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Lillian Smith, Richard Wright, And Walker Percy's Ontological Vision: Gnosticism, Cartesian Dualism, And The Split Of The Southern Self

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LILLIAN SMITH, RICHARD WRIGHT, AND WALKER PERCY'S ONTOLOGICAL
VISION: GNOSTICISM, CARTESIAN DUALISM, AND THE SPLIT OF THE
SOUTHERN SELF

by

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of the New Southern Studies and its critiques of Southern Exceptionalism, the critic of Southern Literature has felt the necessity to both look within and outside the American South to re-contextualize the parameters of the study in order to avoid the pitfalls of totalizing and whitewashed narratives it is accused of perpetrating. As Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino note in their study *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, such a shift may be accomplished through the consideration of more salient measures of identity and belonging, such as religion, class, and gender. In this paper, I examine how religious taxonomies of being, an ontological dualism rooted in Christian Fundamentalism, can be explored in order tie together a multiplicity of narratives of the South while simultaneously allowing these different Souths to maintain cultural integrity. Through putting the works of Walker Percy, Lillian Smith, and Richard Wright in conversation with one another, the careful critic can establish a common thread of dualistic ontologies through three differing, Southern perspectives. Although by no means totally representative of their respective communities, Wright, Smith, and Percy all identify and contend with the splitting of the soul (or mind) from the body and how this ontology was used by their communities to establish systems of control. Although all three authors deal with and illustrate these systems of ontological control differently, the splitting of the body from the soul proves an essential aspect of each author's consideration of what it means to be categorized as Southern.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>LR</i>	<i>Love in the Ruins</i>
<i>MB</i>	Message in a Bottle
<i>Med</i>	<i>Meditations on First Philosophy</i>
<i>SAFMM</i>	“The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault of the Modern Mind”

CHAPTER 1
DIAGNOSING THE SPLIT IN THE SOUTHERN COLLECTIVE
CONSCIOUSNESS

In his seminal study of the American South, *The Burden of Southern History*, C. Vann Woodward suggests that, in the one hundred years between the Civil War and Civil Rights movement, the collective consciousness of White Southerners suffered a debilitating collapse, largely under the social pressure of rationalizing the exclusionary social systems of slavery and racial discrimination: “Much of the South’s intellectual energy went into a desperate effort to convince the world that its particular evil was actually a ‘positive good’ it withered in the torments of its own conscience until it plunged into catastrophe to escape” (Woodward 21-22). Writing even earlier than Woodward, W.J. Cash noticed a peculiarity in the white male Southerner mind, attributing the peculiarity not to the effects of rationalizing slavery but, rather, something far more fundamental. Cash suggests that the Southerner’s “Puritanism might at a pinch move him to outlaw the beloved fiddle from the Church as an instrument of Satan, would indeed lead him habitually to regard pleasure as in its very nature *verboten*” (Cash 57). For Cash, the Southerner’s denial of his body leads to a potentially devastating psychological split: “One might say with much truth that it proceeded from a fundamental split in his psyche, from a sort of social schizophrenia” (Cash 58). Cash’s

linking the South's seemingly collective schizophrenia to its paradoxical sexual mores and denial of the body begins to delve into the theological epistemology of the white Southern social system, but ultimately stops short. Although Cash does not push his theory beyond white male Southerners, he nonetheless establishes dualism, particularly a split between body and soul, as a distinguishing characteristic of the white Southern consciousness and hints at the far-reaching effects it had on the social fabric of the American South.

In *Whistling Past Dixie*, Thomas Schaller suggests, "the South is different...because it's still full of Southerners" (Schaller 6). Although Schaller's indictment is rather vague and totalizing, he does broach an essential question: "What makes the Southerner Southern?" There exists a much larger metaphysical and, thus, physiological distinction: a religious, and largely theological division, or splintering off of a distinguishable ontological tradition that gave shape to the entire social system of the South. As Cash suggests, Southerners once exhibited "a fairly definite mental pattern associated with a fairly definite social pattern—a complex of established relationships and habits of thought, sentiments, prejudices, standards and values, and associations of ideas, which, if it is not common strictly to every group of white people in the South, is still common in one appreciable measure or another, and in some part or another, to all but relatively negligible ones" (Cash xlvi). What is key here is that Cash white-washes the South, and marginalizes minority groups, excluding them from the purview of his study. Despite his totalizing of South, his assessment does reveal the importance of Southern social patterns in determining the shape of a collective consciousness.

In *Killers of the Dream*, Lillian Smith attempts to give a more definite shape to Cash's "fairly definite mental pattern" (Cash xlvi). In her estimation, the fracturing of the Southerner's very being is tied intrinsically to race and leads to a catastrophic collapse: "however they dealt with it, nearly all men—and women—of the dominant class in the South suffered not only the usual painful experiences of growing up in America but this special Southern trauma in which segregation not only divided the races but divided the white child's heart" (Smith 134). In addition to Smith, the Southern novelist most explicitly concerned with the effects of dualistic ontologies and the separation of the body from the soul was Walker Percy.

Although Percy provides a philosophical thread that allows us to trace the splitting of the body and the Soul back to the Enlightenment, and, to an extent, early Church heresies, he does not necessarily locate the genesis of the phenomena deep within the Southern social fabric, but rather in an erudite, pseudo Christian Southern stoical ideal, which limits its scope to the old Southern aristocracy. Although Smith convincingly roots the psychological split in the American South's specific iterations of Christianity, she falls into a similar trap as Percy, insisting on a color line. Both Smith and Percy identify the ontological splitting as the root of a systemic problem, but both, in one way or another, limit the range of its influence. Smith limits the scope of her observations by attributing blame to segregation, specifically the segregation experienced by those wealthy enough to hire a black nanny, while Percy limits his theory through his insistence that the fracturing of the body and the soul lies in the academy and white Western culture. The most powerful social and political force in the American South for past century has, and continues to be, preachers and lay people of the Southern Baptist

and Evangelical Church. The Christian Fundamentalism practiced in the South actually provided the Southerner with a pre-existing epistemological understanding that allowed the Southern slave owner to deny a human person a soul.

Tracing the rhizomes of Southern religious consciousness further illuminates the nature of the split both Percy and Smith identify. Rooting the genesis of the splintering of the Southern psyche in epistemological and religious roots of Christian Fundamentalism allows it to travel across racial and regional lines. As Joe E. Morris explains in his study, *Revival of the Gnostic Heresy Fundamentalism*, the dualism of Gnosticism, as well as the idea of pneumatic beings, or predestined individuals who possess the “divine spark,” persists in some primitive Baptist sects, Mormons, Pentecostals, Church of God, and Seventh-Day Adventists (Morris 97). Notably, with perhaps the exception of Mormons, none of the aforementioned Christian denominations are predominantly white or limited to a specific socioeconomic class. Perhaps the most interesting inclusion is the Seventh-Day Adventists, the childhood religion of the American novelist and intellectual Richard Wright, who grew up in the sharecropping society of the post-bellum South. Wright’s narrative of his traumatic childhood experiences while being raised as a Seventh-Day Adventist in *Black Boy* call into question Smith’s romantic characterization of African American society.

Wright’s narrative provides an interesting case of the effects of the selfsame psychological fracturing in the African American psyche that Smith and Percy explore in their own works. While Wright manifests some of the same psychological effects as Smith and Percy’s subjects, he also utilizes the psychological split in order to resist the institutionalized racism and abject poverty he encounters while living in both the South

and the North. Considering Wright alongside Smith and Percy and using Harold Bloom's *American Religion*, as well as Morris's monograph to dissect the Gnostic influence in the Southern religious consciousness affords the opportunity to expand the observations of Percy and Smith to the periphery of Southern society and beyond, as well as reorient the socio-historical genesis of the split.

As Matthew Lassiter and Joseph Crespino already noted in their study *The Myth of Southern Exceptionalism*, the mythology of Southern exceptionalism has dubious agendas and, at times, rests on shaky platitudes: "When regional compartmentalization fails, the 'Southernization of America' metaphor works to erase the longer trends of white backlash and political conservatism in a different but equally problematic way" (Lassiter, Crespino 9). Indeed, the South is not alone in its ontological split, but its major social institutions did build its structurally critical ontologies within a particular social environment, one which traversed borders and oceans, but, nonetheless, remains particularly Southern. Despite their missteps, when Smith and Percy's assessment of the Southern collective psyche is shed of its racial limits, and read in conjunction with Wright's *Black Boy*, it provides a illuminating view into the ways Christian Fundamentalist epistemology and the social systems which it creates impact the Southern mind. The Southern psyche which Wright, Percy and Smith access reaches deep into a foundational collective consciousness. The ontological dualism that provides the foundation for Wright, Percy, and Smith, exposes the roots of the cultural consciousness of the American South and illuminates the complexities of the Southern psyche.

