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# For the Hard of Hearing: a Catholic Novelist Confronts Modernity

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For the Hard of Hearing: A Catholic Novelist Confronts Modernity

by

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*'For The Hard of Hearing': A Catholic Novelist Confronts Modernity*

With the recent publication of Paul Elie's article *Has Fiction Lost Its Faith*<sup>1</sup> a clear division has arisen among Catholic literary critics as they continue their public debate through sporadic general publications. For Elie, the twentieth century aristocracy of Catholic Literature has collapsed, with the once apparently strong presence in public art now lacking a qualified, clear and identifiable voice of faith. Gregory Wolfe, on the other hand, points to a myriad of contemporary figures but claims it is an inability of critics and readers to find where the Catholic voice of faith is expressed on the margins of popularity and powerful institutions.<sup>2</sup> Dana Gioia joins the discussion by largely elaborating the question of Catholic Literature, providing a more detailed and technical critique of the contemporary state of affairs for Catholicism and culture.<sup>3</sup> These three public voices are united in their impression that something has become disconnected. Catholicism has receded from the Arts, and society as a whole is in no apparent dispute over it. Their publications are not academic articles; they are more akin to musings of elderly artisans reflecting upon their period. Producing more questions than answers for a serious inquirer, they are provocative, inciting responses from those with invested interest in Catholicism and its place in contemporary culture. As essays in general publications that market to a varied demographic readership, they have their limits and their discursive functions. Elie functions as a mining canary - a sign to the Catholic literary population - generating an intentional alertness; purposely having chosen to publish his article in the New York Times Book Review for a larger platform to begin focusing the population on how to identify the particular character of contemporary Catholic literature. Whether in agreement or opposition, a vast and indiscriminate readership was notified. My contention however with the critics isn't a problem of whether Catholic writers are

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Elie. *Has Fiction Lost Its Faith*; *New York Times*. Dec. 19, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Gregory Wolfe. *Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World*; *The Wall Street Journal*. Jan. 10, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*; *First Things*. Dec. 1, 2013.

unable to revive the vitality faith in novels, or whether there are new writers that merit Catholic literary praise;<sup>4</sup> I am concerned rather, with the neglect of a fundamental element of assessment: the recent past of Catholic novelists who lived amidst the major change of Christianity losing its general sensibility in formative public institutions, and how they responded to its deterioration through their novels. Dana Gioia is the closest critic to capturing this element when he notes the “prominent, prestigious, and irreplaceable” Catholics whose significance sixty years ago was influential in shaping American Letters, yet only to acknowledge their presence but not their literary manner of communicating a Catholic voice.

If the character of American Catholic Literature was forged in the early and mid-twentieth century, becoming a permanent reference point for Catholicism’s cultural identity, then by turning to the major American Catholic writers inculcated in our cultural history, specifically Walker Percy, the current debate can be recast into a more productive light. Literature is a communicative activity intended, however weakly, to be held and possessed by a reader and in turn, the reader possessed by the author. It is an activity that can be either more or less successful. “Everybody knows more than the novelist, but what the novelist may be good for, despite his shakiness and fecklessness, or perhaps because of it, is to record what other people, absorbed as they are in busy and useful lives, may not see – a certain upside-downness about modern life – that, for example, there is something deranged about normal people and that crazy people may be trying to tell us something.”<sup>5</sup>

If we are willing to admit that we are privileged by history, as having a greater vantage point on the past, we should also be willing to admit that there is a privilege that those in the past had over us, that is, they lived through a process that we inherited further along in its development. The Catholic institutions in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were always vigilantly

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<sup>4</sup> I am in no formal position to take liberty with judging faithfully the merits of contemporary Catholic authors. That is a task to be taken up by other scholars who have the needed experience and breadth. My contribution is only to clarify the current debate among critics and offer a more productive point to proceed by.

<sup>5</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land: Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 162. Patrick Samway, FSG. 1997

opposed to liberalism and modernity, which it viewed as leading to a *living death*<sup>6</sup> or as the scholar John Desmond calls *spiritual suicide*.<sup>7</sup> The further an individual became entrenched in such a way of life the more they would mistake death as life - spiritual death would become normalized. If this is how Catholicism sees the process of history, we might be able look back and understand how particular things 'fit together,' but we will also be further along a process that was just beginning to radically reshape American civilization. Even if we retrospectively claim that we would have never partaken in such a world, we are all still a product of it to varying degrees. "Whenever you have a hundred thousand psychotherapists talking about being life-affirming and a million books about life-enrichment, you can be sure there is a lot of death around."<sup>8</sup> The fact that our culture has become infatuated with health is a sign of the greater prominence of illness. We don't usually concern ourselves with things that we are already habitually accomplishing or fulfilling. I'm not going to talk about air quality if I lived my entire life in Aspen, Colorado in 1920. Most likely I will never develop institutions to keep a degree of awareness always directed upon it, unless I have reason to be insecure about it.

The primary question to begin this critique is: what is the task of a Catholic novelist? Once duly clarified in the first section: *Contemporary Catholic Literary Critics*, as making belief believable<sup>9</sup>, Walker Percy's literary works can be seen to illuminate the current disconnect between Catholic literature and culture - a disconnect between the author and reader, and the author and the world. Percy was a rare individual with a unique set of circumstances throughout his life that I believe refined his religious sensibly, and made him an acutely apt novelist and thinker, able to depict the complexity of a variety of different

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<sup>6</sup> See: Carson Holloway. *The Way of Life: John Paul II and the Challenge of Liberal Modernity*. Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2008. Holloway uses John Paul II's *Evangelium Vitae* to show the fundamental error of modernity philosophic basis for rationally securing human dignity and providing a universal ethics for human rights and welfare.

<sup>7</sup> John Desmond. *Walker Percy and Suicide*, pg. 1. First Things. ISI, 2009.

<sup>8</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land: Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 162. Patrick Samway, FSG. 1997

<sup>9</sup> Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and Manners*, pg. 200-201. Excerpt from the following passage: "If the Catholic faith was central to life in America, Catholic fiction would be far better, but the Church is not central to this society. The things that bind us together as Catholics are known only to ourselves. A secular society understand less and less. It becomes more difficult in America to **make belief believable**."

intellectual disciplines as they affect an individual's self-identity and pair them with equally complex emotional and social experiences, without contrivance or artificiality.

One of Percy's notable intellectual influences was Romano Guardini, a German theologian who wrote *The End of the Modern World* in the 1930s, a pivotal text for Percy's development of his understanding of Catholicism in the modern era. *The End of the Modern World* provides a clear lens for highlighting the effects of modernity found in Percy's writing. A close reading of Walker Percy's novel *The Last Gentleman* through the cultural critique of Romano Guardini also reveals a vision of the difficulties that will be faced by future Catholic writers if the characteristic elements of modernity continue in their logical form. A dominant characteristic of modernity is how it alters the source of self-knowledge as self-generated, turning each individual in upon themselves as sufficient unto themselves. It has a solipsistic affect upon interpersonal communication. Catholic literary critics then should concern themselves with whether or not Catholic writers face the same, if not more difficult challenge, of communicating with an entire culture if they are to be heard in the deepest reaches of the reader's self about the immediate mysterious and inexhaustible meaning of an individual's existence<sup>10</sup>, which usually goes unnoticed when "sunk in the everydayness of life"<sup>11</sup>.

The task then, is to also get a focused picture of what historically unique events and challenges were confronted by Percy, personally and societally, that were spiritually abrasive enough to refine his sensibility without dulling it. Elaborated in the section, *Twentieth Century Intellectuals and Romano Guardini*, the following highly influential events will be used to help explain why a retrospective look at Walker Percy's novel *The Last Gentleman* (1966) can put the current debate in perspective:

The intellectual developments that were once the subject of speculation and public debate by earlier generations began to

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<sup>10</sup> For Catholicism this is a tangibly real experience 'in time'. Experience of one's sense of existence is shaken free from the mundane sense of 'moments'. "Just as the apprehension of time is caused in us that we apprehend the flow of the 'now' itself, so the apprehension of eternity is caused in us as much as we apprehend the 'now' standing still." Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theo.* I.q.10a.2ad.1.

<sup>11</sup> An expression from Walker Percy's first novel: *The Moviegoer*. A typical existentialist, especially Kierkegaard and Heidegger, theme reworked into the language of Percy's character Binx Bolling.

become established institutional realities. The Southern Agrarian lifestyle that was adamantly anti-industrialization and civically outspoken concerning the impending social transformations was on its way to the grave by the time Walker Percy developed his faculties as a cultural critic. For an acute intellect, it was impossible to avoid the tensions of the twentieth century as Marx, Freud, and Darwin were assimilated into Americanism, becoming influential social forces shaping personal and societal identities. The postwar period made the question of technology and morality inescapable. Historical progressivism and its multiplicity of expectations arrested itself in the utter irrationality of the world wars' dehumanization, and other public spectacles of depravity lauded as science. European intellectuals became aggressively critical of the Enlightenment framework of reason with some remaining in America during WWII.<sup>12</sup> It was during the Second World War, while at a Sanatorium in New York, that Walker Percy began becoming deeply familiar with the recent European intellectual tradition.

Throughout Walker Percy's literary life, he was attempting to penetrate the melee of thoughts that were taking hold upon immediate social consciousness and his own; a process that was making the essential voice of Catholicism increasingly inaudible as a meaningful tradition. This discordant shifting that coincided with Percy's eventual conversion should not be interpreted as a discrete phase shift akin to a chemical reaction. Conversion is not a simple event to be marked in 'time'. Verbal declarations, rites, catechism and all other activities associated with the folksy image of conversion distort and dismiss what is a lifelong activity. This feature of Walker Percy's life is what makes his writing so uniquely relevant. He was not a 'cradle Catholic' already steeped in the signs, symbols, and liturgical tradition. This point will be taken up further in the section: *The*

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. *Dialectics of Enlightenment: Cultural Memory in the Present*. Stanford University Press, 2007. See also: Benfey, Christopher. and Remmler, Karen. *Artists, Intellectuals, and World War II: The Pontigny Encounters at Mount Holyoke College, 1942-1944*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2006.



*Art and Skill of a Catholic Novelist*, which includes both Flanner O'Connor's thoughts on being a writer, with what she calls "Christian convictions", in *Mysteries and Manners*, and Walker Percy's non-fiction essays elaborating similar points.<sup>13</sup>

If the Catholic novelist is to make belief believable, then a more productive question among the critics would be: Is contemporary Catholic Literature still able to make belief believable? Do contemporary Catholic novelists face the same, if not more or less, difficult task of writing about belief than their mid-twentieth century predecessors? This is, not a question of evangelizing or dogmatic polemics; rather it is a question of relation. To make belief believable is to have the voice of Catholicism become more than a historical fact used as an easily encapsulated object by an author. It is to give it life, a life qualitatively distinct from all the other voices of the day, yet just as vital and interpersonal. A voice actually heard by the other voices, not just tolerantly present among them for 'good form' and secular inclusion - welcome but required to assent to the dominant culture's 'house rules' and conventions. More importantly, it's a voice that exhaustively listens to other voices and yet still has something meaningful to say, something to be heard that cannot be rationally dismissed. To illustrate this point notice how when communicating we can never say exactly what we mean, but the inexpressible is always in the background, looming 'larger' than what we are saying (some authors are better than others at bringing the reader to the precipice of words - some prepare a hang-glider for the moment the reader is left to their own devices, while others leave the reader with a parachute, to either jump and see how they fare or to linger, peering over the edge). Colloquial phrases such as 'get to the point' or 'what are you trying to get at' can be a way to start to think about it. "...More happens than meets the eye. The mind is led on by what it sees, into the greater depths that the book's symbols naturally suggest."<sup>14</sup> This is exhibited by Walker Percy's writing, but it also carries with it a private and lonely image- the silence of belief before others.

<sup>13</sup> Walker Percy's non-fiction: *The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science (1977)*, *Novel-Writing in an Apocalyptic Time (1986)*, *How to be an American Novelist in Spite of being Southern and Catholic (1984)*, *Physician as Novelist (1989)*, *The Culture Critics (1959)*, *The Culture - Church and Evangelization*.

<sup>14</sup> Flannery O'Connor. *The Nature and Aim of Fiction*, pg. 71. Farrar, Straus and Giroux 1969.

