

The Myth of the Fall from Paradise: Thomas Merton and Walker Percy

John P. Collins

Introduction

"A starship from earth is traveling in the galaxy, its mission to establish communication with extraterrestrial intelligences and civilizations." This is the opening line from Walker Percy's Chapter 19 in his book titled *Lost in the Cosmos, The Last Self-Help Book*. Percy goes on to say that: "The time is the year 2050 C.E. (Common Era, so called because, though the era is post-Christian, it proved useful to retain the year of Christ's birth)." Eventually "excited earthlings" in the space ship establish communication with the inhabitants of the planet, Proxima Centauri or PC3, and both communicants agree upon a lexicon and syntax. The earth ship and PC3 work many weeks to develop successful communication and eventually the earth ship asks for permission to land. The following are excerpts from their two way communication:

Earthship: [We] [r]equest permission to land....

PC3: Not quite yet. You haven't answered our question about C[consciousness]-type.

Earthship: What do you mean by type of consciousness?

PC3: We are C1s. We wanted to know whether you are C1s or C2s or C3s.

Earthship: What is a C1?....

PC3: A C1 consciousness is a first-order consciousness, or what you would call a preternatural consciousness—according to the dictionary your computer transmitted.

Earthship: It is? Say again. Preternatural?

After a description of this Edenic or unfallen state there is a dialogue about the C 2 and C3 state of consciousness:

Earthship: What is a C2 consciousness?

PC3: A C2 consciousness is a consciousness which passes through a C1 stage and then for some reason falls into the pit of itself.

Earthship: The pit of itself?

PC3: In some evolving civilizations, for reasons which we don't entirely understand, the evolution of consciousness is attended by a disaster of some sort.... It has to do with the discovery of self and the incapacity to deal with it, the consciousness becoming self-conscious but not knowing what to do with the self, not even knowing what its self is, and so ending by being that which it is not, saying that which is not, doing that which is not, and making others what they are not.

Earthship: What does that mean?

PC3: Playing roles, being phony, lying, cheating, stealing and killing. To say nothing of exotic disordering of the reproductive apparatus of sexual creatures.... What concerns us is our experience with C2s whom we have allowed to land on PC3. They are usually polite at first, but always turn hostile [and] deceptive.... They are mainly concerned with self-esteem.

We are afraid of C2s. They do not know themselves or what to do with themselves. . . . What's your C-type? Are you C1, C2, or C3? You will not be given permission to descend until we establish that.

Earthship:(*after a pause*): What's a C3 consciousness?

PC3: A C3 consciousness is a C2 consciousness which has become aware of its predicament, sought help, and received it.... If a C1 meets with disaster, falls into the pit of itself, and becomes a C2, it must become aware of its sickness and seek a remedy in order to be restored to the preternaturality of C1.

The PC3 people go on to ask the Earthship inhabitants a series of questions about the planet Earth to determine its C status—1, 2, or 3. One question was about wars in the last hundred earth-years. The earth ship responds that there have been about a hundred million people killed in wars. After a series of other questions and answers PC3 replies:

"...your species is in trouble. You don't even know whether you have a civilization, and the chances are you do not." Then PC3 asks the earthlings if they have sought help for their debased condition. The earthlings reply in the negative but they do have an amorphous bundle of self help programs that include "meditation, caring, sharing interpersonal warmth, creativity." PC3 then sorrowfully states: "Permission denied [to land]. Please resume your mission or return."

Earthship (*frantically*): We can't return. There is nothing to return to.

PC3 recommends that they proceed to PC7, another C2 civilization which is "curious, inquisitive, [and] murderous... They are sentimental, easily moved to tears, and kill each other with equal ease.... Two superpowers, ideological combat but not yet a nuclear exchange. They like wars too, pretend not to, but get into trouble during an overly prolonged peace. Right now they are bored to death and spoiling for a fight.... Good luck. You have one hour to vacate orbit. Over and out."

Thus we have Walker Percy's interpretation of the three states of created mankind played out in a satirical drama in space.¹ There is the C1 or preternatural or unfallen state; the C2, the fallen or violent state and C3, the restored state.

Although the Fall is the main focus of my paper, the preternatural and restored states will also be presented to provide the necessary context. The purpose of this paper will be to demonstrate a parallel development of the vision of the "Fall" by Thomas Merton and Walker Percy. In a previous publication, I established the foundation for similar concerns articulated by both writers about the "malaise" and "alienation" of our contemporary society. This paper will focus on the "Fall" primarily through Merton's book, *The New Man*, although other Merton texts will be referenced as necessary. I will attempt to demonstrate in parallel fashion the works of Walker Percy including his two novels, *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*. Percy's essays and interviews will be cited to provide background for the selections from the above mentioned works. In a word, the protagonist, Will Barrett of both novels by Percy symbolizes the first or fallen Adam, a parallel to the fallen Adam, as articulated in the first part of Merton's book, *The New Man*. Will emerges, however, as the redeemed or recovered Adam in *The Second Coming* and can be seen as the counterpart for Merton's second Adam or Christ, the redeemer for mankind in *The New Man*. The Redemption would restore the unity that was ruptured through the fall. This loss of unity interrupted man's contemplative vision because he "was created as a contemplative" according to Merton.² The conclusion of the paper will point to the final optimism of both writers as the new Adam, or the second Adam, heralds the way to an inner transformation and union with God, hopefully leading to the eventual renewal of a broader human society. All of us

need this kind of optimism and hope in our contemporary world marked by violence, terror, and the casual indifference of Western man in regards to his eternal salvation.