PERCY AND THE VIOLENCE OF THE ABSTRACTED SELF

In his essay “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind,” written at the end of his life, Percy reiterates that all modern issues stem from the blunder of Descartes: “But in fact, in speaking of the ‘mental’ and the ‘physical,’ of the psyche and the brain, and with however much hope and sophistication we wish to phrase it, are we not admitting that we are still hung up on the horns of the ancient dualism of Descartes, however much we wish to believe we had gotten past it?” (*SAFMM* 3). Percy continues, laying out the essence of the issue at hand: “Descartes, if you recall, divided all reality between the *res cogitans*, the mind, and the *res extensa*, matter. God alone, literally, knew what one had to do with the other” (*SAFMM* 3). For Percy, the root of all modern problems, from the errantry of science, to the self-abstraction and loneliness so prevalent in the modern age, all stem from Descartes’ distinction. As John F. Desmond suggests in his monograph *Walker Percy’s Search for Community*, Percy insists that the debilitating affliction of modern man has its roots in scientific rationalism: “Percy came to analyze the historical, philosophical and theological roots of his predicament and longing. This search led him to the belief that the root of the immediate problem lay in the modern, post Enlightenment Western world’s lack of a coherent theory of man, much of the blame for which rested, in Percy’s view, with Descartes and his followers” (Desmond 13). The ontology of the moderns, Descartes’ in particular, leaves the individual with but one choice, self-transcendence, which, Percy contends, is the cannibalism of the individual’s own flesh.

Desmond points out that Percy's main critique of the modern American cultural consciousness lies in its insistence on atomized individualism: "In his novels he explored and satirized what he saw as the debilitated state of modern American culture, trapped in its self absorbed individualism, consumerism, violence, racism, and general spiritual anomie" (Desmond 6). As Desmond concludes, Percy believes that the loss of intersubjectivity, seeing the other as a *thou*, as Martin Buber would have it, rather than an inconvenient *it*, set in motion the fall of the Western world: "With characteristic, he saw this debilitated state as a sign of the death throes of the collapse of a western culture dominated by scientific humanism" (Desmond 6). Desmond, following the current of critical thought and Percy's own words, locates the issue at hand in the twentieth century, and, regionally, in Europe. But, as we will see, the isolated individualism that perpetuates a vicious cycle of seeking to abrogate responsibility for the other parallels the Gnostic taxonomy of souls and spiritual economy, one that stems from a peculiarly American expression of Christian Fundamentalisms, as well as Cartesian dualism, rather than a strictly European strain.

As Bloom notes in *The American Religion*, the desire for isolation and atomistic individualism in the American cultural consciousness has its roots in our particularly American iteration of Protestantism, rather than the post-religious American cultural consciousness: "We are a religious culture, furiously searching for spirit, but each of us is subject and object of one quest, which must be for the original self, a spark or breath in us that we are convinced goes back before the creation" (Bloom 22). Although Percy seems to designate this atomization of the self and desire for transcendence to the post-religious age, he does recognize that its inception lies in a particular figuring of the human person,

which stems from Enlightenment Christianity and took on a unique form in the hands of the Southern aristocracy. Bloom locates the wellspring of American individualism deep within American Christianity, rather than Stoicism pitted against Christianity. Despite the Enlightenment's influence on such Dualism, the escape from the world, or transcendence of the bodily self, became an acceptable social doctrine for the majority of Southerners through the endorsement of the most influential Fundamentalist Christian churches in the American South.

In this context, Christian Fundamentalism is understood as the unaffiliated Christian sects including Southern Baptists, Mormons, Pentecostals, and Seventh-Day Adventists that sprung up during the revivalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Morris 81). As Morris posits, the most basic tenets of Fundamentalism include the inerrancy of scripture and the separation of the body and the soul (Morris 88). Morris echoes Harold Bloom, who, some years before Morris, claimed, "Mormons and Baptists call themselves Christians but like most Americans they are closer to ancient Gnostic than to early Christians...Gnosticism, the most negative of all ancient negative theologies, emerges again in the Southern Baptist" (Bloom 219). The Gnostic splitting of the body from the soul, made manifest in Christian Fundamentalism, creates the "mode of thinking," which Lillian Smith identifies as the cause of the fracture of the Southern consciousness, which in turn leads to isolation, self-hate, and sexual oppression. The combination of isolation, self-hate, and sexual oppression provided fertile ground for totalitarian thought long before Bloom or Morris wrote their studies (Smith 91).

In Gnosticism, there exists a three-tiered hierarchy of being: pneumatics occupy the highest level of being, psychics occupy a middle, liminal space, and hyletics are the lowest, animalistic state. Pneumatics, the spiritual beings, are a select group of predestined beings who alone possess a divine spark, allowing them access to the mysteries of the Divine Creator (Morris 18). Hyletics are the opposite of pneumatics in that they only exist on the bodily level and are unable to access the spiritual world. All hyletics can do is “eat, drink, sleep, defecate, copulate, and die” (Morris 19). Such a spiritual economy allows certain enlightened individuals to treat these lower order beings as beasts. Like beasts of burden, they can be co-opted and used without moral ramifications. The Gnostic hierarchy of beings reinforces the Christian slaveholder’s relegation of black and colored bodies to the hyletic level of being. Existing only in the physical realm, slaves were “lost causes” who did not possess souls and could be treated accordingly (Morris 19). The hint of Gnostic doctrine implicit in the attitude of the Southern slave owners suggests that denying black bodies a soul, or self-reflective rationality, is a consequence of a larger systemic issue buried deep within the religious structures of the American and Global South rather than, as Percy would contend, strictly a child of enlightenment rationalism and scientific secularism.

In linking Gnosticism to Christian fundamentalism, Morris asserts that “dualism is evident when one speaks of the bad world and the need to set oneself apart from that world by leading a spirit-filled, or spiritual life...Gnostic and Fundamentalists agree that the material, physical world is evil and irredeemable” (Morris 95-96). The theological inflections of the South lend to a figuring of the divine as alone, and thus, personal. This figuring of the Godhead persists in the largely African-American, Seventh-Day Adventist

theology as well. Bloom contends that the American, particularly Southern Baptist and Evangelical, obsession with the primitive church, wanting to return to the “original church,” leads to a reaching back to Gnostic ideals. As Bloom contends, the Bible has been thoroughly Americanized and transformed to privilege the individual. For Bloom, Gnosticism permeates all theologies occupying American soil. Although the Gnostic seed sown throughout our collective theology, it found particularly fertile soil in the American South.

Bloom’s characterization of the American religion as inherently individualistic and dualist finds a voice in Percy’s fiction. Percy preemptively manifests Bloom’s notion of “a religion of the self” burgeoning under a plurality of sects, through which the individual “seeks to know its own inwardness in isolation” in two of his novels in particular: *Lancelot*, and *Love in the Ruins* (Bloom 37). Bloom cements isolation and the primacy of the individual’s will as the foundational principles of the American Religion: “What the American Self has found, since about 1800 is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out; society, temporality, *the other*. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss” (Bloom 37). In *Lancelot*, Percy presents his reader with a case study of modern humanity. The individual has become so abstracted from him or her self that he or she falls first to catatonic boredom, then to grotesque violence and, ultimately, begins to see the other as less than human. Percy’s main character Lancelot illustrates that the American individual has been “afflicted with a particularly virulent strain of this Cartesian malady,” one that Alexi de Tocqueville observed as emblematic of the American people from the very beginning of our nation (Desmond 13). Tocqueville

noticed that, “in ages of equality every man seeks his opinion within himself...all his feelings are turned toward himself alone” (Tocqueville 104). For Tocqueville, this turning within the self so prominent and elevated in American Culture results in the eroding of public virtue, and, in his estimation, takes on a particularly American form: “Individualism, at first, only saps the virtues of public life; but in the long run it attacks and destroys all others and is at length absorbed in downright selfishness...Selfishness is a vice as old as the world, which does not belong to one form of society more than to another; individualism is of democratic origin (Tocqueville 104). In Percy’s novel, Lancelot’s expression of American individualism takes on a particularly violent tone.

Time and again in his two hundred page long monologue Lancelot suggests that man (he completely masculinizes society, reducing women’s role in society to a strictly sexual existence) acts according strictly to his personal consciousness and always for the purpose of dominance. For Lancelot, violence and radical individualism rules all: “There is going to be a new order of things and I shall be a part of it...It is simply this: a conviction and a freedom. The conviction: I will not tolerate this age. The freedom: the freedom to act on my conviction. And I will act. No one else has both the conviction and the freedom” (*Lancelot* 156). Lance’s radical individualism ultimately leads him to brutally murder his wife, her lover, and a host of Hollywood producers with little to no remorse. Strikingly similar to Smith’s diagnosis of the South’s oppressive social systems, as will be seen later, Lancelot’s twisted individualist ethics demonize sexuality and reduce it to an act violence and control. Such a figuring of the bodily stems directly, not from Descartes, but from a Southern Protestant theology twisted by Gnosticism’s rejection of the body.

