NEW SKIN FOR THE OLD CEREMONY: RITUAL IN POST-WAR AMERICAN
EXISTENTIALISM

by

MICHIAL FARMER

(Under the Direction of Reginald McKnight)

ABSTRACT

This dissertation will examine the role of the religious impulse, belief, and ritual in American fiction—specifically that fiction heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy—in the decades following World War II. The six writers I examine—Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Flannery O’Connor, John Updike, Walker Percy, and Frederick Buechner—typically follow one of two routes as regards ritual and belief: Either they present the ritual as an end unto itself, with belief as an unnecessary afterthought, or else their characters have a deep and personal faith in God that cannot be expressed through the potentially outdated rites of traditional Judaism and Christianity. In the former scenario, the ritual remains intact, even though belief has rotted away beneath it; in the latter, belief is as strong as ever, but the rituals have had to change to keep from destroying it. An examination of the ways fiction writers navigate these issues will tell us important things about human beings’ relationship to religion, ritual, and belief.

INDEX WORDS: Existentialism, Judaism, Christianity, ritual, Saul Bellow, J.D. Salinger, Flannery O’Connor, John Updike, Walker Percy, Frederick Buechner
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Dedicated to the memory of Russell Owens, who generously gave me his library and who demonstrated how a Christian existentialist lives in grace, dignity, and kindness. The world is a little colder for his absence from it.

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CHAPTER 1
EXISTENTIALISM AND THE RELIGIOUS IMPULSE

“Who in her lovely slip? Who by barbituate?
Who in these realms of love? Who by something blunt?
And who by avalanche? Who by powder?
Who for his greed? Who for his hunger?
And who shall I say is calling?”

The religions of the book have practiced theodicy as long as they have existed. Job, the oldest book in the Hebrew Bible, attempts to reconcile a loving God with one man’s shattered world, and the conclusion it comes to amounts to a big question mark hanging over the issue. Job, having lost his children, his property, and his physical health, endures the unsatisfactory explanations his friends offer up for several dozen chapters and then demands—quite reasonably, in the eyes of the modern reader, if not the ancient Hebrews—an explanation from his God. The answer is not what he expected: God descends from heaven in a whirlwind and barrages Job with questions:

Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?

Gird up now thy loins like a man; for I will demand of thee, and answer thou me.

Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding.

Who hath laid the measures thereof, if thou knowest? or who hath stretched the line upon it? (Job 38:2-5, KJV)

God continues in this fashion for 124 more verses, until Job can only apologize for questioning the One from Whom “no thought can be withheld” (42:2). The rather
unpleasant moral of the story seems to be that human beings have no business conducting
theodicies, that instead they must put their faith in a God who could at any moment allow
them to suffer atrocities they do not deserve to undergo.

The twentieth century is rich with such atrocities, often on a staggeringly global
stage, and religious believers are apt to feel like Job’s friends watching something like the
Holocaust unfurl. What theodicy can survive something so horrible? What faith can survive?
What explanation can possibly be given? Did God and Satan have a deal for the lives of
every man, woman, and child at Auschwitz? Were the gas chambers and the mass graves part
of a chess game on a cosmic scale? The pawns in the game recoiled at the thought:

There is a story that one day at Auschwitz a group of Jews put God on trial.
They charged him with cruelty and betrayal. Like Job they found no
consolation in the usual answers to the problem of evil and suffering in the
midst of this current obscenity. They could find no excuse for God, no
extenuating circumstances, so they found him guilty and, presumably, worthy
of death. (Armstrong, History 376)

And why not? How many of the millions of Jews sent to Auschwitz would, after all, escape
to tell the tale? Job may have received a new family and new wealth in return for his much-
vaunted patience, but that did little to soothe the terror of his sons and daughters, torn to
pieces by the whirlwind. God might be interested in building heaven on the tears of the
destroyed, but one hardly faults Dostoevsky’s Ivan Karamazov for his refusal to countenance
such a world. “It’s not God that I don’t accept,” he tells his saintly brother Alyosha, after a
chapter full of description of the most horrible abuses ever committed. “Only I most
respectfully return Him the ticket” (Brothers 226). Can an honest man do anything else?
So it is hard to blame the Auschwitz prisoners for convicting and sentencing God. But what happened after the trial is even more interesting: “The Rabbi pronounced the verdict. Then he looked up and said that the trial was over: it was time for the evening prayer” (Armstrong, *History* 376). At this point, we see clearly and dramatically that ritual and rite can exist separately from belief and faith. Immediately after God’s trial and execution at Auschwitz, the hangmen knelt and prayed the prayers written to God. Judaism, then, survived the Holocaust, even if God’s survival is up in the air. The Law of Moses made it to 1945, even if the Lawgiver suffocated in the clouds of Zyklon B. Judaism thus ends up being something beyond a religion, at least in as much as a religion involves faith in a higher power; the ritual itself defines a certain sort of Judaism after the Holocaust. This division is most visible in the largely American movement called Reconstructionist Judaism, which Rebecca T. Alpert and Jacob J. Staub call “Perhaps the only truly indigenous attempt to solve the problem of modernity for American Jewry” (2-3). The movement was spearheaded by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan in the first third of the twentieth century but picked up a good deal of steam after World War II. Its central innovation comes in its definition of Judaism not as a religion or a culture but as a civilization; this definition encompasses religious faith, nationality, and ethnic identity but substantially broadens the traditional definition of what it means to be Jewish. As Alpert and Staub note, the “civilization” definition of Judaism suggests a cultural totality and includes “art, culture, philosophy, language, law, ethics, celebrations, patterns of eating and dressing, and sancta” (10). Under this schema, the specifics of doctrine become far less important, and Reconstructionist Jews are free to conceive of God in new ways:
Although religion is paramount in the Reconstructionist definition of Jewish civilization, conspicuously absent from our definition of Judaism is any mention of God. This is no accident. Reconstructionists believe that it is the Jewish people that is the constant which runs through all the various stages in the evolution of Jewish civilization. Jewish conceptions of God have changed through the centuries over the course of our historical odyssey. . . . To define Jews in terms of their beliefs about God is thus impossible, unless we choose to distort the reality of the Jewish experience. (18)

Indeed, according to Kaplan, the purpose of religion—Judaism or any other faith—is not so much to concoct theologically accurate statements about the divine as “to enable the group so to adjust itself to its environment as to make the most of its life” (44). This definition reflects Kaplan’s background in sociology as much as it does his theological training and has proved remarkably popular in modern Judaism.

However, if Kaplan left his thoughts on religion to this merely sociological definition, Reconstructionist Judaism would not be much different than Reform Judaism and other movements that seek to break with the past. In fact, Kaplan has as much (or more) scorn for Reform Jews as he does for the dogmatically Orthodox. “We are,” he says, “emphatically opposed to the negation of Judaism,” a negation, as he sees it, aggressively pursued by Reform theologians:

Reform Judaism represents to us an absolute break with the Judaism of the past, rather than a development out of it. In abrogating the hope for a national restoration, it has shifted the center of spiritual interests from the Jewish
people to the individual Jew. Reform Judaism has as little in common with historic Judaism as has Christianity or Ethical Culture. (40)

In this revolt against Reform Judaism, one discovers the true perspective of the Reconstructionists, who wish both to preserve the distinctiveness of Jewish civilization and to jettison those aspects of traditional Judaism (most notably supernaturalism and the chosenness of the Jewish people)\(^1\) that do not fit into the modern world and the contemporary open society.

Reconstructionist Judaism thus involves a maintenance and simultaneous reimagining of ritual. Kaplan suggests a sociological use of religious ritual: “The participation in a common ritual helps to cement the we-feeling of the group” (218). Reconstructionists strip Jewish rituals of their divine mandate and any “magical” power that previous groups may have found in them; instead, they find in these rituals a symbolic value for both the Jewish community and the individual Jew. As Alpert and Staub put it, “Meanings beget new meanings. . . . For example, the Shabbat candles remind us that fire is both life-giving and destructive, and that the messianic hope of the Shabbat depends on our ability to harness our technology for constructive purposes” (23). The ritual thus survives into the modern world, and the shift from literal to symbolic observance gives a new and modern meaning to the actions involved in it. For a Reconstructionist, the actions of the prisoners in Auschwitz make perfect sense: the prayer service held after the trial of God isn’t a theological gesture at all, but rather a sociological one, meant to hold the community together and maintain its distinctiveness in a situation that threatens to destroy the Jewish civilization once and for all.

\(^1\) While Kaplan rejects supernaturalism, he is by no means a philosophical naturalist, let alone a materialist or an atheist. Instead, he advocates a position he calls “transnaturalism”; as Emanuel S. Goldsmith describes it, transnaturalism “envisaged God in the ‘organicity’ of
Reconstructionist Judaism, however, is only one way of explaining the post-trial Auschwitz prayer service. Existentialist theology offers another. This movement is so broad that it is difficult to set forth one single belief held by every theologian associated with it—but it is accurate to say that many, if not most, religious existentialists believe that man has an inborn religious impulse, as described in the first paragraph of Augustine’s seminal *Confessions:* “to praise you [God] is the desire of man, a little piece of your creation. You stir man to take pleasure in praising you, because you have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (1.1.1). According to Augustine, then, men and women are in some important sense defined by an absence at the heart of their being, an absence Jewish and Christian thinkers connect to the Fall described in Genesis 3. The sin of the first man and woman resulted in God’s withdrawal from daily human life. The religious impulse—as Augustine describes it, a sort of spiritual restlessness—is the unconscious acknowledgement of this withdrawal. If the Fall thrust man into alienation (from God, from

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2 A word on gender terminology: I use the term *man* to describe both men and women, for reasons that Miguel de Unamuno explains in *The Tragic Sense of Life*: “*Homo sum; nihil humani a me alienum puto,* said the Latin playwright. And I would rather say, *Nullum hominem a me alienum puto:* I am a man; no other man do I deem a stranger. For to me the adjective *humanus* is no less suspect than its abstract substantive *humanitas,* humanity. Neither ‘the human’ nor ‘humanity,’ neither the simple adjective nor the substantivized adjective, but the concrete substantive—man. The man of flesh and bone; the man who is born, suffers, and dies—above all, who dies; the man who eats and drinks and plays and sleeps and thinks and wills; the man who is seen and heard; the brother, the real brother” (1).

The rise of feminism in the time between Unamuno’s era and our own has (quite rightly) made the universal *man* problematic; nevertheless, I will continue to use it because it denotes a concrete and specific being rather than an abstraction. Whenever possible, especially when referring to multiple entities, I will say “*men and women,*” but under most circumstances my use of *man* should be understood to refer to both genders, with no slight intended toward women.

Likewise, when I describe God, I will forego the use of pronouns except when it is not euphonious to do so; at such times I will follow the tradition and refer to God as *He* and *Him.* Readers may feel free to substitute *She* or *It* if they are so inclined.
others, from nature, from himself), then the religious impulse is the insuppressible urge to transcend that alienation.

Blaise Pascal, an important influence on existentialist thought, takes Augustine’s restlessness even further. He observes that “All men seek happiness” but adds that “after such a great number of years, no one without faith has reached the point to which all continually look” (Pensées §425). The quest for happiness is really an attempt to escape the alienation caused by the Fall, and the quest cannot be fulfilled without man’s reconciliation to God. The person in search of happiness looks deep inside him or herself and finds nothingness:

What is it then that this desire and this inability proclaim to us, but that there was once in man a true happiness of which there now remain to him only the mark and empty trace, which he in vain tries to fill from all his surroundings, seeking from things absent the help he does not obtain in things present? But these are all inadequate, because the infinite abyss can only be filled by an infinite and immutable object, that is to say, only by God Himself. (§425)

That the abyss in one’s soul is infinite guarantees that only God can fill it; thus, the life of man is an endless striving after fulfillment—a religious impulse that can be easily misdirected. Augustine’s language is rather optimistic, as though his return to divine rest were inevitable. Pascal is markedly more pessimistic, focusing not on the ultimate fulfillment but on the pain in the meantime; in this section of the Pensées, Pascal presents human life as a thing of great pain, ruinous and alienating.

The Swiss theologian Karl Barth combines Pascal’s proto-existentialism with the Calvinism of the Reformed tradition and ends up with an even bleaker view of the human
condition. Human beings are naturally drawn toward religion, says Barth, but they are drawn in the wrong direction:

There comes into being what is known as the “religious” life, which is regarded as something peculiar, which is contrasted with the life of the generality of men, and which, because it is nothing more than romantic unbelief, has no protection against the enmity of those who despise it. There emerges from the righteousness of God of the Prophets the human righteousness of the Pharisees, which is as such ungodliness and unrighteousness. (Epistle 60)

The religious impulse, according to Barth, leads human beings astray, away from the one true God revealed (as Christians believe) in Jesus Christ. The person who obeys his or her religious impulse has thus “falsified his accounts by failing to disclose how serious his position is. Though he piles up higher and higher his divine claims, his divine assurance, and his divine delights, he does but build a Tower of Babel” (61). Barth’s Calvinism—so often forgotten when he is rightly classed as an existentialist theologian—is paramount here. Human beings cannot find their way to God, and so they need God to reach down and reveal Himself to them: “There is no way from us to God—not even a via negativa—not even a via dialectica nor paradoxa. The god who stood at the end of some human way—even of this way—would not be God” (“Problem” 177). Barth’s version of the religious impulse is thus a confused and frustrated one, with human beings longing their whole lives for God but utterly unable to find God on their own.

We get a sunnier view, perhaps, from the Jewish existentialist theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel, who defines humanity based on its drive to encounter God. Heschel goes so
far as to identify the *Imago Dei* of Genesis 1:26-27 with the religious impulse. Other creatures, Heschel tells us, possess the faculties for “Expression and communication” (4). But what sets man apart from the other animals is “his being compelled to draw a distinction between the utterable and the unutterable, to be stunned by that which is but cannot be put into words” (4). The inmost core of the human being, in other words, is inaccessible to, and unexplainable by, scientific inquiry. The scientist may suggest that he believes in the unknown as a category. Heschel would no doubt reply that this is not what he means at all: “The ineffable is not a synonym for the unknown or the non-descript; its essence is not in its being an enigma, in its being hidden behind the curtain” (22). The ineffable is, in other words, the unknowable rather than the unknown. Further, the religious impulse precedes scientific inquiry: “The awareness of the unknown is earlier than the awareness of the known. The tree of knowledge grows upon the soil of mystery” (7). People feel the longing for the ineffable before they feel the longing for concrete and scientific knowledge; to make the latter supreme would be to live in bad faith. To live as though human beings are exclusively rational creatures is also to live in bad faith, since “Soul and reason are *not* the same” (7). People may not be wholly irrational beings, but they are extrarational—they can transcend mere rationalism.

