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Walker Percy's Linguistic Alienation

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WALKER PERCY’S LINGUISTIC ALIENATION

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Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by
John V. Halbrooks
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This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
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ABSTRACT

This paper demonstrates that several central characters in Walker Percy's fiction, specifically Kate Cutrer in *The Moviegoer* and Will Barrett and Allison Huger in *The Second Coming*, tend to use language in unconventional ways. Their strange use of language stems from a dissatisfaction with traditional means of signification. Society reacts to this linguistic difference by treating these characters as abnormal.

In *The Moviegoer*, Kate's Aunt Emily treats her as if she were sick because Kate will not participate in the old New Orleans traditions that are so significant to the family. This traditional signification system, or "world of signs" as Percy calls it, has lost its meaning for Kate. Therefore, Kate says and does things in unusual ways to inject meaning into her life.

In *The Second Coming*, Allison is in a mental hospital undergoing electro-convulsive therapy because she speaks and acts abnormally. Meanwhile, Will finds himself on the brink of suicide, a fate that has already taken the life of his father, because he cannot cope with the meaninglessness that he finds around him in his Christian/resort community.

All of these characters discover meaning by refusing to bow to traditional signification systems and by rediscovering the power of language. They carefully consider the words that they use to assure themselves that they convey meaning rather than cliché.
WALKER PERCY'S LINGUISTIC ALIENATION
Introduction

In an episode of Rod Serling's *The Twilight Zone*, the protagonist becomes troubled when everyone around him begins to use the word "dinosaur" in the place of "dinner." Gradually more and more words change in conversation until all spoken words lose contextual meaning. Conversations seem to make sense to others but sound like gibberish to him. He hovers on the brink of insanity, his learned social uses of language instantly obsolete. The episode graphically depicts the relativity of language: that language and meaning are determined by social convention, and that anyone outside that linguistic context cannot relate to or function within society.

In "Discourse in the Novel," Mikhail Bakhtin writes of the dialogic qualities of everyday conversation:

> Were we to eavesdrop on snatches of raw dialogue in the street, in a crowd, in lines, in a foyer and so forth, we would hear how often the words "he says," "people say," "he said . . ." are repeated, and in the conversational hurly-burly of people in a crowd, everything often fuses into one big "he says . . . you say . . . I say . . ." Reflect how enormous is the weight of "everyone says" and "it is said" in public opinion, public rumor, gossip, slander and so forth. One must also consider the psychological importance in our lives of what others say about us, and the importance, for us, of understanding and interpreting these words of others ("living hermeneutics"). (781)

As Bakhtin suggests, citation of others in conversation lends authority to our opinions, proclamations, and meanings, and those around us confirm meanings of words through their use of the words. And when the use of words loses its contextual meaning, as it does for Serling's linguistically tormented protagonist, language becomes impotent for both speaker and listener. The spoken word,
logos, lends significance, determines meaning, and controls our understanding of the world around us. Logos also establishes social and behavioral norms: people are often judged by how their speech accords with the speech of others. Thus, the spoken word also controls our visions of ourselves and of other people. But the spoken word does not possess an inherent stability; rather, its meanings change according to such variables as languages, dialects, accents, irony, gesture, situation, and the individual speaking. Speaking and acting in a socially consistent manner is a complex operation that one must learn and constantly practice and that varies according to social context.

It follows from this social interpretation of the spoken word that much of what determines normality depends on the person's ability to use language. In Lost in the Cosmos, Walker Percy posits that every person has his or her own "world of signs" with which he linguistically organizes his world:

If I wish to catalogue my world, I could begin with a free association which could go on for months: desk, writing, itch, Saussure, Belgian, minority, war, the end of the world, Superman, Birmingham, flying, slithy toves, General Grant, the 1984 Olympics, Lilliput, Mozart, Don Giovanni, The Grateful Dead, backing and filling, say it isn't so, dreaming . . . (103)

His world, obviously, is peculiar to him, and so is everyone else's, but most people in a given social context have a range of signs and meanings in common. Societies often judge as abnormal those who too frequently stray outside the common world of signs in their use of language, whether or not their linguistic variations are internally consistent.

In his fiction, Percy depicts a number of these outsiders and challenges his readers to reconsider whether they can or should be so easily characterized and dismissed. His characters often use language and signs in ways that deviate from society's norms, largely because they feel that society's common signs have been
overused and so evacuated of their meanings. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Father Smith asks Tom More:

"Do you think it is possible that words could be deprived of their meaning?"
"Deprived of their meaning. What words?"
"Name it! Any words. Tom, U.S.A., God, Simon, prayer, sin, heaven, world." (128)

Smith and other Percy characters regard words and signs as so abstracted through cliché that they become untrustworthy. The untrustworthiness of words is hardly a new *motif* in modern American literature. Frederic Henry, for example, the protagonist of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*, cannot "stand to hear" abstract words, and he considers them "obscene" (185). War propaganda and battle experience reduce abstract words to empty slogans compared to the words representing the concrete realities of war, the only words that continue to hold meaning for him. Faulkner's Addie Bundren in *As I Lay Dying* considers the abstract words her husband uses as meaningless, particularly *love*, a word that many of Percy's characters also find troublesome: "Love, he called it. But I had been used to words for a long time. I knew that that word was like the others: just a shape to fill a lack; that when the right time came, you wouldn't need a word for that anymore than for pride or fear" (158).

Addie and Lieutenant Henry both recognize the meaninglessness of words as a response to extraordinary circumstances whose significance abstractions cannot adequately convey. For them only the concrete, only actions and things have the power to carry significance. Addie learns "that words are no good" after the momentous experience of giving birth, while Henry becomes "embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice" under the life-changing circumstances of combat duty during that great war of disillusion, the First World War. For Addie
and Frederic Henry, words are impotent signifiers upon which others confer meaning to "fill a lack."

Percy's characters differ in their circumstances from Faulkner's and Hemingway's characters. His protagonists find that words, through overuse or insincerity, have become meaningless in the midst of everyday life. Perhaps the reason for this important difference derives from the different historical contexts of the writers. While Hemingway and Faulkner lived and wrote during the disillusioning years between the two world wars and watched traditional meanings and belief systems shatter into "a heap of broken images" (to use T.S. Eliot's phrase), Percy produced his work in a world that had lived through those events and was already fragmented.1 Frederic Henry watches his world crumble; Will Barrett tries desperately to restore unity to a world that seems irrevocably disjointed.

The apparent social abnormality of Percy's characters derives from a desire for a unified vision that signifies, that makes sense to them. When, in reaction to what they see as the meaninglessness of words and the fragmentation of their worlds, they reconstitute their own meanings for words and radically alter their world of signs or significations, those around them begin to view them as abnormal or even sick or insane. In fact, their problems tend to be largely linguistic in origin. While the spiritual alienation that critics like Lewis Lawson and Jay Tolson have identified in Percy's novels is definitely present, several of his central characters experience a linguistic alienation every bit as profound. Specifically, Kate Cutrer in *The Moviegoer*, and Will Barrett and Allie in *The

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1For Percy's characters, particularly Binx's and Will's fathers in *The Moviegoer* and *The Second Coming* respectively, war actually *lends* meaning to life. They find that in war meanings are sharply defined, while everyday life creates a kind of despair of ambivalence despite the supposed ideal of peace. In everyday life one must confront the problem of meaning in a world without sharply defined values.
Second Coming, try to re-define radically their linguistic worlds and, through this process, reshape their relations to their social worlds.
I

"This I Believe":

Kate's Linguistic Sickness in *The Moviegoer*

In the fall of 1954, shortly after the birth of Walker Percy's second daughter, Ann, the Percys discovered in dramatic form that she was deaf: Ann showed no reaction to a nearby gun shot (Tolson, 246). From this point on Percy's attention to linguistic theory extended beyond purely intellectual speculation—he had a vested interest. Percy was determined that Ann should live as normal a life as possible. At the same time, he realized that language was a social phenomenon and that his daughter's ability to comprehend and manipulate language would determine her competence to cope with society. He and his wife, Bunt, decided to keep their daughter at home with the family rather than send her off to a special school. The alternative that they chose allowed Ann to develop her linguistic skills more thoroughly because she was able to function within a more conventional context among people who were not deaf. As Jay Tolson writes, "While the traditional method reduced the deaf child to rudimentary signaling, using words as signals to satisfy needs, the Mirrielees [Ann's teacher] method brought the full symbolic power of language to deaf children. It taught them to use words as a means of knowing the world and themselves" (249). Ann not only mastered nouns and verbs, but also syntax, grammar, and abstract parts of speech. The Percys wanted her to master the full symbolic repertoire of language and thus be able to participate in serious dialogue.

