

## ANALYSIS

*The Last Gentleman* (1966)

Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

"*The Moviegoer* is a remarkable use of the man who uses the cinema world as a counter to the real one. The two worlds do have points of contact, but ultimately the one is unable to make up for the deficiencies of the other, especially since the movie world often has the same inadequacies, blown up. *The Last Gentleman* (1966) is a more elaborate conception and surely an important work. Once again it features the lost young man, Will Barrett, searching for forms and meanings and trying to 'be good' as nearly as he can see his way to it. He begins in New York, with a fortune of \$18,000, most of which he spends on psychiatry. He is a maintenance engineer, works at night, specializing in Temperature and Humidification Control; during the day he scans the city landscape with a telescope, 'a wicked unlovely and purely useful thing.' Barrett's malaise consists in attacks of *deja vu*, experiences of total recall, which shake and disturb him and upset the pattern of present behavior. He wants to serve, and before he has found his way to do so he will have many strange adventures. If there is nothing wrong with him, he says, then there is something wrong with the world.

The key to Barrett's conduct is propriety; he is 'the last gentleman.' He is forever at the task of establishing his credentials. The effort to establish himself as valid and authentic first takes him into Virginia, with Forney Aiken, a white photographer who is going through the South to do a 'photographic essay' on the Negro; he disguises as a Negro for the purpose. Of course this change of appearance causes near riots, especially when Aiken attempts to walk into his own house, in Levittown.

This is a foretaste. *The Last Gentleman* is a picaresque novel concerning the adventures of a subtly sincere person who is trying to get into exact focus with present circumstance. Most of his travels through the South are with the Vaught family, whom he first met in New York. In Charlestown, South Carolina, he observes the pretty details of the past; 'pretty wooden things, old and all painted white, a thick-skinned decorous white, thick as ship's paint, and presided over by the women.' He tries to define himself by loving Kitty ('her charms and his arms'), but 'she was too dutiful and athletic'... He was the boy, and she was doing her best to do what a girl does.

Obviously, the arrangement isn't going to work, their actions are too much a la mode. Barrett is Percy's version of the twentieth-century *Candide*; that is, he is not optimistic, but rather *sincere*, a quality that will cause many difficulties along the way. As they move through Georgia they note the machines being used for cutting through a new freeway: 'The whole South throbbed like a Diesel.' Kitty comes at him like a Diesel locomotive, and it doesn't work out. The South he returns to is different from the one he had left: 'more and more cars which had Confederate plates on the front bumper and plastic Christs on the dashboard.' The *deja vu* no compete with the raw, jangling present South.

The Vaught castle in Georgia is obviously a major eyesore symbol of the New South. It fronts on a golf course and is made of purplish bricks, 'beam-in-plaster gables and a fat Norman tower and casement windows with panes of bottle glass.' As Mr. Vaught says, it's a good place 'to live and collect one's thoughts.' Here Will Barrett meets Sutter, the archdemon, cynic, a character from an imitation of a Dostoevsky novel. He had been a doctor once, and one of his patients had died because of a theory Sutter had had about illness and well-being; he has retired from the profession since. It is Sutter who asks all the disturbing questions: Do you believe in God? Do you think God entered history? How do you define a gentleman? Especially under the influence of the last question, Barrett suffers a *deja vu* which encompasses his father's views of and relations to Negroes. Each time he tries to make a 'sensible settlement' of his affairs (marrying Kitty, taking over a position in Vaught's Chevrolet agency, etc.), a *deja vu* assaults him. This idea, of the *deja vu* interfering with too easy a solution of the present, is like Bolling's problems in *The Moviegoer*, where eventually communication with Rory Calhoun of the film world breaks down.

Sutter's notebooks or 'Casebooks' carry the philosophical burden the rest of the way. 'I am the only sincere American,' he announces in one entry. 'Soap opera is overtly and covertly lewd'.... Further observations concern the 'new South.' The Southern businessman is the new Adam, but 'the truth of it is, you were pleased because you talked the local Coca Cola distributor into giving you a new gym.' Sutter acts as a disturbing influence on Barrett; there are points upon which they agree, but his cynicism gives Barrett a jolt. Barrett's trouble is that he has had a liberal, philosophical father, who knew the right literary allusion for an occasion, while Sutter (like the devil) can quote scriptures to his advantage as well. They are two generations of the intellectual, and Barrett has to decide between them. He used to walk with his father, he remembers, 'and speak of the galaxies and of the expanding universe and take pleasure in the insignificance of man in the great lonely universe. His father would recite "Dover Beach," setting his jaw askew and wagging his head like F.D.R.' His trouble, writes Sutter, is 'that he wants to know what his trouble is.... That is to say: he wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence...' This is an exact description of Barrett's dilemma, but it doesn't explain Sutter's.

Sutter's points of view and Barrett's *deja vu* tend to take over the novel, the plot of which concerns the Vaught son, Jamie, who is in Barrett's care. Sutter 'steals' him, drives him to Santa Fe, where he appears about to die. Barrett faces Sutter in the hospital, annoying him and pressing home the moral point of his reasons for taking him out west. The two opponents now face each other with hostility.

'Violence is bad.'

'Violence is not good.'

'It is better to make love to one's wife than to monkey around with a lot of women.'

'A lot better.'

'I am sure I am right.'

'You are right.'

This exchange is a parody catechism of the most superficial liberal virtues, and both Sutter and Barrett are aware that it is worthless. But Barrett confesses that he needs Sutter, to correct him in his 'gentlemanliness,' to be there always as a cynical guard against excessive, unwanted goodness. The gentleman needs the cynic, the skeptic, to watch over him.

This is as much as Percy's second novel does; but, in its explorations of the man of good will, it scores many points. Essentially, Barrett is disturbed by the same world that troubles Bolling--a world of chaos and villainy and accident that just isn't properly available to easy definition. Bolling has recourse to the 'good guys' in the movies and on television, but eventually he has to give them up. He suffers from malaise, which strikes him without warning. Barrett wants the old cliches to work; but in the end he admits that they are a hindrance to a realistic adjustment to the world as it is. The stinks, the vulgarities, the pompousness, all of the defects that Sutter had noticed long before."

Frederick J. Hoffman

*The Art of Southern Fiction: A Study of Some Modern Novelists*

(Southern Illinois 1967) 133-37

"A good example of the aptness of Kierkegaard's diagnosis is offered by the central character, Will Barrett, in Walker Percy's novel, *The Last Gentleman* (1966). Barrett has lived in a state of 'pure possibility' up to the time when the novel starts, when we find him lying down. His general proneness is an indication of the effect of living in this state. 'The vacuum of his own potentiality howled about him.' He is one of the deracinated, the last of the line of an old Southern family, and he has become 'a watcher and a listener and a wanderer.' Most of his life has been 'a gap' and he has a tendency to fall into 'fugue' states which are reminiscent of Jake Horner's 'weatherless' days. At such times it is as though he drops out of the reality shared by everyone around him, into a sort of absent consciousness beyond all identities and names. One result of his inability to remain operative within the given social structure is a condition which besets many other American heroes--'a strange inertia.'

When Barrett does move, this movement usually takes the form of purposeless wandering which ends with him suddenly completely estranged from his environment and unable to recognize where he is. He

often resolves to integrate himself with society in all the conventional ways, but one scarcely feels that he will get beyond the impasse which he has experienced before. 'He either disappeared into the group or turned his back on it.' Which is a succinct formulation of the classic dilemma of the American hero in his relations to society. At the end of the book we see Barrett, not with his wife and in a home as he resolved, but on the road, running after the philosophically and medically unorthodox Dr. Vaught (another of those equivocal doctors) to ask him one more question. This doctor has a notebook in which Barrett reads the following extracts:

Man who falls victim to transcendence as the spirit of abstraction, i.e. elevates self to posture over and against [a] world which is *pari passu* demoted to immanence and seen as exemplar and specimen and coordinate, and who is not at the same time compensated by beauty of motion of method in science, has no choice but to seek reentry into immanent world *qua* immanence... *transcendence*.

A later extract comments on Barrett: 'he wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcendence (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g. 'environment,' 'groups,' 'experience,' etc.) in such a way that he will be happy.... Yes, Barrett has caught a whiff of the transcendent trap and has got the wind up. But what can one tell him? It is possible to resolve to re-enter ordinary reality, but the actual mode and moment of re-entry may still elude the aspirant to immanence. This is demonstrated in many recent American novels--Saul Bellow's *Herzog*, for example, is just such an aspirant. Walker Percy's book suggests indirectly that a man may exist between transcendence and immanence as a 'wayfarer,' and we can readily recognize how many American heroes have felt forced to adopt the way of life suggested by that designation.

Perhaps the most revealing passage concerning Barrett's relationship with the world around him is the one which describes the Trav-L-Aire car in which he travels around the South. It is completely self-contained with all the conveniences necessary for the owner to be self-sufficient, and it has an observation dome as well. Barrett delights in this way of life: 'mobile yet at home, compacted and not linked up with the crumby carnival linkage of a trailer, in the world yet not of the world, sampling the particularities of place yet cabined off from the sadness of place, curtained away from the ghosts of Malvern Hill, peeping out at the doleful woods of Spotsylvania through the cheerful plexiglass of Sheboygan.' His tone is here clearly somewhat ironic and the attitude expressed is not offered as a final one. Even so, his pleasure at being 'cabined off' from the world, temporarily secure from the coercions of the conditioning forces, is in line with that familiar American delight at feeling free from external control and shaping. At the same time it is precisely such a 'cabined off' feeling, in the world yet not of the world, somehow sealed up in the self, that also presents itself to Barrett as the main problem with which he has to struggle as he wanders without anchorage or definition through the realms of possibility.

Barrett's praise for his car and his position of being in the world without being of it may remind us of Melville's encomium to the 'rare virtue of interior spaciousness' and his image of the dome of St. Peter's which suggests a veritable cathedral of consciousness, well able to rebuff the outside world if necessary, and supply its own internal compensations. At the same time the drop from cathedral to car suggests some diminution of that interior spaciousness, and it is this contraction I wish to consider here. The instinct to cultivate and protect an area of inner space is a recurrent one in contemporary American fiction; indeed it is, as I have suggested, often the only area in which a writer and his hero can experience any freedom. The ability to do this is often the salvation of the writer, and the American hero often avails himself of the consolations of unreachable inwardness. At the same time, some American writers have been exploring some of the less happy aspects and effects of cultivated interiority, and their fictional conclusions are an important part of contemporary American literature."

Tony Tanner  
*City of Words: American Fiction 1950-1970*  
(Jonathan Cape 1971) 260-62

"*The Last Gentleman* is a more ambitious novel than *The Moviegoer* and a more spacious one. In his second novel Percy has moved out in a number of ways from the confines of his first. The physical scope alone suggests the difference. Where *The Moviegoer* is intensive, centering closely on New Orleans, with a

couple of excursions along the Gulf Coast and a sojourn to Chicago, *The Last Gentleman* is extensive and moves from New York through the Deep South to the Southwest. Along the way it develops an amplitude the earlier novel lacks. And Percy makes a minor stylistic breakthrough in capturing a supple American rhythm and tone that in retrospect give *The Moviegoer* the slightest trace of a European accent. The protagonist of *The Last Gentleman* breaks out of his underground existence as a humidification engineer in Macy's basement and makes a journey that takes him across country and out of time, from the contemporary 'fallout' of American life to a realm beyond the reach of time.

Simultaneously a shift of emphasis takes place. *The Moviegoer* probes the malaise of American life and records, almost in passing, the death of the narrator's half-brother, Lonnie Smith. *The Last Gentleman* by contrast is structured on the impending death of Jamie Vaught, and Percy climaxes the novel with a powerfully rendered account of the event itself. Clearly *The Moviegoer* did not offer him sufficient latitude to explore the fact of death, the uniquely personal 'I and my death' of the existentialists. Its reality permeates *The Last Gentleman*. And the death of Jamie Vaught is set off against a peculiarly modern kind of death-in-life.

The novel describes a pilgrimage, but it is a pilgrimage unlike any other because Will Barrett is a new kind of pilgrim. He suffers a postmodern incapacity. What is it to be a pilgrim if you are blind to signs along the way and deaf to the messages? That question underlies the novel. Will's journey takes place in a world denied grace by an affliction Kierkegaard saw in the making. Percy explores its lethal complications in being, choosing for the purpose a young man whose malady disqualifies him as pilgrim while it qualifies him admirably as protagonist.

Will Barrett qualifies as protagonist in that he suffers from amnesia and from time to time lapses into fugue states following which he can recall nothing of what has transpired. Even between spells he is shaky about what is what. 'Much of the time he was like a man who has just crawled out of a bombed building,' Percy says. But such a predicament is not altogether bad: 'Like the sole survivor of a bombed building, he had no secondhand opinions and he could see things afresh.' This fresh vision of things is combined with a sentience, a supersensitive radar, which enables him to receive the signals others are transmitting along with, or in spite of, their words. Lacking secure memory, he cannot make logical or temporal connections; possessing acute sensibility, he can perceive the sense of a situation through all the nonsense of its words. He thus serves the author as an instrument for taking a fresh look at the American scene. The novel attempts a clear phenomenological look at American life in the 1960's, unobscured by the clouded lenses of fashionable opinion.

Reinforcing this primary qualification of Will Barrett's is another. Until the moment the novel opens he has lived in a state of 'pure possibility, not knowing what sort of man he was or what he must do, and supposing therefore that he must be all men and do everything.' He is as undefined at the outset as the world he inhabits. Near the end of the novel his sense of possibility receives a jolt that marks the beginning for him of 'what is called a normal life,' when Sutter Vaught informs him bluntly that he, Sutter, will not be around after Jamie's death. Will cannot understand why. Sutter, who is planning to kill himself with a Colt pistol, says in exasperation: 'What in Christ's name do you think I'm doing out here [in New Mexico]? Do you think I'm staying? Do you think I'm going back [to Alabama]?' The stark elimination of alternatives finally astonishes Will for the first time in his life, after when he takes shape as a normal person. But in the meantime his sense of limitless possibility combines with his amnesia to facilitate a fresh look at the current scene as events drive him closer and closer to a final choice.

What disqualifies him as a pilgrim is an incapacity we need to define at the outset. It is more than an incapacity of will, to make the obvious pun, and is related to one of his quirky notions: 'that "It" had already happened, the terrible event that everyone dreads.' With his amnesic spells Will is peculiarly vulnerable to such a notion, since the disaster might have occurred during one of his fugues. His shakiness leaves open the question whether 'It' has already taken place and what 'It' can be if not the blowing up of the world, which manifestly has not happened yet. And indeed 'It' has happened, a terrible catastrophe that Will cannot possibly see because it consists in large measure of the way he has come to look upon himself.