“...We know now that the modern world is coming to an end... at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefit from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies... Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another... the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.”<sup>15</sup>

The above epitaph is found at the beginning of *The Last Gentleman*. While it is an example Percy’s regard for Guardini as important figure for Catholicism and modernity, it also phrases succinctly the undercurrent of Percy’s literature. The tempest of modernity and the havoc it has, and will continue to wreck upon the life of man, is not without its silver-lining. No matter how ruinous it may be to the inner life of man, it will also bring about an open yet grotesque honesty, where a small minority will see things clearly, despite their ugliness; for at least the confusion of virtue and vice, sacred and profane, love and despair, will cease for them.

If one accepts my proposal that a Catholic writer’s job is to make belief believable then it is in our best interest to seek counsel with those who were heavily engaged in the 20th century culture as a whole, as Catholics. This is not to say they that they discovered how to make belief timelessly believable, or that they were completely successful in their own time, but rather that they show us a talent for writing literature that at least has the power to arrest the reader with believing in a possibility of belief-- at least until they finish the book. The last section, *The Last Gentleman*, will be analyzed to show what exactly we can take away from Walker Percy’s literature as it pertains to Catholic novelists today: a detailed account of the struggle of wresting the reader from the self-identity of mid-twentieth century and its deafening effect, and the way Percy used literature in an attempt to render Catholicism’s voice audible without directly making the novel appear Catholic. Percy wrote continually about the struggle for communication:

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<sup>15</sup> Walker Percy. *The Last Gentleman*- Opening Epitaph from Romano Guardini’s *The End of the Modern World*.

It is one thing to live in bad times where common language is spoken, values and beliefs shared in common, like the fourteenth century, which had the black plague but also had Langland and Chaucer, one of whom wrote about how bad things were and the other told stories and cheered everybody up and both were understood. It is something else to live in a time of great good and evil which nobody understands, where there are many kinds of discourse each of which makes a kind of sense to its own community, but where the communities don't make sense to each other and none of them make sense to the novelist, who feels more and more like the canary being taken down the mine shaft with a bunch of hearty joking sense-making miners while he, the canary, is already getting a whiff of something noxious and is staggering around his cage trying to warn the miners but they can't understand him, nor he them.<sup>16</sup>

### Contemporary Catholic Literary Critics

The postwar decade was not a period of Catholic literary dominance, which is not, to my mind, an attractive or desirable goal. It was, instead, an era in which Catholic voices in all their diversity played an active role in shaping the dynamic public conversation in literature... These writers published in the mainstream journals and presses of the time as well as with specifically Catholic journals and presses. They also won major literary awards. Between 1945-1965 Catholic novelists and poets received 11 Pulitzer Prizes and 5 National Book Awards (6 NBAs if one counts O'Connor's posthumously published *Complete Stories* in 1972).<sup>17</sup>

Walker Percy, though not mentioned by Gioia in *The Catholic Writer Today*, was a major contributor to the Catholic literary legacy, with his first novel *The Moviegoer* (1961) being awarded one of the 5 National book awards cited above. Also, though beyond Gioia's time period, yet still reflective of Walker Percy's powerful work, the National Endowment for the Humanities awarded Percy the Jefferson Lecture award in 1989, a year before his death, which served as the occasion for his last public statement, *The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind*, later published in a collection of his essays and

<sup>16</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land: Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 1158-159.

<sup>17</sup> Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*, pg18. Wiseblood Books 2014.

interviews edited by Patrick Samway.<sup>18</sup> That same year, the University of Notre Dame awarded Percy its Laetare Medal, given to a Catholic "whose genius has ennobled the arts and sciences, illustrated the ideals of the Church, and enriched the heritage of humanity".<sup>19</sup> In 1988, Walker Percy was one of only fourteen laymen asked to address the Pontifical Council for Culture in Rome. Walker Percy infused himself into the lives of prominent intellectuals throughout his entire life and well beyond. He had a lasting effect on the child psychologist Robert Coles who dedicated his last book *The Spiritual Life of Children* to him. In 1978 Coles wrote a two part profile in the *New Yorker* about him,<sup>20</sup> a testament to the prominence of Percy's public stature. Biographers like Jay Tolson, Lewis Lawson, William Rodney Allen, and Bertram Wyatt-Brown have produced significant studies attempting to peer further into his life, spending most of their professional careers on his life and works. Scholars are still publishing in academic journals using Walker Percy's fiction as a window into the Catholic culture and its intellectual life. All of this is to say, that Walker Percy can indubitably be considered a central player in Catholic Literature and its public intellectual presence. Which is why, just as could be the case for Allen Tate, Thomas Merton, Flannery O'Connor, Dorothy Day, or J.F. Powers, the current debate about Catholic literature and its position in arts and culture would be served well by considering him.

He wrote extensively about the future of the novel and about his own struggle being a writer with Christian convictions. The issue of writing as a Catholic wasn't simply a matter of using Catholic images. Non-Catholics writers can and do use such images: church services, cathedrals, priests, Catholic education, and religious rites and symbols. Rather, it is a deeply complex communicative process involving the author's entire life as a person within Catholicism, yet recognizing the fluxing experience of simultaneously being a part of the world and the communities outside the Catholic sensibility, that was

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<sup>18</sup> Patrick Samway is a Jesuit Priest and Professor who was close friends with Walker Percy, being present throughout Percy's mid-life conversion to Catholicism.

<sup>19</sup> University of Notre Dame, website, Laetare Recipient History. An award that Dana Gioia also received in 2010. As for the NEHs, The Jefferson Lecture, it is the highest honor the federal government confers for distinguished intellectual achievement in the humanities.

<sup>20</sup> Part I: October 2, 1978 and Part II: October 9, 1978.

and still are openly hostile to it. Images and words are easily appropriated and given a new connotation, where the primary meaning the word once evoked is at risk of becoming irretrievably lost for a society. This is the direction Paul Elie sees the Catholic literary language headed:

A seminary student has an affair with an insurance adjuster he met in an office building near Riverside Church; then they go their separate ways — and that’s the whole story. A collective of Dumpster-diving dropouts follows an “Anarchristian” creed on the edge of a student ghetto, and in the novel about them the faith is as sloppy as the sex... This, in short, is how Christian belief figures into literary fiction in our place and time: as something between a dead language and a hangover. Forgive me if I exaggerate. But if any patch of our culture can be said to be post-Christian, it is literature. Half a century after Flannery O’Connor, Walker Percy, Reynolds Price and John Updike presented themselves as novelists with what O’Connor called “Christian convictions,” their would-be successors are thin on the ground.<sup>21</sup>

After this article was published, as could be expected from such striking provocation, a backlash of Catholic writers began contacting Elie, offering their unpublished manuscripts or chides against him for using such a large brush. The article is inflammatory but probably not mere sensationalism. Paul Elie has positioned himself within the literary community to have a larger sense than most Catholic critics about Catholic literature. He is currently serving as Senior Fellow with the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs and Director of the American Pilgrimage Project. Early in his editorial career he worked with *Publishers Weekly* and *Linga Franca*, finally settling in with *Farrar, Straur, and Giroux* in 1995, for seventeen years. Elie also has an intimate familiarity with the twentieth century writers, publishing *The Life You Save May Be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (2003): an eloquently weaved biography of Walker Percy, Flannery O’Connor, Thomas Merton, and Dorothy Day.

According to Elie’s perspective, even Catholic novels that have a semblance of belief, are barely invoking the Catholic language and voice as living words. In *Has Fiction Lost Its Faith*, he cites McDermot’s inclusion of Catholicism as an example,

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<sup>21</sup> Paul Elie. *Has Fiction Lost its Faith?* New York Times Book Review, pg. 1. December 19, 2012.

explaining its weakness as couched in historical narratives that provide the reader with a way of stomaching the element of faith as belonging to the past generations, were such a thing is 'understandable'. If belief is included, it is artificial and marginalized in Catholic writers. The imaginative imagery of belief as a legitimated presence in literature holds little if any affective sway, if it is employed in an impoverished landscape. For Elie the goal of Catholic literature is one, of making the question of belief vitally relevant, able to seize even an indifferent reader. He quotes Flannery O'Connor, "To the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures." By the way Elie describes the successors to Don DeLillo and Cormac McCarthy (consider by him as the last recognizable Catholic novelists) it appears as if they thought creating bold figures was all that O'Connor meant. "But when I close the books their beliefs remain a mystery. Not in the theological sense — a line going off the grid of cause and effect, a portal to the puzzle of existence. I just don't know what they believe or how they came to believe it."<sup>22</sup> Even the faith in DeLillo and McCarthy's writing is seen as beginning to wane, leaving the reader with historical sympathies but not an effected sense of reality. Questioning the presence of faith in Catholic Literature is not a rebuff questioning the faithfulness of American Catholics; as if one's faith can be legitimized only to the extent they can write and produce good novels. The translation of one's depth of experience into a communicable event is an enormous challenge, for a writer faces a wall of tangled networks of words and images floating between the reader and themselves. For Elie, there are just no good contenders to this challenge.

A month later Gregory Wolfe responded in the *Wall Street Journal* to Elie's article with one titled, *Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World*, leading off by introducing the perennial myth of decline that critics often use when seeing their predicament retrospectively, with Elie being explicitly included in this group of critics blinded by the myth. "Religious believers are equally prone to this sort of thing, and they often give it their own spin. One version goes like this: Whereas in the 20th

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid, pg. 3.

century there were literary giants who grappled with faith— T.S. Eliot, Walker Percy, and Flannery O'Connor— our own time is devoid of distinguished writers exploring religious themes.”<sup>23</sup> This being one of the first few sentences of Wolfe’s article, it is unfortunate to already see the debate slipping away from a common understanding. Wolfe’s already leading the conversation astray by his phrase ‘devoid of distinguished writers exploring religious themes.’ Elie doesn’t say he is witnessing a decline of literature with religious content, but is concerned rather, with the quality and way religious content figures into the nexus of novelistic elements used by the writer – the language, voices, setting, etc. – which is directly related to predicting how it will interact with contemporary readers and their larger culture. The challenge is whether or not the explored religious themes can actually stand-up against the living realities that confront the Catholic novel, as it is engaged by an array of people who spend the majority of their time ‘reading’ a different kind of book – American Culture as it is now.

Gregory Wolfe, as editor and one of the founders of *Image* – “a journal that publishes literature and art concerned with the faith traditions of the West” – for the last 24 years, also believes that his experience in the literary field provides him, as it does Elie, with a legitimate grounding for his perspective. He doesn’t deny that contemporary Catholic literature has changed from the mid-century, “It has to do with the way that faith takes on different tones and dimensions depending on the culture surrounding it.”<sup>24</sup> Wolfe describes the change by appropriating Elie’s citation of O’Connor’s take on communicating with the deaf and blind people of modernity, dichotomizing O’Connor’s ‘shouts’ with his prescription of ‘whispers’. His only semi-substantive point is that our culture isn’t like the one confronted by Percy and O’Connor, but rather, we live in post-modernity where all grand metaphysical narratives are held suspect by our culture. He concludes that if cultural behavior and identity shift then author’s depiction will inevitably shift too. Two questions need to be asked though: (1) Is the author consciously choosing to shift the way Catholicism enters into their novel as an intentional strategy for a communicating a

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<sup>23</sup> Gregory Wolfe. *Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World*. Wall Street Journal. January 10, 2013.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 1.

specific point? (2) Why would a complex shift in cultural identity and elements of discourse be responded to with a simple switch of opposites – from ‘shouting’ to ‘whispers’? Wolfe’s answer would logically begin with what he means by ‘whispers’, but this is difficult to interpret because of how relates whispers with a kind of silent obscurity- “Indeed, one of the most ancient religious ideas is that grace works in obscure, mysterious ways. But obscure is not invisible.”<sup>25</sup> Implications of ‘whispers’ are then also tied up into scene citations from two novels that are beyond my paper’s scope. Keeping in mind then that I’m restricting myself to Wolfe’s most obvious meanings from what can reasonably gleaned from his text, it seems that ‘whispers’ are a way of minimizing attempts at reification of religious themes in favor of emphasizing negatively the mystery of an unknown experience.

