

## ANALYSIS

*Love in the Ruins* (1971)

Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

"Percy's third novel is his most ambitious and demands consideration as a major work. In his earlier novels he probes the malaise intensively or traces a pilgrimage from the dislocated postmodern world back into the ancestral past and on to a transcendent timelessness. But times have gone from bad to worse all the while, and Percy, surveying the ruins-in-the-making of contemporary America, now leaps boldly into futuristic satire.... The narrator who supplies this entertainment is an alcoholic psychiatrist who compares himself to 'old Doc' in Western movies... [Thomas More] 'Sir Thomas was right, of course, and I am wrong'.... The crucial phase of his discovery came...in the mental hospital to which he had committed himself following a suicide attempt, while he lay recovering from 'seizures of alternating terror and delight with intervening periods of immense longing'....

What he attempts in *Love in the Ruins* is a comic synthesis of modern thought, like Dante's comedy in his time, and one addressed to the realities of the day. Its scope extends to the borders of the republic and beyond. Like Dante he writes in the aftermath of an Event, but in this case the Event is followed by an Eclipse. The landscape of *Love in the Ruins* lies deep in the shadow of that Eclipse, in the eerie twilight of a double vision that it will be my task to bring into focus. In such a complex book it is easy to become lost. My aim here is to make out the principal guideposts and thereby keep to the way.

*Love in the Ruins* is Percy's most comprehensive diagnosis of the malaise. Underlying the novel is a question that has haunted the minds of many: how to account for the 'monstrousness which the twentieth century let loose upon the world,' as he once put it, 'not the bomb but the beastliness'? Or to narrow the question as Percy does, 'why does humanism lead to beastliness?' The novel suggests some answers. If we contemplate the scene he lays before us, we can see that his figures languish in the ruins of a consensus. 'The terror that confronts our age,' says the anthropologist Loren Eiseley, 'is our own conception of ourselves.' And it is just such an urgency--our conception of ourselves--that informs Percy's novel, the ruins of which are built on what he has referred to as a 'consensus anthropology.'

This consensus anthropology gives *Love in the Ruins* a blurred background that often lends it a peculiar coic quality. An example should clarify what I mean. In the climactic showdown in *The Pit*, midway in the novel, Dr. Thomas More, Percy's narrator, meets Dr. Buddy Brown in a contest for the welfare of an old man named Mr. Ives. The patient has gone mute and taken to antisocial acts such as defecating on Flirtation Walk in the Senior Citizens Settlement. He sits in his robe, 'head jogging peacefully, monkey eyes gone blank,' while his fate is being decided. Dr. More's status is ambiguously patient-staff, since he has yet to be officially released from the mental hospital to which he voluntarily committed himself. While Dr. More admires the beauty of his own hand and the medical students in the amphitheater contribute whoops and yells to the proceedings, Dr. Brown makes the conventional case for shipping Mr. Ives off to the Happy Isles Separation Center for a painless termination.... Do we detect anomalies in the proceedings, or is everything quite in order?

If everything is as it should be, then Percy is too late and we have already arrived at our destination in the strange new world he paints for us. But if we still have eyes to see, what we see here is blurred, 'a double vision of man,' to use Percy's phrase, 'like watching a ghost on TV.' Note the general response in the amphitheater. No one seems shocked at the prospect of exterminating an old man who is no threat to anyone; propriety consists in not speaking plainly about it in his presence. The obscurity is not in the act but in the unmasking of it. Aside from the embarrassing presence of the old man himself, the only discordant note is struck by Dr. More, who insists the patient know what fate is being prepared for him. What we have is a war between conventional propriety and the bizarre notions of an eccentric psychiatrist on 'patient-staff' status who insists on flouting convention....

The Director who presides over convention here is a behaviorist, like Buddy Brown, both of them scientific humanists who insist on the supremacy of human values. 'Tom, you and I don't disagree,' Dr. Brown tells Dr. More before the encounter, and as Dr. More listens skeptically Dr. Brown runs through his litany: what counts is the 'quality of life,' the 'right of the individual to control his own body,' above all 'a man's sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his own potential.' They both 'believe in the same things, differing only in the best way to achieve them.' What Dr. Brown recites is the consensus anthropology of which Percy has spoken, which he says might be called 'the Western democratic-technological humanist view of man as higher organism invested in certain traditional trappings of a more or less nominal Judeo-Christianity'....

Quit stalling, Percy seems to say. It is one or the other: either a child of God, free and sacred, or an organism in an environment, whose sufferings can be terminated with impunity. It cannot possibly be both. And the 'eerie neck pricklings' one often feels in reading *Love in the Ruins* arise when the incoherence of this consensus is revealed. Percy has set out to destroy the middle ground of the consensus; he wants to sharpen the focus. Either / or, in effect: you cannot have it both ways.

The instrument of his explorations is Dr. Thomas More, the eccentric 'patient-staff' narrator, who flouts propriety by uttering words like *funeral* in public places. And just as *The Last Gentleman* moves into territory foreshadowed in *The Moviegoer*, the stark landscape of personal death, *Love in the Ruins* moves on the explore terrain tentatively staked out in *The Last Gentleman*, the land that lies in twilight under an Eclipse, plagued by the modern Black Death of the spirit. But Dr. More is no Will Barrett, disoriented and unable to assemble the pieces of his world. He is quite clear on what is what, and his diagnosis shows the monstrosity loosed upon the world by the twentieth century to be rooted in a strange new malady.

The condition he finds is a rift in the humanity of men. He calls it More's syndrome: 'chronic angelism-bestialism that rives one's soul from body and sets it orbiting the great world as the spirit of abstraction whence it takes the form of beasts, swans and bulls, werewolves, blood-suckers, Mr. Hydes, or just poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery.' The rift involves more than the traditional mind-body split, as I will undertake to explain. What we must keep in mind is the narrator's identity, for the novel has numerous literary and mythic parallels to confound the unwary, most conspicuously a suburban Paradise that is unspeakably lost and a Faustus who does more than wonder at unlawful things. The parallels are by turns amusing, illuminating, and exasperating; they cannot bear the weight of the novel. The key lies in the loyalties and allegiances of a latter-day Thomas More....

Dr. Thomas More, collateral descendant of the original, presides over Percy's comic synthesis. Unlike his distinguished forebear, Percy's narrator is not projecting Utopia but fighting a rearguard action against it. Like Sir Thomas he refuses allegiance to the new order: that is the central fact in the novel. Dr. More challenges a consensus anthropology that draws its rhetoric from one source and its operating assumptions from another. His loyalty is to a conception of man that goes back through Marcel to More and Aquinas: *homo viator*, or man as wayfarer. In the sixteenth century, the time of Thomas More, says Hallett Smith, man occupied a unique position: 'God had made three kinds of creatures, the angelical, who were pure intelligence; the brutal, who were pure 'sense' or instinct, without 'discourse of reason'; and the human, who had some attributes of both.' Man's position midway between angel and beast was precarious. He could ascend gradually to the angelic level, but since the Fall it had become more likely that he would incline toward the condition of beast. 'There was available to him, however, Divine Grace, by means of which he could, if he would, reverse the effects of the Fall.'

The novel describes a new Fall in which man has become lost to himself, even to his sins. It takes place in the twilight of an Eclipse that will be discussed presently. Dr. More has invented an 'ontological lapsometer,' a device to measure the depth of this new Fall scientifically. With the aid of his lapsometer he can diagnose and even cure the ills of man--psychological, political, philosophical. The lapsometer thus becomes the key to Percy's synthesis. His chief diagnostician is the middle-aged psychiatrist Dr. Thomas More. Since the doctor's diagnosis must stand or fall on its own merits--and because I feel more comfortable doing so--I will refer to Dr. More simply as Tom. And with that introduction we are ready for a look at the novel to see what is what in Paradise after the new Fall and what forms of grace are available to those destined to become its exiles.

The novel opens on the Fourth of July as Percy jumps directly into the middle of the action. But the USA whose birth is commemorated on this day is neither the New Canaan envisioned by the early Puritans nor the shining republican haven for the Rights of Man, but a decaying mock-Paradise beginning to sprout vines. Something awful has gone wrong. 'Undoubtedly something is about to happen,' Tom informs us at the outset. 'Or is it that something has stopped happening?' Is it that God has removed his blessing from the USA or simply that our luck has run out? Either way, that 'felicitous and privileged siding' so long and joyously occupied by the United States of America is no more; the clanking old historical machinery of the 'roller-coaster' chain has taken hold and now carries us 'back into history with its ordinary catastrophes.' Tom More, still another of Percy's castaways, comes to himself in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world' and asks himself if it has happened at last. Carbine across his lap, he occupies the southwest cusp of the cloverleaf on a decaying interstate, surveying ruins of our civilization.

That is the predicament into which Percy drops us in his opening pages. He moves along at a good clip, alternating present action with accounts of the recent past and with Tom's personal confessions and judgments and his prophecies uttered in the spirit of John the Baptist. Given the pace of the narrative, we need to get the lay of the land before we proceed.

The geography of this fallen paradise reveals its underlying divisions. On the extremes lie the town and the swamp. The town where Tom maintains an office has become a refuge for 'all manner of conservative folk, graduates of Bob Jones University, retired Air Force colonels, passed-over Navy commanders, ex-Washington, D.C. policemen, patriotic chiropractors, two officials of the National Rifle Association, and six conservative proctologists.' To this culture the Honey Island Swamp is a counterculture, a vast wilderness serving as both refuge and guerilla base for 'forays against outlying subdivisions and shopping plazas.' Where the population of the town is ideologically homogeneous, the inhabitants of the swamp are a wild aggregation of the disaffected; and as Percy calls the roll the authentic kaleidoscopic color of our contemporary culture is on parade: 'Bantu guerillas, dropouts from Tulane and Vanderbilt, M.I.T. and Loyola; draft dodgers, deserters from the Swedish army, psychopaths and pederasts from Memphis and New Orleans whose practices were not even to be tolerated in New Orleans; antipapal Catholics, malcontented Methodists, ESPers, UFOers, Aquarians, ex-Ayn Randers, Chocktaw Zionists who have returned from their ancestral grounds, and even a few old graybeard Kerouac beats, wiry old sourdoughs of the spirit who carry pilgrim staffs, recite sutras, and leap from hummock to hummock as agile as mountains goats.

Between these two extremes lies that 'oasis of concord in a troubled land' where Tom makes his home, Paradise Estates. In Paradise conservative Christian businessmen live peacefully alongside liberal unbelieving scientists. They grumble of 'atheism and immorality' or 'outworn creeds and dogmas,' respectively, but there is little difference. Conservative housewives, picking up their faithful black mummies in Happy Hollow, carry them in their back seat, old style, while liberal housewives require theirs to ride alongside of them in front. Both agree that other blacks are mostly trifling and no-account. Northerners by now outnumber Southerners, equaling them in enthusiasm for mint juleps and hushpuppies. Readers who know Percy will recognize Paradise Estates as a haven for the despair which is unaware of itself. This paradise is no melting pot, but the mushy suburbia of modern society. Between town and swamp it lies, this oasis; between the orthodox and the disaffected, a sweet concord of the unaffected. Everything is either polarized or pulped.

Still there is 'hope,' for just beyond the hump of the interchange where Tom keeps watch is Fedville, the federal complex that stands as a monument to man's resolve to better his condition. Its monoliths house the hospital and medical school, NASA, the Behavioral Institute, the Geriatrics Center, and the Love Clinic. Fedville is the latter-day Crystal Palace to which Tom is destined to play Underground Man. The presiding spirit is that of B. F. Skinner's new order, more than anything else, to which Tom refuses allegiance, and it is here at Fedville that this latter-day Thomas More is fated to undergo his public trial. This brief sketch of the novel's geography should make clear that the southwest cusp of the interstate alongside a ruined motel is a more fitting place for the modern wayfarer than the false paradise Tom has left behind. We can reenter the landscape at that point now as the novel gets under way.

'Two more hours should tell the story.' Tom remarks in the second paragraph, coming to himself as Percy introduces an element of plot interest in this most suspenseful of his novels. 'One way or other. Either I am right and a catastrophe will occur, or it won't and I'm crazy. In either case the outlook is not so good.' A strange predicament, on this late afternoon of the Fourth of July. Is the end of the world at hand? Why is the narrator sitting here in a pine grove? *Three* girls? Why the wacky tone if catastrophe looms and God has removed his blessing from the USA? The first page raises these questions; and Percy, juggling assorted elements of present, past, and future, proceeds in this opening section to demonstrate just what a pass Tom and the others have come to.

The times, we are told, are bad.... The antic quality of the second little scene qualifies the mention of 'evil particles' in the third... The tone belongs to John the Baptist, but the spirit is something else--Tom the Baptist, perhaps, a new kind of prophet seeking to reconcile man to his sins... He sounds like a bookie with an inside tip, an impression confirmed when he produces his invention... Tom's invention is no technological miracle for which the science-worshipping public should hold its breath, but a focusing device introduced to dramatize the condition for which it is designed. The comic perspective established in these first three sections holds as Percy goes on to juxtapose a page on the fragmentation of the church with three lines on buzzards. The Catholic Church, like everything else, has split into factions, the American schismatics enshrining property rights and the Dutch relevance. The Roman Catholics have become a scattered remnant, the one priest faithful to Rome reduced to moonlighting as a fire-watcher, keeping an eye out for brushfires below and signs and portents above. As for Tom, the bad Catholic of the novel's subtitle, he all but boasts of his degeneracy: 'I believe in God and the whole business, but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, and my fellowman hardly at all.' What lies behind such a confession? For one professing Christianity it seems a peculiar thing to banter about....

Tom is dwelling in the comic religious mode of Kierkegaard, where 'a man stands up and says the right thing...and so has understood it, and then when he has to act does the wrong thing...and so shows that he has not understood it'.... The Dr. Faustus theme is sounded in a section on the vanity of scientists. Tom's greatest worry is not the catastrophe he fears but the possibility that it will overtake them before his discovery can create a sensation in the world of science. His invention could save the world or destroy it, 'and in the next two hours will very likely do one or the other'.... Superstition thrives, in altered forms.... The church is named after St. Michael, who is represented in art bearing a lance and shield. In this suburban paradise St. Michael's lance has been transformed into a television tower.

The politics of Paradise reflect its general condition. Both major parties have changed their names. The Grand Old Party is now the Knotheads... The old Democrats are now the Left Party, or LEFTPAPASANE, which according to the Knotheads (who supplied the name) stands for Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, and Euthanasia.... The Lefts were able to remove 'In God We Trust' from pennies... Conservatives have begun to fall victim to unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressure, and large-bowel complaints. Liberals are more apt to contract sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself.' The syndromes described are those respectively of bestialism and angelism. Tom himself suffers from both at once... Percy is not attempting to project current trends into the future literally, but to exaggerate them with the satirist's aim of creating awareness...