According to Gnostic theology, anything that has to do with the temporal world cannot be trusted, for the evil Demerge created the world in order to trap the spirit of mankind. It follows that the self must separate the soul, the thing believed to generate the self, from the body which he or she sees an unfortunate reality of the fallen world. As Bloom lays out, it was the Demiurge who “created the cosmos, and our bodies and souls, in one blundering act that was also a Fall” (Bloom 50). Creation itself was bad and part of the Fall rather than good and then fallen, as most Christian sects maintain. According to Gnostic theology, there is “no hope either for our bodies or outward souls, no hope indeed for anything confined within the limits of space and time” (Bloom 50). Lancelot echoes the Gnostic gospel of an evil creation stemming from an evil creator that he, as endowed with spirit, sees himself as above. At the end of *Lancelot*, Percy’s protagonist Lance tries to convince his estranged priest friend Percival of the validity of his new world order, Lance suggests: “You were onto it with your doctrine of Original Sin. But you got it exactly backwards. Original Sin is not something man did but something God did to man, so monstrous that to this day man cannot understand what happened to him” (*Lancelot* 222). Lance, like the Gnostics, identifies the body as a trap. As Desmond states, “Lance chooses to equate the sexual with the demonic rather than signify its unique ecstasy by analogy to ‘possession by the divine’” (Desmond 157).

At first glance, Lance’s insistence on pinning the brokenness of the created world on God rather than man would seem contrary to Christianity, but, when read alongside Bloom’s observations, his spiritual economy is revealed as deeply rooted in American Christianity, rather than strictly continental philosophy. Bloom contends that the American, particularly Southern Baptist and Evangelical’s obsession with the primitive

church, wanting to return to the “original church,” leads to a reaching back to gnostic ideals: “Only a gnostic reading of the Bible can make us into the land of promise. The new irony of American history is that we fight over how to make the world safe for Gnosticism, our sense of religion” (Bloom 28). The tendency of Christian sects in the American South to establish close ties and connections to the primitive Church led to their adoption of dualistic ontologies, and although the Stoic principles of the Old South were influenced by Enlightenment thought, Percy’s figuring of the Cartesian/Stoic strain alive in Lance largely misses its rootedness in Southern forms of Christianity.

Lance, a victim of the Cartesian split, separates his thinking self from his body, in an attempt to “guard against the pain of the flesh,” as Desmond suggests, and as a means to “try to dominate the world through a ‘scientific’ demonstration. He attempts to gain power over nature, reducing [all women] to [objects] in an experiment” (Desmond 155-156). For Lance, sex in the modern age, is nothing but an animalistic act of dominance, one built on a hierarchy of being which categorizes humanity into two categories: the assailant and the assailed: “The great secret of the ages is that man has evolved, is born, lives, and dies for one end and one end only: to commit a sexual assault on another human or submit to such an assault” (*Lancelot* 222). Lance’s retreat into himself, his separation of his body from his thinking self, in his mind, marks him as the one capable of committing such assaults. Lance’s taxonomy of being, his denying of certain individuals a soul, allows him to see other people as objects, rather than other beings. As Kathleen Scullin posits in her essay “*Lancelot* and Walker Percy’s Dispute with Sartre over Ontology,” Lance’s self abstraction is the root cause of his psychotic breakdown and ability to enact such grotesque violence: “At Belle Isle, his [Lance’s] actions

progressively remove him from others, turning them into objects, rather than partners, and that direction culminates in murder” (Scullin 111). As Scullin reports, Lance’s murderous rage is a direct result of his self abstraction, his splitting of his body from his soul.

As noted earlier, Lance’s ethical matrix parallels a Cartesian ethic, but more importantly stems from Gnostic taxonomy of being that elevates the transcendent spirit being and maintains that it is justified in enacting violence on bodily beings it deems a hyletic. Lance’s abstraction of his thinking self from his body exhibits a particularly American version of the split. As Louis Lawson observes, Percy often seems to pit his Catholic orthodoxy, against what he sees as a Southern Gnostic Stoicism: “the fundamental conflict in Percy’s fiction is between a gnostic stoicism and Christianity” (Lawson 396-406). Lance often identifies with an old form of Southern stoicism, one that failed but whose principles were justified and true. Lance sees his new world order as springing out of and perfecting the first two revolutions, and identifies Robert E. Lee as its savior and holy figure: “You have your Sacred Heart. We have Lee. We are the Third Revolution. The First Revolution in 1776 against the stupid British succeeded. The Second Revolution in 1861 against the money-grubbing North failed...The Third Revolution will succeed” (*Lancelot* 157). As Lance suggested earlier, his Third Revolution is founded on the principle that “one man is free to act, alone,” and if this is established, then “you don’t need a society” (*Lancelot* 157). Lance’s extreme individualism establishes his indebtedness to an American form of Gnosticism that elevates the unassailability of the individual’s will. As is shown in the novel, this extreme individualism ultimately results in social collapse. As Bloom states, “what the American

Self has found, since about 1800 is its own freedom—from the world, from time, from other selves. But this freedom is a very expensive torso, because of what it is obliged to leave out; society, temporality, *the other*. What remains, for it, is solitude and the abyss” (Bloom 37). Bloom’s theory is made manifest in Lance’s decent into the abyss of self, which impel him to commit his horrendous acts of violence. But it is important to note that Lance’s spiritual economy is not completely separated from Christianity like Lawson suggests, and even as Percy may imagine.

For Bloom, the American self constantly strives to free itself from the other, and to be beholden to no one. “What is it that makes us free of the presence of other selves?” has become, in Bloom’s estimation, the prevailing American question” (Bloom 30). Accordingly, American Christians filtered this question through theological considerations, which results in the American finding God “in herself or himself, but only after finding freedom to know God by experiencing a total inward solitude” (Bloom 32). Following a Gnostic spiritual economy, the inner spark and self contingent on the self “must know itself to be free both of other selves and of the created world” (Bloom 32). Bloom’s noting that this freedom must occur beyond the created world is the most important aspect of his statement, for it not only reiterates that the world is a trap, but also suggests an elevation of the self to the stature of a demi God. Thus, it follows that salvation, for the American, “cannot come through the community or the congregation, but is a one-on-one act of confrontation” (Bloom 33). While Percy comes close to identifying the root of the Southern split Cash and Woodward identify, Smith’s *Killers of the Dream* provides a pointed assessment of the fundamental principles and building blocks of the Southern cultural consciousness opening an avenue of inquiry and revealing

a potential strand of thought that allows the critic take a long view, dig deep, and examine the essential ontologies which lie at the heart of the collective Southern consciousness, and transcend racial categorization.

SMITH'S DIAGNOSIS

In his treatment of Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, "Uncovering the Body, Discovering Ideology: Segregation and Sexual Anxiety in Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*," Jay Watson positions the human body at the center of Smith's work. For Watson, Smith's figuring of the Southerner consciousness rests on her "explicit commitment to the human body as both object and ground of critical thinking," and further that "the body is capable of thinking, and that precisely for this reason it becomes the objective, on several levels, of a preemptive ideological effort" (Watson 471). The cultural forces locked in a struggle for ideological ground made the body the battleground for the struggle of slavery and segregation. The body became a target for social shaming and the site of symbolic control. From an early age, Smith remembers her parents teaching her to "split my body from my mind and both from my 'soul'" (Smith 27). The fundamental split Smith's parents taught her exposes an ontological undercurrent within the social mores of the South that links the collapse Woodward foresees and Cash's paradox. In her "Three Ghost Stories," Smith indicts Christians who appropriate the body and soul split to deny black individuals a soul and use this lack of spirit as a justification for slavery. Smith cuts to the core of the supposedly Christian ethic of the South, pointing to the hypocrisy necessary to uphold a system buoyed by the selling, purchasing, and exploiting of other human beings: "Because these slaveholders were 'Christian,' they felt

compelled to justify the holding of slaves by denying these slaves a soul, and denying them a place in the human family” (Smith 120). The hint of Gnostic doctrine implicit in the attitude of the Southern slave owners that Smith criticizes suggests that the denial of a soul to African Americans, then, is not the source of the Southerner’s psychological split, what she identifies as segregation, but rather a consequence of a larger issue buried deep within the religious structures of the South. If, indeed, the root of the psychological split is epistemological and religious, then it cannot be limited to whites alone but must be extended to those who, regardless of race, share in the same or similar religious traditions.

Smith’s charge against slaveholders touches on the epistemological underpinnings of their justification and begs the critic to ask the essential questions: by what means, or through what epistemology, can a human being be denied the right to possess his or her own body? Within the twisted social structure of “White Supremacy and Christian Fundamentalism,” the body, as Smith suggests, becomes “a Thing of Shame,” because the church splits “the body from the spirit and [injects] sin into bodily needs” (Smith 192, 87, 118). The assertion that sin belongs to the body, and the subsequent splitting of the body from the soul, coupled with denying certain bodies a soul, flows forth from a longstanding ontological and religious tradition in the American South that identifies the body as a trap for the soul.