Consider Christopher R. Beha's "What Happened to Sophie Wilder," published last year, which in *Commentary* magazine critic D.G. Myers said contains "what is perhaps the best conversion scene in an English-language novel since [ Graham Greene's ] 'The End of the Affair.'" The title character, an intelligent, sophisticated writer with no religious background, begins to read Thomas Merton and other writers much concerned with faith. Nothing happens to her for a time, but one day in Mass "something came over her; she walked out changed. It got closer to it to say that she was, for a time, occupied. . . . But mostly she knew that it was something outside of herself, not an idea or a conceit or a metaphor." God is what happens to Sophie Wilder.

My reluctance to grant this as reasonable of Wolfe to include is because up to this point he has made an argument that post-modernism skepticism makes it difficult to court readers with ‘loud’ religious themes, so it is best to whisper. Yet the conversion scene being described violates that method. Beha seems to be writing in a mystical manner about God and personal awareness. Phrases like ‘something came over her’ and ‘she was, for a time, occupied’ are typical of contemporary popular religious sensibility. It is part of popular spiritualist vernacular that tends towards formlessness as being more ‘correct’,

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid, pg. 1.



'intuitable', or 'intelligible' than the narrow tradition of orthodox Christianity.<sup>26</sup> If Beha's conversion scene, the inclusion of Thomas Merton, and attending Catholic Mass is an example of faith whispering in a novel, how are we to identify Walker Percy's novels with main characters that appear to reject Catholicism and supporting character's apathy and/or disenchantment with it? Is the 'whisper' supposed to relate to the absence of descriptions? Favoring simplicity instead of feigning over how to capture in words, that which ultimately drove Saint Thomas Aquinas to silence and his abandonment of his *Summa Theologica*? Walker Percy chose simplicity too, though his execution was to avoid trying to articulate an experience of Grace:

How to write about conversion if it is true that faith is an unmerited gift from God? How to describe, let alone explain it, if this is the case? When it comes to grace, I get writer's block. How to write about other people's conversions when one hardly understands one's own? What one does, of course, is write about causes other than God's Grace, the "proximate," the "material," the "psychological" causes.<sup>27</sup>

Wolfe also cites McDermott's new national award winning book *Charming Billy* as including a whisper of faith. "When someone attempts to play down the reality of death, Billy bursts out: "Our Lord spilling His every drop of blood on the cross to show us death is terrible . . . and all the while we're telling ourselves that it's not so bad, after all." "Life goes on" after a loved one dies, he is told. His response: "I won't let it."<sup>28</sup> I am unable to see these examples as consistent with whispers if the writers half-a-century before used "large-silhouettes."

Almost a year later Wolfe published a longer follow up article in *First Things* called *Cultural Anorexia: Doubting the Decline of Fiction*, including in it a response to Dana Gioia's article *The Catholic Writer Today* (published an edition before Wolfe's). Wolfe argues against Gioia that "the loss of a Catholic presence in mainstream literary culture is not because we are

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<sup>26</sup> The topic of formlessness as a modern reaction to removing authority from the Church and democratizing the 'idea' Christianity is taken up by Martin Mosebach in his book *The Heresy of Formlessness: The Roman Liturgy and Its Enemy*. "The only new thing in Christianity, and what distinguishes it from all other religions--what makes it, so to speak, the capstone of all religions--is not the doctrine, but the Person of the God-man, his birth from a Virgin, his sacrificial death for the sins of mankind, his Resurrection from the dead. It is a historical person, not a mythical one..."

<sup>27</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land: Foreword to The New Catholics*, pg. 343. Patrick Samway. FSG 1991.

<sup>28</sup> Gregory Wolfe. *Whispers of Faith in a Postmodern World*. Wall Street Journal. January 10, 2013.

suffering from a dearth of gifted Catholic writers but because ideological blinders have prevented religious and secular people alike from perceiving and engaging the work that is out there.”<sup>29</sup> These ideological blinders are the myth of secularism having finally triumphed and rid culture of Christianity. It is an illusion generated by the myopia of popular media outlets. Instead of it being a matter of needing new writers, or new stories that are as exemplary as America’s mid-century Catholic novels and writers. Wolfe still adamantly insists a year after his first response to Elie in the *Wall Street Journal*, that our expectation to find the ‘loud’ presence of faith keeps us from hearing its ‘whispers’. “What would feed and nourish us is before us, but we will not eat.”<sup>30</sup> So to the extent that Gioia notes Catholicism virtual absence from a privileged position in our culture’s discourse on Art, Wolfe is willing to agree, but he will not acknowledge the possibility of Catholic writers lacking ingenuity or skill, instead, he still insists that contemporary Catholic writers hold up to the Catholic writers of the mid-century. A significant portion of Wolfe’s article is matching all the mid-century writers Gioia’s cites,<sup>31</sup> with a list of contemporary writers.<sup>32</sup> Even if having exhaustively read each era’s list, it wouldn’t make the debate come closer to finding a suitable understanding since it isn’t a matter of quality for Wolfe. Wolfe’s decline of Catholic literature is only due to *it being excluded* from partaking in the public literary world’s conversation, while Elie and Gioia’s decline of Catholic literature is due to the problems of Catholic culture as a whole, *including the quality* of writing.

It seems to be necessary to sort out the relevant elements of focus for this Catholic literary critique. We are concerned with the text, not problems of distribution and marketing. Even Walker Percy experienced a degree of censorship to increase the

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<sup>29</sup> Gregory Wolfe. *Cultural Anorexia: Doubting the Decline of Fiction*. First Things. December 23, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid, pg 1.

<sup>31</sup> “Flannery O’Connor, Katherine Anne Porter, Walker Percy, J.F. Powers, Ernest Hemingway, Paul Horgan, Jack Kerouac, Julien Green, Pietro di Donato, Hisaye Yamamoto, Edwin O’Connor, Henry Morton Robinson, and Caroline Gordon . . . There were also science-fiction and detective writers such as Anthony Boucher, Donald Westlake, August Delerth, and Walter Miller, Jr.”

<sup>32</sup> “Ron Hansen, Alice McDermott, Cormac McCarthy, Tobias Wolff, Robert Clark, Stuart Dybek, Oscar Hijuelos, Louise Erdrich, David Plante, Ann Patchett, Mary Gordon, Robert Girardi, and the late Andre Dubus . . . There were also science-fiction and detective writers such as Gene Wolfe, Dennis Lehane, Dean Koontz, and the late Tony Hillerman.”

chances of good sales. “I recall to my astonishment at being told that the salesman at Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, my publisher, wanted me to drop the subtitle of a novel I wrote called *Love in the Ruins*, which was, *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* – the suggestion being that a word “Catholic” or even “Bad Catholic” might put people off.”<sup>33</sup>

It also doesn’t include politics, except to the extent the novel is trying to resist the overt and intentional politicization of literature; and finally it is not about writers who are Catholic. There should be some discrimination between Catholics who write *Catholic literature* and Catholics who write *literature*. It is this point in the critic’s public debate that becomes obfuscating: identifying Catholic literature. The reluctance to give a strict definition is understandable from Elie and Gioia’s perspective, because they characterize it as a dynamic process, not just involving religious content. “The Muse is no Calvinist. She does not believe that faith alone justifies an artist.”<sup>34</sup> It is not a matter of believers still writing about religious themes but ones that are oriented towards their specific period. Percy was emblematic of an intellectual Catholic novelist in the 20th century who addressed not just the timeless question of existence and man’s oppositional nature towards his own redemption, but the intellectual lines of thought that had found their way into popular culture and were reshaping it. He crafted his novels to speak not to a reader’s idea of things, but to converse with the way ideas become part of their experience of themselves, relating to a variety of moments with – friends, lovers, failures, simple practical objects, occupations, books, places, emotions, etc. The difficulty an author faces when addressing the intellectual culture is that their novel can suffer from being injected with conceptual thoughts without transforming them with the unique senses of individuality – feelings, perceptions, emotions, movements – that they affect. It was this skill that Percy admired about the existential novelists Sartre, Kierkegaard, and Dostoevsky.

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<sup>33</sup> Walker Percy. *How to be a Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic*, pg 168. FSG. 1984.

<sup>34</sup> Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*, pg. 33. Wiseblood Books. 2014.

An essential quality of powerful Catholic literature, or for that matter all good literature is the avoidance of conveying a sense of artificiality and inauthenticity, where the author never disappears from the reader's awareness, instead lurking amongst the contrivances. "The religious insights usually emerge naturally out of depictions of worldly existence rather than appear to have been imposed intellectually upon the work."<sup>35</sup> What usually results is ironic. "Many Christian readers want inspiring books written by exemplary individuals who depict virtuous characters overcoming life's obstacles to arrive at happy endings. These readers should avoid most Catholic literature."<sup>36</sup>

Whereas, Paul Elie focus on the dying expression of faith in contemporary novels and Gregory Wolfe concerns himself with the general readership's inability to recognize what there actually is, Dana Gioia elaborates a fuller picture that including the aforementioned points.

For years I've pondered a cultural and social paradox that diminishes the vitality and diversity of the American Arts. This cultural conundrum also reveals the intellectual retreat and creative inertia of American religious life. Stated simply, the paradox is that, although Roman Catholicism constitutes the largest religious and cultural group in the United States, Catholicism currently enjoys almost no positive presence in the American fine arts—not in literature, music, sculpture, or painting. This situation not only represents a demographic paradox. It also marks a major historical change—an impoverishment, indeed even a disfigurement—for Catholicism, which has for two millennia played a hugely formative and inspirational role in the arts...Roman Catholicism now ranks overwhelmingly as the largest religious denomination in the United States, with more than sixty-eight million members. (By contrast, the second largest group, Southern Baptists, has sixteen million members.) Representing almost one-quarter of the American population, Catholics also constitute the largest cultural minority in the nation.<sup>37</sup>

Without immediately declaring to have pin-pointed the source of the problem, Gioia, discusses the four characteristic elements that have changed since the prominence of mid-century Catholic literary culture: (1) important writers used to

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<sup>35</sup> Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*, pg. 10. Wiseblood Books, 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid, pg. 14.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid, pg. 1.

publicly identify as faithful Catholics; (2) the cultural establishment once accepted Catholicism as a possible and permissible artistic identity; (3) dynamic and vital Catholic literary forces were visibly at work in the culture; and (4) there was a critical and academic milieu that actively read, discussed, and supported the best Catholic writings.<sup>38</sup> Gioia's writing, despite the overwhelming picture he draws, is more of an invitation to Catholics within and outside the arts to investigate the experiences Gioia initiates. At times he is inciting Catholics to reassume control over how Catholicism is engaged and assimilated by American culture. "If the soul of Roman Catholicism is to be found in partisan politics, then it's probably time to shutter up the chapel. If the universal Church isn't capacious enough to contain a breadth of political opinion, then the faith has shriveled into something unrecognizably paltry. If Catholic Christianity does not offer a vision of existence that transcends the election cycle, if our redemption is social and our resurrection economic, then it's time to render everything up to Caesar."<sup>39</sup>

### Walker Percy Scholarship

Contemporary intellectuals, despite anti-Catholicism's<sup>40</sup> strong influence in public educational institutions, still give some thought to the mid-century writers, but it is largely an act of historicism. Kieran Quinlan's book, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, attempts to reconstruct the entirety of Walker Percy's philosophic and artistic intellect, yet only to constrain him to the typical 1940's Catholic intellectual milieu. Remarking that he is "...a writer engaged in an illusory spiritual pursuit that was merely the belated product of a later discredited bourgeois individualism."<sup>41</sup> Current scholarship that does involve Walker Percy as being relevant beyond historical literary analysis is usually conducted within private Catholic Institutions and tends towards tracing the presence of Catholic rites, liturgical elements, Christology, and theology.

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid, pg. 20.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid, pg. 24.

<sup>40</sup> The American politician and sociologist, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, once pointed out that anti-Catholicism remains "*the one respectable form of intellectual bigotry.*"

<sup>41</sup> Kieran Quinlan. *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, pg. 10. Louisiana State University Press, 1998.

