

# Pilgrimage of the Lost Self: Malaise, Sacramental Signs, and Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*

NATHAN P. CARSON

*"...for the self that finds itself lost in the desert of theory and consumption, there is nothing to do but set out as a pilgrim in the desert in search of a sign."*  
-Walker Percy, "Why Are You a Catholic?"<sup>1</sup>

In the middle of paradise on earth, North Americans live in an age of fragmentation, alienation, and discontent. More of our physical needs are met than in any other time and place, or among any other people group in human history. Why then, are we so miserable? Why are many so ill at ease in this Edenic garden of consumption? In his writing, twentieth century Catholic novelist Walker Percy poses these questions to show that something is wrong with humanity. On one level, he views the malady as a product of the "scientific humanism" of our age. On a broader level however, Percy draws upon Christian anthropology for his diagnosis; we are caught up in "the great suck of self,"<sup>2</sup> isolated from sacramental creation, other human beings and from God.<sup>3</sup> Percy holds that those who recognize this state of things often become pilgrims, wayfarers moving toward discovery of true self, others and God.

In his book, *The Second Coming*, Percy aims his attention at the beginning portion of a full spiritual pilgrimage; he only covers a small portion of the whole journey. However, far from treating conversion in a conventional way, Percy combines a unique set of ingredients to make his recipe of pilgrimage well suited to the particular angst and wayfaring of the twentieth century pilgrim. For Will Barrett, the protagonist of *The Second Coming*, notably absent are any of the "conventional" ways of coming to faith such as preached or written scriptures, advocacy of a Christian representative or friend, prayer, or integration into a community of faith. Yet, through the story of this character, Percy provides powerful and uncanny insights into the nature of human pilgrimage. Through a literary analysis of Will Barrett's pilgrimage in *The Second Coming*, I will demonstrate that for Percy, a malaise provoked search, sacramental signs, and intersubjective communion are among the key ingredients in the pilgrimage movement toward faith. Along the way, I will also address several moral

objections against the way Percy depicts human relationships, and against the way he understands the sacramental communication of grace to his characters. My response to such objections will, I hope, illumine the often surprising ways that grace operates within the aspects of pilgrimage with which many of us are all too familiar: they are replete with uncertainty, moral ambiguity, and the experience of the mundane, and they stand in need of a kind of transformation that can meet us squarely within these realities.

### **Malaise**

“The first sign that something had gone wrong manifested itself while he was playing golf.”<sup>4</sup> From this first sentence of *The Second Coming*, Walker Percy conveys to his readers the presupposition of a problem.<sup>5</sup> For Will Barrett, all is not well in Linwood, the elite golf club community where he lives in North Carolina. He was a successful Wall Street lawyer who married into money, is now retired at 50, has a large mansion with a five-car garage on thousands of acres, drives a Mercedes 450 SEL, is the Rotary Club’s community service man-of-the-year, and spends most of his leisure time on the golf course with his buddies. Will Barrett has it all, yet is depressed and suicidal, shrouded in a dark malaise.<sup>6</sup> After deciding to shoot himself only two pages into the story, Will reflects on the “farcical” nature of his life and the lives of others:

The lives of other people seemed even more farcical than his own. It astonished him that as farcical as most people’s lives were, they generally gave no sign of it. Why was it that it was he not they who had decided to shoot himself? How did they manage to deceive themselves and even appear to live normally, work as usual, play golf, tell jokes, argue politics? Was he crazy or was it rather the case that other people went to any length to disguise from themselves the fact that their lives were farcical? He couldn’t decide.<sup>7</sup>

While an inexplicable dislike for a meaningless, consumer-oriented life is typically human, Will’s malaise runs much deeper and is uncommonly severe in several ways. First, it has roots in his relationship with his father who sought to save him from the farcical world by trying to kill him; this same father also committed suicide to save himself from it.<sup>8</sup> Will’s entire life of financial success, ethical decency and predictabilities like “mild poodle-walking” is his

attempt to escape from his father's "death-dealing," and yet he still harbors a profound existentialist fixation with, and sense of being trapped by death; he feels destined to this by his father's.<sup>9</sup> Second, Will experiences an inordinate amount of disorientation. He constantly remembers thousands of trivial details and becomes lost in his inner thought world, disconnected from the scenery around him.<sup>10</sup> He also falls down for no apparent reason and his golf swing develops an aggravatingly consistent slice. Will is disoriented, and as Percy points out, he cannot discern "where" he is "*here* in the present." Finally, of course, Will is suicidal, which for Percy is a logical option in the face of a meaningless, farcical life.

What role does this malaise play in Will's pilgrimage? The severe malaise is a key ingredient for Percy is because it provides "the motivational structures" that drive Will's pilgrimage onward.<sup>11</sup> Lewis Rambo, a leading scholar on religious experience, comments on this type of motivation: "Under abnormal or crisis conditions this [the quest] search becomes compelling; people actively look for resources that offer growth and development to 'fill the void,' solve the problem, or enrich life."<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Percy goes to great lengths to weave a thick web of "abnormal conditions" for Will Barrett, one that is complex and acute enough to propel his journey forward as he searches for "signs."<sup>13</sup>

In addition, Will's malaise both functions as, and results in, a kind of *Sehnsucht*, a longing for something different in life, a desire for something "other" than what is. While some writers conceive of the pilgrimage catalyst in terms of a specific *object* of desire, Will's catalyst is typically Percian in that it lacks an object; it is a nameless *Sehnsucht* that simply issues in ordinary "dislike."<sup>14</sup> In Will Barrett's story in a previous Percy novel, *The Last Gentleman*, Val asks Will: "Do you think it possible to come to Christ through ordinary dislike? Can dislike be a sign?"<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the "dislike" of malaise is itself a sign that launches Will on the quest of finding out what went wrong:

He fired five times into the gorge....The gun bucked, hurting his bent wrist. He held the muzzle against his temple. Yes, that is possible, he thought smiling, that is one way to cure the great suck of self, but then I wouldn't find out, would I? Find out what? Find out why things have come to such a pass and a man so sucked down into himself that it takes a gunshot to knock him out of the suck—or a glimpse in a double mir-

ror. And I wouldn't find out about the Jews, why they came here in the first place and why they are leaving. Are the Jews a sign?"<sup>16</sup>

The idea that "something is wrong" with life is commonplace, but Will's suspicion that the self is its own black hole is a revelation that few reflect upon deeply enough to ignite the deliberate, sustained search that is necessary for new horizons of existence to take shape. In *The Second Coming*, as elsewhere for Percy, malaise is a key ingredient in the pilgrimage toward faith since it is both motivation and desire; it is the catalyst that sets Will on his search for self, meaning and truth.

