

## Thomas Merton and Walker Percy: A Connection through Intersections

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In his essay, 'The Street is for Celebration', Thomas Merton describes the city street as a habitat for the alienated who become transformed through the power of love which 'will set our lives on fire and turn the rubble back onto gold'. Speaking of the street as a space, Merton states '[an] alienated space, an uninhabited space, is a space where you submit'. Further, 'The alienated city isolates men from one another in despair, lovelessness, defeat'. The transforming power of love will enable the people to have joy and inhabit the street 'when it becomes a space for celebration'.<sup>1</sup> Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, has a number of street scenes. Binx, the protagonist of the novel reflects:

The street looks tremendous. People on the far side seem tiny and archaic, dwarfed by the great sky and windy clouds like pedestrians in old prints. Am I mistaken or has A fog of uneasiness, a thin gas of malaise, settled on the street. The businessmen hurry back to their offices, the shoppers to their cars, the tourists to their hotels.<sup>2</sup>

Although Binx has a difficult time articulating the nature of his search, he clearly recognizes that 'the malaise of everydayness' is an obstacle to the search. Later in this essay, Merton's epiphany or transformation on a street corner in Louisville is juxtaposed with a street corner scene in New Orleans, where Binx experiences an epiphany and his transformation is the culmination of the search.

In late January 1964, Thomas Merton wrote in a letter to Walker Percy:

1. In Thomas Merton, *Love and Living* (ed. Naomi Burton Stone and Brother Patrick Hart; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 46-53.

2. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 18.

There is no easy way to thank you for your book. Not only are the good words about books all used up and ruined, but the honesty of *The Moviegoer* makes one more sensitive than usual about the usual nonsense. With reticence and malaise, then, I think your book is right on the target.<sup>3</sup>

So begins the brief and intermittent correspondence (1964–67) between Walker Percy and Thomas Merton. In between the letter exchange was a meeting that the correspondents had at Merton's hermitage along with other members of the editorial board of the publication *Katallagete*. From the above excerpt of this first letter one can gain a flavor of the obvious enthusiasm that Thomas Merton had for Walker Percy's first book, *The Moviegoer*. In subsequent correspondence to other literary personages Merton conveyed equal enthusiasm for this book and Percy's subsequent works. Although an admirer of Percy, Merton did not leave a critique through essays as he did with other literary luminaries such as Albert Camus, William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor and Boris Pasternak. If Merton had lived longer perhaps he would have written a literary critique or if Percy pre-deceased him Merton might have written an 'Elegy', as he did at O'Connor's death. The one advantage that we have with Percy, however, is that we have copies of the letter-exchange with Merton and even a record of a meeting at the hermitage which is not the case with Faulkner, Camus and O'Connor.

This essay analyzes the relationship between Thomas Merton and Walker Percy as documented through interviews, letters, journal entries and commentaries by scholars. Further, delineating the similarities of both men provides the necessary backdrop to an understanding of their interest in the novel as a genre for uncovering what Percy calls the 'malaise' in contemporary society. A brief review of selected works of both writers will show the affinity between Merton and Percy. Finally, the aforementioned novel, *The Moviegoer*, will provide the context for Percy's glimpse of an epiphanic event, an occasion of grace on the corner of 'Elysian Fields and Bon Enfants'. This fictional event will be juxtaposed with an historic event, the occasion of grace for Thomas Merton at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, 18 March 1958.

### I. Early Influences

Walker Percy was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1916, at the age of 13 he lost his father through suicide and at the age of 15 his mother died in an accident. Percy subsequently took up residence with his second

3. In Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1990), p. 281.

cousin, William Alexander Percy, who was a literary luminary in his own right.<sup>4</sup> While residing in Greenville, Mississippi, Percy became friends with future historian and writer, Shelby Foote. This friendship lasted over a lifetime and their correspondence mainly about literary matters was published in 1997.<sup>5</sup> Percy graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1937 and he subsequently entered medical school at Columbia University, underwent three years of psychoanalysis and graduated with an MD in 1941. He and his wife, Mary Bernice (or 'Bunt') converted to Catholicism while residing in New Orleans. Percy published essays on language, philosophy, religion, psychiatry, morality and Southern literary culture. His first novel, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award in 1962. Other novels included: *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987).

Students of Merton, of course, can readily grasp the more obvious similarities between the two men. Merton was born in 1915 and he, too, experienced the early death of his parents as he lost his mother when he was 6 and when he was 15 his father died. Both men attended Columbia University and, in fact, were there simultaneously. Percy received an MD in 1941; Merton received his BA in 1938 and his MA in Literature in 1939. Both were converts to Catholicism; they read St Thomas Aquinas and were caught up in the 'tremendous spiritual awakening in the late forties and fifties'. This was the age of Monsignor Fulton Sheen, a radio and television priest, who referred frequently to the writings of St Thomas. Etienne Gilson's book, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, provided a solid neo-Thomistic foundation for Merton and Percy.<sup>6</sup> Although both Merton and Percy were influenced by the neo-Thomistic constructs of the period, their attraction to Catholicism and ultimate conversion, was expressed in varied ways according to their experiences.

In a 1987 interview with Robert Cabbage, Percy was asked what motivated him in regards to his conversion to Catholicism. His response was that he traced the historical roots of the Church and even found that St Peter was buried 'in the basement of a Cathedral in Rome. Other churches can't produce evidence like that'. Percy admits that his conversion is hard to explain: 'Because in the end, faith is a gift. It's grace, an extraordinary

4. See William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levy: A Recollections of a Planter's Son* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941).

5. See *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* (ed. Jay Tolson; New York: W.W. Norton, 1997).

6. See Kieran Quinlan, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996), pp. 36-41.

gift'.<sup>7</sup> During an interview with Bradley R. Dewey in 1974, Percy states that he reached the decision to become a Catholic by reading Kierkegaard's essay, 'The Difference between a Genius and an Apostle'.<sup>8</sup> From his reading of Kierkegaard, Percy concurred that apostles were 'authorized to tell others what constituted the good life and that these people derived their authority not from themselves, not from their genius or wisdom or power, but from the authority of God'. However, 'to fully receive the message of Christ and his apostles something else was needed – the mystery and gift of grace'.<sup>9</sup>

It is instructive to note that Robert Inchausti describes Thomas Merton in Kierkegaardian terms 'as an apostle not a genius. He did not write great poetry or masterpieces of theology'. Merton wrote about or admired people who in their day 'brought them into conflict with the prevailing pieties of their age'. By examining his own solitude, he was able, through his candor, to speak directly to people's own solitude.<sup>10</sup>

As to what drew Merton to Catholicism, William H. Shannon conjectures that there are a number of factors to consider. Respecting the Catholic culture and suspecting the ecclesial structure of the Church, Merton was influenced by William Blake, Bramachari, and the spiritual classic, *The Imitation of Christ*. Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism* helped Merton 'untie the knots' of his Masters' thesis entitled, 'Nature and Art in William Blake: An Essay in Interpretation'.<sup>11</sup>

Gilson's book, *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy*, revolutionized Merton's life up to that point. He came across 'the word, *aseitas*'. Now the Catholic beliefs took on new meaning. The Aseity of God means that 'God is Being Itself', or 'He is the pure act of existing'. After making more notations from the book, Merton asserts that these statements about God 'lay deep in my own soul'. His former idea about God, a 'fatuous, emotional thing', is transformed into the knowledge 'that no idea of ours, let alone any image could adequately represent God, but also that we *should not* allow ourselves to be satisfied with any such knowledge of Him', Merton con-

7. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), p. 185.

8. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), p. 110.

9. Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 200.