There are some brilliant pieces of scholarship regarding Percy's novels and non-fiction, but there is also a trend to impose an overly optimistic interpretation of redemption for his characters. Scott Rasnic, in his analysis of the ending of *The Last Gentleman*, aptly describes the significance of Jamie's Vaught's baptism; however, he holds that Will Barrett, at the end of the novel, was beginning to grasp the theological significance of things, taking a step in the right direction. "Here at the end, the often baffling and baffled Will Barrett has come, if only just barely, to understand where such extra-ness comes from: the mercy and grace of God..."<sup>42</sup>

Another example is Allen Prigden in *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes: A Search in the Desert*, analysis of *The Last Gentleman*. His understanding of the main character, Will Barrett, as being the subject of a spiritual blindness is in alignment with my understanding except we diverge on a central part of my analysis: Will Barrett's participation in Jamie Vaught's baptism. Prigden describes the scene: "He [Will] witnesses the excruciating death of Jamie and helps Father Boomer with the baptism. Apparently, this death and sacramental rite awaken him to the possibility that there might be mysteries and 'truths', utterly beyond the 'objective' thinking..."<sup>43</sup> He goes on to explain how the last remaining scene relates to Will's spiritual awakening. I disagree with this point, instead interpreting Will as remaining lost at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, unable to clearly understand the significance of Jamie's baptism, despite *being directly involved* in the mystical body. This interpretation is not only based on my reading of Romano Guardini or how the ending is related to the beginning of its sequel, *The Second Coming*. The intention of the scene is revealed by a letter written while Walker Percy was still working on *The Last Gentleman* manuscript, between Percy and his life-long friend, fellow writer and mentor, Shelby Foote.

One thing does alarm me, though: you say this poor bastard never finds the way out. Well and good. I hope you're not going to miss presenting him with a way out. Here's a scene I think you could do: let him come upon a drunken Evangelist {or maybe a crazy one}

<sup>42</sup> Scott Rasnic. *Walker Percy and the Catholic Sacraments*, pg. 78. Baylor University, 2007.

<sup>43</sup> Allen Prigden. *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes: A Search in the Desert*, pg. 28. Associated University Press, 2000.

preaching on the street corner. Mockers are in the crowd, including street urchins. He is an unfrocked priest: someone in the crowd knows this and says so. But he preaches a wild crazy sermon that, behind the wildness, really shows your poor bastard the way. Of course he doesn't take it; it's just wild raving, he thinks.<sup>44</sup>

The tendency of critics to recast the tone of his novel's inconclusiveness as favoring redemption instead of recognizing that Percy's lack of a final resolution emphasizes the gravity of the choice to believe or not-believe, not only for the main characters, but also the reader. Imposing a decision that is never actually fully disclosed or enacted, is a narrow reading that fails to recognize the novel's potentiality to never resolve for the reader, leaving a reader with a lingering discomfort that leaves them with three options: (1) to take the time to seriously reflect on whether they missed something, further engaging with the novel's richness; (2) to choose for the character, revealing their own personal bias, whether they are aware of it or not; or, (3) to breeze through unaware of any significance, which is a choice in its own right, having merely killed time and the novel's statistical odds of surviving the twenty-first century.

Walker Percy's fiction can be difficult for some to understand as Catholic because of its apparent irreverence, especially in his later works like *Love in Ruins* and *Lancelot*, with their boldly grotesque depictions of human failures and Percy's willingness to write vividly about modernity's private lewdness. Percy often explained his approach to writing novels as that of a diagnostician, favoring careful and detailed descriptive work instead of prescriptive. What appears to critics as Percy prescribing Roman Catholicism as the remedial agent, would be an obtuse rendering of Walker Percy's thought on the matter. This type of critique neglects Percy's rigorous philosophical side which many times caused him to speak with greater humility

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<sup>44</sup> Jay Tolson. *The Correspondences of Walker Percy and Shelby Foote: Letter from Foote, 1964*. Double Take Books. 1998.

about his aspirations as a novelist. “...One of the tasks of the serious novelist is, if not to isolate the *bacillus*<sup>45</sup> under the microscope, at least to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable.”<sup>46</sup>

A pathologist’s study of a disease crucially requires being conscientious about prescribing remedies for fear of exacerbating the patients problem or spurring a mutation of the disease. Considering that Percy never ceased thinking about ‘man as he is himself, not man as an organism,’ until his death, we can safely characterize him as a conscientious man, careful in his moralizing. John F. Desmond’s work is extremely informative, revealing numerous ways that Walker Percy’s novels are his lab experiments, with the novel itself as the laboratory he would have had as a practicing pathologist. Two of Desmond’s works helped inform parts of my analysis of Percy’s novels and related implications of Romano Guardini’s *mass-man: Walker Percy’s Search for Community* and *Walker Percy and Suicide*.

Desmond’s *Walker Percy and Suicide* is a sharpened look at how Percy conceptualized modern civilization as death dealing, not only in the obvious post-world wars sense, but in a subtle sense of pervading all of it. Modern life is a suicidal practice where citizens of modern nations become denizens to themselves. “Walker Percy was no stranger to suicide. His family legacy included a long line of ancestors who had taken their own lives, including Percy’s grandfather John Walker Percy in 1917, and his father Leroy Pratt Percy in 1929. In his later years Percy himself expressed amazement and some pride in having “outlived” almost all of his male ancestors, though he did suffer from an inherited disposition toward melancholy.”<sup>47</sup>

While my interest in Percy’s novel *The Last Gentleman* differs from Desmond’s, it is only a matter of depth. Desmond also focuses on Percy’s philosophy of language and semiology as it pertains to Percy’s simultaneous research into the philosophy of Charles Sanders Peirce and his personal private participation in Catholic Rites and his more academic studies of

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<sup>45</sup> A type of bacteria.

<sup>46</sup> Walker Percy. *Diagnosing the Modern Malaise*, pg. 206. Patrick Samway. FSG, 1991.

<sup>47</sup> John F. Desmond. *Walker Percy and Suicide*, pg. 1. First Things. ISI, 2009.



Catholic thought. Semiology, as a developing science of signs in the mid-century (with the American philosopher Peirce, early among the Europeans like Roland Barthes and Saussure), “aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification.”<sup>48</sup>

Percy studied and absorbed Peirce's writings throughout his adult life, eventually making Peirce's realism the centerpiece of most of his own thinking on language. Nevertheless, there were crucial differences between Peirce's and Percy's thought, differences shaped by Percy's religious beliefs... Percy's serious and continuous attraction to Peirce obviously stemmed from his own scientific interests particularly his desire to find a coherent philosophical view. In addition, as Raposa has shown, Peirce's semiotic theories can to a considerable degree be assimilated to Christian theology. Although he was not a practicing Christian believer, and though he tended to view Christ as an ideal figure rather than a unique savior, Peirce found great support for his philosophical ideas in the Scriptures. Peirce's commingling of aspects of Christian theology, ethics, logic, and semiotics would have had strong appeal for Percy. But unlike Peirce, Percy's belief in the Christian Incarnation and the sacraments gave a crucial added dimension—a historical ground—to his own scientific and linguistic perspectives.<sup>49</sup>

Desmond's work, while highly technical, explores the importance of language for communication, not merely the utilitarian sense, but in an inter-personal sense that language, symbols, and images convey meaning about what it is to be a person among persons united in the Church's mystical body. Desmond examines each of Percy's novels to show how he employs his understanding of language as it is used to create and maintain community, but also how Percy conceives of its failure furthering alienation and isolation. It was through Desmond's work that the theme of communicating the Catholic voice of faith became readily apparent to me as not requiring Percy to rely upon archaic Catholic vernacular.

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<sup>48</sup> Roland Barthes. *Elements of Semiology*, pg. i. Hill and Wang, 1968.

<sup>49</sup> John F. Desmond. *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, pg. 15-16. Athens: U of Georgia P, 2004.

## 20<sup>th</sup> Century Intellect & Romano Guardini

In 1912, the magazine *Catholic World* published an article titled *Modern Theories and Moral Disaster*, written by Father Thomas Gerrard, expressing the anxiety of American Catholic thinkers as they witnessed the philosophies that fueled the Enlightenment and were regarded as having reached their logical conclusion. “Three centuries of philosophic thought was at last reaching its ultimate destination – not merely in atheism but also radical individualism, self-indulgence, and even nihilism.”<sup>50</sup> One product of natural philosophy and science was Darwin’s book *Origin of the Species*. It posed a direct and articulate challenge, not only to the teleology of God’s creation ex nihilo, but also increased intellectual support of Pragmatism by subverting the notion of absolutes which are foundational for Scholasticism and its Ethics. Although there were some rational humanists skeptical of humanity being able to manage their conduct on the basis of relativity, they were dismissed by the optimism that it could be handled by social scientists and the State. Catholics weren’t alone in their experience of being intellectually dislocated as the twentieth century began largely considering the anthropological implications of Darwin’s Theory of Evolution. Freud and Marx challenged secular conceptions of sociality of humans and their ability to understand themselves with certainty. The historian T. Jackson Lears in, *No Place of Grace: Antimodernism and the Transformation of American Culture 1880-1920*, documents the general sense of gravity experienced by ordinary Americans too, regardless of religious convictions. The Southern intellectuals were also extremely outspoken against modern industrialism and its ethics of consumerism and materialism. In 1930, twelve Southern public figures spoke out in support of the Agrarian Tradition, publishing a manifesto titled *I’ll Take My Stand*.<sup>51</sup>

Religion can hardly expect to flourish in an industrial society. Religion is our submission to the general intention of a nature that is fairly inscrutable; it is the sense of our role as creatures within it. But nature industrialized, transformed into cities and artificial

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<sup>50</sup> Thomas E. Woods. *The Church Confronts Modernity*, pg.1. Columbia University Press, 2004.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, pg. 2.

habitations, manufactured into commodities, is no longer nature but a highly simplified picture of nature... The amenities of life also suffer under the curse of a strictly-business or industrialized civilization. They consist in such practices as manners, conversation, hospitality, sympathy, family-life, romantic love – in the social exchanges which reveal and develop sensibility in human affairs.<sup>52</sup>

The southern mind was already acutely aware of what industrialism threatened, not simply to their economic system, but more importantly, the virtues of an agrarian community. Even proponents of industrialism at the time were well aware of the possible negative effects industrialism could have on fundamental human relations but believed they could be easily resolved by educational and social programs. The sense of southern agrarian solidarity was impressed upon the South's historical self, a self that Percy was raised in, critical of the industrial intellectual perspective of the natural environment and its consequences beyond merely transforming raw material and manufacturing products.

The southern poet Allen Tate, a convert to Catholicism, was one of the twelve contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* with his piece, *Remarks on the Southern Religion*, further elaborating the question of the southerner's ability to reclaim and understand religion in the face of industrialism and modern philosophy. "It [*Remarks on the Southern Religion*] does not pretend to do the following: to show that the complete horse may be there in spite of the fact that this discussion cannot bring him forth. In other words, there is a complete and self-contained horse in spite of the now prevailing faith that there is none simply because the abstract and scientific mind cannot see him. This modern mind sees only half of the horse - the half which may become a human dynamo, or an automobile, or any other horse-powered machine."<sup>53</sup> Allen Tate saw the religious mind as wanting to account for and defend the whole horse not just the mechanical nature of 'horse.' The mechanical reduction of all things to utility by the industrial self was a rejection of life for everything that fell under its gaze, and as such, the southerner was expected to struggle against the 'modern scientific mind' not just personally and conceptually within one's psyche, as a

<sup>52</sup> Louis D. Rubin, Jr. *I'll Take My Stand* pg. xlii-xliii. Louisiana State University Press. 1997.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. Allen Tate. *Remarks on the Southern Religion*, pg. 157.

psychological battle, but also socially and economically as the scientific mind turned the horse into a human-dynamo and only a human-dynamo - the horse never was. The virtues of beautiful and tender human relationships were also threatened by a mind cleaved to science, which once they began to decay so would man's higher activities and expressions. "If religion and the arts are founded on right relations of man-to-nature, these are founded on right relations of man-to-man."<sup>54</sup>

In the early twentieth century a surge of American intellectuals began publically converting to Catholicism. Their secularized and atheistic counterparts began accusing them of converting merely because of the anxiety caused by the world wars and moral depravity. They were seen as shifting backwards into anti-enlightenment sentiments, lacking the courage to step beyond the mythical and ignorant past, and proceed with Progressivism and Liberalism's agenda of humanity's liberation. When accused of anti-intellectualism, the Catholic intellectuals would respond that rational humanism and its elevation of scientific reason as the ultimate guide of humanity had proven to be unable to account for what it meant to be fully and self-evidently human. The argument came close to home for Walker Percy. In 1946, while in Santa Fe, before his conversion to Catholicism in 1947, Foote told him "that his mind was in full intellectual retreat,"<sup>55</sup> upon hearing his intention to convert.<sup>56</sup>

Walker Percy, however it may have appeared to Shelby Foote, wasn't rushing into the Catholic Church, zealously prepared for baptism and first communion. Having been raised by his cousin William Alexander Percy after his parents died, young Percy had been imbued by proximity to a southern aristocratic world of arts and letters in a perpetual club house for all sorts of intellectuals – from William Faulkner to Harry Stack Sullivan. Will Percy was a single lawyer-poet-novelist-agrarian who was inclined towards Marcus Aurelius' stoicism more than he was to any one traditional religion, exemplifying

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, pg. xliii.

