with a shotgun.

Standing by the water oak, Will remembers this conversation vividly, as reflects on its implications. Ed Barrett recognized that his small victory was irrelevant in the face of the loss of aristocratic sensibilities amongst whites of his class, that his victory was as hollow as the "victorious serenity of the Great Horn Theme" was "fake fake." While the reactionary violence of poor whites may have been defeated, their vices—fornication and bribery—have found their way into the South's upper class. As the last gentleman, Mr. Barrett cannot bear to live in a world in which his courage and sense of duty are without meaning, and he chooses suicide over superfluity. Will's memory thus also provides a compelling perspective for the situation in which he finds himself. The younger Barrett comes to realize that the pursuit of aristocratic

virtue and *noblesse oblige* exemplified by generations of his family has been replaced by the bourgeois banality of the Vaughts and their ilk. Confederate Chevrolet dealerships and casual country club misogyny are little more than fornication and bribery sanitized by the presence of money and privilege. Just a few short years after his father's suicide, Will is living in a South very different from his father's, and yet one that had been uncannily prophesied by Ed Barrett.

Will's reflections on these memories help him to make sense of his father's choice, but also help to provide him with his own perspective for living in the shiny, happy, Republican South of the Vaughts. Just as he recognizes that his father chose suicide rather than superfluity, Will also realizes that he has never known anything *but* superfluity, thus explaining his lifetime of *déjà vus*, fugues, and "spells." If Will has always eerily sensed "it had all happened before," it is because it—an unsettled sense of how to live in a changed and changing South—had been occurring with each new Barrett man over the past several generations. The aristocratic courage and sense of *noblesse oblige* that his great-grandfather had so valiantly exemplified became, as the years moved on, little more than an abstract ideal held by subsequent generations. As the contexts of the South changed, the Barretts' holding to this ideal uncritically foisted them into their own Gnostic alienation, dividing the transcendence of virtues from the the immanence of the contexts in which they could be realized. Once such a division between theory and reality reached a particularly radical distance, all Ed Barrett could do was kill himself in defiant loyalty to the ideal. Once we reach Will himself, even this feeling of defiant aristocratic courage is gone.

Just as perplexed by the changing South as his father, and without even the feeling of his ancestors' bravery, Will long understood himself as alienated from his past and bewildered by his present. Yet as Will's journey South has re-inserted him into the flow of time, his active recovery of memory in Ithaca has helped him make sense of his alienation, and ultimately rectifies him to his own past. As he continues to stand

under the water oaks and contemplate his father's suicide, his "hand went forth, knowing where it was, though he could not see, and touched the tiny iron horsehead of the hitching post, traced the cold metal down to the place where the oak had grown around it in an elephant lip" (261). An unconscious memory of place, physicality, and the immanent thus follows on the heels of an actively-remembered, conscious memory of his ancestry and the transcendent ideals at its core. This juxtaposition produces the novel's most profound moment, presaging Will's ultimate recovery from the divisions of Gnostic time and self-alienation.

What Will comes to realize is this: perhaps time reconfigures the exact appearance of the relationship between immanence and transcendence in particular contexts, but it does not invalidate the need for their coexistence and balance. The tree may eventually grow completely around the tiny iron horsehead, but this inevitable change in context does not invalidate the perpetual truth of the tree and the iron's coexistence. Will's realization of this fact, effected by his reentry into the flow of Southern history and his embrace of memory, reveals once and for all his father's error and a way out of the Gnostic alienation he has been warring against for the entire novel:

> *Wait.* While his fingers explored the juncture of iron and bark, his eyes narrowed as if he caught a glimmer of light and the cold iron skull. *Wait.* I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place. It wasn't even his fault because that was the way he was and the way the times were, and there was no other place a man could look. It was the worst of times, a time of fake beauty and fake victory. *Wait.* He had missed it! It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness and not in the old sad poetry but—he wrung out his ear—but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark that—he shook his head—that— (ibid.)

As with the the final moments before blacking out from being hit with the flagpole, Will cannot fully articulate his thoughts here; perhaps precise articulation of such a significant realization is impossible. But what Will finally comes to see is that it is neither the transcendent theory for living nor the immanent contexts of life that provide man with meaning and existential stability. Rather, such meaning comes from the interaction of the immanent and the transcendent, even if this interaction is as strange and droll as an iron horsehead being swallowed by the bark of a water oak. In terms of his immediate, proximate contexts, Will cannot simply turn his back on the duties and obligations he owes to the Vaughts any more than he can accept their bourgeois banality.