Kate Cutrer in *The Moviegoer* (1960) has a linguistic problem akin to deafness. She wishes to use words to know "the world and herself" but feels that the modern world has left language exhausted of meaning. Words have ceased to be symbols and have become mere signs or "rudimentary signals." While she, unlike Ann, can hear the words, she cannot hear a consistent meaning. Her step-
mother Emily believes her unusual behavior—or use of language—is a signal of sickness (she makes her go to the doctor) rather than of a search for meaning. But in Kate's first scene alone with Binx Bolling, her fellow searcher and the narrator of the novel, she is literally in a process of re-building—or re-establishing—meaning. She is contemplating renovating the basement of Aunt Emily's old house, hence establishing a contextually significant place for herself within the old structure of society. Binx understands what she is after: "I can see why she is so serious: truthfully it seems that if she can just hit upon the right place, a shuttered place of brick and vine and flowing water, her very life can be lived" (48).

Two questions follow from Kate's predicament. Why does she feel that language has lost its meaning, and why does she want to re-define her place in the society that has raised her and determined her understanding of the world? Aunt Emily has shaped Kate's societal context as one of old South politeness, gentility, and respectability. Aunt Emily's is a world in which "a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness . . . [are] the only things that really matter in this world" (196). The novel largely becomes an account of how this system of understanding, this world of signs, has become obsolete through corruption and fragmentation of meaning and how the major characters cope with this problem.

Kate cannot "live her life" yet because she cannot bring herself to marry Walter—her fiancé at the beginning of the novel and a member of the New Orleans elite—and so buy into Aunt Emily's old world (the sign-world of gentility and respectability). This context no longer holds meaning for her. Aunt Emily spends the action of the novel trying to help Kate fit into the old-world context. She attempts to manipulate Kate, for example, by sending her to an analyst, for she feels that Kate's unwillingness to accept her context is a sign of psychological problems. Aunt Emily also appeals to Binx to help Kate because she believes that
Binx shares her loyalty to the values of the old South. She does not realize that Binx also feels alienated from her world of signs.

As he listens to her play the piano he makes it clear that he is uncomfortable with Aunt Emily's system of signification: "Now Aunt Emily, fingernails clicking over the keys, comes back to the tune, the sweet sad piping of the nineteenth century, good as it can be but not good enough. To protect myself, I take one of the photographs from the mantel" (40). More significant than Aunt Emily's playing the piano is that she plays music of the nineteenth century, the age of the Romantic concept of the autonomous self in music as well as in philosophy and literature. For Binx dependence on the self-determining will is "not good enough"; the individual cannot for Binx, as it can for Whitman, "contain multitudes." Thus he looks to sources outside himself to provide signification. His rejection of these traditional signification systems eventually leads to a scene in which Aunt Emily castigates him by spelling out their differences. Binx upsets her by taking an unannounced trip to Chicago with Kate during which he makes love to her. Disappointed in what she perceives as Binx's irresponsibility, Aunt Emily finally realizes that Kate and Binx do not relate to her world of signs, and she defines her world in opposition to theirs: "All these years I have been assuming that between us words mean roughly the same thing, that among certain people, gentlefolk I don't mind calling them, there exists a set of meanings held in common, that a certain manner and a certain grace come as naturally as breathing" (195).

But her assumption is unwarranted. The "set of meanings" agreed upon by "gentlefolk" has been rendered obsolete by a post-modern world that has fragmented belief through a multiplicity of meanings. Aunt Emily's linguistic system also becomes inadequate when it reduces people to types or "emblems" in order to fit them categorically and easily into the societal context.
Percy satirically presents the post-modern multiplicity of meanings as Binx listens to his favorite radio program, *This I Believe*, a program in which "the highest-minded people in our country, thoughtful and intelligent people, people with mature inquiring minds, state their personal credos" (94). He finds in this program a multiplicity of clichés that have been "deprived of their meanings":

Tonight's subject is a playwright who transmits this very quality of niceness [common to the people on the program] in his plays. He begins:

I believe in people. I believe in tolerance and understanding between people. I believe in the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual--

Everyone on "This I Believe" believes in the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual. I have noticed, however that the believers are far from unique themselves, are in fact alike as peas in a pod.

I believe in music. I believe in a child's smile. I believe in love. I also believe in hate.

The program concludes:

I believe in believing. This--I believe. (95-6)

Binx and Kate find themselves in the post-modern world Will Barrett complains of in *The Second Coming*: "Is this an age of belief . . . a great renaissance of faith after a period of crass materialism, atheism, agnosticism, liberalism, scientism? Or is it an age of madness in which everyone believes everything?" (145). Aunt Emily thinks that she lives in an "age of faith" in which meanings are constant. Binx and Kate live in the "age of madness," the post-modern world in which "everyone believes everything."

Percy depicts the other shortcoming of the traditional world of signs--the tendency to reduce people to types or "emblems"-- in several scenes and characters. First, Binx remembers his days in his college fraternity at Tulane
where Kate's eventual fiancé Walter, who has an unfailing ability to define a person with a customized nickname, initiated him. Walter had told the young pledge Binx: "[The other fraternities are] all good boys, Binx. I've got friends in all of them. But when it comes to describing the fellows here, the caliber of the men, the bond between us, the meaning of this little symbol . . ." (30). But Walter does not finish his sentence because he cannot define "the meaning of this little symbol"; it is merely another "shape to fill a lack." Not insignificantly the symbol is D, the Delta. Percy describes the phenomenon of naming and symbolic communication as "The Delta Factor," the Delta representing the triadic relationship between the namer, the signified (the object named), and the signifier, as opposed to the dyadic nature of signaling or stimulus response (Pavlov's dog, for example). The Delta used here emphasizes the importance of signifying in organizing the individual's existential world. Walter enacts the phenomenon of naming by reducing people to types through the use of nicknames:

He liked to nickname the new pledges. One year he fancied "head" names. He lined them up and sat back with his knee cocked up, pushed up his hat with his thumbnail. "you over there, you look to me like Pothead; you talking, you're Blowhead; you're Meathead; you're Sackhead; you're Needlehead." (29)

Binx even joins in the naming, dubbing an unfortunate pledge "Whalehead," but he later realizes that the fraternity's way of signifying holds no meaning for him because Walter's method of naming is arbitrary. He names people according to superficial characteristics or for no reason at all. Binx is a less than model fraternity brother.

Binx resists this pattern of reducing people to empty words. When his mother discusses his dead father, he explains that "My mother's recollection of him is storied and of a piece. It is not him she remembers but an old emblem of him" (134-35). Binx perceives that people characterize others with empty signifiers
that, like other words, have been deprived of their meanings until they do not really represent the person that they signify. Binx explains that his mother "has also made an emblem out of Kate and does not know her at all" (136).

In Lost in the Cosmos Percy writes of the naming of the self: "Ask an L.S.U. fan at a football game: Who are you? He may reply: I am a tiger" (11), that is, a supporter of the L.S.U. Tigers, but what will he be on Monday morning? This classification system is not sufficient for Binx who is not ready to attach himself or anyone else to a set of stable signifiers in order to make them conform to a societal norm or type. Mrs. Schexnaydre, his landlady, also reduces people to types; while she "has lived in New Orleans all her life and knows no one," she "watches the quiz programs regularly and actually feels she knows the contestants" (65). The only people she "knows" are not real people at all but emblems; she can only know them because she can fit them neatly into her world of television. The people who appear on television certainly are more complex and difficult to understand than their on-tube personalities might indicate, but Mrs. Schexnaydre does not consider this difference. Those that accept a consistent linguistic world (Aunt Emily, Binx's mother, Mrs. Schexnaydre) seem to fall into the trap of making people into emblems in such a way that they no longer actually know the people they name.