As proper context for the development of the paper it would be well to review the brief relationship between Thomas Merton and Walker Percy. Why was Merton so interested in Percy's work? He had demonstrated his admiration for Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, in correspondence to Walker Percy dated January, 1964.³ In fact, the two men exchanged letters between the years, 1964-1967.⁴ Moreover, Percy admired Merton, as evidenced in his 1984 interview with Victor and Dewey Kramer.⁵ Percy and Merton met for a brief meeting at Merton's hermitage, albeit the meeting was disappointing and not productive other than small talk.⁶ Merton's interest in Percy's novels is underscored by George Kilcourse when he states: "The evidence of [Merton's] personal reading habits suggests that he nurtured his mature contemplative life by reading a diverse spectrum of novelists" which included Walker Percy.⁷ As Merton integrated his spirituality with his reading of imaginative writing, he realized that the contemplative and the novelist are, at times, on the same wave length in their ability to diagnose the spiritual malaise in our society.⁸ In a letter to his publisher, James Laughlin, Merton declared that, "perhaps the most living way to approach theological and philosophical problems . . . would be in the form of creative writing and lit. criticism."⁹ Kilcourse states that Merton volunteered the term "'sapiential', the highest level of cognition," which explains how the novelist or any artist, for that matter, has a commonality with the contemplative. Merton describes the mission of the contemplative is "'to keep alive a sense of sin' as ontological lapse" resulting from the fall from paradise and the subsequent alienation of man. The ontological lapse, of course, is a violation a "person's very being." It is through "imaginative literature that Merton finds sapientially dramatized the deepest levels of human freedom and the discovery of . . . human authenticity."¹⁰ One of Walker Percy's essays is titled, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," in which he compares the role of novelist to a medical doctor, that is; "Something is wrong. What is it? What is the nature of the illness? Where is the lesion? Is it acute or chronic, treatable or fatal? Can we understand it? Does the disease have a name or is it something new?"¹¹

On May 22, 1966, Thomas Merton wrote Robert Giroux, his editor:

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 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.¹²

I would conjecture that Merton's characterization of the novel, *The Last Gentleman*, as "wacky," could be linked to Percy's view of man as a looney denizen of the world where looniness is the norm. In an interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy in 1986, Percy declared, "I think it is fair to say that [man] doesn't know who he is, what he believes, or what he is doing. This unprecedented state of affairs, is, I suggest, the domain of the 'diagnostic novel.'"¹³ On another occasion, Percy states that Will Barrett "was really sick" and he was lost while being in a fugue state of amnesia—he would come and go with these fugue states.¹⁴ In the context of interpreting Percy's writings, Robert Rudnicki writes that the fugue state in the broadest sense is the "cultural transmission of the doctrine of Judeo-Christianity—the story of the Fall, or exile of man from God—which accounts for the alienated condition of man."¹⁵

Merton evidently detected in Percy's novels a sense of the general malaise prevalent in contemporary American society which in turn was closely aligned to one of his own main themes throughout his writings, that is, man's alienation from himself and from others.¹⁶ Malaise and alienation are a result of the fall and I became interested in both writers as Percy's indirect communication¹⁷ through his novels seem to be a gloss for Merton's more direct communication.

The Merton interface for the three states of consciousness described by Percy, is taken from the book, *The New Man*, which is described as a series of meditations based St. Paul's letter to 1 Corinthians 6:17—"But he who cleaves to the Lord is one spirit with him."¹⁸ William Shannon states that, "these meditations, cover three main topics: (1) the primal state of humankind before the fall ;(2) the fall and its consequences, and (3) the new creation in Jesus Christ

which reestablishes communion between God and humankind. ... [an] 'existential communion' given, lost, restored."¹⁹

Although the focus of my paper is the Fall, I will first present Merton's interpretation of the Unfallen State as well as insights from Walker Percy. Following the section on The Fall, I will conclude the paper with a discussion on the Restored or Recovery State.

The Unfallen State of Man

In his book, *The New Man*, Thomas Merton has two chapters devoted to the unfallen or primal state of man, "Image and Likeness," and "Free Speech: Parrhesia."

Adam received the gift of love and wisdom from God who intended to preserve his bodily life while increasing Adam's spiritual life which was the main reason for his existence. In Paradise, therefore, there "could be no violence [nor] alienation."²⁰ William Shannon declares that Merton writings about contemplation often reference the theme of paradise which represents "a place of unity, harmony, and contemplative joy.... There was perfect communication between [human creatures] and God."²¹ Perhaps it would be helpful to spend a brief moment to understand Merton's interpretation of Paradise. He has this to say about Paradise in his book, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*:

Now this concept [of Paradise] must be properly and accurately understood. Paradise is not 'heaven.' Paradise is a state, or indeed a place, on earth. Paradise belongs more properly to the present than to the future life. In some sense it belongs to both. It is the state in which man was originally created to live on earth. It is also conceived as a kind of antechamber to heaven after death—as for instance at the end of Dante's *Purgatorio*. Christ, dying on the cross, said to the good thief at His side: 'This day thou shalt be with me *in Paradise*,' and it was clear that this did not mean, and could not have meant, heaven.²²

Thomas Merton found paradise, the fall and return, a very powerful myth within the Christian message. Patrick O'Connell describes myths in this context as "imaginative patterns that convey a truth transcending literal facts."²³ Merton further explains that a myth is not a lie but "an imaginative synthesis of facts and intuitions about them, forming an interpretative complex of ideas and images." Therefore these ideas and images becomes a "complex of

values" which is "central in a meaning-system."²⁴ Understanding the myth of the fall and return to paradise in this context, hopefully, will inform the following discussion.