10. Robert Inchausti, *Thomas Merton's American Prophecy* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 1-3.

11. William H. Shannon, *Silent Lamp: The Thomas Merton Story* (New York: Crossroad, 1992), p. 91.

tinues. 'The result was that I at once acquired an immense respect for Catholic philosophy and for the Catholic faith'.<sup>12</sup>

While Walker Percy read Etienne Gilson and Jacques Maritain as well, his attraction to Catholicism was considerably influenced by reading St Thomas Aquinas. The system building, logic, propositions and Aquinas's dialectical style appealed to Percy's penchant for logic and system building.<sup>13</sup> Percy's conversion was 'the result of an intellectual process as well as grace'. Percy still held to his convictions that science can help solve some of humanity's problems and that science can work in tandem with faith. 'But while science could generalize about the human creature, it could not put its finger on the creature's unique endowment, his individuality'. Implied in this individuality is not only humankind's existence but the soul. As Percy pondered his own individuality – his existence, his soul – he came to Christianity out of feelings of self-disgust and his own unworthiness because the recognition of man's inadequacy and corruption 'was the first step in hearing the Christian message'.<sup>14</sup>

Remember Merton had his own feelings of unworthiness and disgust prior to his conversion. Reflecting upon his dissolute life, Merton writes:

If my nature had been more stubborn in clinging to the pleasures that disgusted me: if I had refused to admit I was beaten by this futile search for satisfaction where it could not be found, and if my moral and nervous constitution had not caved in under the weight of my own emptiness, who can tell what would have eventually have happened to me? Who could tell where I would have ended?<sup>15</sup>

Merton reflecting upon the natural human condition through his own sordid condition likens the soul to a 'lucid crystal left in the dark'. Through the gift of sanctifying grace, humanity's selfish nature 'becomes transfigured and transformed when the Love of God shines in it'. This new transfigured and transformed state allows a person to lose 'himself completely in the Divine Life within him' and, thus, become a saint.<sup>16</sup>

During an interview with Dorothy H. Kitchings in 1979, Percy was questioned about the Catholic Church and the authenticity of the Pope and the possible impact on his work. Percy responded:

...I feel like Flannery O'Connor when Flannery said that far from finding the Catholic Church confining or in any way oppressive, she found it liberating.

12. Thomas Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1994), pp. 172-75.

13. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, p. 174.

14. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, pp. 198-200.

15. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 164-65.

16. Merton, *The Seven Storey Mountain*, pp. 169-70.

It puts you in touch with, first with the mystery, and that, in truth, religion has to do with mysteries. It addresses the nature of man. And secondly, the whole Catholic view of man is man as a pilgrim, or on a search or on a pilgrimage – man as a wayfarer, which is what a novel is about, you know; which is probably why Buddhists don't write good novels, or Freudians don't write good novels, or Marxists don't write good novels. They don't see man that way. So the idea of a bishop or a priest, or even a pope looking over my shoulder bothering me is absurd.<sup>17</sup>

During the same period when Percy remains somewhat conservative regarding Catholicism, Thomas Merton began to emerge as a constructive critic. Merton writes to Mark Van Doren, on 28 January 1941, 'I am finding out all sorts of good things about scholastic philosophy, and, incidentally learning to be critical of St Thomas, which is a good thing for a Catholic to be, I find – and a rare one'.<sup>18</sup> Reflecting upon this masterful Columbia professor, Merton claims that Van Doren has Thomistic attributes which influence his teaching. '[T]he scholastic temperament that Merton ascribes to Van Doren in his characterization is easily traced to Merton's Thomistic studies under the self-effacing tutelage of Dan Walsh at Columbia'.<sup>19</sup> When asked by M.R. Chandler for books that influenced him, Merton responded in a letter dated 19 July 1963 listing the *Summa Theologica* as one of nine works.<sup>20</sup> In his journal entry dated 26 June 1941 Merton writes that he is 'reading a lot of St Thomas Aquinas'.<sup>21</sup> Zynda assesses that Thomas Aquinas had a major impact on Merton's mysticism:

Thomas Aquinas had a major theological influence on Merton, for it was through Aquinas that Merton came to know and understand mysticism. Aquinas placed an emphasis on the necessity of developing the intellect. It was the intellect that would serve to safeguard the authentic mystical experience from false mysticism of emotionalism, fanaticism, and occultism.<sup>22</sup>

17. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, pp. 5-6.

18. Thomas Merton, *The Road to Joy: The Letters of Thomas Merton to New and Old Friends* (ed. Robert E. Daggy, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1989), p. 9.

19. Thomas Del Prete, 'Thomas Merton on Mark Van Doren: A Portrait of Teaching and Spiritual Growth', *The Merton Seasonal* 16.1 (Winter 1991), pp. 16-18 (17).

20. William H. Shannon (ed.), *Witness to Freedom, Letters of Thomas Merton in Times of Crisis* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1994), p. 166.

21. Thomas Merton, *Run to the Mountain: The Story of a Vocation* (Journals, 1; 1939-1941; ed. Patrick Hart; San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), p. 377.

22. Mary Damian Zynda, CSSF, 'Contemporary Mystic Study: Thomas Merton as Supported by Evelyn Underhill's Stages of Mystical Development', *The Merton Annual* 4 (1992), pp. 173-202 (185).

In regard to Merton's respect for the dignity of human beings, Zynda states: 'Finally, within Aquinas' thought we perceive the dignity which he attributes to humans. He is open to the world, respects the integrity of the human person and maintains that union with God is the highest state to which one can attain'.<sup>23</sup> The impact of Aquinas is evident two and a half decades later, when one appraises Merton's experience or epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut. 'I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers'.<sup>24</sup>

Merton, however, was becoming increasingly wary of the rigid framework of scholasticism in his writing and explains that the difficulty is with the Thomists and not with St Thomas himself. 'They have unconsciously sealed off' St Thomas who 'was open to the world'. This isolation or containment has forced those who embrace Thomism 'to renounce everything else' and to reject the non-Thomist arguments.<sup>25</sup>

As the lines of scholasticism blurred for Thomas Merton, conservative or classical Catholicism was the mainstay for Walker Percy. Linda Whitney Hobson states, 'Percy's Catholicism is the classical type defined by Thomas Aquinas'. Faith is a partial form of knowing and therefore 'has important cognitive effects on the believer' who has a choice of believing or not. Thus, the believer who has control of his spiritual life can choose to perceive the abundant grace of God in his daily life.<sup>26</sup>

## II. Correspondence and a Meeting

The correspondence between Thomas Merton and Walker Percy has been aptly described through the biographies of Percy written by Patrick Samway and Jay Tolson.<sup>27</sup> The published letters of Thomas Merton<sup>28</sup> and the letters of Walker Percy to Thomas Merton are additional source material.<sup>29</sup> As stated previously, Merton was enthusiastic about Percy's

23. Zynda, 'Contemporary Mystic Study', p. 185.

24. Thomas Merton, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), p. 140.

25. Merton, *Conjectures*, p. 186.

26. Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), p. 6.

27. Patrick Samway SJ, *Walker Percy: A Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997); and Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*.

28. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, pp. 281-84.