The fragmenting multiplicity of meanings and the reduction of people into types degrade language's signifying power to the point that Binx and Kate come to distrust language entirely. In a post-modern world where "everyone believes everything," Kate comes to distrust the very terms the "believers" use to describe their beliefs, especially, like Faulkner's Addie Bundren, that most overused word of all, love. After Kate and Binx decide to get married they have this curious exchange:
Feeling tender toward her, I embrace her and tell her that I love her.

"Oh no," says Kate and takes hold of me coarsely. "None of that, bucko."

"None of what?"

"No love, please."

I misunderstand her and pull away.

"No no. Don't leave either," she says, holding me and watching me still.

"All right."

"Just don't speak to me of love, bucko."

"All right, but don't call me bucko." (174)

Kate cannot trust the word until she can determine its meaning for herself. By way of contrast, Binx's younger brother Lonnie, despite or perhaps because of his illness, holds steadfastly to his center of meaning in Catholicism, and can therefore ask Binx unreservedly for his love. Lonnie's Catholicism sufficiently defines love for him. Conversely, Kate, who is not a practicing Christian and who finds traditional definitions of love untrustworthy or inadequate, rejects the word as insufficient to convey her meaning.

In The Second Coming, Allie is so bewildered by love's multiplicity of meanings that she goes to the library in search of definitions:

She knew a great deal about pulleys and hoists but nothing about love. She went to the library to look up love as she had looked up the mechanical advantages of pulleys. Surely great writers and great lovers of the past had written things worth reading. Here were some of the things great writers had written:

Love begets love
Love conquers all things
Love ends with hope
Love is a flame to burn out human ills
Love is all truth
Love is truth and truth is beauty
Love is blind
Love is the best
Love is heaven and heaven is love
Love is love's reward
"Oh my God," she said aloud in the library and smacked her head. "What does all that mean? These people are crazier than I am!" (217-18)

Later she tells Will Barrett:

"Let us not speak of love yet, I'm not sure of the word."
"No, we won't speak of love, though I feel in the future we might."

(299)

Michael Pearson writes: "Percy, like Will and Allison, wishes to make words mean, to charge them with a meaningfulness that they may have lost. Love is a word drained of all substance; therefore, Percy must find other words to represent the evolving relationship between Will and Allison" (95). Kate, like Allie, does not trust traditional words to define her emotions until she can attach them to verifiable meanings. Therefore, only "in the future," when she can be sure of its meaning, Kate might "speak of love."

Throughout The Moviegoer Kate and Binx look for various ways to cope with the loss of meaning that they find in their world of signs. Kate tries to cope, for example, by speaking in ways that differ from normal conversational modes. Binx understands her odd speech patterns. "Binx can decipher Kate's coded language, accept her abrupt way of ending phone conversations, and detect the impersonations of his sometimes fellow moviegoer and actress" (Ciuba, 81).

"Impersonations" is the key word here. Kate lacks a consistent signifier or definition of herself and thus can find no stable center of meaning. "A person does not have to be this or be that or be anything, not even oneself," she tells Binx (100). This lack of a defining self turns Kate into a chameleon, changing concerns and moods as often as she finds temporary havens of meaning.

This problem of an unstable concept of self is Percy's major concern in Lost in the Cosmos, a book he begins with a quotation from Nietzsche:
We are unknown, we knowers, to ourselves . . . Of necessity we remain strangers to ourselves, we understand ourselves not, in our selves we are bound to be mistaken, for each of us holds good to all eternity the motto, "Each is the farthest away from himself"—as far as ourselves are concerned we are not knowers.

This absence of self-knowledge, perpetuated by the lack of a meaningful social and linguistic context, results in Kate's constant attempts to define or "know" herself by distinguishing herself from others. Binx gives an account of how these attempts to be different in order to know herself lead to Kate's unconventional use of language:

For some reason or other she feels obliged to keep one jump ahead of the conventional. When I answer the phone, instead of hearing "Hello, this is Kate," there comes into my ear a low-pitched voice saying something like: "Well, the knives have started flying," which means that she and her mother have been aggressive toward each other; or: "What do you know? I'm celebrating the rites of spring after all," which turns out to mean that she has decided, in her ironic and reflected way, to attend the annual supper given for queens of the Neptune ball. (56)

Rather than merely presenting herself as a telephone greeting ("Hello, this is Kate"), she speaks in a way that, at least temporarily, holds meaning for her; she stays "one jump ahead of the conventional." Thus when she decides to attend the annual supper, a traditional cultural event, she relates her decision in an "ironic and reflected way," suggesting that she will not attend for traditional reasons. But her significations and meanings are only temporary because they lack stability; she has no center of belief to put her perpetually variable meanings into context. Like Binx, who finds temporary meanings in movies, Kate needs constantly changing systems of signification to avoid what Binx calls the "malaise." After swallowing an overdose of pills, Kate explains the incident to Binx by telling him: "Last night everything was fine until I finished the book. Then it became a matter of waiting. What next, I thought" (159). When she reads the book, she enters a
consistent world with constant signifiers, but when she finishes it she leaves the world of the book and re-enters linguistic limbo.

Binx looks in other directions in his attempts to cope with the loss of meaning. Unlike Kate, he seems to treasure his anonymity. He lives for the distraction of entertainment and movies. "[Binx] chose the most standardized life possible and made himself disappear into an all-encompassing abstraction—as commonplace and uncompelling as car keys, as familiar and heedless as a wallet" (Ciuba, 57). Instead of searching for meaning by constantly reinventing himself, he searches vicariously through movies. Early in the novel Kate joins him in his cinematic search, and they go to see a movie in a New Orleans theater:

There is a scene which shows the very neighborhood of the theater. Kate gives me a look—it is understood that we do not speak during the movie. Afterwards in the street, she looks around the neighborhood. 'Yes, it is certified now.'

She refers to a phenomenon of moviegoing which I have called certification. Nowadays when a person lives somewhere, in a neighborhood, the place is not certified for him. More than likely he will live there sadly and the emptiness which is inside him will expand until it evacuates the entire neighborhood. But if he sees a movie which shows his very neighborhood, it becomes possible for him to live, for a time at least, as a person who is Somewhere and not Anywhere. (53)

This process of certification resides in the authority of an outside voice to lend meaning because the individual cannot accept herself as the center of her linguistic universe. This scene shows striking similarities with a scene from Percy's life which Jay Tolson recounts in his biography:

When the news came on in the evening . . . Percy would sit next to the TV and mouth the voiceover segments of the broadcast so Ann could follow what was going on. He would engage in an even more strenuous exercise when he took her to the movies, sitting in the seat next to her with a small pen flashlight, which he would train upon his lips while he "translated" those parts of the film that Ann could not lipread. There was, as Bunt Percy observed, a special bond between father and daughter. (317-18)
In both scenes, in Percy's fiction and in his life, the female characters attain a "certification" of meaning, but they receive them from different sources. "It is understood that" Kate and Binx "do not speak during the movie." The passive voice of "It is understood" and "It is certified" reflects Kate's passive receptivity for signification. She does not yet look to Binx for meaning—for he is unable to provide it at this point—but instead to the fickle post-modern device of the film, the meaning of which is manifestly unstable and temporary. Conversely, Ann looks to her father to provide meaning. He gives her a consistent linguistic context with which to watch the film. While Kate looks to the unstable and temporary film to provide a context for the real world, Ann looks to her father, her linguistic center in the real world, to provide a context for the film. Percy forged the "special bond between father and daughter" at least partially through providing a linguistic center of meaning for his daughter. Only later, after Kate has undergone the ordeal of complete linguistic alienation, does she look to find her center of meaning in her relationship with Binx.