In his unalienated condition Adam was placed in paradise subordinated to the angels and superordinate to the beasts and "inanimate beings." Adam was, in fact, a "mediator between God and His world," without malice or any destructive inclinations. It was only after the fall through division, and a loss of unity that destruction and violence befell our planet and a general malaise set in.²⁵ As a mediator or interpreter, and a contemplative, Adam was appointed as the overseer of the garden of Paradise or Eden. But Adam was also an activist in this role as he praised God through "the work of his hands and of his intelligence"²⁶ and therefore the traditional antithesis between action and contemplation was not present in Paradise. Merton cites St. Augustine in the interpretation "that if Adam worked even in Paradise, work is by no means to be regarded by us as an evil." Work was part of "the existential communion with the reality of nature and of the supernatural by which he was surrounded." In fact, work was a "conversation with God"—a form of worship.²⁷

As a contemplative in Paradise, Adam constantly met with God in "flashes of mystical intuition" which obviated any form of rebellion, but rather, enabled him to have a perfect self-knowledge.²⁸ Merton uses the Greek word "parrhesia" to mean free speech symbolizing the "perfect communication" of man's "intelligence with God by knowledge and contemplation." Through this condition, "being with Being" Adam experienced the freedom of "spiritual communion." This internal contemplative moment, "being with Being", is the "existential communion" of Adam's "reality around him" and the internal awareness of the "Reality of God."²⁹

Another level of mystery and contemplation was realized with the creation of Eve as Adam progressed in a level of "existential communion" from his first moment of creation in the image and likeness of God to realizing he had a partner who enriched his existence through the form of human love.³⁰ This human love allows man not only to love but to be loved—a vocation to charity. This companionship of love or life of the "other" is a means of giving further "glory to God." "His one Nature and Three Persons" is a refraction and multiplication of the many natures of men united

“with one another in society” emanating from the first union or society of Adam and Eve.³¹ Merton states:

Already, in the woman he saw before him, and in the love that united him to her, Adam also saw the charity and the self-sacrifice that would enable human beings to love one another spiritually and to live as one body in Christ.³²

In an interview with Linda Whitney Hobson Walker Percy renders his construct of the unfallen state or the C1 Consciousness:

Arnold Gesell describes the difference between a four-year old and a seven-year-old this way: the four-year old is a C1 consciousness.... He is in an Edenic state; he's celebrating the world. By the time he's seven, something has happened. He is 'fallen.' He is worried to death about his sexuality, about being naked; it's like Adam and Eve discovering their nakedness.³³

Later in the interview, Percy refers to Sigmund Freud “who would never have talked of God or a fallen state.” Percy claims that through his analysis with a patient, Freud is attempting to create an “Edenic community.”³⁴

In his novel, *The Last Gentleman*, Percy gives us a view of the unfallen state through the character Valentine Vaught, Jamie's sister. She is a nun in a remote area of southern Alabama who is working with children deprived of communication and her work is satisfying because “when they finally do speak, they come into the world, see it for what it is and themselves as part of it, just as fully as Adam and Eve in the Garden.”³⁵ Valentine asserts:

They are like Adam on the first day. What's that? They ask me. That's a hawk, I tell them, and they believe me. I think I recognized myself in them. They were not alive and then they are and so they'll believe you. Their eyes pop out at the Baltimore catechism (imagine). I tell them that God made them to be happy and that if they love one another and keep the commandments and receive the Sacrament, they'll be happy now and forever. They believe me. I'm not sure anybody else does now.³⁶

Another paradisiacal image described by Linda Whitney Hobson is the three month stint spent by Will in a florist's shop in Memphis “just to be near green, growing things and perhaps recover part of Eden”.³⁷

The above passages by both Thomas Merton and Walker Percy foreshadow the fallen state of man. Merton, however, is explicit in his description of man destined to be a contemplative and after the fall man is attempting to be restored to his former state. Percy, on the other hand, describes the unfallen state through C1 consciousness in his book, *Lost in the Cosmos*. A further example of the Edenic community is the innocence of Valentine's children in the scene from *The Last Gentleman* cited above.

The Fall

Walker Percy's novel, *The Last Gentleman*, describes Will Barrett, a modern day Adam, in his search for redemption. The novel, according to Bernadette Prochaska, is about Will Barrett, the journey of a soul, "Adam encountering the unbearable punishment for sin, yet hoping for redemption."³⁸ When asked by interviewer, Zoltan Abadi-Nagy, how he got started with his novel, *The Last Gentleman*, Percy stated: "I wanted to create someone not quite as flat as Binx in *The Moviegoer*, more disturbed, more passionate, more in love and, above all, *on the move*. He is in pilgrimage without quite knowing it."³⁹

Martin Luschei characterizes Will as "an incapacitated pilgrim" on a pilgrimage.⁴⁰ He travels from ground zero, in Central Park to Santa Fe. Early in the novel Will befriends the Vaught family and he agrees to accompany them on the journey to Santa Fe and to be a companion for the youngest son, Jamie, who is dying. As he travels, Will recognizes in the landscapes, the "Fallen world of suffering and death, the home that he shares with others."⁴¹ In route he is convinced by Jamie's sister, Valentine Vaught, to have Jamie baptized to fulfill God's promise of salvation. The baptismal scene represents, on one hand, the effects of the fall through the stench of death and on the other hand, the "hope of resurrection when Father Boomer, reading the ritual for the dying, says to Jamie: 'Today you shall see God'."⁴² Michael Kobre in his book titled *Walker Percy's Voices* claims that: "As a trained physician, Percy is mercilessly accurate in describing the rigors of Jamie's illness. His prose has never been more exact and powerful than in those scenes in which we see the final decay of Jamie's body."⁴³ Martin Luschei asserts that, in fact, *The Last Gentleman*, "is structured on the impending death of Jamie Vaught," a powerful scene, indeed.⁴⁴ Search as he may, however, Will Barrett still does not get it. In an interview with John C. Carr in 1971, Walker Percy gives us some insight

into the memorable scene when Will is trying to understand what happened as he confronts Sutter, Jamie's irascible older brother. Percy states:

[Will] knows that Sutter's on to something. Sutter's got something he wants to know, and Barrett has this radar.... [He] fastens on Sutter, because he has to find out what it is. Sutter leaves him this diary which has all kinds of clues and such, but he still doesn't know exactly what Sutter's getting at. So he finally catches up with Sutter, and in the death scene a baptism takes place, with a very ordinary sort of priest, a mediocre priest. And here again, Barrett has eliminated Christianity. That is gone. That is no longer even to be considered. It's not even to be spoken of, taken seriously, or anything else.... And he is aware of something going on between the dying boy Jamie and Sutter there across the room and the priest. And he is aware that Sutter is taking this seriously. So after the boy dies, they leave and Barrett catches up with Sutter and...he asks Sutter, 'What happened there? Something happened. What happened?' And Sutter brushes him off as usual. 'What do you think happened? You were there.'... [Percy explains:] He *misses* it!⁴⁵

Martin Luschei underscores the fact that Will has missed it and that the "derisive Sutter" knows what is going on. Further Will has missed it because he is a good postmodern Christian and as Percy stated above Will has eliminated Christianity and, in fact, it is gone and not "even to be considered."⁴⁶ Hence the meaning of the epigraph at the beginning of the novel which is prescient of the post Christian Age as articulated by Romano Guardini in his book, *The End of the Modern World*:

The epigraph reads:

We know now that the modern world is coming to an end... at the same time, the unbeliever will emerge from the fogs of secularism. He will cease to reap benefits from the values and forces developed by the very Revelation he denies.... Loneliness in faith will be terrible. Love will disappear from the face of the public world, but the more precious will be that love which flows from one lonely person to another...the world to come will be filled with animosity and danger, but it will be a world open and clean.⁴⁷

Percy echoes Guardini's statement that the modern world known as Christendom has ended. This is a world fueled by the optimism of the Western culture including the breakthroughs in science and "rational humanism." With two World Wars and other tragedies of the past century, this optimism waned. Percy goes on to say that literary traditions that attempt to revive the symbols of Christendom have all but disappeared and "contemporary novelists have moved into a world of rootless and isolated consciousness for whom not even the memory and nostalgia exist" but rather the focus is on "existential self."⁴⁸

John Desmond in his book, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, states that Percy diagnosed "the debilitated state of modern American culture, trapped in its self-absorbed individualism, consumerism, violence, racism." This has signaled "the death throes of the collapse of Western culture [and]...the end of the modern world" according to Percy.⁴⁹ The epigraph in *The Last Gentleman* is a link to Percy's novel, *The Second Coming*, but actually it "expresses the prevailing view in Percy's fiction regarding contemporary post-Christian society," according to Ross Labrie.⁵⁰ We will meet Will Barrett again in this novel which is a sequel to *The Last Gentleman*. But more about that later.

Thomas Merton, too, realized that we were living in a post-Christian society when he stated:

Whether we like it or not, we have to admit we are already living in a post-Christian world, that is to say a world in which Christian ideals and attitudes are relegated more and more to the minority. It is frightening to realize that the façade of Christianity which still generally survives has perhaps little or nothing behind it, and that what was once called 'Christian society' is more purely and simply a materialistic neopaganism with a Christian veneer.... Not only non-Christians but even Christians themselves tend to dismiss the Gospel ethic on nonviolence and love as 'sentimental.'⁵¹

The propensity of man for violence which resulted from the fall severed the existential flow of communication between Adam and God in the Garden of Eden. Adam, now false and subject to illusion was, therefore, "stripped of his sincerity" and he could "no longer face [God] without a disguise."⁵² What does Merton say about the causes of the Fall? In his book, *The New Man*, Merton declares that a rupture of existential communion caused Adam's fractured

relationship with God, with himself, and with other men. Cain became the symbol of violence and disunity. The sin according to Merton was “an attitude of mind,” a condition leading to the eating of the fruit from “the forbidden tree.” According to Merton, the sin was really a change of attitude on the part of Adam who had been, heretofore, mystically united with God. Adam wished to expand his “experiential knowledge of all that was good” to an “experiential knowledge of evil” which was unknown even by God.⁵³ Merton cites St. Augustine explanation of the fall as Adam’s withdrawal from “God into himself...[causing] multiplicity and confusion of exterior things.”⁵⁴

Consequently, we see the effects of the original sin from the smell of death in Jamie’s hospital room in Percy’s novel to the crucifixion of Christ as described by Merton. In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation*, Merton delineates the effects of the fall in a chapter titled, “A Body of Broken Bones.” He describes how the mystical Body of Christ “is drawn and quartered from age to age by the devils in the agony of that disunion which is bred and vegetates in our souls, prone to selfishness and to sin.” He goes on to detail the “unceasing divisions” among men causing “huge wars...[m]urder, massacres, revolution, hatred...slaughter...the destruction of cities by fire, the starvation of millions, the annihilation of populations and finally the cosmic inhumanity of atomic war.”⁵⁵