Smith explicitly refuses to diagnose African Americans with the same psychological fracture as whites. According to Smith, whites were the sole perpetrators of the oppressive system, and thus the only ones subject to the self-rending of the body from the soul and mind in such a way that caused puritanical sexual mores and intellectual

atrophy. Smith posits that the “white mother’s code” caused a split in the “moral nature” of the Southern child (Smith 151). For Smith, the inculcation of Southern children into a social order splits their conscience and leads to the fracturing of the community: “Minds broken. Hearts broken. Conscience torn from acts. A culture split in a thousand pieces. That is segregation” (Smith 39).

The psychological fracture is, she believes, caused by the Southerner’s indoctrination into a fundamentally racist societal order. Smith further suggests that the psychological fracturing of the mind affects only those indoctrinated in white social system of the higher class. Although Smith does extend her analysis to poorer whites, contending that segregation affects all whites, she insist that the upper class felt the rupture to a greater extent. Smith posits: “however they dealt with it, nearly all men—and women—of the dominant class in the South suffered not only the usual painful experiences of growing up in America but this special Southern trauma in which segregation not only divided the races but divided the white child’s heart” (Smith 134). The psychological fracture is, she believes, caused by the Southerner’s indoctrination into a fundamentally racist societal order undergird by a splitting of the body from the soul. Smith’s observations are astute, but she, like Percy, does not fully realize the full reach of such systems of control.

In *Love in the Ruins*, and *Lancelot*, Percy’s thoughts on the self and Southern collective consciousness as isolated, seeking to deny its own flesh, and the other, bear themselves out. Both novels paint a picture that complements and lends credence to Smith and Bloom’s assertions about the ontology of the Southern collective consciousness. Percy, like Smith, largely diagnoses upper-to-upper middle class whites

and intellectuals with the ontological fracturing caused by Descartes, and suggests that African Americans, as well as those outside the bounds of traditional Western society, are somehow sheltered from its effects. Reading Percy through the lens of Bloom, and alongside of Smith and Wright exposes that although Percy's locating of the split in the philosophy of Descartes is accurate to a point, his insistence on its continental and academic roots belies the scope of the issue, as well as the full reach of this ontological rift. Although Percy's *Love in the Ruins* suggests that the ontological split of the body from the mind is the cause for the South's predisposition to violence and the abrogation of the other, his main character Dr. Thomas More, like Smith, does not diagnose African Americans with the same ontological split as white Southerners.

Because Smith does not extend the effects of the Southern Church's "rigid systems of splitting spirit from body" across racial lines, she represents the African American family life and sexual mores inaccurately, missing the fact that they too experience the same ontological split as she. Similarly, in *Love in the Ruins*, Percy continues to assert the phenomena of self-abstraction and isolation as a modern issue rooted in the Enlightenment, rather than in the Gnostic heresy resurgent in a peculiarly American form of Christianity. From this partial misdiagnosis flows Percy's misrepresentation of the African American cultural consciousness. Although Percy stops short of extending the ontological split to African American communities, he does provide a more expansive framework for diagnosing the full extent of the rift than Smith, for he directly ties this rift, not only to Southern social structures, but also to colonial systems of control.

Both Smith and Percy tie their diagnosis of the split to sexual mores. Nowhere is Smith's romanticism more clear than when she attempts to discuss what she sees as the natural nurturing manner of African American mothers. In her praise of the African American mother, she romanticizes the strength of the mother as forged during slavery:

I think the answer lies in the home, in what happened between mother and child in those tiny slave cabins. Those of us who in our childhood knew a few of these strong old women—the children of slaves—can never forget their wisdom, their capacity for accepting life and people, in their deep laughter their unshamedness. They had strong instinctual feelings, not all of them loving but, but they rarely let hate or fear master them.
(Smith 119)

Although Smith concedes that not all of the African American motherly instincts were loving, her idealistic assessment still exposes her limited view. Percy also sets up the slave quarters as a place of shelter, a location somehow protected from the fallout of Percy's ontological disaster. After a fallout from a heavy sodium reaction leads to radical abstraction and widespread violence, Percy's main character Dr. Thomas More takes shelter in the slave quarters of an old plantation: "We live with our children in the old Quarters. Constructed of slave brick worn porous and rounded like sponges, the apartments are surprisingly warm in winter, cool in summer" (*LR* 381). The slave quarters somehow maintain a perfect temperature, an idealized simplicity free of the abstractions and debilitating ontological condition that so ravaged the white classes in the novel. More adopts a life of small scale farming, much like the sharecropping African Americans of the post war years, which Percy idealizes. Percy's reaching back to the soil, a simple life he sees embodied in African American small scale farming culture, exposes

his own misunderstanding of the complexities of African American social structures, as well as the full extent and reach of the ontological splitting which Wright makes evident in his narration of his childhood.

Wright's childhood stands in direct contrast to Smith and Percy's depiction of African American upbringings. Wright grew up in the small sharecropping communities Percy idealizes, but his experience differs greatly from Percy and Smith's illustrations of African American life. Wright's grandmother was not loving or accepting of "life and people," as Smith would have her readers believe all African American grandmothers were. Throughout his autobiography, Wright recounts being physically beaten in the home. The terror Wright experienced at the hands of his grandmother, aunt, and the rest of his extended family led him to question African Americans' capacity for any genuine feeling:

I used to mull over the strange absence of real kindness in Negroes, how unstable was our tenderness, how lacking in genuine passion we were, how void of great hope, how timid our joy, how bare our traditions, how hollow our memories, how lacking we were in those intangible sentiments that bind man to man, and how shallow was even our despair.
(Wright 37)

Wright's assessment of African Americans' emotional sensibilities counters Smith's and Percy's point for point. Where Smith sees the time spent on the plantation as fostering "unashamedness," and "deep laughter," Wright sees "timid joy," and "unstable tenderness." Where Smith sees "wisdom," and "deep laughter," Wright sees only "hollow memories," "complete emotional death to the point of being incapable even of genuine despair. Rather than existing beyond the reach of the ontological fall out, as Percy

would suggest, the slave quarters seem, from Wright's perspective, to lie at its epicenter. Interestingly, Wright's description of life within rural African American communities matches many of the side effects More associates with the ontological split he diagnoses Western man with:

It is a catastrophe whose cause and effects—and prevention—are known only to me. The effects of the evil particles are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and worsen the secret ills of the spirit and rive the very self from itself. If a man is already prone to anger, he'll go mad with rage. If he lives affrighted, he will quake with terror. If he's already abstracted from himself, he'll be sundered from himself and roam the world like Ishmael. (LR 5)

. While Smith sees the African American community as the wellspring of a rich domestic structure, and Percy sees the African American community as beyond the reach of Cartesian abstractions, Wright sees his people in the throes of a social and cultural death that mirrors the collapse Percy imagines.

While speaking to Uru, the Fanon touting Bantu revolutionary leader in *Love in The Ruins*, More tries to explain the direness of the situation for the whites in the community, but largely excludes the African American community from his diagnosis: “Quickly I tell him about my invention, about its falling into the wrong hands and the likelihood of a catastrophe. I describe the danger signs. ‘So even though your pigment may protect you to a degree, I’d advise you take cover if you should sight such a cloud’” (LR 301). Although Percy allows for the possibility of African Americans falling to this ontological split, he does not believe it is a preexisting condition for them, like it is for the white community. The clouds of heavy iodized sulphurs will exasperate the

preexisting condition of Western man, but, for African Americans, it may set in motion an ontological condition previously avoided. Even then, they can take solace in the fact that they seem conditioned against its affects. Smith's assessment, like Percy's, participates in a pseudo paternalistic romantic ideal of the honest, unencumbered lives of an insulated black community. Consequently, both fail to touch on the intricacies and complexities of the African American community's social mores and how they intersect with the social fabric of white communities.

Wright directly addresses those who maintain a romantic reading of African American cultural and social life, stating that he "used to brood upon the unconscious irony of those who felt that Negroes led so passionate an existence! I saw that what had been taken for our emotional strength was our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure" (Wright 37). Wright goes on to voice his concern as to whether or not the "bleakness of black life," would ever allow his people to access Western tradition or build their own intellectual and cultural tradition. Smith, on the other hand, "can not imagine one of them [African Americans] feeling guilt in the way in which 'white folks' felt it, nor [does she] remember their suffering from that sickness of the soul we call ambivalence" (Smith 119). Here, Smith explicitly voices her doubts as to whether African Americans can feel guilt for the state of their culture, and places them outside the reach of the affects of modern malaise. Wright's account of the state of the African American psyche seems to echo Smith's criticism of her own people and manifests Percy's ontological disease.

