

ANALYSIS

Lancelot (1977)

Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

The Fall of the House of Lamar

And, round about his house, the glory
That blushed and bloomed
Is but a dim-remembered story
Of the old time entombed.

"The Haunted Palace," Edgar Allan Poe

"Come into my cell. Make yourself at home.' With this genial invitation Lancelot Andrews Lamar welcomes a visitor to what seems to be a 'Center for Aberrant Behavior.' Lance, as he is called, suspects that he already knows the visitor; he cannot be sure because the effort to remember requires more energy than he cares to devote to it. He thus appears to be another Percy protagonist who discovers that he understands his life about as well as he would understand a movie that he entered somewhere in the middle.

Lancelot, that is, appears to use the same introductory technique as the earlier novels. Binx Bolling returns to wakefulness from sleep, Will Barrett's past is gapped by amnesia, Tom More announces that he has come to himself wondering if 'it' has happened. Certainly such a presentation of man's situation has been Percy's objective as a novelist; indeed, he has implied that it is the usefulness of fiction for phenomenological investigation that induced him to become a reader and--later--a writer of novels. Over and over, using slightly different phrases, he has identified the theme that compels him to write novels: [Concrete man, a stranger transcending being, the point of view of one consciousness, the openness of an individual human existence] [comes to himself, finds himself, is put down, is located, is situated] [in a very concrete place and time, in a concrete situation, in a predicament, in a strange land, in a world].

Rendered so abstractly, the theme evokes for the mind's eye a stark and sterile plain where walks a solitary soul, much like a painting by Dali or Chirico, say 'The Great Metaphysicist.' But embedded in a narrative, the theme loses its irreconcilable subject/object split; for Percy's earlier novels, while not exactly swarming with *Thous*, do have at least one other being with whom the consciousness of the novel can enter into communion: Binx with Kate, Will with Sutter, Tom with Ellen. Readers occasionally complain that the concluding action of a Percy novel is insufficiently telling. Perhaps they look for the wrong kind of action: they are uncomfortable because the physical action is muted and ambiguous; but such readers fail to notice that, in the three novels before *Lancelot*, the metaphysical action has been unequivocal, the achievement of a bonding. This communion, it should be stressed, is not merely a guarantee against ordinary loneliness, but rather an essential to full consciousness; 'consciousness, one suddenly realizes,' Percy asserts in 'Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity,' 'means a knowing-with.' Or, again as he explains in 'Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism,' '*L'enfer c'est autrui*. But so is heaven.' It would seem to follow that a being deprived of any communion with another being would suffer a defect of consciousness, which could result in severe mental disturbance.

Unlike the three earlier novels, which end but do not begin with a human bonding, *Lancelot* begins with an association of the consciousness with another being capable of understanding; for soon enough Lance acknowledges that he does remember his visitor, now Father John, but once Harry, a boy whose home was Northumberland, the next estate to Belle Isle, Lance's home. The two had been close friends up through their college days, so close that Lance thinks that their past is identical, that to see Harry is to see himself. He explains to Harry, 'When I saw you yesterday, it was like seeing myself. I had the sense of being overtaken by something, by the past, by myself.'

The boys had been bookish. Lance remembers, 'We knew each other by several names depending on the oblique and obscure circumstances of our lives--and our readings.' As early adolescents they seem to have held the world in common by using the American legends as a focus; for Harry, Lance became Lancelot, while for Lance, Harry became Percival. Then as adolescence became hard and insistent, their shared reading was *Ulysses* and *Tropic of Cancer*. There were other bonds of course: 'We were honorable families.'

In time, though, each family developed its characteristic mode: 'The men in my family (until my father) were gregarious, politically active (anti-Long) and violent. The men in your family tended toward depression and early suicide.' By the time the two boys were in college their respective family traits had overwhelmed them: Lance became popular and successful both in academics and in athletics, while Harry withdrew into solitary drinking and reading. In recollection Lance tries to make the fundamental distinction: 'I was "smart," but never in your complex way of drinking and reading Verlaine (that was an act. wasn't it?)' Their reading no longer shared, Lance was still bookish enough to notice the specific book that Harry was accustomed to read; their world no longer shared, Lance was too well adjusted to his to understand that Harry's alienation could be symbolized by his reading a poet notorious for his conversion to Catholicism.

Later Lance recalls another puzzling stunt pulled by Harry: 'you and I were riding down the river on a fraternity-sorority party and were passing Jefferson Island, which lies between Mississippi and Louisiana, was claimed by both states, and in a sense belonged to neither, a kind of desert island in the middle of the U.S., so you, drinking and solitary as usual, said to no one in particular: 'I think it would be nice to spend a few days in such a place,' pulled off your coat, and dove off the *Tennessee Belle* (that was an "act," too, wasn't it?)' Again the literary allusion embodied in the action reveals Harry's state of mind: like Huck Finn he is floating down the river, thus experiencing rotation, a savoring of the new as a deliverance from alienation; but when even that experience proves boring, like Tenente Frederick Henry, he dives into the river, fantasizes a rebirth, attempts to cross a zone into the authentic.

It then occurs to Lance that the 'act' might speak: 'you, ever the one to do the ultimate uncalled-for thing --I never really knew whether it was a real thing or a show-off thing. And do you know, I've often wondered whether your going off to the seminary out of a clear sky was not more of the same--the ultimate reckless lifetime thing. Hell, you were not Christian let alone Catholic as far as anyone could notice. So wasn't it just like your diving off the *Tennessee Belle* to go from unbeliever to priest, leap-frogging on the way some eight hundred million ordinary Catholics? Was that too an act?' Of course it was an 'act'--but not a 'put-on'--instead *the* decisive act, the Kierkegaardian leap into faith.

After his ordination, Harry, now Father John, had gone to Africa as a medical missionary. But he had in time returned to New Orleans to serve as a 'priest-physician. Which is to say,' as Lance slyly puts it, 'a screwed-up priest or a half-assed physician.' Lance believes that the two concerns, one of the soul, the other of the body (including the mind), are fundamentally incompatible, hence any mixture of the two results, Lance thinks, in a grotesquerie. Feeling that either is irrelevant to his own condition, Lance reveals something of how warped his mind is. The priest, Lance suspects, has trouble with either one or the other; as he asks his visitor, 'Have you lost your faith? or is it a woman?' Whatever it is, Lance suspects that it has disrupted his visitor's priestly function. It may be true that Father John is distressed that God through His church is doing no more to lighten the world's misery. But that does not mean that he has abandoned his Christian point of view. When he is first welcomed to Lance's cell, he is invited to make himself at home, take the chair, while Lance will hospitably sit on the cot.

Rather, Father John indicates that he will stand by the window. His preferring to look out the window suggests that he intends to keep his sense of scale and proportion informed by the world at large, rather than allow it to be captivated by the isolation of that individual cell. Out the window is the mixture, the sacred and the profane, a cemetery and a movie house showing *The 69ers*. He is always seen through Lance's eyes as walking through the cemetery (never mind whether he can pray; he is not ignoring the eschatological fact that fundamentally defines a vision of life). Lance, on the other hand, rails at the obscenity of the movie and a bumper sticker exhorting MAKE LOVE NOT WAR, while being impressed by half a sign that proclaims, 'Free &....' His only conjectures about the remainder of the sign are 'Easy' and

'Accepted.' Enraptured by the notion of freedom that became his upon the discovery of his wife's infidelity, he does not accept the paradox of man's estate, that he is free but responsible. No wonder that Lance likes to hear the girl out the cell window singing a mawkish song about freedom.

Although he disparages Father John's professional role, Lance nevertheless seemingly needs his old friend as a person: 'seeing you was a kind of catalyst, the occasion of my remembering. It is like the first time you look through binoculars: everything is confused, blurred, unfocused, flat: then all of a sudden *click*: distance drops away and there is everything in the round, bigger than life.' The priest, then, will serve as an intersubjective medium, a means through which Lance can retrieve and order the data of his past.

Lance already has an informing philosophy of history, a 'sexual theory of history,' to apply to the material thus retrieved: 'First there was a Romantic Period when one 'fell in love.' Next follows a sexual period such as we live in now where men and women cohabit as indiscriminately as in a baboon colony--or in a soap opera. Next follows catastrophe of some sort. I can feel it in my bones. Perhaps it has already happened.' In the beginning, according to Lance, the world that boys shared was 'a garden of delights.' Perhaps he is alluding to the vision of Adamic innocence presented in the Bosch triptych, but if so he should recall that the final panel describes Hell. The onset of sexuality did not symbolize the lapse of innocence to Lance that it conventionally does; for an important distinction in his heritage provided an acceptable outlet for masculinity: there are ladies and there are whores. Lance recalls that he and Harry had gone to whorehouses together. Then he adds, with heavy irony: 'I understand young men don't have to go to whorehouses any more.' From his puritanical point of view, based on the double standard, all women are now whores.

There were, then, two realms in Lance's world: an Ideal and a Real. It follows that when Lance first sought a wife, he would visit the realm of the Ideal. There was, for Lance, an ethereality about Lucy Cobb: 'Lucy was a virgin! and I did not want her otherwise.' Thinking back of her, he attaches her to an inviolable southern past: 'Lucy I loved too, but Lucy was a dream, a slim brown dancer in a bell jar spinning round and round in the 'Limelight' music of old gone Carolina long ago. Memories of her life, like those *bibelots* Lance displays for the Yankee tourists, evoke little but a taste for the quaint.

Lance married his Lucy and brought her back to Belle Isle, with its one wing still in ruins from a mysterious fire over a hundred years before. In its decrepitude the house commented, like the House of Usher, Sutpen's Hundred, or Burden's Landing, upon the come-down of those who inherited it. In this house Lucy, who was, in effect, a ghost, albeit one who bore two children, simply disappeared, like one of those anemic Poe women. Lance describes the event: 'Then she died. I suppose her death was tragic. But to me it seemed simply curious. How curious that she should grow pale, thin, weak, and die in a few months! Her blood turned to milk--the white cells replaced the red cells. How curious to wake up one morning alone again in Belle Isle, just as I had been alone in my youth!' Lance's response to Lucy's death reveals the fallenness of his condition. Bored and idle, while living upon the psychological capital of his tradition, Lance has been overwhelmed by the everydayness that so preoccupied Binx Bolling, and he can respond to another being not with passionate concern, with real feeling, but only with curiosity.

With his mother, Lily (whose name suggests purity), Lance continued to live on at Belle Isle. He 'practiced' law, recognizing himself the irony of his definition, for in his case it meant not command, but incompetence. He involved himself in civil rights advocacy, not apparently with any great sacrifice nor out of a sense of brotherhood, but rather of noblesse oblige. For diversion he did 'a bit of reading and even some research and writing: the Civil War of course.' In time, though, he found that his alienation had reached dreadful proportions: 'During the last months I found that I could be moderately happy if I simultaneously (1) drank, (2) read Raymond Chandler, and (3) listened to Beethoven.' Despite all the false enthusiasms, though, Lance was dominated by public time, 'the five o'clock whistle at Ethyl,' for it heralded the latest TV newscast. 'In those days I lived for the news bulletin,' acknowledges Lance, almost literally displaying Heidegger's *Neugier*, a greed for the new, an obsession for the merely interesting, for *Gerede / Geschreibe*, the shallow commentary of the mass media. Lance summarizes his condition quite aptly: 'Do you know what happened to me during the past twenty years? A gradual, ever so gradual, slipping away of my life into a kind of dream state in which finally I could not be sure that anything was happening at all. Perhaps nothing happened.' The ambiguity that Lance experiences is the third characteristic of a being's

fallenness, a being's disowning of itself by immersion into the world of 'them,' so that his sense of his life's slipping away into dream is appropriate.

Then Margot entered Lance's life, a year after his mother's death. With a fifth of Wild Turkey and a copy of *The Big Sleep*, naturally, in his briefless briefcase. Lance was hurrying 'with no other thought in mind but to get past the tourists and the belles and the mud and watch the 5:30 news.' Rounding a corner he caught sight of one of the belles, social aspirants provided as guides for the Azalea Festival, whose eye would not release his. With her hoop skirt and scent of orris root, 'the right smell' for elderly southern gentlewomen, according to William Alexander Percy, Margot must have roused the image of the southern belle, the ideal past, for Lance. Such ideality must have been strengthened at a subsequent meeting, when he found her among a field of two thousand other 'lily-white' Colonial Dames, 'listening to another Dame talking about preserving U.S. ideals and so forth.' She becomes even more persuasive in her role when her speech reminds Lance of his mother.

Just as quickly, though, still at their first meeting her image develops a second aspect. In the pigeonier, to which she has invited herself for a drink, she quickly demonstrates that, though from Texas, she wears her southernness with a difference. She immediately steps out of the hoop skirt as if it were chaps and drinks, sans chaser, from the bottle. Margot must seem to Lance, then, to be the miraculous joining of the ideal with the real. When they had first spoken and shaken hands, Lance had noticed the substantiality of her hand, which had been pressing against the wall to cushion her spine: 'her hand, coming from behind her, was plaster-pitted and big and warm.' Soon, as they talk and drink, she lies down, invites him to join her, then measures him with the world calipers: 'Her fine leg, pantalooned and harlequined...rose, levitated, and crossed over my body. There is lay sweet and heavy.'