She goes through this ordeal when she swallows several sleeping pills, making her family believe that she has attempted suicide. By having appeared to attempt suicide (although she claims to Binx that she has not), Kate has committed the ultimate act of self-alienation. Aunt Emily is now certain of Kate's sickness and abnormality, and she now feels that she must treat Kate differently because she cannot function within the expectations of her social context. Aunt Emily makes it clear that Kate's "sickness" allows her to hold Kate to a different standard of behavior. For example, she tells Binx after she discovers their trip to Chicago: "Kate did not tell anyone she was leaving. However, her behavior is not unexplainable and therefore not inexcusable. Yours is" (186). She believes that Kate's suicide attempt is a categorical sign of her sickness. But for Kate the signifier suicide holds a different meaning. She feels that the idea of suicide gives
her the freedom to live. "Suicide is the only thing that keeps me alive. Whenever everything else fails, all I have to do is consider suicide and in two seconds I'm as cheerful as a nitwit. But if I could not kill myself--ah then, I would" (171), she tells Binx.

In *Lost in the Cosmos* Percy writes of the liberation of considering suicide: "You can elect suicide, but you decide not to. What happens? All at once, you are dispensed. Why not live, instead of dying? You are free to do so. You are like a prisoner released from the cell of his life" (77). It is this liberating power of not committing suicide that allows Kate to come to her stabilizing self-realization on the way to Chicago.

Kate reaches her moment of literal self-discovery on the train, and this time it is not a temporary state like her sense of certification after the movie or as she reads a book; this time she tells Binx that she does not want to forget it. She can finally define herself with words:

"What are you?" [Binx]
"I'll gladly tell you because I just found out and I never want to forget. Please don't let me forget. I am a religious person." (172-73)

She wants to be religious in the sense that she wants to "believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do." She longs for a voice of ultimate authority, a voice to provide a center of meaning and signification for her world of signs independent of Aunt Emily's traditional world of signs and of the post-modern fragmented world:

I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you and I will do what you tell me. Now if I marry you, will you tell me: Kate, this morning do such and such, and if we have to go to a party, will you tell me: Kate, stand right there and have three drinks and talk to so and so? Will you? (173)

Later they attend a movie in Chicago at the "mother and Ur-womb of all moviehouses... Kate holds my [Binx's] hand tightly in the dark" (185). This
time she holds Binx's hand and, like Ann Percy to her father, looks to him for stability and signification. The phrase "in the dark" implies a darkness or opaqueness of meaning, but Binx's hand provides a reassuring center.

When Kate is not with Binx she feels unstable:

"I am frightened when I am alone and I am frightened when I am with people. The only time I'm not frightened is when I'm with you. You'll have to be with me a great deal. . .

. . . "It seems to me that if we are together a great deal and you tell me the simplest things and not laugh at me--I beg you for pity's own sake never to laugh at me--tell me things like: Kate, it is all right for you to go down to the drugstore, and give me a kiss, then I will believe you. Will you do that?" (205)

Binx must be with her or provide her with the linguistic authority to act. But he cannot laugh at her, for to laugh would be to treat her as abnormal and alienate her as everyone else has.

In the Epilogue to the novel, Kate and Binx have married, and we see them put Kate's theory of signification into practice while Aunt Emily continues to believe in her old world of signs, with a difference: Aunt Emily has "accepted what she had been saying all those years, that the Bolling family had gone to seed and that I [Binx] was not one of her heroes but a very ordinary fellow" (207). She also accepts the differences in their signifying systems that she outlined earlier in the novel by enumerating the abstract words that have lost meaning for Binx:

"What has been going on in your mind during all the years when we listened to music together, read the Crito, and spoke together--or was it only I who spoke--good Lord, I can't remember--of goodness and truth and beauty and nobility?" (198). Aunt Emily at this point sounds like "This I Believe," using overused and, for Binx, non-signifying words. She asks, "was it only I who spoke?" Although Binx may have spoken during these times, only Aunt Emily conveyed meaning on her own terms.
Kate and Binx, nonetheless, end the novel on their own terms. They act as Kate has prescribed: Binx reassures her by adding authority to her meanings and actions:

"I've got to be sure about one thing" [Kate]
"What?" [Binx]
"I'm going to sit next to the window on the Lake side and put the cape jasmine in my lap?"
"That's right."
"And you'll be thinking of me just that way?"
"That's right." (212)

Kate looks to Binx to affirm her simple act of carrying the cape jasmine. Then, as she walks away, she holds the cape jasmine against her cheek, as if, now that Binx has notarized the word, she can accept its reality. They still do not use the word love with each other as Lonnie does before he dies, but perhaps, as they gradually define their world of signs for themselves, they shall in the future. Meanwhile they are determined to live together in order to give their lives a meaning independent of old and tired abstractions.
II

All the Names of Death:

Will's and Allie's Re-inventions of Language in *The Second Coming*

Will and Allie in *The Second Coming* (1980) make a much more unlikely couple than Kate and Binx. Williston Bibb Barrett, a Wall Street lawyer, has retired early to the golfing paradise of western North Carolina to live the good life among those of his kind. His wife has died, leaving him a rich inheritance and a high standing in the community. Allison Vaught Huger (Allie), on the other hand, is a young mental patient who, to avoid the trauma of electro-shock therapy, escapes from the institution that has been her home for three years and tries to make a new life for herself independent of the influence of other people, particularly her doctor and parents. What, then, are the forces that bring these radically different characters together and transform the novel into a convincing love story? They are much the same forces that bring Kate and Binx together in *The Moviegoer*, but this time they manifest themselves in different guises.

Like *The Moviegoer*, *The Second Coming* is a story of lost meaning. It presents a world in which traditional ways of signification break down into cliche through overuse and proliferation of meaning until they mean nothing to the main characters of the novel. Aunt Emily's traditional world of gentility in old world New Orleans is not present in this novel. Percy has replaced it with another form of gentility: the retirement resort community of the wealthy where the etiquette of good feelings and golf presides over the lives of the inhabitants. And within this community there are two subsets of value systems that respectively trouble the two protagonists and that, ultimately, begin to look more and more alike as the novel progresses: institutional Christianity and Psychology.
Both characters recognize the inadequacy of traditional discourses to convey meaning as they look to redefine language and, through language, their lives. However, as they reject the traditional methods of signification, they alienate themselves from the community that subscribes to those methods, and the community finds ways to classify them as abnormal: Allie has "psychotic tendencies" while Will is "sick" with "Hausmann's Syndrome." They eventually find meaning and the means to convey it in connection to each other by creating their own small society and their own linguistic context.

1. Will

In the midst of an apparently comfortable retirement, Will Barrett perceives that "the world and life around him . . . seemed to grow more senseless and farcical with each passing day" (3). The multiplicity of the beliefs of others baffles him: he longs to know "the truth," and certainly all of these different beliefs cannot be right:

Marion had been an conservative Episcopalian and had no use for the changes in the church.
Leslie and Jason were born-again Christians and had no use for anything, liturgy or sacrament, which got in the way of a personal encounter with Jesus Christ.
Ed and Marge Cupp were Californians.
Jack Curl, the minister, had no strong feelings about women priests or the interim prayer book. . . .
Kitty believed in astrology.
Yamauchi was a Jehovah's Witness. He believed he was one of the 144,000 who would survive Armageddon and actually live in their bodies on this earth for a thousand years—and reign.
Yamauchi's wife, the cook, was a theosophist, who believed in reincarnation. She believed she had once been a priestess on Atlantis before it sank. (145)
The unbelievers are no better, he finds; they are "even more demented than the believers" (146).

In spite of, or perhaps because of, the farcical variety of beliefs, everyone begins to look alike to Will. Like the radio personalities on "This I Believe," the overuse and the contradictory natures of people's words and beliefs make them appear "in fact alike as peas in a pod." As a result, he remembers and longs for a time in which meaning seemed more clear. As Will has a kind of spell and falls into a bunker while playing golf, he remembers Ethel Rosenblum, a girl from high school:

She was valedictorian and he salutatorian. She could factor out equations after the whole class was stumped, stand at the blackboard, hip hiked out, one fist perched cheerleaderwise on her pelvis, the other small quick hand squinched on the chalk, and cancel out great $a^2 - b^2$ complexes \textit{zip zip slash}, coming out at the end: \(\frac{a}{a}=1\). 1 = 1! Unity! (7)

Will sees in Ethel a stability of meaning. Even when meaning seemed uncertain and the class was confused by the equation, Ethel was able to solve it and restore "unity" with ease ("\textit{zip zip slash}"). But unfortunately for Will, one cannot live by mathematical symbols on a blackboard, and he sees around him only examples of false stability and crumbling values in the guise of eclectic belief. Tradition seems only an excuse for a comfortable, indifferent life rather than stable truth.