At the beginning of *Love in the Ruins*, More diagnoses a young white man with a case of what he calls "severe angelism," which he defines as the complete abstraction of

the soul from the body, a complete rending of the thinking self from its bodily self. The diagnosis of the enlightened and modern individual parallels the very ineptitude that Wright recognizes in his fellow African Americans. In *Love in the Ruins*, More's patient, Ted, "registered a dizzy 7.6 mmv over Brodmann 32, the area of abstractive activity" (LR 34). More continues, suggesting that since Ted's reading he has "learned that a reading over 6 generally means that a person has so abstracted himself from himself and from the world around him, seeing things as theories and himself as a shadow, that he cannot, so to speak, reenter the lovely ordinary world" (LR 34). At the conclusion of his diagnosis, More suggests that an individual with such an extreme case of abstraction lives his or her life "shuddering in orbit around the great globe, seeking some way to get back...winging it like Jupiter and spying comely maids below and having to take the forms of swans and bulls to approach them" (LR 35). The "spiritual apogee" (LR 35) Percy sees in the abstracted modern man finds voice in Wright's anxiety over "our negative confusions, our flights, our fears, our frenzy under pressure" (Wright 37). Wright's account of the African American collective consciousness undercuts the validity of Smith and Percy's exclusion of African Americans from the ambivalence and psychological pain felt by "white folks," and insists that any consideration of the ontological splitting must extend beyond racial lines.

Wright's fear of African American cultural death and loss of genuine emotion also finds voice in Smith's judgment of her own race. As Smith states, the white social structure "turned children sometimes into exploiters but more often into moral weaklings who daydream about democracy and human dignity and freedom and integrity, yet cannot find the real desire to bring these dreams into reality" (Smith 153). She believes of

whites, as Wright believes of blacks, that they have been so anesthetized and psychologically brutalized that they are no longer capable of great, moral, or dynamic action. For Smith, this is borne out in whites' inability to act individually or in unison to end segregation and institutionalized racism, while for Wright, it is manifest in what he sees as the inability of his people to challenge and create their own culture. Wright encapsulates the effect of the split, and the social conditions that it creates through his portrayal of Shorty.

As Wright leaves the optometry practice for the final time, Shorty expresses deep-seated hate and laments that he will never break free from the grip of Southern society: "Sometimes I get so goddam mad I want to kill everybody," he spat in rage. "You can leave." I said. "I'll never leave this goddam South," he railed. "I'm always saying that I am, but I won't...I'm lazy. I like to sleep too goddam much. I'll die here. Or maybe they will kill me." ...This was the culture from which I sprang. This was the terror from which I fled" (Wright 257). Shorty typifies a psyche dominated by fear and unable to bring his dreams of a free life into reality. His desire, like those of the white Southerners Smith speaks of, will never become reality, but remain unrealized because of a system of oppression that splits the body and the mind. Shorty has fallen to a life of the body, robbing him of any spiritual or intellectual agency. Interestingly, many of Percy's characters exhibit the self same rage, and desire to murder as Shorty does, providing a provocative parallel that further suggests that the ontological split knows no racial bounds. One of the side effects of the fracturing of the soul is a reduction of the individual to an animalistic state. The soul seems to leave the body and the individual

begins to act like an animal, fighting for no good reason and enacting terrible acts of violence.

Upon encountering the ignorant and nefarious salesman Art Immelmann administering dangerous dosages of abstraction to prefrontal abstractive centers of students at the university with More's lapsometer, More warns Immelmann of the potentially dire consequences of his actions: "It would render him totally abstracted from himself, totally alienated from the concrete world, and in such a state of angelism that he will fall prey to the first abstract notion proposed to him and will kill anybody who gets in his way, torture, execute, wipe out entire populations, all with the best possible motives and the best possible intentions, in fact in the name of peace and freedom, etcetera" (LR 328). Here Percy links the abstraction of the self, the splitting of the body and the soul, to acts of senseless violence, and hinted at its role in the founding of regimes of violence. Once abstracted from the self, the individual can no longer recognize the other as a *thou*, in the Buberian sense, and instead comes to see the other as an *it*. It follows that once the soul leaves the body, the individual person becomes less than human, and, thus, no longer holds the inherent rights of a besouled being. More laments that once the self loses touch with its body it will

forever after... live like a ghost inhabiting himself. He'll orbit the earth forever, reading dials and recording data and spinning theories by day, and at night seek to reenter the world of creatures by taking the form of beasts and performing unnatural practices. I even fancy that I see his soul depart, exiting his body through, the top of his head in a little corkscrew curl of vapor, as the soul is depicted in ancient woodcuts. Or was it no more than a whisper of smoke blown from the bunker? (LR 370-371)

More's depiction of the soul leaving the body like a wisp of smoke exactly follows Gnostic figuring's of the mankind's ontology and, furthermore, shows the violence inherent in the act of separation. Here also Percy extends, to an extent, the effects of the dualistic ontology beyond the bounds of whitewashed Southern monolith.

Returning to the gnostic idea of *pneumatics*, *psychics* and *hyletics*, the life of the body belongs to those being that are "lost causes" and cannot be saved. Any being that participates in the physical world is exiled from society. Morris asserts that the gnostic concept of an evil world carries over to Christian Fundamentalist thinking in their adherence to a form of dualism. Further, he suggests that "dualism is evident when one speaks of the bad world and the need to set oneself apart from that world by leading a spirit-filled, or spiritual life...Gnostic and Fundamentalists agree that the material, physical world is evil and irredeemable" (Morris 95-96). Wright's devout Seventh-day Adventist grandmother perfectly embodies a dualist spirit that identifies anything of the world as evil and detrimental to the soul. Wright offers an instance where Smith's source of the psychological repression for children growing up in the South is extended beyond White societal structures, and where Percy's self-abstraction is made painfully evident in the African American community.

Wright's grandmother and Aunt Addie attempt to raise Wright in a rigid Seventh-day Adventist household where anything deemed to be "of the world" is violently beaten out of the children. Wright's grandmother suppresses his attempts to learn the things of the world, and demonizes the young schoolteacher who first introduces Wright to fiction, eventually throwing her out of the house (Wright 39). Wright's grandmother's need to keep his mind away from what she deems worldly books parallels Smith's mention of

how her parents “taught me to split my body from my mind and both from my ‘soul’” (Smith 27). Wright’s grandmother, like Smith’s parents, believes that things of the world corrupt the soul. The soul, then, must remain separate from the world if it is to remain pure. In *Love in the Ruins*, More names this psychotic stigmatization of the body “the Lucifer syndrome” (LR 236). Although Percy mainly focuses on how angelism leads to an orgiastic and liberated use of the body, he does note that an extreme case of abstraction from the body “could lead to severe angelism, abstraction of the self from itself, and what I call the Lucifer syndrome: that is, envy of the incarnate condition and resulting caricature of the bodily appetites” (LR 236). The severe angelism More speaks of in this passage characterizes Wright’s grandmother’s attitude towards the body, which, in turn, parallels the Gnostic concept of the body and Smith’s observations on Southern attitudes towards the needs of the bodily being.

After Wright attempts to obtain a job, and defies, sometimes violently, the control of his grandmother and Aunt Addie, his grandmother eventually caves in, telling him he is dead to her, a lost cause. For his grandmother, Wright becomes of the world, and thus has stepped outside of the light of the spirit: “I have nothing to do with whether you go to school or not,’ she said. ‘You left the church and you are on your own. You are with the world. You’re dead to me, dead to Christ’” (Wright 144). Wright’s grandmother’s understanding of salvation and the nature of the body and the soul stems directly from a dualist / gnostic theological matrix. Wright has denied the church, decided to read books of the world, and work “in the world,” which result in his ousting from the company of the elect. For his grandmother, Wright now occupies the world with those beings that live only the life of the body, and thus has quite literally lost his soul. His entrance into the

physical world, or the world of the flesh allows his grandmother to deny him a soul and label him irredeemable. Not unlike White Southern slave owners who enslaved those of a lower order through denying them a soul, Wright's grandmother can deny him a soul, oust him from the family, and encourage his being beaten through the selfsame epistemological system. In addition, the separation of the body from the soul allows for violence to the body for the sake of the soul. The body imprisons the soul, and thus is evil and deserving of abjection.

Read alongside Wright's grandmother's attitudes towards sin, Smith's statement that the African American mammy possessed a "relaxed attitude toward 'sin,'" and the African American community at large was "unconfused by a church's rigid system of splitting the spirit from body and injecting sin into bodily needs, unconfused by a patriarchal-puritanical system" does not hold much credence (Smith 132, 118). For Smith, these "black matriarchs" rather were intuitively in touch with "the psychosomatic truths that we whites are groping awkwardly toward today. The results in their children were stability, a health, a capacity for accepting strain and exuberance, and lack of sadism and guilt that no Anglo-Saxon group, to my knowledge, has ever shown" (Smith 118). It seems as if Wright spends the majority of his childhood running and hiding from women who are seeking to physically beat him. Wright explicitly rejects the unencumbered sexuality Smith identifies as a thing to strive for. Once again, Wright's experience provides a counter to Smith's veiled view of African American ideas of sin and sex, but also provides support for her and Percy's larger schema if only they extended their consideration beyond color lines.