Margot projects an image of realness in yet another way. To insure their privacy, Lance shoots the bolt and turns the ancient lock with an eight-inch key. As he remembered the scene: 'My God, it sounds like the dungeon at Chillon. Let me see that key.' I lay down and gave her the iron key. She held it in one hand and me in the other and was equally fond of both. She liked antiques and making love. As she examined it, she imprisoned me with her sweet heavy thigh as if she had to keep me still while she calculated the value of the iron key.'

The action is both overtly and symbolically sexual. But her inspection of a tool should not be reduced to simply a sexual explanation, for her 'calculation' of the key, and other subjects ('the little spiral staircase. Priceless!'), reveals that she has a mind that conceives of the serviceability of objects. As Lance recollected: 'At heart she was a collector, preserver, restorer, transformer; even me and herself she transformed: to take an old neglected abused thing, save it, restore it, put it to new and charming use.' Admittedly, Margot is mercenary--she could hardly be less, having been young and poor in West Texas--but beyond that she is capable of creating a world of immediate utility by her 'um...zu' calculations. The fundamental relation that a being has to its world is that of use, claims Heidegger; Lance seems to sense that hub-spoke image of *Dasein* as nucleus for its world, but only for woman-being: 'Do you know the way a woman moves around a room whether she is cleaning it or just passing time? It is different from the way a man moves. She is at home in a room. The room is an extension of her.' Margot is not, as Lance and his father have been, a lost subject defenseless in a distant world of objects; rather Margot is present in her world; she projects a sense of connection and touch that is not merely physical, but metaphysical.

Small wonder that Lance, bereft of a vigorous religious heritage (this father's Anglicanism being little more than a limp aesthetic reverie) and of the romantic splendor shed by Lucy, should reach for Margot worshipfully. Embodying many of the assertions in Sutter's notebook, in *The Last Gentleman*, Lance now views the genital as the connection to escape in an everyday world, the 'real thing,' as another of Percy's sufferers, Kate Cutrer, in *The Moviegoer*, calls it. Reverently, before entering such a holy place, Lance pauses to regard 'the warm cottoned-off place between her legs, the sheer negativity and want and lack where the well-fitted cotton dipped and went away. [He] kisse[s] the cotton there.'

On their second meeting Lance begins to ritualize what may have been spontaneous in the pigeonier. Having invaded the convention of the Colonial Dames, he takes Margot driving up the Trace. Again she bluntly initiates the sexual possibility: 'Let's go to bed.' And again there is that slippage from the

appearance of traditional chastity to contemporary eroticism, for they go to a tourist cottage in Asphodel, in the 'lily,' Lance recalls their behavior:

'She undressed without bothering to turn out the light.... She stood naked before the mirror, hands at her hair, one knee bent, pelvis aslant. She turned to me and put her hands under my coat and in her funny way took hold of a big pinch of my flank on each side. Gollée. Could any woman have been as lovely? She was like a feast. She was a feast. I wanted to eat her. I ate her. That was my communion, Father--no offence intended, that sweet dark sanctuary guarded by the heavy gold columns of her thighs, the ark of her covenant.'

Once again alert to the directness, the openness, and the substantiality of her body, Lance has reason to feel that he can capture the real. His detailed description of his experience of desire has correspondences to Sartre's description of desire as 'an attempt to *incarnate* the Other's body.' Thus what he wants to achieve it, through the reduction of himself to flesh, to caress Margot so that she experiences herself as incarnated flesh, then he, as Subject, can throw off his reduction to flesh and enjoy his appropriation of her not merely as object, but as subject trapped under his hand. Such a project always eventually fails, and one of the routes that such failure can take is into sadism. Lance embodies such a mutation in his later actions toward Margot and Raine.

But in the first blush of desire, Margot's body is certainly worthy of worship, of the bended knee; the genital becomes the ark, the locus of the sacred. As well, it is imagined as the transformation of the divine into flesh, the Eucharist. As such, Margot's body, with the singular goodness which it at first provides, is Lance's first positive imagining of the Holy Grail.

For Lance, then, the combination is perfect. In appearance, Margot is the very picture of the lady, who, with her oil money, can restore and manage Belle Isle as well as any plantation mistress in the southern hagiography. In reality, she is his whore, complaisant to his sexual energy with the speed of a zipper. But perhaps she is too obliging:

'The truth is, it never crossed my mind in my entire sweet Southern life that there was such a thing as a lustful woman. Another infinite imponderable. Infinitely appalling. What hath God wrought?

On the other hand, why should not a woman, who is after all a creature like any other, be lustful? Yet to me, the sight of a lustful woman was as incredible as a fire-breathing dragon turning up at the Rotary Club.'

What I really mean of course was that what horrified me was the discovery of the possibility that she might lust for someone not me.'

That dread possibility that she might be promiscuous occurred to Lance on their second meeting. Again, Lance responds to her hand, finding in her a miraculous meeting of styles--handshake, then fornicate. This time the forefinger tickles him, paddles the palm, as Iago says when he wants to paint Desdemona as the wanton; Lance is startled and asks if such manipulation has the same meaning in Texas as in Louisiana. Margot says it does not. They marry, and Lance contents himself with Binx Bolling's Little Way: 'Drinking, laughing, and loving, it is a good life. Not even marriage spoils it. For a while.' It never really occurs to him to wonder about the person whom he married; the body is sufficient: 'on the floor, across the table, under the table, standing up in a coat closet at a party.'

The person who is Margot attempts to assert sovereignty by the only way that seems available to her. Without a profession or without the justification that poverty provides, she cannot work outside the house. Thus she works inside the house, researching and commissioning its restoration, trying to remain in touch with that world of utility that she had possessed. With his personification of Margot only as a sexual organ, Lance describes their marriage glibly: 'Later we lived by sexual delights and the triumphs of architectural restoration. Truthfully, at that time I don't know which she enjoyed more, a good piece in Henry Clay's bed or Henry Clay's bed.' Lance does begin to understand vaguely that Margot suffered from lack of accomplishment, but he disparages her unique agony by incorporating it into a female type, which is subtly satirized by his male eyes: 'Did you know that the South and for all I know the entire U.S.A. is full of

demonic women who, driven by as yet unnamed furies, are desperately restoring and preserving *places, buildings?* women married to fond indulgent easy going somewhat lapsed men like me, who would as soon do one thing as another as long as they can go fishing, hunting, drink a bit, horse around, watch the Dolphins and Jack Nicklaus on TV.' What he really says, of course, is that men say that women may do anything they like, as long as they don't interfere with male routine. As for Margot personally, 'I could see her problem. Christ, what was she going to do? What to do with that Texas energy and her passion for making things either over or of a piece. What did God do after he finished creation? Christ, she didn't know how to rest. At least in Louisiana we knew how to take things easy. We could always drink.' In truth, he really does not care what Margot is. Her last conversation with him is very much to the point: 'I'm nothing.' Then she explains: 'That's what you never knew. With you I had to be either--or--but never a--uh--woman.'

Margot's resumption of her career at Merlin's Dallas-Arlington Playhouse, then, screams its intention: she wishes literally to act, to discover her own role. With Lance lapsed into constant drunkenness and frequent impotence, she could either be overwhelmed by Belle Isle or attempt to escape it. No wonder that, later, she will not go away with Lance, who, she must by then realize, carries Belle Isle within him, but rather plans to play Nora in the film-maker Jacoby's version of *A Doll's House*.

The tragedy of her attempt to make her life is that she instead makes another life. Lance unwittingly accepts the child, Siobhan, as his own, and Margot apparently is frustrated in her efforts to become someone. Eight years later she is trying still, having involved herself with a movie project, to be filmed at Belle Isle, about a planter named Lipscomb, who 'gently subsides into booze and Chopin.' It is a testimony of Lance's self-centeredness that he never acknowledges any similarity between himself and Lipscomb.

Certainly he is not blind to the behavior of others. He exudes pride in the acuity of his sight; he frequently resorts to implements or similes of vision to express himself, his own binoculars, telescopes, mirrors, Elgin's binoculars, television, movies, most especially: 'The moment I knew for a fact that Margot had been fucked by another man it was as if I had been waked from a twenty-year dream. I was Rip van Winkle rubbing his eyes. In an instant I became sober, alert, watchful.' Lance, for all his bookishness, studiously avoids the much more apt literary comparison at this point: that other husband who, to prove his love a whore, demanded 'the ocular proof.'

The imagery of awakening may suggest the strategy earlier identified as Percy's characteristic method of starting a novel. Heidegger's *Befindlichkeit*, coming to oneself through feeling. But yet another aspect of the discovery scene is predominant, Lance's emotional state. Rather than experiencing 'shock, shame, humiliation, sorrow, anger, hate, vengefulness,' he is careful to reveal, as if proud that nothing need be extenuated, that he was aware of nothing but curiosity and interest.

'What I felt was a prickling at the base of the spine, a turning of the worm of interest,' he recalls. Then in his subsequent recital of his detective work in establishing the inescapable fact of Margot's infidelity he repeats the image 'worm of interest' until it squirms with significance. The 'worm' is primarily a description of his genital and suggests that Lance was not capable of tumescence. The worm will indeed turn, and a new style of behavior will occur. It thus becomes his lance, as he begins to envision himself as Sir Lancelot, 'the knight of the Unholy Grail.'

The worm of interest thus becomes an instrument, a divining rod for carnal knowledge: 'is all niceness then or is all buggery?' It first acts as a 'magnet' to lead him to the factual proof of Margot's adultery. It ultimately guides him to conclude, to his satisfaction, that all is buggery. For when he invades his home, to apprehend his wife and her lover, he goes first to the room of Raine Robinette, the young actress. She, too, turns out to be aggressive: 'She put her arms around my waist, locked her hands, and squeezed me with surprising strength.' Then, lying down, she invites Lance to copulate with her, which is hardly surprising, in that her name, *rein(s)* suggests that Lance sees her (and by now all women) as merely a genital. When, however, he sees his daughter's sorority ring on the hand groping for his genital, he is reminded of Raine's corruptive influence on the sixteen-year-old Lucy, that Lucy may indeed become her sister. He has TV proof that Raine is a part of the buggery that goes on behind closed doors: 'A little arrow of interest shot up my spine. I smiled and guided Raine's hand to me.'

At this point in his narrative, Lance asks Father John: 'You know what I smiled, don't you? No? Because I discovered the secret of love. It is hate. Or rather the possibility of hate.' With slight modifications of terms, Lance is employing Sartre's scheme of 'concrete relations with others.' With the failure of sexual desire (which Lance customarily equates with 'love'), sadism or 'hate,' as Lance calls it, sets in. Then, to illustrate his meaning, Lance describes what he did next: 'Here now,' I said smiling, and tenderly pulled her body up, reaching around the front of her until my hands felt the soft crests of her pelvis. "What?" she asked. "Oh." At first as her face was pressed into the pillow her lips were mashed down even more. I was alone, far above her, upright and smiling in the darkness.'

Lance's objective is humiliation. As Sartre describes the event: 'The sadist aims therefore at making the flesh appear abruptly and by compulsion; that is, by the aid not of his own flesh but of his body as instrument. He aims at making the Other assume attitudes and positions such that his body appears under the aspect of the obscene; thus the sadist himself remains on the level of instrumental appropriation since he causes flesh to be born by exerting force upon the Other, and the Other becomes an instrument in his hands. The sadist handles the Other's body, leans on the Other's shoulder so as to bend him toward the earth and to make his haunches stick up, *etc.*'

The worm has indeed turned. With insane contempt for all women, he buggers her, trying to discover the truth about evil, which must be 'the great secret of life, the old life that is, the ignominious joy of rape and being raped.' Raine thus would seem to personify Lance's second, contemporary sexual period, in which humans act as baboons; he determines to use his lance to probe the 'heart of the abscess and let the pus out.'

At the time of his discovery of Margot's betrayal, devoid of passion, Lance himself is little more than a beast, and he soon has an opportunity to see himself in that light. Passing through a room, he sees a figure: 'He was watching me. He did not look familiar. There was something wary and poised about the way he stood, shoulders angled, knees slightly bent as if he were prepared for anything. He was mostly silhouette but white on black like a reversed negative. His arms were long, hanging lower and lemur-like from dropped shoulder.' The reflection is that of a white simian, but Lance is too distanced from reality to make that interpretation of himself. Rather, he returns to his room to look into his own mirror, to be reminded of a Lancelot, disgraced not by his own actions, as the mythic Lancelot, but by actions committed against him. In his idleness, he has become, so he recognizes, a slob: 'More like Ben Gunn than Lancelot.'

At once Lance engages in ritual cleansing, then lies down naked on the cold bricks, as if to suggest that he is back in touch with gritty reality, after years of a 'state of comfort and abstraction.' At the same time he picks up a Bowie knife, drives it into the wall with one hand, then tries to draw it out with the other, in recapitulation of family behavior. The knife had been found among the detritus of history in the pigeonier, had later been falsely reputed by Lance's grandfather to be one of Bowie's originals. Lance also probably contributes to the legend of the knife; during an early interview with Father John, he says merely that an ancestor had had a part in the 'notorious Vidalia sand-bar duel in which Bowie actually carved a fellow limb from limb.' In a later interview he attributes the same grisly action to his great-great-grandfather. Whatever the factual truth, the Lamar recourse to the Bowie becomes mythic truth, the kind that human beings base personal behavior on; Lance appropriates the myth to his own family in anticipation of his insane use of the Bowie on Jacoby.