29. *Letters to Thomas Merton from Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives, Bellarmine University Brown Library).

first novel and sent him the letter dated January, 1964.<sup>30</sup> Merton had also written in his journal entry of 18 January 1964 the following note:

The great impact of Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, is that the whole book says in reality what the hero *is not*, and expresses his awareness of what he is not. His sense of alienation, his comparative refusal to be alienated as everybody else is (not successful), his comparative acceptance of the ambiguity and failure. Book full of emblems and patterns of life. (The misty place where they fish, or rather his brother fishes, like a vague movie too.)<sup>31</sup>

Not long after his journal entry, Merton wrote Mark Van Doren a letter dated 11 February 1964 in which he conveys his enthusiasm for *The Moviegoer*. In the letter, Merton describes the main character, Binx, who in the beginning seems like 'a supreme dope of some sort for going to so many movies, but in the end it turns out that he is the only smart one, in a wild existentialist kind of way'. Further, Merton explains that 'the best thing about the book is that in the end nobody says who is supposed to be right anyway'. He is pleased, evidently, that 'there is no justification for consoling religions. I mean the kind that think they can console by saying everything is all right'.<sup>32</sup>

According to Tolson, Merton admired both Percy's 'philosophical convictions' and his method of discovering 'what he had to say as he said it'. Moreover, Merton 'liked the fact that the characters were free from authorial control' and he 'was one of the first readers to appreciate the dialogic character of Percy's fiction'. Merton's view of the stoic Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* was somewhat disconcerting to Percy but he seemed to appreciate a different point of view of the character as previous commentary about her by southern reactionaries was favorable. Tolson observes that because 'Merton was a more doctrinaire liberal' than Percy and because Merton was the 'product of a bohemian background', he would have had no knowledge of the 'occasional Stoics who stood firmly by what they purported to believe'. Percy's uncle, William Alexander Percy, was a Stoic and therefore Percy 'knew there was far more substance to the Aunt Emilys than Merton could see'.<sup>33</sup>

In the first letter to Percy (January 1964), Merton offered to contact a French publishing firm, Le Seuil, to assist with the publication of the

30. See Appendix below, p. 192.

31. Thomas Merton, *Dancing in the Water of Life: Seeking Peace in the Hermitage* (Journals, 5; 1963-1966; ed. Robert E. Daggy; San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1997), p. 64.

32. Merton, *The Road to Joy*, p. 47.

33. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, pp. 315-16.



novel in France and he also sent Percy a copy of his poems, *Emblems of a Season of Fury*.<sup>34</sup> Percy responded to Merton in a letter dated 14 February 1964: 'I am a slow writer, easily discouraged, and depend on luck, grace, and a good word from others'.<sup>35</sup>

As a result of the correspondence Percy accepted one of Merton's calligraphies. 'The calligraphy, when it arrived, was hung on the wall above Percy's desk next to the motto from Kafka, 'Warte!' ('Wait!'), an injunction in whose wisdom Percy profoundly believed. Work, to him, was vigilant waiting'.<sup>36</sup> When Percy's novel, *The Last Gentleman*, was published in 1966, Merton again was very supportive of his work. In a letter to Bob Giroux, Merton writes:

Walker Percy is one of the few novelists whose books I am able to finish. This is in fact a haunting, disturbing, funny and fantastic anti-novel structured like a long dream and relentlessly insisting that most of reality is unconscious. It ends up by being one of the most intelligent and sophisticated statements about the South and about America, but one which too many people will probably find so baffling that they will not know what to make of it. Even then, if they persist in reading it, they cannot help being affected by this profoundly wacky wisdom of the book. Precisely because of the wackiness I would call it one of the sanest books I have read in a long time.<sup>37</sup>

Evidently learning of the letter Percy responded to Merton, 'Am most grateful for your response to that novel (the writing of which is a poor thing for a grown man to spend his time doing, I am thinking most of the time)'.<sup>38</sup> During an interview with Victor A. Kramer and Dewey W. Kramer on 1 May 1983 Walker Percy stated that he only had met Thomas Merton on one occasion (first Saturday in July, 1967).<sup>39</sup> Percy had been appointed to the advisory board of the magazine *Katallagete* (Merton was also a member) and there was a scheduled meeting of the board at Merton's hermitage located at Gethsemani. Percy stated that he was curious about Merton because he had heard some strange stories about him, for example, Merton was schizophrenic and that he left the Church as well as living with a couple of women. In fact, Percy was surprised at the

34. Merton, *The Courage for Truth*, p. 282.

35. *Letters to Thomas Merton from Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives).

36. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, p. 316.

37. Samway, *Walker Percy*, pp. 251-52.

38. *Letters to Thomas Merton from Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives).

39. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, p. 341.

number of intellectuals who admired Merton but could not come to grips with the fact he was keeping his vows as a Trappist.<sup>40</sup>

Upon meeting and observing Merton, Percy noted that he looked healthy and not sickly as presented by Monica Furlong in her biography of Thomas Merton. Percy states:

But he was very husky, and I think he was dressed in—he had jeans and I don't know whether it was a T-shirt. I have a recollection of something like a Marine skivy-shirt, something like that and a wide belt. And as I say very, very healthy looking. A pretty tough-looking guy. And very open, outgoing, nice, nice and hospitable.<sup>41</sup>

Following some light conversation which included 'bantering, kidding around', Percy and Merton were left alone for a while, perhaps half an hour. Much to Percy's later disappointment, serious conversation about writing did not take place. There were many questions which Percy recollected he wanted to ask but did not. Percy recalled that it was amazing how little they 'found to talk about'. The questions that Percy wanted to ask but did not included his relationship with the Abbot; his own reaction to *The Seven Storey Mountain*, since Percy felt that Merton grew to dislike the book in later years, realizing that a monastic vocation has an initial romantic glow which is not sustained over time; his views about Far Eastern or Asian monasticism; and what about all the books he had written for the abbots over the years—was he forced to write them or did he really enjoy doing it.<sup>42</sup>

Percy remembered two surmises by Merton at the meeting. One was the possible diminution of the large monasteries and the creation of small urban units. But Percy felt that was a standard reply reflective perhaps of the 'small is beautiful' sayings of the 1960s. Merton also referred to the cheese industry at Gethesemani as being commercial exploitation of the monks. This comment was in the context of non-violence and he said 'even the Trappists violate this principle'. Regarding Merton as a writer, Percy said that he read most of his prose work but not particularly his poetry. Percy read *The Seven Storey Mountain* at about the same time he converted to Catholicism and he recalled 'it had a good deal of influence on me'. Percy evidently could identify with it because Merton was at Columbia and also a convert to Catholicism. The timing of the book was good coming about the same time as the post-World War II generation in which there was a 'feeling of uprootedness and dislocation'. Percy was fascinated by Merton 'striking out for the

40. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 310.

41. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 311.

42. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 311-17.

wilds of Kentucky' which apparently partially stimulated him to read *The Seven Storey Mountain* with great enthusiasm and interest.<sup>43</sup>

According to Percy, Merton had a political period and his 1941 novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, was written 'from a left wing point of view, about Nazi bombers flying over the waterfronts of Hoboken or something'. Percy went on to say that 'it astounded like a very bad novel'. Percy mentioned that Merton was on his own spiritual quest. In response to a question about why Merton was such a popular writer, Percy commented:

Well, it had to do more with his talent. He was a very skillful writer and a very appealing writer and a very prolific writer. And also, the times – in the late forties and fifties there was a tremendous spiritual awakening or hunger in this country and in the postwar generation.<sup>44</sup>

Percy states that he is not a critic of poetry but it strikes him that much of Merton's poetry is really not first rate. Victor A. Kramer conjectured that Merton would not have re-published much of his poetry which was placed in the large volume entitled *The Collected Poems*. However, Percy believed that Merton's tapes of his talks at the Abbey – much of it for the novices – was excellent. When Percy made a retreat at a Jesuit Retreat House near New Orleans, he listened to a series of tapes of Merton's 'Talks to Novices'. Percy states that the tapes are really impressive. He really had a gift for that.<sup>45</sup>

Percy was impressed with Merton's humor as well; 'Well, what was admirable about it was the spontaneity and the humor. It's funny. I would think he would have been an excellent Novice Master'.<sup>46</sup> After the meeting at the hermitage, Percy wrote a letter to Merton dated July 13, 1967, explaining that the reason why they were left alone for a while was the hope that their conversation would create many new ecumenical ideas for the publication *Katallagete*.<sup>47</sup> When Percy requested a book on Bantu metaphysics, Merton recommended 'an essential reference book, *Bantu Prophets in South Africa* by Bengt Sundkler, which he was using for the 'South' section of *The Geography of Lograire*'. Percy described his new novel and the setting at the 'Paradise Country Club'. Merton reacted well to the novel in progress that was finally to be entitled *Love in the Ruins*. Since 'country clubs had always been a target for Merton's satire',

43. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 311-19.

44. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 316.

45. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 318.

46. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 318.

47. *Letters to Thomas Merton from Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives).

it is possible that he 'may even have made a contribution' to the novel.<sup>48</sup> After reading Merton's essay, 'The Long Hot Summer of Sixty-Seven', Percy resisted the attempt to combine the race question and the Vietnam War 'under the same rubric, since [he said] I regard one as the clearest kind of moral issue and the other as murderously complex and baffling. At least it baffles me'.<sup>49</sup>

### III Alienation and Malaise

Merton and Percy had some comparable experiences and influences and similar concerns about contemporary society although they expressed these concerns through different literary genres. Victor A. Kramer cogently remarks that Thomas Merton found *The Moviegoer* 'a key to our contemporary moment's distress'. Through Binx Bolling, the hero of the novel, 'Merton realized that all persons in this culture are displaced, yet in continuing to question, they find glimmers of the sacred'. According to Kramer, part of Merton's legacy was an examination of the 'culture's fundamental questions about how to live and love in an age which seems so radically different from earlier ages'.<sup>50</sup> In his book, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist*, Kramer notes that collective society and institutions endangered the soul and Merton joined other Christian writers of the times to highlight 'the dilemma of the individual in a mass society – Caroline Gordon, James Agee, Flannery O'Connor, and Walker Percy'.<sup>51</sup> Amid our collective society alienated man begins the search and as Thomas Merton withdrew from the world many people of the world were 'fleeing to him. Why?' Lawrence Cunningham suggests that Walker Percy 'sums up middle American malaise' in the essay entitled, 'Bourbon' which may be one answer to the question, 'Why?'<sup>52</sup> In this essay Percy writes:

But, as between these evils and the aesthetic of Bourbon drinking, that is, the use of Bourbon to warm the heart, to reduce the anomie of the late twentieth century, to cut the cold phlegm of Wednesday afternoons, I

48. Michael Mott, *The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984), p. 491.

49. *Letters to Thomas Merton from Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives).

50. Victor A. Kramer, 'The Fragmentation and the Quest for the Spiritual in the Late Twentieth Century', *The Merton Annual* 10 (1998), pp. ix-xiv (x).

51. Victor A. Kramer, *Thomas Merton: Monk and Artist* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1984), pp. 109-10.

52. Lawrence S. Cunningham, 'The Monk as a Critic of Culture', *The Merton Annual* 3 (1990), pp. 187-99 (192).

choose the aesthetic. What, after all, is the use of not having cancer, cirrhosis, and such, if man comes home from work every day at five-thirty to the exurbs of Montclair or Memphis and there is the grass growing and the little family looking not quite at him but just past the side of his head, and there's Cronkite on the tube and the smell of pot roast in the living room, and inside the house and outside in the pretty exurb has settled the noxious particles and the sadness of the old dying Western world, and him thinking; 'Jesus, is this it? Listening to Cronkite and the grass growing?'<sup>53</sup>

Walker Percy's novel *The Moviegoer* is in some ways a fictional counterpart to Thomas Merton's alienation theme evident in his works. A brief examination of selected passages from two of Merton's works, *My Argument with the Gestapo* and a 1968 essay entitled, 'Why Alienation is for Everybody', will underscore the nexus between Merton's writings about alienation and Percy's malaise of everydayness which is the theme of *The Moviegoer*.<sup>54</sup>

Since Merton was enthusiastic about *The Moviegoer*, we can conjecture that the novel became yet another link between the spiritual and literary imaginations that enhanced his vision for the contemplative life.<sup>55</sup> We have referred earlier to Merton's conceptions about the literary informing the spiritual through his letter to James Laughlin. Through the 'sapiential' approach Merton 'promotes an appreciation of the literary artist's mimetic ability to communicate a unique knowledge ('depth of awareness') through a work which recreates and interprets human experience'.<sup>56</sup>

It is appropriate that references to the cinema be selected as a construct to examine two passages that provide a link between Merton and Percy. In Merton's novel there is a movie scene in which the narrator, a young man, like 'all contemporary men' are 'seeking in the luminous illusions of the motion picture a respite from inconsolable loneliness and alienation'.<sup>57</sup> The following is a cinematic scene from *My Argument with the Gestapo*:

53. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (ed. Patrick Samway, SJ; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), pp. 102-103.

54. Lewis A. Lawson, *Following Percy* (Troy, NY: The Whitston Publishing Company, 1988), p. 123.

55. George Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms: Thomas Merton's Christ* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1993), p. 128.

56. Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms*, p. 134. For an analysis of the 'sapiential method' as defined by Thomas Merton see Kilcourse, Jr, *Ace of Freedoms*, ch. 4, 'Son of the Widowed God'.

57. Ross Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton* (Fort Worth, TX: The Texas Christian University Press, 1979), p. 37.

And all of a sudden, I was overwhelmed with sadness, sitting at the end of the row, because I suddenly remembered all the times I had sat in movie houses at the beginning of the afternoon, waiting for the picture to start. It was like remembering my whole life. I had spent all the days of my childhood with my legs hanging from the hard seat of a movie, in a big hall full of the sound of children's voices... 'I really hope it will be a good picture'. Nobody understood why I said that... The film, however, was so bad that none of us could stand it... We left in the middle of the picture and came out into the rainy street, blinking and confused, like sick people, horrified at the pallor of one another's faces, at our unnatural expressions of weariness and dismay – as if the movie had been so awful that it had destroyed our health.<sup>58</sup>

Labrie explains that 'The futility of this form of escapism is silhouetted by the garish decorations in the dimly lit theaters'.<sup>59</sup> Through the character Binx in *The Moviegoer* Percy describes the futility of the movies as a means of escaping the malaise:

What is the nature of the search?... The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not 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. 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 to 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.<sup>60</sup>

The connection between Merton's alienation theme and Percy's malaise can be further illustrated by these passages. First, from Merton's essay:

Alienation begins when culture divides me against myself, puts a mask on me, gives me a role I may or may not want to play. Alienation is complete when I become completely identified with my mask, totally satisfied with my role, and convince myself that any other identity or role is inconceivable.<sup>61</sup>

Merton describes the pain of trying to be 'fifty different people' and we finally end up hating our false self and alienated from our true self. Like Percy's not knowing that you are in a state of despair Merton states:

58. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (New York: New Directions, 1969), pp. 81-82.

59. Labrie, *The Art of Thomas Merton*, p. 37.

60. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 13.