Redemption: The Restored State

Walker Percy’s pessimism about the post-Christian society is redeemed, however, when he states:

I have referred to the age as ‘post-Christian’ but it does not follow from this that there are not Christians or that they are wrong. Possibly the age is wrong. Catholics—who are the only Christians I can speak for—still believe that God entered history as man, founded a Church, and will come again. This is not the best of times for the Catholic Church, but it has seen and survived worse.⁵⁶

Percy further speaks of the characters in his novels moving “toward God” through “religious ‘transcendence,’” although the movement is blurred, incomplete, and the reader is puzzled when Will Barrett’s destiny is unclear at the end of *The Last Gentleman*.⁵⁷

However, in his fifth novel, titled, *The Second Coming*, Walker Percy expresses a more optimistic view when he describes his

new novel as having an unambiguous ending unlike his other novels. He claims that it may be the first unalienated novel since Tolstoy. However, Marc Kirkeby states that: “[a]lienation, and Percy’s longstanding concern with the hazy line between sanity and insanity, haven’t disappeared in *The Second Coming*, but the violence and sense of foreboding that pervaded his last two novels, *Lancelot* and *Love in the Ruins*, are gone.” Will Barrett, “callow protagonist,” returns in *The Second Coming* as a “prosperous but confused” middle aged man who meets a much younger Allison Huger who has recently escaped from a mental institution.⁵⁸ I will return to this novel after I present Thomas Merton’s new Adam as explicated in his book, the *New Man*.

For Merton, alienation was the result of the fall from Paradise and therefore the Redemption represents “a return to the paradisaical state, a recovery of lost unity,” according to George Kilcourse.⁵⁹ The Resurrection of Christ after His death on the cross is the “central mystery of our Redemption” and, in fact, the “center of all spiritual freedom.”⁶⁰ The natural head of humankind was the first Adam, and Christ is the new Adam, or the second Adam, through the Redemption.⁶¹ Merton asserts, “All men were united in Adam. All were ‘one image’ of God in Adam. ‘Adam is in us all.’ We all sinned in Adam. Adam is saved and redeemed in us all.”⁶² Merton strikes the theme of unity as he calls upon John Ruysbroeck and his mystical doctrine concerning a “unity of spirit” within man’s interior self, “with God and with other men.”⁶³

Our life was given to us from the first Adam as an outgrowth of the “natural union with God as our Creator.” The life given to us by Christ, or the second Adam, is “totally spiritual.” We might say that Adam presided over “the first creation” and Christ was sent by God to preside over “an entirely new spiritual Creation.”⁶⁴ Because of the fall of Adam, Christ, the second Adam, found confusion and chaos imbedded in the hearts and minds of man causing an alienation of man from himself, from other men, and from God.⁶⁵ The irresponsible first Adam “brought death, illusion, error, destruction into the life of man.”⁶⁶

The mission of Christ, therefore, was to clear the way for God to reunite all of creation including mankind and the quest for salvation. Through Christ “the original existential communion with God” was restored. The gates of Paradise have been once again opened by the second Adam who “restored peace to the soul of man.”⁶⁷ The sufferings of Christ through the crucifixion was a

unifying force allowing each individual the potential of being part of His Mystical Body.⁶⁸ There will come a day when through “a mystical transformation” we will be “perfectly conformed to the likeness of Christ.” He “will live entirely in us [and]...[w]e will be ‘the New Man.’”⁶⁹ Merton concludes the chapter, titled “The Second Adam” with the theme of unity when he states: “We see that we ourselves are Adam, we ourselves are Christ, and that we are all dwelling in one another, by virtue of the unity of the divine image reformed by grace.... We are His new Paradise.”⁷⁰

In his novel, *The Second Coming*, a sequel to *The Last Gentleman*,⁷¹ Walker Percy presents his readers with a theme of restoration. Linda Whitney Hobson strikes an optimistic note about this novel. She claims:

That Eros appears to win at the close of *The Second Coming* is an emblem for how one may yet turn back the tide of violence, apathy, and boredom; seize once again the sovereignty for his own life away from ‘experts’; and turn the massive potential for an apocalypse—personal, national, and global—toward the equal potential for love.⁷²

Caroline Gordon, the novelist, had read drafts of Percy’s early unpublished novels and at one point admonished Percy according to Patrick Samway. He states:

For the record, Gordon made her credo very clear: all novels must be about love; and love between a man and a woman is an analogue of divine love. She stated explicitly that this love is rooted in the incarnation of Jesus, the Christ. ‘Your business as a novelist is to imitate Christ. He was about His Father’s business every moment of His life. As a good novelist you must be about yours: Incarnation. Making your word flesh and making it dwell among men.’⁷³

Bernadette Prochaska interprets Walker Percy’s book, *The Second Coming*, as an intergration of the characters into *communitas*, a road to salvation.⁷⁴ The *communitas* is Barrett’s intention to marry Allison and have a child. Barrett will also garner several unhappy older residents of a convalescent home and build houses on large plots of land. In addition the building of the village, forming a corporation, and sharing the profits with the older residents who are participants “is essentially the integration of the person in the *communitas*.” Hence, “Will has moved from alienation to participa-

tion...[and a] [c]ommunitas...[has become] his most valued vehicle of salvation."⁷⁵ Prochaska recounts the event in Genesis before the fall when God was conversing with Adam and Eve, in the evening, while walking in the Garden of Paradise—this is *Communitas*. Will Barrett had encountered the effects of the fall with Jamie's death in *The Last Gentleman* and now Will, as the new Adam, "is consoled by resurrection" or rebirth. Examples of the rebirth are found in the character of Allison who experienced a rebirth through her escape from Valleyhead Sanatorium. Will is, also, reborn with his fall into the greenhouse from the cave. Throwing his guns into the gorge and his resolve not to commit suicide like his father is another sign of rebirth.⁷⁶