With his fondness for casting himself as Lancelot, though, Lance should have perceived another meaning for the knife. According to Malory, when the sword in the stone appeared, Lancelot refrained from trying to pull it out, since only the purest knight in the world could accomplish this feat. Even in his love-madness, Sir Lancelot had known that he was sinful. But Lance, irrationally recognizing no sin in himself, tries the test and fails, yet does not abandon the Quest of the Unholy Grail. The morning after the discovery of Margot's original infidelity, at breakfast with her, Lance sets out to detect if she has also betrayed him the night before. During their conversation, he observes a fly on his wrist: 'I watched him touch a hair. He did, crawling under it, everting and scrubbing his wings. As he did so, he moved the hair. The hair moved its root which moved a nerve which sent a message to my brain. I felt a tickle.' That tickle, reminiscent of his paddled palm, mocks him by suggesting that his wife is still a whore. Also, just as Lance can see his own reaction to the fly mechanically--in terms of nerve ends and messages to the brain--so he can cope

with outrage by reducing his own outrage over being cuckolded to a series of stimulus-response reactions. He does so, both when he gains the ocular proof and when he commits his own deeds.

Lance is single-minded in his pursuit of the exposure of his wife and her lover, whom he assumed still to be Merlin, allegedly the father of Margot's daughter. To that end, he hesitates at nothing; for, his southern honor having been traduced, any action is justified that will reveal the culprits. Despite his former championing of black dignity, he has no qualms about requesting shameful work from Elgin, the young black who is obligated to him. Elgin thus acts as a spy and, through his technical competency, provides the videotape that confirms the buggery in both Margot's and Raine's rooms. Self-consciously, Lance acts like his grandfather in being pleased with the performance of his 'nigger,' his slave.

After he has seen his 'Double Feature,' Lance prepares to pass judgment and execute sentence upon the guilty. Raine and Dana, having corrupted his daughter, and Margot and Jacoby, the current lover, will not be spared. All the other inhabitants of the house are sent away, including, surprisingly, Merlin. Lance admits that he was astonished by his sparing of Merlin, and he tries to account for his decision, but his reasons (1) that poor Hemingwayesque Merlin is now impotent and (2) that he 'liked' him seem evasive; perhaps, instead, being cuckolded by the same woman has created a bond between them. Then, with the approaching hurricane acting as natural comment upon Lance's whirling mind, he goes about his preparations. Jacoby had wanted a 'Lear-like effect' for the movie about the planter. 'You know,' he says to Merlin, 'mad king raging on the heath, wild-eyed, hair blowing.' 'Yeah, right, Lear, okay,' said Merlin ironically, but Jacoby missed the irony.' Just as crazy as Lear, though presenting a calm appearance, Lance had missed the irony that he was the real-life planter.

Unsealing the capped natural gas well under the restored wing of the house, Lance pipes the fumes throughout the house. As it gathers to an explosive density, he proceeds to execute his judgment by sodomizing Raine and killing Jacoby. A year later, talking to the priest, Lance attempts to make light of fornication: 'fornication, anybody's fornication amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves--no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair.' But he had not been so tolerant when he slipped into Margot's room to see that 'great Calhoun' (or was it the 'clay?') bed and 'the strangest of all beasts, two-backed and pied.' Then he had been particularly mechanically aware of his physical sensations after cutting Jacoby's throat with the Bowie knife: 'I held him for a while until the warm air stopped blowing the hairs on the back of my hand.'

Then Lance again acts in an astonishing way; rather than kill the creature who was charged with creating all his misery, he begins to talk with her. Even after feeling the flutter of eyelashes that only minutes before had paddled Jacoby's cheek, he begins to think of taking Margot away on a trip. As he lights the lamp, so that they can talk at length, the fumes are ignited. Over a hundred years before, the house had exploded, perhaps when the Cavalier spirit had become too expansive. Now it explodes again, Usherlike, in concert with the mind of a man whose honor-worshipping rigidity has driven him mad. Lance describes the effect of the blast: 'I was wheeling slowly up into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell, great wings spread against the starlight.' Lance is so Sartrean that he thinks of the presence of Others as hell; hence he insanely thinks himself like Lucifer in his splendid isolation. But Lucifer was cast out of heaven, out of communion with God, not out of hell. The presence of Others is also heaven, argues Percy, for Others can join the Self in an intersubjective bonding, a shared consciousness, the creation of reality. *Lancelot* is thus fundamentally different from Percy's other novels, in that the protagonist perversely rejects any world but his own.

Lance's two inconsistent actions during his pursuit of 'buggery,' the sparing of Merlin and the apparent sparing of Margot, must receive attention at this point. As Lance arranges his recital of events of the previous year, he often draws a relation between them and events in the more distant past, both of which had destroyed his intensely personal idealization of his experience. The discovery of Margot's infidelity, he says, was like the discovery of his father's involvement in graft. Thereafter, although he professes to be dispassionately seeking the truth of his wife's behavior, he seems frequently to be reacting to fact, to that older set of events.

He begins to establish a model for the triangle of Margot, Merlin, and himself: his mother, his 'uncle,' and his father. The whole story of the older triangle may be a figment of Lance's imagination, of course; it nevertheless dominates his motivations at a layer deeper than he is capable of recognizing. The affair may be briefly reconstructed: his father, though descended from a line of honorable and active men, is incapable of living up to the family tradition; but in attempting to act, to succeed, he falls into dishonor; he then retires from the world into a fantasy of southern romanticism, leaving his wife prey to his own body and to the intruding male who can attend to its needs.

His father always reclining and poetizing and actually a party to his own betrayal, and himself too young to act as his mother's knight, Lance had suffered double disillusionment, father a weakling, mother a whore. No wonder that he would view the intruding male, Uncle Harry, as a rival, that he would remember Uncle Harry's gifts to him, candy-filled pistols and twenty-two bladed Swiss army knives, delightful toys for a child, but mocking symbols to an adult. In time, though, Uncle Harry had been vanquished; as a young Comus knight, Lance had seen Harry as an old man with retracted genital.

When he had married Margot, Lance seems to have cast her in the role of southern matron. Then if he stooped to folly, does that not mean that he, like his father before him, has fallen into impotence? Hence he must restore that mother image to its chaste state, to demonstrate that he is capable of reactivating his manhood. Thus, when he discovers that Merlin is, like Harry, no longer a sexual threat, Lance can dismiss him.

The terms of Lance's motivation may be seen by the scene with the mysterious woman which he imagines on the night of the hurricane. Rather than being an apparition of Our Lady revealing a sacred site or charging the witness to some sacred task, the visitor is Our Lady of the Camellias, the personification not of chastity but of promiscuity. The figure reveals that Lance's mother was like Camille, alluding to the prostitute Marguerite in the several versions of Dumas' *La Dame aux camellias*, who lived only by and for love. Then, as in a dream, Lance sleeps; awakening he discovers that the figure has become his mother, who offers him the sword, the Bowie knife.

But is the knife to redeem her honor or to eliminate his rival? His encounter with Raine suggests the latter. Raine jostles him, perhaps reawakening in him the memory of the way that his mother had once grasped him. Then, when the drugged girl squeezes him, saying, 'You're a big mother,' Lance's fundamental Oedipal motivation may be suspected.

The suspicion is strengthened when Lance approaches his wife's bed, which he sees as 'a cathedral, a Gothic bed,' fitting locus of Our Lady. As he slips up to it, he repeats an action that he had performed while sitting on Raine's bed; he puts 'thumbnail against tooth.' There he stands, peering at the bed, his adult description masking his childish action: he sucks his thumb. Then, after touching the bodies, in behavior unaccountable if adult, he gets in the bed with the 'beast, to squeeze it. But when Jacoby points out that Lance is going to hurt Margot, not him, Lance releases his grip. Then they rise to fight, with Lance thinking of having 'a mother's boy' at his mercy; then one mother's boy kills another. In effect, then, Lance is trying to restore the past to a purity which it apparently never had. Rather than accept the past as it apparently was, undergo a repetition, so that his present can be built upon the authentic, he insanely acts out a past in the present.

Somehow uninjured and thought to be deranged by grief, Lance is placed in an asylum. He has apparently been there for a year when the priest first comes to visit him. Their meetings seem to take place over several days, during which only Lance's voice is directly heard. The priest's responses must be reconstructed from Lance's paraphrase of his speech and comments about his physical behavior. Slight as the response seems to be, Lance pays small attention even to that. He is never provoked into serious, extended thought by one of his friend's questions. Lance's domination of speech does not mean, however, that Father John is insignificant as a character. He poses a constant alternative to Lance's effort to reduce the range of possible relationships between men and women to sexual desire, ultimately to sadism / masochism. For always the priest attempts to pierce Lance's closed mind to offer a differing definition of love, as *caritas*, as the selfless recognition of another self. Rather than accepting the contention that 'Man is a useless passion,' he is testimony that Christ's Passion provides a model for all who would truly love.

Their opposed definitions of love constitute a basic tension in the novel. But their difference is not restricted to the way human beings handle one another, morals. Yet another contrast occurs in their perception of themselves in time. The priest seems at the end to be anticipating--more of the same. It may be, as Lance charges, that he has experienced a crisis of personal confidence, perhaps because ministering to the Africans had not been the grand exploit that he had expected. It may have been that his perception of evil had gotten lost among the social, economic, and political movements of that unstable continent. Or it may have been that he had not, as a physician, admitted that he must first of all heal himself. But whatever his own state of mind, the priest keeps an eye cocked to the outside, the graveyard; on the other hand, Lance never really appreciates the 'outside,' the burning of the levee bonfires on Christmas Eve as a ritual of watching and waiting for Christ's appearance or the All Souls' Day activities. And as Father John confronts the evil that Lance incarnates, he seems to grow stronger in his faith. He does pray in the cemetery; he does begin to dress like a priest, dressed up, not like Lee to surrender, but to do battle. His subsequent actions confirm his decision; he is to leave the asylum to become a parish priest in Alabama, where he will 'preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives,' in Lance's scoffing words. It will not be the grand exploit of converting pagans, but the infinitely more difficult task of fighting everydayness in Kierkegaard's Christendom.

Lance, on the other hand, views his life as an apocalypse, with himself as the agent of a steadily developing revelation. He asks his auditor why he was obsessed with knowing more, but he does not even pause for an answer, gong on to detail his detective work. With the evidence gathered, he creates a sweeping generalization, a theory of history in which the focus of light (his 'Third Revolution' or 'new order') and the forces of darkness (the contemporary world) contend. The stripping away of 'buggery' reaches the ultimate darkness, amidst the howling of the wind and the flashes of lightning, in the revelation of the great whore and the 'beast,' a description worthy of St. John the Divine. Then, having brought about the destruction of his immediate enemies, Lance envisions himself discovering the New Woman and recreating Eden somewhere east of Lexington, Virginia. The New Woman will be Anna, the occupant of the room next to Lance', who has, according to Lance, been made innocent by being raped and forced to commit fellatio. It would be Anna, of course, 'grace,' one of the Godly remnant of Israel, whom Lance would see as worthy of joining him in his innocence in finding love among the ruins. Even after Anna curses Lance for his boorishness, he madly forgives her, for ignorant of the truth that he has discovered, she cannot, he assumes, appreciate his prophecy. He will bring about the millennium, and if God wants any of the credit He had better hop on the bandwagon.

Lance seems plainly to be suffering from severe insanity, perhaps paranoia, at the end. He may *think* that he is to be released; if he *is* actually to be freed, it is a profound comment on what passes for sanity these days. The priest clearly thinks that his old friend is mad; his looks show it. If those italicized responses are really the priest's, they are perhaps just such answers as we make to humor an irrational person. As for the last 'yes,' the only thing that the priest could tell Lance would be 'God help you.'

So the bond between the two childhood friends is sundered at the book's end. One friend has revealed himself as a victim of arrested development, his dependence upon a notion of history as a series of great deeds as perverse as his obsession with the idealized image of his mother. In isolation he looks to a future, a utopia, which will be nothing less than the creation of his conception of the past; he will still be experiencing the empty tape slipping past the tape head, though. The other has evidently suffered from the present, perfect adjustment being neither possible nor desirable. But he gives no indication of returning to the past, to any more 'acts' or great deeds, for deliverance from the present. Rather he will face the future, when it comes, with resoluteness and faith.

The two characters, Lance and Harry, each personify a tradition that Percy has often treated, the southern Stoic and the Christian. Moreover, the earlier treatments have revealed not merely the regional, but the personal significance of the traditions. Hence the two characters invite attention to the two views of the world that have competed for Percy's allegiance.

The attractiveness of the Stoic attitude is felt by many traditional southerners, of course. For the Stoic code is an appealing refuge for those who still weigh conduct, especially in these days when trashy

manners have been wonderfully and almost universally transmuted into the charismatic style. The code is even more intensely meaningful to Walker Percy, though, for being transmitted to him by William Alexander Percy. It is as close as the memory of a son who heard Senator Lamar and Robert E. Lee extolled as models of nobility by one who was himself an inspiration; it is as haunting as the scent of orris root. Lance Lamar is a part of Walker Percy.

The Christian tradition comes through Percy's fiction with no such nostalgic presence. Its fictional representatives have been caught up in paltriness as other folks. Indeed, if anything, they seem sometimes too easily able to live with it. But that, of course, may be their chief strength. That capacity is perhaps what Harry sought by his leap into the priesthood; with a family tradition of depression and early suicide, presumably occasioned by a strong family nose for paltriness, he could only live with the present by putting the past in its place. With his last name probably Percy, with his family home named Northumberland, like the home of the first southern Percy, with the family history of suicide, with his depression in his twenties, Harry is also Walker Percy.