The lapsometer in fact is an ingenious invention and lends itself well to Percy's synthesis.... Tom has tried the device only once on himself, where he uncovered 'a regular museum of pathology, something like passing a metal detector over the battlefield of Iwo Jima'.... Most people nowadays are possessed, harboring as they do all manner of demonic hatreds and terrors and lusts and envies, that principalities and powers are nearly everywhere victorious, and that therefore a doctor's first duty to his patient is to help him find breathing room and so keep him from going crazy'.... The second patient is Ted Tennis, an overarticulate graduate student who suffers from 'massive free-floating terror, identity crisis, and sexual impotence.' He is the embodiment of angelism, a disastrously abstracted type known to every psychiatrist.... Ted is a classic example of the man who abdicates himself in deference to the experts.... Tom laments, the only treatment for angelism was 'recovery of the self through ordeal'....

Ted's research as a graduate student centers on Monkey Island in the middle of the swamp, home of a colony of killer apes thought to be an unevolved descendant of one of man's ancestors.... The question is how to account for man's wickedness?' Biologists tend to look for a 'wicked monkey in the family tree.' Not so, says Tom, far more likely that something went wrong with man.... We can see the true value of the lapsometer as a fictional invention. Human wickedness, it seems to confirm quantitatively, stems from a Fall no monkey knows, and consists of man's having fallen from *self*, from his own being, to become a shadow of himself.... What will not remain for long is emptiness; the void will be filled. Such a fact by itself could explain the monstrousness loosed upon the world....

The term *Eclipse* is mine, not Percy's, but it defines the fictional terrain of his novels. The Event described by Percy is the revelation of God's purpose manifested in time through the incarnation of the Word in Christ. The Eclipse is the 'tempestuous restructuring of consciousness' of which Percy has spoken 'which does not presently allow [man]to take account of the Good News.' Will Barrett exemplifies the condition, and all of Percy's novels take place on the far side of the Eclipse. Tom More has heard the Good News but learned not to listen. The novelist, Percy suggests, is 'one of the few remaining witnesses to the doctrine of original sin, the every-present imminence of disaster in paradise.' The disaster in this paradise is that man has fallen from himself and lost access to his own inwardness, like Will Barrett, and is thus deaf to the Good News and a prey to whatever demons may be roaming the vicinity. That is the new Fall.

But suppose, Tom More thinks, he could 'hit on the right dosage' with the lapsometer and 'weld the broken self' whole?' 'What if man could reenter paradise, so to speak, and live there both as man and spirit, whole and intact man-spirit?'... Tom's third patient is Charley Parker, the golf pro at the Paradise Country Club. A self-made man who from the condition of caddy has risen to become a prophet-activist of the game of gold... Charley is a blind devotee of progress whose success in eliminating labor costs on the golf course has put poor blacks out of work. His depression deepens when his son and namesake drops out of MIT and takes to the swamp, accusing Charley of hypocrisy and blaming him for starving the unemployed blacks.... "The mystery of evil,' Tom muses, 'is the mystery of limited goodness'.... [Chuck has an] idea for a 'golfarama,' a 'mystical idea of combining a week of golf on a Caribbean island with the Greatest Pro of Them All'--namely, Jesus--in a week of golf and revival meetings conducted by a member of the 'old Billy Graham team'.... Like most of us, Charley is copping out. Whether or not his evil is limited goodness, the effects of his labors can be rapacious and blind....

The horrors of Verdun are the horrors of abstraction: 'white Christian Caucasian Europeans, sentimental music-loving Germans and rational clear-minded Frenchmen slaughtering each other without passion.' The effect here is even more ghastly than under the spirit of abstraction, where the abstraction is fueled by resentment.... From this species of 'professionalism,' a form of abstraction in which function is divorced from value, man himself is a dropout.... Chuck, who smokes 'rabbit' cannabis and has begun to 'jump a bit, feet together, kangaroo style,' is wild about the lapsometer, instantly aware of its possibilities: 'Are you telling me that with that thing you can actually register the knotheadness of the Knotheads, the nutty objectivity of the scientists, and the mad spasms of the liberals?'.... His glee at the prospect of them all doing each other in on the 'glorious Fourth of July' betrays a countercultural resentment somewhat out of tune with ideals of peace and love....

It is Hester who believes Tom when he protests that scientists seek the truth. She is Tom's type, 'post-Protestant, post-rebellion, post-ideology,' reverted 'clear back to pagan innocence like a shepherd girl piping a tune on a Greek vase'.... And as Percy brings this first section to a close, there is a touch of the soap opera or Western movie that fits the burlesque rhythm he has chosen to give the novel. Will Tom make it to the pass with his lapsometer in time to head off the sweet beast of catastrophe?.... Here Percy touches the same wound Faulkner probes in his novels. The tone is as much Ike McCaslin's as Tom More's. Yoknapatawpha County lies *behind* the Eclipse, in the ancestral regions obscured by time. The terrain of *Love in the Ruins* lies deep within the shadows of the Eclipse. And Percy makes no mention of the South. His vision encompasses the whole of the New Eden, the United States of America'....

A trace of chauvinism seems to creep in here, along with a pinch of that pride brought to these shores aboard the Mayflower--the assurance that God is backing this enterprise.... [But] Christendom has gone down the drain.... The USA went down the drain not because of polarization or pornography... 'What finally

tore it was that things stopped working and nobody wanted to be a repairman'.... [Tom cries] 'I can save you, America!... I can save the terrible God-blessed Americans from themselves! With my invention! Listen to me'.... Will Tom make it to the pass on time? Will his trusty lapsometer misfire, or worse yet, fall into evil hands? Will the 'terrible God-blessed Americans' pull the game out in the closing seconds? Tune in tomorrow, same time, same station....

Three shots launch the action and also place us subliminally, touching the collective nerve of a nation traumatized by three shots in Dallas: the novel speaks not to an Auto Age, as Tom often refers to our own era, but to that Gothic era of assassinations identified with the name Kennedy.... 'I found myself diving for the corner even as I ruminated'....the conditioned response of an American of the 1960's.... The first campaign of [Tom's] war...takes place...in the long middle sequence of the novel culminating in the comic shoot-out between Tom and Buddy Brown...

Doris mouths one cliché after another from the new spirituality: 'I'm going in search of myself'; 'love should be a joyous encounter'; 'Spiritual growth is the law of life'....'We're so dead, Tom,' she explains. Alistair is a 'very tragic person. But he's a searcher like me, a pilgrim.' The notions of people as dead and man as searcher or pilgrim are very nearly Percy's own. He satirizes her understanding of them, I think, because the worst enemy of truth often is not its opposite, error, but its next of kin, the cliché that encases and smothers it. 'Pilgrim my ass,' Tom says.... He and Doris 'chose not to forgive each other,' he says later, and Alistair 'happened to come along at the right time. Lacking forgiveness, Tom took to drink and Doris to the new spirituality, two familiar responses to great personal loss. Doris died and Tom's life moved into ever deepening shadows...

Dusty Rhodes is a fitting name for the conservative proctologist from Texas who has bought a plantation house called Tara and seeks to revive that faded apparition. Last Christmas Eve, Dusty had found his beautiful daughter, Lola, in Tom's arms in the deep grassy bunker of the eighteenth hold, a bit of 'misbehavior in Paradise' for which he has not forgiven Tom.... An astute Knothead, fully polarized, as befits the proprietor of Tara in the new Southern Paradise, Dusty grasps the political implications of the lapsometer instantly. He is the exemplar of bestialism.... Tom remains abstracted--semi-angelized, we might say--but his orbit swings nearer the human--the condition of man as man. 'Bending close to her, close to the upper reaches of her breast, is like skimming in silence, power off, over the snowy slopes of Kilimanjaro'.... It is inevitable that the muddled psychiatrist is soon 'singing like a cello' between the knees of the lovely cellist.... Brought out of orbit by Lola only to be swamped in the despair of [Perry] Como's Christmas, Tom comes to himself through ordeal and is rescued by the small concrete favors of life, winter sunlight and sparrows kicking leaves....

[Tom] exists in a state of sin, which for Kierkegaard is the opposite not of virtue but of faith. Sin for Kierkegaard 'does not consist in the fact that man has not understood what is right, but in the fact that he will not understand it, and in the fact that he will not do it.... He recognizes himself to be the wayfarer he scorns in the fraudulent platitudes of Doris. It remains to be seen whether his condition will benefit by this fleeting insight.... The theme is familiar Percy: sanity in such times is not man's everyday condition, which is apt to be a pernicious despair, but a state of awareness to which one most likely comes through ordeal, perhaps through 'madness' itself. True sanity resides in Being rather than in non-Being. The world outside the hospital, when Tom leaves the ward and goes AWOL, is almost too much, and Percy renders the moment phenomenologically in one sentence, as he often does in this novel: 'Wham! there it was, the world, solid as a rock, dense as a doorknob.' Tom's return to the ward produces a confrontation in which things are not at all what they seem. We see the sanity of 'madness' and the insanity of 'science' in the form of behaviorism...

Tom has a practical objective in coming to see Max: he wants Max to support his effort to secure funds for a crash program by which to develop his lapsometer and thus ward off disaster--a 'mad' ambition, surely, though the reader can see the sanity of it.... 'Max the unbeliever, a lapsed Jew, believes in the orderliness of creation, acts on it with energy and charity. I the believer, having swallowed the whole Ting, God Jews Christ Church, find the world a madhouse and a madhouse home.... What worries Tom is that he feels no guilt, without which there can be no contrition or purpose of amendment and therefore no forgiveness of sin. Max wants to put Tom in a Skinner box and 'condition away the contradiction' so that he

will never feel guilt.... [Max] cannot see... His mind is imprisoned in its own assumptions. His behaviorism cannot negotiate with other faiths; it can only fall back into the new mumbo jumbo... The reader who does not share Tom's Catholicism may be closer to Max's relativism, a sort of philosophical nowhere, but unless his imagination is too tightly bound he can share Tom's experience of events to come....

A sequence in [the] middle section of the novel shows the effects of this new Fall in a Southern context.... Something bad is going to happen. There is a scene illustrating the mutual concern and affection that often pervaded relations between white and black in the old days.... What is terrifying is not the evil of Hollywood legend, but the 'good gone wrong and not knowing it,' the 'Southern sweetness and cruelty.' That is what shakes Tom. We are in a territory occupied by the spirit of abstraction, that objectification of others, poisoned by resentment, that sees only abstractions or symbols in place of living individual humans....

In a remarkable passage that forms a centerpiece for Percy's comic synthesis, Tom sees a vision of the new Christ in his own reflection in the ancient pocked mirror behind the bar of the Little Napoleon.... Undoubtedly some readers will see in this reflection the evidence that Tom More is the new Christ. I do not. The literary landscape is overpopulated with Christ figures [an Atheist remark], it seems to me, and it has become as difficult to circumvent as to create such symbols. Tom More is Tom More. What he sees in his own reflection is not himself as the new Christ but the need for a new Christ in a fantasy prompted by the racial predicament in which he finds himself. In the limbo of chronic angelism-bestialism we find ourselves divided between our bestial impulses, which are fueled by hatred and violence, and our higher powers, which are stranded in abstract consciousness. One or the other normally predominates, but in either case our humanity, with its inwardness, is lost. So estranged do we become from each other--racially, socially, or personally--that we can relate to each other only through another we love. The old Christ is dead because we have become immune to the shining example; it cannot reconcile our angelic with our bestial selves. The new Christ lies drunk in a ditch. He needs us. He appeals to our love.... And in our love for him we unite our divided selves and join hands in the task.... When will the new Christ appear? Wait and watch, says Tom More; that is 'the spirit of the new age'....

The hottest political issue going, Tom has told us, is euthanasia, and a call on old Mr. Ives prepares the way for the grand finale of this section, Tom's trial in The Pit.... As yet Tom can only diagnose with the lapsometer, and he cannot prove anything even in diagnosis; but armed with his knowledge of Mr. Ives's condition he is better prepared for his trial-by-combat with Buddy Brown in The Pit, where the old man's fate is to be decided. It is at this point that Percy's Mephistopheles appears in the person of Art Immelmann. He arrives, like Marlowe's figure, amid thunder, as Tom sits in his office listening to Don Giovanni begin his descent into hell... 'The lights go out.' Unlike Marlowe's Mephistopheles, Immelmann is not invoked by Tom, the Dr. Faustus of this piece, but intrudes himself like an unwelcome drug salesman.... Immelmann has come to confer recognition on Tom's success in developing a technique that 'maximizes and unites hardware and software capabilities,' a tool for dealing with the heretofore immeasurable and intangible stresses that are rending the national fabric.' Percy gives the devil the best lines as Immelmann proceeds in the sophisticated lingo of the funding game to describe the lapsometer--the key to Percy's synthesis--as a tool 'operative at behavioral, political, and philosophical levels'.... A perfect tempter, offering just what the object of his designs wants and hopes for. He has even brought a contract transferring patent rights that he urges Tom to sign...

Tom stands in peril, with his longings for the Nobel Prize... He is not trying to sell his soul but to donate his lapsometer.... Tom declines the offer to sign over his patent rights, and Art--it seems fitting that a contemporary Mephistopheles should be known by his first name--leaves by the back door.... Marva's religion is a marshy compound of real estate and the occult, overlain by a shroud of Christianity. Wet or dry, Knothead faith is intimately bound to property.... Far closer to the faith of Christ is the unlikely love couple from the swamp who changed upon a Confederate Bible...believed it, decided to be married and baptize their children'.... Kierkegaard wondered how to introduce Christianity into Danish Christendom; how would Christ find entrance to Paradise Estates? By surprise, perhaps, through the naivete of a love couple in the swamp, who take a fresh look at his story and catch at least a glimpse of what is there....

In the mouth of Buddy Brown, who has already made up his mind to ship Mr. Ives off to be executed...talk of 'a man's sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his own potential' rings with mockery, but Buddy would be the last to detect it. The final line could be translated, 'We're not really sure what we believe, so let's not quarrel, let's just do it my way.' Buddy speaks a language of ideals drawn from the Judeo-Christian tradition and operates on behaviorist assumptions. 'It is the job of the satirist,' Percy says, 'to detect these slips and to exaggerate them so that they become known to everybody'....

The prelude to *The Pit* is Tom's visit to the Director. He enters as a patient, having forgotten that Monday is patients' day. Tom's hope is that the Director will help him secure funds to develop the lapsometer. Though the Director, as a behaviorist, is unlikely to smile on the notion of an ontological lapsometer, he is also dying of cancer. 'A dying king, said Sir Thomas More, is apt to be wiser than a healthy king. A dying behaviorist may be a good behaviorist'.... Tom withdraws defeated... He is now so addled that he cannot speak coherently to his nemesis, Buddy Brown.... It is in this condition that he signs away his patent rights to Art Immelmann.