It’s important to note that, for Heschel, the religious impulse is not in itself the ineffable—the ineffable is the mystery behind all things, whether one calls that mystery *God* or some other name. The religious impulse is our response to the ineffable—and it is a response to something objective: “Our radical amazement responds to the mystery, but does not produce it. You and I have not invented the grandeur of the sky nor endowed man with the mystery of birth and death. We do not create the ineffable, we encounter it” (20). Further,
the ineffable is available to all, even the most simple and uneducated. It is universal—maybe even democratic. Most of man’s meaning-making activity flows from his encounter with the ineffable:

Without the concept of the *ineffable* it would be impossible to account for the diversity of man’s attempts to express or depict reality, for the diversity of philosophies, poetic visions or artistic representations, for the consciousness that we are still at the beginning of our effort to say what we see about us. (21)

To reverse the cliché: All streams flow from one sea, and that sea is not sex, as Freud would have it, but the ineffable mystery of being.

Later in the book, Heschel returns to the religious impulse in even more direct terms. He refers to it as a “restlessness” and as “a yearning that knows no satisfaction . . . a yearning to meet that which we do not even know how to long for” (253). It is absolutely inborn, he tells us, and it consists of a need “different from all other needs and . . . incapable of being satisfied in any other but its own way” (247). The religious impulse is not a yearning to *know*, but to *experience*; the religious person wishes “to *be* more than what he is; to transform the soul into a vessel for the transcendent, to grasp with the senses what is hidden from the mind, to express in symbols what the tongue cannot speak and what the reason cannot conceive” (254). Heschel’s definition of the religious impulse goes a long way in accounting for something I will deal with in nearly every chapter of this dissertation: the preponderance of non-religious ritual.

This dissertation will examine the role of the religious impulse, belief, and ritual in American fiction—specifically that fiction heavily influenced by existentialist philosophy—in the decades following World War II. The writers I examine typically follow one of two
routes as regards ritual and belief: Either they present the ritual as an end unto itself, with belief as an unnecessary afterthought, or else their characters have a deep and personal faith in God that cannot be expressed through the potentially outdated rites of traditional Judaism and Christianity. In the former scenario, the ritual remains intact, even though belief has rotted away beneath it; in the latter, belief is as strong as ever, but the rituals have had to change to keep from destroying it. An examination of the ways fiction writers navigate these issues will tell us important things about human beings’ relationship to religion, ritual, and belief.

In my second chapter, “‘Long Live Regimentation!’: Saul Bellow’s New Rituals,” I will conduct a reading of two novels by the Jewish existentialist Saul Bellow: *Dangling Man* and *Henderson the Rain King*. These two books find Bellow struggling with both his Judaism and Jewishness and attempting to find a redeeming ritual in a modern world stripped of religious meaning. The thematic progression from *Dangling Man* to *Henderson the Rain King* is a simultaneous movement toward explicitly religious expression and away from specifically Jewish spirituality and culture.

My third chapter, “Salinger and the Need for Spiritual Specificity,” examines the claims of recent books like James M. Carse’s *The Religious Case Against Belief*, Karen Armstrong’s *The Case for God*, and Robert Wright’s *The Evolution of God*, contrasting their calls for a faith shorn of all doctrines and dogmas with the world of J.D. Salinger’s *Franny and Zooey*. In these two stories, Salinger creates a young woman who wishes to submit herself to the will of Christ. The problem is that her conception of Christ is fundamentally hazy and amorphous, and she cannot submit herself to anyone but the “real” Christ. And yet *Franny and Zooey* cannot serve as a simple repudiation of Carse’s claims; rather, as is the
case with all great literature, it complicates the philosophical issues it addresses, in this case the relationship between thought and act.

In my fourth chapter, I will examine two novels—Flannery O’Connor’s *Wise Blood* and John Updike’s *Rabbit, Run*—that deal with mysticism in the modern world but come to wildly different conclusions about its viability as an epistemological and religious system. Why is it that Hazel Motes’s “wise blood” leads him eventually to God, while Rabbit Angstrom, who operates similarly on instinct (religious or otherwise), progresses further and further into destructive solipsism as the tetralogy that bears his name progresses? I will work through this question in chapter three.

In my fifth and sixth chapters, I examine two connected novels by Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*. I allege that these two novels are photographic negatives that can be read through the theological concept of *eros* and *agape*. In *The Last Gentlemen*, connected with *eros*, rituals—religious and secular—are performed by rote and without sincerity. In *The Second Coming*, on the other hand, the protagonist sheds these rituals in order to enter into a new kind of deeply felt and thoroughly modern faith, hope, and love: the world of *agape*.

Finally, my seventh chapter, “Virginity and Atheism in Frederick Buechner’s *Lion Country*,” deals with a lesser-known existentialist novel, in which sex and virginity form rough corollaries to religious faith and atheism. The book’s protagonist floats aimlessly in what Heidegger calls “curiosity” and Kierkegaard calls the “aesthetic sphere” until he meets an evangelist—possibly, it must be noted, a charlatan—and his daughter, who snap him out of his aesthetic stasis by the use of some very nontraditional rituals.
The novels examined here have in common a deep uneasiness with the ancient
verities of the religious traditions of their authors and an unwillingness to fully abandon these
traditions. Their solutions to the tension vary, of course, but all of the authors involved
struggle against a century choking with meaninglessness in order to create, in the fashion of
the existentialists, their own meaning out of the raw materials of faith and ritual. Their task is
the task of every religious person in the modern age—indeed, in every age.
CHAPTER 2
‘LONG LIVE REGIMENTATION!’: SAUL BELLOW’S MODERN RITUALS

“Like a bird on the wire,
Like a drunk in a midnight choir,
I have tried in my way to be free.”
- Leonard Cohen, “Bird on a Wire”

The explosion of Jewish-American fiction in the 1950s and 1960s springs at least in part from an increased American awareness of Jewishness itself. World War II, with its attendant slaughter of millions of Jews, was still very much a part of public consciousness, though the details and scope of the genocide were, at least to some extent, unknown to the popular imagination. In the 1950s and ‘60s, Jews occupied a strange and liminal cultural space: They were still outsiders in the eyes of many of their countrymen, and yet they were on the way to becoming so-called “ex-minorities.” The period just following the war was an immensely fruitful time for American Jews in nearly every area of popular and intellectual culture, as they watched the locus of world Jewish culture move from Eastern Europe to the United States. With this shift came unbridled prosperity and success:

Never were [American Jews] more prosperous, culturally creative, and secure than in the postwar decades. After 1945, other Americans no longer viewed the Jews as merely another of the many exotic groups within America’s ethnic

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3 The term Holocaust, as applied to the Nazi genocides, is an English adaptation of the Hebrew word הולך, which became the official word used by Israel on April 12, 1951, the date on which the National Day of Remembrance was declared. And yet many non-experts must have remained unaware of the massacres for years, as evidenced by Edward Wallant’s 1961 novel The Pawnbroker, which depends for dramatic effect on the characters’ and the reader’s unawareness of the significance of Sol Nazerman’s concentration-camp tattoo.
and religious mosaic. Instead, they were now seen as comprising one of the country’s three major religions. (Shapiro 28)

And yet the achievements of postwar American Jews came in the shadow of intense anti-Semitism; Edward S. Shapiro claims that “Modern American anti-Semitism peaked in 1944. One-third of the respondents to a poll that year said they would join or at least sympathize with an anti-Semitic political campaign” (5). He also notes that social acceptance tended to come at a price: American Jews often had to assimilate to the cultural mainstream in order to succeed in business, academia, and entertainment. This was especially true of the wave of second-generation Jewish immigrants in the middle part of the century, who “took being Jewish for granted and saw little need to dwell on this fact. They were torn between the Jewish world of their parents and the American world of the streets” (14). Added to this tension was the grim specter of the Holocaust. Jews, even those who were not assimilated, had to ask themselves whether Jewish culture was something worth preserving at all:

The major question facing American Jewry throughout the postwar years was whether their valiant efforts to fill the cultural vacuum created by the Holocaust would prove to be sufficient; would Jewish culture and religion be sufficiently attractive so that Jews would voluntarily identify with the Jewish community and reject acculturation and assimilation? (93)

The upwardly mobile Jews of the mid-twentieth-century were thus dragged downwards by a shadow in triplicate: the lure of assimilation, the remnant of anti-Semitism, and the devastation of the Nazi Holocaust.

This situation understandably created a tension, one that manifests itself in the literature of the era. The Jewish-American Renaissance is rich with fiction about the twin
forces of tradition and assimilation, from Bernard Malamud’s *The Assistant*, in which a young Italian American robs and assaults a Jewish immigrant then goes to work for him and eventually converts to Judaism, to Philip Roth’s short story “The Conversion of the Jews,” in which a boy disrupts his Hebrew school by demanding that having faith in an omnipotent God means acknowledging that God has the power to impregnate a virgin. The Jewish writers of the era are clearly ambivalent about their heritage, an ambivalence that clearly flows from their status as second- and third-generation Americans. Malamud, Roth, and the other writers of the Jewish-American Renaissance (such as Norman Mailer, Herman Wouk, and Chaim Potok) do not attempt to repudiate their religious and cultural heritage—indeed, they use it as the raw material of their fiction, to varying degrees and in various ways—but they display a clear uneasiness about it.4

Alongside the Jewish-American Renaissance of the 1950s and early ‘60s came a renewed social interest in religion and theology of all sorts. Protestant theologians Paul Tillich and Reinhold Niebuhr became minor celebrities, as did the Jewish thinker Abraham Joshua Heschel. Shapiro argues that this upsurge in religion provided second- and third-generation Jewish-Americans with a chance to break with their ethnic heritages while maintaining certain religious rituals and beliefs:

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4 This uneasiness seems much less present in the Jewish-American writers of the present day. Michael Chabon, for example, can write a novel like *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* that is explicitly about Jewish characters and utilizes specific Jewish viewpoints and rituals (most notably the golem) and yet have it transcend the cultural ambivalences of twentieth-century Jewish writers. As Jewish as this novel is, Chabon clearly writes to appeal less to a particular ethnic group than to a subculture based on mutual interest—in this case, geek culture and readers of comic books. He is able to do so, I would argue, because he has absorbed the lessons and tensions of Roth, Malamud, and Bellow to the degree that he no longer has to work them out, at least in his fiction.
Besides Yiddish culture, the other secular forms of Jewish identity brought from Europe also had little appeal to the second and third generations. Few American Jews were sufficiently Zionist to settle in Palestine or Israel, fewer still took any interest in Hebraic culture except for learning a smattering of Hebrew necessary for worship, and Jewish socialism had little relevance for a population that was becoming suburban and overwhelmingly middle class.

For most Jews, then, Judaism remained the major link to their heritage. (161)

The specifics of the Judaism practiced by mid-century Jews was, of course, not particularly Orthodox. Reconstructionist Judaism enjoyed an increased popularity, and so did Jewish existentialism, as championed by Heschel, Martin Buber, and Franz Rosenzweig. The popularity of these two movements suggests a shift in the way people thought about religious belief and religious practice: the former group advocated traditional ritual even if separated from traditional belief, and the latter group posited a religious impulse that remained regardless of the specific practice into which a person put that impulse.

**Stalemate: *Dangling Man***

Into this fertile spiritual territory stepped Saul Bellow, a Jewish writer who is clearly interested in his own Jewishness but who is simultaneously interested in creating something bigger. Bellow was born in 1915 in Quebec to Russian-immigrant parents. The family moved to Chicago nine years later. Despite the fact that he was technically a first-generation immigrant, it is probably more accurate to think of Bellow as a second-generation American with the interests and disinterests Shapiro attributes to them above. Like many first-generation parents, Bellow’s mother Liza wanted her son to become a rabbi, but he had other
plans, studying anthropology at Northwestern University and the University of Chicago. His choice of majors is important, as his work, for all its religious overtones, is undeniably anthropocentric, and when he discusses religion, he, like Mordecai Kaplan, discusses it more as a human phenomenon than as a divine revelation. But despite this similarity to the Reconstructionists, Bellow is ultimately an existentialist, especially in the early part of his career—his first novel, 1944’s *Dangling Man*, descends quite obviously from Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *Notes from Underground* and from Jean-Paul Sartre’s *Nausea*. Like both of these novels, *Dangling Man* is the first-person narrative of a troubled man, although significantly and in a nod to Bellow’s anthropological background, the Dangling Man’s problems appear to begin with his society and his circumstances and then move inward.5 Bellow also takes from Dostoevsky and Sartre the deep sense of dissatisfaction on the part of their protagonists, but he gives it a peculiarly American twist: the Dangling Man is dissatisfied because he is unemployed, a crime against the Protestant work ethic that drives his nation.

*Dangling Man* is, I think, a good place to start when examining Bellow’s attitude toward Jewishness and Judaism. Published in 1944—at what Edward S. Shapiro calls the “peak” of American anti-Semitism—the book presents us with a protagonist who might well be Jewish, who has certain cultural signifiers of Jewishness, but who never declares his ethnicity outright and who has little interest in any religious ritual. Instead, *Dangling Man* is

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5 The movement is reversed in both *Notes from Underground* and *Nausea*. Dostoevsky’s novel famously begins, “I am a sick man…I am an angry man. I am an unattractive man” (15). The first statement is of interiority (personal illness), and the third is of exteriority (appearance to others); the second, of course, is a combination of the two, the Underground Man’s reaction to those around him. *Nausea*, on the other hand, is interior almost to the point of solipsism, and much of the novel has next to nothing to do with any other human being.
a novel of attempted assimilation, the story of Joseph’s drive to convert to American civic religion and to erase his ethnic identification by joining the military and fighting in World War II. His enlistment is not wholly an ethnic and a religious act, of course—it also involves his ceding his personal autonomy (so important to existentialist thinkers of all religious persuasions) to the society he lives in, an act of personal assimilation removed from all ethnic and religious concerns. Read this way, Dangling Man becomes a novel about the search for a codifying ritual in the post-religious age, a Jewish quest for a non-Jewish behavioral structure to give life meaning.