### Sacramental Signs

Jay Tolson, Percy's biographer, speaks of the sacramental life in Percy's work as "an effort to redeem the messiness and deadness of the world through a sacramental vision that allows one to see the world in its beauty, mystery, and sacredness."<sup>17</sup> It is no surprise then, that a second key ingredient in Will Barrett's pilgrimage is the presence of sacramental signs, glimpses of incarnate reality meant to draw Will into himself in the *present*.<sup>18</sup>

Will is characteristically obsessed with signs, yet largely with all the wrong ones. He seeks signs from his past because he thinks the mystery of his father will explain part of his problem. He especially enjoys theorizing about the future, that the Jews' departure from North Carolina is a sign of the Last Days. Will is thoroughly dominated by his dizzying internal life. What he does not realize as he goes about figuring out all the angles on his condition is that his theoretical stream of consciousness—as it culls data from the past or speculates about the future—completely removes him from *himself in the present*, as much or more than the farcical life of Linwood parties, golf and consumption. The real "signs" Will must recognize are the sacramental ones present in the physical, sensible spaces all around him. They are an invitation to enter the incarnational present; they have the power to reveal the in-breaking work of God in creation.<sup>19</sup>

In the present narrative, Will's transcendent theorizing and detailed memory continue to entangle him in the "great suck of self," when only a self-forgetful engagement with creation and the "other" can pull him out of it:

Number seventeen was a par-five medium-long dogleg with a good view of Sourwood Mountain, curving past a pond and a low ridge of red maples which in the brilliant sunlight looked like a tongue of fire searing the cool green fairway....[but] Instead of the immaculate emerald fairway curving between the scarlet and gold hillsides of the Appalachians, he seemed to see something else. It was a scene from his youth, so insignificant a recollection that he had no reason to remember it then, let alone now thirty years later. Yet he seemed to see every detail a clearly *as if the scene lay before him*.<sup>20</sup>

As Will heads out onto the fairway the scenery blazes forth in front of him, yet he is engulfed in “insignificant” memory details that are as clear “as if the scene lay before him.” It is clear that Will’s cognitive preoccupation causes him to miss these “signs,” but far more significant is the sacramental symbolism of the signs themselves. Notably, the colors red and gold dominate the description, which are two prominent colors in iconography; red often symbolizes the divine love of the Holy Spirit, and gold the holiness and goodness of creation.<sup>21</sup> If icons are ‘windows into the transcendent,’ Will is given a glimpse past the sill, but his wandering mind obscures the vision. Pridgen observes that the red trees rising above the meaningless golf-course life of Linwood, very naturally recalls the cross and resurrection for the sacramentally-minded Christian.<sup>22</sup> In addition, the linguistic reference to a “tongue of fire” draws on the biblical Pentecost event (Acts 2:3ff) and images the “signs” the disciples believed would accompany Christ’s *second coming*.<sup>23</sup> Though a second coming is in the works for Will, he does not recognize it yet.<sup>24</sup> Fortunately for Will, many opportunities to witness genuine signs from God pervade the book, though he only catches a few of them.<sup>25</sup>

Thus far I have illustrated Percy’s use of sacramental imagery and signs but have not discovered how this is a key ingredient in Will’s pilgrimage. To demonstrate this we must come to a point at which Will actually responds to an incarnational sign, something that happens in his effort at playing Gideon in Lost Cove Cave. His madness taking over, Will enters the cave demanding a sign from God and an answer to the human mystery that his father failed to discover. In a real sense then, Will is reenacting Percy’s memorable image of an islander who ceaselessly looks to the horizon waiting for a message in a bottle, for news

from beyond the island and across the seas. Percy says, “it is this news and this alone that [the islander] has been waiting for.”<sup>26</sup>

The irony of Will’s descent into the cave in order to get a sign from God is that he leaves behind all the sensory and creational avenues by which God has been giving him signs all along. Pridgen comments, “With his ‘scientific method,’ he will, like the scientist in his laboratory, withdraw from the actual world and participation in its multiplicity and simultaneity of sensory, intellectual, emotional, and aesthetic experience in order to attempt alone to locate God Himself in the cave.”<sup>27</sup> Even as this “poor man awaiting the Last Days and raving away at God and man in the bowels of Sourwood Mountain” proceeds with his experiment, he is missing out on being one of “thousands of normal folk playing golf and antiquing and barbecuing and simply enjoying the fall colors—for on the following day at the height of his lunacy the cloud blew away and the beautiful days of Indian summer began, the mountains glowed like rubies and amethysts, and leafers were out in force....” (213).

Indeed, this cave “experiment” is the ultimate culmination of all the cognitive gymnastics tumbling through Will’s mind; it is nothing less than a modern gnostic errand. Nonetheless, even as Will is shut off from all the world to pursue his heroic quest, he is given an “incarnational” sign:

In the case of Will Barrett, what went wrong could hardly be traced to God or man, Jews or whomever, but rather to a cause at once humiliating and comical: a toothache. So in the end not only did he not get an answer to his peculiar question, not a yes or a no or even a maybe—he could not even ask the question.... There is one cure for cosmic explorations, grandiose ideas about God, man, death, suicide, and such—and that is nausea. I defy a man with nausea to give a single thought to these vast subjects. A nauseated man is a sober man. A nauseated man is a disinterested man. What does a nauseated person care about the Last Days?<sup>28</sup>

If Will is going to persist in blindness to the sacramental reality around him, and if he is incapable of pulling himself out of the “great suck of self” either in its immanent (Linwood) or transcendent (Lost Cove Cave) manifestations, a sign of some kind must pierce through the veil as a gift of grace. Such di-

vine gifts are, for Percy, conveyed through utterly ordinary (and often obscene) phenomena; Will is comically jolted out of his cloistered gnostic ruminations through the simple reality of a toothache.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, toothache nausea gives way to a more comprehensive and immersive experience of a kind of grace that advances Will's pilgrimage. Like Jonah spewed from the mouth of a fish, Will catapults through a wall and out of his cave-womb, out of battered and aimless darkness and crashes into the middle of a sacramental, yet painfully incarnate reality:

Resting elbows on the sill, he meant to poke his head through for a look, but both vines and sill were rotten and he fell...this was a fall through air not vines or bushes, through air and color, brilliant greens and violet and vermilion and a blue unlike any sky, a free-fall headfirst with time enough to wonder if he might not be dead after all, what with this tacky heaven and the great black beast of the apocalypse roaring down at him, eyes red, jaws open and ravening, when, wood splintering first and then exploding into kindling, he hit the table, then concrete, but not too hard, with one shoulder mostly but with the back of his head some. He shut down, turned off like a light...The colors came from a stained glass window set in a roof of clear glass. I'm in church.<sup>30</sup>

Percy's own words here are fitting: "Will Barrett falls out of the cave into Allie's arms, i.e., out of his nutty gnostic quest into sacramental reality."<sup>31</sup> Percy himself reveals in an interview that in composing this scene he indeed thought of Allie as a sign, and had Gerard Manley Hopkins's poem "Pied Beauty" in mind, including the poetic imagery of "block and tackle and trim" as inspiration for Allie's lifting of both Will and the stove with ropes and pulleys.<sup>32</sup> Will is jettisoned out of his detached isolation, into the present world of "dappled" incarnational reality.

Further, in both the case of the tooth and the fall, things are out of Will's hands. This is significant because many of the major moments of spiritual clairvoyance come to Will at precisely the point at which his life is "out of his hands."<sup>33</sup> When life is largely *in* Will's hands he ends up delirious in a cave or massaging his temple with the end of a gun barrel. It is in this way that for Percy, sacramental and incarnational signs come to Will not only as

key ingredients in his pilgrimage, but also as free gifts of divine grace which rescue him with “pulleys and rope” from the bottomless pit of self. Still, the matters of wayfaring through malaise and encountering sacramental gifts are simply preludes to Percy’s critical ingredient of *intersubjective communion*. This ingredient is crucial because it has, for Percy, such a high potentiality to move the pilgrim toward inhabiting several necessary (though certainly not sufficient) existential conditions of authentic selfhood before God. And while genuine cases of intersubjective community are certainly sacramental gifts as well, such cases require careful examination in their own right. For these are gifts that (in Percy’s view) uniquely open us to our intrinsic vocation as human beings and thereby to *fundamentally* transformative divine grace with respect to the pilgrimage of the self.