The stage on which Percy's Faustus meets his Mephistopheles is the men's room, where this emissary from the dark regions of 'funding' is in his element.... Like the diabolic figure [Satan] who accompanies Hawthorne's young Goodman Brown through the forest, he has the gift of 'discouraging so aptly that his arguments [seem] rather to spring up in the bosom of his auditor than to be suggested by himself'.... Art turns the lapsometer on Tom, and the effects are given phenomenologically.... Having himself been massaged by his own lapsometer, his terror now gone and his large bowel 'slack as a string, clear as a bell,' he signs the contract.... Tom seems to have closed a better deal than did Faustus, who promised never to think on God.... The devil again has the best answers. Art insinuates himself into Tom's thoughts to get him to sign the contract: 'Isn't it better to feel good rather than bad?'...

The limitations of such reasoning are those of the musical-erotic, a term of Kierkegaard's that represents the highest achievements of the aesthetic sphere. Seen from the aesthetic sphere, the musical-erotic is the best of the good; seen from the ethical sphere, it is bad. Don Juan is the personification of the musical-erotic, which in its immediacy can only be expressed in music....

The public trial of Tom More culminates in the splendid comic uproar of *The Pit*. Sir Thomas More refused allegiance to the new order and was tried and beheaded for his crime. Tom's trial is a little different. He too refuses allegiance to the new order, in this case a neobehaviorist order descended from B. F. Skinner, but he is not beheaded. His trial consists of gladiatorial combat with one of Skinner's intellectual heirs for the life of poor Mr. Ives--in *The Pit*, where Tom's assumptions and those of the behaviorists can be put to the empirical test. Is man simply an organism to be controlled and treated by proper conditioning, a mere piano key, or is he that testy and paradoxical being who emerged from Dostoevski's underground to proclaim his freedom...?

The steep slopes of the amphitheater are jammed with students... As Buddy Brown and Tom square off in this strange court a tacit behaviorist assumption emerges that Mr. Ives is guilty of terminal failure to respond successfully to conditioning and that unless Tom, upon whom the burden of proof rests, can somehow exonerate him, Mr. Ives is necessarily to be shipped off with his 'differential diagnosis: advanced atherosclerosis, senile psychosis, psychopathic and antisocial behavior, hemiplegia and aphasia'... 'I found no significant pathology,' Tom replies, recommending that Mr. Ives be discharged.... The lapsometer now comes to the rescue.... Mr. Ives began to speak in a 'deep drawling voice'.... 'There is only one kind of response to those who would control your responses by throwing you in a Skinner box,' and that is to 'refuse to respond at all'... It is a superlatively funny scene and succeeds in discrediting behaviorist assumptions....

Tom has emerged victorious from his public trial; now he must face the deadlier temptations of hubris in the privacy of his mind. The action in this second Fourth of July section centers on the hijinks of revolution and Tom's love tryst with his three girls in the broken-down Howard Johnson's, most of it good fun that breaks again and again into burlesque, at times threatening to become tiresome. But underlying all the funny business are the Faustus theme and a religious theme involving Samantha that is virtually unseen and yet emerges almost inexplicably from time to time. The death of Tom's daughter Samantha is the tragic



face beneath the comic mask of Tom More. We have seen how well he can diagnose the ills of others. Now we have a chance to see how well he perceives his own, as within the panoramic public scene of the novel the private ordeal of its narrator now begins to put forth a subdued light that comes to suffuse and illumine the wider sphere. It was the death of Samantha that put Tom on the skids some eight years earlier. She had been the cement holding his life together. Her death gave him an excuse to drink and go into decline. As his intelligence became more and more 'duly darkened,' he became mired deeper and deeper in the comic religious state in which he still lives, saying the right thing and doing the wrong. The religious theme surfaces more and more as memories of Samantha and Doris are prompted by events....

While he waits for Moira to shower during their rendezvous at Howard Johnson's, Tom drinks a toddy and recalls his lost life with Doris in the old Auto Age before Samantha was born. Doris had never understood why he would leave her in the motel Sundays, during their travels, and find his way to mass in some nearby church.... The labyrinth, it becomes clear in the context of the novel, is the abstract 'moonscape' terrain of modern urban society, this nowhere of which Binx Bolling has such a fear, with its interstates and standardized motels... Doris, being spiritual and seeing religion as spirit, could never understand 'that it took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels, that it took nothing less than touching the thread of the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning.' Now he has lost the thread and is himself lost in the labyrinth.... The ghost of Samantha keeps coming back. It is her ghost that keeps a few embers alive in him. Moira is an empty-headed romantic caught in the common snares of inauthenticity. She asks naively, 'Could we live in Paradise?'....

The memory calls up tears, bringing Tom close to a recognition of his present state, and he feels guilty for accepting Moira's favors while she holds herself so cheap.... The adventure with Moira is a rotation leading nowhere.... In promoting, with the aid of Dusty Rhodes, Tom's marriage to Lola, Marva is trying to propel him into the fake repetition of life at Tara.... When Tom says to Lola, 'I've told you we can't go back to Tara,' he is doing more than echoing Thomas Wolfe. The mossy image of Tara is Percy's best lampoon of Southern sentimentality. The roads to Tara are dusty with the tramp of antebellum feet....

Tom leaves Paradise in a wild burlesque, setting off the carillon chimes, discarding Saint Michael's sword at the outside grill, kicking the grill loose during the major chord of 'White Christmas,' and coming out 'feet-first, born again, ejected into the hot bright perilous world' of the Fourth of July, whereupon Lola rescues him on horseback and the two of them ride off....

A conversation in this scene between Tom and Art Immelmann suggests how one form of the monstrosity of our century is born of the rift in man's nature that Percy describes. Tom warns Art of the danger of applying the lapsometer to the 'prefrontal abstractive centers' of a man: 'It would render him totally abstracted from himself, totally alienated from the concrete world, and in such a state of angelism that he will fall prey to the first abstract notion proposed to him and will kill anybody who gets in his way, torture, execute, wipe out entire populations, all with the best possible motives and the best possible intentions, in fact in the name of peace and freedom, etcetera'....

It is hardly surprising that Tom finally conquers his own hubris in the form of a plush post in Denmark in which to await his Nobel Prize. What is interesting is how he does it and why. It may be his invocation of Sir Thomas More that drives Immelmann hence, but what prompts him to resist in the first place? Neither a mechanical necessity of the plot, I think, nor the demands of any mythic or literary parallel outside the book, but the terms the author has set up within the novel: Tom's need to escape More's syndrome and to live as a human. Religion is instrumental, and in Tom's labyrinth the one remaining thread is his memory of Samantha....

The novel goes beyond any sectarian confines to attempt a synthesis of religious and secular thought, and grace here has another dimension. What forms of grace are open to Tom More and to the rest of us who are exile to the postmodern world? Here again, I think, as in *The Last Gentleman*, grace is subjectivity or inwardness. The thread in Tom's labyrinth is the memory of Samantha, which has become the only link with his former faith. The sinful condition in which he lives is the opposite of faith. But the grace of inwardness can be viewed secularly as well.... In the grip of the malaise we become lost in a limbo of

objectivity.... The memory of Samantha pulls Tom out of his abstracted orbit and gives him access to his own inwardness, where he is whole and intact. In the illumination of his reviving faith his condition becomes apparent to him and he realizes he has been feasting on Samantha's death. When he had refused to take her to Lourdes, Doris, who though a dumbbell knew how to read his faults, saw that he refused in fear the girl might be cured.... Who can shoulder such a load? And with that recognition Tom leaves the realm of the comic religious, where he knows without doing, and resumes a life of doing as he knows.

The Samantha theme now recedes and Percy returns to Faustus.... The scene itself is comical. 'Our work here is finished,' the novel's Mephistopheles remarks, gazing happily at the smoking bunker, in an echo of the concluding note of *The Tempest*. He manifests an evil influence over Tom, advancing lapsometer in hand.... Tom closes his eyes and offers a good prayer, for a bad Catholic... Opening his eyes, he finds Art 'turning slowly away, wheeling in slow motion, a dazed hurt look through the eyes as if he had been struck across the face.' Unlike Faustus, Tom had never sworn not to invoke the name of God or his representatives, and Art Immelmann is powerless against Tom's kinsman saint. The innocent Ellen feels sorry for Art as he vanishes into the smoke....

The epilogue opens on a note of reconciliation. The mood is pastoral, and the change in Tom's life is nowhere better conveyed than in this passage worthy of Thoreau at his best: 'Water is the mystical element!... Tom is reconciled at last, this time to himself. 'All any man needs,' he says, 'is time and desire and the sense of his own sovereignty'.... The aspiration symbolized by the lapsometer was one to 'practice more than heavenly power permits,' and we knew all along it would have to be duly chastened....

If the lapsometer fails to effect a miracle cure in Tom's life, as we knew it would, he has nevertheless stumbled upon a simple and ancient remedy. His housing suggests its nature. He no longer lives in the luxury of a mock-Paradise or visits run-down motels with three beloveds, which is to say none; instead he lives in the Slave Quarters with Ellen. Back in the old Howard Johnson's her virtue had been almost oppressive, and throughout the novel she has been Tom's Girl Friday, faithful to 'Chief,' joining in his triumphs and misfortunes. Now it seems fitting that the 'ripe Georgia persimmon not a peach' should share his new quarters in a sort of modified intersubjective communion. I say *modified* because in this novel perfection is not yet in evidence. There is a good deal of plain old English-style muddling through. When Tom goes to confession for the first time in eleven years the best he can do is feel sorry he feels no sorrow for the sins he confesses, though he willingly puts on the sackcloth as penance. A tolerant fellow, he mixes easily with love couples and Bantus as well as Presbyterians. Having escaped the false paradise of the New Eden, he tends collards in a small plot to the east while his less-innocent Eve stirs grits in the kitchen.

The outcome of Tom's private ordeal casts a light over the public landscape of the novel, but Percy does not presume to edify. Nor can the novel be construed as a defense of a Christian life. 'To defend anything is always to discredit it,' Kierkegaard wrote. The joyous tone of the epilogue speaks for itself. The consensus anthropology is revealed in *The Pit* as a fraud, but Percy does not insist the reader accept his own view of man. His comic synthesis will stand on either religious or secular premises. More's syndrome holds for both.

The novel offers another form of grace to its readers: the author's comic therapy. There is a connection, after all, between humor and wholeness. Whose ox has not been gored in this book? I doubt that anyone can read it without taking offense. But in the divided state of angelism-bestialism, humor can heal; it offers release from the grip of bestial aggressions even while restoring moral perspective. The comic is just what Emerson called it: 'a pledge of sanity,' the 'balance-wheel' of the intellect. With the spirit of abstraction rampant in our society, humor may be the only release from collective madness. It plays such a key role in *Love in the Ruins* that the novel's theme could be given in a paraphrase of the scientist's prayer: 'Lord, grant that we be delivered from the Black Death and find ourselves in our love for You. Failing that, Lord, grant that we recover our humanity in loving and being true to one other. Failing that, Lord, grant us at least the power to stand back and see the humor of our predicament before it all collapses around our ears.'

The novel ends hopefully, on Christmas Eve. 'Barbecuing in my sackcloth,' Tom says, opening the final section with a perfect tonal marriage of penance and celebration. He sneaks a few drinks of Early Times and goes on in to carry Ellen, a 'noble, surprisingly heavy, Presbyterian armful,' to her new king-sized bed.

Even the ivy imagery, which up until now has been identified with ruin, works for Tom as Percy ends the novel in a one-sentence summation of this triumphant comedy: 'To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth, not under a bush or in a car or on the floor or any such humbug as marked the past peculiar years of Christendom, but at home in bed where all good folks belong.'

The epilogue is a triumph, the kind of gold we rarely find these days in fiction, and it is earned. It is difficult to think of any novel that ends on a note of such authentic affirmation. My own feeling about the novel can best be compared to the moment following the midnight mass where the children of some love couples and young Thomas More shoot off firecrackers. 'Hurrah for Jesus Christ!' they cry, in another echo of Dostoevski. 'Hurrah for the United States!'

Hurrah for Walker Percy! Hurrah for what is left of the USA! Maybe the New Eden did not work. On the other hand, given the peculiarity of the age, maybe there is yet time for every man to be a king, if only of a poor collar patch in the garden of being."

Martin Luschei

*The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*  
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"Walker Percy likes to compare his role as a novelist with that of the physician or diagnostician: he probes to discover 'what went wrong' and tries to identify the illness. In Percy's first two novels, the illness belongs to a young, disaffected southerner, searching for clues to his past and for access to the spiritual order of existence. But his third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, broadens considerably the scope of his investigation. While the narrator-hero, Dr. Thomas More, suffers from a variety of illnesses, his chief disorder--'More's syndrome, or: chronic angelism-bestialism'--typifies the ailment ravaging 'our beloved old U.S.A.' and the entire 'death dealing Western world.'

Even as More finds himself victimized by a schism between mind and body, he portrays a society riven by diametrically opposed forces: 'race against race, right against left, believer against heathen.' Curiously, the political dichotomy mirrors the narrator's mind-body problem: 'Conservatives have begun to fall victim to unseasonable rages, delusions of conspiracies, high blood pressure, and large-bowel complaints. Liberals are more apt to contract sexual impotence, morning terror, and a feeling of abstraction of the self from itself. Thus Percy depicts the 'Troubles' in American society essentially as a manifestation of the subject-object split which has been central to Western experience since the philosophy of Descartes and the beginning of the modern age. As this essay will suggest, the phenomenon that Percy calls the 'Cartesian split' constitutes the philosophical crux of *Love in the Ruins* and forms the controlling metaphor of Tom More's vision of experience.

1

The problem of the divided self has long occupied a vital place in Western thought. According to the Judeo-Christian tradition, the split between the spirit and flesh occurred when man lost his innocence and wholeness of being in the Garden of Eden. The fall made man suddenly aware of a distance between himself and the created universe and of a distinction between the mind (the perceiving self) and the body (the perceived self). With characteristic simplicity the writer of Genesis describes the latter discovery: 'Then the eyes of both [Adam and Eve] were opened and they knew that they were naked.' At this moment, apparently, the two experienced their bodies as objects (sex objects, as it were) for the first time. Their coming-to-consciousness revealed their own nature and fostered at the same time a sense of homelessness and alienation, which Percy in 'The Delta Factor' has called 'the enduring symptom of man's estrangement from God.'