A primary representation of this non-signifying tradition in the novel is golf and its surrounding etiquette and lifestyle. The eighteen hole ritual gives its players a constant and comfortable set of rules by which to live their lives of a weekend afternoon. Will fits into his particular niche in his golfing friends' consistent little world: he is a solid player with a six handicap and impressive length off the tee. So when one day Will begins to slice badly off the fairway, a wave of discomfort overcomes his foursome. Will is not fulfilling his expected role, and by doing so withdraws from the construct of the game. Dutch historian
Johan Huizinga writes: "By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its illusion—a pregnant word which literally means 'in-play' (from inlusio, illudere or inludere)" (11). When he finally makes a good shot, holing a twenty foot putt on the sixteenth, Will's companions "nodded briefly, signifying approval and a kind of relief that he was back on his game. Or was it a relief that they could play a game at all, obey its rules, observe its etiquette and the small rites of setting in for a drive and lining up for a putt?" (43). But if golf gives them something to do and tells them how to do it, the game provides only a temporary center of meaning; the rules are arbitrary and irrelevant away from the course. Golf does not help them to find real centers of meaning, but it distracts them from the quest by providing a temporary one. Will wonders if his friends realize that "knocking little balls around a mountain meadow . . . was after all preposterous but . . . they had all assented to it and were doing it nevertheless and because, after all, why not? One might as well do one thing as another" (44).

Signification systems that profess to a higher truth content than that of golf, such as his late wife Marion's Episcopalian Christianity, also hold no meaning for Will. When Jack Curl, the Episcopal minister, speaks in a traditional Christian vocabulary, the words do not signify so much as convey a hypnotic sonorous quality: "The old words clanged softly in the golden air around them like the Westminster chimes of St. John's steeple clock" (116). And when Jack uses a tried and true Christian phrase like "Grace is a mysterious thing," Will asks with genuine curiosity, "What does that mean?" (126). Another aspect of the Christian signification system that troubles Will is the fragmentation of Christianity into incompatible denominations; "the animosity one kind of Christer feels toward another . . . [is] dismaying to Will in his search for faith" (Hardy, 206). As he
writes to Sutter Vaught before his self-imposed isolation: "And if the good news is true, why are its public proclaimers such assholes and the proclamation itself such a weary used-up thing?" (172).

But Will Barrett lives in a Christian community where abstraction takes the place of action and where the inhabitants continuously re-invent themselves and their pasts in order to make themselves into a desired image in the eyes of others. People alter their self-images to appeal to their own illusory ideals and purposes rather than to try to reach real self-knowledge, as Will realizes when Kitty, his old flame, blatantly re-constructs the past to suit her present desires: "Had he forgotten something or had Kitty rewritten the entire book of her life?" (153).

Lewis Peckham, golf pro and professed non-believer, also thrives on his constantly changing self-invention. In his attempts to become all things to all men he creates the image of someone who does not know himself: "what was Lewis supposed to do? be an Indian scout? goatherd? English teacher? golf pro? run a Confederate cave? Lewis didn't seem to know" (138). When Lewis asks Will if he has heard of Logotherapy, Will thinks: "Logotherapy. Jesus Christ. What's he been reading now? English teacher, goatherd, spelunker, poet, golf pro, now a psychiatrist" (138). In a sense, Lewis Peckham presents a combination of the corruption of traditional signification that Percy presented in The Moviegoer. As in the earlier novel, the characters feel a need to reduce people to simple words or types in order to fit them into a perceived systematic reality (for example: Allison, mental patient), but Lewis also presents a microcosm of the fragmented world that Binx and Will perceive because he himself professes to a multiplicity of convictions. Therefore, Will cannot simply identify him as Lewis Peckham, golf pro, but also Lewis Peckham, English teacher, goatherd, spelunker, poet, psychiatrist. Early in the novel, Will says to himself regarding these farcical tendencies: "This is not for me" (4). The exploits of people like Lewis Peckham
make it clear to him that the "unbelievers" are no better than the "believers." "The unbelievers, although often more attractive than the believers in being more effectively concerned for the welfare of their fellowman--'they generally perform good works, help niggers, pore whites, etc.'--are nonetheless, as Will sees it, obviously 'crazy' in no longer bothering even to seek an explanation for the 'preposterous' situation of their mortality" (Hardy, 204). The unbelievers do not seem to care that there is no ultimate truth, and they simply go on living their lives of philanthropic atheism.

What Will seeks is an alternative to this world of fragmented beliefs and worn out proclamations. But before he decides upon his search for God, the only alternative he understands is the memory of his father who killed himself during Will's boyhood. Will's father presents death as the ultimate truth and the only sure alternative to a meaningless life and rejection of a meaningless world. Like Kate's consideration of suicide in *The Moviegoer*, Will's contemplation of his father's death forces him to confront its meaning:

Both barrels. Wouldn't one have been enough? Yes, given an ordinary need for death. But not if it's a love of death. In the case of love, more is better than less, two twice as good as one, and most is best of all. And if the aim is the ecstasy of love, two is closer to infinity than one, especially when the two are twelve-gauge Super-X number-eight shot. And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself, the cold-steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck-you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world. (136)

In this central passage Will confronts his father's rejection of the world and rejects that rejection. For in his very act of "fuck-you love fuck-off world," Will's father falls prey to the very corruption he so violently tries to reject. He goes one step
beyond reducing himself to meaningless signifiers; he reduces himself to nothing, or worse, to Mr. Barrett, suicide. He also undergoes a quite literal fragmentation: the "brain cells which together [that is, within a significant working structure, the human brain] faltered and fell short, now flowered and fell apart," or disintegrated into meaninglessness.

By recalling the incident Will is "facing death. It's the prospect of death that enables him to act at last," as Percy told James Atlas in 1980 (Conversations, 183). Before facing death Will searches for meaning only through observation: he observes the various Christians, he observes the Jews' "exodus" from North Carolina (a false "sign"), and, like Allie as she listens to her parents in the doctor's office, he observes the potential of language to convey meaning purely through aural effects (for example, he sounds out his daughter Leslie's name and tries to determine how it reflects her character). But once he faces the reality of death, he needs to determine once and for all if there is a single truth to live by, and he launches his ill-advised plan to find God (if there is such a being) or to expose his non-existence (if there is not).

Will demands an answer from God, a justification for the farcical existence most people live with contented indifference, a viable alternative to his father's suicidal nihilism, and a stable center to his world of signs that will endow words and actions with a definitive meaning to replace the slippery and indeterminate nature of post-modern language. He demands to locate the ultimate center of meaning so difficult to find in this "age of madness in which everyone believes everything" and in which language, especially the language of belief, has become so ambiguous that it no longer holds meaning. Will writes to Sutter that "there may be signs of his [God's] existence but they point both ways and are therefore ambiguous and so prove nothing" (175). He calls his demand, in the language of the times, a "scientific experiment," which he describes to Sutter: "My
experiment is simply this: I shall go to a desert place and wait for God to give a sign. If no sign is forthcoming I shall die. But people will know why I died: *because there is no sign*" (176, my italics). It is significant that he specifically asks for a sign or, in linguistic terms, a signifier that means something other than itself. He does not actually ask to see God, but rather an unmistakable sign of God, a language that means. Ultimately, he asks for confirmation of the authority of what Percy calls "The Delta Factor," that is, the human ability to convey meaning through the medium of language.

He distinguishes his own possible death from his father's death by claiming that his will be a contribution to human knowledge, proving once and for all that the world of signs holds no meaning. But he does not die, and he receives no sign, at least not the kind of sign he might have expected. He finds his sign, or his new center of meaning, in another person.

2. Allie

Allie is a mental patient in her twenties who has had a difficult time coping with life in modern America, particularly its linguistic aspects. During a voice recital in college, she recalls, "I opened my mouth and nothing came out. I forgot the words" (92). By forgetting the words, like Will when he plays golf badly, Allie experiences the breakdown of an established discourse; she disobeys the unspoken rules of concerts. Like Will on the golf course, she makes others uncomfortable because she does not act in the predictable pattern: take the stage, sing the program, respond to the applause with a bow.