### **Intersubjectivity and Percy’s Semiotic Theory of Selfhood**

In Will’s pilgrimage, the primacy of intersubjective communion is explicable only through Percy’s semiotic theory of the self. Percy calls the centerpiece of this theory “the Delta factor,” which is the uniquely human “triadic” use of linguistic signs to name “all perceived objects and actions and qualities” in the world. For Percy, human beings are completely distinct from other organisms because between themselves, things, and their names for things, they create a triadic symbolic *world* whose meaningfulness is not reducible to a mere environment.<sup>34</sup> In Percy’s view, this is partly because consciousness itself (and its “meanings”) is ultimately *social* in nature and origin. He contends that the “prime reality of human consciousness” is not the Cartesian *cogito* (“I am conscious of this chair”), or the Sartrean prereflective and impersonal *cognito* (“There is consciousness of this chair”), since both of these reflective standpoints *presuppose* consciousness. Rather, for Percy, the proper construal of the “originary act of consciousness is the joint affirmation that the object is there for you and me,” a co-designation by means of symbol that “*is itself* the constituent act of consciousness” (“This is a chair for you and me”).<sup>35</sup> Percy thus defines *intersubjectivity* as “that meeting of minds by which two selves take each other’s meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common.”<sup>36</sup>

Percy fuses his linguistic theory of triadic symbolization as essential to human nature (“*homo symbolificus*—man the symbol mongerer,” as he puts it) with



Martin Buber's "I-Thou" relation, Gabriel Marcel's intersubjective authenticity, and George Herbert Mead's notion of socially constructed consciousness, in order to conceptualize our primary and innate co-vocation as human beings. For Percy, as he says, the symbolic "I-you [Thou] interpersonal relation is... the very condition of being and knowing and feeling in a human way."<sup>37</sup> Put differently, Percy says "You—Betty, Dick—are like other items in my world—cats, dogs, and apples. But you have a unique property. You are also a co-namer, co-discoverer, co-sustainer of my world—whether you are Kafka whom I read or Betty who reads this. Without you—Franz, Betty—I would have no world."<sup>38</sup> Our vocation is to discover, know, name and co-celebrate being in communion with other signifying selves.

But we ourselves are the only item in our world of meaning that is thoroughly *unsignifiable*. This is partly why, for Percy, our fundamental human vocation is to turn away from an identity formation project fixated on the self and rooted in self-consciousness. We are a "nought," an emptiness so far as determinate things and meanings are concerned, standing at the center of our signified universe in which everything is named, with no name to give ourselves that actually *captures* our being. As Percy notes, famously, everything in the world has a name except ourselves:

The being of the namer slips through the fingers of naming. If he tries to construe himself in the same mode by which he construes the rest of the world, he must necessarily construe himself as a nothing, as Sartre's characters do. But this is not to say that I am nothing; this is only to say that I am that which I cannot name. I am rather a person, a namer and a hearer of names.<sup>39</sup>

So far as the thematic of pilgrimage goes, Percy's transcendental argument for the necessary unsignifiability of the signifying self creates a distinctively Kierkegaardian problem. For, as Percy notes, "As soon as the self becomes self-conscious—that is, aware of its own unique unformulability in its world of signs—from that moment forward, it cannot escape the predicament of its placement in the world."<sup>40</sup> And such a predicament provokes a fundamental restlessness, an anxiety that functions for Percy (as it does for Kierkegaard) as the call to the self to become itself before God. The task of identity formation,

of finding ourselves, is perennially unfinished until we are affirmed by *others* as the wayfarers that we in fact are; we are (in Gabriel Marcel's words) *homo viator*, beings on the way, possessive of fundamental pneumatic ineffability and ecstatic existence (in the literal sense of standing outside oneself). For Percy, no less than for Kierkegaard, the possibility-oriented *ekstasis* of diachronic selfhood creates an existential predicament of placement in the world, a *predicament* and task that ideally issues in authentic openness *outward* toward world, others and most fundamentally, toward God. The identity formation project of self-consciousness, of an autonomous naming and pinning down of the self is therefore a fool's errand. For Percy, each self needs external signification, an outside source to affirm its wayfaring status and transcendent calling in the world of signs and signified things. In other words, we find our true selves only in encounter with the other beyond the self, and ultimately in encounter with the divine other.

### **Intersubjective Communion in The Second Coming**

For Will Barrett, the upshot of all this semiotic discussion is that his absence of engagement with the "other" effectively eliminates the critical necessary condition for genuine self-knowledge. This is evident in Percy's satirical "self help" book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, where he clearly treats the malaise as a foundational problem of the human condition arising centrally from myopic self-consciousness. For Percy, this semiotically abortive "suck" of self-consciousness is paradoxically also the fundamental ground of human self-opacity.<sup>41</sup> This typically leaves us with two options: the immanent behavior of an animal organism meeting its needs in an environment (such as Will Barrett's Linwood life) or the transcendent behavior of a gnostic locked up inside his own theoretical and (sometimes) lunatic head (Will Barrett's Lost Cove Cave). Will is not a complete being without an authentically triadic intersubjective encounter, in which his own status as an unsignifiable "nought"—as *homo viator* who cannot be reduced to a static thing in the machinery of the cosmos—is recognized and affirmed. Ultimately, in this story, Will is called out of himself and affirmed in his fundamental human vocation partly through general sacramental signs in nature (as noted above), but primarily through his unfolding love relationship with Allison Huger.

We return, then, to the moment in which the toothache-ridden Will is shocked by an unexpected ordeal as he plummets into Allison's greenhouse "out of his nutty gnostic quest," says Percy, and "into sacramental reality."<sup>42</sup> The theme of temporary self-recovery through sudden ordeal is a dominant and explicitly Kierkegaardian theme in all of Percy's novels. Although each recovery is fleeting, the various ordeals experienced by Percy's characters have a cumulative effect of moving them toward authentic existence. Though momentary, ordeal nonetheless propels and intensifies the search for meaning, and thus comprises a recovery of the self to the present, an authentic revelation to the self of its possible freedom to act and ultimately, an intimation (however vague) of the ineradicable task to become the self before God that it is meant to be.<sup>43</sup>

Will Barrett's ordeal of falling into the greenhouse is no exception. As Allie commences the task of treating the unconscious Barrett's wounds and making him comfortable, he wakes up to engage Allie in a wonderfully triadic exchange of symbols, which issues in a fully-fledged tetradic communion, an "I-Thou" flux of perichoretic intersubjectivity. It begins small, with a gentle inversion of Jean-Paul Sartre's all-demanding and dehumanizing stare of the other. Allie ruminates, "It was no trouble handling him until he came to and looked at her. She could do anything if nobody watched her. But the moment a pair of eyes focused on her, she was a beetle stuck on a pin, arms and legs beating the air. There was no purchase. It was an impalement and a derailment" (233). However, when Will does look at Allie for the first time, "Her back felt looks," but his "looks did not dart or pierce or impale. They did not control her. They were shyder than she and gave way before her, like the light touch of a child's hand in the dark" (236).