John Desmond in his book, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, presents a poem by Percy written when he was "celebrating his companionship with a small group of friends" in Covington, Louisiana. The title of the poem is "Community." The last five lines are:

Twenty years of solitariness and success at solitariness,
Solitary with his family like the Swiss family
on their island,
Then all at once community.
Community? What, friends out there in the world?
Yes.⁷⁷

According to Desmond the poem expresses Percy's joy and affirmation of finding community amidst his natural proneness to the solitary life. The search for community is a theme found in Percy's novels, as Desmond notes "alienation and separateness, hope and the possibility for communion reflect the spirit of Percy's obsession with community throughout his career as a writer."⁷⁸ Redemption from their fallen state was the condition of Percy's characters according to Desmond. Driving Percy's theological belief was the Eucharist, "the real presence of God-in-Christ," which was a manifestation of the "mystical community." Therefore "the central truth of community" is "[b]elief in the divine Word made flesh."⁷⁹ Like Guardini, Percy saw the collapse of the modern world as "hope for the renewal of genuine community, of true relations between human beings based on love and truth and honesty."⁸⁰ Gary Ciuba asserts that Will Barrett's love for Allison in *The Second Coming* is an "apocalyptic comedy...a romance for the end of the world in which human love serves as a sign of the divine love at

its source."⁸¹ Further, Cuiba states: "Having looked for signs of God throughout the novel, in the last pages Will keeps glimpsing the divine image through its human embodiments: Allie, Father Weatherbee, and a puzzling pair of orderlies at St. Mark's."⁸² Cuiba states that: "Will's final revelation is that although the Second Coming has not yet reached its conclusion, it has already begun in the daily arrival of the divine presence."⁸³ Cuiba suggests that Percy's title to the novel, *The Second Coming*, is an ever occurring event—"God is always coming" and an echo of the "Karl Rahner's meditation on the Parousia in affirming that the divine approach is neither 'past nor future, but the present, which has only to reach its fulfillment."⁸⁴

Thomas Merton also echoes Rahner when he asserts that man "cannot rest unless he rests in God" and this resting and departure from "anguish" is through the mystical experience⁸⁵ or contemplation—man's original destiny. In the last chapter of *The New Man*, titled "Called Out of Darkness," Merton describes the *Exsultet*, the traditional Catholic hymn of praise sung by the deacon during the Easter Vigil, as a summoning of "Heaven and earth" to join the triumph of Christ. Merton claims that the *Exsultet* is the zenith of Catholic liturgy in its expression of spirituality. In my opinion, Merton's description of this beautiful liturgical hymn as a unifying theme around the positive and negative in God's creation is one of his best rhetorical writings. Couched within the context of the Resurrection, Merton states: "The *Exsultet*... becomes... a hymn in praise not only of light but also of darkness. So profound is the meaning of the Resurrection that everything, even the purest negation, that is touched by its light, acquires something of a positive orientation." Merton goes to say that evil and sin "seen by the light of the sacramental fire, becomes capable of helping the work of God." The sin of Adam becomes a "happy fault," perhaps, a "necessary" fault to fulfill God's plan of proving His love through "Christ's death on the Cross."⁸⁶ This love is a unifying love, bereft of division, strife, violence and the general malovence of mankind.

Walker Percy, of course, is not as direct as Thomas Merton in his articulation of the fall and the subsequent Redemption through Christ as a harmonizing force. Through his many interviews, we learn that Percy was wary of using religious words such as God, sin, salvation, baptism, and the fall.⁸⁷ However, Percy gifted us with the three stages of mankind in his book, *Lost in the Cosmos*,

and we followed the journey of Will Barrett as the pilgrim, lost and found again through the redemptive effects of *communitas* and community in *The Second Coming*. Ted R. Spivey cites the influence of Soren Kierkegaard on Percy's thinking and underscores, in particular, his remarkable essay, "On the Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle." Although a discussion of the essay is beyond the purview of this paper, Spivey conjectures that, "[t]he emergence of the apostle is necessary for both true religious renewal as well as cultural renewal." Percy claimed he had very little knowledge of a real apostle, however, he knew something about the cultural renewal represented by both science and art. Percy believed "that the role of the scientist—philosopher—artist in our time is to prepare for the coming of the apostle."⁸⁸ Science and art representing the analytical and the imaginative can be the elements of a communication modality creating a renewal of unity and harmony in our cosmos.⁸⁹ Spivey illustrates the "withdrawal from cosmic unity" and the "restoration with Being" in Percy's novel, *The Second Coming*.⁹⁰ Will had been living a rather superficial life when he discovers the pain of his father's attempt to kill him and then subsequently commits suicide. Upon recovery and through the help of grace, Will assists Allison who has also suffered pain and has "withdrawn into a mental cocoon." Through the restoration of this communication process, aided by the analytical and imaginative powers, "Percy sees hope for the eventual restoration of harmony within men."⁹¹ Spivey concludes that although Percy chronicles the "decline and fall of the American dream...he presents us with a vision of the possibility of that dream's renewal."⁹²