After Allie does a number of things that could be classified as non-conforming behavior, her mother sends her to a private mental hospital in the same North Carolina mountains where Will Barrett is presently slicing off the fairways. But the treatment she receives, rather than helping her to re-orient her ability to
signify and understand the social world, continuously dis-orient her with
electroconvulsive therapy sessions that deprive her of her memory.

Like Will, Allie finds herself in a world in which words and established
traditions have ceased to mean anything. And also like Will, she finds those
around her interpreting her questions about traditions and meanings as abnormal
or, in her case, a signal of mental illness. Because of the judgments of others,
Allie develops a fear of living among them. She interprets the audience's reaction
to her performance at her recital: "I stood still and looked at them. Time passed.
People looked away. They were embarrassed. Not only embarrassed but
frightened and hateful. Who are you, you bitch, to do this to us when we didn't
want to come here in the first place? What to do? Leave. Check out. Went off
the stage, straight out the fire-escape door, into the street, and right on out of
town" (92). This incident presents a microcosm of Allie's linguistic problems.
First she is unsure of the words, just as in everyday life she feels unsure of the
meaning of words. When she forgets the words, rather than help her to re-orient
her perspective, people judge her as abnormal because she does not behave in a
predictable pattern. Then, in response to the judgment, she isolates herself; she
"checks out."

Later she experiences similar judgments from her parents (Walter and Kitty
Huger), who judge her to the extent that they check her into a mental hospital
practicing electro-shock therapy: "Why did she sound so crazy around her
parents? Because no matter what she said or did, her mother would make her own
sense of it and her father wouldn't like it. So it didn't matter what she said. It was
like being alone in a great echoing cave. There was a temptation to holler" (94).
Her father believes that her problems boil down to her not accepting her
"responsibility." "Shape up or ship out," she thinks in response. "Right. I'm
shipping out" (94).
Allie's mother comes up with bizarre interpretations of Allie's unusual uses of language. She interprets, with the help of a psychic, Allie's statement that she is the "original hooker" to mean that in a former life Allie was a part of General Hooker's corps in the Civil War, or she was a federal spy in Richmond who used prostitution as her cover (259). With these interpretations Kitty constructs reality to suit her perspective. By shaping Allie's meaning to match her own understanding, Kitty avoids the possibility that Allie uses language altogether differently and tries to force her daughter's language and behavior into conformity with her own personal universe of meaning.

But Kitty's and other people's uses of words have lost meaning for Allie as they have for Will. She is in a state of linguistic limbo, struggling and playing with words to try to find meanings that she can understand: "Things though loose can be jammed nevertheless. Blue is for you but the instigation of color is climbing on the Sirius me" (92), she tells her parents when her mother suggests she return with them to Williamsport and live in a restored colonial carriage house. While her parents hear meaningless babble, Allie is trying to voice her meaning as best she can. She sees "those cool dead colonial blues and grays" as representative of out-dated signification systems to which she cannot attach meaning, while to her parents they are simply the "instigation of color." These old signs, which to her parents are a reinforcement of positive traditions, force her collapse into a protective shell that she calls her Sirius self after "the white dwarf Sirius, my favorite [star], diamond bright and diamond hard, indestructible by comets, meteors, people. Sirius is more serious than beetle gauze [Betelgeuse, a red giant star]" (85). Her mother wildly misinterprets Allie's language, and her father believes it to be meaningless.
Dr. Duk, her psychiatrist, tries through jokes to "cure" her of her meaningless use of words (and her more customary silence) and bring her back into the world of common language:

By enlisting her in his joke, he was trying, one, to be funny, and, two, to give her a "language structure" so that she, who had stopped talking because there was nothing to say, would have a couple of easy lines, straight man to his comic.

When he said Knock knock, it was not hard to say Who's there? Or Ivan who? Perhaps he was right. She could never lead off with a Knock knock. So she had lost most of her speech except for short questions such as Who's there? and Ivan who? ["Ivan to be alone."] (79)

As in the context of the joke, most of Allie's speech after she leaves the hospital takes the form of questions because she is constantly in need of re-clarifying and re-centering in order to understand what passes for normal conversation. When a stranger tells her that he has "been into running for three months," she responds: "'You've been what?' What was the meaning of the expression 'into running'? Perhaps he was in trouble. He was on the run" (31). She takes his words literally without putting them through the contextual filter of society: "She took words seriously to mean more or less what they said, but other people seemed to use words as signals in another code they had agreed upon" (31). She is trying to establish for herself the "rules" of discourse that everyone else seems to understand. "What she feared was a breakdown in the rules of ordinary living which other people observed automatically. What if the rules broke down?" (29).

Will Barrett understands the arbitrary nature of the rules of golf; Allie struggles to understand the seemingly arbitrary rules of everyday life. "Suddenly she remembered that she had once been an A student. But what if she flunked ordinary living?" (29).

But how does one determine society's rules and their meanings? First, in the hospital, she looks for meaning in the very sounds of words: "Morsel. She
liked the word. It was folded on itself and had a taste. It was dark and nourishing, better than a snack. She also liked his [Dr. Duk's] rubbish. It was cleaner and firmer than our trash" (81-82). She also tries to determine the meanings of her parents' conversation with the doctor from the sounds of their voices:

Voices can be understood without words. Her father's voice now had the same ragging importunate tone she heard from the landing when he was winning at poker. Dr. Duk's was tentative, premonitory—like a prospector whose Geiger counter begins to click: hold on, what's this? what have we here? Her mother's voice was foot-wagging, eyes going around, exclamatory, impatient: oh, for heaven's sake, let's get this over with! (108)

But this is at best an inexact and passive method of determining meaning; it does not allow her to convey her own meaning to others or to participate in the complicated rules of discourse that trouble her.

She does know, however, that to determine meaning for herself she cannot succumb to the plans that her parents and doctor are making for her: they wish to relocate her in an environment in which she would be permanently supervised and not allowed to decide what to do with her life. In the meantime they want to enjoy the substantial inheritance Allie has recently received from a friend of her aunt. When she finds (by eavesdropping at the door) that she has come into a minor fortune, she feels empowered enough to set her own course and escape from the hospital.

She escapes through another unusual use of language, this time of the written variety. She knows that she will have the opportunity to escape after her electroconvulsive treatment, but she also knows that she will have temporarily lost her memory after the session. She finds a solution by writing "INSTRUCTIONS FROM MYSELF TO MYSELF" in a notebook that she will read after she awakens. Thus she uses language to give herself direction, and by treating herself
as another person in the instructions (she writes in the second person), she enhances her ability to determine and decide practical courses of action and to convey these decisions in language, an ability that steadily improves throughout the novel.

But the ability to make one's way alone in the world is not adequate for Allie. "After making a living, then what do you do? How do you live?" (78). She finds herself feeling lonely at four o'clock in the afternoon when her work is done. What to do at four in the afternoon? In order to make a place for herself in the world she must not only establish a "living," she must also relate to those around her in a meaningful way. But she does not have to do this on her own.

3. Will and Allie

"Finally, though, it is the issue of language that is central in this novel, as it was in the other books, and it is in this novel that Percy's emphasis on the ordeal of naming is most brilliantly dramatized" (Pearson, 96). A key element in the act of naming for Allie is the aural effect of language. She establishes her connection of sound with meaning through her curious way of speaking. She tends to choose words with care so that they convey her meaning while rhyming. By using two words she creates a richness of meaning while the rhyme forms a firm correlation between the words: "I felt concealed and revealed" (69), "I wasn't spying or denying" (70), "A fit by chance is romance" (77). "This is a good place for a new start with words" (75), she tells herself, and she begins to look at words with fresh interest, seeing them as a commodity and a means to an end. Will Barrett is a broker of this commodity; he has the words that she needs. "Give me the words" and "Thanks for the word" (100), she tells Will as if he has given her a gift. Once she has the words she delights in using them and in the new power that they bring her. But to make them her own she must use them in new and creative ways rather
than in worn-out forms like Dr. Duk's *knock knock* jokes or her father's indiscriminate complaints. Once free of the hospital she is able to take command and establish her own use of language rather than have what is to her a meaningless "language structure" forced upon her.