In this chapter, I will compare Dangling Man to Bellow’s fifth novel, Henderson the Rain King, written fifteen years later. If Dangling Man keeps the Jewishness of its protagonist quiet, Henderson eliminates it altogether: Eugene Henderson is apparently some brand of lapsed Christian (Lutheran perhaps, given his probable Scandinavian heritage) and shows little attraction to Jewishness as a social category or to Judaism as a religious one. And yet even more than Dangling Man, Henderson the Rain King is a novel of the religious quest, as its protagonist flees to undeveloped Africa with the mission of finding himself. When he finally does so, it is because he submits his will—as Dangling Man’s Joseph does—to an outside force; but whereas Joseph submits himself to the United States military, Henderson turns to ancient religious rituals, which he combines with the remnants of his Judeo-Christian heritage to make something personal and new. Read together, these two novels show Bellow moving beyond his own Jewishness and Judaism and toward a generalized spiritual expression, but as he moves away from his own heritage, he becomes more religious and more concerned with the rituals by which religion is traditionally expressed.
It must be noted that Bellow always considered himself ethnically and religiously Jewish. As he told interviewer Antonio Monda late in his life, “I’m Jewish. My mother was extremely religious while my father avoided the subject. . . . [I]n the end it was my mother who had the greater influence on me” (29). And yet in the same interview Bellow claims that “I don’t much love classifications, especially those having to do with myself” and that he shares what Monda calls “The Christian idea of grace” (30). He is rather quiet regarding his own conception of God, in Whom he certainly believes, and the closest he comes to an explicitly theological statement is that “I see prayer as an intimate checkup with the headquarters of the universe” (32). He also acknowledges the spiritual and religious content of his novels but says that he resists the urge to propagandize in his books: “If the approach [to novel-writing] is propagandistic, it immediately becomes a problem, whether the intent is to propagandize the existence or the absence of a spiritual reality” (32). And yet earlier in the interview, he declines to talk about the existence of the soul because “what I have to say is written in my books” (31). From these evasions we can conclude that, while Bellow is a religious writer, he prefers not to make explicit theological statements either in his fiction or in interviews and that it is up to the reader to parse the theological content of his novels. If this is bad news for the ideologue, it is good news for the literary critic, who finds in it a raison d’être.

And the critics, of course, have made a wide range of arguments about Bellow’s work. Jean-François Leroux, for example, connects Dangling Man with Dostoevsky’s Notes from Underground and claims that both books are fundamentally about boredom, whether one couches it as romantic ennui or as existential nausea. Further, he says, the boredom and suffering of both Joseph and the Underground Man are caused primarily by a failure to
properly love those around them: “Both begin with the self and so end, coincidentally, by complaining of a ‘loss of contact with anything alive’—a state of hellish indifference or accidie” (6). Likewise, whereas Jo Brans sees the immediate predecessor of *Dangling Man* in Denis Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*, she notes that Bellow “internalizes the opposition” of Diderot’s Moi and Lui “in his protagonist, Joseph” (436) and chalks the difference up to Dostoevsky’s influence (435). Malcolm Bradbury, meanwhile, sees in Bellow’s book other authors generally termed existentialist; the novel, he says, is “inconceivable without Babel, Kafka, and Sartre” (36). Bradbury finds Sartre’s influence particularly strong, “as its agent seeks to bring nature and good faith back to both himself and the outward world by discovering an adequate act of commitment, self-surrender making for self-discovery” (36). Other critics—most notably Edmund Wilson, who reviewed the novel for *The New Yorker* upon its first publication—treat the book primarily as a psychological portrait of “the experience of the non-combatant in time of war” and as “one of the most honest pieces of testimony on the psychology of a whole generation who have grown up during the depression and the war” (78). This reading is legitimate, of course, but it fails to note the universality of Joseph’s problem. Denis Donoghue, on the other hand, writing just after Bellow published *Herzog* in 1964, finds in *Dangling Man* a far more widespread problem. The Dangling Man, Donoghue claims, is the prototypical protagonist in all of Bellow’s fiction, an existentialist everyman who is forced to sit and wait for epiphanies that may never come:

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6 Leroux quotes *Notes from Underground*; as another translation puts it: “[T]o tell a long story about how I missed life through decaying morally in a corner, not having any sufficient means, losing the habit of living, and carefully cultivating my anger underground—really is not interesting” (122). Bellow echoes this sentiment early in *Dangling Man* when Joseph says that “For a long time ‘common humanity’ and ‘bring myself to concede’ had been completely absent from my mind. And all at once I saw how I had lapsed from that older self to whom they had been so natural” (26).
I would suggest that the dangling man is a worthier image of our condition than the Outsider. The figure of the exceptional man in a grim time attracts our sympathy and understanding, but there is a moment at which it ceases to be our problem. Every exceptional man has probably felt himself the man against the sky. But most people, by definition, are not exceptional in that sense. (“Commitment” 176)

Donoghue does not make the connection himself, but Bellow’s protagonists represent the existentialist hero—Camus’s Stranger or Sartre’s Roquentin or Dostoevsky’s Underground Man—transferred into the mythology and the social values of the United States. His characters are exceptional in their unexceptionality, democratic in their ordinariness; the reader finds him or herself far more easily in Joseph or Henderson than in Meursault or Roquentin.

The universality of Bellow’s Dangling Men is immensely important because Bellow—while he was committed to Jewishness and Judaism—clearly aimed in his writing for something beyond the merely sectarian or ethnic. To wit: The characters in Dangling Man are, presumably, Jewish—they live in Chicago’s Humboldt Park neighborhood, which, before becoming known as “Little Puerto Rico” in the 1950s, was heavily Jewish, and Joseph has friends with Jewish last names like Adler, Stillman, and Brill—and yet Joseph’s Jewishness does not play any major role in the novel. The plot and the philosophy would both work just as well if he were named John Huntington (or Eugene Henderson!) and lived on the North Shore. This must be intentional on Bellow’s part—it must be essential to his design that his readers, Jewish or Gentile, be able to identify with Joseph’s predicament. Thus, all but a few background racial signifiers have been effaced from the novel, and
Joseph’s situation is by no means dependent upon either his ethnic or his religious background.

Indeed, Judaism as a religion—or religion as a general framework—is mostly present in *Dangling Man* by its rather conspicuous absence. Joseph and Iva’s neighbor, Mr. Vanaker, is apparently a churchgoing Catholic, although his religious beliefs do not seem to translate into moral behavior, as Joseph catches him stealing socks and perfume from their apartment. Neither Joseph’s nor Iva’s family—both of whom are financially successful—seem to have much use for Judaism or any other religion, and Joseph has no meaningful theological discussion with anyone other than his own subconscious. The absence of religion creates a vacuum of ritual in the novel, best signified by the “dangling” alluded to in the title. Joseph dangles because he has no commitments and no future. He has quit his job at a travel agency in the hopes of joining the American military and entering World War II, but a series of bureaucratic requirements results in a prolonged and uncomfortable waiting period while the government investigates Joseph, who is a Canadian citizen. He cannot take a job during this interim period because he could be drafted at any moment, but at the outset of the book he has been waiting for more than half a year. Is it any wonder he finds himself directionless? Fate has given him ultimate freedom, the freedom to do all the things his work commitments kept him from doing before—specifically, he now has time to work on his pet intellectual project: “several essays, mainly biographical, on the philosophers of the Enlightenment.” But he cannot work on these essays, and he tells us that he “was in the midst of one on Diderot when I stopped” (11). That he cannot finish this project on the Enlightenment suggests that the philosophy of the Enlightenment—focused as it is on reason and man’s ability to understand and conquer his environment—cannot speak to him about the situation in which
he finds himself. Indeed, he would have to turn to existentialism for an explanation of his uncomfortable and unpleasant state of affairs. For Joseph is, as Jean-Paul Sartre memorably puts it, “condemned to be free. Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does” (Existentialism 27). His freedom manifests itself as a noose around his neck, and despite having more time than ever before, he is unable to accomplish much of anything at all. Indeed, near the end of the novel, Joseph himself confesses “that I do not know what to do with my freedom” (151)—his situation has left him aimlessly floating through his neighborhood, his marriage, his life.

Dangling Man is thus one of the world’s great novels of alienation. Its every page bleeds with Joseph’s loneliness and his inability to do anything about it. He says early on of his wife that “the main bolt that held us together”—his job, presumably, and the domestic routine it supported—“has given way, and so far I have had no incentive to replace it. And I am very much alone” (12). He fights with his wife, his family, and his friends through the book, and more chillingly, he dissociates from himself, views his old, comparatively well-adjusted, life from an outsider’s perspective, and sighs in resignation, “Very little about the Joseph of a year ago pleases me. I cannot help laughing at him, at some of his traits and sayings” (26). This dissociation deepens later in the novel when Joseph is confronted by “the Spirit of Alternatives” (134)—clearly a manifestation of his own broken personality—who demands a response to the impossible situation in which Joseph finds himself. Even the landscape holds itself apart from Joseph. Dangling Man takes place from December through early April, a time when Chicago is typically frozen and covered with a negating blanket of snow, and the book is filled with beautiful but harrowing descriptions of an unreal and
inhospitable alien landscape, one that locks Joseph out as surely as he is locked out of the lives of his friends and family.

Joseph’s alienation extends to whatever paltry religious life he has. He seems to be comfortable neither with atheism nor theism, a fitting theological position for a dangling man. In one of the novel’s most powerful scenes, he retreats to the attic during a dinner party at his brother Amos’s house and listens to a recording of a Haydn cello piece over and over again. The music moves him into sustained reflection on his unhappy life:

Its sober opening notes, preliminaries to a thoughtful confession, showed me that I was still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation. I had not even begun. I had, furthermore, no right to expect to avoid them. So much was immediately clear. Surely no one could plead for exception; that was not a human privilege. What I should do with them, how to meet them, was answered in the second declaration: with grace, without meanness. And though I could not as yet apply that answer to myself, I recognized its rightness and was vehemently moved by it. Not until I was a whole man could it be my answer, too. (67)

Bellow’s language here is rather theological, with its references to grace and to the whole man, but Joseph explicitly rejects theological solutions to his problem, even as Haydn’s music proposes them: “But what a miserable surrender that would be, born out of disheartenment and chaos; and out of fear, bodily and imperious, that like a disease asked for a remedy and did not care how it was supplied. . . . No, not God, not any divinity” (68). If God exists in the novel, Joseph is alienated from that God, just as he is alienated from himself, his friends, and the physical world around him.
Joseph’s dangling is certainly related to the alienating self-assertion of Dostoevsky’s Underground Man, as so many critics have claimed, but we must not leave out its relationship with what Søren Kierkegaard refers to as the “aesthetic sphere” of existence. Bellow implicitly invokes Kierkegaard when he has Joseph listen to Haydn. Kierkegaard’s model for the ultimate aesthetic work of art is Mozart’s opera *Don Giovanni*. Haydn was a contemporary and friend of Mozart, and the latter dedicated a series of string quartets (K. 387, 421, 428, 458, 464, and 465) to him. That Joseph has an existential crisis while listening to Haydn is likely Bellow’s way of suggesting Kierkegaard without actually naming Mozart outright. If so, we can legitimately read Joseph as a frustrated aesthete, the kind of person Kierkegaard presents in *Either/Or*, for whom “boredom is the root of all evil” (228). Indeed, Kierkegaard’s aesthete dangles, too, and says of himself: “I feel as a chessman must when the opponent says of it: that piece cannot be moved” (44). He lives for momentary and superficial pleasures—he rarely goes deeper than the surface (despite the hundreds of pages he devotes to analyzing music and culture) and never commits to anything; indeed, commitment is precisely what distinguishes the aesthetic sphere from the sphere above it, the ethical. The aesthete maintains a purposeful alienation from those around him, particularly from his lovers:

I only reserve to myself the private opinion that no love affair should last more than six months at most, and that every relationship is over as soon as one has tasted the final enjoyment. . . . I also know that the highest form of enjoyment conceivable is to be loved, loved more than everything in the world. To poeticize oneself into a girl is an art, to poeticize oneself out of her is a masterpiece. (306)
Compare this callous attitude to that of Kierkegaard’s ethicist, Judge Vilhelm, who affirms romantic love but suggests that “Though based essentially on the sensual, this love still has a nobility by virtue of the consciousness of the eternal it takes up in itself. For what distinguishes love from lust is its having the stamp of the eternal” (393). For those in the ethical sphere, immediate sensual pleasures have validity to the extent that they point to something less immediate—not too far, it must be noted, from the Platonic ideal. But the aesthete cares nothing at all for the eternal and cannot transcend his own restlessness and dissatisfaction long enough to make a commitment; indeed, he fears a commitment, fears real connection, and prefers to stay in a state of wandering.

The concept is similar to one pioneered by St. Augustine and then picked up by Martin Heidegger, that of curiosity. Augustine defines curiosity as a perverted form of pleasure, in that while “Pleasure pursues beautiful objects . . . curiosity pursues the contraries of those delights with the motive of seeing what the experiences are like, not with a wish to undergo discomfort, but out of a lust for experimenting and knowing” (10.35.55). As is the case for most lusts in Augustine’s work, this lust for experimentation never ends, and Augustine describes curiosity as a constant temptation for the intellectual. Heidegger, under the influence of Kierkegaard’s concept of the aesthetic, refines curiosity a bit further. For Augustine, curiosity arises when people forget that the proper aim of learning is the knowledge of God and instead “desire knowledge for its own sake” (10.35.55); Heidegger, an atheist, cannot accept Augustine’s view that curiosity is a sin against God and instead turns it into a sin against oneself; that is, curiosity keeps a person from becoming fully authentic:
When curiosity becomes free . . . it concerns itself with seeing, not in order to understand what is seen (that is, to come into a Being towards it) but just in order to see. It seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty. In this kind of seeing, that which is an issue for care does not lie in grasping something and being knowingly in the truth; it lies rather in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world. (216)\(^7\)

Curiosity, then, eats away at a person’s authentic individuality; in engaging with it, a person becomes increasingly a part of the world around him, lost in what Heidegger elsewhere calls “the They.” Note that this absorption in the world does not result in a loss of alienation. The They Dasein encounters in this manner “is not something like a ‘universal subject’ which a plurality of subjects have hovering above them”; instead, “the Being of such ‘subjects’” should be “understood as having a character other than that of Dasein” (166).\(^8\) Thus, the person who is absorbed in the world is actually thrust further into alienation because he or she is unable to encounter any other people authentically. Curiosity thus deepens alienation even as it seeks to relieve it.

Both of these terms—*aesthetic* and *curious*—very easily apply to Joseph, and it seems as though Bellow means for them to. Joseph dabbles in philosophy and music just the way Kierkegaard’s aesthete does, and he uses the aesthete’s favorite word, *boredom*, when he

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7 Along with curiosity comes “idle talk,” which is to discourse what curiosity is to vision: “Idle talk is the possibility of understanding everything without previously making the thing one’s own. . . . Thus, by its very nature, idle talk is a closing-off, since to go back to the ground of what is talked about is something which it leaves undone” (213).

