

Part Five, Chapter Three:
The Moviegoer: Sackloth and Ashes

by
Karey Perkins

*On writing *The Moviegoer*: [It] is not the picture of a man setting out to entertain or instruct or edify a reader. It is the picture, rather, of a scientist who has come to the dead end of a traditional hypothesis which no longer accounts for the data at hand. (MB 190)*

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Since true prophets... are in short supply, the novelist may perform a semi-prophetic function. Like the prophet, his news is generally bad. (MB 104)

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For as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics – which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker (MG 14).

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Percy's first novel conveys the themes and characterizations that he would continue his entire literary career. Binx is a seeker, a wayfarer and pilgrim, for something "more." In *The Moviegoer*, Percy shows a protagonist subtly guided on his search by signs and clues of the transcendent, as in all his other novels, but Percy's symbolic use of numbers and geometric diagrams would not emerge until his fourth novel.

Percy's thesis that a human is: "more than an organism in an environment, more than an integrated personality, more even than a mature and creative individual, as the phrase goes. He is a wayfarer and a pilgrim" (SSL 246), is demonstrated throughout his novels. The outward and material (dyadic) world is far less than the whole – or even the primary purpose – of any Percyan character. Binx Bolling is the twentieth-century postmodern man, dealing with spiritual alienation and dissatisfaction in a materialist culture that offers nothing outside itself – as other mid-century writers have portrayed.

Binx is the "unknown citizen" Auden draws, and the "invisible man" that Ellison encourages – at peace, outwardly, with society and with his life, yet inwardly, something is unfulfilled, something not quite right: "...people with interesting hobbies suffer the most noxious of despairs since they are tranquillized by their despair" (MG 86). Binx lives the good life, but is still, himself, on the brink of despair – only his self chosen "search" keeps him from it, and his occasional distractions: women, earning money, movies, cars. "Whenever I drive a car, I have the feeling I have become invisible" (MG 11). Binx says:

Life in Gentilly is very peaceful. I manage a small branch office of my uncle's brokerage firm. My home is the basement apartment of a raised bungalow belonging to Mrs. Schexnaydre, the widow of a fireman. I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me. My wallet is full of identity cards, library cards, credit cards... It is a pleasure to carry out the duties of a citizen... I subscribe to Consumer Reports and as a consequence I own a first –class television set, an all but silent air-conditioner, and a very long lasting deodorant.... I pay attention to all the announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving... (MG 6-7)

Like the anonymous unknown citizen, identified by Auden only as JS/07 M 378, Binx is known more by his identity cards than his *name* or his inner self. He is the "model citizen" as the unknown citizen is. He and Auden's citizen both own

the right possessions, albeit different ones for their times; they both take care of their health (both mental and physical) as per social dictates. He takes pride in his conformity, and his certifications by society (“birth certificate, college diploma, honorable discharge, G.I. insurance,...” (MG 6)). The details parallel Auden’s poem, and Percy uses the word “citizen” twice in this paragraph, reinforcing the comparison. Binx is the unknown citizen – but is he free? Is he happy? The question is absurd – or at least it is in the modern world. The fact is, he is not happy because he is not a solely dyadic creature:

Now in the thirty first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it,... living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prosper like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; ... Nothing remains but desire... My search has been abandoned;... I have to find a girl. (MG 228)

He is triadic. Above all, Binx is a seeker for something more than what is offered in his environment. Like Dante wandering in the dark wood, Binx often “comes to himself” – comes out of the distractions of the dark wood of this-world, and sees where he is for what it is. “I remember what I came for” (MG 44), Binx says often. “I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside down for me as I shall explain later” (MG 10). It is then that, for the first time, the possibility of the search occurs to him. “The search is what anyone would take if he were into sunk in the everydayness of his own life.... To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair” (MG 13). The search, a triadic one, is for the satisfaction of another need than biological; the new need is the ontological need of “knowing” an “Other” – of encountering Being. The symbolic, triadic nature of humans is a manifestation of this need. Percy’s “everydayness” is the physical world of sign. Animals don’t search for anything other than their next meal and while many humans choose only to live at this level too, and while modern society even encourages that, Percy believes true human nature needs more. Humans, who use symbols, need God, who is in the realm of meaning and symbol, who is accessed through symbol.

Binx’s discomfort, not being at-home-in-this-world, is reflected in his life. His apartment is “as impersonal as a motel room” (MG 68). He doesn’t accumulate possessions; he remains anonymous in the world, simply earning money and enjoying the pleasure. His heartfelt connection to others in community doesn’t exist. It is a life of loneliness and occasional distractions, such as Sharon or earning money. The magazine of people stories his landlady gives him is the closest thing to connection he experiences. Lonely old Mrs. Schexnaydre, the landlady, has three dogs...