The Greeks also came upon a distinction between mind or spirit (as in the Latin *animus*) and body when they discovered the faculty of reason. In *Irrational Man*, William Barrett notes that 'in Plato, the rational consciousness as such becomes, for the first time in human history, a differentiated psychic function.' However, Barrett notes, Plato's realization marked a change in man's concept of the self: 'The Greeks' discovery represents an immense and necessary step forward by mankind, but also a loss, for the pristine wholeness of man's being is thereby sundered or at least pushed into the background.' Plato's myth of the soul in *Phaedrus* graphically illustrates the perceived disjunction of the self, since (in Barrett's words)

'reason, as the divine part of man, is separated, is indeed of another nature from the animal within him.' In both the Greek and the Judeo-Christian traditions, we may conclude, the acquisition of rational consciousness implied a literal fragmentation of being; thought and feeling became distinguishable phenomena as the self discovered itself.

With the philosophy of Rene Descartes, however, the mind-body duality became a virtual dissociation. Identifying the act of thinking as the central proof of one's existence, Descartes argued in his *Meditations*: 'It is certain that I [that is, my mind, by which I am what I am] is entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.' He thus reduced physical man to an automaton whose various functions (such as the circulation of the blood) might be readily distinguished from the operations of the soul (thought). Ironically, while Descartes intended to reaffirm the Christian doctrine of the soul's immortality, his work had the effect of diminishing traditional reverence for the 'temple' of the soul, human flesh. The corporeal frame became a fascinating mechanism, and man became, in Gilbert Ryle's memorable phrase, 'the ghost in the machine.' Acknowledging the obvious impact of Cartesian thought, Walker Percy dates the devaluation of modern existence from that fateful moment when 'the famous philosopher Descartes ripped body loose from mind and turned the very soul into a ghost that haunts its own house.'

Nearly all of Percy's writing, fictional and nonfictional, in some sense seeks to answer the rhetorical questions that introduce 'The Delta Factor': 'Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century? Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and making over the world for his own use?' Although Percy offers a variety of explanations for this predicament--from secularism to the loss of individual sovereignty--his diagnosis of the contemporary malaise frequently hinges on the problem of the divided self.

According to Percy, modern man has been victimized by his willingness to accept the Cartesian view of man as an object to be understood and explained empirically. Repeatedly the author attempts to break through the rigid Cartesian distinctions between subject and object by reminding us of man's peculiar nature: of his susceptibility to alienation, of his queer habits of naming and symbol-mongering, of his refusal to behave like 'an organism in an environment.' A scientific thinker conscious of the limits of science, Percy contends that an objective-empirical theory of man inevitably ignores the mystery of being. Such an objectification must ultimately produce a schism between one's theoretical understanding of human nature and one's immediate, inscrutable, creaturely feelings. As *Love in the Ruins* illustrates, this alienation of mind from body sunder the individual into a 'mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man.'

Popular faith in scientific theory has spawned a variety of other maladies, according to Percy. He observes in 'The Delta Factor' that contemporary discussion of man as 'a sociological unit, an uncultured creature, a psychological organism' makes no provision for the individual being: 'Science cannot utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature insofar as it is an individual but only insofar as it is like other individuals.' Immersed in a scientific culture, modern man therefore risks a loss of self, an erosion of his inherent sense of individuality, which results in a feeling of anonymity. About this situation Percy remarks, 'That is why people in the modern age took photographs by the million: to prove despite their deepest suspicions to the contrary that they were not invisible.'

Since a scientific culture orients itself primarily toward the normative needs of mass man in its products, advertising, and institutions, a further consequence of the objective-empirical perspective is the impoverishment of daily human experience; preoccupation with the external conditions of being finally produces a superficiality in the order of modern life. Whether this problem manifests itself as the 'everydayness' encountered by Binx Bolling or the 'ravening particles' of drabness glimpsed by Will Barrett and Tom More, Percy reminds us that if a person is to recover a fresh perception of the world, he must be prepared to circumvent established Cartesian modes of experiencing and understanding reality. Only then can he recover what Emerson called 'an original relation with the universe.' Only then can he redeem his existence from the patterns contrived by the engineers of human happiness. But until the denizen of the modern world discovers the spiritual bankruptcy of the objective-empirical world view, he cannot begin to guess the sources of his own unhappiness. He must continue to suffer from such maladies as alienation, anonymity, inauthenticity, and despair.

In several respects Percy's third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, brings to a focus his thinking about the Cartesian split and the consequences of living in a scientific culture dedicated to need-satisfaction. The 'transcendence-immanence' conflict of Sutter Vaught in *The Last Gentleman* has become 'chronic angelism-bestialism' for Tom More, but the issue remains the same: how to reconcile mind and body and recapture a sense of authenticity and wholeness about one's individual existence. In portraying More's quest for harmony of being, Percy offers his most complex and extensive diagnosis of the sundered self; his investigation in *Love in the Ruins* carries him into the diverse areas of science, religion, and history, in pursuit of a solution to the malaise of modern man.

2

The most zany aspect of More's quest is his effort to perfect a scientific instrument capable of healing 'the secret ills of the spirit.' Using the 'More Quantitative-Qualitative Ontological Lapsometer,' a device which can identify--in the manner of nineteenth-century phrenology--one's dominant cerebral center, the narrator hopes to treat 'a person's innermost self.' He describes the lapsometer as 'the first caliper of the soul' by which he can measure 'the length and breadth and motions of the very self'; with the right modifications, More believes that he can convert his diagnostic device into a therapeutic instrument. Through a dosage of "heavy Sodium" or 'Heavy Chloride' radiation, he hopes to treat the prevailing brain center and alleviate those excesses of the spirit which produce 'angelism' and 'bestialism.' He openly aspires to correct the damage done by Descartes, exclaiming, 'Suppose I could hit on the right dosage and weld the broken self whole!'

No little irony attaches to More's grand design. A good portion of the novel, after all, satirizes the scientific community in general, and behaviorists of the B. F. Skinner stripe in particular, for blind allegiance to empirical methods at the expense of human sovereignty and dignity. Among the research facilities at Fedville, More singles out the Love Clinic (inspired by Masters and Johnson) and the Geriatrics Rehabilitation Center as dehumanizing operations. The narrator makes an impassioned stand against scientific impersonality when he defends the right of a geriatric patient to live out his life rather than be sent to the Happy Isles Separation Center. Yet his crusade against the brave new world of the social scientists rings hollow, for his own solution to the 'deep perturbations of the soul'--lapsometer therapy--also involves a violation of the inner man. Even as he depicts a plastic, gadget-oriented world created by modern technology and a research complex dedicated to the behavioral conditioning of our most human responses, More unwittingly adopts an objective-empirical procedure to heal the Cartesian split.

The narrator's ironic position is never resolved in *Love in the Ruins*. Even after Art Immelmann, the Mephistophelian 'liaison man' from Washington, has demonstrated the diabolical potential of the lapsometer, More retains a dauntless faith in his hardware. He announces in the epilogue: 'Despite the setbacks of the past, particularly the fiasco five years ago, I still believe my lapsometer can save the world--if I can get it right.' But More will never get the lapsometer 'right,' for he has not yet recognized that its fearful power to reshape the human spirit rests in the hands of fallible men. As Hawthorne illustrated in 'The Birthmark,' no scientist, however wise, can conduct research on the human soul without destroying it. To violate the sanctity of the heart was for Hawthorne the most reprehensible sin; More seems bent on the same transgression, despite his consciousness of the ethical questions raised by modern scientific methods.

More's contradictory attitude apparently mirrors Percy's own ambivalence toward scientific technology. While he criticizes the 'objective-empirical' mentality and shows how the 'experts' have made the concrete existence almost inaccessible to the modern wayfarer, Percy deprecates the common man for his gullibility. In *Love in the Ruins* More claims that the problem 'is not so much the fault of the scientist as it is the layman's canonization of the scientists.' In effect, Percy absolves the scientist (the seducer) from moral responsibility for his endeavors--a surprising position for a writer of Percy's theological inclinations.

That position seemingly reflects a deep-seated scientific bias: Percy freely admits 'My first enthusiasm was science, the scientific method, and I think it was a valuable experience... I am convinced of the value of the scientific vocation, of the practice of the scientific method.' But Percy is also painfully conscious of the various pitfalls of the scientific method; thus in 'Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method,' he insists that the 'scientists of man' must forgo the luxury of a bisected reality, a world split between

observers and data.' Such ambivalence leads to a certain evasiveness about the ultimate worth of the scientific method; whether mankind will be saved or destroyed by the continued domination of the scientific-technological establishment remains a clouded issue in his work.

Not surprisingly, then, More's continuing pursuit of a scientific solution to the Cartesian split raises several interpretive questions. Are we to perceive his dedication to the lapsometer as an ironic indication of his own limited vision or as a serious endorsement of the scientific vocation? Will the perfection of the lapsometer permit man to 'reenter paradise' as a 'whole and intact man-spirit,' as More hopes, or will it deprive him of that which makes him truly human--the odd mixture of angel and beast? As Percy has suggested in several essays, scientific progress involves both gain and loss: the more of the world the scientist conquers in the name of knowledge, and the more he surrounds that conquered territory with cognitive theory, the less possible it becomes for the scientist to fell a part of that world, since his endeavors have widened the gap between subject and object. As More's satire of the Love Clinic and Geriatrics Rehabilitation suggests, scientific research to eliminate human unhappiness often has the reverse effect of intensifying boredom and discontent. Given the paradox inherent in Cartesian epistemology, it may well be that More retains his essential humanity at the end of the novel by virtue of the fact that he has not yet got his invention 'right.'

3

The very name of More's invention implies the second dimension of his quest, for the etymology of the word *lapsometer* demonstrates Percy's interest in theological problems. The author makes plain the religious implication in a conversation between More and the director of the Fedville hospital.

'What do you call this thing, Doctor?' the Director asks, exploring the device with his pencil.  
'Lapsometer.' I am unable to tear my eyes from his strong brown farmer's hands.  
'The name interests me.'  
'Yes sir?'  
'It implies, I take it, a lapse or fall.'  
'Yes,' I say tonelessly.  
'A fall perhaps from a state of innocence?'  
'Perhaps.' My foot begins to wag briskly. I stop it.  
'Does this measure the uh depth of the fall?'

While the director's reference to a 'lapse or fall' here confirms the connection between More's advice and man's first transgression in Eden, the narrator elsewhere offers a different explanation of the name: 'Only in man does the self miss itself, fall from itself (hence lapsometer!).' From these separate explications, we can infer that in measuring the dissociation between the two sides of the self, More in a sense empirically verifies man's fallen condition; his invention demonstrates that the split recognized by Descartes derives ultimately from Adam's mythic misdeed and that the problem of the sundered self is more properly a spiritual than a psychophysical phenomenon.

Percy also signals the theological aspect of More's quest through his constant verbal play on the name of the narrator's subdivision--Paradise Estates. Standing between the town, peopled by 'all manner of conservative folk,' and the swamp, crawling with 'dropouts from and castoffs of and rebels against our society,' Paradise Estates constitutes a middle ground: 'a paradise indeed, an oasis of concord in a troubled land.' Insulated (until the Bantu revolt) from the political and social realities of the rest of the world, the subdivision approximates a modern conception of heaven: 'Everything is lovely and peaceful here. Towhees whistle in the azaleas. Golfers hum up and down the fairways in their quaint surrey-like carts. Householders mow their lawns, bestriding tiny burro-size tractors.' But when More diagnoses the 'frigidity and morning terror' of a female resident, he finds her 'terrified by her well-nigh perfect life, really death in life, in Paradise, where all her needs were satisfied and all she had to do was play gold and bridge and sit around the clubhouse watching swim-meets and the Christian baton twirlers.' Through such revelations, More exposes Paradise Estates as a technological parody of Eden, an ironic symbol of human longing for prelapsarian happiness. The conveniences and comforts of modern suburbia have led only to a numbing existence, the more deadly because its inhabitants live with the myth that paradise can be regained in 'the good life.'

As most readers readily perceive, *Love in the Ruins* is rife with Edenic themes and allusions. Percy clearly casts More as an American Adam (in the tradition described by R. W. B. Lewis), who in the course of the novel succumbs to the temptation of a satanic figure, sees a vision of hell in an amphitheater called The Pit, and ultimately loses his home in Paradise. But if we accept the seriousness of Percy's allegorical design, *Love in the Ruins* amounts to a substantiation of the 'fortunate fall' theory. Delivered from the deadening confines of Paradise, More ironically recovers health, happiness, and religion in the old slave quarters near the bayou.

The narrator's recovery from waywardness and spiritual confusion evolves through a series of overtly symbolic scenes. As the novel opens, More describes himself as a 'bad Catholic' who has 'stopped eating Christ in Communion, stopped going to mass, and...fallen into a disorderly life.' En route to the Center with news of the impending Bantu revolution, however, More has a religious experience of sorts in the Little Napoleon bar: 'In the dark mirror there is a dim hollow-eyed Spanish Christ. The pox is spreading on his face. Vacuoles are opening in his chest. It is the new Christ, the spotted Christ, the maculate Christ, the sinful Christ. The old Christ died for our sins and it didn't work, we were not reconciled. The new Christ shall reconcile man with his sins.' The image, of course, is More's own. Infused with the hope of healing 'the soul of Western man,' the narrator lapses into a reverie that discloses both the angelism of the abstracted scientist and the spiritual predicament of the layman in the post-Christian epoch. The concept of goodness has become so problematical that only a 'maculate Christ' can be understood by the present age. More's fantasy becomes an expression of the need for and the desire to become the new messiah; but it is also a recognition of the illness of modern man, a spiritual malaise objectified by the 'pox' and 'vacuoles.' As physician and 'new Christ,' More apparently intends at this point to heal himself, and mankind as well.

More's figurative death and rebirth, perhaps the most blatant symbolism in all of Percy's fiction, occurs when Uru, the black militant, locks the narrator in an abandoned Catholic church. More escapes from this mausoleum of lost faith through an air-conditioning duct which in Freudian terms he compares to the uterus and to paradise. In darkness 'black as the womb,' he muses that 'refrigeration must be one of the attributes of heaven.' However, the fate of Adam, reenacted biologically in the trauma of birth, necessitates expulsion from the womb-paradise. Pushing through a loose panel, More delivers himself from the darkness: 'Out I come feet-first, born again, ejected into the hot bright perilous world.'

The narrator's reentry into the world of experience happens, significantly, as the 'final major chord of *White Christmas*' resounds from the carillon of the church. This coincidence appears to substantiate the Christian implications of More's rebirth, but it reminds us simultaneously of the secularization--in Percy's view, the impoverishment--of religion in contemporary society. Being 'born again' seems to have lost its radical meaning; indeed, that may be the ironic point of Percy's painfully obvious allegory, for More's rebirth, despite its apparent symbolic importance, produces no dramatic revival of faith. Only as a representation of More's response to institutional religion does the event possess Christian meaning; his deliverance literally involves an escape from a dead church, a reminder perhaps of Kierkegaard's persistent struggle with established Christendom.