Will is a true descendant of Descartes, and the mind-body rift that takes place with Descartes has been fatally widened in Will's case by his veneration of science.... In a sense Will's creed is: I think, therefore I *am* not. It may have been such a fact of consciousness that Kierkegaard had in mind when he noted in his journal: 'It is the grace of God that he wishes to be personal in relation to you; of you throw away his grace he punishes you by behaving objectively towards you.' Will lives in a state without grace because he has come to view himself objectively. He takes 'an objective attitude to his own personality,' as Kierkegaard said of Socrates in danger. If we translate Kierkegaard into our own terms and define grace here as subjectivity or inwardness, Will's condition begins to make sense. He is denied grace because he has abdicated himself. He lives not in the infinite passion but in a shadowy objective remove that denies him access to his own inwardness.

*The Last Gentleman* is the pilgrimage of an incapacitated pilgrim. The physical movement of the novel is a direct analogue for his pilgrimage, and I will follow the chapter divisions in my discussion as we move in five states from Ground Zero to Santa Fe....

The trouble with Will Barrett is that his consumer's paradise yields inauthenticity in myriad forms along with material wealth... Percy's starting point in the novel is the consumer's paradise of contemporary America, which more than satisfies the officially defined 'needs' of most people but produces a menacing fallout or malaise as well.... Will withdraws to New York...a landscape bombarded by everydayness and inauthenticity and devitalized by abstraction.... The New York depicted in the novel corresponds to what Percy has called the 'notion of the American city as an alien place....a paradigm of the existentialist or even the Christian view'.... Here in New York he is a chameleon... The atmosphere of *The Last Gentleman*...undergoes a transcendent change from the noxious urban smog of 'ravaging particles' described in this opening section to the purer air of the American Southwest, where the novel ends.... A major portion of the novel involves a return to Will's Southern roots....

Will's amnesia allies him in an odd way with Faulkner's Benjy Compson, though he is by no means an idiot. His time sense is almost as dislocated as Benjy's, but the sound and fury he experiences belong to an abstract postmodern world shorn, like Benjy's, of the benefits of the past.... Will is the incarnation of the naive secular faith in psychoanalysis.... Like Kate Cutrer in her 'objective' moments, he is able to dissociate himself from himself in the most exemplary way, and he is so very modern that he knows the World's Great Religions have yielded great psychological insights.... From the limbo of his objectivity Will cannot really *see* what is there.... Will has eliminated Christianity as a viable possibility...Will is a postmodern citizen.... He can play any role... What he cannot do is say what he is, or define himself more clearly than a chameleon can define its color. He cannot choose....an irony-laden rejection of what has been handed down... Only in ordeal does life revive....

Will comes from a family that has 'turned ironical and lost its gift for action'... Along with the decline of the heroic virtues we recall from Aunt Emily's lectures and know so well from popular mythology, we can see here the insidious growth of hyperconsciousness described by Kierkegaard and Dostoevski.... Will is a post-Faulknerian Quentin Compson, quartered in the Manhattan YMCA instead of the Harvard Quad, burdened with the weight of the Southern past even while he endures the bombardments of modern urban America. Will has had a go at Princeton, where he occupied the same room his grandfather had used in 1910--the same year, curiously, in which Quentin Compson committed suicide at Harvard.... We see Will's temperamental affinity with Binx Bolling....

Armed with his powerful telescope...he has deeper plans: 'I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge I have so arduously gained from five years of analysis'.... Percy suggests his failing: he wants to *engineer* his life on the soundest 'scientific' principles rather than commit himself to the vexatious and sovereign task of living it'.... The instrument of his deliverance is the telescope... The world of the telescope is a spatial analogue for his own world of time, a thing sharply observed but severely dislocated....

Will harbors the instinct to plunder women sexually.... [He] cannot 'relate' properly; so he withdraws to observe the deadly strikes of his feathered counterpart. The unerring falcon is a good foil for the gentleman-voyeur, foreshadowing with the greatest subtlety an essential part of Will's pilgrimage, his

attempt to reconcile these opposing impulses.... The event that is to change his life comes about purely by chance....Percy's presentation of Kitty Vaught... Will and Kitty 'meeting cute'... The meeting comes to Will as a sign, one that becomes more fateful when he learns that the bench is located exactly at ground zero....

What Will sees in his hallucination, I think, is a vision of *modern* life.... His amnesia, Percy has said, 'suggests a post-Christian shakiness about historical time,' accentuated by his transplantation to New York City and his night work in Macy's sub-basement; he becomes almost Oriental in his abstraction from time....' Looked upon from this postmodern, post-Christian perspective with which he emerges from his underground redoubt into the light of day, the whole scene has a most illusory and archaic sweetness and wholeness. The view is backward in time to the period before the Western world view had been totally shattered. This modern world had a sweet wholeness about it, illusory or not, even if it was living off the diminishing capital of the Christian faith--'reap[ing] benefit...from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation' it denies. Authority was still there, beleaguered though it was, and one could be a liberated modern rebelling against superstition even while secure in the warmth of one's faith in 'science.' Men knew what they were about. From a postmodern perspective, with the 'fogs of secularism' dissipated, this world can only evoke the repetitive nostalgia of an old silent film. How quaint that everyone seems to know what he is doing! A funny business indeed!

Will's hallucination is a brilliant phenomenological rendering of future consciousness in which we can see Percy moving ahead in time toward his next novel. Here it foreshadows what Will is about to recognize as a sign.... 'Was it possible, he wondered, that--that "It" had already happened, the terrible event that everyone dreaded.' But no: he smiles and thumps his head; 'he was not yet so bad off as to believe that he was being affected by an invisible gas.' Invisible gas, no; but that something has already taken place becomes portentously clear when after ten minutes of studying the map Will's heart gives a 'big bump' in his neck...The bench, where the Handsome Woman had sat, was exactly at ground zero.' Will's sign emanates from ground zero. That is the starting point for the pilgrimage of this incapacitated pilgrim. His journey will carry him from the hallucinatory postmodern world, which in fact is the present world shorn of illusion, back through the modern world to the South, both new and old, in search of roots and meaning. The sign at ground zero leads him straight to the Vaughts, who will lead him the rest of the way.

The fateful magnetism between him and the Vaughts owes something to the manner of their meeting. Percy shifts the narrative point of view to demonstrate how each of the Vaughts in turn takes to Will.... Poppy sees Will as 'a stout Southern lad in the old style, wellborn but lusty as anyone, the sort who knows how to get along with older men'.... Kitty, his love, makes her appearance in a manner reminiscent of Kate in *The Moviegoer*.... The author encases her in cliches.... She feels safe with Will because something--amnesia--is wrong with him too.... Rita comes across as one of the most unpleasant dogooders I have met in fiction.... Rita is patronizing and meddlesome, and Percy captures it all perfectly in her speech. She is the kind who can damage a good cause more than a dozen enemies.... To Kitty she is a saint.... The relationship is at least latently lesbian, and Rita's jealousy of Will surfaces clearly at times, but this minor theme leads away from the central theme of the book....

Simpleminded Kitty echoes her in explaining that Rita's marriage with Sutter went wrong because Sutter developed 'abnormal psychosexual requirements'.... Will's concern with what it means to be a gentleman is important to the book, as the title makes clear, and influences his decision to return to the South.... Will is [entangled] in the cliches by which he tries to live. He lacks the irony of Binx Bolling and, living as he does in pure possibility, sees charm in the notion that he might 'marry him a wife and live him a life.' His problem is how to live.... Kitty, his 'certain someone,' is a dud....These two halves do not constitute a whole. Her position is that of a woman in an arranged marriage... She is too busy playing inauthentic roles to benefit by the security of such a traditional relationship.... Percy demonstrates convincingly that sex functions here as 'a symbol of failure on the existential level'.... The important thing to emerge from this fiasco is Will's intense interest in Sutter.... From this point on Will's interest in Sutter intensifies with his belief that Sutter has some secret to tell him. Sutter is the expert who can tell him how to live. It becomes clearer and clearer that what Will is searching for is a father figure more than a 'certain someone'....

The dilemma is sharply posed: either be a gentleman or be a fornicator, not a gentleman who fornicates. Either the ethical sphere or the aesthetic. Will's effort shortly thereafter to meet Kitty's expectations in the

park shows gentlemanly manners enlisted in an ungentlemanly cause. His father was right: Kitty makes a better lady-coed than she does a whore.... In identifying himself as a Princeton student in yet another of his impersonations, this gentlemanly wayfarer reveals just how dislocated he is.

The third chapter contains Percy's broadest satire to this date and some of the funniest episodes in contemporary fiction. The author hits a new and more resilient stride in the opening paragraph as he describes Will's first ride... Mort Prince inspires Percy's satire.... His novel *Love*, which is delivered to Will in his bed by Muzh wearing a shorty nightgown, is about 'orgasms, good and bad, some forty-six,' and ends on what passes for a religious note: 'And so I humbly ask of life,' said the hero to his last partner with whose assistance he had managed to coincide with his best expectations, 'that it grant us the only salvation, that of one human being discovering himself through another and through the miracle of love.' The satire accomplishes two things here. It demonstrates how such writers can be, like Rita, the thieves of virtue, the 'goody-goodies' Confucius spoke of who by occupying defensible positions render them indefensible. And by contrast it heightens the value of being a gentleman.

When Will actually meets Mort Prince he likes him at once, 'perceiving that he [is] not the mighty fornicator of his novels but a perky little bull-shooter of a certain style, the sort who stands in the kitchen during parties, suspended from himself so-to-speak, beer can in hand and manner forming at the corner of his mouth... The visit to Mort's place in Levittown provides a good glimpse of Northern neighbors enforcing the American way of life.... Mort's house, which has a cathedral entrance, serves as a shrine of property rights, which are sacred and segregated... The episode dramatizes a suspicion Percy voiced in 1957 that perhaps 'the best imaginable society is not a country-wide Levittown in which everyone is a good liberal ashamed of his past, but a pluralistic society, rich in regional memories and usages'....

Percy has shifted dramatically from the abstracted postmodern urban world, future-oriented and bombarded by noxious particles, to the nostalgia-laden and immanent South awash in memory. Will's return to the South is a vital part of the Return, as Percy calls it, the search for an answer to the question, Who am I? Will's return is a response to the nameless instinct that draws him back to the house of his childhood where he can recover himself. His journey back into the South is accompanied by *deja vus*, most of them beautifully done, and an often ecstatic rediscovery of the familiar.... Rita holds Will off by calling him Lance Corporal, 'skirting with him the abyss within himself'....

The Trav-L-Aire [is] Huck Finn's raft on wheels, with a few gadgets to bring it to date.... For Will the return by Trav-L-Aire amounts to an existential repetition with rotational dividends, which amounts to a spectacular circumstance. From time to time Percy has Will and Jamie 'stepping down from the zone of the possible to the zone of the realized,' the actualized South.... One does not have to be a Southerner, presumably, to possess subtlety of mind, and such passages highlight an occasional contrast between the fiction artist in Percy and the rhetorician. When he is dramatizing, the effect can be awesomely real, when he begins rhapsodizing on the same theme it can be hollow without advance notice. He seldom yields to this temptation that so often undoes Faulkner, and it could be that on occasion the looseness of his third-person narration taps a vein of suppressed orotundity....

Will and Kitty...have been avoiding each other like strangers... He asks her to go for a walk along the beach. Things are uneasy because Kitty has been clinging to Rita. Each now feels the other has changed.... Finally, Will tells Kitty he loves her.... When he kisses her he gets an inkling of what is wrong: 'She was too dutiful and athletic.... The setting is right; what can be wrong? They are like tourists unhappy in Taxco. The distance Percy maintains is effective here, and he goes on to show the disjunction between Will's expectations of her as a woman and Kitty's expectations of herself.... 'He saw that she was out to be a proper girl and making every care to do the right wrong thing'.... The whole scene is a desperately inauthentic playing of roles.... Even as Will resolves to 'court her henceforth in the old style' it seems to be 'his duty now to protect her non-virtue' as best he can. Courting among the 'quality' in old Carolina has come to this.... Immediately the door opens opposite them to disclose Rita, one specter haunting their relationship.... Sexual roles are as muddled among the Southern quality as anywhere. The malaise is everywhere.

'The South he came home to was different from the South he had left,' the next chapter begins. 'It was happy, victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican'.... This panegyric, even though we know it describes Will's rediscovery of the South, seems a preposterous picture of a society undergoing profound racial turbulence. Is Percy telling it 'straight'? It is easy to conclude that he is, despite the obvious exaggeration. But a closer look at the new South he portrays in the novel shows it to be an impressive facade behind which lie agonizing difficulties.... We know that for Percy man is not at home in the world and that for Will to be 'happy and at home too' would be delusive.... The happiness of the South drove him wild with despair.' Percy's best symbol of this new South is the Vaught family residence, 'a castle fronting on a golf links'... The Vaught have risen in the world along with this new South... One casualty of their ascent in status, Sutter points out, is Jamie, who has never been baptized. The situation dramatizes a profound conflict of interest... There is a long scene during which Jamie endures angrily what everyone else is doing, a scene which in the light of his imminent death subjects their everyday lives to a searching existentialist light....

The death scene at the end...can be read on the plane of religious symbolism, with the boy in Albuquerque as Jesus. For one thing Jamie has settled the question of his 'transfer' but neglects--rather pointedly, it seems--to mention with whom he has conferred. And Jamie has been corresponding with this boy--in fact could live with him. Another hint comes at the end: the father's shop on the highway. Dropping the clue as an afterthought makes the point more subtly, while lending it emphasis. Jamie follows these remarks with an account of a Russian novel he has read that in this context illustrates the power of hope... 'I understand the atmosphere is a great deal clearer in New Mexico.' We are thus prepared for the transcendent move to the Southwest in which the book culminates... Kitty has now 'arrived.' She has become a cheerleader and has found her role... Will has been ensnared by the Vaughts; and Kitty, who is 'house-minded,' wants to cage him in Cap'n Andy's house....

Will has decided to go with Jamie. If Kitty will come along, fine; otherwise he will share the Trav-L-Aire with Jamie.... Rita, who wants Kitty for her own, knows perfectly well what a threat this [is]... She forces the dilemma upon him: either be a pilgrim and go off with Jamie, or marry Kitty and feed the chickadees. And Will cannot move to such a decisive act; he cannot choose.... Will...lacks will.... Sutter comes to his rescue.... Sutter contend with her for Jamie. Sutter is a pivotal figure in the novel.... It is as if all the dialectical ironies of Percy's books had been concentrated in one man. What Binx and Will perceive, Sutter *enacts*. He carries irony into action. His presence becomes crucial because Will is a good man of curtailed awareness and Sutter provides an alternative view as the novel develops a dual center of consciousness.... Sutter knows that Will cannot really be helped until he is 'Will-ing' to take charge of his own existence.... No expert can 'help' Will by telling him how to live. That is up to him.... Sutter puts Will on the road he must travel alone.... Sutter's injunction later proves to be the slim thread that persuades him to continue his pilgrimage. Will awakes from his deep sleep to find that Sutter had spirited Jamie away, presumably having left town to avoid prosecution for hanky-panky with an on-duty nurse. Will keeps a rendezvous with Kitty to look at Cap'n Andy's house....