In this, Will here escapes what Brooks identifies as Gnosticism's emphasis on the individual's "salvation depending on his own efforts" (Brooks 56). In the aftermath of his visit home, Will's desire to "know everything" ceases, and he finds stability in that cessation. While he ends the novel confused about faith—the Roman Catholic baptism of Jamie on his deathbed is deeply confusing to Will—he nevertheless finds a form of salvation, and is saved from the cruelness of infinite possibility. His active recovery of memory points Will toward recognizing that he is not an isolated, atomistic individual, but is rather connected to things larger than himself; among these are history, tragedy, community, and a sense of duty. These are things that are not only *exterior* to him, they are *anterior*; Will cannot—and does not—exist as the man he is without his connection to these. Brooks notes that Gnostic man, "[d]issatisfied with the nature of reality," becomes convinced that "he can remake the world to suit himself" (56). Having reflected on his father's suicide, Will cannot countenance such hubris, and must simply bring to bear those things larger than himself in the world in which he finds himself as best he can. In this, Will stands in stark contrast with Sutter.

For much of the last third of the novel, Will is challenged by his reading of Sutter's

casebooks, records of medical histories in which Sutter rehearses his Gnostic theories of sex and the pursuit of meaning. These books illustrate a man who is actively attempting something like reconfiguring the ways in which an individual man interacts with the world. Sutter examines how a frank, crass acceptance of the immanence of sex can save an individual from a sense of transcendence as oppressive, as presenting the self with the terror of infinite possibility. But even this becomes untenable. As the books metamorphose into one-sided dialogues with Val, Will witnesses the logical end of Sutter's Gnostic attempts:

> You [Val] say don't worry about [issues of theodicy and God's justice], first stop fornicating. But I am depressed and transcendent. In such a condition, fornication is the sole channel to the real. Do you think I am making excuses?
>
> You are wrong too about the sinfulness of suicide in this age, at least the nurtured possibility of suicide, for the certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself. But death is outlawed now as sin used to be. Only one's own suicide remains to one. My "suicide" followed the breakdown of the sexual as a mode of re-entry from the posture of transcendence. (293)

Sutter is here defending an earlier suicide attempt. As an intractable Gnostic, Sutter sees existence as an irredeemable tension between transcendent unreality and immanent reality; one must be one or the other. Wishing to escape the infinite oppressiveness of the unreal, Sutter first uses sex "as a mode of reentry from the posture of transcendence." When that fails to reorder the nature of reality—Percy is here insisting that existence is both/and with regard to transcendence and immanence, not either/or—Sutter resorts to suicide and the nihilistic embrace of nothingness as the ultimate form of reality.

Throughout the latter portions of the novel, Will often genuinely seems to fear Sutter, and we're also given a sense that what Will most fears about Sutter is that he might *become* him. Will spends the majority of the novel overwhelmed by infinite possibilities; his conversations with Sutter reflect this anxiety and are thus deeply unsettling. But through Will's recovery of memory—his re-entry into the flow of time, and his critically-remembered connection to history, tragedy, community, and duty—he comes to the fundamental recognition that he cannot remake existence, and the connections between the individual and world that surrounds him. That is, he recognizes the immanent reality of the here and now, *as well as* his connection to transcendent things outside of himself, and that both of these are of equal importance in the creation of meaning and existential stability. In a significant moment near the end of the novel, this recognition helps Will overcome the siren song of Sutter's nihilism. After Sutter announces his attention to kill himself ("If I do outlive Jamie. . . it will not be by more than two hours"), Will is, for the first time in his life, "astonished."

> "You won't join me, Barrett?"
>
> "What? No. No, thanks."
>
> Sutter nodded cheerfully, dropped the pistol in the side pocket of the jacket, and hurried down the path after the last of the dudes.
>
> Perhaps this moment more than any other, the moment of his first astonishment, marked the beginning for [Will] of what is called a normal life. From that time forward it was possible to meet him and after a few minutes form a clear notion of what sort of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life. (306-307)

Will is astonished by Sutter's ready admittance of his intentions, his invitation for Will to "join him," and perhaps most tellingly, Sutter's active disengagement from

duty and things outside of his own atomistic self. After all, this conversation comes on the heels of Will discussing how to announce Jamie's imminent death to the Vaughts and plan for the young man's funeral—issues about which Will, quite understandably, thinks that Sutter, as the eldest brother, should take the lead.