8 *Dasein* (German for “being-there”) is the term Heidegger uses in lieu of “self” or “individual.” It designates a form of being that interacts with the world around it, as opposed to Descartes’s detached and observing self. That the being one encounters in absorption in the they is not *Dasein* but something else entirely suggests a series of selves equally closed off and inaccessible—a nightmare of alienation.
rejects Goethe’s appeal to romantic love as a route to salvation: “his boredom threw that ‘passion of love’ in the shadow and he instantly took his place for me beside the murderer Barnardine in *Measure for Measure*” (19). He also resembles the aesthete in his ability and willingness to objectify women; specifically, he cheats on his wife with Kitty Daumler, a woman about whom he seems to care very little. Furthermore, the name of his lover suggests Heideggerian curiosity (as in “curiosity killed the cat”). If Bellow means for Joseph to fit into these categories, then the lengths to which he goes to avoid pattern and routine make a great deal of sense. He tells us that “I have fallen into the habit of changing restaurants regularly. I do not want to become too familiar a sight in any of them, friendly with sandwich men, waitresses, and cashiers, and compelled to invent lies for their benefit” (14). Likewise, his intellectual life is a marvel of curiosity and aestheticism, as we see from a conversation he has early on with his friend Myron. Asked why he didn’t change the world as a would-be revolutionary communist, he replies, “I changed my mind about redoing the world from top to bottom à la Karl Marx and decided in favor of bandaging a few sores at a time.” The pragmatism of this response is immediately subverted by his next sentence: “Of course, that was temporary too” (34-35). He cannot settle on an intellectual position for the same reason that he cannot settle on a restaurant: To do so would be to make a commitment and to force him to be responsible for it or else to “invent lies” about it.

And yet Joseph is clearly dissatisfied with his life without commitments. He clearly misses the rhythm of his old life, and the lack of definition of the way he lives dehumanizes him. Thus, he insists that “There must be a difference . . . between things and persons and even between acts and persons” (25), for if a man is defined solely by what he does, Joseph is

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9 The name *Kitty* will signify much the same thing in Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman*, as we shall see in Chapter 5.
nothing at all. In the meantime, he searches for a rhythm that will give his life meaning, a system by which he can organize his days and nights. A warped religiosity characterizes this search. Denis Donoghue asserts that “the dangling man sometimes devotes himself to the niceties of routine in the hope—I assume—of mistaking routine for ritual” (“Commitment” 175). In other words, if one function of the religious life is to provide a method of marking time and making the days and months into something meaningful, then Joseph’s quest for structure and stability is fundamentally a religious quest, albeit one he does not himself frame in religious terminology. “For me,” he says, “it is certainly true that days have lost their distinctiveness. There were formerly baking days, washing days, days that began events and days that ended them. But now they are undistinguished, all equal, and it is difficult to tell Tuesday from Saturday” (81). Joseph invokes the Jewish Sabbath here but does not remark upon it, and this simultaneous suggestion and omission signifies the lacuna in Joseph’s soul. Readers understand that a submission to the sacred calendar would improve Joseph’s situation—perhaps even Joseph himself understands it—but he has eliminated religious faith as a possible category on the grounds that the leap of faith would be “anterior, not of my own deriving” (68). What he wants, then, is a system of religious rhythm that is entirely of his own design—and yet at the same time he flees structure and order, as evidenced by his shifting restaurant schedule. He has been left in a stalemate between his fear of the loss of meaning and his fear of boredom. He knows that the solution to his problem is a commitment

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10 Such is the premise of a book like Emil Bock’s The Rhythm of the Christian Year, which finds in the festivals of the high church a connection to the natural passage of time. The Jewish calendar, too, is replete with holy days that sanctify time itself; to be left outside this chronology is to be left out of meaning-making itself. While Joseph was by all accounts irreligious before he began dangling, his job provided an acceptable replacement for the sacred calendar. This is why it is important that he worked for a travel agency, a business built, in large part, on seasonal fluctuation and change.
to an ideal or person—indeed, he says that people cannot live without an attachment to one of thousands of “ideal constructions, each with its assertions and symbols, each finding . . . its particular answer and each proclaiming: ‘This is the only possible way to make chaos’” (140). But he cannot find such an attachment, cannot get into a rhythm, because he cannot bring himself to commit to something outside of his own skull.

Eventually, the world breaks the stalemate down. For one thing, the weather gradually changes, a natural progression of ritual that Joseph anticipates long before it actually happens. On February 27, just under a month before the official beginning of Spring, he declares that “on the twenty-first I will change from my winter clothes and, no matter what the weather is like, even if there is a blizzard, I will walk through Jackson Park hatless and gloveless” (154), clearly indicating a longing for ritual so intense as to be humorous. The coming of Spring is, however, inevitable, and so the rhythm Joseph seeks is eventually forthcoming, even if March 21 is a “slaty, windy day with specks of snow sliding through the trees” (170). Additionally, he begins to desire a connection with other human beings. After reading a letter from his friend John Pearl, who has moved away from Chicago and is displeased about it, Joseph says both that “I’m sorry for him” and that “such a letter buoys me up. It gives me a sense of someone else’s recognition of the difficult, the sorrowful, in what to others is merely neutral, the environment” (153). His reaction here sounds somewhat strange but is really a normal reaction to another’s alienation. As Walker Percy puts it, “There is no such thing, strictly speaking, as a literature of alienation. In the re-presenting of alienation the category is reversed and becomes something entirely different” (“Man” 83). To speak of one’s alienation to another—or to hear of another’s alienation—is to break the
feedback loop of loneliness and to make some desperate connection to something outside of oneself. Indeed, a few days after reading this letter, Joseph diagnoses his problem:

We struggle perpetually to free ourselves. Or, to put it somewhat differently, while we seem so intently and even desperately to be holding on to ourselves, we would far rather give ourselves away. We do not know how. So, at times, we throw ourselves away. When what we really want is to stop living so exclusively and vainly for our own sake, impure and unknowing, turning inward and self-fastened. (153-154)

Remarkably clear-eyed, Joseph recognizes that he is being held captive by his own stubborn self-reliance.

The problem is that he still cannot find anything to attach himself to permanently. Even World War II seems to him a rather arbitrary conflict. As he tells the “Spirit of Alternatives” in their second conversation, the war is merely “an incident. Is the real nature of the world changed by it? No. Will it decide, ultimately, the major issues of existence? No. Will it rescue us spiritually? Still no. . . . In no essential way is it crucial—if you accept my meaning of essential” (168). And yet the war is an option; it is something that could rescue him, in that it involves both the highest commitment and a very strict set of secular rituals. So when life finally pushes Joseph to his absolute limit, he surrenders to the war:

I believe I had known for some time that the moment I had been waiting for had come, and that it was impossible to resist any longer. I must give myself up. And I recognized that the breath of warm air was simultaneously a breath of relief at my decision to surrender. I was done. But it was not painful to acknowledge that, it was not painful in the least. Not even when I tested
myself, whispering “the leash,” reproachfully, did I feel pained or humiliated. (183)

He goes to the draft board and asks—perhaps demands—to be inducted into the army. That this plan works suggests that he could have done so all along, that he was no victim of circumstance, and that his dangling, therefore, was of his own design. He begins and ends it.

The last lines of the book have created something of a controversy in the criticism. Joseph rejoices that he is “relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled,” before giving three cheers: “Hurray for regular hours! And for the supervision of the spirit! Long live regimentation!” (191). Frederick R. Karl claims, for example, that

The final lines . . . turn the novel into an ironic statement, in which Bellow establishes the attractions of “alternative spirits” to his own point of view. The moral struggle is on: to preserve oneself against all the traps and snares, whether overindulgence in self or the regimentation of what lies beyond. (87)

Denis Donoghue agrees, suggesting that “the hero surrenders, gives up the struggle on the last page, like Hans Castorp going down to the war” (“Dangling” 21); so does Jo Brans, who says that Joseph’s “advance looks suspiciously like defeat” (446). And Algis Valiunas accuses Joseph of fatuousness, of “speaking of war as if it were some especially challenging post-graduate tutorial, arranged for his benefit” (52)—and even if the war itself is ostensibly about the very sort of freedom for self-determination that Joseph has been seeking, Valiunas suggests that his attitude toward it is so off as to be silly. (87)

However, while Bellow’s intentions are substantially more ambivalent, I do not think that Joseph himself means these sentences to be sarcastic or sinister in any meaningful way. Rather, these closing pronouncements serve as Joseph’s very real celebration of the thing that
has been most missing from his life these past few months: ritual. The army cannot provide a religious or sacramental life to him, of course, but it can do the next best thing and give his living a rhythm that it has lacked for a long time. He is right to celebrate it, and he celebrates it without irony or cynicism. At the same time, the reader is right to be suspicious, for the overall tone of the ending is ambiguous: “Joseph’s cry is a testament of loss, a testament of gain, an acquiescence in the defeat of the solitary free spirit in its solipsism, but an embrace of historical attachment, enforced community, the ‘uniform of the times’” (Bradbury 39). Joseph may celebrate his commitment, but Bellow is less sure—and the inadequacy of the solution becomes clear in *Henderson the Rain King*.

**Checkmate: Henderson the Rain King**

The message of *Dangling Man*, in the end, seems to be that any ritual is better than no ritual at all—that the motions of religion are important even if one cannot hold to any particular religious belief. *Henderson the Rain King*, published a decade and a half later, will complicate this message. Its protagonist, much like Joseph, finds himself in spiritual stasis; however, he is substantially older than Joseph and has exhausted the secular options in which his 1944 counterpart put his hope. In the end, he must turn to explicitly religious rituals to break him out of his stasis and to bring him an earthly form of salvation—but he must also adapt these ancient rituals to the demands of the modern world.

If Joseph was implicitly Jewish and never dared or bothered to speak about his ethnicity or religious background, Eugene Henderson is implicitly gentile and happy to talk about it. His last name suggests a Scandinavian heritage, and his background is stereotypically WASP-ish: “I am a graduate of an Ivy League university—I see no reason to
embarrass my alma mater by naming her. If I hadn’t been a Henderson and my father’s son, they would have thrown me out” (4). He is, in fact, the heir to his father’s business fortune, which keeps him idle and living in opulence in Connecticut. His situation thus seems the opposite of Joseph’s—he is gentile rather than Jewish, suburban rather than urban, rich rather than poor. And yet the two characters are largely identical. Both find themselves unnervingly idle and cannot bear it; both have strained relationships with their friends and family; and both are insatiably curious in the Augustinian/Heideggerian sense of the word. In Henderson’s case, this curiosity manifests itself chiefly in his marriage. When he first wife left him, he tells us, he was “delighted with the divorce. It offered me a new start in life. I had a new wife already picked out and we were soon married” (4-5). His language here betrays curiosity’s hope for redemption: a new life built by the casual destruction of the old. By the action of the novel, however, salvation has failed him, and he is equally unhappy in his second marriage; as he puts it, “Now I feel the disorderly rush” (5). Henderson swiftly flits from marriage to marriage—not as quickly or as foolhardily as Joseph does from restaurant to restaurant but no doubt too quickly for his psychological and spiritual health. The practice clearly makes him miserable.

The major difference between Joseph and Henderson is that the latter is much more comfortable diagnosing his problem as a religious one. On the first page of the novel, he thumbs through his father’s books and finds a sentence that appeals to him: “The forgiveness of sins is perpetual and righteousness first is not required” (3). He clearly longs for such forgiveness, but his lifestyle and position get in the way: “I forgot which book it was. It was one of thousands left by my father, who had also written a number of them. And I searched through dozens of volumes but all that turned up was money, for my father had used
currency for bookmarks” (3). Bellow clearly means to bring to mind Matthew 19:24: “It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God” (KJV). And yet Henderson’s religious longing remains as intense as ever, even if he cannot satiate it with his wealth or his education:

Now I have already mentioned that there was a disturbance in my heart, a voice that spoke there and said, *I want, I want, I want!* It happened every afternoon, and when I tried to suppress it it got even stronger. It only said one thing, *I want, I want!*. . . [T]his was all it would ever tell me. It never said a thing except *I want, I want!* (24)

Predictably, the various non-spiritual methods Henderson uses to attempt to satisfy his longing have little to no effect—this is exactly the situation we would expect if the existential theologians were correct and only God can fill the hole inside people. Most significantly, the avenue that Joseph so hoped would solve his problems at the end of *Dangling Man*—the secular rituals of the United States Army—have failed Henderson long before the action of *Rain King*. Speaking of his combat in World War II, he tells us that he “was too old for combat duty but nothing could keep me from it; I went down to Washington and pressured people until I was allowed to join the fight” (4). The parallel to Joseph’s situation is striking and obvious, and that Henderson’s religious longing, his curiosity and boredom are still intact even after going through the war suggests that Joseph’s hopes are ultimately in vain. In this way, *Henderson the Rain King* functions as a critique of the final message of *Dangling Man*. Regimentation was not long-lived after all, and as the novel begins, Henderson is drifting as aimlessly as Joseph was—perhaps even more aimlessly, since Henderson has exhausted certain options that Joseph was still able to hold onto.
The avenue to fulfillment that Henderson is still able to believe in is travel, particularly travel to an exotic and primitive location. This is, as Frederick R. Karl notes, a peculiarly American attitude toward salvation. The modern American has lost touch with the religious systems and structures of his ancestors, and “The loss of that sacred feeling, or the sense that it cannot be assimilated into our lives, creates in the postwar writers a terrible debilitation.” The solution most of them find is the desperate journey “to discover that magic, to seek a mythical locale in the next town, road, outpost” (43). Historically this search has involved heading West, like Huck Finn’s lighting out for the territory. But Henderson leaves not for the territories but for Africa. That he, a stereotypical east-coast WASP, does not consider California as a potential promised land even for a moment suggests a certain exhaustion with America as the provider of salvation, even as Bellow (and Henderson) remain intensely American in their faith that movement itself is the cure. Indeed, Henderson clearly believes that Africa is going to save him from himself and his aesthetic boredom. He begins the third chapter by announcing, “And now a few words about my reasons for going to Africa” (20)—but the chapter does not discuss Africa at all. Instead, he talks for several pages about the various methods he has sought to ease his curiosity: the Army, marriage, pig farming, playing the violin, and so on. None of these methods are able to kill the voice inside of him screaming “I want, I want, I want!” Thus after describing these distractions and curiosities, he begins the fourth chapter by asking, “Is it any wonder I had to go to Africa?” (32). He hopes this faraway and exotic continent will serve to still his

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11 I certainly do not mean to suggest that, by 1959, American fiction as a whole found America a land of depleted salvation. Indeed, many major novels of the era (On the Road, of course, but also Rabbit, Run, The Last Gentleman, and Bellow’s own Adventures of Augie March) continue to present the less urbanized sections of America as a potential solution to urban and suburban ennui.
religious longing. He is counting on it to succeed where everything else he has ever tried has failed.