The soft gaze quickly gives way to the all-important activity of *talking*, and Percy suggests the effects are expansive. The experience of communion issues not in a subjective closure or inwardness in which Will "finds himself" for the first time. The anxiety arising from creational self-unsignifiability nearly always results in such an inward collapse, in the self-conscious attempt of a person to grasp themselves as a "something" in the world of signified "things." Not so here. In their encounter with one another, Will and Allie experience an opening out, an expansive orientation of *ekstasis* toward being itself:

She was moving against him, enclosing him, wrapping her arms and legs around him, as if her body had at last found the center of itself outside itself....“There is something you need to know,” he said. Yeah, she thought, there is something I needed to know and I think I know. What I need to know and think I know is, is loving you the secret, the be-all not end-all but starting point of my very life[?]....It might be the secret because a minute ago when you held me and I came against you, there were signs of coming close, to it, for the first time, like the signs you recognize when you are getting near the ocean for the first time. Even though you’ve never seen the ocean before, you recognize it, the sense of an opening out ahead and a putting behind of the old rickrack bird-chirp town and countryside, something tasting new in the air, the dirt getting sandier, even the shacks and weeds looking different, and something else, a quality of sound, a penultimate hush marking the beginning of the old uproar and the going away of the endless sea.... (257, 258-59)

Several things are noteworthy from this passage and its surrounding context. First, throughout the novel (as noted above) Will is plagued by an inability to be attuned to his life “*here* in the present.”<sup>44</sup> Earlier in the novel, at his wife Marion’s deathbed, he had wondered “how it is that death...can restore a missed life?” Will realizes that an ordeal—here the insistent presence and unavoidability of his wife’s death—“had given him leave to live in the present. Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream” (123-124). By contrast, the ordeal of his encounter with Allie, and continuing throughout their interactions with one another in the closing portions of the novel, Will finds himself pulled out of his head, attentive to the realities of the unfolding relationship. He is restored to the present through ordeal, but persists in such attention and growing authenticity through the intersubjective communion of the relationship itself.

A second related point is that the greenhouse encounter (and the continued relationship as it unfolds) provides a mode of authentic self-placement in the world for both Will and Allie. Here we must recall the predicament that Percy’s unsignifiable self cannot avoid: “As soon as the self becomes self-conscious—

that is, aware of its own unique unformulability in its world of signs—from that moment forward, it cannot escape the predicament of its placement in the world.”<sup>45</sup> We may also recollect the prior suggestion that, for Percy, each self needs *external* signification, an outside source to give it substance and place in the world of signs, an other who might rightly offer what Will Barrett inordinately sought through pseudo-intimacy with Kitty Vaught: to be “answered, responded to, delineated” (172). In other words, one’s true self and one’s proper placement in the world are only found in authentic “I-Thou” encounter with the other.

This accounts for the expansiveness that Allie and Will experience in beginning to find themselves by being found in and named by the other. Allie becomes aware of a new possibility for self-placement in the world which opens up to an “endless sea” that begins from, but does not end in, her love for Will; it is the “starting point” of her “very life.” Through this “opening out,” Percy suggests that the self is not only known but *placed* in the world when it is named by the other, when two triadic selves converge in the tetradic exchange of “I-Thou” intersubjectivity to share (among other things) a semiotic world of meaning and referentiality. Indeed, shortly after Allie’s comments, Percy writes that “Their foreheads touched. Their bodies made a diamond” (262). Yet this is no exclusive lover’s gaze. Percy signals that the lovers are rightly placed in relation to the whole created order, of which the greenhouse is a microcosm: “Soon the lightning was almost continuous, ripping and cracking in the woods around them. Facets of glass flashed blue and white. It was like living inside a diamond” (264). Through the communion of intersubjectivity and all that issues from it—the co-naming, co-discovering, and co-celebrating of being itself—human beings are placed aright in the world.

The third pilgrimage-relevant aspect of this intersubjective encounter is, however, easily missed. As noted, Will and Allie (but especially Will) are restored to the present, and also find the beginnings of proper “placement” in the world of signs, each being found in and named by the other. Notably, though, the entire encounter is an utter gift. Although the task of human becoming is indeed that of proper placement of self within the world of symbols, here both Will and Allie somehow find themselves having been situated, placed, and gifted with at least the beginnings of who they themselves must also become.

This is why Percy emphasizes the sacramental aspect of the entire greenhouse scene. Will falls “through air and color, brilliant greens and violet and vermilion and a blue unlike any sky,” and later he sees an icon of Christ in the Grand Crowne stove—reminiscent of William Blake’s bright burning “tyger”—when on the oven range, “A fire burned behind amber mica bright as tiger’s eyes” (226, 228). Will has indeed fallen, as Percy says, into a “sacramental reality” in which Allie is for him an effectual sign of something greater. For all the intensity of his solitary search, Will is rescued from his solipsistic “suck of self” by a gift beyond himself, together with the beginnings of proper placement in the world. In an interview, Percy reveals Allie as an instrument of an unexpected gift of grace, since “after all you don’t plan on grace. You try something. Then something happens to you, you fall down, you get lucky.”<sup>46</sup>

Indeed, Will’s pilgrimage toward genuine faith, while certainly only just beginning, depends critically on his recognition that intersubjective communion with Allison is personally gratuitous (and not just lucky). Toward the end of the novel, he comes to realize that a gift is “a sign of a giver” (360). Percy does not bring Will through his entire pilgrimage simply to fall in love with a girl. There is indeed a “God-directedness” at the core of Will’s anxious longing, and Allie serves as a horizontal, sacramental sign, a message in a bottle pointing him to a vertical relation to God. Ralph C. Wood comments on this:

Humanity has an irrepressible longing, Percy insists, for the Good News that does not originate immanently within our own human sphere. Even when most at home in the world, we remain castaways who secretly desire another country, a city not made with hands. To be truly human, therefore, is to be more than a citizen of the earth; it is to comb the beach daily in search of “the message in the bottle”—not for immanent island news, but for transcendent tidings from beyond the seas.<sup>47</sup>

The interpretation of Allie as a sign, gift, or message to Will Barrett is confirmed toward the close of the novel. As he later returns to Allie’s greenhouse, he overhears her singing a song called “Love’s Message,” in which a “lover is asking a brook to carry his message of love to a maiden” (354). In some way, Allie embodies a message to Will of divine love from across the seas. For Percy, the experience of intersubjective communion between Allie and Will is not

a tetradic end in itself, a closed system of human intersubjectivity. It is, rather, a crucial ingredient in his *ongoing* (surely still unfinished) pilgrimage toward full-fledged relationship with God: for it is a relation that ultimately finds its natural and normative *telos* only in God.

This is why, in his chief philosophical article on intersubjectivity, Percy argues that “Intersubjectivity may not be construed as an interaction,” since its “most characteristic property” is a “polarity of authenticity and inauthenticity” in which “normative terminology is unavoidable.”<sup>48</sup> In other words, the relation of intersubjective communion between Will and Allie has a normative element at its core; in their very authenticity with one another (and the possibility of inauthenticity), the relation points beyond the lovers themselves to a normative criterion, a vertical, “true north” compass bearing on what it means to be fully human. As Benita Moore notes, for Percy “the world itself is sacramental, a sign pointing beyond itself. Beings in the world, *especially persons calling forth depths of love*, reveal the sacred which yet remains concealed in itself.”<sup>49</sup> With this in mind, Percy ends *The Second Coming* with Will Barrett’s final recognition of this reality: “Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have” (360).