There can be no synthesis of the two forces. Nor, indeed, has Percy himself ever suggested that there could be. But his previous attempts to charm his Stoic ghost relied upon much softer incantations; Aunt Emily is a lofty, tough old patrician and Ed Barrett has a streak of noblesse oblige, before each is found incapable of transcending the paltriness around him. *Lancelot*, though, is a much more mordant portrait of the Stoic tradition than *The Moviegoer* or *The Last Gentleman*. Lance's father is not really a physical invalid, but rather a spiritual coward (Lance is silent on this point: did his father ease himself off the world's stage?), and Lance becomes a monster by feeding upon the legends of ancestors.

The ghost still beckons, then, inviting Percy to view the world as a set of fixed and immutable forms. And so tempting is its appeal that Percy has had to reveal, this time, just how lethal its influence could be. For the first time he has directly opposed the Stoic with the Christian. But the Stoic has not been vanquished; Walker Percy can no more stop being a southerner than he can stop being a Christian. As a southerner he will continue to despise the things that he as a Christian can live with. That tension has given us a brilliant sequence of fictions, *Lancelot* the most exciting yet, and it will give us more."

Lewis A. Lawson
"The Fall of the House of Lamar"
The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being
ed. Panthea Reid Broughton
(U Mississippi 1979) 218-44

"When Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, Walker Percy's protagonist monologist in *Lancelot*, thinks of himself and his buddy J. B. Jenkins, the Grand Kleagle of the Ku Klux Klan, as 'sunk in life, soaked in old Louisiana and tears and three hundred years of Christian sin and broadsword Bowie-knife Sharp's-rifle bloodshed and victory-defeat,' his mind is fingering the pimple-become-volcano that is at the center of the book's explosion. Time and again Lancelot's mind circles back over the sins of yesteryear, its bold and decisive deed, and the lack of sin and event today. It is Lance's search for sin, his 'unholy grail,' that shapes the action of the novel, and it is the failure of this quest that shapes the conclusion.

Although Lancelot's story can be laid out in a quite linear fashion--remote southern history, childhood and his parents, football stardom, Lucy Cobb, Margot, dream world, awakening, and events preceding his confinement--his own narration, told from the cell of a New Orleans asylum, is fragmentary. Like a man assembling a jigsaw puzzle, Lancelot picks up and puts down the pieces of his past, trying to construct the fragments into a whole. He is a detective sifting through clues to recover and understand his personal history; and, although our curiosity is teased about the fateful events during the hurricane at Belle Isle, the real suspense is not about what happened in the past, but about what is happening in the present to Lancelot and his listener, Harry or Percival. It is suspense about what one is to do in the face of the contemporary situation.

Lancelot's past was split into two major segments by the letter *O*, his daughter's blood type and unmistakable evidence of his wife's unfaithfulness. Before the discovery, he had been living in a

dreamworld of his own making; he had been sunk in the patterns of his ruined Louisiana aristocratic ennui. After he detects Margot's infidelity, Lancelot comes alive. 'The moment I knew for a fact that Margot had been fucked by another man, it was as if I had been waked from a twenty-year dream. I was Rip van Winkle rubbing his eyes. In an instant I became sober, alert, watchful. I could act.' The Rip van Winkle legend, which Percy had used before, repeats an archetypal pattern: he who was dead is now alive; Lazarus has been led out of the tomb; but with Percy, the pattern is usually precipitated by shock. Stung by the intolerableness of imagining his wife under the weight of another man, her mouth giving to another the familiar mews of pleasure's pangs, Lance bristles with excitement at the possibility of finding something unusual amidst the ordinariness of life. Could it be that sin, dismissed by contemporary society, actually exists? His skin prickles with interest. If he could know his wife's adultery in the most direct way, would he not know sin? Setting out on his quest for the unholy grail, Lancelot becomes a searcher like all of Percy's previous heroes; but he is the first to look for sin.

Until recently, sin was something the southern writer did not have to send his hero in search of. William Faulkner, Erskine Caldwell, Robert Penn Warren, and Flannery O'Connor portray characters who choose evil and are blamed for it. The whole southern tradition, Donald Davidson suggest, confronts us with 'the ancient problem of evil and its manifestations'; and Davidson distinguishes it from the northern 'assumption that there is no defect or irregularity in human nature and human affairs that cannot be remedied by the application of money, science, and socialistic legislation.' By contrast, 'for Willie Stark, for the Compons of Faulkner's novels...there is no remedy in law or sociology, and no reward but the reward of virtue and the hope of heaven.

The sources of the southern writer's sense of sin lay in the history of the region. Because of the clear injustice of one race's enslaving another, southern writers have been able to write about right and wrong. As Hugh Holman explains, 'the southern writer has been uniquely equipped by his history to draw the symbol of guilt and to serve, himself, as an example.' Christian fundamentalism relies directly and literally on the Bible, and the Bible teaches there are commandments, and the violation of one of these commandments is a sin. Any good fundamentalist knows sin's reality, no matter what some jesuitical clergyman might say about the sinner's necessary knowledge, intention, and consent to the deed, or no matter what some psychiatrist might say about inner compulsion. Less pervasive than fundamentalism but nevertheless influential in the South was a Stoic tradition, originating in the planters of Virginia, which taught that in one's heart one knows what one ought and ought not to do. When fundamentalism's absolutism was accompanied in the southerner's postbellum consciousness by stoicism's ethic, the southern literary tradition (remembering slavery) was informed with a sense of sin and a knowledge of guilt.

With Percy, the guilt has run out. The older southern writers were close enough to the event of slavery to inherit the guilt, strain under it, and exorcise it by writing about evil as evil. But this condition no longer prevails, as Percy's flatly unemotional treatment of Negroes in his novels suggests. Elgin, the young black in *Lancelot*, has simply jumped over the whole history of slavery and the descendants of his race's enslavers by being smart and getting a scholarship to M.I.T. Such an example, regardless of its typicality, rather too conveniently suggests that injustice belongs to the dead past. As for segregation and the not-so-distant denial of civil rights, Percy suggests the white southerner's evolving attitudes. Her portrays Lancelot Lamar as a liberal, guilt-motivated advocate of civil rights in the 1960s whose outlook changes to benign indifference in the 1970s. Lance, like most sympathetic white southerners, simply assumes that the battle for civil rights has been fought and won.

In fact, all of the conditions conducive to a sense of sin have changed. The overwhelming media influence of secular, unheroic America has penetrated and eroded the uniqueness of the South's consciousness. Fundamentalism has been compartmentalized into an *ism*, and a rural one at that. The Bible belt has been loosened, with the holy book now vying with *The Six Million Dollar Man* as a myth of morality. Stoicism has been eroded by psychological pragmatism and economic opportunism, with Marcus Aurelius giving way to Dr. Joyce Brothers and Dale Carnegie. Even the southerner's newspapers are filled with syndicated columns out of Chicago, New York, and Washington; and injustice no longer seems the responsibility of the South alone. The old South's righteousness and guilt have become homogenized into the same type of general smiling uneasiness experienced in the rest of the country.

This change is reflected clearly in Percy's early novels, which show almost no sense of or concern with sin. *The Moviegoer* was one of the first important southern novels in which this sense of moral evil was not felt. *Detached, flat, ironic, and curious* were adjectives used to describe the book's tone, in contrast to the more customary epithets like *gothic, brooding, southern, earth-fed, or soul-searching*, much less *fury-driven*. All of Percy's main characters have been wry and ironic observers of human conduct, but they neither judge nor are judged harshly, administering at most, as Binx Bolling phrases it, 'a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself.' Aside from a few lyric sexual tingles, the strongest emotions expressed by Binx Bolling and Will Barrett are boredom and curiosity. And, until the appearance of *Love in the Ruins*, could one have even imagined an apocalyptic novel in which hardly any blame is laid? Violence and destruction result from the various factions being trapped in their own abstractions, but the individuals hardly seem to be at fault.

Sin has been absent from Percy's work because he does not see it operative in the world about him. It is not that he is simply a novelist of manners. No, Percy is an observer of morals as well as manners. Yet the term moralist does not fit him because it implies a criticism of immorality that is absent in his work. Percy sees contemporary society not as immoral but as amoral, missing the moral dimension and so incapable of acting either morally or immorally.

Up until now, Percy has been satisfied with a detached, Horatian satire of the contemporary amorality. When he has criticized it more directly, it was through a secondary character like Sutter of *The Last Gentleman*. Now in the person of Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, named after the seventeenth-century Anglican divine. Percy unambiguously scourges the modern world's lack of moral responsibility, especially in the area of sex. Enraged by the sexual revolution that has hit his own wife, daughter, son, and mother, Lancelot Lamar lashes out at 'the great whorehouse and fagdom of America.' While one must be careful to distinguish the author from his protagonist, Lancelot's rhetoric is so strong about 'this cocksucking cunt-lapping assholelicking fornicating Happyland U.S.A.' that Percy seems at once to be expressing his own outrage and, at the same time, parodying it.

Because of his Catholic background, Percy conceives of sin primarily as the subjective concurrence in an objectively evil act. But subjective concurrence demands freedom and core involvement, both of which Percy views as lacking in contemporary society. Percy sees the effects of objective sin; but he also sees that no one is able or willing to take responsibility for his own acts. 'Not one in 200 million Americans is ready to act from perfect sobriety and freedom,' observes Lance. He recalls a couple so bound by the surface patterns of their lives that it took a hurricane poses such objective danger that it neutralizes their fear of admitting their hatred to one another.

Core involvement means that the person is integrally bound up with his act, emotionally as well as volitionally. However, modern psychology has so sliced up the human psyche that one seems less likely to have acted freely than to have acted out of a compulsion, from his shadow side, or because of his id's drives. As for emotional attachment to one's deeds, Lancelot notes that 'people have fewer emotions these days.' Merlin's actors can register fifteen emotions without having a single real feeling. In casting about for examples of obvious sin, Lancelot must reject Hitler, for 'as everyone knows and says, Hitler was a madman.' As for child beaters, they have 'psychological problems and are as bad off as the children. It has been proved that every battered child has battered parents, battered grandparents, and so on. No one is to blame.' Percy here is covering some of the same ground covered by Karl Menninger, M.D., in his *Whatever Became of Sin?* (1973), when Menninger traced the process by which sin became crime, and crime became illness. For a solution to its evils, the modern world has turned from the priest to the police to the psychiatrist. Menninger listed many of the things he considers sinful in contemporary society and urged 'a revival or reassertion of personal responsibility in all human acts, good or bad.'

Although Percy would agree with the spirit of Menninger's exhortation, *Lancelot* shows that it would be naive to make the problem one of will. Because of the limitations on human freedom, wholeness, and emotional depth, the connection between the doer and the deed as been snapped. Lance himself is both the channel of this message and the victim of it. He is more than capable of fathoming the depths of moral vacuity in people like Jacoby, Raine, and Troy Dana and lamenting it; and he desperately wants the moral connection mended. However, when it comes to taking responsibility for his own violence, Lance has a

total emotional dissociation. He reflects on the moment before he committed murder, 'As I held that wretched Jacoby by the throat, I felt nothing except the itch of fiberglass particles under my collar.' He remembers 'casting about for an appropriate feeling to match the deed,' and not finding one. Lance is himself part of the no-feeling phenomenon he had described when he said, 'This is an age of interest.' One year after the murders, the closest Lancelot can come to admitting responsibility for his actions is to say that 'something went wrong, because here I am, in a madhouse--or is it a prison?--recovering from shock, psychosis, disorientation.' Lance's moral sensibility is so slight that he knows 'something went wrong' (not that he did something wrong) only 'because' he is incarcerated. He is unable to call what he did a sin, preferring the more comfortable medical terms, 'shock, psychosis, disorientation.'

While Lance's frequent references to his 'confession' may be taken literally as one seeking absolution from his priest, Lance's confession is the typically modern one of his own description, 'Bless me, Father, for I have done something which I don't understand.' Lance knows what it is that he did; he knows why he did it, but he does not understand the disparity between society's condemnation of the deed and his own emotional indifference to it. Percy has shown us the complexity of the difficulty in reestablishing moral responsibility through the irony of a hero who, though explicitly concerned about moral irresponsibility, is himself a victim of it. Lancelot Andrewes, the preacher, cannot practice what he preaches.

The list of sins in *Lancelot* differs somewhat from Menninger's, but the novel is plainly Percy's *Whatever Became of Sin*. Many of the wrongs in the novel are violations of the commandments. Lance's father is guilty of stealing. His wife lies to him (bearing false witness). Adultery is committed by Margot, Merlin, Jacoby, Raine, Uncle Harry, Lance's mother, and himself. Lance also violates the injunction not to kill. And Raine and Troy must answer to Christ's warning not to 'lead astray a single one of these little ones.'