<sup>55</sup> Jay Tolson. *Correspondences Between Walker Percy and Shelby Foote*, pg. 7. Double Take Books, 1998.

<sup>56</sup> Paul Elie. *The Life You Save May Be Your Own*, pg. 157. FSG, 2003.

paternalism's strength: service to others, defense of the weak, right is right, benevolent sharecropping. Young Percy was raised in this twilight of *noblesse oblige*<sup>57</sup> and Christendom, lamented of by Will in his autobiography:

We of my generation have lost one line of fortification after another, the old south, the old ideals, the old strengths. We are now watching the followers of Jesus and Buddha and Socrates being driven from the face of the Earth. But there is time ahead, thousands of years: there is but one good life and men yearn for it and will practice it again, though of my contemporaries only the stars will see. Love and compassion, beauty and innocence will return. It is better to have breathed them an instant than to have supported inequity a millennium. Perhaps only flames can rouse a man from apathy to his destiny.<sup>58</sup>

The thought of Catholicism in any positive sense didn't strike Walker Percy till he was sent to a sanatorium near Saranac Lake, New York for two years after contracting tuberculosis while completing his physician's residency. It was there that a fellow patient, Arthur Fortune, introduced him to the Catholic intellect of Thomas Aquinas. It was also there that Percy made up for his solely scientific education he received at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. "Like most medical students I had a one-sided education. I was a professional skeptic."<sup>59</sup> The Sanatorium became his new place of study, independently building the foundation to his Arts and Letters discipline through the curriculum of the twentieth century European mind, with teachers such as: Camus, Sartre, Marcel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Thomas Mann, Kafka, Jacques Maritain, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. He also became interested in semiology after reading a philosophical journal article published by Susan Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key*. It was upon this that Percy began building up to what Desmond calls Percy's theosemiotic view – a compounding of his study of the existential novelists (Kafka, Sartre, Camus, Thomas Mann), Christian Existentialism (Dostoevsky, Kierkegaard, Heidegger), Semiology (Susan Langer, Frege, Charles Sanders Peirce) and Catholic Theologians (Guardini, Aquinas). Percy had developed an incredible ability to synthesize the language of science and its strict

<sup>57</sup> *Noblesse Oblige* is French for "Nobility Obliges." It is the concept that nobility extends beyond mere entitlements. Implying a moral economy wherein privilege must be balanced by duty towards those who lack such privilege or who cannot perform such duty.

<sup>58</sup> William Alexander Percy. *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*. FSG, 1941.

<sup>59</sup> Lewis Lawson. *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, pg. 68. University Press of Mississippi. 1993.

methodologies, with the existential perspective and Catholic anthropology. When he began writing fiction ten years later, he was able to keep the novel's story vitally tangible and relevant to ordinary concrete human experience.

My point is that the stance of the physician is appropriate here. For his stance is one of the diagnostician. A diagnostician is a person who stands toward another person in the relation of one who knows that something has gone wrong with the other. He, the physician-novelist, has a nose for pathology. In his case, that of the physician-novelist, the pathology he discovers in his characters has afflicted the very society that surrounds him. It might be called scientism... not the truth and beauty of the scientific method, but a certain abstractedness and disorientation that follows upon the elevation of science to an all-enveloping ideology.<sup>60</sup>

Just as every physician's training in pathology includes memorizing diseases and their symptoms, Walker Percy as a physician-novelist, spent years studying as a metaphysician. One such course of study that is usually neglected by scholars of Walker Percy, is Percy's familiarity with Romano Guardini's critique and study of the history of western society's metaphysics – beginning with the ancient Greeks to European modernity – and its disastrous conclusions for genuine personhood. Percy acknowledges Guardini in his non-fiction essays:

To state the matter as plainly as possible, I would echo a writer like Guardini who says simply that the modern world has ended, the world, that is of the past two or three hundred years, which we think of as having been informed by the optimism of the scientific revolution, rational humanism, and... Christendom... To speak of the decay of Christendom is to say nothing of the ultimate truth of Christianity, but only to call attention to a cultural phenomenon and the symbols with which it was conveyed.<sup>61</sup>

Since western antiquity man's sense of being and his image of *the world he found himself in*, had gone through three radical shifts by the time Guardini wrote *The End of the Modern World*: the Classical, the Medieval, and the Modern. Walker Percy's era was to witness the dissolution of the modern world. Guardini only concerns himself with describing the sense each era had of their self-identity and its relation to the world. Contemporary science and education create a model that would map

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<sup>60</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land: The Novelist as Physician*, pg. 194. Patrick Samway, FSG. 1991.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. *Diagnosing the Modern Malaise*, pg. 208.

on the following way: Man's sense of being would be physiological, we typically view ourselves as biological bodies and interpret our sense of self through the logic of what having a biological body implies – for example biological organisms decay, die and decompose, therefore “I” will undergo a similar process. The world is typically in reference to physical locations, environments, earth, etc. The concept that is unfamiliar to our general sensibility is Being. We may equivocate and say ‘existence’, but that usually falls back on ‘existing physically as an organism or natural object that is subject to change.’ If pushed further for an answer, we may say ‘Nature,’ usually meaning we live ‘within space-time’ determined by something called Nature, that has laws ordering and limiting things, absolutely. Nature ‘just is’ and it is what determines the existence of things. Beyond its many uses in the scientific disciplines – psychology, chemistry, physiology, anatomy, biology, physics, geometry, astrology, and mathematics – its definition is always defined in negative theological terms. “The technological mind sees nature as an insensate order, as a cold body of facts, as a mere “given,” as an object of utility, as raw materials... it views the cosmos similarly as a mere “space” into which objects can be thrown with complete indifference. The Technological man will remold the world...”<sup>62</sup>

The era most relevant to Percy's literature is the medieval shift into the modern era described above. “The Middle Ages transformed radically man's sense of existence and his vision of the world. Medieval man centered his faith... in the Revelation which affirmed the existence of a God Who holds His Being separate and beyond the world.”<sup>63</sup> From the Revelation arose the Christian Faith, where each person recognized that they must confront and answer His Call. As finite beings, each person could find the fullness of their personality only by recognizing their relationship and dependence upon the Transcendent. While it is common to consider this Dogma of the Church as oppressive, as it is said to bind and limit society with its Authority, for the Medieval personality it was the only way to surmount itself and its world. “Medieval man was interested neither in pursuing nature and history empirically nor in mastering reality theoretically. He chose to plunge into truth by way of meditation; then

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<sup>62</sup> Romano Guardini. *The End of the Modern World*, pg. 55. ISI, 1956.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid*, pg. 7.

he drew from his meditations the spiritual laws governing all reality.”<sup>64</sup> What contemporary science takes up zealously as the obvious way to establishing knowledge – natural sciences and natural history – would have appeared futile and ignorant to the medieval intellect, for it would be to misunderstand the intellect’s power, ignoring the relationship between a finite world and a transcendent Being. Surveying lower orders of finite existence to understand one’s self would have been to degrade one’s divine image.

The modern shift resulted from the pursuit of knowledge being founded independent of Revelation. This modern preoccupation with proving humanism’s rational self-reliance began the development of an autonomous cultural process that was intent on discovering the truth of existence by experiment and rational theory in the physical sciences. The assumption was that their methodological approach founded on the certainty of empiricism, would allow them to discover the truth of existence allowing transcendence and self-mastery. The actual reality was that modernity had begun constructing an identity that would perpetually copy itself, mechanically integrating into all features of civilization and its members, since at the beginning of modernity’s revolution the self was emptied of all immaterial metaphysics, it was a *tabula rasa*, occupied only by the furnishings offered forth by experience. The Agrarian sensibility described the behavior simply. “Ambitious men fight, first of all, against nature; they propose to put nature under their heel; this is the dream of scientists burrowing in their cells... nature wears out man before man can wear out nature; only a city man, a laboratory man, a man cloistered from the normal contacts with the soil, will deny that.”<sup>65</sup>

These obvious distortions are what Percy addresses by the term scientism and its influence on what Marcel would call man as a *homo viator* – man finding himself as pilgrim in a particular time and place. Percy contrasts scientism against the scientific method, claiming that the former is a crude appropriation of what is actually an elegant invention for discovery and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid, pg. 23.

<sup>65</sup> *I’ll Take My Stand*, pg. 9.



technology. The scientific method turns into scientism when it tries to apply its method of discovering constants and universals upon understanding the particular question of one's own existence. Guardini's *mass-man* is modernity's constructed self-identity that is supposed to be the answer for the ultimate question of self. It is calculated by statistical averages and empirical induction. Standardized by polls, economical and industrial functional needs, free market movements, and by creating "an environment belonging only to himself, and reflecting only himself."<sup>66</sup> Scientism has a homogenizing effect upon each personality, passively disabling originality and creativity, because the fullness of life and richness of personality are ends lost or sanctified by confronting the Call of God, which modern institutions are inherently deaf too. Donald Davidson, one of the twelve agrarians, remarked about the future of art under industrialism. "If they exist at all, they will flourish only in a diseased and disordered condition, and the industrial Maecenas will find himself in the embarrassing position of having to patronize an art that secretly hates him and calls him bad names." For the southern intelligence, work and leisure were to be enveloped by the goal of a stable establishment that nurtured the growth of Art and Religion. Beauty is wholly dependent on right relations in a community and in nature, if these faltered, art was distorted. The southern intelligentsia warned about progress as principled. If viewed as a principle, it would express itself endlessly. The same applies for the modern self. How then are we to identify falsity?

What irrevocably is a man? A man is a person called by God. As that man he is capable of answering for his own actions and of participating in reality through an inner and innate source which is one with himself. This capacity makes each man unique. A man is not unique because of his peculiar talents; a man is unique in the clear and absolute sense that, as is each of his fellows, he is a being one with himself, indispensable, irreplaceable, inviolate.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Romano Guardini. *The End of the Modern World*, pg. 60. ISI, 1956.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, pg. 63.

From this Guardini asks, “does the leveling which flows from the dominance of the many cause the loss of personality or does it cause the loss of the person himself?”<sup>68</sup> Percy takes up this question with what he considers a way of knowing in its own right, the novel. It is a way of exploring and capturing specific salient features of society in the great movement of history, and placing it in a way before the reader, not as a portrait, but as an evocation of their wayfarer nature. It provides the novelist with a meditative practice of deliberately slow and drawn out self-reflection. If a novelist has an easy and relaxing time with *their novel* then they have fooled themselves into believing they are writing as a way of knowing. “Writing a novel is a terrible experience, during which the hair often falls out and the teeth decay. I’m always irritated by people who imply that writing fiction is an escape from reality. It is a plunge into reality and it’s very shocking to the system.”<sup>69</sup>

The modern culture treats the self as universally given to our own self-reflective powers so that the only authority one needs to recognize is one’s own conclusions after having exercised self-reflection. If it is not self-evident for a modern individual then it is useless and void of meaning. Yet modernity will recognize a more palatable authority in psychology, most likely because its multiplicity of practices doesn’t contradict the modern self’s control. Popular psychology, as it manifested itself in new cultural commodities – self-help books, health magazines, how-to-be: successful, make friends, find true love, etc. – postures itself with a therapeutic task since it is seen as having accomplished a fundamental understanding of the psyche.<sup>70</sup> Percy was familiar with this perspective from his medical training in psychiatry and debates imaginatively with it in his fiction and scholastically in his essays and academic papers.