Will not only acts as a supplier of words and ideas but also as exegete to her unusual language patterns. When he hears her speak he recognizes that she is in the process of developing her linguistic ability: "But there was another voice, something new and not quite formed" (100). When he gives her a gift she tells him: "What a consideration! But more than a consideration. The communication is climbing to the exchange level and above. And the Plagna is not bologna." Will effortlessly translates: "Did she mean that his consideration (being considerate) was more than just a consideration (a small amount), more than exchange (market value of the Plagniol), which was after all baloney?" (100). Will understands her language while her mother misinterprets it, her father thinks it is meaningless, and her doctor tries to cure her of it. Kitty wants him to "listen" to Allie. Indeed he does, but not in the way she might expect; he is not interested in changing her. Will approaches Allie's speech without an agenda.

For example, when Will visits Allie at her new greenhouse home, the only remaining structure on the mountain property she has inherited, and gives her a few essentials (including a few words), he understands Allie's awkwardness when she wants him to leave, and he relates to the problems of signification that she expresses:

"When are you going to leave?" [Allie]
"Oh."
"You see."
"What?"
"The feelings are more than revealing."
"Yes, I see what you mean. Yes, you may have hurt my feelings a little, but maybe not as badly as you think. At any rate, it is not an awful thing. I'll leave so you can enjoy the avocados."

"It's not you."

"You mean it's not that you dislike me but you don't know how to get rid of me and that makes you nervous. What if I don't leave? Yes, it's a problem sometimes. I developed an art of moving people out of my office. It was a matter of placement of chairs and of getting up and moving in such a way that the other person finds himself at the door without knowing how he got there."

"Le cool is coming soon," she said, gazing around.
"Le cool? Yes, fall is upon us."
"Le dad is no better than le doc and what are you in le plan?"
"Well, I don't know. But I wasn't trying to be your father or your doctor."

"Understanding can also be a demand. De man. Le mans."
"Yes. I guess you are fed up with people trying to understand you. And I guess I was sounding like--who? De man. What man is that, I wonder. I'm making you nervous. I'll be going." (103)

This is a crucial scene because Will presents the qualities that lay the groundwork for her trust in him. Will understands her but does not try to decide things for her; he is non-prescriptive and, therefore, not threatening to her new ability to think and decide for herself. When Allie says that "Understanding can also be a demand," she voices her complaint that when people try to understand her unusual speech it is usually for the purpose of trying to cure her of it.² But while Allie needs someone to understand her, she also needs to make her own decisions in order to define herself. "Asking is losing, she might have said. Or getting helped is behelt" (84). She wants to make it on her own. When those subscribing to traditional systems of meaning (like psychiatry) try to help her, it impedes her progress just as it had for Kate Cutrer, because their "empty proclamations" do not hold meaning for her.

²Percy might be poking fun at deconstruction when Allie says "Understanding can also be a demand. De man." Allie feels that when people "misread" her they create meanings to suit their own purposes. She essentially complains that people tend to deconstruct her language. Percy may be inserting an inside joke at the expense of deconstructionist Paul de Man.
His curious conversations with Allie also begin to affect Will Barrett's use of language. At one point he thinks to himself: "Where is the word, the girl in the greenhouse would say, and look around" (116). He does not judge her because he is having a similar crisis of meaning: since he does not subscribe to a signification or belief system (e.g. Psychiatry, Presbyterianism, Theosophism), he does not try to classify her according to one. But he truly begins to feel her influence after his ill-fated search for a sign from God in a long-disused cave—the "desert place" he had referred when writing to Sutter.

Suffering from exhaustion, thirst, and pain, he searches for the mouth of the cave and escape from his self-inflicted imprisonment. The opening he happens upon turns out to be an opening to Allie's greenhouse, and he crashes through her ceiling like a comet. This incident occasions a discovery for Allie. He clears the vines away from the cave opening when he falls and thus unblocks the greenhouse's natural air-conditioning system, a steadily temperate flow of air that keeps the house warm in winter and cool in summer. For Will the fall is even more provoking. He had expected to find from his experiment that either the believers were right and God would deliver a sign, or that the unbelievers were right and God would not deliver a sign. But after his fall Allie asks him:

"Did you find the answer?"
"Yes."
"Which was it?"
"I don't know." (223)

Will receives no unambiguous sign, but the sign that he does receive (Allie's nursing him back to health and the realization of their love) points him in a new direction: self-discovery and self-definition. He has witnessed Allie's rebirth; her escape from the hospital has allowed her to redefine herself and make her own decisions. This rebirth has spawned in her a constant joy in new discoveries:
"She clapped her hands for joy. What a discovery! To get a job, do it well, which is a pleasure, and get paid, which is yet another pleasure. What a happy life employees have! . . . the trick lay in leading the most ordinary life imaginable, get an ordinary job, in itself a joy in its very ordinariness, and then be as extraordinary or ordinary as one pleased. That was the secret" (223). Will has gone through a rebirth of his own; he has been given another chance at life, and, like Kate Cutrer, whose concept of suicide allowed her to relish her existence, Will's near-death experience allows him to redefine himself and to defy those tired old traditions that he now perceives as a death in life:

Ha, there is a secret after all, he said. But to know the secret answer, you must first know the secret question. The question is, who is the enemy?
Not to know the name of the enemy is already to have been killed by him.

Ha, he said, dancing, snapping his fingers and laughing and hooting ha hoo hee, jumping up and down and socking himself, but I do know. I know. I know the name of the enemy.
The name of the enemy is death, he said, grinning and shoving his hands in his pockets. Not the death of dying but the living death. (246)

Watching Allie's linguistic ordeal has helped to show him the importance of naming. This new emphasis provides him the means to name all of the forms of living death in the guise of signification and value systems that will "not prevail" over him. It also allows him to name the alternative to these many deaths: "Everybody thinks that there are only two things: war which is a kind of life in death, and peace which is a kind of death in life. But what if there should be a third thing: life?" (247). Like Allie who discovers the joy of choosing a life and living it, Will decides to live a new life of his own rather than fall prey to what he sees are various forms of death snapping at his door. Will and Allie play out the drama of his decision and her realization through the rest of the novel as they strive to re-invent the terms that define them. But they have one more discovery to
make: that they need each other as a center and source of stability to their new worlds.

Allie makes this discovery first as they hold each other in the greenhouse during the first sleet of the year: "She was moving against him, enclosing him, wrapping her arms and legs around him, as if her body had at last found the center of itself outside itself" (233). She has found her center of meaning as well as her sexual center. Here is an alternative to her white dwarf "Sirius" self. Will provides a linguistic center as well; his conversations produce in her a pleasure as intense as sexual pleasure: "Though he was hardly touching her, his words seemed to flow across all parts of her body. Were they meant to? A pleasure she had never known before bloomed deep in her body. Was this a way of making love?" (237). And just as Percy lists some of the signs in his world of signs in Lost in the Cosmos, she listens with pleasure as he inaugurates their new mutual world of signs:

He was using words like "my shameful secret of success as a lawyer," "phony," "radar," "our new language," "this gift of yours and mine," "ours" (this was her favorite), "being above things," "not being able to get back down to things" (!), "how to reenter the world" (?), "by God?" "by her?" (!!!!!). (237)

Their new language is their new ability to determine meaning by using words in new and different ways; it lends them the power to name independent of society's classification systems.

Allie has found something else of value in addition to her new linguistic powers: she has also discovered a possible cure for her four o'clock in the afternoon malaise:

"Oh my," she said. "Imagine."
"Imagine what?"
"Imagine having you around at four o'clock in the afternoon." (233)
As well as having discovered the liberation of making a living, she has also found the answer to her earlier question: "After you make a living, then what do you do? How do you live?" (78). She arrives at the answer in conversation with a checkout girl at the A & P supermarket: "Then that is what people do, get a job, go to church, get a sweet honey man. All those years of dreaming in childhood, of going to school, singing Schubert, developing her talent as her mother used to say, she had not noticed this" (228). Will has helped to provide her with the means and the confidence to make a living as well as the means to live after the making. By taking her language and desires at face value, rather than subjecting them to endless interpretations and judgments, he has helped to give her the freedom to find her own meanings.