Perhaps Smith's greatest romanticizing of African American society comes in her evaluation of African American sexual attitudes and mores. Smith correctly identifies that Southern religion as well as cultural tradition have denounced the body as a trap for the soul but excludes African Americans from her assessment. Within the twisted social structure of "White Supremacy and Christian Fundamentalism," the body, as Smith suggests, becomes "a Thing of Shame," because the church splits "the body from the spirit and [injects] sin into bodily needs" (Smith 192, 87, 118). The association of sin strictly with the body flows from a longstanding gnostic conception of humanity that identifies the body as a trap for the soul. Let us not forget Lance's twisted conception sexuality and his insistence on its connection to violence and domination: "God's secret design for man is that man's happiness lies for men in men practicing violence upon women and that woman's happiness lies in submitting to it" (*Lancelot* 224). Morris asserts that, although not specifically stated in doctrine or overtly preached from the pulpit, it is nonetheless present and essential to Fundamentalist theology. As Morris asserts: "Dualism is there. It is embedded in the themes of evil flesh and saving spirit...Gnostics and Fundamentalists agree that...essentially, flesh is evil" (Morris 95-96). The locating of sin in the body is not particular to White Southern societal structures but can be carried to those who share in the same religious tradition.

Providing a counterpoint to Smith, Wright frames his sex life within a dualistic paradigm. Wright relegates sex to a corrupting action of the body stating that he could have found "release from anxiety and longing in sex and alcohol. But the memory of how my father had conducted himself made that course repugnant. If I did not want others to violate my life, how could I voluntarily violate it my self?" (Wright 253). Sex, for

Wright, is a bodily act that corrupts and violates his sense of self. His depiction of the body as a trap that corrupts his mind and soul mirrors Gnostic and fundamentalist understanding of sex and shares some assumptions in common with Lance's final estimation of the act. Wright, like his grandmother, ultimately sees the body as an object of shame and corruption. The soul takes primacy over the body as the entity that can resist the systems of religious and racial oppression. For Wright, to participate in drinking and illicit sex pushes him to the level of a *hyletic*, a being who only lives in the corporeal world. Wright's criticism of his father's liberal sexuality also calls into question Smith's glorification of African American sexuality as unhindered by puritanical notions. Wright's transformation provides an interesting example of a particular iteration of what Percy deems to be a negative shift of African American society from outside the Western intellectual tradition (something he sees as positive for them, in this case, would not be subject to the ontological missteps of Descartes) to beginning to absorb its teachings.

What Wright sees in his father when he visits him as an adult is not an individual free of rigid puritanical systems, but rather an empty shell capable only of a bodily life:

I stood before him, poised, my mind aching as it embraced the simple nakedness of his life, feeling how completely his soul was imprisoned by the slow flow of the seasons, by wind and rain and sun, how fastened were his memories to a crude and raw past, how chained were his actions and emotions to the direct, animalistic impulses of his withering body. (Wright 34)

Wright sees his father as a victim of being limited to a bodily animalistic existence, robbed of the life of the mind. Perhaps, for Wright, the Western intellectual tradition at least may have allowed him to live beyond a purely bodily experience. Wright presents his father as a *hyletic*, a being robbed of his soul through his entrapment in the world.

Wright's terms of "imprisonment" place his ontology firmly in the camp of the dualists through his insistence that physical world "chains" and limits his father.

Once again, Wright counters Smith's statement that the results of such an "unencumbered" sexuality lead to children that exhibit "a stability, a health, a capacity for accepting strain and exuberance, and lack of sadism and guilt that no Anglo-Saxon group, to my knowledge, has ever shown" (Smith 118) through his portrayal of the consequences of his father's loose sexuality. After his father leaves to live with another woman Wright's mother works long hours, and eventually has a stroke. Wright and his brother find themselves in an orphanage for an extended period of time, Wright becomes a drunk at the age of six, and, in a strange parallel to Percy's Lance, burns down the family house because of the neglect he feels. His father's life of the body leads to the impoverishment of the family. In Wright's narrative, a social paradigm without "Anglo-Saxon" societal structures actually leads to the disintegration of the family, rather than some pseudo utopian, post-Victorian society.

Wright spent the years following his family's move back to his grandmother's home in constant fear of being beaten, to which he responded violently. On numerous occasions, Wright feels like he must pull a knife on Aunt Addie, or the aptly named Uncle Tom in order to avoid being beaten and forced into the church's rigid system. The caring "matriarchs" of Smith's world are the ones who inflict the most pain in Wright's. He is beaten within an inch of his life by his mother in a fit of confused concern and anger: "You almost scared us to death,' my mother muttered...I was lashed so hard and long that I lost consciousness...for a long time I was chastened whenever I remembered that my mother had come close to killing me" (Wright 7). The suffering that Wright

endures at the hands of the “black matriarchs” exemplifies a more violent system than Smith describes in *Killers of The Dream*. In both *Killers of The Dream* and *Black Boy*, children are held by a rigid, and violent system based on puritanical notions of sin.

For Wright, the church functions as an institutional trap that seeks to indoctrinate youth into a twisted social system: “It was no longer a question of my believing in God; it was a simple, urgent matter of public pride, a matter of how much I had in common with other people. If I refused, it meant that I did not love my mother, and no man in that tight little black community had ever been crazy enough to let himself be placed in such a position” (Wright 154). For Wright, the church becomes a cultural institution, tangled with notions of black masculinity and social responsibilities, rather than a liberatory system of belief. Smith expresses the same entanglement of Church, and societal expectations, when she states that, “under the authoritarian system of White supremacy twisted up with Christian fundamentalism, they have been taught to believe one is disloyal when one makes any criticism of things as they are” (Smith 192). Smith, Percy and Wright recognize that the church functions as a societal system of control that appropriates notions of salvation in order to indoctrinate the individual into a totalizing system of conformity. The African American and White communities are receiving the same epistemological teachings that give way to similar societal structures of ontological control, which, in turn, result in similar psychological scarring.

When taken beyond their prescribed racial boundaries, Percy and Smith’s diagnosis of the psyche of the Southern Christian Fundamentalist mind provides a profitable lens through which to view Richard Wright and his developing conception of self as a resistance to the debilitating modes of ontological control at play in the

American South. Wright's own escape from these systems comes through his adoption of a more transcendentalist application of the very Gnostic heresy used to oppress him.

Wright assumes a spiritual and ontological economy in which the ascendancy of the soul comes through enlightenment, striving after knowledge, rather than the dictates of God.

Although Wright seeks to throw off the chains of Fundamentalist ontological constructs that deny him a soul, he adopts a spirituality of transcendence that takes advantage of the splitting of the body from the soul.

CHAPTER 2

WRIGHT, PERCY AND HEALING THE SPLIT

In his study on Naturalism and the religious sensibilities of Richard Wright, Robert Butler posits that, although Wright rejects his Grandmother's stringent fundamentalist religion in *Black Boy*, he simultaneously absorbs and assimilates some of its spiritual aspects into his writings. Butler believes that at the core of Wright's vision is the question of how to "achieve a human self while inhabiting a deterministic environment which systematically denies your status as a human being" (Butler 46). Percy undertakes a similar project in his fiction, the healing of the split as a means of promoting a newfound inter-subjectivity. As Brinkmeyer notes in his essay "*Lancelot and the dynamics of the Intersubjective Community*," Percy sees the modern individual's abstraction from his or her self not only as a fallacy, but a dangerous fallacy in need of correcting. Brinkmeyer contends that, for Percy, "the myth of [the] Cartesian autonomous self is...just that—a myth" (Brinkmeyer 158). Brinkmeyer invokes a quote from Percy's "Symbols as Hermeneutic Existentialism" in which he suggests that the basic formula for intersubjective consciousness is "not the Cartesian *I am conscious of this chair* or the Sartrean *there is a consciousness of this chair for you and me*" (MB 282). For Percy, intersubjectivity should form the foundation of the consciousness and the only way to achieve this is through a uniting of the body and the soul. As More states at the end of *Love in the Ruins*: "Despite the setbacks of the past, particularly the fiasco five

years ago, I still believe my 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” (*LR* 383). For Wright on the other hand, the body as the object of oppression and violence must be transcended. Wright follows a similar trajectory as the African American community in *Love in the Ruins*, following the ontological disaster they begin attending Ivy League schools and slowly to adopt Enlightenment ideals: “Most of the younger smarter Bantus are, to tell the truth, only nominally Bantu, having lost their faith at the Ivy League universities they habitually attend” (*LR* 386). Percy sees African Americans as falling into the same trap of self-abstraction as the Western White men through educating themselves in the Enlightenment tradition. While Wright embraces the intellectual traditions of modernity, Percy sees them as destructive. Wright actually attempts to heal his ontological rift through an adoption of Western Enlightenment traditions, rather than avoiding them and seeing them as the destructive principles of a broken Western ontology.