...each for the reason that it had been reputed to harbor a special dislike for Negroes. I have no particular objection to this trait in a dog – for all I know, Mrs. Schexnaydre’s fears may be quite justified. However, these are miserable curs and to make matters worse, they also dislike me. One I especially despise, an orange-colored brute with a spitz face and a plume of a tail which curves over his back exposing a large convoluted anus. I have come to call him old Rosebud. (MG 76-77)

Percy’s themes of alienation and loneliness manifest in this passage. Mrs. S. is alone and lonely, disconnected from community. Her fear of blacks represents the lack of oneness in society – divisions not just on a personal level, but on a social level. Binx is detached from it all. He’s not reached Kierkegaard’s ethical stage yet, so the “rightness” or “wrongness” of Mrs. S.’s prejudices matter not at all to him, only how it might affect him. The three dogs are Cerebus, the ugly, brutish three-headed dog guarding the gates of hell: Mrs. Schexnaydre’s world, in which Binx lives, is a hell in its aloneness and division.

The allusion to Orson Well’s *Citizen Kane*’s “Rosebud” is significant. The movie centers around the search for the meaning of the name “Rosebud” which the movie’s dying protagonist utters at the very beginning of the movie – the movie’s first spoken word and the protagonist’s last dying word. The movie’s search echoes that Binx is on a search for the ontological connection. “Rosebud” was the meaning of the Well’s protagonist’s life; in the movie, it was the sled given to him by his parents that he was separated from when he was a boy – symbolic of when he was taken from the love of his family to be raised by the bank – a lonely and alienated arrangement, though financially lucrative.

This, then, is the life and fate of modern man. The danger is, of becoming “no one nowhere” (MG 83). Kate says to Binx, “What if there is nothing. That is what I’ve been afraid of until now – being found out to be concealing nothing” (MG 115). The void is terrifying. Death is a void; death is terrifying. It is nothingness. Naming, self, and community ensure “something.” But the community is also related to an actuality, a reality, outside itself. In other words, the community can’t agree upon something that doesn’t really exist. But it must agree on something. It ensures we do not live in a void, that we live in an agreed upon community of triadic symbols, constituting a tetradic community that creates a world. To not live in this agreed upon world is to be isolated and to wonder if one’s world actually exists – if it actually is real. Kate continues,

“Couldn’t a person be miserable because he got one thing wrong and never learned otherwise – because the thing he got wrong was of such a nature that he could not be told because the telling itself got it wrong – just as if you had landed on Mars and therefore had no way of knowing that a Martian is mortally offended by a question and so every time you asked what was wrong, it only grew worse for you.” (MG 113).

Neither Binx nor Kate feels at home in their worlds. Something is missing. They are seekers.

Binx may be on a search, but would rather not think so. His distant buddies (“the last time I had friends was eight years ago,” MG 41) are content with their distractions from the search, but Binx, try as he may to be content, is not: “We were pretty good drinkers and talkers and we could spiel about women and poetry and Eastern religion in pretty good style... In fact this was what I was sure I wanted to do. But in no time at all I became depressed” (MG 41). Binx feels they are saying, “How about this, Binx? This is really it, isn’t it boy?” (MG 41), yet this only spirals him into a “deep melancholy” (MG 41).

Their distractions are not the “it” that Binx is searching for; rather, he is enticed and gladdened and fascinated by “wonder.” He says of his friends’ activities: “It doesn’t distract me from the wonder.... Not for five minutes will I be distracted from the wonder” (MG 42). The dyadic world does not have wonder – nor does it have mystery – but there are “clues,” signs. For it is also mystery – mystery beyond the everydayness – he seeks. Kate’s derriere is a kind of mystery; it is “ample and mysterious,” he says. Though Kate’s derriere is obviously not the real wonder, the real mystery, that Binx seeks, he is happy with it. It is a “clue” to mystery beyond the everydayness, just like the contents of his pockets are “both unfamiliar and at the same time full of little clues” (MG 11). Their unfamiliarity means he is seeing things with fresh eyes – which are now opened to see something more, to see the transcendent.