But Will has another lapse into a crisis of meaning before he and Allie can firmly establish their life together. He returns to his house and finds that others are making plans for him. Jack Curl and Leslie are planning to build a "love-and-faith community" with the money that Will has inherited from his wife. His friend Bertie has planned to enter him into the Seniors' golf tour. And in his mind he begins to slide back into that old arbitrary sign world of the golf and country club mentality: "Why not play golf with the hale and ruddy Seniors for the next thirty years? He'd be the youngest on tour, the Golden Bear among the old grizzlies" (265). He completely regresses after he wrecks his Mercedes on the way back to town. As he walks to the bus station he thinks to himself: "Leslie has a plan. He felt himself in good hands" (266). He has forgotten his resolution not to succumb to tired old classifications; he is allowing his destiny to be decided for him as he falls prey to the living death.

A stranger at the bus stop mentions his Georgia destination to him, and Will suddenly decides that Thomasville, Georgia, the site of his father's first suicide attempt, must also be his destination: "Georgia, the man had said, and the word
came to him like a sign. Georgia! That was the place!" (267). But like the imaginary departure of the Jews from North Carolina, Georgia is a false "sign" for Will. He has momentarily forgotten that he has decided to start a new life. Then while on the bus he sees a poplar tree shaped in such a way that it reminds him of Allie, and suddenly "his heart was flooded with a sweetness but a sweetness of a different sort, a sharp sweet urgency, a need to act, to run and catch. He was losing something. Something of his as solid and heavy and sweet as a pot of honey in his lap was being taken away" (269). But his remembering is short-lived. When he demands that the driver stop the bus, the driver reacts violently by forcing Will out the door without stopping the bus. Before impact, with the ground flying up to his face he says to himself: "right, it's not going to end like this or in a Georgia swamp either because I won't stand for it and don't have to" (271). He loses consciousness.

Will awakens in a hospital room with Leslie, Jack Curl, Vance Battle, and another doctor gathered around him. The doctors inform him that he suffers from a rare illness known as "Hausmann's Syndrome" (based on a real syndrome called temporal-lobe epilepsy), a disease resulting from an imbalance of the pH level in his brain. The other doctor, Dr. Ellis, describes the symptoms:

As I recalled, Dr. Hausmann listed such items as depression, fugues, certain delusions, sexual dysfunction alternating between impotence and satyriasis, hypertension, and what he called wahnsinnige Sehnsucht—I rather like that. It means inappropriate longing. (274)

As Dr. Ellis describes the treatment, which consists of regular monitoring of the pH level, Will takes note of "the not unpleasant sensation of being caught up, diagnosed, recognized, planned for, of the prospect of one's life being ordered henceforward, like joining the army" (275). Again, Will has forgotten his resolutions and is allowing others to choose his course for him. And the doctors
and company wish to relieve him of what they believe to be "inappropriate longings," in other words, thoughts that do not accord with the categories that society has set; they want to control his mind and make him subscribe to the traditional signification systems that he has been so desperate to escape. Dr. Ellis describes another man with the same illness and claims that "Except for living in our convalescent wing, he has a normal life" (275, my italics). They want to do to Will the same thing that they did to Allie: constantly monitor and watch him, make his decisions, while all the time they pretend that he is living the life of his own choosing.

They send him to St. Mark's Convalescent Home where he can be properly monitored and supervised. He does not resist, his mind numbed by the pH-controlling medication. They direct him away from unconventional thoughts with a drug that creates a sensation of contentedness. But when he avoids taking his medicine for twelve hours he begins to think on his own again: "Again the past rose to haunt him and the future rose to beckon him. Things took on significance" (296, my italics). As things take on significance he finds himself returning to Allie, his new center of significance. He has again come to the realization that he needs her, and he tells her why:

[Will] "We need each other for different things."
[Allie] "What is the manifestation of the difference?"
"I need you for hoisting and you need me for interpretation."
"Say what?"
"I fall down from time to time and you are very good at hoisting. It would be pleasant to have you around to give me a hand," he said.
"The pleasure would be mine. In short, I'll do it. I am so happy about your pH."
"By the same token, I remember everything and you forget most things. I'll be your memory. Then too, your language is somewhat unusual. But I understand it. In fact, it means more than other people's. Thus, I could both remember for you and interpret for you." (300)
Allie will be there to provide stability for Will when he has an occasional crisis of meaning, while Will will be the voice of authority confirming her meanings.

But the book does not quite end at this point. Will collects others of society's rejects (a gardener and builders from the convalescent home) and provides them with jobs developing the land that Allie has inherited. He does not judge or classify them, and thus he gives them a means to determine their own signification outside the system that has condemned them to eternal senility. Thus they set out literally to build a new sign world, albeit a small one.

"How would you like to begin your new life?" Will asks Allie. She answers: "It is time. How would you like to begin yours?" (301). Will certainly starts from the beginning as he proposes to work as a clerk for Slocum, the town lawyer, until he can pass the North Carolina Bar exam. To fully establish his "new life" he must put behind him the high profile Wall Street lawyer (an image and a context now worn out for him) that he once was.

The end of the novel finds Will asking Father Weatherbee, an old Catholic priest, to perform the wedding ceremony for him and Allie. Will's recognition of God is rather abrupt but not unconvincing. Although he did not at first perceive the answer to his cave experiment, he begins to see Allie as the "unmistakable sign" that he has been looking for: "Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver?" (328). Initially, he asks the question, but in the final sentences he convinces himself of the answer: "Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have" (328). It is natural that the book should end with Will looking to God because he has realized that life is a mystery (but one to be savored), and love is a delight. And as Percy himself wrote: "Life is a mystery, love is a delight. Therefore, I take it as axiomatic that one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight; i.e., God"
(Signposts, 417). Thus Percy's ultimate cure for linguistic sickness is to allow God to be the center of meaning, though not the God of the half-hearted Christianity and worn out clichés subscribed to by Jack Curl and the like. Such religion becomes a hollow construct, cheapened by ambiguity and inauthentic proclamations of faith. Percy's characters liberate themselves through action and by freeing themselves from proclamations: good works rather than good words. Percy calls the reader simply to read God's "unmistakable signs" in these actions of liberation.

In the process of composing this essay I have noticed that my finger reaches for the question mark key ("?") with remarkable frequency, especially when quoting from Percy's texts. This recurrence of the interrogative mode should not be surprising to the Walker Percy reader, for the question mark denotes an ambiguity of language and meaning central to his philosophical and narrative concerns. While the nature of the presentation changes from novel to novel, from the playful satire of Love in the Ruins to the heart of darkness at the core of Lancelot, the inquiry stays the same: that is, what is the place of humankind, and what can one make of our strange and unique ability to use words, and what do these two problems have to do with each other?³

However, in his fiction Percy does us one better than merely asking the question, an admirable enough service by itself; he gives us stories that seem to make banal the prospect of searching for abstract answers to these questions. To do so would be to disguise philosophical issues as people and come dangerously close to allegory, and Percy held that "allegories are dull affairs. I've never read a readable one" (Signposts, 201). These are real people as unsure of their natures as

³His first book of philosophical essays, The Message in the Bottle (1975), is subtitled: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other.
we are; and one of Percy's true insights as a novelist is his refusal to create characters who transcend the bounds of reality by finding definitive answers to abstract problems. Indeed it is when Will Barrett gives up his philosophical quest to find God and confronts real issues, his love for Allie and the new practical aspects of his daily life, that he finds his personal justifications for existence.

But Percy also resists the novelist's temptation to reach conclusions. Like the rest of us, his characters are still evolving when we leave them. At the end of *The Moviegoer* we do not know if Kate Cutrer can maintain her precarious stability, nor do we know if Binx is sincere or will be faithful in his new "love" for Kate. And while Allie seems more confident than Kate, we leave her at the beginning of her new life, not the end; her future is no more sure than the enigmatic Will's who, despite his new enthusiasm, might find himself at the bottom of another bunker on the seventeenth fairway if he doesn't watch his pH level.
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