At this point Will takes his leave of Kitty and sets out on his pilgrimage to the Southwest.... Sutter was right in saying that something would free Will to act, though it is uncertain whether it was the blow on the head from the Confederate monument that freed him or just another fugue.... 'What is this place? Where am I going?' Will asks himself, touching his bruised head.'... Once again we have Percy's castaway, coming to himself with only a bizarre casebook and a map for clues.... Percy uses Will's amnesia to shear away distracting elements and present the simple alternatives. The first item of business, laid out on his map by Sutter, is a visit to Val. The Trav-L-Aire affords him such episodes in much the same way Huck Finn's raft gives Huck glimpses of the Grangerfords and the Phelps.... Val is feeding entrails to a cooped-up hawk that seems to underline how little her own predatory instincts have been affected by her conversion to Catholicism. As a pilgrim, or peregrine, she is not on the way so much as caged up in herself....

Whatever the merits of Sutter's criticism, Val plays a key role in charging Will with Jamie's salvation.... She conveys the message to Will that Sutter and Jamie have been there and are headed for Santa Fe.... Now Will is off again in the Trav-L-Aire, this time heading home, without knowing it, to stand before the house of his father.... The purpose of his return is not to slug Beans on the neck, and yet the encounter provides a fitting entry to his hometown, for Will has come back to recover himself, and the repetition in the blow he



delivers opens the way for the Return as he homes in on the reality he must confront : his father's suicide.... The question could not be more existential. He has come back to Ithaca because he must fathom the meaning of his father's suicide and somehow deal with it before he can be free to become himself. His amnesia and even his deafness are related to what he is blocking out.... Percy himself told John Carr: 'So Barrett is obsessed with this thing that had happened, his father's suicide. And the whole first two-thirds of the book is going back to this thing that had happened, which actually had shocked him so much he'd almost become a hysteric. He was deaf in one ear'.... Percy sets the inanities of 'Strike It Rich' off in counterpoint against the remembered tragedy of Will's father's death....

Men had sworn to kill his father.... 'I'm going to run them out of town, son, every last miserable son of a bitch'... Now, as Will stands before his house, he recalls the night, just such a night as this, on which his father had killed himself. It had been a 'night of victory' on which the father had learned all his enemies had left town. They no longer had to stay: 'We haven't won, son,' he said. 'We've lost'.... He seems on the verge of discovery... But the passage is broken in upon by one of Percy's best encapsulations: 'The TV studio audience laughed with its quick, obedient laughter--once we were lonesome back home, the old sad home of our fathers, and here we are together and happy at last.' The conjunction brings a whole world into focus: the desperate inauthenticity of the TV laugh show audience, gone from the 'old sad home of our fathers,' being soaked up by these tough old women whose men, some of them, had taken their own lives rather than accept the pass they found themselves in. The meaning of the moment has been captured by Lewis A. Lawson when he says Will must come back 'to accept finally the fact that his Stoic father had abandoned him, would not wait for him, did not prepare him for the chaos that is life.' His father had in effect abandoned Will for his private solution in the kingdom of self; and until Will has confronted that stark fact he cannot hope to make his way through the droll disorder of his own existence. Will rejects his father's Stoicism, which tells him how to die but not how to live. That is why he is the *last* gentleman; the role is played out. Now he will become a pilgrim....

The white Southern gentleman, descendant of the racial moderate who once was almost the sole champion of the Black man's rights in the South, now finds himself in a 'fix' the black will have to understand before they can really speak to each other again. It is a painful recognition. Having rejected the Stoic view, which cannot help him, and the new South, in which he can never be at home, Will is ready for the road.... He takes a collapsible boat he and his father had used for a duck hunt...and launches himself into the 'privileged zone' of the Mississippi...casting a neutral eye on the reprehensible activities at old Fort Ste. Marie, where civil rights activists are being held prisoner, like Huck Finn observing human malfeasance along the shore. A visit to Uncle Fannin, the last of his father's generation, completes Will's Southern business and assesses the hope of the 'old' South.... Uncle Fannin and his black subordinate vibrate to the same television programs....

The final move is to the 'transcending Southwest,' as Sutter calls it. The atmosphere is truly clearer, as Jamie had anticipated, though the intellectual atmosphere becomes rather dense with ideas from Sutter's casebook, which sometimes rather jams the signal. The casebook actually contributes a good deal if the reader does not stop to puzzle it out as he goes.... The action of this final phase takes place in and around Santa Fe, which of course means Holy Faith. Sutter's ranch hideout nearby is the 'locus of pure possibility,' Will discovers... It is here in the Southwest that Will is finally to narrow his infinite possibilities and decide to do one or two things instead of all. But Sutter is not at his ranch, and Will locates him in the plaza at Santa Fe, coming out of an adobe Rexall... Sutter's reference is to Philip the evangelist, who encountered the eunuch in Gaza and gave him the good news of Christ's coming. We will soon see in what sense Sutter is a eunuch and what news Will has for him.

Will's first duty is to be a faithful companion to Jamie, whose death is imminent.... Percy's medical experience comes into play in this section, with its officious nurses and cavalier interns, and he captures perfectly the sustaining illusions by which we manage ultimate questions... 'It was understood that the universe was contracted to enclose the two young men'.... Sutter has arrive at a dead end in a dude ranch on the road to Albuquerque. 'We are doomed to the transcendence of abstraction,' his casebook says. Sutter defines transcendence as the self-abstraction that can take place in science, elevating a person to 'a posture over and against the world,' which is thereby 'demoted to immanence.' From his orbit of abstraction the only reentry he can find into immanence is sexual, which is why he is a 'pornographer'.... 'Sutter is in fact a

eunuch because he is locked into his own egocentrism, as Marcel calls it; he cannot initiate the call to another that can bring about a true transcendence through intersubjectivity. Intellectually he can see everything but his own failing.

Will Barrett suffers an equally pernicious form of abstraction. The layman dispossessed by science is trapped in abstraction without realizing it. This is 'something psychologically even more portentous,' Percy has written, than the technological transformation of the world by science: 'the absorption by the layman not of the scientific method but rather the magical aura of science whose credentials he accepts for all sectors of reality.' In the lay culture of a scientific society nothing is easier than to 'fall prey to a kind of seduction which sunders one's very self from itself into an all-transcendent 'objective' consciousness and a consumer-self with a list of 'needs' to be satisfied'... Sutter says of Will in his casebook that 'his posture is self-defeating'; he 'wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g., 'environment,' 'groups,' 'experience,' etc.) in such a way that he will be happy. Therefore I will tell him nothing.' Will is denied grace because he has abdicated himself. He has learned to view himself objectively....

Will never does grasp this difficulty of his, but he recognizes that he cannot forever drift along on pure possibility.... Will has been in touch with Kitty by telephone and decided to go back to Alabama. He will marry Kitty and become personnel manager for Poppy's Chevrolet agency.... Will informs Sutter of his decision and in what amounts to a litany he spels off a list of clichés that Binx Bolling has treated with irony.... [This is] word-for-word what Nell Lovell says in *The Moviegoer*, and it is as if Binx were standing in Sutter's place, the echoes are so strong. I do not detect irony here. Will after all has been living in pure possibility. This recipe is at least concrete, and whatever his means of livelihood, it is his calling that matters. A pilgrim will encounter many obstacles on any road....

Sutter, whom Will comes to see as the 'dismalest failure, a man who had thrown himself away,' is at the end of his road. Having rejected the first two courses, 'living like a Swede' or 'as a Christian among Christians in Alabama,' he is going to opt for the remaining alternative: 'to die like an honest man.' When Will fails to understand him, Sutter demands irritably: 'What in Christ's name do you think I'm doing out here?'... This moment of astonishment marks the beginning of Will's normal life: 'From that time forward it was possible to meet him and after a few minutes form a clear notion of what sort of fellow he was and how he would spend the rest of his life.' He has been jarred out of pure possibility.

Jamie's death is described in realistic detail in an extended scene of indelible power. Will is unprepared for death without the presence of women to cushion him from its reality, and Percy shows him reacting with a well-conditioned modern mentality.... Val, whose presence is felt, charges Will again by telephone with seeing to Jamie's baptism... Where Will would mask the fact of death itself, Val is concerned with the administration of sacraments and Sutter with Jamie's dying his own death, aware of what is happening.

Unless one takes an orthodox Catholic position (I am not competent to do so), it is difficult to know in just what sense Jamie is 'saved.' One interpreter sees the ending simply as 'the drama of Jamie's redemption.' To me the administration of sacraments alone hardly satisfies the demands set up in the novel, and the evidence is rather mixed. We have an umpirelike priest administering baptism...hardly a flattering view of the priest. We have the derisive brother... And we have the innocent Will, who does not grasp what takes place but is able to interpret Jamie's last garbled words... Jamie seems to accept the credentials of the newsbearer... The priest says Jamie should know the message is true because he, the priest, is here to tell him. A 'Holsum bread' truck passes under the street light at this moment [Holsum is pronounced wholesome and the "bread of life" is Jesus Christ.]...

Before he set out on this last journey, Jamie lived in self-abstraction. Now, at his death, he enters his life fully. Perhaps having made the leap of faith, he receives the repetition.... It is clear that Jamie becomes a *sovereign* wayfarer, aware of his own death and in charge of his life. Will and Sutter remain. In a sense each is incapacitated, Will by his veneration of the experts, Sutter by his inability to break out of egocentrism. What are we to make of the ending? The clue is in Sutter's quip about Philip in Gaza, The previous summer, shortly after he had learned of Jamie's illness, Sutter had taken Jamie camping in the desert, where they became lost for four days. The canteens were found 'mysteriously emptied' and they

escaped only because a plane spotted them by chance. Val has seen the ordeal as a religious experience. If we consider that Sutter emotionally has become a eunuch, we can speculate that he fled to the desert this time not only to let Jamie experience his own death but also in the hope that some kind of good news might yet reach him through the agency of Will--some fourth possibility to add to the alternatives with which he was to astonish Will. What kind of news could he expect to hear from Will?

Will is a witness to Jamie's death and salvation, but a witness in the objective sense, not as one in whom an event takes place but as an onlooker. He knows something is happening but cannot figure it out. As Percy says, he *misses* it. The pilgrim misses the import of another's pilgrimage; it is the derisive Sutter who knows what is taking place. Will misses it because as a good postmodern he has eliminated Christianity from consideration. As Percy remarks, 'That is gone. That is no longer even to be considered.' Will is the cat in Percy's cartoon who has run off the cliff and finds himself standing in air. The Christian alternative is more obsolete to Will than Sutter's Edsel in a world of glittering Chevrolets. The irony of the ending is that the evangelist is without evangel--good news. Then what message can he possibly have for Sutter?

The epigraph from Romano Guardini suggests an answer. The modern world is coming to an end, and the postmodern world, with the fogs of secularism lifted, will be 'filled with animosity and danger.' Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another.' The doctor in the case has a more desperate need than his patient. The ending dramatizes the reality. Sutter turns back. Will cannot read the signs or hear the message but he carries the good news of love; he can initiate the call. And Sutter still has some capacity to respond; he waits in his 'fake Ford' as Will comes bounding after him with his 'final question.' His 'I'll think about it' is a major concession.

One reason Sutter turns back in response to Will's expressed need may be that Will finally shows some sign of shouldering the burden of his existence. Perhaps he Will Bear-It. If he leaves off calling the experts of the world 'sir,' there is a possibility he may yet become sovereign. In the end, as the strength 'flowed like oil into his muscles and he ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds' after the waiting Edsel, like Philip after the eunuch in his chariot, he was bearing a kind of good news. Maybe he can survive the hazards of promoting Chevrolets in Poppy's agency and feeding the chickadees with his certain someone. We have to give him an outside chance, for up to now Will's whole life has been a postulate to him, the good news a tune played to the deaf. Perhaps the grace of inwardness will now enter his life and he will hear.

It is a long way from Ground Zero to Santa Fe, and there is no resting place yet. We cannot be sure that Sutter has really turned back, or that Will's hope will not become mired in the 'ferny Episcopal woods' of Alabama. All we know for sure is that the engine is running."

Martin Luschei

*The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise*  
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"In a scene in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* the novel's excessively romantic hero, Miles Coverdale stands meditatively before a window when a dove flies directly toward him, swerves, and then vanishes, as does also 'the slight, fantastic pathos with which he had invested her.' Coverdale readily invests the dove with portent because, after millennia of symbolic associations, both he and Hawthorne's reader agree on the dove's specialness. A dove flies on extended wings in whatever stately mansions of the soul. But now suppose, the postmodern reader is tempted to ask, we were to change before Coverdale's eyes that dove into a pigeon. The embarrassing predicament that would ensue finds its artist in Walker Percy.

Entropy (the pigeon) and news (the dove) are the generating poles of *The Last Gentleman*. The novel dramatizes a contest for the attention of Will Barrett, the title character; he is torn between a stagnant mentality of entropy and an imaginative expectancy of news. Two rival arts of being-here, one essentially entropic or reductive, the other essentially news-making or creative, converge on the prime world-making *materia* of place, language, and death. Out of these three phenomena Percy bodies forth Will's inwardness and tracks his possibilities, and failures, of progress toward receptivity to news. Finally it is within an

imagination of home that Percy advances and unifies the dialectic relationships within place, language, and death. By doing, he seeks to restate man in such a way as to possess him of his potential.

I shall center this essay in a discussion mainly of three emblematic scenes which exemplify the workings of the imagination of home: Will and Kitty's failed love-making in the Central Park 'sniper's den'; Will's visit to Valentine Vaught's piney-woods mission school; and Will's attendance at the deathbed baptism of Jamie Vaught.

Percy begins Will's journey in Central Park at 'ground zero.' The term is well calculated to record the terrifically emptying impact of a historical climax, when the dove of epiphany turns into the pigeon of entropy. The climate of loss is total. Entropy defines itself here as the measure of disorder consequent to postmodern leveling. 'Nothing is *really* real for mankind,' says a commentator on Romano Guardini's *The End of the Modern World*, 'until it can be located, until man can find it in some given place.' The statement is an apt journey text for Will, who is, perhaps, the most explicitly place-conscious character in Western literature. But in the detritus of vanished landmarks and forgotten unities at ground zero, how can anybody or anything be located and thereby realized?

Such a crisis of orientation informs Will's occupation with Kitty one night in a rocky hideaway in Central Park: 'The place was down a ravine choked with dogbane and whortleberry and over a tumble of rocks into a tiny amphitheater, a covert so densely shaded that its floor was as bare as cave's dirt. By day it looked very like the sniper's den on Little Round Top which Mathew Brady photographed six weeks after the battle: the sniper was still there! a skeleton in butternut, his rifle propped peaceably against the rocks.' The redundancy of place-notation--'amphitheater,' 'covert,' 'cave,' 'den,'--is neither idle nor mistaken. In this parcel of localized acreage Will, whose chronic amnesia symbolizes among other things contemporary self-absence, needs to memorize where he is! The accumulating rhetoric of dwelling resounds his effort to persuade himself he is a somebody somewhere rather than a nobody nowhere. In the end he only feigns inhabitation. The impossible transmigration of locale through Brady's camera and Will's memory dramatically exposes Will's substituting a preoccupation with place for any real occupation of space.