With all of these sins around, why and in what sense does Lancelot 'seek' the unholy grail? Although Lance had been haunted all his life by the memory of his father's theft and the suspicion of his mother's adultery, these remained vague subterranean gnawing uneasinesses until the letter *O* (Percy's scarlet Letter) set him on his quest for knowledge. Shaken by the intolerableness of Margot's unfaithfulness, Lance remembers a similar dislocation that took place when he discovered his father had stolen ten thousand dollars: 'The old world fell to pieces.' Disillusioned by the people he most needed to admire, Lance reflects, 'How strange it is that a discovery like this, of evil...can shake you up, knock you out of your rut, be the occasion of a new way of looking at things!' His father's dishonesty, his mother's likely adultery, and his wife's infidelity challenge his assumption of the general beneficence of mankind. Lance had accepted without question the unchanging guise of niceness and blamelessness with which the world went on, but now he has to know whether it is all really niceness and blamelessness or buggery. 'One has to know,' says Lance. 'There are worse things than bad news.' He can make no further discovery about his parents' deeds, for they are lost in the irretrievable past; but Margot's are not.

The bad news Lance seeks, however, is more than the fact of Margot's unfaithfulness. He already knows that. He thinks that by actually seeing her in her adultery he will see sin. Even though his scientific frame of mind tells him that her actions are only molecules rubbing against molecules, would he not discover more in actual observation? Wouldn't he pierce to the heart of the intolerableness; wouldn't he find sin? After all, Lance thinks, if the best thing in life is sexual love, would not the equation be balanced if it were also the worst? This is the heart of the quest. 'Evil is surely the clue to this age, the only quest appropriate to the age. For everything and everyone's either wonderful or sick and nothing is evil.' But Lance assumes that, if only he can get beyond those closed doors, he will see the buggeriness of the buggery, the sinfulness of the sin, the raw culpability of their free and immoral act. And this knowledge will be revolutionary.

But the quest fails. Lance discovers nothing, he admits, at the heart of evil. 'There is no unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail.' He does not see sin. He sees his wife's negative intermingling with Jacoby's negative; he sees his daughter in a three-way geometric pattern (diagramed, not described, in the book) with Raine and Troy Dana. So not only does the Hollywood cinema fail to show sin as sin (as evidenced by the type of movie they are making) but even his and Elgin's (a scientist giving us the sheet facts) *cinema verite* also fails to show sin. Later, when Lance gets even closer to the deed and stands over his wife and

Jacoby in bed, he senses only the 'beastliness' of their act, nothing more. Why does Lance's quest fail so dismally and so abruptly?

Lancelot knew that he was going to blow up Belle Isle once he had seen the film of his wife's and daughter's bedroom activities. He plans the explosion carefully, sends away both daughters, Tex, Elgin and his parents, and even encourages Merlin, whom he's taken a liking to (after all, wasn't Margot dumping Merlin, too?), to leave as well. Through all this premeditation, Lancelot, quester after the unholy grail, does not even think to look for sin in his own actions, the only place where he could have hoped to find it.

Lance's quest is misdirected and hence doomed from the outset. In looking for sin in others, his wife and Jacoby in particular, Lancelot was looking for the impossible, for sin is a subjective occurrence existing only within an individual's psyche. Naturally Lancelot could never see sin. He saw but a negative image or a diagram--the inevitable vision from the outside. So taken up with his search for sexual sin in others, Lancelot misses the sinfulness of his own acts, sexual and violent. As he stands above Raine Robinette, about to enter her, Lance ruefully remembers the lost excitement of locker-room fantasies about Ava Gardner. His apparent flaccidity is rescued by the sight of his daughter's ring on Raine's finger and the erotic hate this sight stirs in him. 'The possibility of hate rescued lust from the locker-room future and restored it to the present.' Their intercourse is described by Lance without joy or guilt; neither during nor after it does he consider this act as a possible location for sin. Yet it was as much an act of adultery as Margot's--and with perhaps much less justification; for, after all, hadn't the man Margot married become an admittedly alcoholic dreamer who lately 'had trouble making love' to her?

In his quest for sin, Lance is as uninterested in his murders as in his adultery. When he first grabs Margot and Jacoby in a bear hug, Lance's mind roams to historical speculation: 'it seemed of no great moment whether I squeezed them or did not squeeze them.' It is not just that his feelings are cold, but his intellect simply does not make the connection between what he is doing and the sought-for sin.' Through all of his meticulous preparation for the explosion, Lancelot has not one question about the morality of his own actions. He is incapable of self-knowledge, incapable of blaming himself, and therefore incapable of finding sin. Corresponding to the irony of Lancelot Andrewes preaching emotional involvement and practicing emotional detachment, we have the irony of Lancelot, the quester, looking for sin in the wrong place.

Percy saves the crowning irony of the novel, however, for the end. Just a little over a year after Lancelot's terrible deeds at Belle Isle, he is to be released. He crows gleefully to Harry-Percival, 'I'm leaving today. They're discharging me. Psychiatrically fit and legally innocent. I can prove I'm sane. Can you? Why do you look at me like that? You don't think they should? Well, in any case, my lawyer got a writ of habeas corpus and my psychiatrist says I'm fit as a fiddle, saner in fact than he--the poor man is overworked, depressed, and lives on Librium.' Lancelot's story then is one of crime and no punishment. Most probably he was deemed temporarily insane during the night of the hurricane. Now he is 'psychiatrically fit and legally innocent.' Psychiatry and law have no more means for holding a man responsible for his horrors (four people were killed by Lance's hand) than calling his behavior 'aberrant' and detaining him until he has recovered from 'shock, psychosis, disorientation.' Dostoevsky at least gave Raskolnikov, who also was judged temporarily insane, eight years in Siberia. Percy in letting Lancelot off so easy seems to be implying that the sanctions of society on such behavior are almost nonexistent. Not only is Lancelot unable to hold himself responsible for his actions, but society is equally impotent to deal satisfactorily with human evil.

Since he fails to find his grail, how does Lance plan to deal with morality in the future? He determines simply to avoid the whole question of moral responsibility when considering the masses and to use a clear and frank language that describes deeds not motivation. There will be 'whores,' 'ladies,' 'thieves,' 'honorable men' in his self-declared new dispensation. General Lee and General Forrest will know one another instantly amidst a convention of Buick salesmen on Bourbon Street because they will instantly recognize in each other a high, old, Stoic code of honor and courage. In his efforts to simplify, to find some clear method of dealing with the intolerableness of the modern world, Lancelot abandons the befuddling complexity of the human psyche. People will be their deeds and their deeds will conform to his categories, he concludes, thus objectifying and ultimately dehumanizing mankind. He decides to play God and divide

mankind into the sheep and the goats, left hand and right hand. Thus he is guilty of supreme hubris. Lancelot reassures Harry that he will not need violence in his new order, for he has found that if you say something with conviction, people will usually believe you. He sheathes his sword, but does not discard it.

When Harry-Percival agrees with Lancelot's 'it's your way or mine,' Percy has limited the theme of his novel considerably. In the past he has been accused of copping out in his endings, but in *Lancelot* he takes an unequivocal stand. There are only two real responses: Lance's new found code of the heart, an oversimplifying hearkening back to the old pagan view of virtue for virtue's sake, encouraging others to accept this code, and waiting for (or perhaps instigating) something to happen to stop the madness of the modern; and the priest's way.

We have spoken little of this silent figure who himself has undergone changes during Lancelot's monologue. At the start of the novel, Lance had noticed his friend refuse to say prayers for the dead at the request of a woman in the graveyard. Later Percival is seen kneeling and praying by one of the tombs. He has also clarified his own future. Instead of continuing as a priest-doctor, he will go back to being a priest, content to minister to the needs of the poor in Alabama (like Val in *The Last Gentleman*). Percival (the name's similarity to 'Percy' deserves mention) reverses the process that Karl Menninger had described. He abandons medicine and turns back to faith. His way is believing in the Christian God, continuing to mediate in his small way that God to his people, hanging onto the complexities of sin's subjectivity, resisting Sodom in his own person and encouraging those around him to do the same, but forgiving them when they do not. His way is the 'God-bless-everything-because-it's-good-only--don't-but-if-you-do-it's-not-so-bad' attitude that is mockingly rejected by Lance. Percival's choice is at once an alleluia, a prohibition, and an absolution --a combination incomprehensible to Lance.

However, in the face of Lance's ranting and raving, the priest's way quietly becomes the true thematic center of the novel in its final pages. From the start Percival had considerable stature because of the amount of affection, trust, and admiration bestowed on him by Lance, who is not lavish with such things. He is the first person Lance would speak to in over a year; and Lance talks compulsively to him as a defendant addressing his judge, as a patient confiding in his doctor, as a penitent baring his soul to his confessor, and as a friend reminiscing with a friend, even though Lance admits, 'I don't know why I want to talk to you or what I need to tell you or need to hear from you.' In chastising Percival for leaving the United States for Biafra, Lancelot muses, 'if you'd been around to talk to...' He doesn't finish the sentence, but the implication is that things might have been different.

Percival's silence involves tremendous concentration and interest as he keeps coming back to Lancelot's cell just to listen. His silence is an active one, a time of assimilation and decision. In a time when talk is cheap, Lance respects his friend's silence despite his efforts to provoke Percival out of it. Lance taunts him about being a spoiled priest, about the ludicrous changes in the Church with nuns in pant suits wriggling their asses to guitar music during mass, and about the Church's failure and its need for a new Reformation. Harry-Percival's silence in the face of these accusations does not imply consent, but rather consideration and ultimately confidence in his own way. When he does speak, his words carry an intensified power because of the preceding silence and because of their strategic location at the end of the novel. Percival is given the last word. When a man utters thousands of words, his message is likely to be lost in the clutter; when another man listens to the first's every word and then answers in thirteen words of his own, his message sticks. Percival usurps the novel.

His answers to Lancelot's questions are clear and firm. He establishes their lines of agreement and their differences. He agrees with Lance's condemnation of Sodom, so Percy closes the door on the modern American do-you-own-thing sexual utopia. But that is 'all' they 'can agree on.' Percival does not share Lancelot's rage, and he does not approve Lancelot's deeds in the past or the future. What is it that he would like to tell Lancelot at the end of but does not? That Lance's way will not work. It has been tried before, by the Romans and the Old South, and it has failed. The sword, which Lance intends to have recourse to if nothing apocalyptic happens, is wrong. Lance in his outrage at the speck in his wife's eye has missed the plank in his own.

In *Lancelot*, Percy has written a disturbing book. His perspective on the modern world is a self-imposed narrow one, for as Lance says, 'Have you noticed that the narrower the view the more you can see?' Lancelot's cell becomes a symbol of our need to get a more oblique, more partial view of the world in order to understand it. As such, the cell is an instrument of recovery like Binx's movies, Will's telescope, and Tom's lapsometer. However, all the previous protagonists were absorbent characters, sponges. Lancelot is sharp, clear, and decisive, a lance. Thus Walker Percy, M.D., uses the most drastic of medical treatments, the knife, to expose the moral stagnation of American life. Since his instrument is itself infected, however, it is offered not as a cure but only as a corrective. Percy retains an ironic distance from Lancelot's blindness to his own evil, and he uses the priest-doctor Percival as a guide to a more healthy future."

William J. Dowie
"Lancelot and the Search for Sin"
The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being 244-59

"When a self-proclaimed messiah prophesies the destruction of modern corruption and proclaims a new life of pastoral harmony, we are inclined to be skeptical. Our uneasiness increases when he describes his conception of present decadence--'the secret of life is violence and rape, and its gospel is pornography'--and when he asserts his intolerant vision of the future--'no Russkies or Chinks.' But what if he announces that he himself will forcibly inaugurate the new age? When he backs up his threat with the story of his first messianic act--the murder of his wife, her lover, and two friends--and when he describes himself as the New Adam accompanied by his New Eve--a social worker who, he claims, has been purified by a gang-rape--our suspicions are confirmed: the man belongs in a nuthouse.

A nuthouse, or 'Center for Aberrant Behavior,' is where *Lancelot* takes place and the self-proclaimed messiah, this madman and murderer, is the protagonist, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar. Lance has a point: the society he describes is corrupt, deadened by pills and booze and sex. But isn't he himself a symptom rather than a savior? Lance considers the lax sexual standards of modern times the chief symptom of moral deterioration. The home movies he makes for evidence of his wife's infidelity show his sixteen-year-old daughter's menage a trois and his wife's progression from lover to lover. But surely these pornographic films are no better than the commercial movies which Lance despises. Because he reasons that love can be both the greatest evil and the greatest good, he has become obsessed with sexual sin, seeking assurance of good through knowledge of 'a purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation.' Failing to find evidence of pure evil, he intends to found a chivalric society in which he himself will determine tolerable and intolerable behavior. Like other of Percy's protagonists, Lance is a seeker, a questing spirit among anaesthetized souls and one who dares to plunge into the 'heart of darkness.' But Lance's quest is unholy, his method destructive, and his dream, the raving of a madman.

Still, we cannot simply dismiss Lance as a lunatic. At the end of the novel, having been proclaimed psychiatrically fit and legally innocent, he is released from his cell and intends to set out for Virginia to plot the bloody revolution he foresees. Moreover, he is not alone in his cell: a rather mysterious figure, a priest-physician and childhood friend, visits him there, eliciting the narration which comprises the novel. This visitor, although for the most part silent, endorses Lance's prophesy of a new life in Virginia, but not necessarily the new life which Lance envisions. The visitor also indicates that he has a message--a message which will be uttered, however, only after the novel ends. At the close of the last chapter we finally hear the visitor speak, if only in monosyllabic responses to Lance's questions. Looking Lance full in the face to indicate that he has something of importance to communicate, the visitor replies to Lance's final query, 'Is there anything you wish to tell me before I leave?' 'Yes.' And there the novel ends.