### **A Transformative Pilgrimage?**

I have argued that a malaise provoked search, sacramental signs, and intersubjective communion are three critical elements that advance the pilgrimage journey of Will Barrett in *The Second Coming*. Over the course of the novel, the impotent longing and despair of Will’s solitary malaise transfigures into a fruitful eros, a longing (*Sehnsucht*) for self-found-in-the-other which, as gift and sacramental sign, provokes also a longing for God. This is a considerable transformation. But just how transformative is it, particularly when it comes to the relationship with Allison Huger? Here, I will address two types of moral objections to such transformative efficacy, beginning with a feminist criticism. Percy’s readers (notably his female ones) often faulted him for insufficient knowledge and stunted fictionalization of women, while some scholars have criticized the “male supremacist” perspective of both protagonists and third-person narrators in his novels, including *The Second Coming*.<sup>50</sup> Specifically,

on one possible feminist interpretation, Allie is a prototypical misogynist cliché: she is a vulnerable, childlike, mentally unstable, and sexually available younger woman who solves the male protagonist's midlife crisis by sleeping with him.<sup>51</sup> This problematizes Percy's conception of successful pilgrimage and particularly his own stated satisfaction with writing a beautiful and redemptive love story.<sup>52</sup>

Second, there are also concerns related to sexual ethics. In the context of *The Second Coming*, Not only is Will twice Allie's age, but there is also a vague (though unconfirmed) suggestion that he could possibly be her father (167; 259-260). Moreover, from the third-person narrator's point of view, one of the most profound moments of intersubjective communion occurs through extramarital sexual union. This not only raises prospects of incest, but also the mortal sin of fornication according to the Catholic dogma to which Percy subscribes. How, then, can such a morally problematic and potentially incestuous act function as a transformative sacramental sign? More generally, are moral and spiritual transformation actually effected through morally and spiritually corrupt actions or states of affairs? This is quite counterintuitive indeed.

These are important ethical objections, some aspects of which retain their validity no matter what reply is given. However, several lines of response not only mitigate these concerns, but also illumine some important features of moral and spiritual pilgrimage and transformation as such. First, the prospect of incest is never satisfactorily resolved in the novel, or in Percy's interviews, and may be a loose end that he failed to tie up. The fact that Percy did not "realize" the protagonist was Will Barrett—the young protagonist of a previous novel, *The Last Gentleman*—until much of the novel was written, could account for this unresolved ambiguity in *The Second Coming*.<sup>53</sup> It may also be the case that Percy leaves the issue unresolved in order to stress (as he so frequently does elsewhere) the fact that genuine pilgrimage progress is—as a matter of moral phenomenological realism—always laced with deep uncertainty and with the prospect of (or with quite real) moral failures.

With respect to the feminist criticism, there is more to be said. Given Allison's mental instability, her childlike rediscovery of the world, the age differential with Will, and the asymmetry of power that typically comes with these factors, there are aspects of this critique that are quite legitimate. Will appears partly attracted to Allie *because* of her affliction and vulnerability, she does seem to resolve some of his midlife crisis issues partly (but not only) by sleep-



ing with him, and at the end of the novel it appears that the man (Will) is in charge and the primary decision maker; it is not a fully egalitarian relationship.

However, these partly legitimate critiques eclipse neither the beauty and authentic mutuality of the relationship, nor Percy's unprecedented (for him) novelistic treatment of the genuine independence and integrity of a female character's own unique pilgrimage. On the first point, some comparative insights from Percy's other novels are helpful here. In general, sexual and relational brokenness in its manifold bizarre and humorous aspects—as a malaise-ridden, impotent mode of immanent identity formation and self-placement in the world—is among Percy's chief ways of describing the madness and existential predicament of the self in a post-God age. Romantic relationships and sexual activity in most of his novels are typically treated with excoriating satire, humor, horror and frustrated intentions. Relational partners are frequently plagued by emotional and intellectual detachment or self-satisfied ironic distance, while attempted sexual activity is often sabotaged with partners humorously afflicted by nose swellings, hives, or sudden knee jerks. As Hardy notes, "On the rare occasions when sexual desire neither failed nor was thwarted, its end was achieved in a mood of either bawdy hilarity, genial but hardly edifying, or of a cold, totally impersonal and dehumanizing gratification."<sup>54</sup>

Compared to the majority of Percy's treatment of relationships and sexuality, then, the contrast in the relationship and sexuality between Will and Allie in *The Second Coming* is striking. Once again, Hardy nicely captures the difference:

...before *The Second Coming* there is no successful representation of the love of a man and a woman that is at once solemn and full of delight.... Will's and Allison's loving is something all but wholly new. In the moments of physical intimacy neither partner maintains any of the attitudes of emotional and intellectual detachment, ironically observant or self-bemused, that characterized the couplings and non-couplings described in the earlier novels.... Unlike most of the other lovers in Percy's fiction, Will and Allison are not disposed in any sense merely to 'use' each other, in the satisfaction of an indifferent lust, or as the substitute objects of indefinable emotional needs. Neither is already fired with desire when they meet; they are in the strictest sense aroused by each other. Their ecstasy, their 'coming together,' is no swoon of mind-

less self-forgetting, but a mutual surrender of selves, each to the other, in which all their human faculties are intensified and heightened, none suspended or obliterated.<sup>55</sup>

Beyond the moments of sexuality, moreover, the mutuality, self-discovery, and intersubjective relational authenticity between the two characters reaches a high water mark never achieved elsewhere in Percy's fiction. When *The Second Coming* made its literary debut in 1980, reviewer Gerard Reedy was therefore correct to observe that although this novel shares Percy's typical cultural critique with the first four, "this new work attempts in much greater detail than before to accentuate the positive: to explore, with great imaginative joy, states in which human beings may live together with authenticity."<sup>56</sup>

A second response to the feminist objection noted above, is that in the *The Second Coming* Percy also achieves (for him) an unprecedented level of female character development, as Allison's own pilgrimage of growth and discovery is quite independent of (though intersecting with) that of the male protagonist. In Allison's case, her journey of rediscovering the freshness of being through the reinvention of language, is an aspect of the story (and of the relationship with Will) that is not only wholly her own, but also allows her to fictionally embody Percy's understanding of what a prelapsarian, semiotic and creational ideal for human beings might look like. Far from merely an indication of her female vulnerability and susceptibility to the opportunism of an older male, then, Allison's childlike engagement with language and the world represents and embodies a rediscovery of what it might mean, for Percy, to begin the journey toward a robust and flourishing humanity.