But if More's ordeal assumes false significance as a New Testament motif. More makes his way out of the air conditioning duct, his dark, cool paradise, using the sword of St. Michael (removed from a religious statue) as a makeshift screwdriver. According to Milton's account of the fall, St. Michael is the archangel who escorts Adam and Eve out of the garden. But he subsequently performs a more complex task, offering the fallen couple an insight into the spiritual purpose of suffering and counseling them to learn 'true patience' and practice moderation. Although More experiences no such meeting with the archangel, he does, after wielding St. Michael's sword, eventually amend his own life. He forsakes his lovers, Moira and Lola, to marry his Presbyterian nurse, Ellen, and he finally accepts the limited happiness of a more moderate and orderly existence, returning, in the epilogue, to the religion he had lost years before.

Five years after the main action of the novel takes place, More goes back to the church on Christmas eve to confess his sins, perform an act of penance, and take Communion. He offers the reader a key to the meaning of the ritual when, in an earlier passage, he speaks of his travels with Doris, his first wife, and of his delight in seeking out 'some forlorn little Catholic church' every Sunday morning: 'Here, off I-51 I touched the thread in the labyrinth, and the priest announced the turkey raffle and Wednesday bingo and

preached the gospel and fed me Christ.' More's 'touching the thread in the labyrinth' serves the mystical function of uniting mind and body: 'It took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels...it took nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love [Doris] in the morning.' Thus at the end of *Love in the Ruins* when More takes Communion, he once again touches the vital thread which can bring the sundered self together. In Kierkegaardian terms, the mass becomes a 'repetition,' a moment of spiritual awareness occasioned by a sudden recovery of past experience. In ritual, More rediscovers a source of wholeness, a means of reconciling the self with itself and of continuity, a means of uniting himself with a chain of believers the first of whom were the disciples.

To disguise the conventionality of More's return to faith, Percy portrays him at the end of the novel incongruously barbecuing turkey in his sackcloth, sipping Early Times bourbon, and singing 'old Sinatra songs.' But the narrator's new perspective is plain enough; he now spends his time 'watching and waiting and thinking and working.' Specifically, he waits for the Second Coming. When Colley Wilkes, the 'super Bantu' birdwatcher, announces that the rare ivory-billed woodpecker--called the 'Lord-to-God'--has come back 'after all these years,' More describes a second religious reverie, the counterpart of his 'Spanish Christ' fantasy: 'This morning, hauling up a great unclassified beast of a fish, I thought of Christ coming again at the end of the world and how it is that in every age there is the temptation to see signs of the end and that, even knowing this, there is nevertheless some reason, what with the spirit of the new age being the spirit of watching and waiting, to believe that--'. The wish remains unstated and unfulfilled. But it seems an index of More's spiritual progress that he no longer casts himself in the role of messiah. Though Christ has not yet come again, More's recovery of faith has at least granted him more peace and serenity than he has known in years. His recovery of the thread in the labyrinth has evidently mitigated his 'chronic angelism-bestialism' and enabled him to relish the paradoxical freedom of life in the slave quarters.

4

While Tom More regards the sundered self alternately as a psychophysical disorder and as a spiritual malaise, he also understands the split as a product of historical processes. According to Toynbee's *A Study of History*--a work of evident importance to Percy's narrator--the disintegration of a civilization tends to manifest itself in individual and social schisms: More is thus to some extent a victim of historical destiny. But as an adherent of Toynbee's cyclical theory, the narrator also finds his hope for deliverance partially upon history itself, believing that the end of an age dominated by Cartesian thought may produce a new theory of man based on the sovereignty and wholeness of the individual. This historical sense creates a consequent ambivalence in the narrator; though he outwardly dreads the 'catastrophe' threatening Western man and struggles (however ineffectually) to prevent it, he secretly longs for disaster and the new beginning it might provide.

Woven into the fabric of the novel is the narrator's persistent sense of cyclical destiny. The opening scene finds More sitting under a tree 'waiting for the end of the world' and pondering the possibility that 'God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery, the sudden jerking ahead of the roller-coaster cars as the chain catches hold and carries us back into history with its ordinary catastrophes.' More's ambiguity in this passage exposes the limitation of the human view of history: we are unable to distinguish 'the end of the world' from one of the 'ordinary catastrophes' of civilization. Nonetheless, the roller-coaster proves a felicitous metaphor for history since its structure physically suggests the rise and fall of empire and the idea of cyclical movement which returns inevitably to the point of origin. This idea corresponds to T. S. Eliot's discovery in 'East Coker': 'What we call the beginning is often the end / And to make an end is to make a beginning. / The end is where we start from.' More likewise understands his existence in terms of temporal paradox: his anguished 'sense of an ending' (to use Frank Kermode's phrase) is balanced against his anticipation of the age to come.

The dying age, according to More, was first ushered in by the emergence of modern science in the seventeenth century. Heralded by the *Discourse* of Descartes, this epoch reached a momentous juncture in the first World War; in 'The Delta Factor' Percy baldly asserts, 'The old modern age ended in 1914.' Affected by his reading of Stedman's *History of World War I*, Tom More says of the same year: 'Here



began the hemorrhage and death by suicide of the old Western world: white Christian Caucasian Europeans, sentimental music-loving Germans and rational clear-minded Frenchmen, slaughtering each other without passion.' Stedmann's devastating account of Verdun leads More to observe ironically that 'the slaughter at Verdun was an improvement' over the less effective warfare of the nineteenth century. Verdun epitomizes for the narrator both the potential destructiveness of technology and the futility of modern experience. For as More recognizes, these soldiers fought 'without passion' not so much to annihilate each other as to destroy the deadly boredom of their own lives: 'For fifty years following the battle of Verdun, French and German veterans used to return every summer to seek out the trench where they spent the summer of 1916. Why did they choose the very domicile of death? Was there life here?' The story of the returning troops strikes More deeply because he too senses that 'the dying are alive and the living are dead,' even in Louisiana.

More's vision of disintegration parallels the theories of Toynbee in striking ways. The implied relationship between the sundered self and the riven world in *Love in the Ruins* seems a fictional projection of the 'schism in the soul' and the 'schism in the body social' by which Toynbee identifies a disintegrating civilization. The schisms are closely related; the social dichotomy, according to Toynbee, becomes an 'outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual rift.' The denizens of a crumbling culture may experience this latter split as an inner conflict between 'abandon' and 'self-control'; between a 'sense of drift' and a 'sense of sin'; or between 'archaism' and 'futurism.' All of these responses, Toynbee argues in Volumes V and VI of *A Study of History*, reveal an absence of imagination and growth; in essence, they amount to active or passive alternatives to creative human behavior. This dialectic seems fully consistent with Percy's critique of American society and Western civilization. The stereotyped Knothead proctologists and Leftpapa psychologists of *Love in the Ruins* look to the past and the future, respectively, but fail to articulate a humanly constructive response to the present.

In fundamental ways, the narrator's actions also illustrate the polarities of the 'schism in the soul.' That More's 'disorderly life' as Don Giovanni reflects the principle of 'abandon' seems clear enough; yet his battle with Art Immelmann and his subsequent marriage to Ellen represent an effort to discipline the passions and exercise a modicum of 'self-control.' Similarly, More is caught between a 'sense of drift' and a 'sense of sin'; he feels powerless to halt the 'forces of evil' at large in society and to some extent participates in the decadence, but he feels guilty, finally, for his failure to 'master and control the soul's own self' (in Toynbee's words), and so goes to confession.

His response to cultural crisis also reflects aspects of both 'archaism' and 'futurism.' The narrator frequently reverts to the past when confronted by contemporary chaos: he recalls idyllic love-making with Doris, his erstwhile 'Apple Queen,' his horseplay with Samantha, the fated daughter, and his life in the old 'auto age' before vines covered shopping plazas and the pool at Howard Johnson's turned 'an opaque jade green, a bad color for pools.' More feels drawn also to the Middle Ages and the unclouded moral certainty of his namesake, Sir Thomas More, who likewise dreamed of a simpler, utopian existence. And he further yearns for the prelapsarian harmony of Eden, the third focus of his archaistic imagination. With the lapsometer, he hopes to enable man 'to reenter paradise, so to speak,' and return in effect to an earlier, beatific phase of human history.

But More's own experience ultimately discloses the futility of archaism (Paradise Estates proves a false utopia) and causes him to look to the future for deliverance from the present. Toynbee observes that 'it is only when this archaistic line of escape has been tried in vain' or rejected as intrinsically impossible that the soul will 'nerve itself to take the less natural line of futurism.' And so More watches and waits for the end of the world, focusing his chiliastic hopes on the Second Coming. But his persistent references to catastrophe imply another futuristic solution to his problem; as noted earlier, More covertly longs for the sort of disaster that might reshape the human order and resolve the 'schism in the soul.'

For if More's experience has taught him anything, it is that accidents and catastrophes have the effect of confirming the wonder of existence and enabling us to 'come to ourselves.' An unexpected recovery of self occurs when More tries to escape his depression through suicide: 'One morning--was it Christmas morning after listening to Perry Como?--my wrists were cut and bleeding. Seeing the blood, I came to myself, saw myself as itself and the world for what it is, and began to love life.' Percy's refrain--coming to one's self--

seems to imply a reconciliation of mind and body, a sudden recovery of spiritual wholeness. On such terms More can accept the collapse of Western civilization--which on one level he dreads--as a potentially salutary experience. Notwithstanding its frightening aspects, disaster has the effect of making life more 'real,' of generating vitality, and of clarifying purposes and values. As Percy observes in 'The Man on the Train,' the question 'what if the Bomb should fall' really misses the point of the modern predicament: 'The real anxiety question, the question no one asks because no one wants to, is the reverse: What if the Bomb should *not* fall? What then? At least the Bomb, the threat of disaster, affords man some means of recovering the 'wonder and delight' of existence. For Percy, catastrophe implies both desolation and redemption, for only through loss can we regain an awareness of the mystery of being.

To illustrate the regenerative aspect of catastrophe, Percy juxtaposes the dramatic action of *Love in the Ruins* against the steady, silent incursion of the wild vines. For Tom More, the vines furnish tangible evidence of cultural disintegration: he discovers them pushing through the rotting top of an Impala convertible, invading the bar of the Paradise County Club, and menacing his mother's backyard. At one point he notes with apparent alarm 'a particularly malignant vine' which has laid hold of a garden statue of St. Francis. However, in 'The Man on the Train,' Percy affirms that 'the heart's desire of the alienated man is to see vines sprouting through the masonry.' One suspects that, beneath his surface concern, More too shares a secret delight in the mutability of human structures and sees the vines as a symbol of life and growth. Significantly, he uses vine imagery in the last paragraph of the novel to describe a loving embrace with Ellen: 'To bed we go for a long winter's nap, twined about each other as the ivy twineth.' Although the vines initially threaten More, they finally seem to represent the possibility of regeneration in the ruins of what Ezra Pound called 'a botched civilization.'

Thus through historical change, More hopes to be saved from history. It is his fate (and perhaps our own as well) to live in a period of cultural breakdown, to experience the 'schism in the body social,' and to discover a corresponding rift in his own soul. But if the course of history is cyclical, as Toynbee (and his predecessor, Oswald Spengler) asserted, then a final collapse might well usher in a new age of creativity, growth, and spiritual renewal. Indeed, the same theory of disaster and recovery underlies the conception of *Love in the Ruins*; in 'Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,' Percy suggests: 'Perhaps it is only through the conjuring up of catastrophe, the destruction of all Exxon signs, and the sprouting of vines in the church pews, that the novelist can make vicarious use of catastrophe in order that he and his reader may come to themselves.'

5

In the epilogue to *Love in the Ruins*, Tom More has apparently 'come to himself' without the aid of a global catastrophe. Indeed, More refers casually to the crisis five years earlier as a 'fiasco'; Bantu militants have been transformed by oil profits into Bantu golfers, who furiously attack the back nine clad in knickerbockers and English golf caps pulled down to their eyebrows. The political turmoil has also subsided: Knotheads have moved to 'safe Knothead havens' like Cicero and Hattiesburg, while Leftpapas have flocked to Berkeley and Madison. But whatever the satiric purpose of such resolutions, the epilogue creates an idyllic perspective seemingly at the expense of the novel's integrity. In effect, More invalidates his own earlier vision of things, shifting his narrative out of the eschatological mode to create what Frank Kermode calls a 'disconfirmation' of apocalypse. He produces this falsification by collapsing the 'riven world' theme, trivializing the social and political conflicts which had seemed so momentous. For example, the race issue ceases to matter when Percy depicts the black man as a parody of the white status-seeker, his historical predicament utterly forgotten. Tom More simultaneously advances a mawkish theory of poverty: 'All any man needs is time and desire and the sense of his own sovereignty. As Kingfish Huey Long used to say: every man a king. I am a poor man but a kingly one. If you want and wait and work, you can have.' That is, differences in power, opportunity, and ideology vanish if one works hard and savors his disinheritance.

It seems clear that Percy regards the schism in the social structure as a superficial manifestation of the split within the individual. That split, 'the modern Black Death...chronic angelism-bestialism,' continues to afflict the world, but Percy's narrator has apparently found a solution. His leap into faith, which parallels developments in Percy's first two novels, seems to derive in part from the writings of Kierkegaard and Marcel. But a more likely inspiration for More's recovery of self is Toynbee's theory of 'palingenesis' or

rebirth. In *A Study of History*, Toynbee describes transfiguration, 'illustrated by the light of Christianity,' as the only authentic solution to personal fragmentation. This mystical transcendence may require a compound movement of withdrawal followed by return--a period of meditation in exile followed by a reentry into the world of men. Significantly, Percy's narrator refers to the same passage early in *Love in the Ruins*: 'Toynbee, I believe, speaks of the Return, of the man who fails and goes away, is exiled, takes counsel with himself, hits on something, sees daylight--and returns to triumph.' The remark is more than a scholarly allusion; it prefigures the outcome of the novel and identifies a major theoretical substructure. It suggests that even as Percy explores the problems of the sundered self and the riven world, he has in mind a specific conclusion--the 'palingenesis' of Toynbee as an archetype of redemption.

The author's conceptual design has important consequences for the representation of character. In 'Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,' Percy recalls with apparent approbation Flannery O'Connor's explanation for the bizarre types in her fiction: 'for the near-blind you have to draw very large, simple caricatures.' Though Percy disparages 'edifying' fiction, his commitment to Christian eschatology inevitably binds him to a didactic program and governs his representation of experience. Indeed, his predilection for the split-metaphor seems to reflect his desire to create 'very large, simple caricatures,' who, whatever else they may be, present themselves as angels, beasts, or some combination of the two. Although the technique enables him to investigate, in clinical fashion, the peculiar relationship between spirit and flesh, it leads likewise to an oversimplification of human personality. Thus, while Percy asks us to take seriously the angelism-bestialism of Tom More and supplies the salient facts of his life, the narrator remains curiously remote and fantastic; he speaks of pain but never seems to feel it. Part of the difficulty stems from metaphorical overkill, in which angelism and bestialism lose their evocative qualities, becoming mere figures in an equation. Faced with a similar problem in *Steppenwolf*, Herman Hesse rejected the simplicity of the wolf-man metaphor as a way of describing the suffering of Harry Haller....