This unheard message, anticipated from the beginning, is absolutely crucial to the reader's satisfaction. The ending, moreover, is not so much ambiguous as unfinished; that is, Percy relies on the reader to supply the final message in order to qualify Lance's projection of the future and to resolve the question raised about the nature of love. Can he really expect to establish a dichotomized society in which men will be either gentlemen or thieves and women either ladies or whores? If not, what will his new life be? The reader, placed in the position of the confessor, cannot avoid the nagging conviction that the unheard sentence is accessible, the inevitable response to the confession which we, as listeners, should know. This feeling of near-recognition, fostered by our identification with the silent visitor, is not misleading. Percy

does not tantalize us merely for the sake of suspense; the answer is available--is, in fact, contained in the structure of the novel.

It is impossible to ignore the structural parallels of Lance's story to the quest of Malory's Sir Lancelot du Lac. Lance himself acknowledges the similarity describing his search for sexual sin as his Unholy Grail. He often compares himself to King Arthur's knight, declaring that he was actually named after Sir Lancelot rather than the Anglican divine, the Andrewes having been tacked on to his name in the attempt to give it Episcopal sanction. And Lance calls his visitor Percival from a childhood nickname. Most significantly, the Grail legend explores the conflict of secular and spiritual love similar to the conflict of sensual and chivalrous love which torments Lance. Lance is sometimes confused about the details of the quest for the Holy Grail: for example, he states that only two knights achieve the Grail, forgetting that Galahad, Sir Lancelot's son, is also successful. Nevertheless, the structural similarities in the two stories are extensive.

Both Lancelots are aristocratic champions of the poor and oppressed, Lance having worked with blacks during the sixties for civil rights. Like Sir Lancelot, Lance initially enjoys an innocent love affair: Sir Lancelot's love for Guinivere in the first part of his story is sanctioned by the courtly love tradition, and Lance remembers his first marriage with Lucy as a time of innocence. Both Lancelots indulge in a later period of sensuality: Sir Lancelot spent two years at Joyous Isle with Elaine, their child, her father, and a troop of maidens and knights: Lance lived at his Louisiana mansion, Belle Isle, with his second wife Margot, their daughter, Margot's father, and the troop of Hollywood people who are making a film there.

Furthermore, the two Lancelots seem to have lapsed into a trancelike state during this period--Lance calls it a 'dream state'--in which they half-consciously play the roles offered them by their environments and by their companions, states from which they are suddenly awakened. Lance likens himself to Sir Lancelot at the moment when he comes to himself in the woods after being caught in adultery with the queen. Lance, however, admits that 'it's a bad comparison,' especially since Lance is the cuckold not the adulterer. In fact, Lance more closely resembles Sir Lancelot at the moment when Percival recognizes him at Joyous Isle, where he has been living in disguise.

Subsequently, Percival takes him back to Camelot where he is inspired by the Grail to renounce his impure life and set out on his quest. Percy's Lance, having discovered his wife's infidelity by chance, is also awakened in a perception of his wasted life at Belle Isle. Lance acknowledges that he has become a mere creature of habit and dissolution, a mediocre and middle class man, and decides to reform, to become an avenging hero. Just as this stage of entranced physical love in Sir Lancelot's life is ended when he begins his quest for the Holy Grail, Lance also begins a new life of renunciation in his quest for the Unholy Grail, sexual sin. At the end of their searches, both experience the blast of an explosion. Sir Lancelot is knocked out for twenty-four hours when he attempts to enter the room in which the Grail is present, and Percy's unholy knight is caught in the explosion which he has set to destroy his mansion and the people in it.

At this point the stories begin to diverge and, in fact, to oppose one another. Lance's quest is, after all, inverted: he is the knight of the Unholy Grail, and he proposes a return to chivalry, the secular life which Sir Lancelot finally rejects. Lance evades the question of an all-encompassing Christian love: 'Don't talk to me of love until we shovel out the shit.' As Lance's confession has progressed, the priest-physician, like the medieval Percival, has gained religious strength: he dons priest's clothing during the course of the year and near the end of the novel says a prayer for the dead, a service which he has earlier refused. Moreover, Lance calls him Christ and Jesus--epithets which are disguised as expletives but which still carry religious impact. Yet Lance refuses to hear the visitor's spiritual counsel, rejecting a merciful love which could bridge the gap between the imperfect real world and the chivalric life which he envisions. Unlike Sir Lancelot, who is torn between secular and religious love, Lance makes a distinction between two types of human love--sexual and chivalric love. This crucial difference accounts for the inversion of the climax of the two otherwise similar stories. Unlike Sir Lancelot, Lance fails to accomplish his quest. 'There is no unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail,' he decides.

In spite of this failure and the numbness which Lance experiences instead of a sense of revelation, he plans to establish a new life based on chivalry in contrast to the religious life embraced by Sir Lancelot. And his visitor, who intends to take a church in Alabama just as the medieval Percival enters a hermitage

outside the city, confirms Lance's projection of a new life in Virginia with Ana, the rape victim. The reader, however, cannot accept Lance's vision of the future without misgivings, not only because he proposes an impossible return to a mythical chivalric age based on the legendary Old South, but also because he espouses violence and what is surely a merciless and distorted view of modern life. Declaring that the secret of love is hate, Lance equates human love with rape. Humans exist, he believes, 'for one end and one end only: to commit a sexual assault on another human or to submit to such an assault.' This conflict between what the novel seems to affirm and the reader's humanistic values is disconcerting. But here lies the importance of the unheard sentence--the visitor's message. Lance's revelation, unlike that of Sir Lancelot, is yet to come.

The nature of this revelation is suggested by another structural parallel, invoked by Percy in the following inscription which prefaces the novel:

He sank so low that all means
for his salvation were gone,
except showing him the lost people.
For this I visited the region of the dead....

This passage from the *Purgatorio* suggests a parallel to the quest of Dante, another great medieval seeker also concerned with the relationship of secular and spiritual love (cf. the discussion in Coles, *Walker Percy*). Dante's first pure love ended abruptly with the death of Beatrice just as Lucy's early death terminated the pure love stage of Lance's life. Later Dane apparently also indulged in a hedonistic life, since the heavenly Beatrice chides him for forsaking his pure morality to plunge into wickedness after her death. Just as Lance has found himself 'in the dark,' Dante at the opening of *The Divine Comedy* suddenly finds himself in the midst of a dark wood. Lance's visitor, a friend from the past, resembles Dante's guide, the ghost of Virgil: he appears from the cemetery on All Soul's Day and is several times likened to a ghost, and he finally breaks a long silence to guide Lance through the realms of the dead--his past--and to accompany him through Purgatory--his year in the mental hospital.

As the inscription explains, Dante is shown the damned souls in order to prepare him for the revelation which follows. Percy makes it clear that Lance, too, needs a guide, someone to focus his attention on the past. Lance protests that the past is not meaningful and that he cannot remember it, but clearly he cannot fully comprehend the visitor's message until he has thoroughly examined the motives and emotions which accompanied his crime. Several times during the course of the narrative, the visitor starts to speak but hesitates and instead redirects Lance's attention to this crucial point in his past. And in spite of his protests, Lance himself knows that something went wrong with his life and that the past holds a clue.

In the memories of his past, Lance finds his own carnal hell on earth, and Lance's hell bears a striking resemblance to Dante's second circle, which Lance refers to as 'a rather pleasant anteroom to hell.' It is here, incidentally, that Dante meets Paolo and Francesca, the lovers who were inspired to commit sexual sin by reading of Lancelot's and Guinivere's first kiss. In Dante's second circle, carnal lovers are driven about incessantly in total darkness by fierce winds. The events which Lance recalls take place in a similar environment. The moviemakers at Belle Isle have simulated a hurricane as background for the x-rated film they are making, a film which features a sexual savior who transforms all evil to erotic good. This simulated hurricane is soon overwhelmed by hurricane Marie, whom the revelers greet with an orgy of sex and drugs. Moreover, the videotapes commissioned by Lance in order to view the sexual antics of his wife are distorted so that "The figures seemed to be blown in an electronic wind.' The Belle Isle of Lance's memories is indeed a carnal hell.

To discover the clue in the past, Lance must review not only the events of the past but also his own emotions. The visitor again and again speaks of love, asking Lance if he loved Margot and finally if he can ever love anyone. (We infer these questions from Lance's responses, since the visitor remains silent until near the end.) Tormented by Margot's infidelity, by the fact that she has physically loved another man, Lance parries the question, refusing to call sexual passion love. But at the same time, he describes his joy with Margot in such loving detail that there is little doubt. Dichotomizing love into chivalrous and sensual love, he declares that in the future men 'will know which women are to be fucked and which to be honored

and one will know who to fuck and who to honor.' But Margot's dying words indicate the error of this severe judgment: 'With you I had to be either--or--but never a--uh--woman.'

By reviewing the past with the priest as his guide, Lance has come to recognize that his quest has failed: instead of experiencing a sense of absolute sin at the end of his quest, he has discovered only numbness. As the novel closes, he is still in his purgatorial cell. He complains of being cold, unable to feel emotion, and he continues to describe things with a cold logic which belies emotional involvement. But there are suggestions of the change to come.

The inscription chosen by Percy locates Lance at the end of his purgatory, recalling the moment when Virgil surrenders Dante to the guidance of Beatrice. As Beatrice looks Dante directly in the eyes for the first time, her brilliant gaze reveals to him the light of heaven. In *Lancelot* it is the visitor who looks straight at Lance before revealing the truth to him, and this visitor has been called Lance's Beatrice. The visitor admits, however, that his message is not important since what he has to say will happen anyway. In *The Divine Comedy*, too, the Church fails as a guide to spiritual fulfillment; it is human love which must transform Lance. The priest-visitor will soon be replaced as a guide by Anna, the rape victim, who is repeatedly compared to Lucy, Lance's first love. This 'Lucy of the new world' is almost a reincarnation of his first wife so that Lance rediscovers his first innocent love just as Dante finds Beatrice once more. And like Beatrice, Anna can show Lance what the priest can only verbalize.

When Lance invites Anna to join him she refuses to commit herself because he cannot say that he loves her, and later she angrily denies that the secret of life is 'the ignominious joy of rape and being raped.' She inserts a welcome note of sanity when she rejects his notion that her ordeal has either violated or purged her inner self. In spite of these rejections, however, Anna, according to the visitor, will accompany Lance to Virginia. Clearly, her presence will modify Lance's plan for a chivalric society in which sensual love will be divorced from 'pure' love. Anna, like Margot before her, denies this scheme of absolutes. In spite of her rape, she refuses to consider sex a force of evil. Like Beatrice, she can reveal to Lance what the priest could not: the transforming power of human love.

By suspending Lance between the moments of revelation of the two great medieval seekers, Percy provides the key to the unheard message at the end of *Lancelot*. Lance recalls Sir Lancelot at the end of the *Sangreal* just as he suggests Dante at the end of the *Purgatorio*. But Lance's search for the Unholy Grail is not rewarded by the inscription, Lance is on the brink of a discovery. The movie made at Belle Isle foretells this revelation. Although it focuses rather crudely on the sexual aspect of human love, it shows 'that the girl with her own gift for tenderness and caring converts a moment of violence into a moment of love.... The girl guides him toward life through the erotic. She is his Beatrice.'

Corinne Dale

"*Lancelot* and the Medieval Quests of Sir Lancelot and Dante"

Walker Percy: Art and Ethics 99-106

"...peculiar times require peculiar quests."

"Walker Percy's *Lancelot*, a very peculiar book, engages the critic, challenges his stance, in the way few contemporary American novels any longer care to do. *Lancelot* is the monologue--now obstreperous, now canny, now frightening, now pathetic--of a madman, the tale of a brutal negative quest, brutally told. Mad Lancelot surely is, but mad in a fashion that blunts the critic's diagnostic instrument and subverts his presumption of sane and sanitary distance, for the symmetry between the narrator's violently obsessive quest for meaning through his telling and the critic's zealous and equally over-determined pursuit of meaning in the tale is inescapable and disturbing. Is it not mad to monograph on a madman's monologue? That question identifies the predicament that is *Lancelot*--a predicament especially pointed for criticism but implicated in any authentic reading of the novel. *Lancelot* is a novel about a character in a predicament; ultimately that character is I--reader and writer.

Most Americans are well acquainted with the disadvantages of madness: the delicate wariness that settles in on the faces of relatives and friends; the irksome difficulty in keeping the fold card straight; a certain moroseness that taints one's enjoyment of even the most tasteful serials on PBS; a persistent itch

beyond the power of Downy Fabric Softener to allay. But if we are almost tediously familiar with the disadvantages of madness, perhaps we are insufficiently aware of its advantages. Chief among them is the possibility of a vantage, a point of view. It may be a slight vantage, as narrow as the view from the window of a madhouse; but, as Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, madman, attests to his silent interlocuter, 'the narrower the view, the more you can see.' What Lancelot sees out the window of his New Orleans madhouse is 'a patch of sky, a corner of Lafayette Cemetery, a slice of levee, and a short stretch of Annunciation Street,' and, he tells us, part of a sign. It reads:

*Free &
Ma
B*

For the madman the fragment lures speculation. Lancelot freely conjectures what the whole sign might say: 'Free & Easy Mac's Bowling? Free & Accepted Masons' Bar?' He expects to learn the answer when, after finally proving his sanity, he leaves his confinement. And maybe he will, though the novel ends in the delay of that departure and that discovery. I won't ever know what the complete sign says, unless I should be very lucky and on a future trip to New Orleans find such a sign on such a street. What a bonus for sanity that would be! The narrow view of the novel divulges only a partial sign, however, and, in doing so, simultaneously poses and answers the riddle, when is a sign not merely a sign? The answer: when it is a message, when it addresses me in my predicament, even if its only address is 'you are in a predicament'--when, that is, I am forced to make use of it because I have nothing else. In my predicament as reader of this book, provided with only a narrow view between its red walls, the insignificant breaks upon me with the force of a message, even if that message conveys only the urgency of my questions: *Free* and what? What does *Ma* have to do with it? *B*? What? How? This must be madness.