For example, in the novel Allie escapes from Valleyhead Sanatorium after a three-year stay, during which time she had spoken very little. Given her situation, Allie is a powerful illustration of Percy's contention that our use of linguistic symbols has become so commonplace to us, that we fail to see that is it nothing less than "the secret of knowing what the world is and of becoming a person in the world."<sup>57</sup> Allie is "like a child left at the movies and forgotten" who "could see the best part again" (105). After escaping the Sanatorium, "she remembered nothing," and this allows her, like the young Hellen Keller, an unusually fresh start at living, at discovering what language means and what it means to be human.<sup>58</sup> Indeed, Allie's three-year sabbatical from speaking and

subsequent reentry into the daily use of words allows her non-jaded access to the being of the physical world around her. For Percy, a symbol provides us with access to the freshness of being (“that is a *robin!*”), yet the symbol can also conceal being when symbolic utterance regresses into cliché, or when symbolic familiarity renders the named object ordinary and unimportant, relegating it to the realm of the commonplace as the symbol “conceal(s) the creature until it finally becomes invisible” (“that is *only* a robin”).<sup>59</sup> But Allie has a chance to see and experience everything anew; clichés and shorthand phrases mean nothing to her. “Have a nice what?” (24-25). In this way, she embodies both the wonder of fresh access to being, and a critique of the way that ordinary language closes being off by becoming “hardened and opaque.”<sup>60</sup>

Through the character of Allison, then, Percy illustrates the need for evacuated symbols to be reinvested with fresh meaning, in the process of which human beings are given a glimpse into the full wonder and uniqueness of the symbolic ability that belongs at the core of his anthropology. As Benita Moore notes, Will’s quest for God and Allie’s search for language are presented in *The Second Coming* as parallel quests, and it is the *feminine* mode of the quest that emerges victorious in the story. While traditional religious symbols in the modern age have been evacuated of their meaningfulness and revelatory efficacy, says Moore,

Allie’s immersion in ‘the ordinary’ of language reveals fresh possibility for the appearance of the sacred in the world today... the novel’s very structure and texture enact what Heidegger called the human vocation, ‘...to find a name for Being,...to provide for it a clearing’ (1975, 158). In traditional Christian language, Allie opens up the sacramental character of the universe.<sup>61</sup>

Allison Huger is not, therefore, a vulnerably disempowered foil against or solution to the male protagonist’s issues. While we can acknowledge the limited efficacy of the aforementioned feminist critique, Allison is far from a misogynist cliché. She is on a pilgrimage of transformation, discovery, and increasing existential authenticity of her own, and this only enhances Percy’s multidimensional treatment of her unfolding love relationship with Will, and

the personal transformation this intersubjective community makes possible for the both of them, including their rediscovery of the presence of God.

Having addressed a series of moral objections from the perspective of a feminist critique of the novel, I now turn to the second moral objection related to sexual ethics. For Percy the Catholic novelist, how can the extramarital sex between Will and Allie function as a sacramental sign effecting (in part) pilgrimage transformation? Put more generally (as stated above), how is moral and spiritual transformation efficacious at all through morally and spiritually corrupt actions or states of affairs?

In the first place, to ask such a question of a Catholic novelist is to engage in ethical criticism of art. But in at least one late interview, Percy denies the fact that he is writing “moral fiction,” and adds “as Kierkegaard would say, it’s not the novelists business to be edifying, or ‘bring the good news.’”<sup>62</sup> Percy seems to take his novelistic task, rather, as one that aims at truth through faithful attention to reality, and especially through attention to the search for existential coherence and for God amidst the ruins of malaise-ridden late modernity. So at one level, the objection appears misguided and seems to beg the question, if it amounts to the charge that a writer who does not claim to directly edify has written in an unedifying way. This, however, would be an overly simplistic response to the objection. For, I take it, the objection is not against the fictional portrayal of sexual immorality or sinfulness as *such*, but rather against its portrayal *as* a sacramental sign or mediator of divine grace. It remains a relevant objection then, for I have argued that the intersubjective communion between Allie and Will—which surely includes the sexual aspects—is a primary sacramental sign through which grace is present and transformative in *The Second Coming*. Here the narrower moral objection regarding sexual ethics becomes a general question of critical importance for how we understand pilgrimage and transformation. In general, how can an immoral or spiritually bad activity count as a sacramental sign or mediator of divine grace?

One response might be to say that, given a theological assumption that the created cosmos and human activity within it are imperfect, fallen and tainted by sin, it follows that *any* mediation of divine grace *must* be conveyed through imperfect, fallen, and sin-tainted realities. Even if mediated through created goods, it is the case that no created *goods* are unqualifiedly good, and therefore that no operation of grace through them is mediated through unqualifiedly good

events, objects, or states of affairs. From this vantage, the claim that fornication—or any other sinful activity—can mediate grace ceases to look so strange. Perhaps one can say that insofar as the act in question is good (even if not absolutely so), it is such a potential vehicle. The sexual activity of Will and Allie, insofar as it involves the genuine goods of relational intimacy, pleasure, the open possibility of procreation, and mutual respect for and delight in the humanity of the other, surely could be such a vehicle or sign of grace, despite its clear morally problematic properties. To my knowledge, Percy does not defend his treatment of sacramental signs in this way. Still, it is not only a promising line of defense worth considering in its own right, but it also outlines the *general* shape of Percy's own commitment—shared by so many twentieth century Catholics and theologians—to sacramental realism and the fictional aesthetic it implies.

In the post Vatican II period, sacramental realism broadly names the theological commitment to see the seven Sacraments (with a capital “S”) not as exclusive sources of real divine grace at work through materiality (such as bread, wine, and water) but as indicators of the way in which the whole of created being is the theater God's gracious operation. Dominican theologian Colmar E. O'Neill, for example, uses Vatican II's definition of the church itself as “a kind of sacrament or *sign and instrument* of intimate union with God” to argue that the Sacraments reveal the way God operates in and through the whole of created being as such.<sup>63</sup> On this view, “sacramental” signs (lower case “s”) are at work in nature, the church, and through other human beings (like Allison Huger), not merely as epistemological indicators of the divine sources of causal or ordered activity in the world (as in the medieval treatment of natural signs), but as real sources of sacramental grace that move and may transform the human will.

Many Catholics in the twentieth century, including Percy, Flannery O'Connor, and David Jones, realized that such sacramental realism demanded of them a uniquely Christian aesthetic. If the real action of Christ's saving grace is at work in the Sacraments and in the church, then, as Helena M. Tomko notes,

Literary sacramental realism will attempt to draw the consequences of this into fiction and poetry.... A belief in the sacramental system requires an aesthetic that tries to draw out and depict the sacramental par-

adox, to plumb the depths and heights of experienced reality, painting the visible with the invisible, the mundane with the celestial, attempting to harmonize the workings of creative art with the workings of grace.<sup>64</sup>

A Catholic literary aesthetic, notes Tomko, thus affirms “the real, active, yet hidden presence of redeeming grace at all levels of human life and art.”<sup>65</sup> Percy apparently agrees. In line with Flannery O’Connor’s aesthetic of sacramental realism, he insisted that openness to “the mystery” of one’s fictional art required “a necessary sensitivity to the hidden dimensions and energies of [the novelist’s] characters and of the presence of the mystery which may erupt in their lives and which, for want of a better word, we may call grace.”<sup>66</sup>

It is no surprise then that for Percy, sacramental grace is indeed present and conveyed in the ordinary, in sinful and broken realities, and indeed in the obscene or ugly. Franklin Arthur Wilson importantly notes that for Percy, sacramental signs and the activity of grace are not limited to beautiful encounters with nature or salutary human relationships. Rather, notes Wilson, Percy uses the grotesquely obscene in his novels such as “a dung beetle, bowel movements, the deaths of children, and even genocide to express the sacramental presence of God in the often traumatic mess of human existence.”<sup>67</sup> Commenting in the margins of his bible (the *Knox NT*) on Jesus’ healing of the blind man in John 9, Percy notes that “sensible” elements of bodily fluid (spittle) and dirt are an “obscenity,” and yet the vehicles of divine grace, communicated to the blind man in the form of healing.<sup>68</sup> Among many other places in his novels, Percy takes this line of thought quite seriously in *The Last Gentleman*. As Jamie Vaught nears death while being baptized, Christ’s presence shows up in and with Jamie’s bowel movement. Here, says Wilson, “Christ makes his sacramental entry into the world amid the stench of death and fecal decay,” while also noting that “Normal religious sensibility is blind to the presence of holiness in the scandal of human shit.”<sup>69</sup> For good measure, Percy adds a second bowel movement just as the baptism is about to occur.