Even in Kierkegaard’s aesthetic stage, these mundane objects can be clues that there may be a transcendent. The sign/symbol permeates as light shining in the darkness – or maybe just faintly glimmering, but light-emanating nonetheless. The difference is, in the aesthetic stage, the light is fleeting and transitory – and distorted by the lens through which it is viewed – and easily lost and disappears. St. Paul said, “Now I see through a glass darkly...” and then, in the afterlife, he will see more clearly, “face-to-face.” In Plato’s *Parable of the Cave*, the prisoners view the shadows as real, though they are not. They are, of course, merely shadows of real people and things. Yet the shadows, though not reality in its entirety, are clues to what is real. They still give glimmers as to what really exists; they hint that there is something more.

Success can satisfy briefly. Binx, exulting and communing with Sharon on their success, saying: “Our name is Increase” (MG 94), conveys a shadow of the real symbol, and a reflection of the joy, though muted and transient. “It is a great joy to be with Sharon and to make money” (MG 95). Binx’s car becomes a symbol of not only his own success, but a hint of this something beyond, something other-worldly, that can lift him out of everydayness. It is a religious icon, carrying the transcendent within it, at least within Binx’s head (where all symbol occurs anyway). The new automobile is “endowed...with certain magic properties by virtue of the mystery and remoteness of its manufacture” (MB 284). Percy calls this an “idolatrous desire” – to have the car not for its function of transportation, but rather to “have the car itself” and therefore transform one’s life from nothingness to somethingness (MB 284). It is a means of identity, totemism: “The car itself is all-important, I have discovered” (MG 123). While his old Dodge was “a regular incubator of malaise... The MG jumps away from the stop sign like a young colt. I feel fine. Yes she [Sharon] is onto the magic of this little car.

We are earthbound as a worm, yet we rush along at a tremendous clip between earth and sky. (Like Odysseus on the horizon...) ... we flash past and all of the sudden there is the Gulf, flat and sparkling away to the south" (MG 124). The car has become the carrier of magic and mystery, a clue to the transcendent. Like the Word, the divine name, the divine is contained within the earthly signifier. The car is a symbol, however earthbound and ultimately inadequate a signifier it is, for Binx. Yet the fact that he signifies at all is evidence of his search for the signified, despite the mistaken and "idolatrous" path. He is a human seeking the divine encounter.

These clues – Kate's derriere, the coins in his pocket, his car – are signs of his search for the transcendent despite their inefficacy at leading him to the transcendent. The war also provides a distraction from "death" and the void of everydayness, ironically. Emily says, "How simple it would be to fight. What a pleasant thing it must be to be among people who are afraid for the first time when you yourself for the first time you life have a proper flesh-and-blood enemy to be afraid of. What a lark! Isn't that the secret of heroes?" (MG 58). A cause gives an elusive, though concrete and non-transcendent, meaning and purpose to life. Binx explains his scar to Sharon: He got it in the war: "Farewell forever, malaise" (MG 127). For Binx, the war is not a Kierkegaardian stage two ethical cause – for a purpose or contribution to society – but an aesthetic cause, bringing him closer to the delights of Sharon. Yet, within it is the shadow of eternal victory – denial of death – not transcendent yet, but still a glimmer of such. Having a real, concrete obstacle or battle to fight is a cure to the abstract, elusive enemy of existential angst. A cause lifts us out of the everyday banality of life.

Eddie Lovell, the salesman, is caught in the everydayness and conformity of life, and quite happy with it. He asks no questions, is not on any search, has no need for any mystery beyond the physical realities of the dyadic world: "Now he jingles the coins deep in his pocket. No mystery here! – he is as cogent as a bird dog quartering in a field. He understands everything out there and everything out there is something to be understood" (MG 19). For similar reasons, Binx does not envy his more industrious and successful friend Harry Stern: "—now here is a fellow who does have a flair for research and will be heard from. Yet I do not envy him. I would not change places with him if he discovered the cause and cure of cancer. For he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in" (MG 52). Lovell is the earthly salesman, Stern the airy romantic (a scientist enthralled with his research), but neither are onto the answer.

Both are dyadic and desire nothing "more," yet both characters are drawn without overt references to twos or pairs or dyads. Binx's triadic character is drawn with many symbols and other rhetorical devices, but only a few threes or triangles present themselves in this, Percy's first novel. And, even when threes are present, these threes are not the triad of language theory, but the trinity of the church.