Free &

Freedom, as Lancelot's favorite song says, is just another word for nothing left to lose. Lancelot's madness began with the sudden awareness of that freedom in the shocking recognition of nothing. From his vantage in the madhouse Lancelot tells his story, the tale of a Louisiana lawyer in his forties, squire of the family mansion of Belle Isle, a former happy hedonist whose pleasures have lost their savour. Lancelot's second wife, Margot, has made a rapid transit from *nouveau riche* to *nouveau antiquarian*; she begins by restoring Belle Isle to its antebellum splendor, tries to restore her husband to a likeness of Jefferson Davis, and turns, finally, to the project of restoring herself to a factitious glamour by becoming a motion picture actress. As if by the logic of that restoration Lancelot has been eased out of the revived grandeur of his ancestral home into the pigeonier outback, where he roosts, a long pigeon, while a flock of Hollywood moviemakers on location nest in the manse.

Always a creature of habits, Lancelot has by now been reduced to just three: drinking, reading Raymond Chandler, and, preeminently, monitoring the news. Every pleasantly pickled hour he listened to the reports on the radio, and every evening his last, ritualistic act is to cast a blood-dimmed eye on the television's spectral summary of the day's events: no-news from everywhere. He does not realize his compulsiveness or his discontent until, one afternoon, he suddenly *does* receive news, from a wholly unexpected source, in a form not immediately explicable but immediately meaningful. The message: nothing. Or, to be more precise: oh, cipher, zero. Looking up from a Chandler novel, Lancelot glances at a release form for his daughter's summer camp and notices that her blood type is listed as I-0. That 0, the place-saver in the decimal system, when placed behind the one and the hyphen, simultaneously indicates his daughter's blood-typed and displaces Lancelot with his IV-AB from her blood-line, involving the giddy inference that he has been replaced in his wife's bed.

Lancelot retrospectively compares the effect of this discovery to the insistent and catastrophic chain of inferences that follow upon an astronomer's observation of the dislodgment of a single point of light in a galaxy trillions of miles away: 'The astronomer sees a dot in the wrong place, makes a calculation, and infers the indisputable: comet on collision course, tidal waves, oceans rising, forests ablaze. The cuckold sees a single letter of the alphabet in the wrong place. From such insignificant evidence he can infer with at least as much certitude as the astronomer an equally incommensurate scene: his wife's thighs spread, a cry,

not recognizably hers, escaping her lips. The equivalent of the end of the world following upon the out-of-place dot is her ecstasy inferred from the *O*.'

A violent logic, which will, for Lancelot, justify violence. Violent, but if mad, it is the madness of our own Judeo-Christian culture, which becomes intelligible only in the plausibility of the end of the world and in the possibility of moral and spiritual equivalent to the eschaton. And, given the end of the world, a certain violent logic does enforce itself: because the eschaton will be a unique and totalizing event, it must be incommensurate with anything else, context or cause. For both astronomer and cuckold to follow the chain of inferences that unveils the end of the world requires a transcendental leap from the general to the unique, from evidence to experience, from mild interest to fierce passion. It follows that the truest moral equivalent to the eschaton emerges where incommensurability is both most familiar and least intelligible, in the sexual climax, which, as Lancelot argues, belongs to none of our conventional categories and which is, properly speaking, *unspeakable*.

The incommensurability of the sexual orgasm, which in its *ek stasis* takes one out of one's place, opens to an absolute beyond the phenomenal--an absolute, Lancelot insists, either infinitely good or infinitely evil. The only anchor available to stabilize this indeterminate moment is fidelity; fidelity between the partners to this grave ecstasy is the life preserving fiction of a benign commensurability. For Lancelot to suddenly infer the entirely separate ecstasy of his wife from the out-of-place, unfaithful *O* is to cut away that stabilizing anchor and to chart will he will be a course to the end of the line: to sheer negativity, absolute evil. Such is the logic of eschatology, wherein the world is ultimately consumed not because of a stray comet but because of its own incommensurate, fatal significance.

Suddenly, giddily free, with nothing left to lose, Lancelot seems to come to himself, feels capable of action for the first time in many years. The inference of absolute evil does have, like madness, its compensations: it makes knights out of broken down old boozers, and it impacts a kind of heady joy in the heart of despair--what Lancelot calls a 'secret sweetness at the core of dread.' Lancelot describes that peculiar emotion by comparing the discovery of his wife's infidelity to the time when, as a child, he accidentally came upon a cache of 10,000 embezzled dollars buried beneath the argyle socks in his father's bureau--evidence of an unsuspected corruption that knocked the son's world to pieces. He recalls the hunger of his eyes for the sight of that dirty money, how they shifted it to and fro ever so slightly, scanning, gluttonously trying to take it all in. Lancelot feels the same sweet dread in the evidence of his wife's ecstasy. Opening to his eye, the *O* provokes what Lancelot calls the 'worm of interest,' which, once stimulated, will wriggle into an emptiness at one and the same time repellent and inviting. For the worm, inference is but appetizer. Though vengeance be Lancelot's goal, he must satisfy the interested eye by feasting on the act itself in the absolute knowledge of whether all is good or evil, niceness or buggery.

In his pursuit of this awful knowledge Lancelot eccentrically emulates the method of Philip Marlowe, tarnished knight in the city of fallen angels. The man becomes the private I; private eye turns peeper. He first enlists the services of his black factotum Elgin (the name of a watch) to observe and chart the comings and goings of the film crew at the local Holiday Inn. When the evidence of bedhopping proves inconclusive, Lancelot, with the help of Elgin's MIT-trained expertise, sophisticates his methods, substituting for his servant's eyes the objective probing lens of the camera. After insuring that the film company will have to spend their last two nights at Belle Isle, he converts the house into a weird television studio, each bedroom equipped with its own prosthetic eyeball. But the more sophisticated the equipment, the more bizarre the results. This technique of bringing the sinners into focus with movement-activated cameras and infrared lenses does show them compromised but in a compromise of the viewing instrument itself, which records them strangely distorted--a so-called negative effect that aptly comments on Lancelot's negative quest.

Furious to eliminate the indeterminacy that haunts him, Lancelot decides to feast his eyes directly on the truth. He prepares for a vengeance that will be identical with knowledge, where the hidden evil will be raped by a sovereign knower. The next evening he diverts gas from a partially capped well into the ventilation system of the sealed house and then balefully enters its poisonous darkness. The cold eye of the hurricane that rages without, Lancelot pierces ever deeper into the bedrooms of those who sport in adultery and perversions, until, at the center, he ruthlessly lances the infections with penis and knife in a violent

knowledge that discloses the secret of life and affirms the justice of his quest even as the apocalyptic explosion of the gas-filled house affirms the intelligibility of history itself.

Apocalypse may have come, but Lancelot, survivor, is no less haunted. By recounting his terrible story to a priest/physician and former friend he seeks to regain a lost focus and assurance, to rediscover a truth he is sure he knows. In this narrative quest the mind wends its way through a lurid landscape oppressively charged with significance. The madman's compact with lover and poet is to compare great things with small. And as Lancelot has inferred absolute evil from the evidence of his wife's infidelity, so does he find in his predicament the type of an evil that has correspondences everywhere. Whether or not the world has actually ended or will end, the need for an end and for a new beginning is starkly legible in the signs of the times. The madman's litany of those signs builds to a wholesale denunciation of the homogenized hell of contemporary America: 'Washington, the country, is down the drain. Everyone knows it. The people have lost it to the politicians, bureaucrats, drunk Congressmen, lying Presidents, White House preachers, C.I.A., F.B.I., Mafia, Pentagon, pornographers, muggers, buggers, bribers, bribe takers, rich crooked cowboys, sclerotic Southerners, rich crooked Yankees, dirty books, dirty movies, dirty plays, dirty talk shows, dirty soap operas, fags, lesbians, abortionists, Jesus shouters, anti-Jesus shouters, dying cities, dying schools, courses in how to fuck for schoolchildren.'

The loss of the country is the surrender to spectacle; the task of living has become a business of show. And show business--Hollywood movies and moviemakers--becomes for Lancelot the epitome of a pervasive, disgusting infidelity of appearance to reality. A century ago Walt Whitman stood on California's shores and saw the great westering circle almost circled. Just twenty years ago Alan Ginsberg wandered through a supermarket in California and found *both* peaches and penumbras. Today, Lancelot envisions a California where a movie theater playing *Deep Throat* snuggles knowingly up to the gates of San Clemente --the Hollywood version of Paradise, where the hypocrite will lie down with the pornographer. Worse, in the inevitable reflex of sin, Hollywood, with its hurricane machines and freeze-dried divinities, has spread east, where actors and actresses, producers and directors mindlessly spout the ideology of a joyful, life-enhancing sexuality while they secretly practice fornication and buggery in lewd daisy chains that are the perversion of nature.

As it must, the diseased part infects the whole. Lamia--fantastic, alluring--first poisons the bed and then one's hold on reality itself: 'The world had gone crazy, said the crazy man in his cell. What was nutty was that the movie folk were trafficking in illusions in a real world but the real world thought that its reality could only be found in the illusions. The proper equivalent of this nutty indeterminacy is not the liberal's daydream of a pluralistic society fondly tolerant of all distinctions, but Pandaemonium, Mammon's mimic kingdom, a hellish nightmare that threatens to make all distinctions impossible. One choice alone remains to settle into that ultimate form of alienation that Blake called the limit of opacity or to elect a Luciferian indignation which in acknowledging a fallen estate insists nonetheless on the prerogatives of a proud sovereignty.

As his indignant answer to this intolerable age of Sodom Lancelot envisions a new order of things where sovereignty is possible, a place and time of capable action. He prophesies a revolution. 'You have your Sacred Heart,' he tells the priest. 'We have Lee. We are the Third Revolution. The First Revolution in 1776 against the stupid British succeeded. The Second Revolution in 1861 against the money-grubbing North failed--as it should have because we got stuck with the Negro thing and it was our fault. The Third Revolution will succeed.' Lancelot's prophecy corrects the American myth of the ever new frontier by identifying it as the mere rotation of keenly felt, constrictive limits with the comforting illusion of the limitless. In its stead he projects a myth of return, to Virginia, beautiful island between North and South, where America began, where will congregate a band of gentlemen, militant in their assured virtue, disciplined by the knightly values of 'tight-lipped courtesy between men. And chivalry toward women,' whom the men will save 'from the whoredom they've chosen.' The stern Virginian will fashion from *Free & O* (open, type O, type and archetype, aught and naught) the noble prospect for a sanely limited community. Lancelot quotes inspiringly from the traditional song:

*Oh, Columbia, our blessed mother
You know we wait until you guide us.*

Give us a sign and march beside us.

The curve of Lancelot's madness is the impassioned trajectory from the misplaced *O* tickling his worm of interest to this vision of Columbia chastely offering a transparent sign of noble purpose to her marching sons.

And what of Columbia's daughters? What will their freedom be? Lancelot is explicit: 'They will have the freedom to be a Lady or a Whore'--a single, determinate choice, on which the whole vision rests, for that determinacy is anchored in the great secret of life which was the unholy prize of Lancelot's quest. 'The great secret of the ages,' he reveals, 'is that man has evolved, is born, lives, and dies for one end and one end only: to commit a sexual assault on another human or to submit to such an assault.' He goes on later: 'God's secret design for man is that man's happiness lies for men in men practicing violence upon women and that women's happiness lies in submitting to it.' Given that brutal design, the distinction between lady and whore is simply a reflection of the determinate difference between fidelity and betrayal. The news that in this fallen world such a distinction can and must be made is the grail that Lancelot has brought back from the end of the world. As an answer to the priest's pious objection that we have been redeemed, Lancelot disdainfully gestures to his narrow view and says, 'Look out there. Does it look like we are redeemed?'

Can this view be controverted? Try. It's like arguing with a madman. A madman with a sword. Would it do any good to suggest that this vision of a reactionary revolution is actually a repetition, to point out that Southern men have already banded together as a clan of knights sworn to chivalric protection of the pure Southern Lady? Almost certainly not, for in his madness Lancelot knows what we Sodomites do not guess, that in the hazards of true repetition lies the only possibility of raising alienated consciousness to the second power, a secondary reflection which in its difference identifies the mind's potential sovereignty and freedom. This power of repetition is attested to by the major repetitions in the book: the repetition of the quest of the original Lancelot by his namesake; the repetition of the quest of the latter-day knight in his monologue. One must return in order to begin. In recognition is the possibility of action and knowledge.