Further, recollections of his own father's suicide, and its deleterious effects on the lives of so many, are also surely on Will's mind in this moment. That he has only recently processed these memories in a mature, active manner is important here. While we can only speculate about how different his reaction would have been, it is certain that had Sutter presented Will with this announcement and invitation prior to Will's return to Ithaca, he would have not experienced "his first astonishment" and it would have been impossible to "form a clear notion of what kind of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life." But here, we can come to a reasonably confident idea of the rest of Will's life: he will recognize the proper relationship of immanence and transcendence, something based in a proper ordering of time.[19] While Will cannot embrace the faith of Val, he has found salvation, and is rescued from the existential quagmire of Gnostic time and its oppressive, infinite possibilities.

In the novel's closing moment, Will attempts to call Sutter back into the flow of time, away from the Gnostic impulse to remake existence and the nihilistic embrace of death that follows from this project's inevitable failure. As he pleads with Sutter "to come back" to the South, rejoin his family, and recognize that time itself is not a lie—not a transcendent unreality only undone by a destructively exclusive embrace of the immanent—Percy's neurotic, dreamy engineer reverses Sutter's invitation to suicide and nothingness, and instead calls Sutter to family, duty, and those things that exist beyond the hyper-immanence of self. In its last moments, *The Last Gentle-*

[19]Whether or not the Will Barrett of this novel's ostensible sequel (I say ostensible, inasmuch as the connection between the two novels seems largely tenuous, based mostly in names and plot points rather than a consistent thematic unity), *The Second Coming* actually lives up to this expectation is another matter, and one I do not have room to consider here.

man's dreamy confusion, satirical indictment of the postmodern South, and complex treatment of the deleterious existential consequences of Gnostic denials of time's necessary blending of immanence (who I am now, in this moment) with transcendence (what is anterior to me, how does it shape me, and what do I owe to that which comes after?) appropriately gives way to joy. As Will calls after Sutter and Sutter's car slows down, we are told that "[s]trength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten foot antelope bounds," as Sutter's car ultimately "waited for" Will (323). The language here suggests that Will successfully calls Sutter away from suicide for at least a moment. There are significant echoes of the night Ed Barrett killed himself, as Will pleads with Sutter to "come back" and "wait," just as he had with his father a few years before. As Ed Barrett passes Will on his way upstairs to shoot himself in the chest, Sutter passes Will on his way to end his life. But unlike Ed Barrett, Sutter does yield to Will's pleadings; Sutter does "wait." Will's recovery of memory, and his active reengagement with the flow of time, has thus not only saved him, but has also put (an at least temporary) stay on the execution Gnosticism has foisted upon at least one other human soul. Truly, this is serving something greater than the self.

In concluding this discussion, Richard Weaver's thought again proves useful. About midway through *Ideas Have Consequences*, Weaver discusses the "split in the theory of knowledge which took place at the time of the Renaissance." In the medieval world, scholarship and learning formed "a path to self-deprecation, and the *philosophiae doctor* was one who had at length seen a rational ground for *humiltas*." In early modernity, the theory of knowledge abandoned "self-deprecation" and *humilitas*, and comes to see the aim of knowledge as domination, a notion summarized in the Baconian maxim, "knowledge is power" (Weaver, *Ideas* 72). Weaver thus articulates two competing versions of knowledge: an older version governed by an awareness of human frailty and limitation, and a modern version—the "forbidden knowledge"

of "the useful rather than the true and the good, of techniques rather than of ends" (ibid.). Weaver argues that if we are convinced—as he is, and as Walker Percy seems to be—that the problems of modern man are "philosophical, we cannot expect a return to selflessness without an epistemological revision which will elevate the study of essences above that of particulars and so put in their proper modest place those skills needed to manipulate the world. Nothing can be done until we have decided whether we are primarily interested in truth" (72-73).