Conclusion

My paper is a modest attempt to interpret the fall from paradise through the works of Thomas Merton and Walker Percy. As a prelude to the fall, Paradise or the unfallen state was primarily exemplified through Percy's book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, as the inhabitants of the planet, Proxima Centauri explained the C1 consciousness stage to the crew of the Earthship. Paradise, the primal state of man, was explicated by Thomas Merton in his book, *The New Man*. Merton's two chapters titled, "Image and Likeness", and "Free Speech:Parrhesia" describe Adam as a contemplative experiencing "flashes of mystical intuition" with God. Through the fall, however, the mirror of "existential communion" was shattered and we find Will Barrett, the protagonist, in Walker Percy's *Last Gentleman*, try-

ing to fathom the Christian message in the memorable deathbed scene with Jamie. Since Will has eliminated Christianity and he is in a fallen state, "he misses it." In his book, *The New Man*, Thomas Merton interprets the shattered mirror as "a rupture of existential communion" between Adam and God which led to division and disunion among mankind.

Finally however, we experience Walker Percy's optimism through his novel, *The Second Coming*, a sequel to *The Last Gentleman*. Linda Whitney Hobson describes the success of Eros in *The Second Coming* in overcoming the violence of our society. Percy evidently heeded Caroline Gordon's admonition that novels should be about human love, an "analogue of divine love." Thomas Merton calls us out of darkness in his explanation of the *Exsultet* and it is, perhaps, a symbol of the restored or redemptive state whereby we experience God's love as a unifying love for mankind.

And so we have it, with Will Barrett, a fallen Adam restored as the second Adam, a hopeful Adam, an Adam with a vision of love and harmony. We have learned through Gary Ciuba's interpretation of *The Second Coming* that Will Barrett's human love for Allison mirrors a divine love for God who is not past or future but a God who resides in all of us waiting for fulfillment—an echo of the love espoused by Romano Guardini; that is; the precious love which will flow "from one lonely person to another." So too, Thomas Merton's second Adam, Christ, provides by grace and a transformation, the unity of all of us dwelling in one another through the Mystical Body of Christ, a return to Paradise—"We are His new Paradise."

Endnotes

1. Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos, The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1983), pp. 198-213.

2. Thomas Merton, *The Inner Experience* (ed. and Introduction by William H. Shannon; San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2003), p.35.

3. Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers* (ed. Christine M. Bochen; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1993), pp. 281-282.

4. *Correspondence: Thomas Merton and Walker Percy* (The Thomas Merton Center Archives, Bellarmine University Brown Library).

5. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), p.316.

6. Lawson and Kramer (eds.) *Conversations*, pp. 310-313.

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

8. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, pp. 130-131.

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

10. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, pp.134-135.

11. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land* (ed. Patrick Samway, SJ; New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991), p.205.

12. Patrick Samway, S.J., *Walker Percy, A Life* (Chicago: Loyola Press, 1997), pp. 251-52.

13. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), *More Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), pp.141-142.

14. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 66.

15. Robert W. Rudnicki, *Percyscapes* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1999), p.31.

16. Note. Merton describes alienation in this way. "Humanity, which was one image of God in Adam, or, if you prefer, one single 'mirror' of the divine nature, was shattered into millions of fragments by that original sin which alienated each man from God, from other men and from himself. But the broken mirror becomes once again a perfectly united image of God in the union of those who are one in Christ. Thus, in Christ, 'God reunites His whole creation, including matter, but especially man, in a new economy of salvation.'" Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p.149. Walker Percy in his novel, *The Moviegoer*, describes the malaise through the protagonist, Binx. "What is the malaise? you ask. 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 are no more to be in the world than Banquo's ghost. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 120. On alienation Percy states: "[A]lienation, after all, is nothing more than a very ancient, orthodox Christian doctrine. Man is alienated by the nature of his being here. He is here as a stranger and a pilgrim, which is the way alienation is conceived in my books." Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (eds.), *Conversations with Walker Percy*, pp. 28-29.

17. Note. Regarding indirect communication Percy has this to say. "[A] reason for reticence is that novelists are a devious lot to begin with, disinclined to say anything straight out, especially about themselves, since their stock-in-trade is indirection, if not guile, coming at things and people from the side to speak, especially the blind side, the better to get at them. If anybody says anything straight out, it is apt to be one of their characters, a character, moreover, for which they have not much use. Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, p. 304.

18. Thomas Merton, *The New Man* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1961), p. 67.

19. William H. Shannon, Christine M. Bochen and Patrick F. O'Connell (eds.), *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), p. 322.

20. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p. 53.

21. William Shannon, *Thomas Merton's Paradise Journey* (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 2000), p.3.

22. Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (A New Directions Book: New York, 1968), p.116. Note. Merton continues about his concept of paradise: "We must not imagine Paradise as a place of ease and sensual pleasure. It is a state of peace and rest, by all means. But what the Desert Fathers sought when they believed they could find 'paradise' in the desert, was the lost innocence, the emptiness and purity of heart which had belonged to Adam and Eve in Eden. . . . What they sought was paradise within themselves, or rather above and beyond themselves. They sought paradise in the recovery of that 'unity' which had been shattered by the 'knowledge of good and evil.' Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite*, pp. 116-117.

23. *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, p.349.

24. Thomas Merton, *Faith and Violence* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1968) p. 274.n.

25. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 57.

26. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 59.

27. Merton, *The New Man*, p. 78-79.

28. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 73-74.

29. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 73-76. Note. The phrase "existential communication" occurs repeatedly throughout the book and was, in fact, the original title of the book. *The Thomas Merton Encyclopedia*, p. 322.