The movies are alternately clues to his search, and distractions from, his search. Binx finds greater reality in movies at times: "It is their [movie stars] particular reality which astounds me" (MG 17). When Kate and Binx watch *Panic in the Streets* with Richard Widmark, that takes place on Tchoupitoulas Street in New Orleans, and they walk out onto the street itself, she and Binx both know it is "certified," making it more "real" (MG 63):

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 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. (MG 63)

Certification is a kind of "naming." Just as we name an object and place it in our intersubjective framework by such action, so does movie certification "name" the object, placing it in a communal framework. Moviegoers from California to New York now know and see Tchoupitoulas Street just as the movie director has framed it, and the masses of America agree upon its existence and character, as portrayed by the movie director. Samway explains:

Percy wrote a draft of what would eventually become *The Moviegoer*, winner of the National Book Award in 1962. The story, which differs considerably from the printed novel, depicts a young medical student attending a John Ford movie at Radio City Music Hall in New York City. The unnamed narrator lives at the West Side

Y.M.C.A., just as Walker Percy did when he first arrived in New York to begin studies at Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons. While watching the cowboy in the movie, the narrator asks: "Who is he? What is his identity in relation to me?" And then the epiphany: "For we live in a meaningful world," the narrator says. "This moment, the moment of the movies, is the Significant Moment." ... The protagonist, Binx Bolling, who ultimately goes to medical school himself, resembles his earlier New York City counterpart in that both men find intense satisfaction while watching movies, suggesting, as did Woody Allen later in "The Purple Rose of Cairo," that movies are more "real" than everyday life. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy poses not only a serious question about the nature and function of art for people who are searching for some type of authentic existence, but about the place where they will find it. ("Walker Percy's Homeward Journey," para. 8)

Art functions to "name" our life, just as a single word, the signifier, names its signified and brings its reality into our awareness and our world. Movies are naming devices just as words are, bringing the ontological connection with the other. Yet movies, like words, can restrict and box what they name as all symbols go through the stages of symbolic transformation. The symbol is the window to something beyond, hope of something more, but with one foot in this world, functions imperfectly.

When Binx's world gets a little too dyadic – too biologically oriented, too full of everydayness, too absent of symbol and meaning – the fabric of life wears thin. "Ah, William Holden where are you when we need you. Already the fabric is wearing thin without you" (MG 18). William Holden, the movie star, is an everyday symbol, a clue to what lies beyond. Again, these symbols, that have nothing to do with Binx's physical or biological success, represent that he is searching for something beyond that. They indicate a spirituality, however misguided or ineffective they are at actually bringing him to an existential "authenticity" or fulfillment, when he searches in the right place.

With this spirituality, the fabric of life is full. The fabric is the interwoven connectedness of all that is, instead of chaos of random events. It is a Langer's "world" instead of an environment, and Peirce's synechism and Jung's synchronicity instead of Freud's uncanny.

Ultimately, these everyday symbols such as William Holden fail to provide lasting connectedness to an underlying ground of Being. Percy writes of the movies:

The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place – but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. In two weeks time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead. (MG 13)

In fact, everyone is dead. "For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead" (MG 99). Talking to Nell Lovell, who speaks of her values, and "...why does she talk as if she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead." Nell asks how Kate is and Binx can only "think hard, trying to escape death...." But in the end, "We part laughing and dead" (MG 102).

Living the externally successful "good life" does not mean being alive. Physically, yes; ontologically, no. It is not life or the fullness of life. "I don't feel a bit gloomy!" Nell exclaims (MG 101). She and her husband communally have the same life goal: "To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off" (MG 101). For Percy, this is not the meaning of life, nor a cause worthy to live for. Binx rejects the Kierkegaard's second stage – the ethical stage of contribution of community.

Other characters also conform to second stage everydayness, and so none can offer Binx guidance or assistance in seeing something "more," something beyond the second stage, even if they'd like to. Aunt Emily is another character grounded in the world, who wants to direct Binx on his search, but is less far along spiritually than he is, so can offer him no help at all. Her search is still a this-worldly one in the ethical stage: "What is it you want out of life son? ... don't you feel obliged to use your brain, to make a contribution?" (MG 53). She recommends he search for purpose, but one found in the rewards of this world – a career, a job, good deeds, at the very least. But the real search is not for anything

in this world, which Binx already knows. It is inside of himself. Aunt Emily's rigid adherence to her southern stoic tradition and values keeps her from the real connectedness and fabric of life that Binx is seeking. While Aunt Emily's former world view is crumbling around her as the south is changing, she looks still to "this world" for her answers.

Her search is not the triadic search but the dyadic one – in a society. And even for Aunt Emily, the fabric of life is wearing thin. Binx says, "For her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense. She understands the chaos to come" (MG 54).