Half-man and half-caricature, Percy's Tom More is too complex to be understood in terms of the metaphor by which he persistently attempts to explain himself. Why then does Percy make such extensive use of the split-metaphor? Surely, one factor is the eschatological motive, the desire to represent modern man as a creature torn asunder, in need of wholeness and vision. But a more important clue may come from the metaphor Percy uses to describe his vocation: the novelist as diagnostician. Percy's characters, frequently described in physiological terms, fall readily into categories (the Knothead proctologist, the Leftpapa behaviorist, etc.); they exist not as human beings but as completely predictable organisms in an environment. Even a major character can be described as the locus of certain symptoms. That is, of course, the very truth Percy seeks to disclose--that twentieth-century man has willingly traded his soul to satisfy needs and has thus surrendered his individuality. But this revelation, the product of Percy's scientific training, his passion for ideas, and his pursuit of a 'theory of man' within the context of Christian belief, comes to us finally not as the confession of a fellow sufferer but as the clinical diagnosis of an angel orbiting the earth."

J. Gerald Kennedy

"The Sundered Self and the Riven World: *Love in the Ruins*"

*The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*

ed. Panthea Reid Broughton

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"In the essay 'Notes for a Novel about the End of the World,' Walker Percy discusses his ideas about a serious novel describing 'the passing of one age and the beginning of another.' The novelist, Percy thinks, is a quasi-prophet who 'writes about the coming end in order to warn about present ills and so avert the end.' His vision testifies 'to a species of affliction which sets him apart and gives him an odd point of view. The wounded man has a better view of the battle than those still shooting.' Percy's essay, written some years before *Love in the Ruins*, suggests his general theory about what and how the novelist who can see signs of the end should write.

In *Love in the Ruins* Percy follows the essay's prescriptions, but with certain modifications. One rather improbable (and therefore intriguing) modification is that, while Percy says that the novelist as quasi-prophet necessarily speaks from an odd point of view, in this apocalyptic novel he chooses a narrator whose point of view is not just odd; it is unreliable. We see all the action from the perspective of Tom

More--drunkard, psychotic, and semi-lapsed Catholic. Thus, though Percy planned for his third novel to embody the quasi-prophetic insights of the eschatological novelist, he chose to relate those insights through a narrator whose own vision is distorted by alcohol, neuroses, and guilt. We may understand more clearly how Percy's art works if we take a close look at the complex ways in which More distorts reality and if we speculate about the possible origins and implications of More's distorted vision.

First, More's ability to discriminate and to narrate simple faces accurately is decidedly suspect. More remarks, 'As best I can piece out the Colonel's rambling, almost incoherent account, the following events took place earlier this morning,' and at the same time decides, 'There is no reason to doubt their accuracy.' The juxtaposition of the incoherent Colonel Ringo and More's assurance is puzzling, and More himself has already described the Colonel as a much distracted old man with one eye 'turned out ninety degrees.' Why should the reader believe that this overwrought old man with impaired vision is an accurate observer and narrator? The answer of course is that the reader would be wrong to do so, and More's rapid acceptance of the authority of the 'rambling, almost incoherent' story gives the reader an insight into More's difficulties in assessing reality. To corroborate the Colonel's story, More acknowledges that he 'witnessed the beginning of the incident,' and then admits that he thought the discharging of celebratory firecrackers was actually rifle fire. More's admission undercuts his credibility as a verifying witness and accurate narrator.

Throughout the novel, More exhibits his inability to get things straight. He tells us that Lola occupies room 205 of the deserted Howard Johnson's motel, but later when he sees a 'blurred oval in the window of room 203,' he believes it is 'Lola.' Actually room 203 is Ellen's. Later, More writes that the Bledsoes have lived in their 'Spanish stucco' house for 'fifty years,' although in a later passage he says, 'Yonder in the streaked stucco house dwelled the childless Bledsoes for thirty years.' The latter number, thirty years, is correct, if we may believe More's assertion that he visited the area 'as a boy while the house was a-building.' Since More is forty-five, such a visit would have been impossible had the house been fifty years old.

The reader may be amused to trace More's slips, trying to verify his assertions, calculating his accuracy in details, catching his mistakes. That Percy has underlined the inaccuracy of his narrator is hardly to be doubted. As the novel nears its conclusion, More admits that he is more than normally 'confused and exhausted.' He has a hard time getting his bearings, and--'somewhat confused'--he examines the contents of his 'pockets to get a line on the significance of the past and the hope of the future.' For the present, he is lost, overwhelmed by the flux of reality.

Like the equally confused Hamlet who is also confronted by a metaphysical identity crisis, More is a constant questioner. His questions seem attempts to 'get a line on' the present: 'Did I remember to put pistol in bag?' 'Why am I so jumpy?' 'Where are the dogs?' 'Did Max give me a shot?' 'Is it possible to live without feasting on death?' The questions are aimed at himself, his environment, his beliefs; they apparently arise from two aspects of More's personality. First, he is basically insecure and unsure of himself. Since he lacks an integrated selfhood, everything comes to him in a questionable shape. In *The Message in the Bottle* Percy discusses the poorly integrated self and the results of that 'monstrous bifurcation of man into angelic and bestial components.' He explains that the fragmented person could not 'take account of God, the devil, and the angels if they were standing before him, because he has already peopled the universe with his own hierarchies.' A bifurcated world not only obscures truth but also spawns illusions. The world More lives in then is both fragmented and phantasmagorical.

More's insecurity takes a second, more positive form, however, as intellectual curiosity. He never accepts an *apparent* reality without question. Paradoxically, his weakness can be his strength. As a medical diagnostician, he is a genius; as a man, he is filled with terror of an unknown and, perhaps to him, an unknowable reality. This terror leads More to a peculiar and yet not totally unique way of dealing with reality. He has a penchant for using similes; and through his use of the simile, he transforms his world into a romantically more acceptable place. The Pit scene will serve as an example of More's habit of imposing an incongruous series of romantic similes on reality: 'The seats of The Pit slope steeply to a small sunken arena, a miniature of the bullring at Pamplona.... My one small success in The Pit might be compared to a single well-executed *estocada* by an obscure matador.' The students 'roost like chickens along the steep slopes'; Max Gottlieb sits 'erect as a young prince, light glancing from his forehead,' reminding us of

Buddha. More enters 'like a relief pitcher beginning the long trek from the left-field bullpen.' The Director is 'like the ancient mariner'; Buddy Brown, 'like a cowboy bulldogging a steer'; Mr. Ives, 'like a jake-legged sailor'; and Helga Heine, 'like Brunhilde.' The Pit is finally 'like a den of vipers.'

Certainly these comparisons reflect the range and power of Percy's imagination, and they further confirm his assumption that the beauty of analogy may be 'proportionate to its wrongness or outlandishness.' But from another viewpoint, they testify to Percy's consciousness that, though a linguistic analogy may, as he says in 'Metaphor as Mistake,' make knowing possible, it may also interfere with knowing. That seems to be what happens in The Pit scene, for the reality of The Pit is so distorted by the superimposition of romantic imagery that we cannot be sure what does happen. Certainly the scene becomes anything but what it is, a place for good-natured medical high jinks; More transforms the scene in The Pit into a possibly crucial occurrence in his nation's history--and he cannot allow himself the comic perspective.

Nor can More allow himself, insecure as he is, to take responsibility for his own disaster. When the horseplay of The Pit turns into a sexual orgy, he claims that there has been diabolic interference; Max, on the other hand, believes More's own 'gift for hypnotherapy' is to blame. Apparently, no one but More has observed Art Immelmann's mass distribution of lapsometers, and we should at least consider the possibility that More has here 'peopled the universe with his own hierarchies.' Perhaps More's paranoia has (if you will) hypnotized him into seeing a merely irritation man as an embodiment of the devil himself. If so, vehicle has obliterated tenor, and an outlandish simile has become not a way of knowing but a way to self-deception.

Analogy seems to work similarly in More's private life as a means of denying and evading his own experience. He heightens the quotidian reality of conjugal existence by the eclectic use of religious myth. 'Women are mythical creatures,' he tells us. 'They have no more connection with the ordinary run of things than do centaurs.' Doris, his first wife, 'became a priestess of the high places,' while at the same time she looks 'like a long-thighed Mercury, god of morning.' Alistair, Doris's English boyfriend, flexes 'as gracefully as Michelangelo's Adam touching God's hand...extending his golden Adam's hand and touching me.' Through his continued use of simile, More's homelife is projected as a strange concatenation of Hebrew, Classical, and Christian myth. The extraordinary will help to save him from the ordinary reality which he seems to fear and with which he cannot cope.

More's fundamental way of dealing with the pressure of reality is a variant of his transformation of the world through similes. If we are careful with the concept, perhaps we can see More's tendency to heighten, distort, and schematize reality as a mythmaking process. For example, the Myth of Foundation (which may derive from Faulkner) is basic to More's vision of the United States not as 'any other country' but as a 'new Eden' blessed by the deity. More imagines God saying, 'it is yours because you're the apple of my eye; because you the lordly Westerners...believed in me and in the outlandish Jewish event even though you were nowhere near it and had to hear the news of it from strangers.... And all you had to do was pass one little test, which was surely child's play for you because you had already passed the big one. One little test: here's a helpless man in Africa, all you have to do is not violate him. Western man promptly flunks his historic examination. With More's mythic statement, compare Percy's statement in propria persona in 'Notes for a Novel': 'White Americans have sinned against the Negro from the beginning and continue to do so, initially with cruelty and presently with an indifference which may be even more destructive.' The baldness of Percy's statement contrasts strikingly with More's ornate myth of national loss, though the ideas expressed are similar. For More, the myth of the fall from grace stands as a buffer between him and the sordid simplicity of 'cruelty' and 'indifference.'

If More sees American history in mythic terms, he also heightens his own past into a particular myth of death and loss--the death of his daughter and wife, his loss of direction. Samantha's death seems to have been the unbearable reality that pushed More into his role as mythmaker. Her death has become a way of finding himself; he recovers the 'self' through participating in the 'ordeal' of her dying. After considering her death, he asks, 'Is it possible to live without feasting on death?' The phrasing reminds us of More's emphasis on 'eating Christ,' on the Eucharist, and suggests that in More's vision Samantha's death is rather closely linked with Christ's. In a way, More's concept of life-in-death and life-through-death is an extension

of the Christian mythos by which the true believer gains the fullness of life through participation in Christ's sacrificial death. The old man dies; the new man is reborn. Thus More expects Samantha's death, like Christ's sacrifice, to anchor him to life. But More's myth--one might call it his obsession with the death-dealing Western civilization--fails since it precludes his full participation in life. Perhaps also it fails because More is making a false analogy, or rather, a false theology.

Similarly, More's mythologizing of his own past seems to deny him access to his immediate experience. Waiting for Moira to shower in the ruined motel, More thanks not of Moira but of 'Doris, my dead wife who ran off to Cozumel with a heathen Englishman.' Holding Moira in his arms, he thinks of Samantha's first abortive date, and while he is answering Ellen's questions, he is reminded 'of Samantha, who used to come home from school letter-perfect in her catechism and asks me to hear her nevertheless.' No matter how More may mythologize the past, the past haunts him and keeps him from participating fully in the present. His awareness is blocked, the death myths of the past throw their shadow on his present life.

Further, it may be argued that the geography of More's world is his fictive construct, shaped by his preoccupation with the past. More remembers that he and Doris and Samantha used to travel together in the old Auto Age. On Sunday mornings, he and Samantha would leave 'the coordinate of the motel at the intersection of the interstates,' and descend 'through a moonscape countryside' to a Catholic church in a small town. A type of Theseus seeking escape, More 'touched the thread in the labyrinth.' He returned to the motel 'exhilarated by--what? by eating Christ or by the secret discovery of the singular thread in this the unlikelyst of places, this geometry of Holiday Inns and interstates?' More mythologizes the landscape into moonscape and labyrinth, but more significant is the way his imagination fixes the interstates into a geometric figure of four quadrants with a motel at the center. The intersecting highways are schematized as 'interstates extending infinitely in all directions, abscissa and ordinate.'

This description from the past has its echo in the present, for More *imposes the same kind of scheme on the present landscape*. Because of his attachment to the past, to his Sunday mornings with Samantha, he lifts the geometric model from a bygone time and constructs his contemporary world according to its form. Intersecting highways (Interstate 11 running north and south, and an undesignated interstate running east and west) neatly quarter More's world into four symbolic parts. The very neatness of the scheme indicates that it is More's imposition, not an accurate vision of reality. The ruined Howard Johnson's motel, a focal point of the immediate action, is just inside the southwest quadrant which also contains Paradise Estates, where More lives. 'The scientists, who are mostly liberals and unbelievers, and the businessmen, who are mostly conservative and Christian, live side by side in Paradise Estates,' More suggests. The symbolically and ironically named Paradise contains a soup mix of people and political opinion; because of this, it is a quadrant which lacks focus and indeed lacks drive. It is an area of abandonment--abandoned cars, abandoned motels, houses, movie theaters, churches, and so on. As a whole, Paradise lacks potency, and it is fitting that the sexually impotent Ted Tennis lives here. Although More may feel that Paradise is 'an oasis of concord in a troubled land,' he again deceives himself; it is an oasis in ruins.

In part the ruins are spurious. Tara seems to dominate the landscape of Paradise, 'a preposterous fake house on a fake hill.' It was built from the 'original plans,' that is, 'the drawings of David O. Selznick's set designer.' The fraudulence of Tara suggests that life in Paradise itself is defined through incongruous images and models. But More is fascinated by the falsity; 'The very preposterousness of life in Tara with Lola inflames me with love,' he confesses.

As mistress of Tara, Lola is the female genius of Paradise. In each of the four quadrants, More has a woman who loves him and who symbolizes for him the central aspects of that quadrant. Lola is the auburn-haired Texas girl, the cellist who appeals to his musical-erotic. In her, More embodies his personal myth that 'Music ransoms us from the past, declares an amnesty, brackets and sets aside the old puzzles.' Her mixture of music and sex is a strong potion of forgetfulness and irresponsibility. 'We'll make music,' she cries, 'and let the world crash about our ears. Twilight of the gods!' But Lola also represents the 'Gone with the Wind' myth, a spurious southern agrarianism. 'When all is said and done,' Lola tells More, 'the only thing we can be sure of is the land. The land never lets you down.' They are looking out over the acres of grass, hardly the kind of land to put our trust in if you wish to eat. Paradise Estates, the southwest quadrant, is a curious hodge-podge of attitudes and values. As they are embodied in the sexually attractive Lola,

More finds them emotionally compelling, a possible alternative. As they are embodied in impotent Ted Tennis, More intuits their sterility.