Significantly, in the sentence immediately following the above description of the place, Will seems to take his cue from the dead sniper. Preparing to embrace Kitty, he acts out the sniper's relinquishment of his rifle: 'He set the police special in the dust beside him.' At this point in Will's journey the sniper is his ironic occupational model. Like a sniper Will stands outside the space, both inner and outer, that he is meant to control or, at the very least, contest. Unoccupied by himself and well-nigh, like Central Park itself, a public space, he is up for claim by whatever aggressive local, past, or fantasy presence. (The same holds true for Kitty. While Will orients himself toward a historic impossibly transplanted spirit of place, Kitty is a mouthpiece of the *Zeitgeist*, whose leveling presence solicits from her the forms of behavior preached by its myriad quack ontologists and faddish lifestyleists.) At ground zero Will is the nothingness through which we see, as through a ghost, the landscape.

The sniper is one of a cluster of space-control designations--*janitor, engineer, proprietor, Adam, genius loci*--which throughout Will's journey function in a chorus role, vis-a-vis his sources and methods of self-orientation. The repetition of these designations suggests Will's desperate but unfulfilled need to place himself. The term *proprietor*, as Will is sometimes called in reference to his ownership of the two-hundred-acre remnant of the old family plantation in Mississippi, is particularly summational, as is *planter*, a variant form of *proprietor*. Will is 'the strangest of planters, proprietor of two hundred acres of blackberries and canebrakes,' and Percy puns on Will's strenuous efforts to 'plant' himself in the root-resistant debris of leveled landscapes.' Taken socially, *proprietor* betokens Will's last gentlemanship--his honorable upholding of old-fashioned proprieties. As such, *proprietor* achieves succinct biographical descriptiveness: Will is character in search of personality. Turning its traditional connotation of territorial suzerainty completely inward, *proprietor* at once comments ironically on Will's vacancy--he is both literally and psychospatially an absentee landlord--and underlines the necessity of self-sovereignty incumbent upon him.

One cannot be a proprietor without language; for to name something is to claim sovereignty over it and to be unable to name it is to fail to establish sovereignty. Farther along in his journey, during his brief visit to Valentine Vaught's pineywoods mission school in Alabama, Will learns as much. For it is at Val's that

language is introduced as the peculiarly human mode of sovereignty over inner and outer space. With Val in south Alabama, he sees how, as existential model, *proprietor* intersects with and yields to *Adam*, who was first landlord of the creatures in the Garden because he was their namer.

Val's mission settlement in the pines is likened to a 'place of crude and makeshift beginnings on some blasted planet.' This landscape, a vision of the world after the Bomb, logically succeeding ground zero, stages a confrontation between the word and pure space, which asserts language's first and immemorial task: the provision of an order within and a shelter from space. Scene and event at Val's, conversation and underconversation, all espouse the spatio-temporal lordship of language. Language is presented in its highest power: naming. 'When they do suddenly break into the world of language,' Val tells Will of her backward pupils, 'it is something to see. They are like Adam on the First Day. What's that? they ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them and they believe me.... They were not alive and then they are and so they'll believe you.' Naming particularizes language's power of placement. A name gives then named thing 'form and habitation,' that is, a negotiable shape and a conjured setting, wherein it is let free to declare itself. Through naming the namer gains admittance to the going agreements about what is real that we call the truth, and the world begins to assume for him the recognizable features of a place. Naming confers reality not only on the thing named but on the namer; it is both a giving and a receiving of news. Naming is the Eureka bond between a person and the other: that which was lost is found.

As a mode of placement, naming is not only a celebrative act, one, that is, which occasions a reciprocal greeting between namer and named, but a competitive act as well. By his words man competes with the given for room to live. Through language he endeavors to wrest himself free from what around him conduces to inertia. This rivalry between language and thingness, the verbal and the reific, is dramatized early in the novel in a flashback to the summer when Will worked in his father's law firm. There he would overhear his father 'speak with his clients, a murmurous sound compounded of grievance and redress. As the summer wore on, it became more and more difficult to distinguish the words from the sound, until finally they merged with the quarrels of the sparrows under the windowsill and the towering sound of the cicadas that swelled up from the vacant lots and filled the white sky.' The surrounding space breaks down the words spoken in it, converting them into its own mindless din, an ironic Babel of 'towering sound.' Language is naturalized, leaving Will ludicrously a dream and speechless among the beasts, tending his allergy-swollen 'great baboon's nose.' The tone is light enough. But behind the mocking squib of Darwin upside down is a monitory truth: the leveling of language--the disintegration of news into noise--risks the loss of man.

Because of the crucially sensitive political relationship between language and space, Barrett could not establish sovereignty in the 'sniper's den' scene. The trial-and-error naming of the Central Park hideaway--'amphitheater,' 'covert,' 'cave,' and finally 'sniper's den,' as it is thereafter designated--is in its very tentativeness and redundancy a travesty of the Adamic function. Language serves a mnemonic rather than a nominative purpose. The name settled upon, in that it is borrowed from another time and place, approaches the height of namelessness--interchangeability. (For a name, like a place, is a concentration of energy, felt as a presence, within *inimitable* bounds.) Unnamed, the place arrogates to itself decisive powers. 'Setting' overturns its meaning, moving from complement to whole, stage to stage-manager. The place not only lends Will and Kitty a separate audience, but also, one senses, dictates what they say.

Kitty, for whom the hideaway acts as a test space for her sexually liberated consciousness, speaks of her love for the dance; Will, for whom the place acts as a sensorium for his nostalgic and topophilic fantasies, speaks of an ancestor who fell at the siege of Petersburg. But concomitant with the weakening of language's spatial authority has come a decline in its exchange value. Neither party hears the other. Speech degenerates into speeches, dialogue into monologue. In the darkness they have difficulty 'placing' each other even by touch. Will fully clothed, Kitty naked, they lie beside each other full of words and incommunicado. Their failed lovemaking is appropriate because their language carries no spatial-temporal lordship. Unable to possess the place, they are unable to possess themselves or each other. Utterance is reduced to a form of existential absence. Despoiled of their sovereignty, the two remain vacancies in a void.

As a paradigm of postmodern man's increasing inability to take place, the 'sniper's den' scene includes as well the two principal shapers of the entropic landscape: history and science. Under the aegis of these two forces, which converge in Brady's camera, Will and Kitty perform their emptiness. Will labors under the burden of historical superfluosity. With the major exception of Val's place, most of the places in his journey, until he reaches the desert, are already occupied by the dead. The environs of a Bear Mountain ski lodge are dominated by a 'shadowy knoll associated by tradition with Mad Anthony Wayne,' and the gold course adjacent to the Vaughts in Alabama is 'haunted by the goddess Juno and the spirit of the great Bobby Jones.' In the 'sniper's den' scene the dead sniper's solid reality and serene repose contrast markedly with Will's and Kitty's somewhat laborious compilation of evidence that they exist.

An apt gloss on the scene is this reflection of Frederick Brown's: 'Like Beckett's anti-heroes, we inhabit nowhere; only the dead, happily immured, enjoy place.' Also like Beckett's anti-heroes, we are upstaged by these unriddable corpses. Their stubborn vitality, their continuing displacement of our space--'the sniper was still there!'--consigns us to the ghostly realm of the vicarious. In places predominated by another presence one's gestures easily become histrionic, mimetic. (As we have noted, Will's putting down his police special involuntarily mimics the sniper's relinquishment of his rifle; the historically rich corpse momentarily serves Will as a stand-in self.) The 'cave' of man's beginnings has become the 'amphitheater' of the end game, in which the obscurely exhausted players pile parody upon parody, as if trying to sustain the illusion of having something to parody.

Where history preempts individual living space by the sheer redundancy of its overkept accumulations, science usurps it by its attractive methods of acquisition. 'The price of the beauty and the elegance of the method of science = the dispossession of [the] layman.' By ordaining the analytic faculty as the only credible, or sufficiently beautiful, locus of event, science disinherits its users of the world it opens to them. People are specialized out of existence. 'It suited them [Will and Jamie] to lie abed, in the Trav-L-Aire yet also in old Carolina, listening to baseball in Cleveland and reading about set theory and an Englishman holed up in Somerset.' Place, baffled through a trunk line of exotic transmissions, reduces to non-place: Old Carolina, 'a region immersed in place and time,' to a site of 'abstract activity which could take place anywhere else, a map coordinate.' Characteristic of the false art of being-here, the law of change at work is not creative but cooperative. In this scene in the camper, results parody needs by substituting their opposites: mediation is taken over by media, participation by consumption. The place is, in effect, bracketed by history, presuming to be the record of the past, and by science, presuming to be the record of the future, but the occupants are not present. Indeed, the meticulous placing of the two travelers merely begs the question, where are they?

Often such reality-loss in an intolerable intensification of emptiness, can lead to panic. Periodically Will is beset by swarms of unlocalized fears called 'ravenous particles.' At such times he is desolately terrorized by a cessation of being without the release of death. But this scene, which so well demonstrates Max Frisch's shrewd observation, 'technology...the knack of so arranging the world that we don't have to experience it,' is as cozy as it is precisionistic. Plainly Will is lost in admiration for what separates him from experience.

If postmodern man remains enthralled in the idolatry of his own creations or, more precisely, in the *idolatry of his omissions*, can he hear news? In the deathbed baptism scene the dying Jamie Vaught, who has sent for a book on entropy, receives, instead, news of his salvation. But Will hears only words. 'Here,' says Percy of this scene, 'Barrett has eliminated Christianity. That is gone. That is no longer even to be considered... He *misses* it!' Will fails to make the discovery of his fundamental identity upon which the hearing of news depends. He misses what he is. 'Man,' says Percy, 'is alienated by the nature of his being here. He is here as a stranger and as a pilgrim, which is the way alienation is conceived in my books.' In *The Last Gentleman* alienation is rehabilitated from its emotional unrecognizability as a literary theme and established not as the agony of a particular age but as the universal human condition.

The second fall of man, then, is not to recognize his first one. Man perpetuates his forgetfulness of his fundamental identity as a pilgrim stranger--Will's amnesia is representative--by supposing himself an organism adapting to an environment. Postulating for himself the latter's pure ecological connectedness, he, in effect, dissembles his alienation and lives in bad faith. Will is scandalized in the deathbed baptism scene

by the homely, makeshift performance of the rite and the overpowering stench of death. He aroused rote defense of his Episcopalian raising, in order to invoke right appearances and exempt him from the Catholic priest's proceedings, is but the ceremony of his innocence. Even as he involuntarily uses religion to evade religion, so his social embarrassment completely conceals his ontological embarrassment. For, as a pilgrim stranger, Will is born embarrassed, born at a loss.

Suppression of real human identity with a parody of it is the ironic point of another scene, which the deathbed baptism forcefully recalls. There in a New York hospital the occasion is Jamis's temporal rather than eternal birthday. By way of celebration, 'the interns made a drink of laboratory alcohol and frozen grapefruit juice, as if they were all castaways and had to make do with what they had.' With their peculiarly adaptive drink (in the hospital surroundings the 'laboratory alcohol' crudely suggests sterilization and preservation) the celebrants secure themselves as organisms in an environment. Then in a prodigy of imposture they pretend to be what they are--'castaways'! The festivities take on the astonishing obliviousness, the self-perpetuating unreality, of the dancing on the *Titanic*.

Later Will's identity is presented to him, albeit unapprehended by him, in a parody of the Fall. Regaining consciousness, but not memory, on the camper seat after falling and striking his head on a monument during a campus uprising, Will asks, 'Oh, where is this place?... Where am I bound and what is my name?' For all the novel's marvelously sensed catalogue of places, this nowhere (echoing God's question to Adam after the Fall, 'Where art thou?') is *The Last Gentleman's* symbolic center. For the three questions Will asks after his fall evoke, respectively, place, death and home, and language; thus they couch in the riddling manner of oracular utterances, clues to their answers. Man is a die-er and a home-goer, that is, a pilgrim stranger--a wanderer to a fixed and unknown point. He is also, it follows from his homelessness on this earth, a placer and a namer; the latter two corollary identities refer to his ways of taking charge of time and space. Man, in sum, is potentially a *sovereign* pilgrim stranger.

The sovereignty of man, the efficacy of his placing and naming, the most felicitous possible fulfillment of his being here, roots directly in his lived nomination of himself as a pilgrim stranger. Will misplaces himself because he misnames himself. In the 'sniper's den' scene his self-locating gesture is an elaborate falsification of his fundamental identity. In a superimposition of the Gettysburg sniper's den he seeks to convert area into place by installing in the Central Park hideaway a place-presence--the aura of the dead sniper. But a place, we remember, is a concentration of energy, felt as a presence, within inimitable bounds. Like a name, a place is not interchangeable. Indeed, traditionally, a *genius loci* exists coterminous and con-substantial with its place in guarantee of that place's incalculable individuality and absolute immovability. Ostensibly a placer, Will here is really an antiplacer. He contributes to the pervasive leveling of place occurring today, when the sound of the bulldozer is heard even, and especially, in the place-rich South; there the novel's 'loess' and 'moraine'--soils transported from elsewhere--characterize a landscape accumulating toward the extinction of places.

Will's promotion of delocalization in his apparent resistance to it exposes his in-trained environmental view of things. Ultimately the sniper, whom, as we have seen, he briefly mimics, is established as the external stimulus that conditions his behavior. Overlooking his pilgrim strangerhood, Will construes himself as an organism adapting to an environment. Therefore he is hard put in the pitch darkness of the 'sniper's den' literally to 'place' Kitty or, symbolically, himself. Brady's camera symbolizes the encroaching invisibility of himself and his world. 'People in the modern age,' says Percy, 'took photographs by the million: to prove despite their deepest suspicions to the contrary that they were not invisible.'

Postmodern man's mistaken identity is both source and consequence of the contemporary denaturing of language. Will's failure of sovereignty, it is true, follows his misnaming of the 'sniper's den' but such misnaming creates a condition in which naming can hardly be true. Instead, we have false naming--the naming that kills--when the name comes to obscure the thing. Such a fundamental slippage between names and their referents further vitiates language itself. We see how such a double-speaking process works in the language used by Lamar Thigpen. Contemplating with self-consciously heroic complacency the Vaughts' three black servants waving a picturesque farewell from the back steps, Lamar says, "'There's nothing like the old-timey ways!..." even though the purple castle didn't look much like an antebellum mansion and the golf links even less like a cotton plantation.' Despite the radical change of the picture its caption is read the

same. Language is reduced to a parody of its nominative and presentational function. Increasingly, phenomena drift about unnamed. The age itself, the frequent 'nowadays' of the novel, lacks a name; 'postmodern' is a stopgap no-name, which, like the expression, 'the hereafter,' admits only the expectation of chronological sequence and the complete ignorance of our fate. Detached from the things they are meant to articulate, words increasingly appear, in effect, in quotation marks. The word *intimate*, for example, is relegated to precisely this status as a possible adjective for Will and Kitty's contact without communication in the 'sniper's den.'