We are told tacitly by scientism to instead spend our time and energy effectively on exploring and understanding how the natural world works. With the naïve rational humanist presumption that everything can be penetrated by our intellect, and

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid, pg. 64.

<sup>69</sup> Flannery O’Connor. *Mystery and Manners*, pg. 40. Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1969.

<sup>70</sup> The etymological root is the greek word *psuke* for soul, yet for modernity the classical understanding of the soul becomes regarded solely as a phenomena of the mind.

that which still remains unsolved will be the task of future generations to eventually master. Unlike the continual project of natural science's accumulation of knowledge read into our future history, the metaphysical problems are considered concluded and belong with the Greek gods and scholastic non-sense about how many angels can fit on the head of a needle. Self-knowledge and morality is democratized, as each individual is considered to possess the self-sufficiency to determine what is true and right. Academic disciplines and education become instruments of the individual to construct their own sense of the world, as long as it's within the relative boundaries of that era's 'reason' or new fashionable self-betterment provided by the culture. The naïve progressive sees each generation as natural 'evolving' towards a greater illuminated reason than the ones before. Guardini predicted that the incoherent modern sensibility would begin to dissolve as the modern culture begins showing signs of disease, manifesting in the modern malaise. Unfortunately, the anxiety the general culture will experience, if they choose to acknowledge their falseness, will eventually drive them to change, but in the wrong direction. Accepting the falsity of modernity will result in a final public break with the remaining religious heritage of Western culture, because the falsity of modern culture was its hypocritical belief in values that modern metaphysics undermined – the way an individual lived and how they considered their self didn't match their purported values and principles. If modernity is to be consistent with its belief in 'man perfecting man,' then according to Guardini, its future success would depend upon replacing the lingering religious sentiment with a new religion, one consistent the rejection of God. "...man-in-the-world is the source of his own alienation because he cannot find anything that transcends his moment in it. The shrinkage of the cosmological principle of human self-understanding did not merely conclude in materialism, but in a re-spiritualization of the world itself."<sup>71</sup> Modern culture's scientism and progressive industrial techniques would give way to an artificial religion with man and his world as its

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<sup>71</sup> Wayne Allen. *Romano Guardini and the Dissolution of Western Culture*, pg. 200. Modern Age, 1998.

object – the state, politics, and biology. The modern intellect constructed an ethic and parallel culture that only regarded history and spiritual identities as valuable to the extent they could secure its ends.

### **The Art and Skill of a Catholic Novelist**

*“The individual cannot think and communicate his thought, the governor and legislator cannot act effectively or frame his laws without words, and the solidity and validity of these words is in the care of the damned and despised litterati . . . when their very medium, the very essence of their work, the application of word to thing goes rotten, i.e. becomes slushy and inexact, or excessive or bloated, the whole machinery of social and of individual thought and order goes to pot.”*

-Ezra Pound

A central point the contemporary Catholic literary critics didn't include was the simple yet powerful understanding that all a writer has for their art are words. “The trouble is that when words get abused, cheapened, exhausted, worn thin as poker chips, the novelist is losing his only tools. Always in deep trouble, he is now in deeper trouble than usual.”<sup>72</sup> Walker Percy was highly aware of the emptying modern language was suffering as it was being run through public chatter and the grand entertainment machine. His writings continually address the commercialization of religion as spirituality, the Hollywood environment, and the loud presence of Evangelicals in the public sphere. Five years before Percy died in 1990, Neil Postman wrote, “not long ago, I saw Billy Graham join with Shecky Green, Red Buttons, Dionne Warwick, Milton Berle and other theologians in a tribute to George Burns, who was celebrating himself for surviving eighty years in show business. The Reverend Graham exchanged one-liners with Burns about making preparations for Eternity. Although the Bible makes no mention of it, the Reverend Graham assured the audience that God loves those who make people laugh. It was an honest mistake. He merely mistook NBC for God.”<sup>73</sup> Around the same time Postman's book *Amusing Ourselves to Death* was published, Percy was writing about television and the threat it posed to developing young minds of future generations,

<sup>72</sup> Walker Percy. *Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 161.

<sup>73</sup> Neil Postman. *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pg. 5. Penguin Books, 1985.

pessimistically speculating about the future of the novel... “If books, written and read by a few educated people, turned the world upside down, how to calculate the effects of... six hours a day, day after day, year after year.”<sup>74</sup>

The Catholic novelist had only one thing accessible to assist them with using words whose days seemed numbered - their self-awareness and sensibility. Which was a difficult challenge to reclaim according to Guardini, but would prove fruitful in two ways: (1) the author’s struggles and hardships, if experienced as a unique person called by God, would give them greater depth and clarity; and (2) it would give them a unique and creative voice for using language. “With the best of intentions, he subverts both the Christendom and the paganism of his culture and he does so cheerfully and in good heart, because as a creature of the culture he is subverting himself, first, last, and always.”<sup>75</sup> Walker Percy and Flannery O’Connor take upon themselves the job of Catholic novelists with a weighty severity.

Why pair them together? They were familiar with each other’s work and conceptual approaches. They had the same editor at Farrar, Straus and Giroux publishing house, and sent their manuscripts to the same reviewer and mentor Caroline Gordon.<sup>76</sup> Both Flannery O’Connor and Walker Percy wrote about being novelists with Christian convictions, informed by the old dying southern life and their Catholicism. O’Connor is being included in this section particularly for her articulation in *The Fiction Writer and His Country*, of the strange irony of a modernized public. Typical Americanisms abounded, expressing its country as “enjoying an unparalleled prosperity,” being “the strongest nation in the world” and having “almost produced a classless society;” yet an editorial piece published in the *Times Magazine* was bemoaning the absence of a literary voice in the country to express the joyousness of the great era of progress. Flippantly referring to ‘the joy of life itself’ as what the voice of the country should resound. The editor’s rhetoric conflates ‘joy of life itself’ with spiritual values. In this sense, spiritual values

<sup>74</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land*, pg. 296.

<sup>75</sup> Walker Percy. *Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 181.

<sup>76</sup> (Interesting note, after Flannery dies in ‘64 (the more shockingly grotesque writer) Walker Percy’s novels become more exaggerated and perverse-caricatures replace the subtler style).

become objects, simple matters of fact that we can just recall and they will answer our summons. O'Connor contrasts this sense of entitlement to the activity of vocation. "A vocation is a limiting factor which extends even to the kind of material the writer is able to apprehend imaginatively. The writer can choose what he writes about but he cannot choose what he is able to make live, and so far as he is concerned, a living deformed character is acceptable, and a dead whole one is not."<sup>77</sup> O'Connor continues:

What these editorial writers fail to realize is that the writer who emphasizes spiritual values is very likely to take the darkest view of all of what he sees in his country today. For him, the fact that we are the most powerful and wealthiest nation doesn't mean a thing in any positive sense. The sharper the light of faith, the more glaring are to be the distortions the writer sees in the life around him.

O'Connor is not associating spiritual values as always paired with dark imagery, as if required if one was to write about them. Rather, an author's sensibility will involuntarily change to the degree they embody spiritual values internally and communally, disclosing the modern world's deformity in all its detail. The disfigurement of the person is usually covered over by daily modern life. The modern routine offers more immediate satisfaction but it comes at a high price, a loss of refined sensibility for spiritual values, a loss which is typically insensible because of its subtle nature compared to gross satisfaction. The novelist with Christian convictions can only depict the fullness of their vision as it relates communally (not just to their own 'private life'), and if it is a fallen world, to write utopian fiction would be dead on arrival. "Naming death in life... is a thousand times more life-affirming than all the life-affirming self-help books about me being okay and you being okay when in fact everybody is not okay, but more than likely in deep trouble. Beware of people who think that everything is okay. My own

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<sup>77</sup> Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and Manners*, pg. 27. Farrar, Straus & Giroux 1969.

secret belief is that Leo Buscaglia,<sup>78</sup> leading apostle of love and okayness, is in deep trouble and will soon require psychiatric help.”<sup>79</sup> If the Catholic novelist is to make belief believable, the writing has to meet the reader, in a world familiar to them.

This is in agreement with Dana Gioia’s view that it would be misleading to emphasize overt Catholic themes as qualifying literature to be classified as Catholic. There are a number of authors who have divorced themselves from the Catholic Church and antagonistically and unavoidably intertwined Catholic themes, yet would not be agreeable to being included with novelists writing about faith. “The greatest misunderstanding of Catholic literature is to classify it solely by its subject matter.”<sup>80</sup> *The Last Gentleman* and the sequel *The Second Coming*, could easily be Nietzschean as much as they could be Dostoevskian. They are in no explicit manner dogmatic or interfaced with theological treatises. While Percy undoubtedly held Church Dogma in high regard and was well-read in theology, his writing illuminates life as angelic, as it is bestial. He keeps his dominant characters lacking any sense of stability and certainty, even though he was concretely and deeply situated, in a very intimate sense, with his Catholic practice (becoming an oblate later on in life) and convictions.

“The religious insights usually emerge naturally out of depictions of worldly existence rather than appear to have been imposed intellectually upon the work.”<sup>81</sup> What was not noted in any length by Gioia, besides mentioning ingenuity, is that an author’s ability to produce such an effect is contingently bound to their unique insight. There is no methodology we can distill from Flannery or Percy. It seems like a trivial point to make but it is important to realize that such an effect is not universally achievable or repeatable. Contemporary authors can appropriate the style, resurrecting Walker Percy’s ‘voice’, repeating the dissected notions, but to put it rather crudely, this is grave robbing. The whole integrated unity that was the life of Walker Percy is responsible for his public reception, and for his uniquely crafted novels. In a letter to Foote, Percy wrote, “I’m

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<sup>78</sup> Formally known as Felice Leonardo Buscaglia. A professor, writer, and motivational speaker in the 70’s popularly known as ‘Dr. Love’.

<sup>79</sup> Walker Percy. *Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 29. Faust Publishing, 1986.

<sup>80</sup> Dana Gioia. *The Catholic Writer Today*, pg 10. Wiseblood Books 2014.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, pg. 12.

attempting the impossible to write about traditional great themes, love, sin, god, death...” but Percy was well aware that writing is not a function of the will, “one waits until one finds a language.”<sup>82</sup> ‘Timeless’ themes are always taken up in time, which will always require a unique and un-reusable vernacular style of language discovered and crafted by a particular author for a particular reader. When Percy says “one waits,” he is referring to the mid-century novelist’s bardo, of the shifting self-caught in modernity’s dissolution. A creative person who walks the borderlands between faith and doubt – continually in conversation with all lines of thought and well versed in all of their intricacies.

If the novel is seen as a participatory aid for reestablishing sensitivity to the uniqueness of each person’s own life, how is one to view the reader? A novel is not mysticism and those who expect extraordinary conversion are charging someone else, in this case the author, with divine responsibility, instead of seeking liberation from their mundane waking and rotating amnesia by crawling out in humility from the burden of societal meanings taken up and absorbed by merely living in the world. The novel works to the degree the reader works. Though, as a novelist, Percy wouldn’t have stopped writing because of an actual or speculated readership unable to interact meaningfully with his novels, it is a diagnostic tool for himself too. The possibility that the future culture will be in worse shape and that the novel might prove itself no longer able to make belief believable is always present for Percy. The end of *The Last Gentleman* reflects his pessimism. But his pessimism isn’t completely without hope – “He has to be hopeful or he would not bother to write at all.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Jay Tolson. *The Correspondences of Walker Percy and Shelby Foote*, pg. 179.

<sup>83</sup> Walker Percy on the job of novelists.



**The Last Gentleman 1966**

“And there is ... a type of modern man who can neither believe nor contain himself in unbelief and who searches desperately, feeling about in all experience for the lost God.”