For Aunt Emily the solution is to live a good life in this world; Binx should go to med school and make a contribution and do it as best he can. Her southern stoicism admits defeat ahead of time, but finds honor and sense in the fruitless struggle anyway: "a man must go down fighting. That is the victory" (MG 54). She frames Binx's search, his spiritual journey, in a culturally accepted tradition that ends in this world, a "*Wanderjahr*, a fine year's ramble up the Rhine and down the Loire, with a pretty girl on one arm and a good comrade on the other" (MG 55). This *Wanderjahr* she exhorts is not the search of a wayfarer for meaning and purpose, but rather literally means to wander (with distractions and for distraction) aimlessly. It is a random journey, not a search, because it points to no transcendent reality and has no destination. Aunt Emily later condemns the search, without knowing her prescience; she is not in the photograph on the mantel because the participants wanted to, in her words, "Go gallivanting [sic] off to Hungary to shoot quail. I said, My God, you can shoot quail in Feliciana Parish" (MG 49). With unrealized wisdom, Aunt Emily voices that the quest is right here and now. It seems like it is far away, but it is in our home, inside us.

She represents the humanist tradition which fails only because it ends in itself – just as science, books, music fail (MG 55), if they become, not symbols to something else, something transcendent, but ends in and of themselves. "Percy presents a dialectic between two 'cures.' The first is stiff-upper-lip devotion to duty and traditional Southern values, as exemplified by Aunt Emily. The second is the mystery and irrationality of Catholicism, as embodied by Binx's mother and the Ash Wednesday service" (Coulehan, para. 4). Binx's realization of the despair and emptiness and futility of stage two ethical contributions to the world leads him to reject it, and to fall back into stage one, distractions.

There are other dialectics as well. The ironic fraternity name, Delta Psi, conveys this idea of the trivialization and loss of symbol that might point to something transcendent, and instead, points only to this world. Percy juxtaposes two opposites, in his view: Delta and Psi. The second half of the fraternity name is "Psi" – short for psychology. Percy almost went into psychiatry, and that interest is one seed of his study of anthropology. But psychology is inadequate to fully describe humans, especially their spiritual needs, which it often overlooks or even denies. It more often than not, offers chemical solutions to such conditions as despair. Psi is also a term for ESP and other a paranormal activity, something Percy viewed with disdain – and also not an answer (though purported to be one by the current age) to spiritual emptiness. The first half of the name is more significant: the Delta symbol represents human triadic behavior – symbol, language, art, culture, religion, the presence of the transcendent in the world – the REAL answer.

But not for the frat boys. Walter says in admiration, "'But when it comes to describing the fellows here, the caliber of the men, the bond between us, the meaning of this little symbol – ' he turned back his label to show the pin and I wondered if it was true that Deltas held their pins in their mouths when they took a shower – " (MG 37). When the fraternity members hold the Delta pin – a sign of the fraternity, no more than that, and not true fraternity – in their mouths, where language emits, Percy shows us that instead of searching for transcendence and meaning beyond themselves, these boys remain happy in the material world, keeping their spirituality and symbol-mongering locked away inside of them.

Binx is unsatisfied with this. His primary reaction to Walter's world is: "It was boring, to tell the truth" (MG 39). While Walter and his fraternity brothers have nothing wrong with them per se – they are in fact all "good fellows" (MG 38) – Binx would much rather be "lost in the mystery of finding myself alive at such a time and place" (MG 38).

Sex without soul – dyadic instead of triadic – is another theme of Percy's, covered much more thoroughly in later novels, especially *Love in the Ruins* and *Lancelot*. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy writes, "Dr. and Mrs. Bob Dean autograph copies of their book *Technique in Marriage* in a Canal Street Department store" (MG 189). The spiritual is missing from the

physical act; the book is cold psychology, not soul, and reduces sex to a mere biological act – a cause-effect dyad without the third element of the coupler. The physical act should be an expression of, be a medium through, which the spiritual occurs, just as a sacrament is. If one innate biological action has sacramental powers, rather than being arbitrarily created by human community, it is the sexual act. Spiritually, it is an encounter of ontologically knowing the essence of an “other,” as “Adam knew Eve” just as we know the signified through the signifier. It is a quite literally, a coupler. Binx feels an aversion to the Deans’ reduction of it to a mere “technique”: “It is impossible not to imagine them at their researches.... A wave of prickling passes over me such as I have never experienced before” (MG 190).