But identity and sovereignty can be positively interrelated; for man's discovery of his pilgrim strangerhood is the dislocation that makes things visible. With Will, journeying under the post-postlapsarian curse of mediateness, which divides him from his every activity, things are either so far away they are merely picturesque or so close they block themselves out. Minus a countering identity to focus things, Will is fixated or engulfed by them. But the recognition of the otherness of things and persons makes mediation possible, as opposed to mediateness; and with mediation, reciprocity; with reciprocity, love. When Jamie Vaught, confronted by his own death, in a sovereign act of self-choosing, in effect, christens himself a pilgrim stranger, he becomes, in Flannery O'Connor's phrase, 'a realist of distances.' That is why he hears news and Will only words.

Will's journey with terminally ill Jamie Vaught is also a death vigil, a postmodern installment on the theme of 'as I lay dying.' The deathbed baptism scene powerfully enacts the novel's major explicit premise, its working creative principle: 'The certain availability of death is the very condition of recovering oneself.' Thus the intensification in the novel of the memento mori establishes as man's last hope his last extremity. Man is a die-er. Death is a going, a progress. *Homo moriens* is *homo viator*. Implicit in the recognition of the personal reality of death is the demand to be oneself--a pilgrim stranger, a placer, and a namer. For death, the distance between man and home, is the distance between man and the other. While false naming kills, true naming, then, gives life. 'What's that? they ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me.... They were not alive and then they are and so they'll believe you.' Hence Valentine Vaught, when in this way she presents language as naming and naming as news, is portrayed as a death figure: 'a woman dressed in black, feeding entrails to a hawk in a chicken coop. She looked familiar. He eyed her, wondering whether he knew her.'

The faraway model here is Orpheus, who, presiding over the giving of life to things in the form of names, sojourned in the realms of both the dead and the living. The topic at Val's, in short, is incarnation. As Val hand-feeds the chicken hawk 'gut[s],' she refers to her bishop as 'chicken-hearted'; and later Val, whose lovelessness keeps her more a symbol than a fulfillment of mediational and affective powers, admits to hating certain people's 'guts.' 'Mind, in order to bear its witness,' says Gide, 'cannot do without matter. Hence the mystery of the incarnation.' The wit of the primitive punning is wit-ness to that mystery. If the word is man's ever materializing, ever vanishing bond with things, death is the bond between the man-made word and the thing it names. It engenders the numen, the presence, that makes the name represent the thing. Death is the transfiguring factor. It is the defamiliarizing familiar, which brings things forth in their forgotten strangeness. As the deathbed baptism scene shows, the possibility of news depends upon the credibility of death.

But death has, like place and language, borne the brunt of postmodern leveling. It is suppressed by the new prudery which reduces death the ineffable to death the unspeakable. 'Death is as outlawed now as sin used to be,' remarks Sutter Vaught in his journal. Percy's task in the course of the novel is to resurrect the personal reality of death. To this end, in the deathbed baptism scene, as opposed to the 'sniper's den' scene, not the dead but death itself is present. 'There arose to the engineer's [Will's] nostrils first an intimation, like a new presence in the room, a somebody, then a foulness beyond the compass of smell.' The fallen sniper is but one of a number of historic personages evoked in Will's journey that, together with historic events and scientific products and method, are deployed by Will to ornament his vacancy. There death is picturesque. Here death is grotesque. There death serves to lend Will a semblance, however false, of place. Here, working as the modern avatar of the sublime, which Thomas Mann accredits to the grotesque, death is essentially displacing. It becomes, in Heidegger's words, that 'strange and unhomely thing that banishes us once and for all from everything in which we are at home.' Astonishingly, in fact, death, the 'presence,' the 'somebody,' in the room, merges with the '*genius loci* of [the] Western desert,' described as a 'free-floating



sense of geographical transcendence.' Death and home, scene and change of scene, coexist in one unified potentiality. A stereotypical nonplace--the hospital room--becomes in its numenization a place, and place itself is now finally defined as *anywhere one hears news of home*.

Here, squarely under the [pyramid] sign, a kind of transvestiture occurs: the dying man puts on life, the living one puts on, unwittingly, death. Making placelessness radiant, death repeats the ontological imperative of ground zero: out of nothing Will must make something; he must fabricate a plot for his life. But the *materia* at hand, in the form of the makeshift baptismal vessel, the 'clouded plastic' hospital glass, offends Will's well-bred sensibilities: 'But surely it was to be expected that the priest have a kit on some sort.' In a parody of Christ's agony in the garden--'let this cup pass from me'--the glass remains unincarnate, untransfigured by the leap of faith which endows something other with symbolic value. Will sees in the 'clouded plastic glass' only the gratuitous insufficiency of materials which embarrasses his environmentalist expectations. The stubborn extraneousness of the item, its ungreetability by imagination and its immunity to synthesis, witnesses to Will's deafness to the summons to pilgrimage. He is unable to begin his life. In that deficiency he assumes the likeness of death, and in a most appropriate specific form. Reducing the mystery of death to a problem in manners, turning news, as ever, into knowledge, astonishment into inertia, Will, not death, appears at the last as the great leveler.

The gravitational pull of home is felt in *The Last Gentleman* in several ways. The word tolls throughout the book. 'Take me home,' says Kitty at the end of the 'sniper's den' scene. 'I'm taking Jamie *home*,' declares Mr. Vaught in New York. On his deathbed Jamie speaks 'seriously of going home, no, not home but to the Gulf Coast.' Will's continual expulsion from places, even in mid-occupation, as a consequent of his mediateness, begins too in the course of the book to suggest its contrary: a rehearsal for ultimate inhabitation. His very flight, that is, begins in a kind of palimpsest effect, characteristic of the novel's most important mode of disclosure, to reveal the possibility of pilgrimage. Finally, the increasing aerialization and celestialization of imagery in the novel--the sky in the desert is 'empty map space'--suggest the belief that, in Mircea Eliade's words, 'man desires to have his abode in a space opening upward.' For the home Will ultimately seeks is not in his hometown of Ithaca, Mississippi, but in heaven, and the father he ultimately seeks is no earthly one but the Father of Souls. Man's only home on earth is *the road home*. It is not a state, some plugged-in locus *amoenus*, but a status--that of a sovereign pilgrim stranger. The finally relevant question is never, where is man? but, what is man? And the finally relevant answer is not an ecology of life but a theology of being.

To this end, Will's blind, unwitting search for home is at once bound up in and set off by Percy's own quest in the novel for authority. As a Christian existentialist, Percy has communications problems that extend beyond the deadening of responses consequent to stimulus flooding and psychic overloads. His outreach as a religious writer is peculiarly crippled by contemporary exhaustion of charismatic and prophetic properties, which are reflected, as we have seen, in the leveling of place, language, and death. In addition, Christian notions of 'sin' and 'grace' are as remote today as alchemy or the four humors. Orthodox religious counters are simply dead issue--nonnegotiable. Will, the title character, upon whom the novel is lost--he 'misses it'--is the putative reader. Percy's altogether formidable task, as it was Flannery O'Connor's, is to make God real in His absence. God must be invoked without being named.

Necessarily eschewing appeal to vestiges of man's old religious consciousness, which would reinforce spiritual indifference and make dismissal irresistible, Percy endeavors to become postmodern man's new, lost memory. To keep the religious vision in a time of trouble, to echo William Blake, Percy works with the 'religious' in 'its root sense as signifying a radical *bond*...which connects man with reality--or the failure of such a bond--and so confers meaning to his life--or the absence of meaning.' Will's repeatedly missed appointments with his fundamental identity at once express directly the accelerating contemporary appetite for instant, disposable creation and obliquely an objectless, irreligious dream of God. Percy's authorial role is as decreative as it is re-creative. If man realizes his loss, perhaps he will recognize it. If he forgets being, perhaps he will discover it firsthand. Like O'Connor with her sacred blasphemies, Percy works through indirection. Harboring perhaps equal malice toward man's organized ignorance of his own nature, Percy seeks his authority in scandal.

But how to make scandalous the scandal of contemporary loss? The scarcity of scandal--any scandal--is one of the embarrassments of present-day dearth. In his nostalgia for sin and longing for apocalypse, Sutter Vaught, the novel's surrogate author, embodies Percy's need to create scandal. To this end, Percy, like Sutter, woos death. Death in the novel, as demonstrated by its progress out of the picturesque into the grotesque, is a symbol always being overtaken by reality. Death is conceived as at once the symbol and the scandal--that is, the scandalization--of man's existential absence, his missing of himself. The chaos without freedom; the end without revelation, consequent to postmodern leveling; man's outliving of himself by confusing the Bomb and the Second Coming, the survival of a body and the salvation of a soul; the reduction of love to an impersonal narcissistic attraction of emptiness for emptiness: these states Percy scandalizes by experiencing them through the novel's recollective consciousness as the sensations of a dead world body.

Intensifying its presidium over the novel's successive precincts, until it emerges in the deathbed baptism scene as a 'presence,' a 'somebody,' in the room, death is not only a scandalmonger, it is also the most visible manifestation of the author's Muse. 'The consciousness requires a presence,' says Percy, 'in order that a literature be conceived between them.' Like Yeats's antiself, death is the necessary adversary that forces the conceiving self to exceed itself. In this excess, of which scandal is but one specific form, Percy finally bases his claim to authority. His intimacy with death is the exhibited necessity of his freedom. In the character-action of the novel his artist-Muse relationship with death is subsumed in a host-guest relationship, which is all-important to the novel's shaping intentions. The politics of this relationship impose a need for ritual, and not (as Will thinks in his concern over the seemliness of the baptismal utensil) for technique. The ritual base requisite for alluding to being--our only way of expressing it--and for the reinstatement of spiritual quest is wrought in *The Last Gentleman* under the tutelary genius of death.

In his choice of a home for Will, where, presumably, he and Kitty will live after they are married, Percy passes on to Will his own exacting problem of rehabilitating leveled materials. There the trinity of resources--place, language, and death--exist challengingly in a bathetically reduced condition. The home features a 'ferny dell' and a 'plashy brook' (place), a 'bridge' (language), as its former seafaring owner, Cap'n Andy, has nicknamed the ridge overlooking a plain, and, circling above, 'buzzards and crows' (death). Cap'n Andy, we learn, 'bored himself to death.' He succumbed, that is, in Saul Bellow's definition of boredom, to the 'pain caused by unused powers, the pain of wasted possibilities or talents...accompanied by expectations of the optimum utilization of capacities.' Like Will, by and large, especially in the deathbed baptism scene, Cap'n Andy embodies the definition of entropy as energy unavailable for work during a natural process. Cap'n Andy is a museum exhibit of leveled human resources. We are back at ground zero.

But the carefully wrought underwork of the novel, articulating the opposed imagination of news, prepares us to find latent in ground zero a possibility of the sacred center (hence the location of the former in Central Park). There Will might successfully return place, language, and death to their wonted inexhaustibility. He might successfully hold them in regenerative unity (acting out the novel's most teasing phrase--'a perfect pyramid, shedding itself.' If so, then the pigeon of entropy turns before our eyes into the dove of epiphany. With its 'best view on the ridge,' its open upward accesses, the place is built for the reception of news. The 'bridge' bespeaks language's mediational powers and the bonding strength of the namer's faith. The circling 'buzzards and crows' picture Will's gyration outward in search of his center, his true home, and symbolize the companioning ministry of death that instructs him in his alienation. This, together with the analogue of the place as a ship (it has a 'fo'c's'le' too) and with Cap'n Andy's rank of command, suggests the continuous activation of Will's status as a sovereign pilgrim stranger. Seen thus, the place is the road home: a portable capability of self-renewal, a dynamic repose in the insufficiency of the given.

In this way the place sums up the two dominant sensations of the novel: danger and hope. The leveling of the world may become a demonic end in itself. Perversity will be felt as originality, problems as solutions, and loss, intensified, as gain. On the other hand, leveling may proceed finally to de-create man's falsified identity as a tourist and a consumer and to reveal his true identity as a pilgrim and a participant. The astonishing failure of the things in which man has misplaced himself may lead to his self-recovery. The immaculate solitudes of the desert, where we leave Will, are either the verge of extinction or the preliminary to communion. The novel is a network of uncompleted arrangements, a series of

transformations held firmly, almost intolerably, in reserve. Yet the novel's very open-endedness is, in contrast to the closed system of an end game, a gesture of hope. And Will, we note, is at the conclusion of the novel less the fugitive of history (he no longer tries to avert Confederate defeats) and less the prisoner of science (he has set aside his telescope). His last word in the novel, 'Wait,' is the watchword of the author himself. It betokens we can hope, an orientation at once chastened, almost suppliant, and alert, toward news. Does it suggest a nascent vulnerability to the grace to continue? Perhaps the novel is, at the end, best described as a 'balance of stone--with gestures to grow'."

Richard Pindell

"Toward Home: Place, Language, and Death in *The Last Gentleman*"

*The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*

ed. Panthea Reid Broughton

(Louisiana State 1979) 50-68

"In 'The Man on the Train,' Walker Percy has evoked 'the triple alliance' that fiction can establish between reader, character, and author. The experimental 'triple alliance' mirrors, on a different scale, the triadic nature of language which Walker Percy has investigated in several of his linguistic essays. But it is also reflected within the text in the trinity of narrator, narration, and narratee. Since this trinity is the basic structure of narrative, as it is of discourse, obviously only wide ranging variations of the relations among the three elements distinguish different kinds of narrative. In a given story the fundamental set of relations undergoes changes as the narrator's distance to his subject and/or to his narratee increases or diminishes. The narrative triangle is never a static form, though it may be more or less dynamic. Examination of the *shifts in narrational relations is therefore as important to the understanding of a novel as content analysis*. [Postmodernist separation of form from content. Italics added] Walker Percy's nonfictional work provides a special incentive to study his fiction in this light. I have analyzed elsewhere the situation of discourse in *The Moviegoer*. Here I propose to explore *The Last Gentleman*. Within the limited scope of this essay, however, it is impossible to chart all the shifts in the narrational structure, and I shall merely take a few soundings to establish some of the narrator's positions in that structure.

A comparison of the beginning and ending of *The Last Gentleman* throws light on the narrator's journey on the narrational map. Although Kierkegaard and Guardini stand double guard at the gates, the epigraphs of *The Last Gentleman* need not scare away the reader; the domain within, as one enters it, seems reassuring: 'One fine day in early summer a young man lay thinking in Central Park. However wary modern fiction may have made us, we feel reasonably confident that the story will tell us who the young man is, what he is doing in Central Park, and why the fine summer day is of special importance. Is not all this promised us in the familiar phrasing and tone, the very shibboleth of the storyteller? Nor do the following paragraphs, although they modify the almost legendary lilt of the first sentence with more matter-of-fact descriptions, disappoint our expectations: they provide and withhold information about the young man in the most satisfying manner, while showing that the knowledgeable narrator is firmly in control: 'In the course of then next five minutes the young man was to witness by chance an insignificant, though rather curious happening. It was the telescope that became the instrument of a bit of accidental eavesdropping. As a consequence of a chance event the rest of his life was to be changed.' Yes...chance, change, and destiny...all the ingredients of a good traditional narrative.