30. Merton, *The New Man*, p.89. Note. The image of God is in nature. The likeness of God is through grace. Source unknown. Merton alludes to the image and likeness in the following: After the fall "human nature in its essence was not ruined, only weakened, by original sin. St. Bernard sees the fall not as a descent from the supernatural to the natural, but as a collapse into ambivalence in which the historical 'nature' in which man was actually created for supernatural union with God is turned upside down and inside out, and yet *still retains its innate capacity and 'need' for divine union*. The human soul is still the image of God, and no matter how far it travels away from Him into the regions of unreality, it never becomes so completely unreal that its original destiny can cease to torment it with a need to return to itself in God, and become, once again, real." Merton, *The New Man*, p. 112.

31. Merton, *The New Man*, p.91.

32. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 93-94.

33. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *More Conversations*, pp.89-90. Note. Arnold Gesell (1880-1961) was a noted child psychologist, especially, during the 1940's and the 1950's. He was widely regarded as the nation's foremost authority on child rearing and development. Gesell remains an important pioneer in child development. *Encyclopedia of Psychology*. Internet.

34. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *More Conversations*, pp 93-94.

35. Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp.52-53.

36. Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966), pp.301-302.

37. Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy*, p. 52.

38. Bernadette Prochaska, *The Myth of the Fall and Walker Percy's Last Gentleman* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc. 1992) p.ix.

39. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *More Conversations*, p.143.

40. Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), p. 114.

41. Allen Pridgen, *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2000), p. 79.

42. Prochaska, *The Myth of the Fall and Walker Percy's Last Gentleman*, p. ix.

43. Michael Kobre, *Walker Percy's Voices* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), p.108.

44. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p.111.

45. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *Conversations*, pp. 67-68. Note. The dialogue is quotation marks in slightly different than the dialogue in his book, *The Last Gentleman*. Perhaps, Walker Percy was doing the quote from memory rather than the actual text.

46. Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer*, p.166.

47. Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, Epigraph.

48. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, pp. 208-209.

49. John F. Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004), pp. 6-7.

50. Ross Labrie, *The Catholic Imagination in American Literature* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1997), p.147.

51. Thomas Merton, *Peace in the Post-Christian Era* (ed. and with an Introduction by Patricia Burton, New York: Orbis Books, 2004), p.xxi.

52. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p. 77.

53. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, pp.105-106.

54. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p.114.

55. Thomas Merton, *The New Seeds of Contemplation* (New York: A New Direction Book, 1961), p. 71.

56. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, p. 388.

57. Walker Percy, *Signposts in a Strange Land*, p. 388-389.

58. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 190.
59. Kilcourse, *Ace of Freedoms*, p.135.
60. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, p.232.
61. Merton, *The New Man*, p.131.
62. Merton, *The New Man*, p.133.
63. Merton, *The New Man*, p.141.
64. Merton, *The New Man*, p.148.
65. Merton, *The New Man*, p.149.
66. Merton, *The New Man*, p 151.
67. Merton, *The New Man*, pp. 151-152.
68. Merton, *The New Man*, p.154.
69. Merton, *The New Man*, p.158.
70. Merton, *The New Man*, p.161.
71. Note. Paul Elie states: "No novel ever demanded a sequel less than the *Last Gentleman*; it is doubtful that even Percy himself had wondered what had happened to Will Barrett and Kitty Vaught." Elie goes on to describe the characters in *The Second Coming*. He states further: "Percy was openly repeating himself [about the characters in the book]. The question is why. He was just writing along . . . when a middle-aged character turned into Will Barrett. He [Percy] may have found once again that he could not imagine new characters. He may have honestly seen a sequel as a new way forward, a classic Kierkegaardian return, a visit to old territory as a different person and a different writer." Paul Elie, *The Life You Save May Be Your Own* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003), p. 447.
72. Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy*, p. 131.
73. Samway, *Walker Percy, A Life*, p.164.
74. Prochaska, *The Myth of the Fall and Walker Percy's Last Gentleman*, p.115.
75. Prochaska, *The Myth of the Fall and Walker Percy's Last Gentleman*, pp.120- 121.
76. Prochaska, *The Myth of the Fall and Walker Percy's Last Gentleman*, pp.122-123.
77. John F. Desmond, *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, p. 2.
78. Desmond, p.3.
79. Desmond, p. 5.
80. Desmond, p.7.
81. Gary M. Cuiba, *Books of Revelation* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1991), p.202.
82. Cuiba, p.243.
83. Cuiba, p. 246.
84. Cuiba, p.234.
85. Thomas Merton, *The New Man*, pp.113-114.
86. Merton, *The New Man*, pp.244-245.

87. Lawson and Lewis (eds.), *Conversations*, p. 79. Note. Although the word "fall" is not used in a series of words quoted by Walker Percy who stated: "In my view you have to be wary of using words like 'religion,' 'God,' 'sin,' 'salvation,' 'baptism,' because the words are almost worn out." *Conversations*, p. 79. In a Percy interview, Peggy Castex states: "The Fall...?" She continues with her dialogue with Percy, "[The Fall]. But that's a dirty word. You can't use that word in a novel. If you do, everybody will close the book." Through further dialogue Percy assents to the statements by Castex. *More Conversations*, p.56.

88. Ted R. Spivey, *The Writer as Sharman* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1986), p.169.

89. Spivey, *The Writer as Sharman*, pp.187-188.

90. Spivey, *The Writer as Sharman*, p.172.

91. Spivey, *The Writer as Sharman*, pp.172-173.

92. Spivey, *The Writer as Sharman*, p.188.