61. Thomas Merton, *The Literary Essays of Thomas Merton* (ed. Patrick Hart; New York: New Directions, 1981), p. 381.

'To live in constant awareness of this bind is a kind of living death. But to live without any awareness of it at all is death pure and simple—even though one may still be walking around and smelling perfect.'<sup>62</sup>

This statement resonates with Percy's epigraph in *The Moviegoer*: 'The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair. Søren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death*.'<sup>63</sup>

Binx in *The Moviegoer* describes the malaise 'as the pain of loss' from the people in the world: 'What is the malaise? ... The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost.'<sup>64</sup>

As a happy consumer residing in the aesthetic stage, Binx says, 'The car itself is all-important'. But as he rides merrily along to the Gulf Coast he finds a false happiness with the car and he is soon enveloped in the malaise of despair. He describes himself and his friend Sharon as 'a little vortex of despair moving through the world like the still eye of a hurricane'.<sup>65</sup>

Binx is the epitome of Merton's definition of the false self—trying to be someone he is not—those 50 different people and finally realizing his self hate has driven him to despair. As we will see later in this essay, Binx finally is on to the search when he experiences an epiphany.

Walker Percy had been asked about the nature of the 'search', the central metaphor, in his novels. He responded as he did on this occasion when queried during an interview with John Griffin Jones in 1983:

I think the normal state for a man to find himself in is in a state of confusion, spiritual disorientation, drawn in a sense to Christendom, but also repelled by the cultural nature of Christendom. To answer your question, the common thread that runs through all of my novels is of a man, or a woman, who finds himself/herself outside of society, maybe even in a state of neurosis, psychosis, or derangement... Maybe I try to design it so that it will cross the reader's mind to question the, quote, 'normal culture', and to value his own state of disorientation. You say the search. I think the search is the normal condition. I think that's the one thread which unites all of my characters, that they're at various stages of disorder, and are aware of it, and not necessarily unhappy about it, not altogether unhappy about it.<sup>66</sup>

62. Merton, *Literary Essays*, p. 382.

63. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, epigraph.

64. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 120.

65. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 121.

66. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 281.

Merton, like Percy, was concerned with the cultural nature of Christendom as he stated in August 1963: 'If there is a 'problem' for Christianity today, it is the problem of the identification of 'Christendom' with certain forms of culture and society, certain political and social structures which for fifteen-hundred years have dominated Europe and the West'.<sup>67</sup> Percy at different times defines symptoms of the malaise. In one interview with Robert Cabbage dated November 1987, Percy referred to the 'age of thanatos', perhaps, beginning with the Battle of Somme and Verdun during World War I in which two million men were killed within a two-month period. He lamented abortion when the Supreme Court legalized the 'murder of 30 million unborn human beings'. 'The role of chemicals to relieve depression has been overdone rather than employing some "old-fashioned psychotherapy",' he complained. 'It reminds one of Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* where everyone was taking pills and feeling fine'.<sup>68</sup> Still in another interview with Timothy Dwyer in 1987, Percy suggests part of the malaise may be students in the high school not interested in reading because they are 'watching the tube eight hours a day'. Perhaps kids are 'hanging out in cars' too much.<sup>69</sup>

Lewis Lawson explains that the 'malaise of everydayness' is a masquerading of happiness and not being aware that such persons are in a state of despair. 'These people are desperately alienated from themselves'.<sup>70</sup> Everydayness, according to Martin Luschei is a 'generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality'. Numbness and anxiety result from one's anonymity and routine existence.<sup>71</sup> In trying to find one's way out of the malaise the term 'wayfarer' is employed by Luschei. 'The term wayfarer comes from Marcel' and by definition a wayfarer 'is a man who is not at home but on the road'. Being on the road is the conception of salvation as man moves towards God, a transcendence which is the one distinguishing mark of human existence.<sup>72</sup>

Thomas Merton describes the journey in another way through contemplation, a transcendence:

67. Thomas Merton, *Honorable Reader: Reflections on my Work* (ed. Robert E. Daggy; New York: Crossroads, 1989), p. 66.

68. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, pp. 183-87.

69. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 182.

70. Lawson, *Following Percy*, p. 9.

71. Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 21.

72. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 37-38.



Contemplative wisdom is then not simply an aesthetic extrapolation of certain intellectual or dogmatic principles, but a living contact with the Infinite Source of all being, a contact not only of minds and hearts, not only of 'I and Thou', but a transcendent union of consciousness in which man and God become, according to the expression of St. Paul 'one spirit'.<sup>73</sup>

The mission of the contemplative can be viewed from two levels. The lowest level is 'the recognition of this splendor of being and unity — a splendor in which he [the contemplative] is one with all that is'. The higher level, according to Merton, is 'the transcendent ground and source of being, the not-being and the emptiness that is so called because it is absolutely beyond all definitions and limitation'.<sup>74</sup>

When Percy accepted The National Book Award he described *The Moviegoer* as an attempt to make 'a modest restatement of the Judeo-Christian notion that man 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'.<sup>75</sup> The castaway in Percy's essay, 'The Message in the Bottle', is an image of a 'wayfarer', a man searching for the news. Percy delineates the different categories of news as information, island survival, and scientific knowledge which can 'be arrived at independently on any island'. It is the news from across the sea that the castaway seeks, a metaphor of the Christian faith. But to receive the news, the castaway must have the proper disposition — one who knows something is missing in his life and heeds the call to 'Come!' For Percy, the worst kind of despair was not to recognize that you were in a state of despair as one 'who lives the most meaningless sort of life, a trivial routine of meals, work, gossip, television, and sleep, he nevertheless feels quite content with himself and is at home in the world'. The newsbearer is essential and must be one who 'has the authority to deliver the message'. The genius, in Kierkegaardian terms, generates knowledge and may be, in fact, ahead of his time but his knowledge is not transcendent. The transcendence of the apostle is recognized by the gravity of the message as one who is called by God and 'I make you eternally responsible for what you do against me'.<sup>76</sup>

Alienated man in contemporary society was a theme throughout Merton's writings that parallels Percy's castaway. Douglas V. Steere states in the foreword to Merton's *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* that 'Thomas

73. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 90.

74. Merton, *Honorable Reader*, p. 89.

75. Percy, *Signposts*, p. 246.

76. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987), pp. 119-49.

Merton was passionately aware of the inward crises of our age and its acute need of the dimension of contemplation'.<sup>77</sup> Further:

In an age of science and technology, in which man finds himself bewildered and disoriented by the fabulous versatility of the machines he has created, we live precipitated outside ourselves at every moment, interiorly empty, spiritually lost, seeking at all costs to forget our emptiness, and ready to alienate ourselves completely in the name of any 'cause' that comes along... Contemplation is related to art, to worship, to charity: all these reach out by intuition and self-dedication into the realms that transcend the material conduct of everyday life. Or rather, in the midst of ordinary life itself they seek and find new and transcendent meaning.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. The Novel

With limited success in creating a readership with his essays, Walker Percy finally turned to the novel as a vehicle for dramatizing his philosophical and religious experience in a non-didactic and indirect way. According to Percy in a 1980 interview with Henry Kisor, the role of the novelist is '[t]o question the values of society' just as canaries in a mine 'would swoon' if there was bad air.<sup>79</sup> The idea of the philosophical novel was alien to American writers at the time but customary to French writers. Percy states in an interview with Malcolm Jones in 1987 after two failed earlier novels, *The Charterhouse* (1951) and *The Gramercy Winner* (1954):

And it crossed my mind, what if I did something that American writers never do, which seems to be the custom in France: Namely, that when someone writes about ideas, they can translate the same ideas to fiction and plays, like Mauriac, Malraux, Sartre. So it just occurred to me, why not take these ideas I'd been trying to write about, in psychiatry and philosophy, and translate them into a fictional setting in New Orleans, where I was living. So I was just sitting out there (back porch), and I started writing.<sup>80</sup>

According to Robert Coles, Percy was determined by 1959 'to tie his philosophical ideas firmly down; give them the life that a novel can offer'.<sup>81</sup> Indeed he found his voice in the French tradition of the

77. Thomas Merton, *The Climate of Monastic Prayer* (Kalamazoo, MI: Cisterican Publications, 1969), p. 17.

78. Merton, *The Climate*, p. 17. Douglas V. Steere quotes from a short essay appended to a 1959 edition of *Thomas Merton's Selected Poems*, pp. 109-11.

79. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 197-98.

80. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 175.

81. Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1978), p. 144.

philosophic novel, as the voice in *The Moviegoer*, although a 'distinctive Percy tone' is indebted to Albert Camus.<sup>82</sup> During a 1977 interview with Herbert Mitgang, Percy expressed his admiration for the French novelists because they combine philosophical conviction with novelistic art which is 'usually fatal, but the French seem to achieve it. Sartre solved the problem of joining art and philosophy in his best work, *Nausea*, and Camus did so in several of his books'.<sup>83</sup> Although Percy was indebted to the French novelists for content he owed his debts elsewhere for the stylistic devices. The phrase 'everydayness' appearing in *The Moviegoer* is a term borrowed from Heidegger. Luschei describes it: 'This condition can be defined as a generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality. It is connected with routine and the anonymity of people in the mass, and it results in numbness and anxiety'.<sup>84</sup> Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* encounters inauthenticity – another concept borrowed from Heidegger and further explained by Sartre as bad faith or '[t]o be aware of playing a false role and go on deceiving oneself'.<sup>85</sup> Percy's concern about inauthenticity has a parallel in Merton's description of 'the true self and false self'. In a review of Merton's tapes Victor A. Kramer has commented: '[I]f we are to locate our true self, we must strip away what is false forever. The self we project, to and for others, is sometimes not us. One is reminded of Walker Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos*. Man is lost precisely because he has become too concerned about others and has lost sight of his truest inner self'.<sup>86</sup>

Although Percy was indebted to Søren Kierkegaard, he experienced frustration understanding Kierkegaard over the years. He notes in an interview with Bradley R. Dewey in 1974: 'So reading Kierkegaard is like growing up; it takes a long time, many years, a lot of work. And I still can't say that I have read him thoroughly or even completely'.<sup>87</sup> Merton enjoyed the same reading as Percy and remarked in his journal entry dated 26 November 1940: 'A week ago today, I bought Kierkegaard's *Fear and Trembling* at the Oxford University Press, and have since talked about it so much I feel as if I had been reading Kierkegaard all my life'.<sup>88</sup>

In an interview with Jo Gulledge in 1984, Percy further explains that

82. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 15.

83. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 146.

84. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 21.

85. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 26.

86. Thomas Merton, *The Merton Tapes*, reviewed by Victor A. Kramer, *The Merton Annual* 5 (1997), pp. 362-68 (365). The tape was AA2267, 'The True Self and the False Self'.

87. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, 107-108.

88. Merton, *Run to the Mountain*, p. 259.

'the whole of *The Moviegoer* is about Binx's malaise, and everybody picked up on the *malaise* because that was something that hadn't been written about, at least not by most American novelists during that period'.<sup>89</sup> Percy defines two different kinds of searches; the search for scientific truth is explained through reading Binx's *The Chemistry of Life* which is a vertical search for truth. Conversely the search for the existential is the horizontal search and 'addressed to the concrete realities of existence' as opposed to the abstractions of the vertical search.<sup>90</sup> In other words science can take one only so far in explaining humankind – one needs to ask the question 'who am I' which is the horizontal search.

During an interview with Bradley R. Dewey in 1974, Percy asserted that in the essay, 'The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle', Kierkegaard describes a genius as one who 'arrives at truth like a scientist or a philosopher or a thinker'. Whereas the apostle 'has heard the news of something that has happened, and he has the authority to tell somebody who hasn't heard the news what the news is'. Percy explains that Binx embarks on the horizontal search and 'he certainly did not mean looking for God, although he talks about that... Everybody believes in God, so how can you search for something everybody believes in?' Therefore, Binx 'embarked on kind of an antic search which was still in the esthetic mode...walking out to the lake at night...going to the movies'.<sup>91</sup>

Judylyne Lilly and Claude Richard moderated in an interview with Walker Percy on World Net, 3 December 1986. Percy states that Binx does not go to the movies as a form of entertainment but rather as 'exercises in repetition and rotation so that this is all part of the search'.<sup>92</sup> Rotation and repetition are the means for transcending the three spheres of existence, the aesthetic, the ethical and the religious. Both rotation and repetition are methods of avoiding alienation. Rotation is the search for the new and looking around the bend for new hope. Binx experienced rotation as he had new experiences with a revolving door of different secretaries. Repetition is the return or recreation of past events and people. One looks to the past for the lost thread of his life; and if it is an authentic repetition he compares 'what he was and what he is' and either despairs or experiences 'a religious conversion' like Binx who "'leaps" from the aesthetic sphere clear over to the religious'. The aesthetic sphere can be best described as 'the happy consumer' who does all the right things; has the right clothes, hairstyle and car – all designed to make a statement. The ethical sphere is

89. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 301-302.

90. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 88.

91. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 113-14.

92. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 160.

represented by Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* who personifies the Stoic philosophy which 'includes charity, compassion and reason'. The religious sphere is where one realizes a faith in God but cannot or will not express this faith because 'he would commit the blunder of being what Percy calls 'edifying', so he acts humorously in regarding himself and the world'. Also since faith is inward — 'to talk about it is to lose it and threaten to become that supreme boor, the proselytizer'.<sup>93</sup>

Thomas Merton had his own experience using the novel as a medium for expressing his ideas but was unsuccessful in his attempts. In fact, his 1941 novel *My Argument with the Gestapo* (formerly entitled *Journal of my Escape from the Nazis*) was published only posthumously in 1969. Naomi Burton tried placing it before Merton entered the monastery but was vetoed by her senior editors. She mentions two other novels that Merton sent her, *The Labyrinth* and *The Man in the Sycamore Tree*, which were also not accepted for publication.<sup>94</sup> Mott mentions yet another novel, *The Straits of Dover*, which came back with a rejection slip on 14 October 1939.<sup>95</sup> Naomi Burton refers to 'three finished novels that he [Merton] himself destroyed before entering the Abbey of Gethsemani'.<sup>96</sup> However, Mott states that, 'One copy of one draft of *The Labyrinth*' remains.<sup>97</sup>

In Merton's published novel, *My Argument with the Gestapo*, the young traveler, Thomas Merton, reports through the voice of a poet. 'There is a pervading sense of dreamworld or hallucination heightened by the device of passages written in a macaronic language, invented from multilingual roots, to satirize and parody political propaganda speeches dealing with the war'.<sup>98</sup> In the novel Merton records his own sense of the malaise and the search. Anthony T. Padovano notes: 'The novel is a novel of fancy but everywhere there is the smell and taste of decay. The fictional Merton conducts an endless search by means of questions that receive no answers and by journeys that have no motive other than movement'.<sup>99</sup>

93. Hobson, *Understanding Walter Percy*, pp. 15-22.

94. See Naomi Burton's 'A Note on the Author and this Book' (dated St Valentine's Day, 1969 from York, Maine) following the preface of Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*.

95. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 137.

96. Thomas Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo*. Note by Naomi Burton. Also see Paul Peterson, 'Thomas Merton in Search of his Heart: The Autobiographical Impulse of Merton's Bonaventure Novels', *The Merton Annual* 9 (1997), pp. 74-89. This is an excellent description of Merton's early novel attempts. He draws upon the fragments of the remaining manuscripts.

97. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 127.

98. Merton, *My Argument with the Gestapo* (backcover).

99. Anthony T. Padovano, *The Human Journey* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1982), p. 13.

Robert Lax attempted to be a constructive critic for Merton's novel-writing but Mott reports, 'No one in the next two years [1939-1941] was able to convince Merton he was not a novelist'. Mott adds that Merton's self-assessment as to his failure as a novelist was 'because he was unable to create a fictional character, and because he made the mistake of thinking that anti-plot means plotless'.<sup>100</sup> As we all know Merton successfully developed the theme of the search and the journey in his memorable spiritual autobiography, *The Seven Storey Mountain*. Padovano observes, 'Merton's appeal for Americans is premised on the narrative character of his work [*The Seven Storey Mountain*] organized under the symbols of journey and the self'.<sup>101</sup>

Though failed as a novelist, after entering the monastery, 'Merton embarked on what would become the most fruitful career of any priest-poet in the history of American letters'. In fact, 'his whole life and writing career built toward a combination that would finally rival the career of all priest-poets!'<sup>102</sup> Merton enjoyed literary acclaim as a prose-writer and poet. Maritain called the closing of *The Sign of Jonas*, a prose-poem, 'one of the finest passages in modern literature'.<sup>103</sup>

In spite of his success, 'There was still something of a frustrated novelist in Merton' and as late as 1964 he claims to still have an idea for a novel in mind. If he cannot write the successful novel, Merton realizes the value of the genre as a vehicle or medium for expressing the 'truth'. Mott judged that through 'careful reading of the works of Camus and Faulkner, Merton was coming to a new sense of the power of the novel of certain writers to reach a hidden level of truth through fictional models'. Merton also had an interest in Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy as well.<sup>104</sup> In a letter to James Laughlin dated 8 October 1966 Merton remarks, 'Jacques Maritain and I both agreed that we thought perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems now (that theology and philosophy are in such chaos) would be in the form of creative writing and lit. criticism. I am pleased with the idea and it seems to make sense'.<sup>105</sup>

In an essay on William Faulkner, Merton questions whether there is 'such a thing as religious literature at all'. He continues to explain within the Faulkner critique that there should be no confusion between 'literary'

100. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 137.

101. Padovano, *The Human Journey*, p. 4.

102. Kramer, *Monk and Artist*, p. 10.

103. Patrick Hart (ed.), *Thomas Merton: Monk* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1974), p. 47.

104. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 477.

105. David D. Cooper (ed.), *Thomas Merton and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1997), p. 301.

and 'religious' values. 'Obviously, religious orthodoxy or sincerity is no guarantee that a work is artistically valid... If, on the other hand, an understanding of the work implies some awareness of religious values, then one must be able to identify oneself to some extent with the author in holding these values to be "real".' William Faulkner is one of those 'sapiential' authors 'who possess this power to *evoke* in us an experience of meaning and of direction or a catharsis of pity and terror which can be called 'religious' in the same sense as Greek tragedy was religious'. The sapiential or 'The 'wisdom' approach to man seeks to apprehend man's value and destiny in their global and even ultimate significance'.<sup>106</sup>

How to get a sense of a spiritual union of God and man across to his readership was a constant concern of Walker Percy, who was one of those aforementioned novelists that Merton felt could 'reach a hidden level of truth through fictional models'.<sup>107</sup> Percy's indirect style was his method of conveying the Christian message. Percy states in an interview with Brent Short in 1990, 'If you get caught writing a "religious novel" – about God, Judaism, Christianity – you are dead... As one of my characters, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* says, "Whenever anyone says God to me, a curtain goes down in my head"'.<sup>108</sup> Underscoring the indirect method, Percy states in a 1971 interview with Charles T. Bunting:

The main difficulty is that of language. Of course the deeper themes of my novels are religious. When you speak of religion, it's almost impossible for a novelist because you have to use the standard words like 'God' and 'salvation' and 'baptism', 'faith', and the words are pretty well used up... [T]he so-called Catholic or Christian novelist nowadays has to be very indirect, if not downright deceitful, because all he has to do is say one word about salvation or redemption and the jig is up, you know.<sup>109</sup>

## V. Epiphanies

An epiphany has been defined in *A Handbook to Literature*:

*Epiphany* has been given wide currency as a critical term by James Joyce, who used it to designate an event in which the essential nature of something – a person, a situation, an object – was suddenly perceived. It is thus an intuitive grasp of reality achieved in a quick flash of recognition in which something, usually simple and commonplace, is seen in a new light,

106. Merton, *Literary Essays*, pp. 94-100.

107. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 477.

108. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 239.

109. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 41.

and, as Joyce says, 'its soul, its whatness leaps to us from the vestment of its appearance'. This sudden insight is the *epiphany*.<sup>110</sup>

In *The Moviegoer* we come to the climax of the novel when Binx affirms his love for Kate after seeing a black man emerge from a church in New Orleans on Ash Wednesday:

The Negro has already come outside. His forehead is an ambiguous sienna color and pied; it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes. When he gets in his Mercury, he does not leave immediately but sits looking down at something on the seat beside him. A sample case? An insurance manual? I watch him closely in the rear-view mirror. It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bon Enfants? 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 importunate bonus? It is impossible to say.<sup>111</sup>

Percy speaks about the phenomenon of grace: 'I have to be careful when I speak about grace. I have to be extremely allusive. I think Caroline Gordon said, "The novelist is entitled to use every trick of deceit and underhandedness at his or her control"'.<sup>112</sup>

Lawson says of Binx, 'Such is the restoration of his spirit that he sees a sign of God's grace — a black man emerging from a Catholic church with his forehead marked with ashes — and converts, achieves an existential repetition'.<sup>113</sup> Percy explains that an aesthetic repetition is the 'savoring of the past as experience' but 'without surrendering the self as a locus of experience and possibility'. Conversely, the existential repetition is 'the passionate quest in which the incident serves as a thread in the labyrinth to be followed at any cost'.<sup>114</sup> Or as Luschei explains, the aesthetic repetition is 'a mere sampling of emotion, a breaking out of everydayness', whereas an existential repetition is 'a moment of serious insight contributing to the search'.<sup>115</sup> In another essay Lawson says of this event in the novel, 'Much of that meditation is sufficiently vague to apply to anyone, but only someone who has experienced grace and knows the richness of its workings could be capable of such a brilliant description of it'.<sup>116</sup>

110. C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature* (New York: The Odyssey Press, 1960), p. 198.

111. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, pp. 234-35.

112. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 239.

113. Lewis A. Lawson, *Still Following Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996), p. 54.

114. Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, pp. 95-96.

115. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, pp. 51-52.

116. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p. 110. The word 'grace' is used loosely in lit-



Hobson explains, 'If the reader is, like Binx, in need of God, he will see in Percy's writing the signs of grace. If the reader is a scientific humanist, he probably will not, but he may appreciate the good story'.<sup>117</sup> According to Quinlan, 'Binx can look at a prosperous Negro who has just emerged from a church and wonder whether or not the indistinct mark on his forehead represents the action of God's grace'.<sup>118</sup> Desmond observes that, 'However, at the novel's end, Binx remains open to his search and to the possibility of the presence of God in the ordinary world'.<sup>119</sup> In an interview with W. Kenneth Holditch, Percy makes this observation about the scene at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants:

[T]he strange thing is that he [the Negro] will receive the sacraments; that the sacraments work nevertheless. You have this strange admixture of the inauthentic living by social status; and yet who are we to say that the sacraments are not operative? That he's not receiving grace along with it? That's the mystery.<sup>120</sup>

Percy responds to a question about 'the infinite mystery' in an interview with Jan Nordby Gretlund in 1985:

So it bothers you that the solution to the search turns out to be a mystery? All right, Faith consists of two or three mysteries: the Incarnation is a mystery, the Trinity is a mystery, and the real Presence in the Eucharist is a mystery. But that is the end of the search, that is the end of the quest, you don't go beyond that. Either you believe that, or you don't.<sup>121</sup>

Although Binx's 'epiphany' on the corner of Elysian Fields and Bon Enfants was fictional, Thomas Merton's 'epiphany' on 18 March 1958 was 'very real'. This event occurring on the corner of Fourth and Walnut Streets in Louisville, Kentucky (the home of the Early Times Distillery –

erature. We have seen Walker Percy not really defining the word but being 'extremely allusive' when speaking of it. Perhaps we can infer that Percy, being the good Scholastic, may have grasped a meaning through reading St Thomas in his treatise on Sacramental Grace as it relates to virtues and gifts. In a reply to an objection, St Thomas states the grace of the virtues and gifts perfects the essence and powers of the soul sufficiently as regards ordinary conduct. St Thomas proceeds to demonstrate the value and need of sacramental grace. In the context of *The Moviegoer* one might assume that Percy is referring to grace as it perfects the soul through virtues and gifts. St Thomas, *Summa Theologica*, Volume Two, Part IIIQ. 62 Art.3., p. 2357.

117. Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy*, pp. 42-43.

118. Quinlan, *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist*, p. 97.

119. John F. Desmond, 'Walker Percy's Eucharistic Vision', *Renascence* 52.3 (Spring 2000), pp. 219-31 (221).

120. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, pp. 11-12.

121. Lawson and Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations*, p. 106.

a favorite whiskey of Walker Percy) was recorded in Merton's book, *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*.<sup>122</sup>

The above recorded epiphany was one of Merton's three epiphanies, as described by Gary Cummins. The first occurred in Havana, Cuba in 1940; Louisville, of course, was the second in 1958, and Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka in 1968 was the third. 'Each epiphany revealed to Merton something of reality, Christ, his relationship with God, the human race, and creation. As he struggled to verbalize things too Other for amorphous words or theological precision, Merton unconsciously linked the three with the classical vocabulary of mysticism and his own spiritual lexicon'.<sup>123</sup>

Whether it is the fictional epiphany on the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants, or Merton's personal epiphany on the corner of Fourth and Walnut, 'it is the soul, the whatness leaping from the vestment of its appearance'<sup>124</sup>—a moment of grace. This moment of grace is a transformation of the person in 'God's living presence' but Charles R. Meyer makes a distinction between the one who is permanently disposed to grace and the person who is not fully committed and therefore, the transformation is transitory and related to an individual act of the person.<sup>125</sup> But as William Reiser, SJ, explains, 'No single moment stands in isolation unsupported by all things that have made us who and what we are. It is unhelpful to think of the will of God as coming from outside or beyond what we already are. There is, we might say, a biography of grace. The will of God in our lives has a history'.<sup>126</sup> So it was, perhaps, with Merton and with Percy's fictional character, Binx, on their respective corners—a biography of grace.

## VI. The Last Letter and a Homily

It is somewhat ironic that both Walker Percy and Thomas Merton, converts to Catholicism, would be buried on the grounds of an abbey—their search finally ended. Walker Percy had become a member of the Bene-

122. William H. Shannon, *Something of a Rebel: Thomas Merton, his Life and Works. An Introduction* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St Anthony Messenger Press, 1997), p. 160.

123. Gary Cummins, 'Thomas Merton's Three Epiphanies', *Theology Today* 56.1 (April 1999), pp. 59-72 (59).

124. Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, p. 198.

125. Charles R. Meyer, *A Contemporary Theology of Grace* (New York: Division of the Society of St Paul, 1970), p. 174. It is appropriate that grace as transforming be used in this context.

126. William Reiser, SJ, *Jesus in Solidarity with his People: A Theologian Looks at Mark* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2000), p. 90 n. 1.

dictine lay confraternity shortly before his death and was buried in the grounds of St Joseph's Abbey (Louisiana), 12 May 1990 amid a gray, ominous sky with threatening clouds.<sup>127</sup> Thomas Merton, a member of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance was buried in the grounds of the Monastery of Our Lady of Gethsemani, 17 December 1968, while 'rain, turning to snow, fell on the crowd'.<sup>128</sup>

In a later commemoration service for Walker Percy at St Ignatius Church in New York City on 24 October 1990 Shelby Foote 'delivered what he considered his "last letter" to his best and oldest friend':

I would state my hope that Walker Percy will be seen in time for what he was in simple and solemn fact—a novelist, not merely an explicator of various philosophers and divines, existentialist or otherwise... Their subject [other writers], his and Faulkner's—and all the rest of ours, for that matter—was the same 'the human heart in conflict with itself'.<sup>129</sup>

In his funeral homily, Dom Flavian Burns, Abbot of Gethsemani, said of Thomas Merton, 'The world knew him from his books: we knew him from his spoken word. Few, if any, knew him in his secret prayer. Still, he had a secret prayer, and this is what gave the inner life to all he said and wrote'.<sup>130</sup>

'The human heart in conflict with itself' expressed through Percy's novels and Merton's secret prayer revealing his 'inner life' through his voluminous writings have given us, for our time, twin prophets connected, yet distinct, guiding all of us in 'our search'.

### *Appendix*

Letter from Thomas Merton to Walker Percy [January 1964].<sup>131</sup>

There is no easy way to thank you for your book. Not only are the good words about books all used up and ruined, but the honesty of *The Movie-goer* makes one more sensitive than usual about the usual nonsense. With reticence and malaise, then, I think your book is right on the target.

For a while I was going around saying it was too bad guys like Hemingway were dead, as if I really thought it.

127. Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*, p. 489.

128. Mott, *The Seven Mountains*, p. 570.

129. *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, pp. 303-304.

130. James Forest, *Thomas Merton: A Pictorial Biography* (New York: Paulist Press, 1980), p. 215.

131. *The Courage for Truth*, pp. 281-82.

You are right all the time, not just sometimes. You are right all the time. You know just when to change and look at something else. Never too much of anyone. Just enough of Sharon. The reason the book is true is that you always stop at the point where more talk would have been false, untrue, confusing, irrelevant. It is not that what you say is true. It is neither true or false, it points in the right direction, where there is something that has not been said and you know enough not to try to say it.

Hence you are one of the most hopeful existentialists I know of. I suppose it was inevitable that an American existentialist should have a merry kind of nausea after all, and no one reproaches you for this or anything else. It is truer than the viscous kind.

I think you startled with the idea that Bolling would be a dope but he refused to be, and that is one of the best things about the book. Nice creative ambiguities in which the author and the character dialogue silently and wrestle for a kind of autonomy.

As for Southern aunts, if they are like that you can keep them. (But I praise the Southern aunt's last speech too. Insufferable, the last gasp.)

All this says nothing about how I was stirred up by the book. It should be read by the monks for a first lesson in humility. But I guess they would be bowled over by Sharon, so I better not hand it around to the novices.

I am glad Fr. Charles [Jack English, a Trappist monk from Holy Spirit Monastery in Conyers, Georgia] came by here and got sick and told you to send the book.

Now send me all your other books or things you write, please. Do you want anything of mine? I do artworks very abstract, maybe you would like one. Let me know if you like abstract brush and ink calligraphies.

Did this book get published in France yet? If not tell me and I will get the guys at Le Seuil busy on it at once.

I will send you my new book of poems (*Emblems of a Season of Fury*).