However, the expectations aroused by the first chapter do not simply concern the content of the story but its narrational configuration as well. Clearly, the vague chronological specification, which sets the subject at some undefined and indefinable temporal remove from the narrator and the narratee. would have been in keeping with the novel's two alternative titles, *The Fallout* and *Ground Zero*. Moreover 'one day' presupposes an indeterminate series of other days and the indefinite article 'a young man' a background of human beings from which a selection has been made, presumably because of its insignificance. The beginning of *The Last Gentleman*, unlike those of *The Moviegoer* and *Love in the Ruins*, implies that the narrative discourse is a segment of an infinite narration. It suggests the remote, abstractive attitude of the narrator and the exemplarity of the particular story which is about to be told.

But who is going to tell this story? With the first sentence, some hesitation is still possible since a first-person narrator might yet make his appearance as a witness to the scene. But the rest of the page confirms the impression suggested in the opening line that we are reading a third-person narration. If the narrator is

undramatized he is by no means absent. He first intervenes to evince previous knowledge of the 'next five minutes' and 'the rest of [the character's] life. He stresses the articulation between the near and the far future by explaining that the telescope is to be the instrument of the change. The mention of the telescope, the function of which is to transform the insignificant into the fateful, can be heard as a statement of fact. But it can also be heard metaphorically, since an optical instrument turns into a means of eavesdropping.

The narrator turns to the subject of the announced transformation: 'He was an unusual young man. But perhaps nowadays it is not so unusual. What distinguished him anyhow was this: he had to know everything before he could do anything. For example, he had to know what other people's infirmities were before he could get on a footing with them.' The comment, 'he was an unusual young man,' at once endows the character with his first explicit psychological feature, and gives the extraordinary events about to be told a semblance of realistic motivation, the common-sense assumption being that unusual things happen to unusual people. But at this point the narrator pauses. Can he really depend on such a norm? The idea that the allocutor may differ from his notion of the usual clearly impels the narrator to add an oddly concessive clause ('What distinguished him anyhow was this...') and to produce an 'example,' reasserting his right to define the young man. Phrases like *anyhow* and *for example* also show a narrator didactically presenting his information for maximum discursive effect, while the present tenses and a number of deictics call attention to the act of narration. Despite the lack of a grammatical *I* the situation created is that of discourse, or what Benveniste calls *recit*, an utterance assuming a speaker and a hearer and in the speaker the intention of influencing the other in some way. From the first page of the novel it is clear that the set of relations established designates rather than effaces its triangularity. However unspecified the locus of the narration, the locutor outlines a subject for the benefit of an allocutor. The three elements are held in balance. One might diagram the narrative configuration as an equilateral triangle...

Whatever our personal interpretation of the novel, *The Last Gentleman* impels us not only to participate in the construction of its meaning but to do some thinking of our own about language, about the relationship between words and things and people and being. In *The Moviegoer* the narrator-protagonist was absorbed in the wonder of naming. In *The Last Gentleman* this activity is one which the narration, largely through the manipulation of the narrative triangle, demands from the implied audience. Walker Percy's concern with 'Naming and Being' may therefore be less evident in his second novel; but it is no less profound."

Simone Vauthier  
"Narrative Triangulation in *The Last Gentleman*"  
*The Art of Walker Percy* (1979) 69-72, 95

"In everything he writes Walker Percy protests against doubleness. In 'A Theory of Language,' for example, Percy criticizes the linguists for perpetuating a 'somewhat decrepit mind-body dualism'; in 'Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method' he insists that scientists must instead 'forgo the luxury of a bisected reality.' And yet that very dualism for which he chides linguists and scientists seems to be a habit of mind with Walker Percy. That is, even as Percy protests against dualism, he presents in his fiction alternatives which tend to be either/or choices: either body or mind, bestialism or angelism, immanence or transcendence.

Fiction of course depicts the human experience; it cannot be faulted for being amoral or violent or dualistic if the world it grows out of is so. Nevertheless, I wonder if the doubleness Walker Percy presents and protests may not to some extent be a projection from within himself. If so, Percy's dualistic conceptualizing may buttress the ideational structure, but it also undermines the imaginative fullness of his fiction.

Percy's conception of a bisected reality informs *The Last Gentleman*. Structuring the book around a series of foils, Percy exemplifies the split between the body and the mind in the way he juxtaposes the South and the North; in Will Barrett's books of 'great particularity'--as opposed to Jamie Vaught's books 'great abstractness'; in Barrett's two guides for finding Sutter and Jamie--the reassuring Esso map 'with its intersecting lines and tiny airplanes and crossed daggers marking battlefields' and Sutter's difficult and disturbingly abstruse casebook; in Barrett's memories of a black man's 'working' Mr. Ed Barrett for money, while Mr. Barrett spoke abstractly of the 'cheapness of good intentions and the rarity of good character';

and in the way Percy foils such minor characters as the resident and the priest who preside at Jamie's deathbed and such major characters as Val and Sutter.

Characterization as a whole is structured in terms of the mind/body split; thus the minor characters tend to exemplify bestialism, while the major characters are afflicted with angelism. In *The Last Gentleman* the minor characters are remarkably alike in their self-satisfaction, adjustment, insensitivity, and blindness. Mr. Vaught who confronts death by side-stepping, joking, and buying presents exemplifies this type; for Poppy Vaught 'did not know what he did not know.' The students at the university too, who seem to Will remarkably 'at-one with themselves,' are living life in its lowest common denominator.' The fraternity brothers that Son Thigpen brings to the Vaught's house are, for example, completely set 'for the next fifty years in the actuality of themselves and their own good names. They knew what they were, how things were and how things should be.' They are comfortable in themselves, well-adjusted, because they have no other idea of what else life should hold; thus they coincide with an entirely finite mold.

Of the fraternity brothers, Will Barrett asks, 'why ain't I like them, easy and actual?' He is not because he is tortured by ideals and mental constructs which intervene between himself and his world. Suffering from angelism or excessive abstraction, Will is better at abstract games and systems than at living. He has to 'know everything' before he can 'do anything.' Thus an education only 'made matters worse' for him because it had 'nothing whatever to do with life.' It guaranteed his existence in a condition colloquially but aptly described as 'out of it.' The minor characters tend to be 'in it' and adjusted while the protagonist is 'out of it' and alienated; the absolute dichotomy between them indicates how much Percy characterizes, structures, and conceptualizes in terms of that very decrepit and shop-worn split he deprecates.

But Percy's dependence upon that split is most explicitly exemplified in *The Last Gentleman* in matters sexual. One day Will Barrett longs for 'carnal knowledge, the next for perfect angelic knowledge'; one day he is 'American and horny'--the next he is 'English and eavesdropper.' Kitty Vaught offers to be either whore or lady for Will, and Will begs Sutter to tell him to be unchaste or chaste, to fornicate or not to fornicate, but to tell him one or the other.

To Barrett, the Cartesian split is exemplified in one overwhelming question: to be a gentleman or a fornicator. For Will the matter is not simple. With his great-grandfather, being a gentleman was not a matter of breeding but of willingness to act on principle; that ancestor 'knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought.' But successive generations of Barretts have become less and less sure of what is right. Mr. Ed Barrett was actually 'killed by his own irony and sadness and by the strain of living out an ordinary day in a perfect dance of honor.' For Mr. Ed, honor had become a dance, an artificial pattern, an obligatory reenactment of the code of *gentillesse* which was woefully anachronistic for his times. In Will's age, moreover, that code is not only anachronistic, it is ludicrous. It provokes Will to challenge another Princeton student for failing to exchange 'hellos' or polite 'what says'; and it compels him to blow up a Union Army plaque--a perfect ineffective gesture since 'no one ever knew what had been blown up.'

Clearly the causes which demand that a gentleman act with honor are not so plentiful or clear-cut anymore. There are no more noble wars; Will is drafted for an apparently meaningless and purposeless two-year hitch in the army. The one question Will can answer affirmatively about his father is that he was a gentleman, for in Mr. Ed's day at least honor meant something. But in Will's own time, being a gentleman has been reduced to maintaining the proprieties around women. Will considers himself 'bound south as a gentleman' and therefore chastizes himself for behaving like 'white trash' with Forney Aiken's daughter.

Will makes a stilted apology, but 'what saved him in the end was not only [his] southern chivalry but [her] Yankee good sense.' The word *saved* there is a peculiar one. We are reminded of the *conversation* (I use the word loosely) that Will has with Kitty about dances. Kitty asks Will to take her to a dance, tells him that her grandmother composed the official ATO waltz, and says she loves to dance. Will, all the while, is telling how the Confederate officers continued to go to dances even during the worst of the fighting. But to Will the really curious aspect of the tale is that during the Civil War his ancestor 'did not feel himself under the necessity, almost moral, of making love.'

Will sees love-making as obligatory in a permissive society, thus he is fascinated by a time when honor 'saved' a man from a sexual encounter with a lady before marriage. That fascination may indicate sexual insecurity; more probably, however, it is a manifestation of moral insecurity. Will's ancestors knew right from wrong and could act accordingly. Morality was not necessarily and exclusively sexual, but nevertheless their sexual code serves as an apt analogue for the rigidity of their moral code. And similarly, twentieth-century sexual ambiguity is a fitting emblem for contemporary moral ambiguity. Because sexual and moral absolutes have been submerged in a flood of relativism, Will Barrett feels cast adrift. Thus he wishes to find a mooring somehow with someone who will tell him unequivocally what to do.

He cannot coerce Sutter into doing so, and so he takes recourse in the dictates of a code from simpler times. Will determines 'I shall court [Kitty] henceforth in the old style.' Thus he 'aimed to take Kitty to a proper dance, pay her court, not mess around.' But during the entire course of the novel Will neither takes Kitty dancing as a gentleman might nor messes around as a fornicator would. He feels frustrated and wonders if being a gentleman in this day and age causes his terrible sense of uneasiness and dislocation. He asks Sutter 'whether a nervous condition could be caused by not having sexual intercourse.' Sutter knows of course that Will is asking permission to break the gentleman's code for reasons of health, and Sutter refuses to play that game. Instead he says 'Fornicate if you want to and enjoy yourself but don't come looking to me for a merit badge certifying you as a Christian or a gentleman or whatever it is you cleave by.'

Will wishes to cleave to a concept of himself as a gentleman. Yet being the last gentleman (Percy did intend that the title refer to Will) makes Will miserable because it necessitates his being chaste in an age when chastity seems to be a dead issue. Thus though all Percy's protagonists find their experiences 'evacuated,' Will is more 'out of it' than the others. Percy's other protagonists try out a variety of methods for putting themselves back in touch with the physical world. But because he sees the malaise chiefly in terms of sexual deprivation, Will imagines that he may regain the world only by losing his virginity; yet remaining a gentleman is necessary to his self-esteem. So Will is in a double-bind, for to him *gentleman* and *fornicator* are mutually exclusive terms.

Curiously, Will blushes over 'the word "fornicate." In Sutter's mouth it seemed somehow more shameful than the four-letter word.' The word is shameful to Will because it conjures up memories of his father whose epithet for all lower class whites was *fornicators*. Mr. Ed Barrett in fact felt that because modern-day sons of gentlemen were now fornicators, all principles were dead. Just before committing suicide, Mr. Barrett said to his son: 'Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hatred us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay [and confront me]? They know they don't have to kill me.' In other words, the southern aristocracy has betrayed its own principles so that there is no longer any need for confrontation between lower- and upper-class whites.

For a man whose own father took him to a whorehouse at the age of sixteen, this logic is rather peculiar. It seems, in fact, that to Mr. Ed whoring was not fornicating. He could condone open sexuality among blacks; he told Will that 'They [blacks] fornicate and the one who fornicates best is the preacher'; but he was shocked by white people who 'fornicate too and in public and expect *them* back yonder [the blacks] somehow not to notice. Then they expect their women to be respected.' Mr. Barrett's fear was that the black man and the white man were each going to 'pick up the worst of the other and lose the best of himself.' He went on to instruct Will to be like neither group--neither like a black--'a fornicator and not caring' nor like a middle class white--'a 'fornicator and hypocrite.' Thus Mr. Barrett seems to have told Will that sex should not be abused by either promiscuity or hypocrisy.

Yet Mr. Ed's instructions to Will on sexual matters were not so well reasoned. He spoke neither of commitment nor of intimacy. What he did tell Will was only, 'Go to whores if you have to, but always remember the difference. Don't treat a lady like a whore or a whore like a lady.' The whole question of human sexuality and morality was distilled for Mr. Ed into a matter of social distinction. The gentleman could 'take his pleasure' (an old-fashioned phrase Will uses when he realizes that he almost seduced or was seduced by Kitty in Central Park) with a whore, but his women were to be respected. Mr. Ed was a great believer in character, but his message to his son, as Will recalls it, seemed to define morality in terms of propriety, and propriety in terms of distinguishing between a lady and a whore.

No wonder Will sees his choices in either/or terms: gentleman or white trash, chivalry or fornication. Sutter cannot figure out what Will wants of him, but he says, I suspect it is one of two things. You either want me to tell you to fornicate or not to fornicate, but for the life of me I can't tell which it is.' Will replies by begging Sutter 'Tell me to be chaste and I will do it. Yes! I will do it easily!... All you have to do is tell me.' But Sutter will not tell him, and Will instead implores 'Then tell me not to be chaste.' Will would adopt either of the two absolutely opposed courses of action if only a parent figure would dictate the course for him. Certainly his desire to be told what to do stems from personal insecurity and the insecurities of the age; yet his Manichean opposition is clearly the special legacy of his father.

Will's father was an idealist. He liked to listen to the sad old Brahms records and walk under the live oaks at night and speak to strangers 'of the good life and the loneliness of the galaxies.' For him whoring was apparently an acceptable means for reclaiming the lost world, but not an especially important one. Instead Mr. Ed Barrett felt that action as an application of high principles was the way to reenter the world. Thus he told Will of the Klu Kluxers 'I'm going to run them out of town, son, every last miserable son of a bitch.' But when he discovered that the Klan was not interested in a showdown with him, that the issues were obsolete, Mr. Barrett took a double-barrel twelve-gauge shotgun and fitted its muzzle 'into the notch of his breastbone' and pulled both triggers.

Mr. Ed Barrett assumed that putting principles into action was the means for reclaiming a lost world. He committed suicide because his life could be redeemed only by a set of principles which, he discovered, were no longer in the world. The suicide then was for him a logical extension of the recognition that he and all he lived for were 'out of it.'