Bellow thus codes Henderson’s journey into Africa as a kind of religious quest—though Henderson’s status as a *schlemiel* threatens to turn the entire category of religious questing into a big joke. But Henderson does not proceed to Africa with the humble and broken heart of the religious pilgrim. He remains stiff-necked and proud, as is appropriate for a man who repeatedly identifies himself with the biblical king Nebuchadnezzar. Nebuchadnezzar was the Babylonian king who drove the Israelites into exile and imprisonment. He is perhaps most famous for a staggering act of pride, described in the third chapter of Daniel. The king makes a giant gold statue and makes the refusal to worship it a personal insult against himself. When three Israelites—Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego—refuse to worship any god other than their own—he orders them thrown into a furnace. God intervenes, the three are not harmed, and Nebuchadnezzar recognizes the God of Israel as a powerful and protective god. Henderson’s identification with Nebuchadnezzar (particularly with Daniel’s warning against him in Daniel 4:25: “They shall drive thee from among men, and thy dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field” [Bellow, *Henderson* 21]) suggests a hardheartedness, pride and idolatry deep in Henderson’s soul, qualities that he is only partially aware of.

Henderson does not quite demand worship upon entering the village of the Arnewi, but the language he uses to describe his encounter with the villagers is distinctly theological—with himself as the *theos*. As a crowd of children approaches him, he turns to his translator and remarks, “How do you think they’d like it if I set fire to a bush with this lighter?” (48), an ironic echo of Exodus 3:1-21, in which Moses encounters YHWH in the
form of “a bush . . . burn[ing] with fire, and the bush was not consumed” (3:2). His pretense to the contrary, of course, Henderson is not God, and the bush quickly turns to ash. A few moments later, a young woman bursts into tears upon seeing Henderson, and he turns strangely messianic: “Shall I run back into the desert,” he thinks, “and stay there until the devil has passed out of me and I am fit to meet human kind again without driving it to despair at the first look?” (49). Bellow here alludes to Christ’s temptation in the desert, in which Jesus turns down Satan’s offer of worldly power and protection. Ironically, Henderson’s evocation of this scenario is an attempt to increase rather than decrease his own worldly power—his hollow promise to run into the desert and away from society is built on the premise that his presence is so powerful as to reduce strangers to tears. As it turns out, the young woman is crying because the Arnewis’ livestock is in decline, and Henderson feels shame for his arrogance. This shame is short-lived, however, when he discovers that the Arnewis believe themselves to be living under a divine curse. The cistern from which they and their cattle get their water has suddenly been filled with hundreds of frogs. Henderson is baffled:

“You call this a curse?” I said. “But you’ve been out in the world. Didn’t they ever show you a frog at school—at least a picture of one? These are just harmless?”

“Oh, yes, sure,” said the prince.

“So you know you don’t have to let your animals die just because a few of these beasts are in the water.”

But about this he could do nothing. He put up his large hands and said,

“Mus’ be no ahnimal in drink wattah.” (59)
This conflict between Henderson and the prince is the conflict of Western scientific arrogance and African religious humility. Henderson insists that he understands the world better than the prince and that there is a simple and scientific solution to the problem, but he fails to take seriously the role of religious tradition in the lives of the Amewis, who have a custom that neither they nor their cattle may drink water that has been contaminated by an animal. Nor may they touch an animal that has contaminated their drinking water. Presumably this ban has been dictated by their religion, but the reader never learns the specific reasons for it, mostly because Henderson never bothers to ask.

Instead, learning of the problem with the cistern and the frogs brings out the absolute worst in him. “I realized,” he confesses, “that I would never rest until I had dealt with these creatures and lifted the plague” (61), again echoing the book of Exodus, in which YHWH brings ten plagues on the Egyptians for their oppression of the Hebrews. Henderson thus puts himself in God’s position by declaring himself able to end plagues. His self-apotheosis allows him simultaneously to see himself as far above the primitive Arnewis and to condescend to help them—he literally fashions himself as their messiah. His patronization is extraordinary:

I myself could only feel for him, dumbly. It wasn’t enough that they should be suffering from drought and the plague of frogs, but on top of it all I had to appear from the desert—to manifest myself in the dry bed of the Arnewi River with my Austrian lighter—and come into town and throw [Itelo] twice in succession. (69)

Henderson’s language is a parody of the self-revelation of an omnipotent God. Bellow, of course, stands outside the language, as the reader—who has, after all, now seen Henderson
gropes his way blindly and humorously through his entire life—must also. Despite Henderson’s pretensions to divinity, his efforts at helping the Arnewi are doomed to failure because he clearly does not understand their culture. “Should you preserve yourself, or the cows, or preserve the custom?” he asks. “I would say, yourself. Live . . . to make another custom” (62). One would expect this attitude from a wealthy American who has spent much of his life severing his ties to his own family history and tradition, but it is obviously an attitude the Arnewi cannot share; Prince Itelo’s only response is a deflecting “Hm, very interestin’. Is that a fact? ‘Strodinary” (62). Henderson’s hubris, however, is such that he is willing to completely ignore the wishes of the people he wants to help.

One must not lose sight, when lost in the thick haze of Henderson’s imperialist arrogance, of his religious longing. He clearly connects his desire to lift the plague of frogs with his interior emptiness; thus, he feels “as though that cistern of problem water with its algae and its frogs had entered me, occupying a square space in my interior, and sloshing around as I moved” (61). Even as he shrugs off the Arnewi devotion to religious ritual, he recognizes that the tribe may have something to offer him, some way to “cure” him of his existential crises and to satiate the religious longing that has brought him to Africa. One sees this clearly when he meets Mtalba, the Arnewi queen. “I believed,” he says, “the queen could straighten me out if she wanted to; as if, any minute now, she might open her hand and show me the thing, the source, the germ—the cipher. The mystery, you know. I was absolutely convinced she must have it” (79). Elsewhere, he says, charitably, that “this will be one of those mutual-aid deals; where the Arnewi are irrational I’ll help them, and where I’m irrational they’ll help me” (87). While his religious longing seems legitimate enough in these passages, it does not purge him of his hubris. For one thing, he still frames the discussion in
distinctly Western terms: He will help the Arnewi where they are *irrational*. The thought seems not to occur to him that the conflict is not a question of irrationality vs. rationality but a question of humility vs. pride. Furthermore, he treats Mtalba not as a human being with real desires, hopes, and dreams—certainly he shows a marked lack of respect for her religious traditions—but as a magic talisman that he can rub to cure his athlete’s foot.¹²

At any rate, if we are to read Henderson’s exploits with the cistern and the frogs as an expression of religious longing—and I think we have reason to do so—we must read it as a Barthian commentary on the utter failure of upward motion toward God.¹³ For the explosives Henderson tries to use to remove the frogs go too far and destroy the cistern itself, ruining the Arnewi water supply. Henderson’s religious longings, mixed inextricably with his own pride, have brought only destruction and turmoil to himself and to those around him, and he is left, begging in vain for death in his “bagging, sopping shirt, with the unbearable complications at heart” (110). He will receive only banishment, ending any possibility that Mtalba, or any other magical Arnewi woman, will offer him an easy salvation or reveal to him the unspeakable mystery of being. Henderson has, undoubtedly, reached his lowest point. His will to self-actualization has been thwarted, first by the secular and military forces of organization and ritual that Joseph hoped would cure him in *Dangling Man*; then by Western rationalism, which can only deepen the enormous hole inside of him; and finally by his own

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¹² I suspect this attitude is less racist than sexist and that it belongs to Bellow as much or more than to Henderson. As Frederick Karl notes in his discussion of *Dangling Man*, “Bellow’s men may like to think they are saved by intellect and choice, but often it is the right female at the right time. . . . [O]ne cannot ignore the apparent superficiality of what constitutes salvation. His protagonists may be sick unto death, but what they need is beef broth and a tempting nipple, not Kierkegaardian faith” (85). Then again, Bellow may recognize the limitations of this schema, as Henderson certainly finds his own salvation in something more akin to Kierkegaardian faith than to sensual embrace.

¹³ For my discussion of Karl Barth’s views on the religious impulse, see Chapter 1.
religious instinct, which has led him halfway across the world only to strip him of his self-respect and his spiritual well-being. Henderson has undergone a *kenosis*, an emptying-out; were he the hero of a Shakespearean tragedy, the process would have killed him—but because *Henderson the Rain King* is unmistakably a comedy, Bellow lays his protagonist low so he can later raise him up in true salvation.

The agent of Henderson’s salvation is a neighboring tribe, the Wariri. This tribe does not greet him with the friendliness and enthusiasm of the Arnewi; indeed, he begins his stay in their village by sitting in prison. This treatment serves to check his hubris. As the guard puts him into his cell, Henderson tells us, “I could have grabbed his gun and made scrap metal of it in one single twist, but what was the use of that?” (119). His arrogance, while still present, has abated somewhat—he realizes that the rules and laws of the tribe are bigger and more powerful than him, and at least at this stage he does not want to impart to the natives the wisdom from his vast storehouse. Henderson’s experiences with the Wariri (especially his relationship with Dahfu, their king) break him down. He even begins to develop a true epistemological humility:

> This planet has billions of passengers on it, and those were preceded by infinite billions and there are vaster billions to come, and none of these, no, not one, can I hope ever to understand. Never! And when I think how much confidence I used to have in understanding—you know?—it’s enough to make a man weep. (161)

In the place of his former imperialist arrogance, Henderson will develop the existentialist notion that the human condition consists less in *being* than in *becoming*. Bellow, no doubt, picked up the idea from Heidegger and Sartre, both of whom emphasize becoming in their
major philosophical treatises. Heidegger refuses even to accept the existence of a stable self; he remarks early in Being and Time that “if we posit an ‘I’ or subject as that which is proximally given, we shall completely miss the phenomenal content of Dasein” (72). Instead, Heidegger understands Dasein as an entity which always already strives toward itself. Sartre gets at the same idea when he makes his famous claim that he is not what he is and that he is what he is not. His example is of a gambler who does not want to gamble and yet approaches the roulette table:

The earlier resolution of “not playing anymore” is always there, and in the majority of cases the gambler when in the presence of the gaming table, turns toward it as if to ask it for help; for he does not wish to play, or rather having taken his resolution the day before, he thinks of himself still as not wishing to play anymore; he believes in the effectiveness of this resolution. But what he apprehends then in anguish is precisely the total inefficacy of the past resolution. It is there doubtless but fixed, ineffectual, surpassed by the very fact that I am conscious of it. The resolution is still me to the extent that I realize constantly my identity with myself across the temporal flux, but it is no longer me—due to the fact that it has become an object for my consciousness.

(Being 69-70)

Human freedom thus necessitates human becoming rather than human being. It is also important to note the method by which Heidegger observes we become: “Man’s perfectio—his transformation into that which he can be in Being-free for his ownmost possibilities (projection)—is ‘accomplished’ by ‘care’” (243). Human beings thus become themselves by commitment, by attaching themselves to the world around them.
By the time he has his first audience with King Dahfu, Henderson is well on his way to the process of commitment, as is evidenced by his shift from the arrogance of being to the humility of becoming: “[S]ome people found satisfaction in being . . . Others were taken up with becoming. Being people have all the breaks. Becoming people are very unlucky, always in a tizzy. The Becoming people are always having to make explanations or offer justifications to the Being people” (160). Clearly, Henderson classes himself with the latter group. If he were aware of Sartre’s philosophy—as Bellow himself clearly is—he would see this position as a fundamentally good one, because it would allow him to be more than the mistakes and sins of his past, even though he could not escape them in the full sense of that word.

It is important to note that, at this point, Henderson’s overall arrogance has not disappeared, as the situation with the Wariri rain dance demonstrates. He makes a bet with King Dahfu—who neatly straddles the divine between Western empiricism and African religiosity, since he seems to believe the doctrines of his tribe even after studying medicine at a Western university—that the rain dances will be ineffective. Confident in his victory, he can sneer that the ritualistic dances are “strictly like vaudeville” (177). He bases his bet on scientific observation; after the dances are performed, he tells King Dahfu that “In spite of all these operations, the sun is still shining, and there aren’t any clouds. I even doubt whether the humidity has increased, though it feels very close” (177). Dahfu’s response is telling. “Your observation is true,” he says, “to all appearance. I do not contest you, Mr. Henderson. Nevertheless, I have seen all expectation defied and rain come on days like this” (177). Dahfu is able to believe in both the scientific method—built on objective and empirical observation—and in the religious rituals of his tribe. He has nothing in particular against the
Western system; indeed, he reveals later in the novel that he would have received his M.D. if his father had not died and the demands of his tribe’s rituals had not brought him back to Africa. Were Henderson similarly able to integrate science and religious ritual, his Western arrogance would be checked, and he might even find a cure for his alienation and loneliness. But he clings to the one at the expense of the other and must suffer for it.

The real irony of this passage comes with Henderson’s own participation in the rain-dance ritual. The Wariri begin moving their stone idols around. They treat the smaller gods rather carelessly; Henderson tells us that “they handled [them] very roughly and with a lot of wickedness. They let them fall or rolled them around, scolding them as if they were clumsy” (181). Eventually the only idol left is the largest, “Mummah the goddess of clouds” (182), which several burly Wariri try and fail to move. The issue, according to Dahfu, is not their physical strength but their “confidence” (184), a virtue which no one can accuse Henderson of lacking. Thus the American requests to move the statue himself, despite Dahfu’s ominous warning that “there may be consequences” (189). This action makes Henderson the “Sungo,” the Rain King, and it is not long before “after a great, neighing, cold blast of wind, the clouds opened and the rain began to fall” (201). Henderson is engulfed in the deluge and embraced by the Wariri; Dahfu’s response is amused and sarcastic: “Mr. Henderson . . . it is a great thing you have performed for us, after which pains we must give you some pleasure, too. . . . Do you see, Mr. Henderson, the gods know us. . . . You have lost the wager” (202). The terms of the bet were that Henderson would have to stay with the Wariri for an indefinite period of time—and they prove to be his salvation.