As Butler points out, Wright’s grandmother’s fundamentalist religion participates in, or in some ways defines, the deterministic environment in which he lives. The Cartesian split of the body lends to a system that denies humanity to any individual that seeks to stray outside of its strictures through robbing them of a soul. Butler’s reading of Wright opens the door to a complex commentary on the nature of the Protestant African American, and his relations to Cartesian ontology, exploring and interrogating the ways in which Wright appropriates the splitting of the body from the soul. Perhaps Butler’s most interesting assertion about *Black Boy* is his delineation of two major narrative

threads in the story: “1) An outward narrative documenting the injustices and brutalities of the deterministic social environment which trapped him in both the South and the North and 2) an inward narrative which dramatizes his transcending that environment with his own spiritual energy and free will” (Butler 47). Butler’s split of Wright’s narrative between an outward world and inward world calls to mind Descartes’ withdrawal into the self. Just as Descartes retreats alone to his chambers and leaves behind the corporeal world in favor of the life of the mind, Wright also leaves behind the physical world in favor of an intellectual life. Wright utilizes the separation of his mind, the source of his intelligence and imagination, from his body, which is the object of racial and domestic violence. Wright appropriates and reifies the ontological split of his body and mind as a mode of resistance and development.

Butler keys in on the compartmentalized and divided form Wright’s life takes on after he moves to Chicago: “Here too he lives a radically divided life outwardly working a number of menial jobs so that he can support himself and his family and inwardly developing the enriched consciousness he needs as a writer and activist” (Butler 53). The day is spent in largely mindless manual labor, where the body is subject to poverty and racial abjection, while the night is devoted to the development of the mind and spirit through the activity of the intellect. Using Butler’s observation as a launching point, a Cartesian split of the soul and the body in Wright’s daily life begins to become clear, the very split which Percy and Smith insist the African American is free of, becomes, for Wright, his salvation.

Descartes’ first principle of philosophy, and thus his concept of the human person, stems from his assertion “I am thinking, therefore I exist” (*Discourse on Method* Part IV:

32). From his assertion that to think is to exist, which he deems the first principle of his philosophy, Descartes precedes to lay out the primacy of the mind. He states that since he can think of his material body as not existing, and think of those objects around him as not existing, but cannot think of himself (as a thinking thing) as not existing, then he must exist because he thinks. Descartes' dualist epistemology, importantly, establishes the primacy of the mind. For Descartes, the soul, or thinking self, becomes the essence that makes a person human. Thus, a true philosopher will live the life of the mind.

Descartes begins his *Meditations on First Philosophy* by doubting everything around him, stating: "I have convinced myself that there is absolutely nothing in the world, no sky, no earth, no minds, no bodies" (*Med II: 25*). In *Black Boy*, Wright also isolates himself from the world and begins a life of the mind. As he begins in earnest on the development of his intellect, he identifies his mind as the true source of his being, distrusting anything of the world.

So far I had managed to keep humanly alive though transfusions from books. In my concrete relations with others I had encountered nothing to encourage me to believe in my feelings. It had been by denying what I saw with my eyes, disputing what I felt with my body, that I had managed to keep my identity intact. (Wright 318)

Wright explicitly states the distrust of his body, and reliance on the self affirming existence of the mind, similarly to what Descartes does in the *Meditations* when he states: "in general, everything relating to the nature of body, could be mere dreams <and chimeras>....But what then am I? A thing that thinks. What is that? A thing that doubts, understands, affirms, denies, is willing, is unwilling, and also imagines and has sensory perceptions" (*Med II: 28*). For Descartes, and in turn Wright, anything that does not

belong to the mind cannot be trusted. The definition of self must come from the isolated mind rather than the world. Wright's move to "keep [his] identity intact," through the life of the mind follows Descartes' assertion that to define oneself by any other means results in abstractions founded on mere chimeras, and that the only thing that can be known for certain is thought: "At last I have discovered it - thought; this alone is inseparable from me. I am, I exist - that is certain" (*Med II*: 27). Just as Descartes affirms the self through the ability to think, so too does Wright, insisting that his identity comes, not from his body, but rather from his intellect. For Percy, such thinking is destructive because it leads to a loss of intersubjectivity. For Wright though, the distancing of the thinking self from the body allows him to transcend the entity that he feels leads to objectification and repression, his body.

Wright makes a rhetorical move spatially and psychologically inward: "my problem was here, here with me, here in this room, and I would solve it here alone or not at all...I returned to my room and sat again, determined to look squarely at my life" (Wright 383). Wright's move inward mirrors Descartes's in the *Meditations* when he too declares his freedom from childhood ignorance and isolates himself in his chambers, and vows to face those essential questions on his own: "Some years ago I was struck by the large number of falsehoods that I had accepted as true in my childhood...I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations" (*Med I*: 18). Wright engages with the conceit of withdrawing into the mind and searching for a sort of salvation through a new knowledge achieved by casting off the misconceptions of childhood and moving towards a deeper, more self aware consciousness when he states: "The days of my past, of my youth, were

receding from me like a rolling tide, leaving me alone upon high, dry ground, leaving me with a quieter deeper consciousness” (Wright 382). In his desire to reach a deeper consciousness and move to a “high ground” Wright begins to, albeit in a secular fashion, move towards a gnostic and fundamentalist idea of salvation, which seeks to free the soul from the evils of the world and unite it through *knowledge* to divine. While Smith, Percy, and Wright identify similar psychological issues in the collective consciousness of their races, and source them in dualist ontologies, they differ in their solutions.

Butler notes that the second part of Wright’s autobiography’s title, “The Horror and The Glory,” suggests “not only the split between the pain of his outward life and the rich satisfaction of his inward being, but also the Seventh-day Adventist belief that the agonies of earthly existence will one day be redeemed by ‘the glory’ of a conversion made possible by the Second Coming” (Butler 53). Wright utilizes the Seventh-day Adventists belief in the need to transcend a deterministic world constantly threatened by the “radical instability of life and ever present danger of death and damnation” (Butler 51), in order to form his own humanistic secular theology and resistance to nihilism. Later in life, Wright, though still staunchly critical of his grandmother’s fundamentalist religion, commented on the positives of what he called, “the spirit of the Protestant ethic” as a “heritage of free thought” which urges the individual to “work and redeem himself through his own acts” (Butler 55 quote). Wright follows the Gnostic tradition of an individualistic search for salvation in knowledge rather than faith. In the Gnostic economy of salvation the individual, “discovers their true identity and receive eternal life...by ‘knowing’ and not by faith or believing” (Morris 97). Wright believes, like the Gnostics, that salvation lies within a movement beyond ignorance, rather than sin (Morris

98). Wright's childhood, and adult life challenges Smith and Percy's notions of African American life in the South or elsewhere, but at the same time, lends vivid support to both their theories of the effects of the rigid systems of splitting the body from the soul found in the South on those children indoctrinated into them. At the end of *Black Boy*, Wright suggests, "the whites were as miserable as their black victims...If this country can't find its way to a human path, if it can't inform conduct with a deep sense of life, then all of us, black as well as white, are going down the same drain..." (Wright 383). Wright's statement points to the truth that both Whites and blacks have found themselves twisted by the same systems of control.

Smith and Wright find common ground in their hopes for the individual's ability to transcend racial discrimination. Smith expresses a similar notion of a secular salvation from the evils of segregationist society as Wright when she states: "They will not stop now until they arrive at their destination, which is the achievement of full civil rights as American citizens...The philosophy of these students is a mixture of Thoreau, Jefferson, Gandhi, Martin Buber, the teachings of Jesus and something uniquely theirs" (Smith 251). Both Smith and Wright predicate their secular cultural salvation on the ability of the individual to move towards knowledge. They both believe this knowledge will bring about a Second Coming of sorts, one that will allow the individual to transcend the deterministic society of the Jim Crow South. For Percy, on the other hand, unity must be sought through a spiritual renewal rooted in scholastic and medieval epistemologies. As Desmond asserts, "Percy's vision of community was complex and multifaceted. At its root it is a theological conception of community, of a mystical community of spiritual beings existing both within and beyond time, under God. For Percy, the historical axis of

this community was the Christian Incarnation, the entry of the divine Logos into history, or what he referred to more broadly as the ‘Jewish Christian event’” (Desmond 5).

Percy’s focus on the embodiment of God, the essential task of asserting the divinity of the body as one with the soul is ultimately made clear at the end of *Love in the Ruins* when More echoes Gerard Manley Hopkins in characterizing man as a dappled thing:

“Suppose--! Suppose I could hit on the right dosage and weld the broken self whole!

What if man could reenter paradise, so to speak, and live there both as man and spirit, whole and intact man-spirit, as solid flesh and a speckled trout, a dappled thing, yet aware of itself as a self!” (*LR* 36). While Wright utilizes the split, isolating the body from the mind, Smith and Percy seek to reclaim the body as an essential aspect of the human person intertwined with the soul. Although their means of achieving transcendence and knowing the self may differ, Wright, Percy, and Smith all have the same goal in mind: to make mankind whole again and establish a new community in which each and every individual recognizes the divinity of the other.