Each of the quadrants has its natural enemy in another quadrant, and Paradise seems especially vulnerable to Honey Island Swamp in the southeast. The swamp is a misty series of savannalike islands 'dreaming in the gold-green world.' Like Paradise, it is a hodge-podge of people, from 'ferocious black Bantus who use the wilderness both as a refuge and as a guerilla base from which to mount forays against outlying subdivisions' to 'all manner of young white derelicts.' In fact, 'all manner of disaffected folk' meet in the swamp.' It is a variant of the pastoral world, a place to opt out of the urban world and the life that the people of Paradise stand for. Here is noncommitment, and More is attracted to this life through the brown-haired, hazel-eyed Hester onto whom More projects, with almost no knowledge of the real woman, an entire world view. 'Hester is my type,' More asserts, 'post-Protestant, post-rebellion, post-ideology ...reverted all the way she is, clear back to pagan innocence like a shepherd girl piping a tune on a Greek vase.' For him, she is a historical, standing outside the stream of history. As he later says, 'she's wiped the slate clean.' More does not deny his attraction to Hester and what she stands for in his mind--'How stands it with a forty-five-year-old man who can fall in love on the spot with a twenty-year-old stranger, a clear-eyed vacant simple Massachusetts girl, and desire nothing more in this life than to move into her chickee?'-but she is the one girl to whom he is sexually attracted and with whom he does not sleep. He cannot make contact with Hester. Because of his strong sense of tradition--a sense of the past that allows him to impose his myths on a recalcitrant present reality--More cannot wipe the slate clean; he cannot follow his mythic Hester into the 'gold-green world' of Honey Island Swamp.

In More's mythic geometry, this pastoral world is antagonistically juxtaposed to the suburban world of Paradise. Charley Parker's son, Chuck, who opposes his father's social ideas, lives in the swamp while his father lives in Paradise. The Bantus from the swamp apparently invade Paradise at various times, looting and burning, and after the Bantus finally become rich, they buy Paradise and live there. The uncommitted life of the swamp people stands in strange and perhaps envious opposition to the vested interests of Paradise.

In the northeast quadrant 'rise the monoliths of 'Fedville,' the federal complex including the hospital...the medical school, the NASA facility, the Behavioral Institute, the Geriatrics Center, and the Love Clinic.' Fedville is the liberal sector, filled with scientists, who, as More sees it, 'are mostly liberals and unbelievers.' The area is associated with mental aberrations, amoral sexual investigations, behavioral control systems, and finally euthanasia. In contrast to the freedom of the swamp, the emphasis here is on control of the individual and his environment; here More sees an unrestricted modernism which he helps with his scientific discoveries, but which he decries as a religious man.

A West Virginian with short blond hair, Moira Schaffner is More's girl in Fedville. At first she is an assistant in the Love Clinic; later she becomes the nurse (and still later the wife) of Buddy Brown, More's licentious alter ego. Moira (the Greek 'Fate') embodies More's vision of love--modern romantic love. 'She's a romanticist.... She lives for what she considers rare perfect moments,' perhaps vaguely remembering Robert Browning, the poet of 'Love Among the Ruins.' For Moira, the old-fashioned sexual inhibitions are gone: 'How prodigal is she with and how little store she sets by her perfectly formed Draw-Me arms and legs.' Unlike More's Hester, she requires a historical setting for her love. 'She likes to visit ghost towns and jungle ruins,' for 'ruins make her passionate. Ghosts make her want to be touched.' Of course More realizes that her historical romanticism is commonplace and thoughtless.

'Moira, who is twenty-two and not strong on history, thinks that the great motels of the Auto Age were the haunt of salesmen and flappers of the Roaring Twenties.' Moreover, she gets the name of the romantic Roman city wrong; she misquotes Edward FitzGerald, considers Mantovani classical, and holds Rod McKuen as her favorite poet. The spuriousness of her romanticism rivals the spuriousness of Lola's 'Gone with the Wind' agrarianism, but as More is enamoured by the preposterousness of Lola's myth, so is he equally in love with Moira's fantastic romanticism. It is More himself who selects the ruined Howard Johnson's as their place of assignation, thus accepting (if only ironically) Moira's mythology. Her past is an urban past made up of flappers and salesmen meeting in lonely motels; Lola is of an agrarian, genteel South. With Lola and Moira, More seems to be attempting a parodic 'kind of "historical therapy"....a

recapture of the past and one's self.' Since he realizes the speciousness of these mythic pasts as well as their attractiveness, his attempts are half-hearted and unsuccessful. He cannot give himself wholly to either.

The northwest quadrant contains the town, a fairly small Louisiana town, where More maintains his office. 'By contrast with the swamp, the town has become a refuge for all manner of conservative folk,' More believes. Leroy Ledbetter's Little Napoleon tavern is in town, and here More sips toddies with his old friends. The flavor of the town is perfectly captured when Victor Charles helps More into the tavern. Victor has played the Good Samaritan, helping More out of a ditch into which he had drunkenly fallen. As Victor supports him, More is party to a subtle interracial violation: 'I should have either dismissed him outside or held on to him longer,' More explains. 'As it was, letting go Victor when the bar was within reach, I let go a second too early, so that Leroy Ledbetter turning toward me in the same second, did not see me let go but saw Victor just beside me and so registered a violation. Not even that: a borderline violation because Victor was not even at the bar but still a step away.' While the scientists are busy recording data electrically in Fedville, the townsfolk are just as busy recording another type of data. The measurements are subtle and traditional, and More can understand these findings as easily as he can interpret scientific data.

Although born in Japan of Georgia missionaries, the dark-haired Ellen Oglethorpe embodies this basically conservative tradition. She 'is a beautiful but tyrannical Georgia Presbyterian. A ripe Georgia persimmon not a peach, she fairly pops the buttons of her nurse's uniform with tart ripeness. She burgeons with marriageable Presbyterianism.... Her principles allow her a kind of chaste wantonness.' In contrast to the too-liberal Moira, Ellen is a twenty-four-year-old virgin. Her aunt admonishes her: 'think of yourself as a treasure trove that you're guarding for your future husband.' She wants More to live up to the best that's in him, and, like a good Presbyterian, feels what he needs is 'good hard work' and (she hesitates to say) a wife. If Hester represents a thoughtless present, and if Moira and Lola represent specious pasts, Ellen emphasizes the responsibilities of the present to the future.

The town and Fedville are natural antagonists in More's world. On the Fourth of July, the townspeople meet at the football field for a celebration, and the deputy sheriff reports, 'They talking about marching on the federal complex.' According to one townsman, Fedville is filled with 'commonists, atheistic scientists, Jews, perverts, dope fiends, coonasses.' The conservative town and liberal Fedville are as at odds as Paradise and the swamp. 'It's the town people fighting the federal people.'

More sits at the omphalos of his projected four-part world when we first see him in the novel. 'This spot, on the lower reaches of the southwest cusp, was chosen carefully,' he says. 'From it I command three directions of the interstates and by leaning over the lip of the culvert can look through to the fourth, eastern approach.' Symbolically More places himself at the center of his world, and as Ellen points out, More's 'shelter'--the motel--is 'convenient to town, Center, and Paradise.' In More's view, he is indeed at the center of the historical crisis he believes to be happening in 1983. His geometric schematization of reality mirrors this belief.

From this survey of More's world, we see that he is the product of a secular age, and his problems, although spoken of in religious terms, are often secular in nature. The moral landscaping that More does is not along spiritual lines, but political--moderate, radical, liberal, and conservative. Religion is a secondary consideration, and it is not the veil of the temple which is rent, but the Rotary banner: 'Is it the truth? Is it fair to all concerned? Will it build goodwill and better friendships?'

For what he believes to be the disintegrating secular world, More projects himself as the neo-Christ, the modern savior. Drinking at the Little Napoleon, More sees his image in the bar mirror. 'In the mirror there is a dim hollow-eyed Spanish Christ,' More fantasizes. 'The pox is spreading on his face. Vacuoles are opening in his chest. It is the new Christ, the spotted Christ, the maculate Christ, the sinful Christ,' and it is of course Thomas More. When he sees himself as the 'new Christ [who] shall reconcile man with his sins,' More's habit of imposing myths approaches blasphemy. But in the present time of the novel reconciling men through love seems a less appropriate means than curing them through methodology; thus More is more likely to trust the fate of Western Man to his lapsometer. Between Christian love and scientific control, between a free gift and an imposed solution, More finds the second alternative more congenial. He considers his article for *Brain*, which explains the use of the lapsometer, as 'perhaps even epochal in its



significance.' With the lapsometer in hand, 'any doctor can probe the very secrets of the soul, diagnose the maladies that poison the wellsprings of man's hope. It could save the world or destroy it.' Salvation will now be in the hands of doctors, not the priests. More sincerely believes his invention to be of crucial importance, and dreams of receiving the Nobel Prize for his work.

More distorts the importance of his gadget, and one way Percy puts More's vanity into context is through Mr. Ives, who has deciphered the Ocala frieze. Among other things, Dr. Brown finds Ives to be suffering from senile psychosis, psychopathic and antisocial behavior, and aphasia. 'Despite extensive reconditioning in the Skinner box, the patient continued to exhibit antisocial behavior,' Brown reports. Nevertheless, Ives, through a great deal of painstaking research in 'the Franciscan files in Salamanca' and in Tampa, Florida, has mastered proto-Greek and deciphered the frieze. His explanatory article will appear in 'next month's Annals.' Part of his evidence is 'a crude coin...like a ten-dollar gold piece,' which he is chary of giving up.

More and Ives--both accused of madness and antisocial behavior, both refusing to be reconditioned by the Skinner box, both private researchers, both widowers--feel that they have made their ultimate contribution to their respective areas. The difference is that Ives has really deciphered the Ocala frieze; it is questionable if More has invented a gadget which will cure Western man. By implication Percy asks the reader, 'Could it be that More's work will be, in reality, less influential than Ives's? Colley Wilkes puts More's research into proper empirical framework when he tells him: 'I am convinced you're on the right track in your stereotactic exploration of the motor and sensory areas of the cortex. This is where it's at.' More's lapsometer is a specialized tool for exploring the uses of the brain; but More snaps back, 'What concerns me is angelism, bestialism, and other perturbations of the soul.' Wilkes and his wife are nonplussed. These things may interest More (as they interest Walker Percy), but they are not to be measured in the laboratory. More cannot see the incongruity between his end and the means he has selected; he would like to see himself as the new Christ who can use gadgetry to bring a scientific means of grace to a secular age. Because he is in the habit of randomly projecting diverse myths, More cannot see that these two myths--the one of God's grace, the other of man's scientific control--are mutually exclusive.

Ironically, even while More wants to save his age, he wishes to destroy himself. He has attempted suicide by slashing his wrists, and though he has almost killed himself in the past by drinking gin fizzes, he still drinks them--at a time when he feels that he needs his full faculties. Generally courting danger, he dwells on scenes of destruction, on Verdun and other battlefields. The deaths of his wife and child are constantly in mind. The Tom More we see throughout most of the novel is a man preoccupied with destruction. Given More's preoccupation, it is not surprising that he sees an apocalyptic world which is ready to explode. He projects himself onto the world. As he says, catastrophes are comforting to him; it is the everyday world that he finds hard to face. The myth of the apocalypse seems ready-made for his underlying pessimism.

The myth of diabolical intervention is equally important to More, since he does not want to be responsible for any misuse of the lapsometer. Indeed, More refuses to accept responsibility for himself or his world. When Lola asks him to stay with her at Tara, he tells her, 'I have, uh, other responsibilities,' and adds subvocally, 'Such as two girls in a motel room.' The point is that More has no sense of responsibility. In the midst of what he sees as an apocalyptic disaster, More is holed up in a motel for less than moral reasons. He refuses to take a truly active part in trying to save his world.

Because More cannot accept his responsibility, Art Immelmann enters. Art may be more than a figment of More's unstable mind; but he is certainly both a convenient scapegoat and a projection of More's destructive propensities. More's colleagues sensibly see that More himself is responsible for the orgy in The Pit. Max points out that More has taken 'four hundred overworked daxed-up strung-out students at the end of the year' and used hypnosis on them; Stryker sees the lapsometer as 'an extremely effective objective correlative.' Of course, More would like to blame 'diabolical abuse,' that is Art Immelmann. But even if he is the devil incarnate, Art explains that he is essentially powerless. 'We never "do" anything to anybody,' he tells More. 'We only help people do what they want to do. We facilitate social interaction in order to accumulate reliable data.' Art merely helps More do what he basically desires to do. Before Art's arrival, More tells Max, 'I've got to get this thing mass-produced and in the hands of G.P.s,' and Art later only

slightly increases the scope of More's original plan: 'We're prepared to fund an interdisciplinary task force and implement a crash program that will put a MOQUOL in the hands of every physician and social scientist in the U.S. within one year's time.' In either case, the plan is extremely dangerous if the lapsometer has the capacity to 'destroy' the world as More claims. It is no tool to be trusted at random to every doctor and social scientist in America. Art really becomes a projection of More's own irresponsibility and pride. More wants the Nobel Prize for his work, and Art promises to get it for him. Even Art's slightly old-fashioned manners and dress seem to mirror an essential part of More, the old-fashioned gentleman doctor. In narrating his story, More radically distorts Art's passive function in the action.

In the scene dated '7:15 p.m. /July 4,' More recapitulates the antagonisms and the desires of his story. Wrapped in smoke, with whiffs of brimstone, noxious vapors, and fog, the scene is much like a movie montage or a nightmare, and the reader may feel that a good part of the action takes place in More's confused head. But three important things happen in this strange scene. First, Ellen reports, 'There was no real trouble.' The Bantus 'faded away,' as if they were simply dark figures of paranoia in a diseased mind. More's myth of apocalypse fades with them. Second, More rejects Art Immelmann, and the rejection of Art becomes important for More as a rejection of his own pride and irresponsibility. Third, More goes home with Ellen, and by so doing, seems to reject an illusory world and accept a real one. The next time we see him he is hoeing collards in his kitchen garden. The enclosed patio in Paradise is exchanged for a workaday vegetable garden in the slave quarters.