Sutter Vaught too attempted suicide--and for much the same reason, though as a scientist Sutter's problem was not idealism but objectivity. Nevertheless, both the idealist and the objectivist suffer what Percy in *The Moviegoer* calls 'the pain of loss.' The price modern man pays, according to Sutter, for 'the beauty and elegance of the method of science' is dispossession. Man has lost touch with the world he lives in, and Sutter can see no means for reclaiming that world except lewdness. Sutter considers lewdness to be the 'sole portal of reentry into [a] world demoted to immanence; reentry into immanence [can occur only] via orgasm.' Thus Sutter insists that 'lewdness itself is a kind of sacrament' because through sex the transcendent becomes immanent. But of course the union of transcendence and immanence through orgasm does not last and 'post-orgasmic transcendence [is] 7 devils worse than' the original abstracted state. Thus pre-orgasmic suicide is considered 'as consequence of the spirit of abstraction and of transcendence.' Sutter Vaught has written up these theories in a scientific article on post-orgasmic suicides which result from 'The Failure of Coitus as a Mode of Reentry into the Sphere of Immanence from the Sphere of Transcendence.'

Sutter seems to have lived his own life under the assumption that 'fornication is the sole channel to the real.' Thus his method for overcoming depression and abstraction has been to pick up a strange woman and take her to bed with him. That method has been singularly ineffective. Thus, finding himself even more depressed after one such affair, Sutter concluded that '*There is no reentry from the orbit of transcendence,*' and made an abortive suicide attempt. Perhaps sex fails to salvage Sutter not only because it is short-lived but also because for Sutter it is un-lived. That is, Sutter never fully participates in the life of the body. Instead he isolates genital sexuality from the entire complex of human relations and expects it to be sufficient to ground his abstracted state. He too then, like other characters in *The Last Gentleman*, treats sex as an abstraction.

The way sex can become an abstraction is most clearly exemplified by a book by Mort Prince which Will Barrett vaguely remembers reading. As he recalls it, Prince's *The Farther Journey* was 'a novel about a writer who lives in Connecticut and enters into a sexual relationship with a housewife next door, not as a conventional adultery, for he was not even attracted to her, but rather as the exercise of that last and inalienable possession of the individual in a sick society, freedom.' Clearly for that writer, sex was an idea; it was not even physical. It may only have been authorial wish-fulfillment, for Mort Prince clearly is not the 'mighty fornicator' his heroes are.

Kitty too is an inveterate abstractionist. She has to aim to be herself, and Barrett does not know how to tell her just to be herself. In Central Park, she takes off all her clothes and throws herself into Barrett's arms

not because she loves him or desires him but to conduct 'a little experiment by Kitty for the benefit of Kitty.' She wants to prove that there is 'nothing wrong' with her. That episode is aborted ostensibly because Kitty gets sick from hikuli-tea; but Barrett is disconcerted enough to vow to 'court her henceforth in the old style.' When she kisses him he figures out what is wrong: 'is this right, she as good as asked.' She takes 'every care to do the right wrong thing. There were even echoes of a third person: what, you worry about the boys as good a figure as you have, etc. So he was the boy and she was doing her best to do what a girl does. He sighed.'

Kitty cannot show her own feelings, whatever they are, because she is busy impersonating, trying to do the 'right wrong thing.' She has abstracted both the method of love-making and the substance: 'Love, she like him, was obliged to see as a naked garden of stamens and pistils.' As a modern woman, she feels obliged to see love as a matter of sex alone. Sex then for Kitty is an abstraction, as it is for Rita. According to Sutter, Rita made sex and exercise in technique. They became 'geniuses of the orgasm' and she was fond of publicly declaring that the two of them were 'good in bed.' For Rita, sex seems unrelated to privacy or intimacy--as we see when she suggests that Will and Jamie find themselves a 'couple of chicks.'

Rita's methodological and therapeutic approach to sex scandalizes Sutter who wants science and sex utterly dissociated. But Sutter, though he is 'overtly heterosexual and overtly lewd,' is also an abstractionist about sex. Sutter is an abstractionist in two ways. First he makes sex into theory--describing himself as a 'sincere, humble, and even moral pornographer'; and second, he abstracts from complex and involved human relations. And so sexuality in his terms cannot possibly satisfy all that he demands. Sutter tried to compensate by attempting to intensify the touch of flesh--through the use of games, an extra woman, or pornographic pictures. Sutter speculates that 'genital sexuality = twice "real" because it is 'touch, therefore physical, therefore "real",' and again because scientific theory certifies it as the 'substrata of all other relations.' But apparently it is not real enough for Sutter.

Mr. Ed Barrett and Dr. Sutter Vaught are juxtaposed against each other, yet beneath their obvious dissimilarities they are very much alike. Both suffer from the malaise of abstraction, though Mr. Barrett's problem is transcendent idealism while Sutter's is transcendent objectivity. Mr. Barrett proposes principled action; Sutter proposes genital sexuality as a means of reentering the world. Both means fail. And both men attempt suicide. Mr. Barrett's southern version of the stoic Greco-Roman heritage (indicated by the name Ithaca) and Sutter's desacralizing science offer neither men any continuingly viable ways to live their lives.

The ending of *The Last Gentleman* suggests that the church offers human beings a viable way to live in this world without being consumed by it. Because the pain of dying prevents abstraction, Jamie can *experience* the truths of religion for the first time. Conversion for his sister Valentine Vaught was likewise an experiential breakthrough. Since she was raised in a perfunctory sort of Alabama Protestantism, Roman Catholicism came to Val like news from across the seas and she 'Believed it all, the whole business.' Yet she did not become spiritual. Her mission in south Alabama may look like a lunar installation, but it is very much a part of this ordinary dull world, as are both representatives of the church in this novel. Father Boomer, with his thick muscular body, healthy skin, and 'big ruddy American league paws,' looks 'more like a baseball umpire' than a priest. And Val, who does not wear a 'proper habit but a black skirt and blouse and a little cap-and-veil business,' remains a somewhat plumpish bad-complexioned potato-fed Vaught. Will's encounter at the mission with the rather fleshy Val feeding entrails to a hawk is calculated to be totally physical, even repugnantly so.

Paradoxically, in Walker Percy's world, the representatives of science are emaciated and other-worldly while the spokesmen for religion are fully-fleshed and this-worldly. That is because they know the secret of living in this world while the abstracted scientist does not. Among the religious, accepting this world is made possible by the knowledge that man is a wayfarer whose real home is elsewhere. Knowing that this life is not his only life gives man the option of savoring experience--just as a castaway temporarily marooned on an island would delight in the serendipitous experience of life there. Thus religion, with its news that man is a wayfarer, puts human beings in touch with the earth and the body.

That perspective of course is not Sutter Vaught's. In his notebook Sutter replies to Val: 'Let us say that you were right: that man is a wayfarer (*i.e.*, not a transcending being nor immanent being but a wayfarer)



who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him (*i.e.*, his salvation) and which he had better attend to.' Then Sutter continues to reason that even knowing that he is a wayfarer and that news of ultimate importance is offered to him, a man like Will Barrett will not be affected. According to Sutter, he would 'receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better.' In other words, Will is so hopelessly abstracted that he could not experience the immediacy even of news of his own salvation.

Nevertheless, being a wayfarer is Walker Percy's metaphor for man's condition on this earth. That image should mend the existential rupture and make enjoyment of the immediacy of time and place possible. For when human beings see the world afresh, as the castaway does when he finds himself washed ashore and as Will Barrett does when he recovers from a siege of amnesia, they can delight in it.

For Walker Percy the special charm of being a wayfarer, though, seems to be a matter of being neither one nor the other. For that situation the best analogue in the book is the Trav-L-Aire which is 'in the world yet not of the world, sampling the particularities of place yet cabined off from the sadness of place.' Like the camper, the wayfarer is in yet not of the world. He has sovereignty because he can experience the world afresh, yet he can listen to news of his salvation because he knows that there is another world beyond this one.

But the image of man as wayfarer, minus the religious trappings, partakes of the same polarized reality that obsessed Sutter Vaught. Sutter in fact writes to Val that there are no differences between the two of them except that she believes that life can come from the Eucharist, and he does not know where it comes from. Val's ideal image of man is the wayfarer; Sutter's is the fornicating scientist. He asks 'what is better than the beauty and exaltation of the practice of transcendence (science and art) and of the delectation of immanence, the beauty and exaltation of lewd love?' The fornicating scientist can live both outside and inside the actual world, be both transcendent and immanent. Like the wayfarer he is both out of and in the world. In the essay 'The Delta Factor' Walker Percy pictures one such scientist; he is an astronomer who works on Mount Palomar during the night and during the day comes down into town to live like other humans. Percy calls him 'one of the lucky ones' and explains 'His is the best of both worlds: He theorizes and satisfies his need. He is like one of the old gods who lived above the earth but took their pleasure from the maids of the earth.'

That image of a 'lucky' man is yet another example of dualistic conceptualizing. For there again, as with Mr. Barrett's gentleman of action, Sutter's fornicating scientist, and Val's wayfarer, a split between the mind and the body is presupposed. That split for Will is the choice between being either a gentleman or a fornicator. But Will must somehow himself 'forgo the luxury of a bisected reality' and get the mind and the body, logos and eros into harmony with each other. In *The Last Gentleman* there are two instances when that split is transcended. Each instance is noetic and ineffable. Each is a hierophany, what Mircea Eliade defines as an 'irruption of the sacred.' One of course is the baptismal scene at the end of the novel. Apparently Jamie is ready to accept the truths of religion because he is no longer an abstracted theoretician. Instead, he is gripped by the 'dread ultimate rot' of his own body.

Then amidst the scandalous stench from his own bowels, while a Holsum bread truck (suggesting the life-giving body of Christ) passes outside, something transcendent occurs. Will and Jamie communicate without words and so, apparently, do Jamie and God. Though he may seem like a 'storekeeper ever his counter,' Father Boomer serves as a messenger of Truth. And Will Barrett, though he believes nothing himself, becomes an agent of Jamie's belief. Apparently the tap water in the clouded plastic glass mysteriously receives the blessing of the Baptismal Water. Performed during the Easter Vigil, the prayer consecrating the water begins: 'May He by a secret mixture of His divine power render this water fruitful for the regeneration of men.' Will does not understand the 'secret mixture' in the mundane glass, nor does he know exactly what happened in the hospital room, but he does know that something mysterious occurred. Even Sutter makes some sort of tacit acknowledgement of mystery. But neither of them has directly experienced the hierophany. That they felt it happening to Jamie is, however, acknowledgement that the mystery was actual.

For Will himself, however, the first-hand experience of mystery occurs only once in the book. It is when he returns home and touches 'the sibilant corky bark of the water oak' and relives for apparently the first time the events just preceding his father's suicide. Here is how Percy juxtaposes the touch of the tree and Will's recognition: 'Again his hand went forth, knowing where it was, though he could not see, and touched the tiny iron horsehead of the hitching post, traced the cold metal down to the place where the oak had grown round it in an elephant lip. His fingertips touched the warm finny whispering bark....' Years before, Will had implored his father: 'Wait,' but Mr. Barrett only paused before going in to get the shotgun. Years later, as Will touches the interface between the bark and the iron, he says *wait* again to himself. For he seems to have discovered something that his father had missed.

The image is highly ambiguous, but it seems to me that in touching the iron and bark Will experiences a union of transcendence and immanence which his father did not see as a possibility. Mr. Barrett missed the gratuity of the ordinary world and looked for meaning only above and beyond this world. He lived for abstract ideals whose associations with the commonplace had been severed. But Will feels how the old iron hitching post, redolent of the old days of southern gentlemen, is half covered over by warm bark and knows without words that the two need not be dissociated. Percy designed the passage as an answer to the epiphany of matter Sartre presents in *La Nausee*. For Will, as for Roquentin, the experience serves to ground him in the world of matter. And it further reinforces his distrust of his father's abstractions. That distrust manifests itself most explicitly, just after Will touches the tree and says *wait*, when a young black man passes along the sidewalk. His father would doubtless have theorized to the black man about character or the galaxies, but Will does not presume to speak, for he knows that there is nothing he can say that can mean anything to this young man.

Elsewhere, Val's 'lip-curling bold-eyed expression' reminds Will that Val is Kitty's sister. And a similar repetition of phrase establishes for us the kinship of the two hierophanies. In the first such experience Will 'traced the cold metal down to the place where the oak had grown round it in an elephant lip. His fingertips touched the warm finny whispering bark.' And later after Will 'who did not know how he knew' explains to the priest what Jamie wants, the priest promises not to let Jamie go. Then 'as he waited he curled his lips absently against his teeth.' The lip of the bark and the lip of the priest serve to associate these two scenes. But the scenes are essentially alike because each presents an ineffable experience in which the categories of transcendence and immanence are overcome. Under the tree Will Barrett did not presume to speak to the Negro, knowing that both of them were 'in a fix' and could not understand each other's separate dilemma. And 'that's why there is nothing to say now.' After Jamie's death, Barrett realizes that he does not have to know what Sutter thinks before he knows what he (Barrett) thinks, and yet he still asks Sutter to wait. He tells Sutter that he will do as he has planned, that is, he will marry Kitty, and that he nevertheless wants Sutter to come back with him. He says: 'I, Will Barrett...need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you. Jamie and Val too.'

Clearly, Will is terrified lest another father figure walk away from him and commit suicide. But it also seems that Will needs Sutter as a representative of transcendence, lest he be submerged by immanence or sunk in the everydayness that life with Kitty promises to be. Will has experienced two hierophanies; yet there is no indication that any such ineffable experience will be a part of his life with Kitty. Will speaks of his future life with Kitty in terms as abstract as any his father might have used and as inauthentic as any Nell Lovell in *The Moviegoer* might have used. We readers probably find our own necks prickling when we read of Will's future plans and hear from the narrator that henceforth Will entered 'what is called a normal life.' Like Sutter, we cannot imagine talking to Kitty about anything other than The Big Game. And so we cannot imagine how marriage to Kitty can be anything other than a betrayal of the understanding Will achieved under the live oak in Ithaca, Mississippi.

Walker Percy assumes that marriage in itself is an accommodation to the ways of the world. For Will Barrett marriage offers a sort of both/and possibility: an option both to remain a gentleman and to satisfy his 'coarse' desires. For Percy it exemplifies Kierkegaard's ethical stage as an acceptance of responsibility in the human community. And a normal married life may also offer the religious man a sort of 'cover' so that he may pass incognito through the world. But marriage in itself, to Percy, cannot be transcendent. And that is why Will Barrett still needs Sutter Vaught. Jamie had both Val and Sutter to remind him that this world is not sufficient unto itself. Will must at least have Sutter. Thus he asks Sutter five times to 'wait.' And

when 'a final question does occur to him' he runs after Sutter in the 'spavined and sprung' Edsel. The last sentence of the book tells us that finally the Edsel waited for him.

That uncared for Edsel seems a sort of secular sanctuary--at least another reminder that one can live in the world and yet be out of it. Like the Curlee suit which Percy tells us is 'double breasted' and the Thom McAn shoes, Sutter's Edsel is intended to exemplify his dissociation from middle-class values (while indicating something of Percy's dependence on those values). Nevertheless, being in the world means distinguishing between a Curlee and a Saville Row suit. Being out of the world means not giving a damn. Percy defies it as transcendence.