Percy's "wayfarers" and "pilgrims," to use those terms so often associated with his protagonists, find themselves facing the quandary Weaver sketches out, and are attempting to decide if they are "primarily interested in truth." As we see in the two deeply novels I've discussed, each of which is deeply concerned with Gnosticism, Percy's protagonists recognize that they are living in worlds—in Souths—in which immanence has been elevated over transcendence, and in which the of knowledge of transcendent truths has been denigrated by desires for power, domination, and crass consumption, and thus the cultivation of the "useful" knowledge of "techniques." Will Barrett and Dr. Tom More are each tasked with figuring out what a proper knowledge of the truth looks like, and how it can help them survive the existentially limiting consequences of Southern Gnosticism. Each man decides that he is, in fact, "primarily interested in truth," and each draws on the Southern conservative tradition—and its various articulations of community, duty, faith, transcendent order, memory, and history—to recover this truth, a truth that ultimately saves these characters from the tragic existential consequences of self-division.

Chapter 6

Conclusion: Further Possibilities for and Consequences of Southern Conservative Superfluity

This dissertation has explored two propositions: first, that "Southern conservatism" exists as a set of beliefs about community, transcendence, and the nature of the self, and that all political and social manifestations of Southern conservatism—for good and for ill—are based in these beliefs. These beliefs are ultimately anti-gnostic, ante-modern, and are manifested in response to the particularities of the South's interrelated historic, socio-cultural, and economic experiences. Secondly, this dissertation has argued that some Southern artists have engaged the core beliefs of Southern conservatism, rather than its socio-political manifestations, and their critical engagement of the South's conservative tradition allowed them to find existential stability in times of bewildering social, cultural, economic, and demographic change. I've explored the interplay of these two propositions in the work of William Alexander Percy, Peter Taylor, and Walker Percy.

I originally chose these writers for reasons outlined in the introduction; they are representative of the concepts I've set out to explore, and I am convicted than any such exploration would necessarily need to consider Taylor and the Percys. Yet as I've moved forward, I found myself constantly thinking of other writers whose work would be useful to an expanded version of this project. The process of a critical, existentially useful reevaluation with the Southern conservative tradition is at work in some predictable places; one certainly feels it at work in the poetry and essays of Allen Tate, for instance (although his sole novel, *The Fathers*, seems to treat Southern conservatism in the epiphenomenal mode I ascribed to Faulkner, Welty, and O'Connor in the introduction). Jack Burden, from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*, is a clear predecessor of characters like Taylor's Nat Ramsey and Phillip Carver, especially in Burden's closing realization. But lest we think this project could simply include all of the literary-minded members of the Twelve Southerners, the type of critical engagement with the South is clearly not at work in the literary output of Donald Davidson, who seems most interested in expressing a Southern superiority based in

the region's conservatism, nor that of Andrew Lytle, whose fiction fits into the exploratory, conservatism-as-representative-feature of the broader Southern experience we see in most Southern authors.

The critical, re-evaluative engagement with the Southern conservative tradition I've explored in this dissertation stems from individuals feeling a profound sense of alienation from the South, yet a recognition of some quality or qualities in the South that makes these individuals reticent to decry or reject it *tout court*. I've shown how this works in William Alexander Percy's memoir, *Lanterns on the Levee*, as well as how Peter Taylor's fictive œuvre presents a long journey towards making peace with the South, and the ways in which reengaging Southern traditionalism undoes the existential alienation and self-division felt by Walker Percy's Dr. Tom Moore and Will Barrett. As just stated, Tate and Warren would be necessary, and obvious, additions to an expanded version of this project inasmuch as we see similar dealings with alienation in *All the King's Men* and "Ode to the Confederate Dead.". Yet if this sense of alienation from, but a reticence to abandon, the South is the hallmark of the works this project has explored, an expanded version of it would need to consider the work of two less-obvious writers: Booker T. Washington and George Washington Cable.

Inasmuch as Southern conservatism has often provided the intellectual basis for black disenfranchisement (something I've tried to point out, when appropriate, in this dissertation), including Booker T. Washington, a black man born into slavery, in this conversation might seem strange. But just as William Alexander Percy engages and reinterprets the possibilities Southern conservatism provides for him in order to make a means for a gay aesthete to exist in the inter-war Mississippi Delta, so does Washington enact a similar process, critically engaging the South's conservative traditions to provide African Americans with a theory for living in the Jim Crow South. Of course, scholars have long recognized Washington as a "conserva-

tive," especially vis-à-vis his intellectual rival W.E.B. DuBois. Yet what we see in Washington's memoir, *Up From Slavery*, is not simply promoting hard work, personal responsibility, and useful trades—though he is, to be certain, promoting these. But beyond his promotion of this pragmatic conservatism, Washington is claiming many of the aspects of the Southern tradition that produced the racialist paternalism that provided intellectual and moral validity to black marginalization. Through shrewd rhetorical maneuvering, Washington is cleverly reconfiguring these very notions to produce authentic and empowering forms of black community. A careful study of *Up From Slavery*, paying especial attention to how social bond individualism, notions of duty, and a resistance to the gnostic pull of "immanentizing the eschaton," would provide for nuanced understandings of Washington's social and rhetorical project, including his infamous Atlanta Compromise speech, in which he seems to advocate for a passive acceptance of segregation.