In the novel's coda, 'Five Years Later,' More has changed, though he has not been utterly reclaimed from his vanity. He still believes that his gadget can save the world--if he can get it right--and that there is 'some reason' to await the imminent apocalypse. But, with a few minor exceptions, the romantic similes are gone along with the confused questioning of the earlier action. More feels that a new age has come. 'Now while you work, you also watch and listen and wait. In the last age we planned projects and cast ahead of ourselves. We set out to 'reach goals.' We listened to the minutes of the previous meeting. Between times we took vacations.' Formerly, More dredged up myths from the past and awaited the future apocalypse. By distorting reality, he failed to live and love *in the real world* and was indeed a soul divided from its body. Now he again has a wife and children, and is coming to know himself as an integrated person.

Father Smith's final words to More are important advice. We must think about things 'like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest, showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people, particularly to our own families...doing what we can for our poor unhappy country--things which, please forgive me, sometimes seem more important than dwelling on a few middle-aged daydreams.' The middle-aged daydreams are not only More's lecherous thoughts about Mrs. Prouty, the flirtatious Sears salesperson. They also include his distorted vision--a daydream--of himself and his world.

Moreover, his earlier vision of apocalypse is undercut by Victor Charles who is running for Congress. 'I got the Bantu vote,' Victor claims. Chuck Parker is working for him among the swamp people; Max Gottlieb, among the liberals; Leroy Ledbetter, among the conservatives; and Victor wants More's help with the Catholics. More joins Victor's political team. More's lapsometer is not needed to save the political fabric of Louisiana and the nation, nor are his various mythologized attempts to translate his world out of itself. Some far more commonplace and traditional political wisdom seems to have done the job.

But perhaps the myths More has used and needed are *there* in the texture of his world. Perhaps, Lola, Moria, Hester, and Ellen are *indeed* embodiments of American myths of agrarian stability, the grandeur and vitality of the past, the saving power of music and love, the Edenic and unspoiled country, the efficacy of work. Perhaps a sense of apocalypse does hover over a divided nation. Perhaps then the myths are not completely imposed by More, but simply seen by him in his role as vatic shaman. Nevertheless, Percy shows us these myths operating in the mind of a mentally disturbed man. As a psychotic psychiatrist, More is continually advising, 'Physician heal thyself.' He is both diagnostician of and participant in the disease, and he has the same relationship to the larger disease, the malaise of Western man. There is a resulting ambiguity in More's vision; for as it reveals the basic problems, it also obscures them by distortion.

Arthur Kopit's statement on the American propensity for mythmaking is surely apropos here: 'The danger isn't what happened, but the way in which we changed what happened into a fable.' And John Lahr later notes that the American 'need for oversimplification encourages myth.' More the seer is also More the simplifier, the schematizer, the fabler. Our myths, Percy seems to imply, are a part of the malaise, part of our inability to confront reality in a positive, clear-sighted way and to deal with it as it is. By diagnosing More, we come to understand our own habits of verbal distortion and romantic mythologizing, our own propensities to rely almost superstitiously on science rather than humanely and responsibly working out our spiritual salvation. More never completely frees himself from his mythologized world, but at the end of the novel, he is slowly working toward a clearer vision. Implicitly, Percy instructs us to do the same."

William Leigh Godshalk  
"Love in the Ruins: Thomas More's Distorted Vision"  
*The Art of Walker Percy* (1979) 137-56

"Implicit in the American pastoral ideal--whether it derives from Jew, black, or white Protestant--is the notion of space, vertical as well as the more obvious horizontal. In Walker Percy's *Love in the Ruins* (1971), the apocalypse has arrived, and America lies in ruins; the novel a montage of Percy's view of the 1960s. What remains after a secular Armageddon is a small group of people, their so-called leader a sympathetic doctor, all holed up in an abandoned Howard Johnson's.

What could be a more telling metaphor than America's favorite rest stop! Ruins lie around, after a '15-year Ecuadorian war,' but salvation rests in those emblems of bourgeois America on the road. More, the protagonist, digs in with food, drink, and three women. This particular Howard Johnson's, deserted and overgrown as it is, has extraordinary facilities, all weighted toward the male point of view, our basic and traditional allegory. The women need a doctor, or More, but he requires three different women: Mormon love in an orange villa.

The significant element is the spacing. More is spaced in, spaced out, distanced from the rest of the world. With the closing of the frontier, only Howard, not Lyndon, Johnson remains, and 'he' becomes 'it,' our new pastoral. Since we need space, then pastoral settings (wherever), skyscrapers, and even those roadhouses which dot the landscape at intervals like the forts of an earlier age are our new notion of distancing.

The survival of the picaro in the American novel can help to explain that compulsive need for space--outward (on the road) or upward (to the moon). With the building up of cities, the closing out of space, one alternative form of spatial arrangement is the Howard Johnson's of reality and fantasy (white building, bright orange roof, almost unlimited flavors of ice cream, free rest rooms, et al),, the new Tower of Babel. Instead of dispensing languages, it dispenses flavors, new taste sensations, and minimum comforts....

*Love in the Ruins* is subtitled 'The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World,' or apocalyptic almost now. It is an excellent follow-up to *The Last Gentleman*, creating a trilogy of novels, to be broken by *Lancelot* in 1977. The protagonist is a very ill psychiatrist named Thomas More: 'I am a physician, a not very successful psychiatrist; an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors, but a genius nevertheless who sees into hidden causes of things and erects simple hypotheses to account for the glut of everyday events; a bad Catholic; a widower and cuckold whose wife ran off with a heathen Englishman.' More's positioning of himself vis-a-vis his society and culture is roughly equivalent to that of his distant ancestor Sir Thomas More, who found himself a Catholic in a historical era shifting away from him. More held on by insisting on what he knew were individual and religious truths, and paid for his beliefs with his head; our contemporary More--a scientist who yearns after the Nobel Prize--has devised a Lapsometer, a machine that 'can disguise and treat with equal success the morning terror of liberals and the apoplexy of conservatives.'

More's machine, called More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer, quantifies 'angelism-bestialism,' those wide swings of mood and temperament which make man subject to extremes of behavior. One of the machine's bad side effects is that even as it makes men happy (like soma in *Brave New World*), it produces a chain reaction in the heavy sodium deposits where it is situated. For all its value as a sedative

and soporific--a great pill, massage, rubdown--the Lapsometer is a false guide, a solution from outside. It is, also, an imitation shaman, like so much of Pynchon's technology, which leads to decline even as it reinforces, a sign of entropic exhaustion even as it appears to support all systems.

The Lapsometer functions in a society that has exhausted itself on an Ecuadorian War of fifteen years standing--apparently our Vietnam War--and a racial war, in which Bantus and local blacks are slowly overrunning the countryside. Snipers are everywhere, and More's life is saved only because, as a doctor, he had befriended many poor people and blacks. The social fabric has been shredded, everyone is involved in a last-ditch effort to save himself, or else to continue as if nothing has happened, while the walls fall.

Percy has structured the novel carefully in a four-day period, July 1-4. The plan, apparently, was to approximate the creation of the world with something of its decline: the fall to work within more or less the same terms as the rise. The opening segment uses July 4 (5 p.m.) as the date, and Dante's 'middle of the journey' as the psychological equivalent. More muses: 'I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me has it happened at last?' July 4, traditionally Independence Day, now signifies dependence, for More lives in the 'latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world.'

The time is sick, the narrator, More, ill (hives, loss of breath, alcoholism, fall from Catholicism, fall from grace, purpose, function). Things fall apart. There only remains the Lapsometer, that measurement of one's fall--a scientific marvel of sedation which may win a Nobel Prize and which is sought for the military. Percy then moves us backward in successive segments to July 1, 2, 3 to an earlier time on July 4 (8:30 a.m.), then to a later time on July 4 (7:15 p.m.). The fourth is the key, like the sixth day of Creation: 'Two more hours should tell the story.' The rise and fall of the Western world, as embodied in America, lies at stake. The time is now, but the world of the novel is future America, teetering. The sole one who can hold it back is a lapsed Catholic, an alcoholic doctor. If the territory seems Greene, Percy has enlarged it, so that personal frailties are associated with a global situation.

While More's long-range solution is the Lapsometer--he has had fifty machined in Japan--his short-term solution is a half-ruined Howard Johnson's, a fortress against the coming siege. The 'oranging of America'--a locale for refreshment and relief of physical needs--has become an outpost of American civilization. More holes up there provisionally with three women to service one man, an ill man at that. One, Lola, provides music, her chief attractions, besides her ability on the cello, being a strong set of legs and a powerful back. Her muscular structure seduces More, as he positions his body where the cello usually is. A second woman in his Howard Johnson's harem is Moira, whose perfectly formed limbs and healthy abundance--heaviness in small things--make him aware of what a marvel the female body is. Her cultural tastes, however, run to Montovani. The third woman (and More's fate) is the nurse Ellen, who caters to his ills. His attacks of hives and suffocation--an asthmatic condition--need ministering, and Ellen, a strict Presbyterian, is there. He does not sleep with her until their marriage--she wins the man by hanging on to her virginity.

More services his harem--Herzog's ultimate dream!--with more than affection. He stocks the Howard Johnson's with a six-month supply of food, runs in a water line from a nearby Esso station, supplies air conditioning, lays in cases of whiskey and a set of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and is prepared to establish an alternative life to the guerilla warfare that threatens to overrun this section of Louisiana. But more than guerilla warfare is the 'apocalyptic' fallout that is expected: a sickness unto death. 'For I have reason to believe [More says] that within the next two hours an unprecedented fallout of noxious particles will settle hereabouts and perhaps in other places as well. It is a catastrophe whose cause and effects of the evil particles are psychic rather than physical. They do not burn the skin and rot the marrow; rather do they inflame and worsen the secret life of the spirit and rive the very self from itself.' Whatever is unbalanced in man--rage, sense of separation of himself, terror--will be intensified by the fallout, and he will be driven ever farther into isolation and solitary wandering.

The apocalypse will be both physical (from the heavy salt in the area) and psychical. The 1960s were, for Percy, the time when both of these conditions obtained: *Lancelot* measures his more violent response. The Lapsometer may 'save' those who have fallen, but Catholicism--or any strictly held religious belief--

might have equally saved, as More recognizes when he seeks absolution for his sins. Yet *what really saves is not religion but the discovery of an alternative life*, [Here this Atheist critic imposes his own rejection of religion on a Catholic writer.] one that goes beyond the hospital, where the sick are well and the so-called normals are sick. In the Pit, where doctors perform for the sake of a student audience, More demonstrates that an allegedly psychopathic patient, Mr. Ives, is quite normal, simply rebelling silently against what society does to its aged citizens. The twisting of sick and well--here, Percy appears to have learned from Laing--is a pervasive sixties theme, perfectly tuned to the needs of the decade when abnormal and normal converged. Laing's clinical rather than theoretical evidence could only have been embraced at a time when sensations became at least as significant as intellect.

Percy's More does not choose to lose his head. He is impressed by countercultural possibilities, and considers moving in with some dropouts, in order to live 'completely and in the moment the way a prothonotary warbler lives flashing hold fire.' In effect, he salvages what he can, by marrying Ellen and carrying on a very low-key medical practice, while living in 'slave's quarters.' The novel shifts, and we move five years forward. We have the 'new age,' one that features 'the new plague, the modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely, More's syndrome, or: Chronic angelism-bestialism that rives soul from body.' He still believes in his Lapsometer to save the world, but he cannot get it right; meanwhile, men have taken the form of beasts, blood-suckers, werewolves. More hopes that one day he will turn the corner and transform ghosts or beasts into men. The world now, for More, is a Bantu world, achieved not through revolution but through their exercising their property rights. The old area, once called Paradise Estates, contained oil, and the Bantus profited; now they own 99 percent of Paradise. More adapts, unlike his namesake, who refused Henry's direction.

The lapsed Catholic is received back into the church. Although he cannot regret his sins, he has 'perceived' his life and altered it. He has forsaken alcohol, has married and settled down with Ellen, has fathered a family, helps the poor for little compensation, and has made his peace with the one issue that was always the great sin of white America: race. As blacks form a new Hanseatic League of City-States (Detroit, New York, Chicago, Boston, Los Angeles, Washington, etc.). More stands fast. Without forgoing his body or his plans for the future, he contributes himself. But 'now' counts. In the last age, men 'planned projects and cast ahead' of themselves, hoping to reach goals. More simply lives.

The truly evil element in the novel is represented by Art Immelmann, who is ever present as CIA, FBI, military, government, corporate complex. He is the beyond. For him, the Lapsometer is a weapon, and he gets his hands on More's stock of them. He does not wish to cure, but to hold power. His curious name is emblematic. Max Immelmann, a German, devised for pilots a defensive maneuver--a half loop, followed by a half roll, then a level position--that allowed the pilot to gain altitude while appearing to fly in the opposite direction. The name is brilliantly applied to someone who represents bad faith. But More's own 'good faith' has hardly been pure. He needed his harem, his drug fix for hives, breathing difficulties, lows and highs; he required cases of whiskey. Only when cultural and political changes occurred did he alter his style, and he feels like 'Robinson Crusoe set down on the best possible island with a library, a laboratory, a lusty Presbyterian wife, a cozy tree house, an idea, and all the time in the world.' Such is 'love in the ruins.' that mix of scientific humanism gone sour and Nietzsche's 'last man' philosophy. Only irony wins."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 30, 319-21

"With *Love in the Ruins* (1971), Percy's talent came to full flower. Dr. Tom More's ambition is to cure his age's malaise--the separation of body and spirit--by means of his invention, the lapsometer, 'a caliper of the soul.' The electric charge of Percy's cerebral themes is well grounded in his narrator, Tom More, who announces early, 'I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellow man hardly at all. In this novel Percy weaves his moral and philosophical concerns into a hilarious, ironic dystopia."

Mark Johnson  
*Fifty Southern Writers since 1900*  
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain

(Greenwood 1987) 347

"As Percy's reputation as a formidable novelist of ideas grew, he upset expectations with his third novel, published in 1971, *Love in the Ruins*, a hilarious satire of modern technological life and the sham of modern psychiatry. Its protagonist, Dr. Tom More, is a thinly disguised re-creation of Sir Thomas More and Percy himself, who dutifully skewers the false utopias of Eastern religion, consumer capitalism, and errant liberal Catholicism."

Bruce L. Edwards  
*Cyclopedia of World Authors II*  
ed. Frank N. Magill  
(Salem 1989) 1174-75

"The plots of Percy's third and fourth novels both took new directions. *Love in the Ruins* (1971) has as its setting an America already descended into the chaos that Percy thought was probably inevitable. The principal figure is Dr. Tom More, a lapsed Catholic and sex-preoccupied psychiatrist, himself in treatment as an outpatient. The action of the novel is More's attempt by means of a device he calls the ontological lapsometer to take control of the minds of the populace and transform chaos into utopia; its happy denouement is his revelation of himself as a fool and his salvation of sorts under the sober ministrations of a sensible Presbyterian wife."

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

Michael Hollister (2021)