“Seeing” is also important to Percy. Vision enables humans (and animals) to perceive the physical environment, as Percy defines “environment;” however, “seeing” is the framework that we choose to overlay onto all that our senses absorb. Seeing refers to the ability to see past the mere physical everydayness and find clues and signs of something beyond. “Seeing” creates the “world” (as per Percy’s definition of world) that we live in and into which all that our vision perceptions will then fit, and then have symbolic significance and meaning. We “see” beyond our environment to the world. A world has meaning, is a place of human activity that transcends mere dyadic cause-effect. Freud’s theory of the “uncanny” says that these signs and clues are random and any meaning we attach to them is neurotic; Jung’s theory of synchronicity and Peirce’s synechism says that we’re on to something in perceiving something “more” in these coincidences. Binx deals with the dialectic of randomness versus order and pattern in the chaos, with the idea of arbitrary chance as opposed to an ordained, divine plan for life – right from his very beginnings. Aunt Emily laments Binx’s father marrying the nurse that worked for him. Binx says, “Sometimes I have the feeling myself that who my mother was and who I am depended on the chance selection of a supervisor of nurses in Biloxi” (MG 48). In the end, he seeks for and chooses divine pattern, not randomness, through his ability to “see” something more in the clues and symbols of life.

Sign comes in many different forms, not always word and language. In order to signal to Binx he wishes to see him, Uncle Jules “so signifies by leaving his door open to the corridor so that I will see him...” (MG 96). It is the coupler (the human’s perception) that makes sign what it is and that gives it meaning.

Among the many signs and clues Binx sees, the Jews predominate, just as they do in all his novels. Rather than a passing sign with significance only for the individual symbol-monger, the symbolic presence of the Jews has its roots in Judeo-Christian biblical tradition. Its communal certification over the span of millennia gives it greater authority and power. “An odd thing. Ever since Wednesday I have become acutely aware of the Jews. There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say” (MG 88). Binx’s noticing of the Jews presages *The Second Coming*, where the symbolism of Jews is even more prolific. Binx believes they indicate some meaning, purpose, and pattern to the world rather than a meaningless, absurd existence that has no transcendent reality. They reveal a fabric to life. He doesn’t know what it is, or what they indicate, but they indicate something. Percy says:

Between him and the Camus and Sartrean heroes of the absurd there is a difference. Camus would probably say the hero has to create his own values whether absurd or not, whereas Binx does not accept that the world is absurd; so he embarks on a search. So to him the Jews are a sign. I think he said, “Lately when I see a Jew on a street I am amazed nobody finds it remarkable. But to me it is like seeing Friday’s footprint in the beach.” Of course, he is not sure what it is a sign of. Sartre’s Roquentin in *La Nausee* or Camus’ Meursault in *L’etranger* would not find anything remarkable about a Jew, they would not be interested in him. (Conl I 76)

Binx searches for a “fabric of life” to the absurd chaos around him and seeks clues. He knows the Jews are one. Just as Binx does not know **what** the Jews are a clue to, just **that** they are a clue, Percy does not know what the coupler is a clue to, just that it, also, is a clue. His conclusion of *Message in the Bottle*: “The apex of the triangle, the coupler, is a complete mystery. What it is, an “I,” a “self,” or some neurophysiological correlate thereof, I could not begin to say” (MB 327), echoes Binx’s claim of the Jews that, “There is a clue here, but of what I cannot say” (MG 88). These are the same – both clues, signs, but more than dyadic signs, they are both symbols of a mysterious transcendent. Percy uses the same phrase to end this novel, saying of the penitent’s ashes and intentions, that “it is impossible to be sure... impossible to say” (MG 235) as to the what and why of his spiritual condition. But the signs – the Jews, the ashes – show that the mysterious transcendent, whatever it is, is there.

In college, Binx's friend Walter is "tapped for Golden Fleece,... the final honor in a paragraph of honors" (MG 36). In Greek myth, Jason's Golden Fleece is a sign of worldly achievement and status – he wins the crown of king upon retrieving it. It is also the color of gold, representing money, and something rare and valuable and coveted. The Order of the Golden Fleece is also an order of chivalry founded in 1430 by Phillip III of Burgundy – later becoming exclusively Catholic during the Reformation despite a pagan reference for its name and symbol. Both of these are symbolic of good behavior and social status in the world, something Walter represents and something that sends Binx into a spiral of depression because he is searching for something more.

However, embedded in the phrase is another, quite different allusion. In biblical lore, Gideon's fleece refers to his search for a sign. He makes a pact with God that if "there is dew on the fleece and all the ground is dry, then I will know that you will save Israel by my hand, as you said" (Judges 6:37) Sure enough, God does as requested, and when Gideon reverses the sign, (fleece dry, ground wet), God does so again. The biblical fleece is a symbol, not of achievement, but of covenant and relationship and community – and not any kind of relationship, but one with the eternal and transcendent. The fleece is a clue to God's real presence in Gideon's life as well as God's commitment and fulfilled promises.