George Washington Cable is one of the 19th century South's foremost liberals, whose racial attitudes made him a pariah. Ultimately, Cable left the South in self-imposed exile, moving to Northampton, Massachusetts in 1885, never to return. Yet Cable's work, both before and after 1885, shows a conscientious engagement with the South's conservative traditions, and an attempt to use these traditions to show the South its own errors, inconsistencies, and the myriad ways the South fails to exist in a manner consistent with its own foundational logics. Richard Weaver, whom I have positioned as perhaps the most significant interpreter of Southern conservatism, seemingly recognizes this aspect of Cable's work, including him in a group of "artists who loved the Old South, and the remnants of it still surviving, for its color, romance, charm, and unreasonableness, but who were continuously disturbed by an inner voice of social justice. One finds in their work sympathetic pictures of the vanishing order and a general endorsement of those virtues on which the South prided itself, but he finds also many uneasy questions, either direct or implied." Cable, Weaver re-

marks, "was the first" of these writers to "discover the basic inconsistencies in the conventional Southern attitude" (Weaver, *Southern Tradition* 308).

While Cable's invocations of many of the "virtues on which the South prided itself" are evident throughout his fiction, perhaps his most important work for understanding how he utilizes aspects of the Southern conservative tradition to point out the "basic inconsistencies" and moral failings of the South is his 1889 novel of Reconstruction, *John March, Southerner*. Penned in the North during his self-imposed exile, it is a complex and ambitious novel that reflects what Louis D. Rubin describes as Cable's recognition that "the South had no intention of permitting the freedman to retain the rights of citizenship granted him during the Reconstruction period, and that 'enlightened' opinion in the North was willing to acquiesce in allowing the South the do what it would with its Negro citizens" (Rubin, *Cable* 212). *John March, Southerner* shows "the limitations of the New South ideology of industrialism and development as a solution for the region's troubles, [demonstrates] why the Negro must be fitted into Southern plans instead of being disenfranchised and set off by himself. More than that, [Cable wants] to describe the South as he knew it, to show how narrow evangelical religion was failing to bring out the best in Southerners... to strike out against lethargy and complacence," and other other hardy critiques of the late-19th century South (213). Much of what Cable is doing in *John March, Southerner* is thus a predecessor of what Walker Percy would do some 80 years later in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Last Gentleman*. Cable, like Percy, effects this largely by drawing on many of the principal ideas of the South's conservative traditions to show how his "New Southerners" have lost their way, much as Percy does with his postmodern Southerners. As Rubin perceptively remarks, Cable ultimately "wanted to show how the Confederate tradition was being misused by so many Southern politicians and economic entrepreneurs for purposes of profit and power, and how the cloak of genteel respectability was masking, throughout the South, economic and political rapacity of

the most unbridled sort" (216). The result was a novel of mixed aesthetic successes, but which shows how Cable, now supremely alienated from the South, could not quit it, and continued, even in exile, to see how a different theory for living existing at the core of the South's conservative traditions.

An expansion of this project would thus explore how Southerners in a more obviously vexed position with regard to their place in the South nevertheless still find some utility in the South's conservative traditions. But the utility of Southern conservatism—as critique, corrective, and alternate vision of possibilities for living—may ultimately be limited. The experiences of Booker T. Washington and George Washington Cable would surely bear this out, just as we have seen in William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy, and Peter Taylor's work. And this brings us back to another core idea of this project: superfluity. This project has continuously dealt with the need to think through the usefulness of ideas that may very well be antiquated, not obviously applicable to current realities, and perhaps fundamentally useless in the face of those current realities.