As it turns out, the Wariri are governed by a set of religious rituals so strict and complex that they make the Arnewi look like Western libertines. They dress Henderson,
amusingly enough, in the traditional garb of the Sungo, a pair of “transparent” green pants that show off their wearer’s “stained jockey shorts” (204). Then Dahfu reveals the central and mysterious ritual at the heart of Wariri kingship:

“[My father’s] time came, he died, and I was king. I had to recover the lion.”

“What lion are you talking about?” I said.

“Why, I have told you yesterday. Possibly you have forgot—the king’s body, the maggot that breeds in it, the king’s soul, the lion cub? . . . [T]his very young animal, set free by Bunam, the successor king has to capture it within a year or two when it is grown.”

“What? You have to hunt it?”

He smiled. Hunt it? I have another function. To capture it alive and keep it with me.” (209)

Interestingly, Dahfu puts this ritual into Henderson’s previously elucidated existentialist terms: “I am not yet fully confirmed in the rule of king. You find me at midpoint. To borrow your manner of speaking, I too must complete Becoming” (210). In thus connecting Dahfu’s situation with Henderson’s, Bellow sets up the lion-capturing ritual as the solution to the sort of existential identity crisis his chief protagonist has been undergoing since he first introduced him. It is no surprise that Henderson is so attracted to the king, and even though he finds this ritual barbaric and incomprehensible, he finally understands that his own method of living has been remarkably ineffective. It is his trust in Dahfu—as well as, doubtless, his recognition of the failure of his own system—that leads him to accompany the king on the search for the lion. To do so, Henderson must lean on the closest thing he has heretofore experienced to religious ritual: the regimentation that Joseph so admired in the
military. “At such a moment,” he says, “I would call on my military self. Thus I mastered my anxious feelings, chiefly by making my legs go” (219). This act of self-surpassing signifies Henderson’s real entry into the world of Wariri religious ritual; by the novel’s end, he will exchange this secular regimentation for genuine religious expression.

The Wariri religious system requires that its practitioners move beyond mere humanity and embrace an all-encompassing celebration of life—one that takes into account the similarities between human civilization and the animal world. Henderson, the Western humanist, resists this move at first. Dahfu seems to anticipate his resistance, and so, before the search for the lion, he takes Henderson below the palace to meet Atti, a captive lion. Fear, quite understandably, overwhelms Henderson, but he is calmed by the presence of the king, who performs such bold actions as sticking his hand inside the lion’s mouth and riding on her back. Watching the king in this way goes a long way in converting Henderson to Wariri thought patterns:

As he hung from her, smiling upside down into my face, I realized I had never even had a clue. Brother, this was what you call mastery—genius, that’s all. The animal herself was aware of it. On her own animal level it was clear beyond any need of interpretation that she loved the guy. Loved him! With animal love. I loved him too. Who could have helped it? (227)

The phrase “animal love” suggests that Henderson, in his affection for King Dahfu, is slowly moving beyond his stringently intellectual worldview and into a positive animality, one that acknowledges the interconnectedness of all life and allows him to existentially go beyond himself. He is still afraid of the lion, but as he tells the king, “It’s as different as can be”
The lion, an important part of Wariri religious ritual, somehow breaks into Henderson’s lonely and depressed psyche, and begins to change him from the inside out.\textsuperscript{14}

The hunt itself ends in disaster. The hunters capture a lion that may well be Gmilo, the reincarnation of the previous king, but as Dahfu attempts to examine the animal, he falls on top of it and is torn to pieces. As Henderson sits with the dying king, the two confess to each other. “Oh, King, King,” says Henderson. “I am a bad-luck type. I am a jinx, and death hangs around me. The world has sent you just the wrong fellow. I am contagious, like Typhoid Mary. Without me you would have been okay” (311). But the king feels equally guilty, confessing that he tricked Henderson into accepting the very dangerous position of Sungo, a rank that ends either in death or in ascension to the throne. The entire situation has brought onto Henderson a grief unlike all the others he has experienced, a grief that cannot be washed away by being abstracted:

At one time, much earlier in this life of mine, suffering had a certain spice. Later on it started to lose this spice; it became merely dirty, and, as I told my son Edward in California, I couldn’t bear it anymore. . . But now, with the king’s death, it was no longer a topic and it had no spice at all. It was only terrible. (313)

This intense, concrete grief plays an important role in Henderson’s salvation: Unable to romanticize his pain, he is left with only two options: He can either kill himself, as he promises to do at the end of Chapter XX—or he can find a way to transcend himself, as he begins to do when he encounters Atti the lion earlier in the novel. \textit{Henderson the Rain King} is rather strikingly clear that self-transcendence demands a religious system of some sort—

\textsuperscript{14}Interestingly, lions also play an important apart in existential awakening in Frederick Buechner’s novel \textit{Lion Country}. See Chapter 7.
and yet the only viable system presented to Henderson thus far is that of the Wariri, which now threatens to kill him or to strand him forever in Africa. In Henderson’s religious self-surpassing, the death of King Dahfu serves as a kind of sacrament:

I never took another death so hard. As I had tried to stop his bleeding, there was blood all over me and soon it was dry. I tried to rub it off. Well, I thought, maybe this was a sign that I should continue his existence? How? To the best of my ability. But what ability have I got? I can’t name three things in my whole life that I did right. (314)

To save himself, in other words, Henderson must become the mirror image of Dahfu, who, after all, studied Western medicine at a major university, only to return to Africa and submit himself to the rituals of his people. In other words, Henderson must understand the religious life of the Wariri—he must, in fact, believe along with them—even if he must eventually return to the secularized West. For Henderson cannot wholly complete the Rain-King ritual, which would involve his becoming king of the Wariri; as he says, “I would have to be husband to all those wives. . . . How could I even think of taking over that bunch of females? I have all the wife I need” (314). He can accept it only by modifying it.

Both the acceptance and the modification of the ritual involve an important humbling for Henderson. He is, after all, rejecting a certain image of himself, an image he has tried throughout the novel to cultivate. He turns down power and the sexual obligation that goes along with it. “I will never have another chance to become king,” he tells Romilayu, his translator. “I’d break my heart here trying to fill his position. Besides, I have to go home. And anyway, I am no stud” (315). He has been broken like Nebuchadnezzar—a humbling
wrapped up in animality and religion. All he is left with, as he recognizes, is “Kindness and love” (316): the mercy of God and of his friends and family. With this in mind, as he escapes the Wariri, he takes a piece of the Wariri with him, in the form of a lion cub in whose body, the tribe believes, the spirit of King Dahfu has been reincarnated. This is not mere metaphor or symbol for Henderson; he clearly believes that in some real sense the king resides in this animal. He tells Romilayu that “The king would want me to take it along . . . Look, he’s got to survive in some form” (326). This lion seems to provide him with a connection to the supernatural, a genuinely religious understanding of the world around him. It is no wonder that, on the plane ride home, he sings Handel’s Messiah: “And who shall abide the day of His coming (the day of His coming)? And who shall stand when He appeareth (when He appeareth)” (334). King Dahfu and the Wariri ritual he represents functions for Henderson as a kind of Messiah, even as he must flee the rest of the tribe. Henderson has been brought to himself, has been taken one step closer to being rather than becoming. He has been filled in a way that no other experience—even the quasi-religious ritual of military life—has been able to fill him. He has found a religious ritual that he can make his own.

It is interesting, perhaps, that Henderson must go across the world and encounter a foreign religion, instead of merely accepting the Christianity in which he was raised or the Judaism practiced (at least to some degree) by Bellow himself. Indeed, just before the lion hunt, Henderson explicitly rejects Christianity. Romilayu, who has been praying throughout the novel, tells him that he is a “Methdous,” to which Henderson replies: “I know it, but that would never help me, Romilayu. And please don’t try to convert me” (277). And yet

15 Henderson’s connection with Nebuchadnezzar is reinforced a few pages later, as he and Romilayu try to escape; as he says, “I was on all fours” (318). Likewise, Nebuchadnezzar “was driven from men, and did eat grass like oxen” (Daniel 4:33).
Henderson clearly seeks to be converted; why else would he “go out in the world and try to find the wisdom of life” (277)? It seems that it is the very foreignness of the Wariri religion—its extreme remove from Henderson’s experience—that allows it to get under his skin and to help him transcend himself.

We must ultimately say the same thing for Bellow. *Henderson the Rain King* is his most explicitly religious novel (though religion pulses under the surface of almost all of his work)—but its religious expression is twice removed from Judaism, first by Henderson’s Christianity and then by the Wariri religion. And yet its connection to Judaism is stronger than one might immediately assume, by virtue of Henderson’s frequent references to the Hebrew Bible and especially to the story of Nebuchadnezzar. The proper religious expression, Bellow seems to suggest, is simultaneously foreign and familiar, a mystical syncretism that is always old and always new. If this formulation is correct, it goes a long way in explaining Bellow’s own wide-ranging religious interests. He self-identified as Jewish until the end of his life, and yet, when asked to categorize his beliefs, he responded, “I don’t much love classifications, especially those having to do with myself” (Monda 30). And yet he clearly adores the Hebrew Bible and sees it as a source of self-knowledge. “You mustn’t be too hard on your own egotism,” he writes to Bobby Markels in 1980. “The Bible says, ‘I am a worm, and no man.’ When it comes to being hard on oneself the Bible is way ahead of us. Actually, atheists can never know how really insignificant they are” (*Letters* 373). And while he is put off by Christianity’s long history of anti-Semitism, he clearly admires its namesake (“Jesus, yes, but what about two millennia of Jewish history?” [485], he asks Stephen Mitchell). While Eastern religions enter his novels less frequently, Bellow himself said that he “read sayings of the Buddha in many editions and started when I was a boy” and
“that he had been so much impressed by D.T. Suzuki’s speech in New York on Zen Buddhism thirty years earlier that he had read many books on the subject afterwards” (Ichikawa 95). Critics have also found evidence of this interest in his fiction; for example, Sukhbir Singh argues that the vast majority of critics misunderstand *Mr. Sammler’s Planet* in their insistence on finding Judaism in the title character, whose “humanistic ideas, harmonious views, controlled actions, and universal outlook . . . together constitute the character of an Indian karmic yogi” (437).

More famously, Bellow demonstrated a deep interest in the quasi-religions of orgone energy and anthroposophy. He followed Wilhelm Reich’s teachings for a few years, using an orgone energy accumulator, although he would turn his back on Reich’s theories around the same time he turned his back on Marxism as a viable political system. He became interested in Rudolf Steiner’s anthroposophy in the 1970s through the work of Steiner’s disciple Owen Barfield and became, for a time, the religion’s most famous practitioner. This attraction, too, makes sense, for anthroposophy seeks to do with European religion what *Henderson the Rain King* does with African religion: take what is most useful from it and move it into a modern context. Thus, Bellow’s Judaic anthroposophy was his own way of combining the familiar and the foreign into a simultaneously new and old religious faith. That his non-Judaic interests—Christianity, Buddhism, Reichianism, anthroposophy—tended to fall by the wayside as time went by, leaving a core of nondogmatic Judaism mixed with the remnants of other faiths, suggests that his religious interests were not merely a search for novelty or for a replacement for the faith in which he was raised; it would be more accurate to say that they were additions to it, to be held for awhile and then released, like Henderson’s lion.
CHAPTER 3
THE NEW AGNOSTICS AND J.D. SALINGER’S SPIRITUAL SPECIFICITY

“The bells that still can ring.
Forget your perfect offering.
There is a crack in everything.
That’s how the light gets in.”
- Leonard Cohen, “Anthem”

The rise of the so-called “new atheists” in the last half-decade has produced at least two kinds of backlash. The first is rather predictable, as theologians—almost exclusively, it must be noted, those from the Christian tradition—have written dozens of apologetics seeking to demonstrate where their atheist opponents are wrong. Whatever the merits of these books may be, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris must have been expecting them when they wrote *The God Delusion* and *The End of Faith*—provocative books like these invite equally provocative responses. The more interesting backlash has come from writers who are not orthodox members of any particular religious organization but who nevertheless feel the world has something to lose in a widespread abandoning of faith of the sort that the new atheists often advocate. The Marxist critic Terry Eagleton surprised many readers of the *London Review of Books* when his October 2006 review of *The God Delusion* took Dawkins to task for committing what Eagleton perceived as an utter failure to take theology seriously.

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as a discipline—and for rejecting it anyway. “Card-carrying rationalists like Dawkins,” he says,
are in one sense the least well-equipped to understand what they castigate, since they don’t believe there is anything there to be understood, or at least anything worth understanding. This is why they invariably come up with vulgar caricatures of religious faith that would make a first-year theology student wince. The more they detest religion, the more ill-informed their criticisms of it tend to be. (“Lunging” 32)

Eagleton makes a valiant defense of religious faith in the face of a rationalist atheism—most of his review is, in fact, a point-by-point explanation of traditionalist Christian doctrine to Dawkins—but the version of Christianity that he ends up praising is a notably liberal one: “The central doctrine of Christianity . . . [is] that if you don’t love you’re dead, and if you do, they’ll kill you” (33). The sentence is pithy but seems to leave out a good deal of what Christians have confessed over the years. This remarkably vague and generalized summation of Christianity fails to mention the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, sin, atonement, the resurrection, Judgment Day, and life after death. Little controversy would follow my saying that most creedal and confessional Christians would object to Eagleton’s definition of Christianity’s “central doctrine,” even as they appreciated his demonstrating Dawkins’s appalling ignorance about the broad cultural phenomenon he rejects outright. To be fair, when Eagleton expanded this review into the lecture series and book *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, he did a much more thorough job of explaining traditional Christian theology, though we must note two things: first, his version of Christianity is still very much modeled

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17 According to Eagleton, this explanation of Christianity comes from Herbert McCabe, an English Roman Catholic priest and philosopher strongly influenced by Marxism.
on the “liberation theology” of the 1960s and ’70s; and second, Eagleton himself is quite careful to announce at the outset that he does not “believe in the archangel Gabriel, the infallibility of the pope, the idea that Jesus walked on water, or the claim that he rose up into heaven before the eyes of his disciples” (xii). He creates an apologetic very much by a secular thinker for secular thinkers.