Other cases of Percy’s “literary use of obscenity as a means of grace” are many, but all of them point to a consistent sacramental vision of the whole of created reality—including the obscene, bawdy, or broken—as the raw materials of revelatory and transformative grace. While these observations certainly prove his approach to be correct, with this background of sacramental realism

in view, one can see that his view is at least well considered, coherent, and theologically defensible. At the very least, it takes seriously the Incarnation and Sacraments as metaphysical touchstones for God's broader redemptive work within created being. It also takes seriously the fact that human pilgrimage toward wholeness in relation to God is an affair replete with uncertainty, moral ambiguity, and mundane experiences that stand in need of divine activity and transfiguration.

### **Conclusion**

If nothing else, Percy is indeed a realist about the nature of genuine pilgrimage in a broken world. Is there genuine transformation in *The Second Coming*? All things considered, I am inclined to agree with Percy's own estimation, when he says that in the end, Will Barrett "actually sees a possibility of achieving love, work that he likes, a sense of identity—as they say nowadays, that he's never had before, freedom to choose for himself, and he demands the presence of God on top of that. And I think it's clear that he gets it."<sup>70</sup> Like his other novels, Walker Percy's *The Second Coming* does not exhaust all that a conversion could be, and certainly not all that a pilgrimage could be. Will Barrett's movement toward God remains, after all, in quite indeterminate infancy at the close of the novel. Nonetheless, Percy writes about conversion and pilgrimage with eyes transfixed on the *beginning* portion of the journey of faith, and he is consequently able to draw out the full implications of God's work in the area of general revelation. Through his narrative work, Percy thus creatively explores the limits of general revelation: profound malaise provides both motivation and desire; sacramental signs are creational windows into eternity; and intersubjective communion returns the pilgrim to himself, releasing the final stopper so that love's message from over the sea may be taken to heart. In *The Second Coming*, Percy succeeds at offering us a compelling story about the necessarily *strange* character of a faith pilgrimage in an age of extreme disorientation, dehumanization and existential malaise, and he offers a way through it.

## NOTES

- 1 Quoted in Allen Pridgen, *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes: The Search in the Desert* (Selinsgrove, Pa.: Susquehanna University Press; London: Associated University Press, 2000), 1.
- 2 Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 14.
- 3 Andrew Smith, "Soteriology According to Walker Percy," *Encounter* 62 no. 3 (Summer 2001), 253.
- 4 Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 3. Hereafter cited in notes as SC, or parenthetically cited with page numbers only.
- 5 Will's malaise is precipitated by indeterminate flashbacks to his childhood encounter with near death at the hands of his father. However, in much of his writing Percy speaks of malaise being caused by a lack of self-knowledge, brought on by an early childhood inability to cope with self-consciousness. People "do not know themselves or what to do with themselves," and consequently each self ends up "being that which it is not, saying that which it is not, doing that which it is not, and making others what they are not." Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1983), 211; 210. (Henceforth, LIC).
- 6 SC, 14.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 8 Cf. *Ibid.*, 70ff.
- 9 For more on the connection between Will's "death-in-life" and his father's suicide, see Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (Pittsburg: Duquesne University Press, 1990).
- 10 SC, 6ff.
- 11 Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1993), 63.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 56 (emphasis added).
- 13 In almost every sense, Will is Percy's archetypal "man in quest." Percy gives his own analysis of Will's situation: "Something's gone wrong with him, and if he's got any sense and comes to himself, he spends his time searching for what happened, searching for the answer." See Brent Short, "The Modern Prognosis: An Interview with Walker Percy" (Washington, D.C.: Henley Park Hotel, May, 1989), 3.
- 14 On the object of desire as catalyst, see C.S. Lewis's use of the "Island" in his fictional autobiography, *The Pilgrim's Regress: An Allegorical Apology for Christianity, Reason and Romanticism* (London: Dent, 1933; paperback edn. reprint: Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000).
- 15 Cited in Ralph Wood, "The Alienated Self and the Absent Community in the work of Walker Percy" in *Morphologies of Faith: Essays in Honor of Nathan A. Scott Jr* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1990), 367. It is also Percy's particular passion to contend that this malaise is a result of "scientific humanism," a worldview deriving from the Enlightenment that reduces humanity to a mere organism that responds to needs and drives: "A symptom implies an illness; there is something wrong with you. An illness should be treated.... You are depressed because you have every reason to be depressed.... You live in a deranged age—more deranged than usual, because despite great scientific and technological advances, man has not the faintest idea of who he is or what he is doing" (LIC, 76).
- 16 SC, 14.
- 17 Jay Tolson, "Walker Percy and Community," *Image* no. 4 (fall 1993), 93-107.



- <sup>18</sup> For much of what follows I am indebted to the work of Allen Pridgen in *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes*. See also John Sykes Jr's review of this book, where he clarifies the influence of Gerard Manley Hopkins: "Percy was convinced (in part by Hopkins), that God makes himself present to us in nature, but that one sign of our general alienation is our obtuseness to this presence." John D. Sykes, Jr., book review in *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 28 no. 2 (summer 2001), 146.
- <sup>19</sup> Pridgen, 23.
- <sup>20</sup> SC, 5-6 (emphasis added). Will not only misses sacramental landscapes, but his obsession with death and his father also skews them, like this other potentially sacramental moment: "A strange bird flew past. A cumulus cloud went towering thousands of feet into the air. Ordinarily he would not have given the cloud a second glance. But as he gazed at it from the bunker, it seemed to turn purple and gold at the bottom while the top went boiling up higher and higher like the cloud over Hiroshima" (SC, 3).
- <sup>21</sup> Andrea Sterk, lecture on iconography at Regent College, May 2003. Also consulted by phone interview was Christina Stavros, a painter of Greek Orthodox icons (Vancouver, B.C., November 2004).
- <sup>22</sup> Pridgen, 107.
- <sup>23</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>24</sup> Maxine Hancock notes that in much of Percy's work, most notably in *The Second Coming*, the two great "comings" or revelations to the individual are these: God comes first in the original Incarnation. He comes second, to the individual in love. Maxine Hancock, "Walker Percy: Crying Clown" in *Cruix* XVIII no. 1 (March, 1982), 26. The truth of this observation becomes clear later on as Allie enters Will's life and embodies "Love's Message" from God. Cf. SC, 354.
- <sup>25</sup> Pridgen's treatment of Will's first encounter with Allie in the woods is particularly profound. He delves into the significance of Will stepping off the fairway, out of his Linwood life and into the trees where a greenhouse awaits, as "an obvious symbol of the redemptive divine life available in the dark forest where Will is now wandering." Pridgen also notes Percy's use of sacramental ark and cathedral imagery, allusions to the promised Incarnation and the Eucharistic Host. He mentions an interview in which Percy comments that Allie is immersed in the present, as well as in the earthy, ordinary "sacramental" things of life, and that her greenhouse is a sign of the new birth that could happen to Will. Pridgen, 111-12. Again however, Will misses the "signs," immersed in the memories of "everything his father said and did" (SC, 71. Cf. also 78-79, "He remembered everything").
- <sup>26</sup> Walker Percy, "The Message in the Bottle," in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1954), 146 (cit. from 4th printing, 1978). The book will hereafter be cited with the abbreviation *MB*, along with the relevant article title.
- <sup>27</sup> Pridgen, 117.
- <sup>28</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>29</sup> As Pridgen notes, "Will does not recognize the signs that appear daily in the messy and imperfect incarnate natural world around him, signs of an infinite life and 'home' transcendent of his and the world's 'Last Days' (SC, 229) and beyond his death-in-life in Linwood. These signs are 'up here' (SC, 378) in the incarnate world with others, not hidden in a dark cave and revealed privately to the solitary gnostic questor.... he is incapable of recognizing that God has already dramatically sent a sign of love and redemption in the Incarnation." Pridgen argues that for Will to come to authentic faith, he must surrender "the absolute epistemological competency he grants his intellect." Pridgen, 103.