Percy is committed to the idea that transcendence is mental; thus he aligns the spirit with the mind not the body. His concept of transcendence is totally Apollonian, but his version of immanence is not Dionysian. His characters traffic in immanence; but, except in the two hierophanies discussed above, they do not transcend in and through it. Immanence to Percy is bestial--a matter of need satisfaction. It is merely the body, merely sex, merely fornication.

Percy uses sexual matters as convenient illustrations of Cartesian dualism. But he fails to see in them a means for overcoming that split, since sex, even for a married gentleman, is still fornication. In the biblical sense, fornication means idolatry or mistaking the profane for the sacred; thus the term supposes a dualism. The Dionysian life should, however, transcend dualism. Eros should conjoin the secular and the sacred, the flesh and the spirit, in a union which is ineffable and transcendent.

Will experiences transcendence once because he feels the physical presence of the iron and the bark. Jamie transcends because the decay of his own body destroys his abstracted stance. But no character transcends through love. Will can feel the presence of Sprit as he touches that tree; he can feel it in his final communion with Jamie; perhaps he will feel it someday in an intersubjective relationship with Sutter. But we doubt he will ever feel it with Kitty. Although he knows that the abstract must not be divorced from the actual, he does not seem able to let that awareness infuse his life with a woman. Indeed, Will is doomed to be either a gentleman or a fornicator--for the book suggests no other choices; it describes heterosexual relations only in terms of either inflated Old South rhetoric or reductionist scientific jargon. And so Will seems fated to see love between a man and a woman in either idealistic or coarse terms and, either way, to miss Dionysus.

Thus the problem with the book's ending is that Percy is conceptualizing in terms of that very mind/body split he and his characters deplore. He gives Will both Kitty (sex, responsibility, immanence) and Sutter (theory, knowledge, transcendence), as if having both of them will enable Will to complete his own personality. Percy's vision of the integrated self is then not whole but split. Walker Percy places his faith in triads, but speaks in twosomes. This double vision is I believe rather like a rock fault beneath a city: it threatens the coherence and solidity of his otherwise very beautiful and sound work. And so perhaps Walker Percy's fiction needs a new image: not opposing poles or equilateral triangles but a mandala which, as an emblem of integration and wholeness, cannot be bisected."

Panthea Reid Broughton  
"Gentlemen and Fornicators: *The Last Gentleman* and a Bisected Reality"  
ed., *The Art of Walker Percy* (1979) 96-114

"Percy is writing now at the end of his tether. Seeking a moral center, he *recognizes it cannot be discovered in formal religion*. [This is anti-religious projection by an Atheist critic--a "secular reader" as he calls himself, declaring: "what really saves is not religion but the discovery of an alternative life." On the contrary, Percy declared himself a Catholic. More perceptive critics recognize him as such and interpret his novels accordingly. Italics added]. In *The Last Gentleman*, the Catholic Church is little different from 'the Sweet Baptist way'; in this novel, the local reverend is indistinct from the local shrink (Cupp and Duk), and they, in turn, no different from the local con man, Ewell McBee. They all represent a disorientation of values, and they are equally useless [to me] as guides....

William Bibb Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* is an explorer of middle distances, a young man who through amnesia and a perpetual sense of *deja vu* occupies territory that is his own. His sense of distance,

of spatial arrangements, is first presented when we meet him, his eye behind the glass of a telescope. He picks up a 'handsome woman' in the park who leaves notes on a bench for a very lovely younger woman, with whom, from a distance, Will falls in love.

Although a tool, the telescope has properties of magic. Within its short, compact space it is 'jam-packed with the finest optical glasses and quartzes, ground, annealed, rubbed and rouged, tinted and corrected to a ten-thousandth millimeter.' That small, toilet-bowl-shaped object contains a whole world of spatial arrangements, bringing into visibility what is otherwise unknown to the naked eye, opening up spatial dimensions Will has only dreamed of. It is also his Eden: the means of transcending his position as a dehumidification engineer in the subbasement of Macy's, an easy night job in which he is buried deep in the bowels of the earth. The sole way Will can temporarily escape that urban blight, that denial of space, is through those magical lenses which create new relationships.

As the 'last gentleman,' Will is further disoriented by being a Southerner (from the Mississippi Delta), distinguished by spatial-temporal dimensions and by style. He is, like Dostoyevsky's Myshkin, positioned differently from other people: head filled with *deja vu*, on the edge of amnesia, eye distanced by telescopic eye, body inhabiting a geographical territory alien to every attitude. As a consequence, Will lives hesitantly, poised between experiences, where things join. 'What with the ravening particles [those elements which disorient] and other noxious influences, when one person meets another in a great city, the meeting takes place edge on, so to speak, each person so deprived of his surface as to be all but invisible to the other. Therefore one must take measures or else leave it to luck.'

As he eavesdrops on the 'handsome woman' (Rita Vaught), he fantasizes that if he saw her snatching a purse and then being pursued by the police, he would hide her in the park, in a 'rocky den he had discovered in a wild section.... He would bring her food and they would sit and talk until nightfall when they could slip out of the city and go home to Alabama.' The fantasy is, of course, of Eden, with Alabama as the place of refuge, where the urban 'ravenous particles' might not reach him.

The telescope makes it possible for Will to move from a world of pure possibility to one in which a chance event alters the course of his life. He goes from existential contingency to one of Christian potentiality, in which openness of experience is, through 'revelatory' observation, transmuted into attachment to another. As one of the epigraphs puts it, 'If a man cannot forget, he will never amount to much' (Kierkegaard). Will has in a certain sense to be reborn, the way Myshkin is resurrected each time he experiences an epileptic seizure. Will's life is experienced on the edge of this moment of near-extinction. Will must be translated into will, and sickness (ravening particles, urban blight, 'last man' philosophy) transformed into social and personal engineering.

During Will's time in New York, his work as a dehumidification engineer places him in a 'dead world,' those areas also explored by Pynchon and Wright protagonists. His area of work is a chthonic place, inhabited by devils who attack his knee, his memory, his ability to face happiness without feeling sick or weak. As an engineer, he is not only out of phase with himself; he has placed himself outside any meaningful society. The telescope brings him closer to connections, for through the telescope he sees the female side of the Vaught family: Kitty, with whom he falls immediately in love; and her sister-in-law, Rita, the divorced wife of Sutter. Will is informally adopted by the rest of the family: the father, an automobile dealer and tycoon; his wife, a racist, an anti-Semite, a believer in the fading Old South; their younger son, Jamie, who is dying of leukemia; and the older son, Sutter, a physician, now forced because of malpractice into pathology, and odd jobs.

The philosophical or ideological line of the novel becomes the opposition between Will, the 'last gentleman,' who is mentally fit, and Sutter, the man who has observed everything and now plays the role of devil. Sutter is a failed medical doctor, a pornographer, a man of great potential violence (he carries a revolver and threatens to end his own life), a man as out of phase with settled life as Will is out of phase with engineering and urban existence. Later in the novel, Sutter offers Will the choices a man may make: 'Which is the best course for a man: to live like a Swede, vote for the candidate of our choice, be a good fellow, healthy and generous, do a bit of science as if the world made sense, enjoy a beer and a good piece (not a bad life!). Or: to live as a Christian among Christians in Alabama? Or to die like an honest man?'

Will does not perceive that Sutter is being candid, that in fact he is offering choices gleaned from the works of Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor when he confronts Jesus; or else the philosophical alternatives offered to the underground man, between exalted suffering (living on the edge) and cheap happiness (living like a Swede).

Sutter's casebook, which he conveniently leaves behind so that Will can read it, is full of the rage of a man--patterned on D. H. Lawrence, Dostoevsky, Nietzsche--who has refused to play the normal game, or to follow through on the expected route. Living at the edge, he is intolerable to those who seek a toehold on interfaces, as Will does. Sutter hopes to transform Will into someone more spectacular; whereas Will is desperately seeking some balance within himself, some cure for the ravaging particles, amnesia, inability to face happiness in others. The two must clash, since interfaces and edges do not blend.

Intermixed in their conflict at both personal and structural levels of the novel is the presence of Jamie. In some way, the dying Jamie is the sacrifice who can bring together lives that would otherwise fragment. His moments of illness, remission, dying are part of a process acting as a lens focused on the family's existence, serving to bring them face to face with more than their great wealth, their father's strange generosity (he gives each child a check for \$100,000 at age twenty-one, for not smoking), their secular, uncaring way of life (the Vaughns live near the sixth hole of a golf course). Jamie's impending death threads through and becomes a religious presence, a potential 'message in the bottle.' He is the news bearer.

Like Graham Greene, another Catholic convert, Percy refuses a simplistic Jesus or a refined church. Jamie is in fact a Baptist and, therefore, someone who remains unbaptized until he is prepared to declare for himself. He has never declared, and now, on his deathbed, he remains out of touch with any formal religious support. Another sister, Val, has herself become a religious, a member of the Catholic order, and she ministers to poverty-level blacks in Tyree County, the end of the line for humanity. She insists that Will, the engineer, find some religious aid for Jesus before he dies, to ensure a state of grace. The sole man of religion Will can bring to Jamie's deathbed is a Catholic priest; and there, in a scene in which religious ministrations (conditional baptism) are intermixed with the release of Jamie's bowels, we have the best we can hope for in a secular society. A Catholic priest ministers to a Baptist, arranged for by the Episcopalian Will and attended by the atheistic Sutter: an ecumenical service of sorts. Jamie dies, a martyr somehow to their way of life; a brilliant mathematician who will never have a chance to become a man of numbers.

The idea of the book, as well as its beginnings, often promises more than Percy can deliver, especially in the middle 150 pages. The Vaught family, despite its diversity, is insufficiently interesting, and Will's love for the prosaic Kitty, essential though it is, for Will's developing sense of unity with himself, diminishes his presence. On the other hand, the opening scenes, with telescope, ravaging particles, eaves-dropping and voyeurism, movement back and forth between street level and Macy subbasement, are visually and philosophically compelling. They have a witty view of life which has been translated into brilliant visual images. When Will puts his eye to the eye of the telescope and observes a peregrine falcon in its moments of hurtle, its own eye fixed on a pigeon, as Will's eye is fixed on its, we enter into a mixed urban image of technical mastery and natural need. Later, the novel's ideology dominates.

Percy's metier (for the secular reader) is his ability to interweave his medical knowledge with ordinary situations. Failed doctors, false curers, imitation shamans abound--in Sutter, in Will's psychiatrist (who of course cannot help), in doctors and nurses surrounding Jamie--as witch doctors fill *Love in the Ruins* and *The Moviegoer*. The presence of the secular doctor is, obviously, insufficient for Percy's religious sense, and when he begins to make his corrective moves in that area, there is a falling off. The reason is evident: what had once been complex becomes reductive; not simplistic, but resolvable, as at the end of *The Last Gentleman*, when Will and Sutter go off together. True, they go off in an Edsel, a doomed car, but Sutter's Edsel functions. Typically, he has a car that is an 'end product,' and typically, it works for him. Typically, he makes his peace with the 'last gentleman,' Will, a human Edsel.

Will's search for good environments, his rejection of bad environments seem possible, although still tentative. Sutter's view of such a search is mockery, and the novel hovers on this edge. In his casebook, Sutter has commented that Barrett's trouble is 'he wants to know what his trouble is...if only he can locate the right expert with the right psychology, the disorder can be set right and he can go about his business.'

Sutter understands Will is seeking salvation, some transcendent being who 'will tell him how to traffic with immanence'--whose environments, groups, associations, which will lead to happiness (cheap happiness, for Sutter). This was the way of his family. Sutter feels Will's condition belongs to the human condition, not to the individual, and Will would 'do well to forget everything which does not pertain to [his] salvation.'

Will reads all this--it has been left behind for his perusal. He perceives what Sutter says, and he rejects it as extreme advice, full of God and not-God, or else peeking under women's dresses one moment and blowing out your brains the next. Will views his problem as quite different: not to settle the universe, but to get through the afternoon hours of a Wednesday. His religious ideal is not to give up hope, not to accept despair, as the long empty hours march on. He leaves it to Sutter to attempt the merger of opposing elements: Will simply wants to still the ravaging particles.

Ideologically, Percy moves between two worlds. One reason Kierkegaard so appeals to him is that the Danish philosopher cast into doubt the very elements that were essential to faith in them. An epigraph to 'The Message in the Bottle,' from Kierkegaard, presents a conundrum: 'No knowledge can have for its object the absurdity that the eternal is historical.' Kierkegaard plays into Percy's sense of man and his associations when he asserts that no truth is established unless it is a truth for him: thus, the engineer must forgo the attraction of scientific fact for the messiness of human associations. Kierkegaard spoke of an '*imperative of understanding*' which '*must be taken up into my life, and that is what I now recognize as the most important thing.*' As Will comes to discover, throwing himself into life is insufficient for discovery; exploration derives from within. Unity lies there."

Frederick R. Karl  
*American Fictions 1940-1980*  
(Harper & Row 1983) 534, 321, 317-19

"*The Last Gentleman* (1966), a runner up for the National Book Award, recounts Will Barrett's odyssey from New York City to the deep South and on the southwestern desert. Carrying ruins to ruins, Will, like Binx, is looking for something the nature of which is ineffable. Observing his countrymen, he asks himself, 'Is it not true that the American Revolution has succeeded beyond its wildest dream of [Mad Anthony] Wayne and his friends, so that practically everyone in the United States is free to sit around a cozy fire in ski pants? What is wrong with that? What is wrong with you, you poor fellow?' This 'last gentleman' is a watcher, a wanderer, whose problem finally boils down to 'how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on a Wednesday afternoon. Percy's philosophical interests and vocabulary ('immanence' and 'transcendence') remain very strong, but this novel's characters are better realized and the humor is more biting than its predecessor's."

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

"Percy followed *The Moviegoer* with a longer, even more philosophical novel in 1966, *The Last Gentleman*, whose plot introduces Will Barrett, a troubled, confused young man in search of himself, who eventually finds meaning in laying down his life for others. 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."

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

"Williston Bibb Barrett, the central figure of his second novel, *The Last Gentleman* (1967), is a transplanted southerner recently aware of his predicament, adrift and desperate in New York. Like Percy his distress is complicated by the knowledge that his father on coming to a similar recognition of his situation committed suicide, but Will Barrett's response, again like Percy's, takes the form of a fruitless

return to the South followed by a trek west to New Mexico. The bulk of the novel, however, presents Will Barrett's interaction with members of the Vaught family, who provide the immediate occasion for his journeying south and west and serve as foils for his faltering progress toward a recovery. The novel concludes, in a manner inversely reminiscent of the conclusion of Evelyn Waugh's *Brideshead Revisited*, with Barrett's seriocomic attempts to comply with the urgent wishes of a Catholic member of the family and get a dying Jamie Vaught baptized."

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

Michael Hollister (2021)