Gideon's fleece is a concrete entity carrying clues of the transcendent, a symbol; the Golden Fleece of Greek myth is merely a sign that points to external accomplishment – even if represents solely an achievement in one's personality instead of physical deeds, it is still temporary and temporal. Binx seeks the symbol, not the sign, because his humanity calls him to such. To see a world only full of Golden Fleeces, and not Gideon's fleeces, is what brings on his displacement and his melancholy.

Seeking a Gideon's fleece, a sign of God, shows that Binx lives a "world" of symbol, of myth, that he lives a semiotic life – not a life merely of biological need-satisfaction. He can "see" something beyond it. Like the Jews, the fleece symbol with its roots in biblical tradition is a symbol of greater power than an individually created symbol. Both the Jews and the fleece can either be merely the same as any other thing in the world – physically, Gideon's fleece is no different than Jason's; Jews are no different than Gentiles. Or spiritually, they can be signs of God, almost sacramental – depending on if one "sees." Binx does.

The train ride Kate and Binx go on is a sign of the journey – but their answer is in New Orleans, not Chicago. The answer is inside self, at home; not outside self, far away. Binx's only real, authentic connections are with Kate and Lonnie. Kate is on "the brink of an abyss" (MG 81) – Kierkegaard's leap of faith. Kate is uneasy with Walter and her stepmother's help:

How much better it would be if they weren't so damn understanding – if they kicked me out of the house. To find yourself out in the street with two dollars to your name, to catch the streetcar downtown and get a job, perhaps as an airline stewardess. Think how wonderful it would be to fly to Houston and back three times a week for the next twenty years. You think I'm kidding? I'm not. It would be wonderful" (MG 66)

She abruptly hangs up when Binx suggest she do that. Kate is even less placated by the materialist world than Binx is, and her malfunction in it only indicates her need for something more. Kate is truly Binx's soulmate as their souls are both searching for the transcendent, unsatisfied with substitutions rather than external ones.

Percy's Catholic message is subtle in most of his books – while there are occasional Catholic figures (priests, nuns, or believers), they do not necessarily proclaim Catholic doctrine as though it were the only truth and the only way. But, when Catholicism is present, including specific, particular Catholic practices, they are shown as clues to the search. In *The Moviegoer*, Binx's half brother Lonnie is the Catholic figure – the Christ figure who suffers and dies for mankind: "For one thing, he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ" (MG 137). He fasts and abstains for Lent, he participates in the sacraments such as extreme unction and the Eucharist. Lonnie is the one that Binx envies the most – that Binx feels has found an answer to the search: "He is my favorite to tell the truth.... I would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is serene

business" (MG 137). Binx's transformation at the end is marked, like Lonnie's life, by sacraments and participation in sacraments; marriage, penance, here.

The sacrament is the union of the physical and spiritual – or more exactly, it is the spiritual manifested through the physical, made present through the physical world and actions. Binx's commitment to others becomes his grace and his sacrament. But, it is to be differentiated from Walter's and Aunt Emily's ethical stage two commitments to achievement and contribution; Binx is not doing so out of a desire to make a contribution to society – that ends only there, with itself. His commitment to others is also a commitment to God. He creates the closest community – an intimate one, a family, not an abstract or anonymous one. Nor is he doing so out of a fatalistic, stoic, resignation that this is what must be in the changing South. Percy explains: "But in the end – and we're using Kierkegaardian terminology here – Binx jumps the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious. He had no ethical sphere at all. That's what Aunt Emily can't understand about him" (Con I 66).

Binx's religious stage is not a purely Kierkegaardian one though. It is *through* commitment to people in one's life that commitment to God is experienced. The novel itself ends with Binx's servanthood to Kate and his family: "I watch her walk toward St. Charles, cape jasmine held against her cheek, until my brothers and sisters call out behind me" (MG 242). Marcel's relational spirituality captures this idea better than Kierkegaard's stage three asceticism and sacrifice of others and the world. Through relationship with the people in Binx's life – a true affirmation and embracing of "this world" and the people of this world – he experiences the grace of God. The Marcellian religious stage is a connection to something transcendent out of which flows connections to this world and to those inhabitants in it, which then become fertile ground for further connection to the transcendent.