—Flannery O’Connor, *Mystery and Manners*

My analysis will focus specifically on the main character Will Barrett, playfully and purposefully nicknamed the Engineer<sup>84</sup> by Percy. The novel acts as the entire modern self, of which, the Engineer is its dissolution. The reader holds the position of the actual whole Self, semi-consciously moving through its other ‘selves’ via the dominant consciousness of Will Barrett. By doing this Percy is emphasizing the importance of the dissolution of the modern world as it relates to possibilities beyond it for assuming a new way of stabilizing. The other characters represent different stabilized but fragmented features of the modern self, with Sutter Vaughn being the second most influential self acting upon the reader’s tacit sense of identity. After describing the Engineer and his relationships with the other characters, I will focus on the moment of possible liberation from just passively merging with the other self’s and continuing with the process of modernity and recognizing the redemptive element of ‘taking a leap of faith’ at the end of the book. Percy already foreshadows early on about the Engineer’s way of handling situations that require choosing an identity:

His trouble came from groups. Though he was as pleasant and engaging as could be, he had trouble doing what the group expected him to do. Though he did well at first, he did not for long fit in with the group. This was a serious business. His doctor spoke a great deal about the group: what is your role in the group? And sure enough that was his trouble. He either disappeared into the group or turned his back on it. Once when he was a boy... gathering around the council fire to sing songs and listen to the director tell stories and later ask everyone to stand up then and there and make a personal decision for Christ, he crept out of the circle of firelight and lit out down the road to Asheville...<sup>85</sup>

His trouble with group expectations is that the present him with choices that will require a kind of definiteness that he himself lacks. “A German physician once remarked that in the lives of people who suffer from emotional illness he had noticed

<sup>84</sup> A nickname that was also given to Thomas Mann’s main character Hans Corp in the novel *The Magic Mountain*.

<sup>85</sup> Walker Percy. *The Last Gentleman*, pg. 18.

the presence of Lucken or gaps. Most of this young man's life was a gap."<sup>86</sup> The Engineer is unable to find a sense of continuity for himself which results in his sense of continual alienation. Guardini discusses this type of anxiety belonging only to modernity, when individuals become aware of the homelessness of their constructed sense of self, no longer able to ignore how misshapen it is in the face of existence. "It is the century of the love of death. I am not talking just about Verdun or the Holocaust or Dresden or Hiroshima. I'm talking about a subtler form of death, a death in life, of people who seems to be living lives which are good by all sociological standards and yet who somehow seem to be more dead than alive."<sup>87</sup>

A sign of the Engineer as modernity's dissolution is that he is continually driven by a prevailing sense that something is wrong, yet as a modern man he approaches the malaise as capable of being overcome through strict rationality. Caught up in a sensibility that only recognizes the elegance and simplicity of mathematical universal reasoning, Percy has the Engineer constantly finding his center by turning to 'self-help' books that assure him that he is doing everything to live a fulfilled and happy life and always reading his '*Theory of Large Numbers*.' It is the modern belief in perfectibility of man by man, through use of reason.

He began the days by reading a few lines from *Living*, a little volume of maxims for businessmen which he had come across in Macy's book department. It made him feel good to read its crisp and optimistic suggestions. *On your way to work, put aside your usual worries. Instead keep your mind both relaxed and receptive – and playful. The most successful businessmen report that their greatest ideas often come to them in such intervals.*<sup>88</sup>

The Engineer is constantly able to clearly express the distorted sense of things but not the source of the distortion. "In here the air was thick as mustard gas with ravenous particles which were stealing the substance from painting and viewer

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid, pg. 18.

<sup>87</sup> Walker Percy. *Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time*, pg. 162.

<sup>88</sup> *The Last Gentleman*, pg. 43.

alike.”<sup>89</sup> His choice of words is rather revealing though – ravenous *particles* – alluding to the mechanistic atomic theory that all things in existence are supposed be reducible to. His commitment to the truth and of science and its faith in its methodology for all phenomena blinds him to his own contradictory self-revelations. It is this commitment and Internalization of Principles of Engineering not allowing him to ‘hear’ or ‘see’ the sacramental moment in the hospital. But the Engineer is continually a living tension, an Engineer and a poet: “It must be admitted that although he prided himself on his scientific outlook and set great store by precision instruments like microscopes and chemical balances, he couldn’t help attributing magical properties to the telescope. It had to do with its being German, with fabled German craftsmen, gnomish slow-handed old men in the Harz Mountains. These lenses did not transmit light merely. They penetrated to the heart of things.”<sup>90</sup>

The heart of things is a brilliant play of words. While the modern sensibility sees it as an expression of getting to the invariant principles that are hidden within nature and its objects, the Engineer gives it a more mythical sense, for it is the instrument by which he spots Kitty Vaught on a park bench in Central Park, immediately becoming infatuated with her. The telescope is the Engineer’s point of entry back into a group, back into a community.

It is by entering the Vaught Family, that the Engineer – the dissolving modern self – presents the reader with different ways to confront the instability of the modern self. Kitty Vaught is a hyper-romantic love interest that can quell the loneliness by infatuation, and ‘self-less’ giving. Jamie Vaught is the explicit image of the dying – the dissolution – whom the Engineer has promised to spend his time with till he dies. Mr. and Mrs. Vaught are a kind of Southern Aristocracy, but they are not agrarians, they live on a golf course instead of a fertile farm. The relationship is absent of love. Mrs. Vaught is continually depicted as lost in nostalgia, overly fixed on southern history – General Kirby Smith and the fall of the Confederacy - and the what-ifs of whether the Civil War would have ended in southern favor. Mr. Vaught’s is a man of economy, working for his cars.

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid, pg. 28.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid, pg. 31.

As an industrial-business man he sells machines, and like an inhuman machine he hires someone to be there for his dying son.

Valeria Vaught is a militant Catholic nun whose first interaction with the Engineer is about his responsibility to ensure Jamie's salvation by having him baptized before he dies.

The last member of the Vaught family is Sutter, who the Engineer engages with the greatest degree of inner concern out of all the characters. The first time the reader is given a piece of explicit insight into the nature of Sutter's character is when Jamie shows the Engineer a scientific article of Sutter's that he keeps in his pillow case, titled: *The Incidence of Post-Orgasmic Suicide in Male University Graduates*, with two sections sub-titled, (1) *Genital Sexuality as the Sole Surviving Communication Channel between Transcending-Immanent Subjects* – (2) *The Failure of Coitus as a Mode of Re-entry into the Sphere of Immanence from the Sphere of Transcendence*. Sutter thus becomes the beginning of Percy's critique of Freudian psychology and sexuality.

Despite that Sutter's ex-wife describes him as a risk to Jamie's health and well-being because of his "deliberate cultivation of destructiveness, of your death-wish, not to mention your outhouse sexuality,"<sup>91</sup> the Engineer believes that he can help him come to understand what his malaise means. At one point the Engineer explicitly tells Sutter why he continues to seek counsel with him, "I can tell somebody knows something I don't know."<sup>92</sup>

"Tell me honestly what difference it makes to you whether Jimmy lives or dies?"

...Rita replied routinely. "You know very well there is no use in my answering you. Except to say that there is such a thing as concern and there is such a thing as preference for life over death. I do not desire death, mine, yours, or Jamie's. I do not desire your version of fun and games. I desire for Jamie that he achieves as much self-fulfillment as he can in the little time he has. I desire for him beauty and joy, not death."

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<sup>91</sup> Ibid, pg. 193.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid, pg. 209.

“That is, death,” said Sutter.

Rita and Sutter become the Freudian *Eros* and *Thanatos* of modernity. Their divorce is purposeful because there can be no union, they are absolutely polarized. The Engineer is respectable to Eros as the modern humanist expression of ‘good-works’, ‘charity’, ‘self-realization’ but is fixated on the ‘hidden’ insights of the Thanatos personality; pursuing Sutter ceaselessly, waiting for him to finally reveal what he knows. Percy makes things clearer for the reader, as he tries to guide the reader’s consciousness outside modernity’s labyrinth of ruins: the Engineer’s affinity to Sutter is one of experience and vision. Sutter is also well aware that something is wrong, but he does not have the answer, he has only entered more deeply into his own search, trying to diagnose the malaise. Sutter writes in his casebook:

I do not deny, Val, that a revival of your sacramental system is an alternative to lewdness (the only other alternative is the forgetting of the old sacrament), for lewdness itself is a kind of sacrament (devilish, if you like). The difference is that my sacrament is operational and yours is not. The so-called sexual revolution is not, as advertised, a liberation of sexual behavior but rather its reversal... now one begins with genital overtures instead of a handshake, then waits to see what will turn up... But I am not a pornographer, Val, like the optician, now a corpse, i.e., an ostensible liver of a ‘decent’ life, a family man, who fancies conventions with smokers and call girls. I accept the current genital condition of all human relations and try to go beyond it. I may sniff like a dog but then I try to be human rather than masquerade as human and sniff like a dog.<sup>93</sup>

Where the Engineer is indifferent to the religious, Sutter is antagonistic but intellectually open. He just believes that the angelic sacrament is no longer functional in modern self. So instead of forgetting about sacramental life all together, Sutter chooses the bestial sacrament way to re-establish human relationships, but he hasn’t figured it out. The only thing that is presented with intense conviction is the hypocrisy of the modern self still believing it is nourished by angelic sacraments, even though it has abandoned them long ago. The spheres of transcendence and immanence that were included in the title of Sutter’s scientific article are secularized notions. Secular Transcendence is the aloof dissociative lost-ness produced by scientism’s

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<sup>93</sup> Ibid, pg. 222.

appropriation of science as being able to explain what it means to be an individual person. It finds itself floating in the tidal currents of value pluralism and fragmented traditional practices and meanings isolated from one another. It is an escape of the modern self, not into the Guardianian *magnum mysterium* sense of resting in the Eternal God, but rather into pure possibility which is a form of nihilism. The Engineer experiences it every time he has to identify himself. It is what leads him away from the camp fire as a boy. Secular Immanence is what Sutter is trying to discover through lewdness by taking it as far as it will go. It is contrasted to the immanence explained by Guardini as a finite being's Faith in the Revelation which establishes one as a unique irrevocable, irreducible whole – a *homo viator* on a pilgrimage to God. As such there is no 'self' that an individual can grasp in its totality as if it was a complete object. It is only complete in an eschatological sense.

Another element of the affinity Percy reveals only to the reader is their suicidal fixation. Dr. Sutter Vaught tried to kill himself when experiencing his most sunken state of 'genital re-entry into the sphere of immanence' after having completed one of his many lewd escapades to escape his initial discovery that his brother Jamie is terminally ill. Being unsuccessful, he vowed not to fail in his next attempt. The Engineer witnesses this kind of behavior voyeuristically through a bullet hole into another room where Sutter is amusing himself with a revolver. Unlike Sutter, the Engineer doesn't want to kill himself, but he is fixated throughout the entire novel with his father's suicide. "I'm not leaving, son," said the man, and after taking a turn, came back to the steps. But instead of stopping to sit beside the youth, he went up past him, resting his hand on the other's shoulder... went into the house, on through the closed-in dogtrot hall to the back porch, opened the country food press which had been converted to a gun cabinet, took down the double-barrel twelve-gauge Greener, loaded it, went up the back stairs into the attic, and, fitting the muzzle... into the notch of his breastbone..."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid, pg. 259.

Throughout the novel, with the Engineer drifting in and out of the self-worlds offered forth by each Vaught, the reader is continually brought against the limits of the secular world as able to produce an affective stability for the dissolution of the modern self. Even the religious self-world of Val Vaught is tinged with a degree of malice and lost-ness. This is the failed self of Christendom though, not Christianity. Christendom is a world that Percy continually finds problematic, expressing it through Val and Sutter's correspondences: "Val had a dream of what the Church should come to. (And I agree! Absolutely!) For example she did not mind at all if Christendom should be done for, stove in, kaput, screwed up once and all. She did not mind that Christs were like everybody else, if not worse. She did not even mind that God shall be gone, absent...and that no one noticed or cared, not even the believers. Because she wanted us to go the route and be like Sweden... that the air would be cleared and even God might give us a sign."<sup>95</sup> Val's militancy is fully informed by the Apocalypse of revealed Christian History. She has already recognized the beginning of the end and is anticipating the world's final rejection of God. Articulating it as the day the humanist state can declare to itself that it had long ago been emptied of religion, and finally cast of its vestiges of piety- it is the day of the Swedes.

Before I address the Hospital-Baptismal scene, as supposedly the most explicit presentation of Catholicism, it needs to be contextualized beyond the usual literary analysis that spins an optimistic message of the Engineer moving in the right direction, which is to say, rejecting Thanatos – rejecting the option of Sutter Vaught as a stabilizing self-orientation for modernity's dissolution. The optimistic reading can be attributed to over emphasizing the moment the Engineer asserts his independence from Sutter in the scene which precedes the Hospital.