Through his return to the particular tenets of Christian Fundamentalism, Wright exemplifies how the split between the body and the mind can both stand as the foundation for a restricting and authoritarian system of oppression, and also provide transcendence for the individual in his or her pursuit of knowledge and freedom. The ontological underpinnings of the Southern collective consciousness that Wright, Percy, and Smith unearth, reveal a common thread that could potentially provide a link between a multiplicity of Southern minds without compromising their integrity. Such a critical approach allows the scholar of the American South to examine the South in a global context rather than strictly regional one.

TRACING SYSTEMS OF ONTOLOGICAL CONTROL TO THE CARIBBEAN AND LATIN AMERICA

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy illustrates that the adoption of a dualist ontology and codifying it as Christian doctrine results in the religious justification of systems of violence and control. In Percy's imaginative world, the Catholic Church has split in two: one faction remains loyal to Rome; the other founds its own particularly Gnostic American Church. Dr. More's mother is a parishioner at the local American Catholic Church and, as More notes, "has a reputation hereabouts as a seer and prophetess. What she is is a Catholic gnostic. Though she believes in God, she also relies on her crystal ball—she actually has a crystal ball" (*LR* 177). Cut off from the tradition of the Roman Church, particularly the teachings of Thomas Aquinas, who espouses a body-soul composite ontology, the American Church falls to the same ontological fissure of the American Gnostic Christian tradition. The American Catholic Church A.C.C. celebrates "Property Rights Sunday" as a major feast day, marking the A.C.C's complete Americanization. The sermon of one of the A.C.C. priests shows the absurd extent to which the modes of American thinking have penetrated Christian doctrine and twisted it to be economically and politically expedient:

Monsignor Schleifkopf reads the Gospel from Matthew that relates how Joseph of Arimathea, a rich man, believed in Christ and gave him his tomb. He preaches on the resurrection of Lazarus, who was also well off" and again " 'Dearly Beloved: we are reminded by the best commentators that Lazarus was not a poor

man, that he lived comfortably with sisters in a home he owned. Our Lord himself, remember, was not a social reformer, said nothing about freeing the slaves, nor are we obligated to. (LR 182)

Percy, like Smith, points to hypocrisy of religious justifications of slavery. Percy, more than Smith, highlights the absurdity of twisting Christian teaching rooted in scripture to justify slavery, or inaction on civil-rights issues. For Percy, Smith, and Wright, when societal constructs and systems of control appropriate Christian doctrine, the Church becomes the wellspring of the dominant systems of control.

More's warning to Art Immelmann about the dangers of the mind abstracted from its bodily self reminds us of the violence that the splitting of the body and the mind generates. More's anxiety and characterization of what happens when an entire society becomes dislocated from itself, and when that dislocation becomes institutionalized bears striking resemblance to colonial projects and Nazism. In fact, in the beginning of *Love in the Ruins* Percy explicitly links the downfall of Western civilization to the moment when he feels Western society began moving irrevocably towards the totalitarian regimes of the mid Twentieth Century: "For weeks now I have been on the Battle of Verdun, which killed half a million men, lasted a year, and left the battle lines unchanged. Here began the hemorrhage and death by suicide of the old Western world: white Christian Caucasian Europeans, sentimental music loving Germans and rational clear-minded Frenchmen, slaughtering each other without passion" (LR 47). Although More pins Verdun as the moment when the hemorrhaging began, he goes even further back to identify the moment when mankind committed the violation that made Verdun possible. As he expounds on the downfall of America, More connects the fall of Western Civilization to one simple

and critical issue, which the splitting of the soul from the body rendered it impossible to make the correct decision on. Even before Verdun, More suggests, Western society failed a critical test, a failure that sealed our doom: “And all you had to do was pass one little test, which was surely child’s play for you because you had already passed the big one. One little test: here’s a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. That’s all. One little test: you flunk!” (LR 57). Now, More does fall to paternalism here by calling Africans helpless, but the main point is that he locates the fall of mankind, specifically of the West, in its horrific treatment of the racial other, the subject that would become the colonial subject. Through More’s assertion, Percy suggests a teleology that leads to the total collapse at the end of the novel: Enlightenment dualism, colonialism, the American Civil War, WWI, and finally WWII. The impetus behind the chain reaction, the essential element needed for the combustion, in his estimation, was Cartesian Dualism. Percy sees this Cartesian ontology as providing the necessary ontological conditions for the totalitarian regimes of colonialism, the Southern Plantation society, as well as Nazism, which, as Brinkmeyer notes in his monograph *The Fourth Ghost: White Southern Writers and European Fascism, 1930-1950*, bears a frightening resemblance to the Southern social systems of the Twentieth Century.

In *Conjectures of Order: Intellectual Life in the American South 1810-1860*, Michael O’Brien discusses the foundations of Southern thought in 19th century, suggesting that the South was imperial, postcolonial, and national. The colonial project establishes a similar eschatological economy as that of Southern Plantation society. In their studies of the colonial project, Enzo Traverso and Sven Lindqvist suggest that the most notoriously tyrannical and oppressive social regimes of the last two centuries sprung

from one another, Nazism from the colonial project and the colonial project from a xenophobic reading of Darwinism. In *The Fourth Ghost*, Brinkmeyer establishes a tangible anxiety among a handful of Southern authors of the South's ideological parallels with the totalitarian regimes of Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. As Brinkmeyer contends, "Fascism compelled all the writers in this study to look far beyond the borders of Dixie to comprehend themselves and their homeland, pushing them toward an understanding of what today is called in Southern studies 'the global South'" (Brinkmeyer 310). Brinkmeyer contends that the treatment of blacks in the South and their lack of citizenship parallel the treatment of Jews in the Rhineland. Brinkmeyer's study provides a sturdy bridge from the Continent to the South, setting up the possibility for a common epistemology, one born out of the Enlightenment and sharing certain ontological conveniences, which also manifest themselves in the teachings of Christian Fundamentalism.

In his article "Necropolitics," Achille Mbembe points out that the colonial ontology locates the being of a human outside of his or her body: "The matter of the body, or again the matter which is the body, is invested with properties that cannot be deduced from its character as a thing, but from a transcendental *nomos* outside it. The besieged body becomes a piece of metal whose function is, through sacrifice, to bring eternal life into being" (Mbembe 37). The splitting of soul from the body in the colonial world, as well as in Southern society allows for a systematic animalization of the body. The system Mbembe lays out allows for the creation of a higher class of individual, one endowed with a spirit that can rule over those beings denied a spirit and therefore predestined to hell. These higher beings have the ability to set aflame and beat to death

the body of those not in possession of a spirit, for, without a spirit, they could not be human. Mbembe, recognizing the insidiousness of such a structure, deliberately highlights its true function in the colonial world: “That colonies might be ruled over in absolute lawlessness stems from the racial denial of any common bond between the conqueror and the native. In the eyes of the conqueror, *savage like* is just another form of *animal life*, a horrifying experience, something alien beyond imagination or comprehension” (Mbembe 24). The ontology necessary for reducing certain bodies to an animalistic state goes beyond a merely biological and racial categorization though, finding its roots in a metaphysical taxonomy. In *Love in the Ruins* More makes a similar observation, insisting that the fall of mankind from grace and innocence could not simply be chalked up to biology, a mere accident of evolution, but rather a collective decision of the human race at some critical moment: “The question is: how to account for man’s wickedness? Biologists, for some reason, find it natural to look for a wicked monkey in the family tree. I find it more reasonable to suppose that the monkey is blameless and that something went wrong with man” (*LR* 36). Percy seeks to dispel the social Darwinist suggestions that the problem of evil belongs in the realm of the sciences and suggest that mankind itself is culpable.

The American South diverges from Traverso, Lindqvist’s and Mbembe’s theory in that the majority of Southerners, as Cash notes, resisted or categorically denied Darwin’s theory. Although they pushed against much of the Enlightenment project, they still maintained similar systems of oppression to the oppressive colonial regimes. In order to justify and maintain its practice of slavery, and of segregation, violence towards the other, the social systems of the South needed an ontology that could claim that the bodies

of racial others do not possess an animating soul. The American South found such ontology in the dualism of Christian Fundamentalism. These selfsame systems of ontological control also crop up in colonial, and postcolonial literature. Furthermore, colonial and postcolonial writers participate in similar projects of resisting, and transcending these ontological systems of oppression. In some cases, they, like Wright, attempt to appropriate the splitting of the body and the soul, and others, like Percy, insist on the power of the body and its inherent divinity. A close examination of how authors like Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Alejo Carpentier, and Marlon James, to name just a few, figure ontological systems of transcendence and control may allow the critic of the American and Global South to trace this ontological thread across borders and over oceans to connect seemingly disparate regions without totalizing them.

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