In Binx's commitment to Kate, to Lonnie, to his family, he manifests his love for God. The aesthetic's distractions are gone: "The playground is deserted" (MG 231). Sharon and Joyce are gone – Kate is chosen. The playground of life is empty, he realizes, and he no longer finds satisfaction in distracting himself with other women or meaningless activities – he is going to build a Marcellian community in marriage and family, where he can live out fidelity to and love of God through faithfulness to and love of his wife and family. Where Binx finds his true place and purpose, and his real clues to his Kierkegaardian search, is in Marcellian community and family. He finds it at home with Kate and Lonnie – relationships of love, relationships of understanding, commitment, family, and permanency.

This is the end to all of Percy's novels (except possibly *The Last Gentleman*) – the protagonist wanders and searches throughout the books, for "God" we presume, only to find himself, at the end of the novel, settling down with a good woman, a fabric of life, in a leafy enclave of human love in which grows divine love and grace. The divine is interwoven within their love. Binx ends with his commitment to Kate, and in the final scene he is a father figure for his nieces and nephews – the movie ending of "everydayness" that he deplores at the beginning of the book. As Kennedy said, to which Percy answered in the affirmative: "In other words, essentially what you're interested in is in the wandering and the searching and being in doubt, but once the character makes his commitment, that's the time when you've got to hit the road and end the book" (Con I 234).

Yet Percy retains some of Kierkegaard. His stage three mystic is silent, in a place that transcends words. In the presence of sacrament, words are not only inappropriate, but impossible. Language is of the head and faith transcends words – "impossible to say." In the epilogue, Binx says:

As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than edifying. For another thing, it is not open to me even to be edifying, since the time is much later than his, much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself – if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification. Further, I... naturally shy away from the subject of religion (a peculiar word in the this in the first place, religion; it is something to be suspicious of). (MG 237)

Language, as Percy says, is worn out, and certainly inadequate for something as profound as the mystery and wonder of life and the transcendent divine.

Words have their place; they are appropriate in the human realm, of the head and the world and in relating to others. They are intersubjective. Kate in her despair asks: “Is everything going to be all right?” Binx answers in the affirmative, but for Kate, at her insistence, he must say it, must *name* it: “Everything is going to be all right” (MG 116). The word has power to transform Kate’s mood. It must be spoken; it must be said. Naming it rescues her from the nothingness. Words are means of change and create community.

Relating to God and to the deeper heart of others is a greater mystery, found in the action of love, and transcends words, logic, and reason. It is done in silence. When the Black penitent exits the church on Ash Wednesday, Binx tries to discern the reasons he entered, and whether he received ashes, “...or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God’s own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say” (MG 235), he ends the chapter. The allusion to 19th century priest Gerard Manly Hopkins’ “Pied Beauty,” (“dim, dazzling”), is appropriate for the mystical symbol of the ashes. Hopkins’ poems celebrate the beauty and mystery of God, but in this poem, the diversity of creation – as the “Negro” going into a Catholic church is a sign of the diversity of the world. “Impossible to say” (MG 235), Binx repeats. In the face of the mystery of God, words are inadequate and reductive. Usually, Binx rarely responds to his aunt’s talks, ethical stage talks, or if he does, it is only in monosyllable. There is no debate or argument or attempt to convince and enlighten on Binx’s part – he knows it is fruitless.

Words are the tools of stage two; silence and the actions of love are the language of stage three. When he announces that he and Kate are to marry, his aunt asks his plans, and he shrugs and does not answer. Rather, to himself, he thinks, “There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons.. It only remains to decide whether this vocation is best pursued in a service station or –” (MG 233). This commitment shows Binx chooses a life of service (“service station”), but it is a spiritual choice, not a humanist or ethical one, is evident here. It does not matter what the external job is, nor its status, nor that society is edified by it. The contribution to be made is not an abstract cause or to an abstract group (“to society”), but to particular individuals, to loved ones, and is rather, to the dark journey (a spiritual one – a dark night of the soul) of the individual.

In *The Moviegoer*, Percy uses symbol and sign and “clues” throughout – as he does in all his novels. He is also well aware of the differences between dyadic character and triadic. However, the use of symbol in this first novel, and his next two, is quantitatively and qualitatively different than the last three novels. In the latter novels, Percy’s Catholic and existential (Kierkegaardian and Marcellian) emphases take a back seat to a semiotic view of his characters, but he uses number symbolism as the primary symbol to show their existential status and growth. In each, a number dominates as the descriptive symbol for the theme of the book.

In this Percy’s first novel, we occasionally have a few threes and triangles, such as the Delta Psi, but they are in no way dominant or different from any other symbol in the book; they are not the prevailing pattern. Not so for Percy’s last three novels

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