This has become an especially relevant, and especially troubling, thought process because of the realities of the moment in which we currently live. Significant portions of this dissertation were written (and all of it was edited and revised) in late 2015 and early 2016, in the shadow of Dylan Roof's murderous rampage at Charleston's Emanuel A.M.E. Church and its consequences for how we understand the South, its traditions, and its traditional symbols. Last summer saw the removal of the Confederate battle flag from the grounds of the South Carolina Statehouse (a short walk from my university office), and the removal of Confederate symbols generally throughout the South.[1] A wide ranging cross-section of Southerners—white and

[1]Alabama, for instance, has five flag poles at its state highway welcome centers, bearing the state flag and the flags of the four nations that have claimed ownership over Alabama: the United States, the Crown of Castille, the Kingdom of France, and the Confederacy. While the state flag, the US flag, and the royal standards of Castille and France fly high, the flagpole that once held the Confederate flag is conspicuously empty.

black, men and women, rich and poor, Left-wing and Right-wing, immigrant and long-time resident, urban and rural—are questioning the persistence and presence of traditional Old South and Confederate symbols with a more unified voice than has previously ever been seen. To hear conservative, small town Southern white men (like members of my own family) questioning the prudence of public displays of Confederate and Old South symbols would have been unthinkable as recently as ten years ago; and yet I have witnessed this very thing over the last several months.

Such realities have not been lost on me, and have troubled me as I continued to write and revise this analysis of the uses of Southern conservatism by great literary artists; after all, this dissertation is, I must admit, also a sort of apologia for Southern conservatism itself. Of course, it is always appropriate for the scholar to analyze—but should he defend, be something other than a dispassionate interpreter of ideas, especially when these are certainly superfluous, perhaps useless, and maybe even (as some would certainly argue) wrong-headed ideas? These are serious considerations, and I have struggled with their implications for my own place within the South; I have sometimes felt that I, too, am one of these "last gentlemen" of whom I have written.

But despite these struggles, my ruminations on these artists and Southern conservatism has consistently lead me back to the same place: the work these artists have done is commendable, and is commendable inasmuch as it is artistic. That is, it effects an attempt to apply some perspective—some theory—to the art of living, and explores the myriad, multifaceted consequences of utilizing this perspective. In 2016, attempts by the jurist, politician, or policy-maker to utilize some past instantiation of Southern conservatism as a political program would be naïve romanticism at best, and at worst, an attempt to re-inscribe upon the South those very things the writers I've examined so vehemently criticized. The policy maker or politician is perhaps incapable of the critical reinterpretation this tradition both invites and needs. But

private citizens certainly can enact this reinterpretation, and the artist, who explores both how we live and how we might live, is the individual to show us how to enact that critical move—and to show us that this is a theory for living that deserves serious consideration. The literary artist in the South thus fulfills his mission as the Carlylean hero, exploring possibilities for meaning, purpose, and the good, inviting us to go on this journey with him.

Ultimately, William Alexander Percy, Peter Taylor, and Walker Percy all perform this heroic role, exploring an aspect of their cultural inheritance—the Southern conservative tradition—to help them make sense of how they exist within a particular time and place, however seemingly superfluous that aspect of their cultural inheritance might be. These are individuals who do not attempt to free themselves from the restraining burden of the past and tradition. In this, they represent an alternative vision to the one put forth by those whom Weaver identifies as the "American frontiersman" who "emancipated himself from culture" (Weaver, Ideas 24). Weaver goes on to note that the frontiersman's "emancipation left him impatient of all symbolism, of indirect methods, and even of those inclosures of privacy which all civilized communities respect." (ibid.) Weaver quotes de Tocqueville's observation that the frontiersman's "disposition of mind soon leads them to contemn forms, which they regard as useless and inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth" (qtd. in Weaver, Ideas 25). The work done by Taylor and the Percys suggests a radically contrary view of these "forms," the myths, symbols, and principles of Southern conservatism. For these artists, such aspects of the South's conservative tradition are not "inconvenient veils placed between them and the truth," but rather heuristics for making sense of Truth, perspectives that prevent them from being undone by the overwhelming, disorienting facts of raw human experience. Faced with the bleakness of crass materialism and the hyper-individualism of (post)modern America, these artists have found something of real utility in their cultural inheritance. Their exam-

ple suggests that this seemingly superfluous cultural tradition, treated with proper critical engagement, may provide us with our own means of surviving an even more crass, lonely, and bewildering moment in the South in the second decade of the 21st century.

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