But repetition is also the limit of action and knowledge. One can plan a Virginian garden of Adamic freedom; but, as we know, the limit of Adam is Eve. Lancelot chooses as his Eve, Anna, the woman in the next cell, who has been reduced by gang rape to near catatonia and whom he involves in various fantasies of communication and conjugation. When recovered, however, she shatters these fantasies in her climactic rejection of his vision of Gentleman Adam and Lady Eve, sovereign raper and submissive rapee. 'Are you suggesting,' she cries, 'that I, myself, me, my person, can be violated by a man? You goddamn men. Don't you know that there are more important things in this world? Next you'll be telling me that despite myself I liked it.' Her angry response, proclaiming an absolute resistance to violation by a self open to more important things, disrupts the delicate focus of Lancelot's monologue and repeats a disturbance that, he realizes, occurred earlier--on the night of his vengeance and in the heart of his triumph.

There, at the end of the line, his unfaithful wife Margot, the ark of covenant that bears his unholy grail, speaks to him in a poignant, etherized dismay about the losses of their lives. Just before the final conflagration she asks, 'What's the matter with me?' 'What?' he responds. 'That's what you never knew,' she says. 'With you I had to be either--or--but never a--uh--woman. It was good for a while.' Her last words are less important than her last silences. The rapee turns on the raper in the moment of his knowledge with a gentle accusation that is the dying echo of a lost possibility: you never knew; I had to be either--or--but never a--uh--woman. The pauses mark the limits of Lancelot's knowledge: either a lady or a whore but never a woman. And what he hears, he sees. In the flaring of the last match Lancelot can see his wife in the corner 'lying on her side,' as he tells it, 'like Anna, knees drawn up, cheek against her hands pressed palms together, dark eyes gazing at me.' At the end of the line the knower looks into the sweet secret of dread and sees that secret looking back at him.

The limit of Adam may be Eve, but what does

have to do with it? The limit of Lancelot, as we know from Malory, is Lancelot, who is both his virtue *and* his taint. The unexpected memory of Margot and the rejections by Anna rupture Lancelot's narrative like the return of the repressed, releasing the confession that his quest had failed after all, that he never found the secret knowledge he has professed. Instead of whore or rapee he has come upon a woman staring at him in sympathy or shouting at him in rage--each encounter marking the beam in his own hungry eye. This failure and its consequent repression occur because this hero is not only Lancelot but Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, son of a dreamy, impotent country squire, who just happens to be a crook, and of Lily of Belle Isle, frail and pretty, who just happens, it seems (the evidence is inferential), to be an adulteress with jovial Uncle Harry. As Lancelot repeatedly recalls, the primal scene of infidelity lay in his childhood discovery of the dirty money hidden in the cavity of his father's sock drawer, the moment when he first experienced the wild surmise that would later prompt him to his unholy quest. But what of Ma?

As it was his mother who sent him (wittingly or unwittingly?) on that first unknowing journey to the uncanny secret--sign of dishonor and impotence--in his father's drawer, so it is his mother who appears in a vision as Joan of Arc to offer him the sword, or at least the Bowie knife, of vengeance at the fatal hour. But if it is his mother as Lady whom Lancelot is avenging, it is also his mother as Whore on whom he is taking vengeance. For it is his mother's uncertain fidelity which is the type of that indeterminacy between Lady and Whore that Lancelot aims to extirpate. He rouses himself from a stupor like his father's and attempts to save himself from the emasculation involved in his father's substitution of the bright, green money for the fact of a female sexuality too darkly, sweetly dreadful to confront.

In attempting to free himself from his father's impotent trance, however, Lancelot obsessively repeats his father's self-destructive evasions. Fantasizing his mother as Joan of Arc, militant virgin, and accepting from her hands the prosthetic penis of the Bowie knife is an arming every bit as unmaning as his father's disarming retreat into genteel avarice. If his father dishonored himself by substituting the corrupt image of money for the uncanniness of his wife's cunt, then Lancelot repeats that error in his substitution of the fascinating uncanniness of the cunt for the vital indeterminacy of the woman. The measure of Lancelot's ambivalence is the impossibility of a man ever knowing absolutely whether his mother is a lady or a whore. The motive of his action is the incapacity of *this* man ever to accept her as a woman. By finding and sacrificing the actual whore, be it Margot or Hollywood, he hopes to save the memory of his mother--Joan of Arc, Columbia, America herself--as Lady. It never works.

Now I *am* in a predicament. I can, if I choose, yield to the momentum of my argument and reasonably explain away Lancelot's rant by psychoanalyzing him, reducing his unsettling vision of America, of man and woman, to the wholly understandable consequence of childhood trauma. From that perspective all that stuff about the end of the world is merely more of the same. Repetition is the limit of action and knowledge. But the monstrous excellence of this book is that though Percy generously supplies the material and tools for such a reduction, he cannily prohibits any comfort in its execution. If I, rationalist, substitute a bright, tidy psychoanalytic explanation for Lancelot's eccentric narrative, I merely repeat his obsessive quest for the determinate and thereby commit myself to a monologue mad like his but chilling and sterile. Every man has a Ma, but only Lancelot tells this disturbing story.

Repetition is the possibility of action and knowledge. That possibility is realized in the book through the development of the figure who listens to Lancelot's story. A priest/physician, what Lancelot calls either 'screwed-up priest or half-assed physician,' he is a childhood friend of Lancelot's, who has been known by many names. Called Percival, for the knight 'who found the Grail and brought life to a dead land,' he visits the tomb of Lancelot where he must both discover and exercise his power of rejuvenation. Called Pussy, he represents the hard chance that man may come to terms not only with woman but also with the femininity that is part of his own make-up. Called John, he must identify himself as either 'John the Evangelist who loved so much or John the Baptist, a loner out in the wilderness.'

While listening to Lancelot this man, 'neither fish nor fowl' when the monologue begins, passes from a state of abstraction to an exploratory interest, and finally to a difficult commitment both to Lancelot and to a renewed religious faith--a commitment quietly signaled by the priest's hesitation in the cemetery outside Lancelot's narrow window as he stops, stoops, to pray for the dead: for Lancelot, for himself, for me. Percival does not bring his grail to a dead land; he *finds* his grail in the broken quest and the tormented

narrative of Lancelot. The priest/physician who aimed to give therapy receives instead news of, in, and for his predicament. And what he receives he charitably returns. When Lancelot, in the madness of his lucidity, light without warmth, exclaims that he is cold, it is John the Evangelist who responds, not simply to comfort Lancelot in his chill, but to rescue him from what the poet of *Paradise Lost* called 'the bitter change / Of fierce extremes, extremes by change more fierce, / From Beds of raging Fire, to starve in the Ice / [His] soft Ethereal warmth.' The priest responds to Lancelot's implied question.

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be what? how?, with the promise of a message, of good news.

That news is never spoken. But the signs of the text, however partial, support, even demand a conjecture. The news must be the hardly possible alternative to both the intolerable Sodom of contemporary America and the mad, murderous rage of Lancelot. It is the alternative that the priest has been advancing all along: first automatically, then guiltily, then cautiously, and, finally, with an authority that leaves Lancelot and the reader hanging on his words: love. Love earned by ordeal, offered in risk, justified by a mortal need. Not *just* love, but *Christian* love. Lancelot had justified his quest for sure knowledge of pure sin as a negative proof of God. 'If,' he had said, 'there is such a thing as sin, *evil*, a living malignant force, there *must* be a God.' The new sovereignty of man that Lancelot had envisioned would have been the earthly analogue of the stern dominion of a divine father. Absolute knowledge forestalled, as is the sovereignty of God and the certainty of his patent justice. But the indeterminacy that remains, clarified by trial and refined by need represents the existential possibility of Christ and his redemptive love: a love whose incarnation is the revived fraternal affection of Percival for Lancelot, and whose prospective images are the charity of a priest in Alabama and the family of man, woman, and daughter in the mountains of Virginia.

That message of love is, as I've said, not spoken in this text. Indeed Lancelot has contemptuously commanded his Percival, 'Don't speak to one of Christian love.' The priest obeys, he speaks only a series of reassuring 'yesses' at the close, affirmations that are not statements but *acts* of love. Perhaps the message of love cannot be spoken without being rendered as utterly banal. And though it is part of the critic's job to make banal utterances, I do apologize for mine. We can't be too certain, or perhaps I should say certain enough, about this book. Like Lancelot, who does not find the consubstantial sign of evil, who can no longer expect the transparent sign that Columbia has promised her sons, and who never even acts on his determination to leave his cell to finally learn the complete version of

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we must take our messages from broken signs, which may madden us or make us lovers--perhaps madden us then make us lovers--in an world which, read rightly, is always balancing precariously between a catastrophic end and a tentative beginning.

I have referred to the monstrous excellence of this book, hardly a novel. The text does open like a novel, pricking the reader's worm of interest and inviting him to penetrate the core, to repeat Lancelot's quest for a final knowledge: reader as raper, book as rapee. But the blandishments of structure and motif betray such a reader; what he finally glimpses is something quite different from the feast he had anticipated. Shockingly intolerant of the conventional enticements, radically skeptical of the sources of its own power, this book rebukes the reader's easy interest and shatters his pretense of detachment by involving him in a repetition of Lancelot's catastrophe, a repetition that is the limit and the possibility of readerly action and knowledge. Fiction and tract, narrative and harangue, *Lancelot* is a book that collapses under the pressure of its message. In its collapse *is* its message. Like the priest who leans a saving love from the disjointed monologue of a madman, I, reader and writer, chastened in my pride, subdued by the 'end of the novel,' can perhaps hear in the silence of the text an urgent note of distress. This note is not the call of madman or prophet but the plaintive, warning song of a canary."

Jerome C. Christensen

"*Lancelot: Sign for the Times*"
Walker Percy: Art and Ethics (1980) 107-120

"In several ways, Walker Percy's *Lancelot* (1977) underscores this terrible dilemma, in which the novelist is divided, even torn, rejecting history and yet yearning after it. A Catholic convert, a Southerner, a medical doctor by training, an outsider to the New York partying and literary scene, a man of considerable wit and a consumer of paradoxes, Percy is particularly equipped for the tightrope act of American fiction. Yet with *Lancelot*, he apparently gave up trying to find delicate holes in the fabric through which he can score; and he moved to apocalyptic endings. For his protagonist, Lancelot, wants to stop the world: 'The point is, I will not tolerate this age.' He insists on his uniqueness, on the singularity of the individual experience, on clear-cut sexual definitions and social roles. He wants to identify with a historical process, to return to an era when he felt this was possible, an Eden that never existed. It is (shades of 'I'll Take My Stand') Southern version of a Greek ideal, when a ruling class had slaves to live for it.

Yet whether the point is well taken or not does not really matter, because in context it derives from a man already a lunatic. We meet Lancelot, not in a tournament, but in a madhouse, prepared to settle down with the young woman in the next cell, a psychotic who has been gang-raped. Thus, the driving need to regain sanity, balance, social structuring, individual worth is given by Percy to a crazed criminal. R. D. Laing is reflected: the mad are saner; the crazy may be holy.

Like the Lancelot of Arthurian legend, Percy's protagonist has been victimized by a woman, his wife, and in his rage he plans revenge, which leads to her death and the death of the two other men in her life. One dies by the knife, two by fire, and Lancelot goes mad, if not already crazed when he systematically plots their deaths. This man, then, becomes the repository of moral wisdom about the modern world, the man seeking a pattern. The ironies cannot disguise that Percy is building upon shifting ground, his view of the sixties and early seventies that insanity is really sanity if the rest of the world is insane. This is another way of posing the confrontation between a historical process and an anarchic behavior which rejects all history. The dilemma passes into ironies, and ironies into paradoxes that cannot work literally unless the author is Dostoevsky writing about holy fools."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 24-25

"Percy followed that achievement with *Lancelot* (1977), an ambitious and penetrating book, a monologue delivered from a prison hospital cell by its insane title character to a friend/physician/confessor named Percival. Percy has disarmingly called it 'a small cautionary tale,' his 'involved sexual-theological number' ('Questions They Never Asked Me,' 188). A savage indictment of a culture in moral ruins, *Lancelot* strips away much of Percy's familiar humor and language play to attain a searing intensity. Language itself is so worn out that Lance tries to communicate with another patient by tapping on the wall. Although Percy maintains his distance from the title character's perspective, its power is so compelling that Lancelot's voice dominates and the novel's harsh tone overwhelms most readers with its bitterness."

Mark Johnson
"Walker Percy"
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 347

"The year 1977 brought Percy's fourth novel, the dark, disturbing *Lancelot*, the story of a vengeful husband, who murders his wife and her lover. Many critics regarded *Lancelot* as a too-pessimistic diatribe against the values of the modern age--a sermon, not a novel."

Bruce L. Edwards
"Walker Percy"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1175

"There was nothing of the comic...in Percy's *Lancelot* (1977), into which he poured both his disgust with the world, exacerbated at the time by the progressively nauseating Watergate affair, and his latent misgivings about his own commitment to the Catholic faith. In it Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, imprisoned in a madman's cell, describes at length to a failed priest named Percival the context in which he feels justified in having destroyed by fire his unfaithful wife, the Louisiana mansion in which they lived, and a group of actors assembled there to make a film. At the end he is still imprisoned in his rage and developing a plan for a new order centered upon the Nietzschean superman; but the priest who has seldom spoken throughout, indicates there is still more to be said."

J. A. Bryant Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 235

Michael Hollister (2021)