- <sup>30</sup> *SC*, 226; 227.
- <sup>31</sup> Walker Percy, "An Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy," *Signposts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991; 2nd edn. The Noonday Press, 1992), 386. Hereafter, further references will be cited as SP, followed by chapter title and page number.
- <sup>32</sup> Peggy Castex, "An Interview with Walker Percy," *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, eds. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson, MS: University of Mississippi Press), 50. Cf. the mention of "block and tackle" in *SC*, 203, 206 and 227.
- <sup>33</sup> *SC*, 305.
- <sup>34</sup> *LIC*, 99.
- <sup>35</sup> Percy, *MB*, "Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism," 282 (emphases original).
- <sup>36</sup> Percy, *MB*, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity," 265.
- <sup>37</sup> *SP*, "Theory of Man," 127.
- <sup>38</sup> *LC*, 101.
- <sup>39</sup> *SP*, "Naming and Being," 136-37.
- <sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.
- <sup>41</sup> See esp. *LIC*, 107-109
- <sup>42</sup> Percy, "An Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy," *Signposts*, 386.
- <sup>43</sup> In most of these "ordeal" experiences, Percy's characters are not restored to their creational ideal with any kind of permanence. Rather, the ordeal and recovery of selfhood in the midst of it serves as a momentary escape from the "everydayness" of the malaise his characters are in. Percy does, in fact, draw the idea of ordeal as recovery and revelation from Kierkegaard's notions of the various forms of "aesthetic relief," or ways that a self stuck in the aesthetic sphere of existence gains momentary reprieve. For more on these connections to Kierkegaard, see "A Talk with Walker Percy," interview by Zoltan Abadi-Nagy (*The Southern Literary Journal* no. 6, Fall 1973), in *Conversations*, 82.
- <sup>44</sup> Jo Gullidge, "The Reentry Option: An Interview with Walker Percy," in Lawson, Lewis A. and Victor A. Kramer, eds. *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), 305.
- <sup>45</sup> *LC*, 109.
- <sup>46</sup> Gullidge, "The Reentry Option," *Conversations*, 307.
- <sup>47</sup> Wood, 362 (n. 7).
- <sup>48</sup> *MB*, "Symbol, Consciousness and Intersubjectivity," 272.
- <sup>49</sup> Benita A. Moore, "Language as Sacrament in Walker Percy's *The Second Coming*," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 60 (Summer 1992): 298. Emphasis mine.
- <sup>50</sup> In an interview with Marc Kirkeby, Percy says "I don't know where [Allison] came from... but I feel happier with her than with any other female in my books. I receive complaints about my books from women, who say to me I don't know anything about women, which I'm the first person to admit. But Allison pleases me very much." Mark Kirkeby, "Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," *Conversations*, 190-191. It is notable that Allison is certainly the most convincing and complete of Percy's female characters, but of course the fact that she "pleases" Percy does not amount to a response to the criticisms above. For one perspective on the "male supremacist" undertone in Percy's novels, see John Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1987), 190.
- <sup>51</sup> I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for articulating this important criticism.

- <sup>52</sup> Cf., for example, Percy's interview comments to Marc Kirkeby, in which he characterizes the story as a "victory of eros over thanatos and life over death... I like to think, half seriously, that this may be the first unalienated novel written since Tolstoy." Kirkeby, "Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," *Conversations*, 190.
- <sup>53</sup> See Ben Forkner and J. Gerald Kennedy, "An Interview with Walker Percy," *Conversations*, 229. The young Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* dated Kitty Vaught, who in *The Second Coming* was Allison Huger's mother.
- <sup>54</sup> Hardy, 188.
- <sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 188-189.
- <sup>56</sup> Gerard Reedy, "Gestures of Solidarity" (Review), *Commonweal* 107 (August 1980): 471-472. Quoted in Linda Whitney Hobson, "Comedy and Christianity in the Novels of Walker Percy" (Ph.D. diss., University of Alabama, 1981), 270.
- <sup>57</sup> *SP*, "Naming and Being," 131.
- <sup>58</sup> By way of contrast, Will Barrett "remembered everything" and, unlike Allie, is a veritable virtuoso of triadic symbolization (79). He is so conversant with his cognitive abilities and his prolific symbol-mongering, that he misses its importance entirely. Thus, he begins to notice it with any sense of depth toward the close of the novel. It is no mistake that Percy situates Will's recognition of symbolization when he is, as Allie was, confined to a convalescent home (*SC*, 325).
- <sup>59</sup> *SP*, "Naming and Being," 135.
- <sup>60</sup> In an interview, Percy comments on his intentions for Allie in relation to language. He notes: "the peculiar phenomenon by which language conceals, fails to communicate and becomes hardened and opaque rather than transparent. I was very conscious of using her [Allie's] language that way, almost as if she were aware ordinary speech had somehow been worn out, that not only did it no longer convey, but sometimes it conveyed the opposite." Kirkeby, "Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," *Conversations*, 191.
- <sup>61</sup> Moore, 281-282.
- <sup>62</sup> Kirkeby, "Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," *Conversations*, 191.
- <sup>63</sup> Colmar E. O'Neill, *Sacramental Realism: A General Theory of the Sacraments, Theology and Life* (Wilmington, DE: Glazier; Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1983), 2.
- <sup>64</sup> Helena M. Tomko, *Sacramental Realism: Gertrud von le Fort and German Catholic Literature in the Weimar Republic and Third Reich (1924-46)* (London: Maney Publishing for the Modern Humanities Research Association, 2007), 6.
- <sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.
- <sup>66</sup> Percy, "How to be an American Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic," *SP*, 184.
- <sup>67</sup> Franklin Arthur Wilson, "Walker Percy's Bible Notes and his Fiction: Gracious Obscurity," *Renascence* 59.3 (Spring 2007), 197.
- <sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.
- <sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 204, 205. Cf. Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966; London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1966), 386.
- <sup>70</sup> Kirkeby, "Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," *Conversations*, 190.