Karen Armstrong’s The Case for God is far less secular than Eagleton’s work, in that Armstrong herself—a former Roman Catholic nun who became internationally famous as a comparative-religion scholar after the publication of Mohammed: A Biography of the Prophet (1991) and A History of God (1993)—seems to subscribe to some sort of spirituality, if not to an orthodox religious faith. She argues in this book that religion seeks less to provide concrete answers to questions that logic or science could answer more precisely than seeks to provide a comforting ritual that allows practitioners to make emotional sense of the world around them. We properly understand faith, therefore, as “a matter of practical insight and

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18 His commitment to liberation theology leads him, I think, to draw a false dichotomy between Christian views that are compatible with socialism and a very broadly and vaguely defined “fundamentalism,” a word he uses pejoratively throughout Reason, Faith, and Revolution without ever really defining it. The closest he comes is to say that “Fundamentalism is among other things the faith of those driven into zealotry by a shallow technological rationality which sets all the great spiritual questions cynically to one side, and in doing so leaves those questions open to being monopolized by bigots” (149). He seems unaware that “fundamentalist” has a real and specific meaning in Christian theology, and while his description is probably meant to cover bombers of abortion clinics and the like, the word itself actually refers to believers who accept as doctrine the beliefs set forth in the 1915 essay collection The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell U Library, 2009). The fundamentals are certainly worth debating, but it is not fair to lump those who subscribe to them in with, say, Muslim suicide bombers, as Eagleton comes close to doing here.

Likewise, I run the risk of becoming what I criticize with my frequent use in this chapter of the adjectives orthodox and traditionalist to describe religious beliefs. I use these two words roughly synonymously, in the case of Christianity, to describe believers who affirm (explicitly or implicitly) the Apostles’ Creed, the most widely accepted creed of the Church.
active commitment; it had little to do with abstract belief or theological conjecture” (102). The modern age has produced an obsession with doctrinal orthodoxy and biblical literalism—and with this obsession comes the rise of destructive fundamentalisms, be they Christian, Muslim, or atheist. If Armstrong is to be believed, no ancient philosopher or theologian of any renown wished to convert his disciples to a proper method of thinking: Even Plato’s Socrates “did not approve of fixed, dogmatically held opinions. When *philosophia* was written down, it was easily misunderstood, because the author had not been able to tailor his discourse to the needs of a particular group” (59). Armstrong remakes the ancients in her own image quite effectively, much as she turns the Socrates of the *Phaedrus* into the Socrates of “Plato’s Pharmacy”; however, in so doing, she defends a version of religious belief utterly unrecognizable to a great number of modern believers of all religions. Indeed, by the end of the book it becomes clear that Armstrong is not defending religion *qua* religion so much as she is defending a sort of spiritual openness, best defined by her description of Jacques Derrida’s attitude toward faith:

> Derrida himself, a secularized Jew, said that though he might pass for an atheist, he prayed all the time, had a messianic hope for a better world, and inclined to the view that, since no absolute certainty is within our grasp, we should for the sake of peace hesitate to make declarative statements of either belief or unbelief. (312)

This attitude admittedly stands in stark contrast to the rationalistic claims of the new atheists—but Armstrong is either ill-informed or disingenuous when she suggests that it was the primary religious attitude before the Enlightenment.
Robert Wright’s *The Evolution of God* shares Armstrong’s historical approach but brings her veiled antipathy toward traditionalist believers to the forefront. Wright appears to consider himself an ally of religious people in the fight against the new atheists, but his book argues that religion must either operate on the principles of scientific exploration or else be a force for actual destruction in the modern world. His controversial history of religious faith suggests, among other things, that Hebrew monotheism developed out of a preexisting polytheism; that the “historical Jesus” was an agent of intolerance who cared little about people outside of his own culture; that the apostle Paul invented the far superior Christianity of most of the New Testament; and that Mohammed was peaceable when he needed to be and violent when it better served his interests. Throughout the book, he describes “God” as constantly changing and moving in a morally progressive direction, but the sense in which he uses the word is highly irregular, as he himself admits:

The god I’ve been describing is a god in quotation marks, a god that exists in people’s heads. When I said . . . that Yahweh was strong yet compassionate, I just meant that his adherents *thought of him* as strong yet compassionate. There was no particular reason to believe that there was a god “out there” that matched this internal conception. Similarly, when I say God shows moral progress, what I’m really saying is that people’s *conception* of God moves in a morally progressive direction. (213)

Furthermore, Wright suggests that theological change rarely, if ever, results from theological conviction; rather, it springs from “the facts on the ground,” and when people conceive of
their interfaith interactions as “nonzero-sum,” their religious beliefs mysteriously become more compassionate and tolerant.

Wright has described himself as an agnostic (*Colbert*), and yet he holds out the possibility that the process of moral development he sees in the world’s religions could itself be a Higher Power:

Suppose, for example, that we accept as our abstract conception of God “the source of the moral order.” . . . Could it be that thinking of this source, and relating to this source, as if it were a personal god is actually an appropriate way for human beings to apprehend that source, even if more appropriate ways might be available to beings less limited in their apprehension? (446)

Wright’s answer, despite his admission that this assertion “sounds like a strained, even desperate, intellectual maneuver, a last-ditch attempt to rescue a prescientific conception of God from the onslaught of modern science” (446), is yes. That is, while he thinks atheism a completely appropriate position—probably even a preferable one to traditional theism—he grants religious people permission to treat the abstract moral order as a sort of impersonal, aloof god. One senses that the actual content of religious faith does not matter much to Wright, so long as that faith pushes people toward more compassionate, “nonzero-sum” interactions with one another. In this, he stands firmly with Armstrong in advocating a religious faith that matters for reasons entirely apart from any claims to truth it might make.

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19 Wright uses the social-science terms *the facts on the ground* and *nonzero-sum* so frequently that one is tempted to say of their use in his book what Mark Twain said of the phrase “And it came to pass” in *The Book of Mormon*: “If he had left that out, his Bible would have been only a pamphlet” (617). What’s more, he uses *nonzero-sum* incorrectly: the term does not necessarily designate win-win situations, as his usage suggests, but a “situation in which both players could win or lose” (Dutta 8).
Another book of this sort—one that slipped through the cracks, I think, because of its early publication date in 2008—is James M. Carse’s *The Religious Case Against Belief*. Like Robert Wright, Carse self-identifies as an agnostic but finds a good deal of value in the “religious” as a social category. His problem, as the book’s title suggests, comes in the related category of “belief,” particularly as it manifests itself in “belief systems”:

Well-developed belief systems have the capacity to account for and explain any issue or question that might arise. They present themselves as thoroughly rational and comprehensible, while answering to a final authority, whether that be a person or a text or an institution. . . . They often have distinctive historical narratives, an extensive mythology, a pronounced sense of community, a pantheon of heroes and martyrs, an array of symbols, scripted rituals, sacred geographical sites and monuments. On top of all this is an absolute certainty in the truth of their beliefs. (32-33)

Much to his credit, Carse includes in his category of belief systems both materialist dictatorships like Soviet communism and the new atheists themselves, whose attacks on religion “come dangerously close to being belief systems themselves. They have the presumption of being able to explain everything” (29). Against the arrogance of belief, Carse poses a religious attitude built on “higher ignorance” that recognizes that we can know *truths* but not *Truth* (15). Properly conceived, then, religion should be shorn of doctrine and built instead on poetry, which “does not translate into belief, or into rational thought of any kind. It can be little more than a random insight, or a puzzling oracular declaration” (102).²⁰

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²⁰ Carse’s definition of poetry here strikes me as both strange and arbitrary. Even a brief survey of literary history should demonstrate that writers from Hesiod to George Herbert to Adrienne Rich have used their poetry to make rational points about belief. Furthermore, he
Religious texts thus become fundamentally uninterpretable; all we can do, if we want to remain intellectually honest, is to “join in to make a joyful noise of our own” (118). Poetry stirs us to create more poetry, which, when Carse talks about it, often sounds like turning cosmos back into chaos.

Faced with the problem of religion and belief, Carse proposes that we replace the specificity of belief systems with a rather vague religious impulse of the sort that Augustine, Pascal, and Heschel identify as the first step toward faith. But Carse specifically cannot recommend this step, for it is a step into belief, and beliefs are largely bad for society. There is, however, one type of believer whom Carse likes and respects: the kind who says,

“My faith has uncertainty, even outright doubt, woven right into it. Nevertheless, I embrace the risk of a leap into the unseen.” I want to emphasize here that this kind of belief, with an acknowledged unknown at its heart, is not the kind that has led to the Age of Faith II with its absolutisms, its certainties, its martyrdoms, and its inevitable drift into violence and warfare. (119)

The belief he describes here is a Kierkegaardian one, built on the Dane’s famed “teleological suspension of the ethical” (83) that leads to a blind leap of faith into the religious sphere that ultimately telescopes and surpasses the aesthetic and ethical spheres.

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includes in the category of religious/poetic texts both the Hebrew and Christian Bibles, large chunks of which are explicit and specific laws and more-or-less systematic theology, respectively.

21 See Chapter 1 for my discussion of these three figures.
22 The “Age of Faith II” is Carse’s term for the modern world, in which “The Crusades are repeating themselves with vastly greater deadliness” and “Every major conflict on earth involves the collision of one belief with another” (26).
23 See Chapter 2 for my discussion of the aesthetic and ethical spheres.
Kierkegaard takes as his example Abraham’s near-sacrifice of his son Isaac on Mt. Moriah (Genesis 22:1-24). After promising him that his descendents would outnumber the stars, God demands that Abraham sacrifice the only son he had with his wife, Sarah. Abraham complies and takes Isaac to Mt. Moriah for the sacrifice, but at the last moment an angel stops him and offers a ram for sacrifice instead. What amazes Kierkegaard about this story is not Isaac’s narrow escape but Abraham’s attitude toward his unpleasant situation. He does not lose hope and submit to resignation—as Kierkegaard knows he would do, were he in this situation—but instead he believes both that he will sacrifice Isaac and that God will restore his son to him in order to fulfill the promises that God made: “He knew it was God the Almighty that tried him, he knew it was the hardest sacrifice that could be demanded of him; but he also knew that no sacrifice was too hard when God demanded it—and he drew the knife” (Fear 55). Abraham’s faith leads him to the teleological suspension of the ethical, which later writers would rename the “leap of faith,” or occasionally, “the blind leap of faith into the irrational.” The idea here is that the ethical sphere represents everything universal about the world, including the moral code, objectivity, and reason. Abraham must leave all of this behind in order to follow and obey God. What he almost does is objectively horrible, it breaks the laws of almost every society in history, and it makes no sense. But he sets out to do it anyway because he trusts the God who commands him to do it. For this reason, Abraham is a model of faith.

It sounds as though Kierkegaard’s schema would fit in very well with the new agnostics’ claims about religion and belief. After all, it involves a surrendering of reason, and with it the propositional truth claims that prop up belief systems. But Carse, I think, misses the specificity of Kierkegaard’s vision. The story of Abraham and Isaac is the story of a
specific man taking a leap of faith in a specific direction toward a very specific God. Change the details, and you have a scenario that Kierkegaard would presumably not sign off on. Indeed, Kierkegaard’s entire system is dependent upon Protestant Christianity. He never even considers other religions as viable options; as Walter Kaufmann notes with disapproval, “his studied ignorance of all other forms of religion amounts to nothing less than a deliberate blindness to human possibilities” (From Existentialism 184). It is thus possible for Carse to invoke Kierkegaard as a source for his nonspecific religion, but to do so would not do justice to the striking narrowness of Kierkegaard’s religious vision. The leap of faith is, at least in Fear and Trembling, possible only within the framework of Judaism—and more specifically, Judaism read backwards through the framework of Protestant Christianity.

We find another critique of new-agnostic openness in a rather unlikely source: J.D. Salinger’s 1961 “novel,” Franny and Zooey.24 Salinger’s interest in religion is famously syncretic. One critic suggests that the author’s religious beliefs are less in any particular system than in “the sacred dignity of human beings” and that in order to orient the reader toward this goal, Salinger utilizes “a wealth of references to Hindu, Buddhist, Taoist, Christian, and Jewish traditions” (D. O’Connor 183). The multiplicity of these references is likely the most dominant and memorable feature of Salinger’s fiction—over and above even the distinctively adolescent voice that attracted so much attention when Salinger first released The Catcher in the Rye in 1951. (The widespread adoption of that voice in the intervening decades has dulled its impact for the modern reader, who is apt to ignore it in Salinger’s work

24 Franny and Zooey is not actually a novel but rather a collection of a short story (“Franny”) and a novella (“Zooey”), both of which were previously published in The New Yorker. The two stories, however, are interdependent to the degree that it makes far more sense to refer to the book as a novel than as anything else.
altogether.) Perhaps the clearest emblem of Salinger’s religious diversity is the makeshift palimpsest in Buddy and Seymour Glass’s bedroom:

> One could have believed that its whiteness, smoothness, and expanse had at one time cried out rather plaintively for India ink and block lettering. Certainly not in vain, if so. Every inch of visible surface of the board had been decorated, with four somewhat gorgeous-looking columns of quotations from a variety of the world’s literatures. . . . No attempt whatever had been made to assign quotations or authors to categories or groups of any kind. (176)

The quotations reproduced in *Franny and Zooey* include writings by Kafka, the *Bhagavad Gita*, Tolstoy, St. Francis de Sales, and others representing the spectrum of Eastern and Western theologies and philosophies. With this sort of ecstatic syncretism in his background, Salinger would seem a natural fit for the vague faiths posited by Armstrong, Wright, and Carse.

*Franny and Zooey*, however, for all its syncretic drive, suggests otherwise. Indeed, at times Salinger goes so far as to suggest that syncretism is the enemy of genuine religious expression—and if he does eventually step back from this suggestion, the novel still effectively shows the problems with what would become the neo-agnostic approach. The book’s protagonists are the two youngest members of the large, brilliant, and damaged Glass family, about whom we read in most of Salinger’s published short stories. Franny, who attends an unnamed member of the Seven Sisters, visits her truly contemptible social-climber boyfriend, Lane Coutell, at his unnamed Ivy League school. After listening to Lane prattle on about his supposedly impressive feats of literary criticism, Franny finally steels herself and
tells him about a book that, she feels, is changing her life: *The Way of the Pilgrim*, written in the nineteenth century by an anonymous Russian. As Franny puts it,

It’s primarily a religious book. In a way, I suppose you could say it’s terribly fanatical, but in a way it isn’t. I mean it starts out with this peasant—the pilgrim—wanting to find out what it means in the Bible when it says you should pray incessantly. You know. Without stopping. In Thessalonians or someplace. So he starts out walking all over Russia, looking for somebody who can tell him how to pray incessantly. And what you should say if you do.