"Barrett, since when is failure, my failure, a badge of wisdom?"

"I did not think of it that way," said the engineer, frowning. Suddenly he did see Sutter for the first time as the dismalest failure, a man who had thrown himself away.

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid, pg. 295.

“I know you don’t,” said Sutter, not unkindly. “But maybe you better start. For both our sakes. Be done with me. Go stay with Jamie.”

“That’s what I’m trying to do,” said the other absently

“What?”

“Be done with you.”

“I fervently wish you success.”

“Yes,” said the engineer, cheering up. “Yes! You’re right. There is no reason why I can’t just get up and go about my business, is there?”

“No reason.”<sup>96</sup>

The conversation proceeds with the Engineer posturing himself as a man of sudden clear convictions. Outlining the life he will lead: marry Kitty, work as personnel manager for Mr. Vaught, buy a house on South Ridge, and join the same denomination because “Kitty is convinced of the wisdom of our having the same church home.”<sup>97</sup> After which he declares that he understands the prime importance of the religious dimension of life, taking a stance to be a good member of the community bringing good will and understanding. This sounds all well and good, for of course good things are preferable to bad things. So despite the fact that the Engineer is blind and deaf during Jamie’s baptism and death, he at least has chosen life instead of Sutter’s offer of death:

“If I do out live Jamie,” said Sutter, putting on his Curlee jacket, “it will not be by more than two hours. What in Christ’s name do you think I’m doing out here? Do you think I’m staying? Do you think I’m going back?”

The engineer opened his mouth but said nothing...

“You won’t join me Barrett?”

“What? No. No thanks.”<sup>98</sup>

Immediately after the Engineer turns down suicide, Percy solidifies his character as no longer being the pure possibility of modernity’s self-dissolution: “Perhaps this moment more than any other... marked the beginning for the Engineer of what is called a normal life. From that time forward it was possible to meet him and after a few minutes form a clear notion of what

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid, pg. 298.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid, pg. 299.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid, pg. 304.



sort of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life.” The Engineer has not actually chosen anything in the positive sense he has only chosen not to do something – to kill himself. But that doesn’t mean he has also chosen to not partake in death-in-life. If we go back to scene of the Engineer’s posturing of self-assurance and conviction, and de-emphasize the thrust of the text’s sentiment of good will and understanding over Sutter’s debauched self, the conversation is oddly one-sided with Sutter only parroting the Engineer back at himself. Which was a technique Sutter used consciously. We can see this by referring to Sutter’s casebook twenty-eight pages before their confrontation:

Barrett: His trouble is he wants to know what his trouble is. His ‘trouble’ he thinks, is a disorder of such a character that if only he can locate the right expert with the right psychology, the disorder can be set right and he can go about his business. That is to say: he wishes to cling to his transcendence and locate a fellow transcender (e.g. me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g., the ‘environment,’ ‘groups,’ ‘experience,’ etc.) in such a way that he will be happy. Therefore I will tell him nothing. For even if he were “right,” his posturing is self-defeating.<sup>99</sup>

If the Engineer was actually independent from his fixation on Sutter he would not have actually have need to ‘prove’ himself. The Engineer gives himself away to Sutter when he said ‘he is trying to be done with him.’ So Sutter, being a highly apt doctor, helped him along by parroting back each declaration. The Engineer got the sense of certainty he needed to be done with Sutter, but without being aware of what he was doing or that Sutter was well aware of his self-defeating manner of living. The Engineer actually only decided on one thing – life – but not the life he and Sutter outlined out for himself, but biological life. He was only really sure that he wanted to keep his body alive and unsure what type of self to keep alive.

The Engineer’s solidification is followed by the death of Jamie Vaught. When the Engineer arrives at the hospital it is immediately apparent that Jamie doesn’t have much longer to live. Overwhelmed, he finds himself on the phone with Val being charged with Jamie’s baptism. Reluctant but folding under the stress, Percy presents the Engineer as executing his orders

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid, pg. 276.

without any awareness. A standardized image of a chaplain (Father Boomer) runs the hospital scene through the expected formalities of obtaining the required answers before being able to proceed. With Sutter recognizing that Jamie is directly on the borderlands of life, Father Boomer hurriedly proceeds to prepare Jamie for the sacrament of baptism.

“I have been asked by your sister to administer to you the sacrament of baptism. Do you wish to receive it?”

“Val,” whispered Jamie, goggling at the engineer.

“That’s right,” said the engineer, nodding. “I called her as you asked me to.”

Jamie looked at the priest.

“Son,” said the priest. “Do you accept the truths of religion?”

Jamie moved his lips.

With the Engineer as his translator, Jamie utters barely audible responses of insistent skepticism. Lapsing into a violent fit before he can respond to the priest asking him if he would like the faith to believe, the priest, spurred by Sutter, rushes through the sacrament. Finishing with: “Today I promise you that you will be with our blessed Lord and Savior and that you will see him face to face and see his mother, Our Lady, see them as you are seeing me. Do you hear me?” The last words uttered by Jamie before he dies are “Don’t, let me go.”<sup>100</sup> The priest holds his hand while he dies. The scene moves rapidly and once Jamie has died in the hospital room in ends. Two pages are all that remain after the hospital scene and it is where Percy renders his final image of the modern self. The Engineer rushes to catch Sutter a couple blocks outside the hospital.

“What happened back there?”

“In the hospital room? You were there.”

“I know, but what did you think? I could tell you were thinking something.”

“Do you have to know what I think before you know what you think?”

The Engineer is sure that something important happened, but he is unable to reveal it to himself. He requires Sutter to help bring it to light, but Sutter side-steps the Engineer’s need, continuing towards he planned suicide. As he is driving away, leaving the Engineer with the family responsibilities, the Engineer yells for him to wait, chasing after in a dead sprint. “The

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid, pg. 316.

Edsel paused, sighed, and stopped. Strength flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds. The Edsel waited for him.”<sup>101</sup> The reader is left without a character resolution. The Engineer choosing to run after Sutter instead of take care of the family arraignments suggests a change of self, opting for Sutter’s self-world of death instead of life, but if we recall the Engineer’s posturing and self-defeating habit of reliance, there could only be this for the Engineer. Whether Sutter would still commit suicide is left inconclusive. Modernity’s dissolution is also left inconclusive, since the Engineer has rejected to participate in the group’s plurality of entrances into a solidified way of existing, just as he did as a boy around the camp fire. Percy leaves the reader in an intermediate state, between an empty self of ‘pure-possibility’ and the thanatos self. The ending, in regards to the Engineer, should be interpreted neither optimistically nor pessimistically since it is functions as Guardini’s anxiety of the homeless self. Whether or not the reader was able to hear and see what the other selves of modernity couldn’t see or hear, is open for debate. But it is clear that Percy understood that there is a certain type existence that diminishes one’s ability to see and hear the meaning of Catholicism.

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid, pg. 319.

**Conclusion:**

Turning and turning in the widening gyre  
 The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
 Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
 Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,  
 The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere  
 The ceremony of innocence is drowned;  
 The best lack all conviction, while the worst  
 Are full of passionate intensity... - W. Yeats "The Second Coming"

"...as the poet [Yeats] said, the center is not holding, that the consensus, while it might not have disappeared, is at least seriously called into question. The question which concerns us here, of course, is whether the deterioration of the consensus is so far advanced that the novel is no longer viable."<sup>102</sup> Walker Percy's choice of the title for his sequel to *The Last Gentleman* – *The Second Coming* – should come as no surprise. His non-fiction would often favor the imagery of 'the centre cannot hold' when discussing the false self of modernity. Its failure would present 'a second coming,' a possibility of recognizing the living death. But for Percy, as it was for Guardini, the self would be in ruins, living in a perfected environment (for man as merely an organism), wanting for nothing material, with death-in-life being hidden even more. The question then is how can a Catholic novelist work with their limited amount of time to make belief believable, not before the Second Coming, that is a theological question, but before the novel is no longer a viable way to communicate faith.

As can be seen from the contemporary literary debate among Catholic critics, there doesn't seem to be agreement on the situation. Gregory Wolfe's blaming the cultural institutions and Catholic critics as not being sensitive enough to hear 'whispers' of faith, severely down plays the difficult task of being a Catholic novelist. When Wolfe refers to contemporary Catholic writers as responding to post-modernity by writing about the smaller more private experiences of faith, Percy had already written a response almost thirty years before to that line of reasoning: "Most contemporary novelists have moved on

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<sup>102</sup> Walker Percy. *Signposts in a Strange Land*, Pg. 207-208.

into a world of rootless and isolated consciousness for whom not even the memory and the nostalgia exist.” As Lewis Simpson put it: “The covenant with memory and history has been abrogated in favor of the existential self”... The real pathology lies elsewhere, not in the station wagon or the all-electric kitchen... but rather in the quality and consciousness of the novelist and his characters.”<sup>103</sup> The privation of experience of characters is going to further alienate the reader, even if the author believes it is a way of depicting the intimate relationship each individual has with faith. It reinforces two features of modern identity -- self-reliance and self-validation -- executed by the modern reader when faced with uncertainty; and if a Catholic novelist’s job is to make belief believable, they are immediately courting uncertainty.

Dana Gioia ends *The Catholic Writer Today* by placing the Catholic novel’s future success in the hands of the writers. The current predicament though is a continuation of the obstacles face by Percy, but far more advanced. New forms of communication and their technological devices have gone far beyond what Percy was alive to see. Popular media has continued its appropriation of words and symbols. The metaphysics of these new environmental influences is subtle but the psychological structures are still there continuing to challenge the novelist on every word, expression, metaphor, trope, and device used to actively wrestle fluctuating meaning to the ground. Contemporary writers are also raised with the modern ‘disorder’ of, what Percy characterizes as, “transcendence and immanence.” The modern individual’s experience of life abstracts and transcends experience, by becoming self-conscious of a modernized idea of experience, at which point it either accepts the distance of experience from arriving at ‘reality’ or it attempts to lose the anxious sense of scientism’s transcendence by being absorbed in the immediacy of the sensory world.

No one can escape the impulse of applying modern standardized images of objects, subjects, or experiences -- neither the reader nor the author. This problem is why Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* is informative. In it Percy recognizes the

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid, pg. 209.

complex self-experience of the reader, not just topically, but determining how he goes about structuring each characters mode of being in the world and its influential relationship with the reader through the proxy consciousness of the Engineer. The Engineer's consciousness creates a sense of the ever-present immediacy of the question of life, of something not being quite right, for the reader and proceeds to explore modern characteristics that relate directly or indirectly to it. His reason for not resolving the question for the reader is expressed by Sutter Vaught:

Even if you were right. Let us say you were right: that man is a wayfarer (i.e. not transcending being nor immanent being but wayfarer) who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him (i.e. his salvation) and which he better attend to. So you say to him: Look, Barrett, your trouble is due not to a disorder of your organism but to the human condition, that you do well to be afraid and you do well to forget everything which does not pertain to your salvation. That is to say, your amnesia is not a symptom. So you say: here is that piece of news you've been waiting for, and you tell him. What does Barrett do? He attends in that eager flattering way of his and at the end of it he might even say yes! But he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology thrown into his immanent meat grinder, and wait to see if he feels better. He told me he's in favor of the World's Great Religions. What are you going to do about that?<sup>104</sup>

To write about belief or unbelief as a solution for the reader or as a resolution for the story, or for that matter any solution at all, betrays the reality of each individual's uniqueness as an irreducible person called forth by God. Positing a complete solution is an act of objectification and oversimplification which gives the impression of universal applicability, as if our modern understanding has exhausted the variability of personal experience. If part of the human condition is finitude so is mystery. Not an objective mystery but a personal mystery that can only be entered upon by each individual. This is not an 'anything-goes' relativity about the meaning of existence, but recognizing that the modern self will distort an outright answer and the limits of words as signifiers. The brilliance of Percy's writing is his attempt at imploring the reader to take upon the question of life – the question of belief or disbelief – personally by evoking the tensions and malaise of modernity in the reader but denying a resolution. He doesn't write about belief, he writes vitally with belief and disbelief.

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<sup>104</sup> Walker Percy. *The Last Gentleman*, pg. 276.

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