(33)

Franny’s attraction to the book stems quite clearly from her family’s syncretic religious beliefs. Thus, it appeals to her that the book is “religious” but also that it is not “terribly fanatical” in some ways. In the end, she feels that the book offers her a ritual divorced from any attendant doctrine. Its advice is to continually repeat the so-called “Jesus prayer”—“Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me” (36)—*ad infinitum*. “If you keep saying the prayer over and over again,” she tells Lane, “then eventually what happens, the prayer becomes self-active” (37). More importantly, this ritual requires no explicit belief in Christ as savior, teacher, or even as historical personage; it does not even require belief in the ritual:

But the thing is, the marvelous thing is, when you first start doing it, you don’t even have to have *faith* in what you’re doing. I mean even if you’re terribly embarrassed about the whole thing, it’s perfectly all right. I mean you’re not *insulting* anybody or anything. In other words, nobody asks you to believe a single thing when you first start out. (37)
Franny sounds like a combination of James Carse and Karen Armstrong in this passage. On the one hand, she is driven less by a set of specific beliefs or doctrines than by a vague religious impulse—so vague, in fact, that Franny herself cannot pinpoint it. On the other, what matters is not the content of her belief but the rote actions of the prayer. As she says, the prayer becomes “self-active”; in other words, the ritual becomes a suitable replacement for any dogmatic belief that might have underlain it in more traditional believers. Indeed, Franny is indignant when Lane suggests that she might believe the teachings of Christianity. “I didn’t say I believed it or I didn’t believe it,” she tells him. “I said it was fascinating” (39). The new agnostics would praise her attitude.

Importantly, while the prayer originates from the Christian tradition, Franny divorces it from that context and attaches it instead to what we might call “universal religion.” The Christian mysticism represented by The Way of the Pilgrim connects to the mysticism of the other major religions:

I just think it’s a terribly peculiar coincidence . . . that you keep running into that kind of advice—I mean all these really advanced and absolutely unbogus religious persons that keep telling you if you repeat the name of God incessantly, something happens. Even in India. In India, they tell you to meditate on the “Om,” which means the same thing, really, and the exact same result is supposed to happen. (39)

From this description, we can make certain statements about Franny’s attitude toward religion. First, she values ritual more than belief and suggests that ritual, properly understood, is eventually self-sustaining. Secondly, all religious rituals (or at least all that fall into the general category of mysticism) have the same basic goal and perhaps even the same
basic means. Thirdly, she is driven toward mysticism, both Eastern and Western, by what she sees as the paltriness of her own existence—her discussion of *The Way of the Pilgrim* is directly preceded by a self-condemnation on the grounds that she is “just so sick of ego, ego, ego. My own and everybody else’s” (29). Finally, therefore, the purpose of mysticism and religious ritual is to allow for a self-transcending experience, to move beyond ego. These four points largely make up the version of religion championed by the new agnostics in general and Carse and Armstrong in particular: a nonspecific faith in Being itself, built on ritual rather than belief and on openness rather than dogmaticism.

Franny cannot sustain this attitude for very long, however. Indeed, after being worked nearly into a frenzy trying to explain *The Way of the Pilgrim* and the difference it has made in her life to her dim-bulb, arrogant boyfriend, Franny collapses and passes out in a restaurant. The story ends with Lane’s expressing phony concern for his girlfriend before suggesting that they have sex that night (“You know how long it’s been? . . . Too goddam long between drinks. To put it crassly” [43]) and with Franny’s continued practice of the ritual that has led to her nervous breakdown: “Alone, Franny lay quite still, looking at the ceiling. Her lips began to move, forming soundless words, and they continued to move” (44).

Since Franny was initially published more than two years before its sequel,25 one must examine it as an individual narrative before looking at the two stories as an interconnected whole. On its own, the ending of “Franny” emphasizes an exceedingly common theme in American literature, particularly that of the 1950s: the individual’s antagonistic position in the world around her. We see the theme as early as the first page, when we find Lane standing in a group of young men waiting for a train: “he was and he

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wasn’t one of them. For ten minutes or more, he had deliberately been standing just out of conversation range of the other boys” (3-4). Clearly, Lane fashions himself as a consummate intellectual outsider—and yet the reader is apt to find him thoroughly a member of an aggravating and style-obsessed academic culture, especially as he prattles on about the supposedly brilliant paper he has written. Franny, too, sees herself as an outsider—but her position is built on substance, not style. She has quit the Theatre Department, for example, on the grounds that she “began to feel like such a nasty little egomaniac” (28). Lane, being an egomaniac himself, cannot understand this revulsion and believes that she is afraid to show her superiority to those around her:

I’m not afraid to compete [she responds]. It’s just the opposite. Don’t you see that? I’m afraid I will compete—that’s what scares me. That’s why I quit the Theatre Department. Just because I’m so horribly conditioned to accept everybody else’s values, and just because I like applause and people to rave about me, doesn’t make it right. I’m ashamed of it. (30)

Franny is the true outsider in this duo—her failure to fit into society stems from the strange spiritual upbringing she has received at the hands of her older brothers, as we will learn in “Zooey,” and the fact that the story ends with Lane’s misogynist come-on juxtaposed with Franny’s spiritual yearnings suggests that Franny’s commitment to the Jesus Prayer will cause her to remain on the outside for the rest of her life. Under this preliminary reading, Franny “retreats to the stall in the ladies’ room to weep for [Lane] and for all the others, one presumes, who, like Lane, are devoted to the Flaubertian view of society, that mean focus on personal vanity, which so offends Franny” (Weigand 13). “Franny,” taken by itself, is thus a
spiritualized version of the “man against society” trope in American literature—and the story is much less interesting than it is once it is combined with “Zooey.”

The sequel complicates “Franny”’s traditional narrative. The story begins with a complicating gesture, an early stab at metafiction:26 “The facts at hand presumably speak for themselves, but a trifle more vulgarly, I suspect, than facts even usually do. As a counterbalance, then, we begin with that everfresh and exciting odium: the author’s formal introduction” (47). This author is not immediately Salinger. The narrator claims that the style of a letter Zooey reads early in the piece, written by his brother Buddy, “bears a considerably more than passing resemblance to the style, or written mannerisms, of this narrator” (50) but continues to refer to himself in the third person because he “see[s] no good reason to take him out of it” (50). In a story that deals so much with identity and with self-transcendence, this is a curious and disorienting move. We are presented with a narrator who first calls attention to his status as a narrator and who then seeks to divest himself of all personality beyond conveying the story, the events of which he was not present to witness. Salinger has thus already complicated the straightforward and appealing narrative of “Franny,” and readers knows that they are not to take the story’s various positions on identity too seriously. The narrator’s description of Zooey the character applies equally well to “Zooey” the story: “In Zooey, be assured early, we are dealing with the complex, the overlapping, the cloven” (51). Salinger does not go quite so far as to hang a Twain-esque sign forbidding the finding

26 Self-reflexive fiction, of course, goes all the way back to The Iliad (what is the invocation of the Muses if not a calling attention to the act of writing itself?), but as a more-or-less official movement it begins in the 1950s with the introduction of the French nouveau roman. It took off in a serious way in the American literature of the 1960s, most notably John Barth’s story cycle Lost in the Funhouse (1968), probably American metafiction in its purest form. One must be careful not to present Salinger as too much of a stylistic radical—teenage diction aside, he writes very much inside of the 19th-century realist tradition—but this opening must have been disorienting to the casual reader in 1957.
of lessons in his fiction, but he does make it clear that any lesson one finds will require a
great deal of finesse and massaging to understand.

“Zooey” takes place the morning after “Franny.” Franny has come home to the
Glasses’ family apartment on the Upper East Side, where she is subjected to the unwanted
ministrations of her mother, Bessie. Much of the story takes place in conversations between
Zooey and Bessie and Zooey and Franny—this dialectical style also complicates any easy
lesson one might wish to draw from the story. Zooey, who unquestionably has the strongest
voice in the novel, is inclined to blame Franny’s nervous breakdown on the spiritual
education they have received at the hands of their eldest brothers, Seymour and Buddy:

We’re *freaks*, the two of us, Franny and I . . . I’m a twenty-five-year-old freak
and she’s a twenty-year-old freak, and both those bastards are responsible. . . .
The symptoms are a little more delayed in Franny’s case than mine, but she’s
a freak, too, and don’t you forget it. I swear to you, I could murder them both
without even batting an eyelash. The great teachers. The great emancipators.
My God. I can’t even sit down to lunch with a man any more and hold up my
end of a decent conversation. (103-104)

Zooey’s language here reinforces the impression the reader received from “Franny”: the
Glass family is hopelessly outside of society. But Zooey’s reasons for saying so are
instructive. “Not that anybody’s interested,” he tells his mother, “but I can’t even sit down to
a goddam *meal*, to this day, without first saying the Four Great Vows under my breath, and
I’ll lay any odds you want Franny can’t, either” (104). The instruction Seymour and Buddy
gave their younger siblings, in other words, has locked them into a pattern of religious ritual.
Indeed, this conversation between Zooey and Bessie takes place while the former is shaving,
a “ritual” (91) that Salinger describes as a battle in “a private war against narcissism he had been fighting since he was seven or eight years old” (92). Zooey repeatedly refers to the bathroom in explicitly religious terms, as when he says to his mother, “It isn’t often we have visitors at our little chapel” (93). Truth be told, Zooey can think only in religious and ritualistic terms, and as the world in which he lives cannot think in these terms consistently, he cannot quite fit in with the people he encounters, from his former-Vaudevillian mother to the producers and screenwriters he deals with in his capacity as an actor.

Furthermore, he recognizes that Franny suffers from this same condition—and yet he assures Bessie that “This thing with Franny is strictly non-sectarian” (95). On the surface, this statement is laughably false. Obviously, Franny’s problem is a religious one; she has collapsed, we have been led to believe, because her devotion to *The Way of the Pilgrim* has severed her from the world to such an extent that she cannot relate to anyone. But semantically, Zooey has something else in mind: Franny’s problem is indeed non-sectarian, in the sense that her problem is about non-sectarianism. To explain it to her, he talks about an incident that happened a decade earlier, when she was ten years old. After reading the sixth chapter of Matthew’s Gospel, Franny declared that she didn’t like Jesus anymore, that she could no longer respect him. Her reasons, no doubt, were unique to her: First, she objected to Christ’s turning over the tables in the Temple; as Zooey puts it, “You were sure that Solomon or somebody wouldn’t have done anything like that” (164). But her more serious objection was to Matthew 6:26: “Behold the fowls o the air: for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are ye not much better than they?” (KJV). It is the final question that infuriated Franny: “Ah, that’s where little Franny gets off,” Zooey rhapsodizes. “That’s where little Franny quits the Bible cold and goes straight to
Buddha, who doesn’t discriminate against all those nice fowls of the air. All those sweet, lovely chickens and geese that we used to keep up at the Lake” (165). Deep down, Franny does not like or respect Jesus very much—and yet she continues to say the Jesus Prayer, as she is directed to in The Way of the Pilgrim. Zooey is exasperated:

God almighty, Franny . . . If you’re going to say the Jesus Prayer, at least say it to Jesus, and not to St. Francis and Seymour and Heidi’s grandfather all wrapped up in one. Keep him in mind if you say it, and him only, and him as he was and not as you’d like him to have been. You don’t face any facts. This same damned attitude of not facing facts is what got you into this messy state of mind in the first place, and it can’t possibly get you out of it. (170)

Unlike the New Agnostics—who often seem to say that the content of religious faith is far less important than its practice (Armstrong), or its attitude of openness (Carse), or its general geniality (Wright)—Zooey demands a religious ritual based on something specific and concrete: the Christ of the Bible. To worship a Christ of one’s own invention (which, as Zooey says, is what “ninety-eight per cent of the Christian world has always insisted on doing” [166]) is to commit idolatry, and furthermore, it will lead to “a tenth-rate nervous breakdown” (166), like Franny’s. One cannot create the object one worships; one must take it for what it is in reality.

It would be a mistake, however, to call Salinger’s overall message in Franny and Zooey an orthodox one, though I do believe it still functions as a powerful corrective to the abstract nature of many of the New Agnostic claims. As the narrator says at the beginning of the story, Zooey the person and “Zooey” the story are “complex . . . overlapping . . . [and]
cloven” (51), and this strong push toward spiritual specificity by Zooey is almost immediately countered by a pull in the opposite direction.

The first sign that Salinger is not recommending anything as simple as religious orthodoxy comes in Franny’s response to her brother’s harangue. She slips deeper and deeper into her “tenth-rate nervous breakdown,” and she refuses to listen to Zooey’s diagnosis, however sensible it might be. His every discursive paragraph is interrupted by a scream from his distraught sister: “Just stop it, Zooey! Just *stop* it!” she cries at one point (166). Eventually she will stop talking altogether and just sob into her pillow on the couch. Zooey ends up breaking off his lecture in mid-sentence: “He stared over at Franny’s prostrate, face-down position on the couch, and heard, probably for the first time, the only partly stifled sounds of anguish coming from her” (172). He looks at her “for a full minute” (173), quietly apologizes, and leaves the room. He clearly realizes that his current strategy has done nothing to relieve his sister’s agony. It is important to realize, however, that his apology and hasty exit by no means “disproves” the things he has been saying to his sister. Zooey has not suddenly recognized that she has been right and he has been wrong; he has not suddenly been converted to the merely practical religious model. Zooey apologizes and leaves the room because he realizes he is just as guilty as his sister. He has not been talking to a flesh-and-blood sibling but to an abstract idea of her that he has mixed with his own deep-seated insecurities about himself and turned into an easy target. He has enacted a negative version of Franny’s recitation of the Jesus Prayer, directed back into his mind rather than into the world of real entities and people. In this context his actions between stopping his speech and apologizing to his sister make sense:
He went, very slowly, over to his mother’s writing table, on the other side of the room. And it was clear, on arrival, that he had no idea why he’d gone over to it. He seemed unfamiliar with the things on the table surface—the blotter with his filled-in “o”s, the ashtray with his cigar end in it—and he turned around and looked at Franny a bit. (173)

Zooey’s encounter with the living-room table is sacramental in its way. He forces himself to experience the concreteness of the table’s existence, its eternal status as itself. Doing so forces him also to confront the concreteness of his sister’s existence: her specificity and her status as a unique human being. It is no wonder that he apologizes to her: His epiphany, as he stands next to the table, is that in his speechifying, he is as unfamiliar with the “things” in the depths of Franny’s being as he is “with the things on the table surface”; he has been responding to some combination of Franny, Seymour, Buddy, and himself. He is guilty of ignoring the specificity of Franny’s pain, just as surely as she is guilty of ignoring the specificity of Christ’s gospel. His apology is necessary and heartfelt.

His next actions are simultaneously a deep riddle and the key to the novel’s attitude toward syncretism and specificity. Zooey retreats into the long-abandoned bedroom of Seymour and Buddy. Salinger explicitly sets this entry up as a religious ritual. To prepare for it, he goes to his own bedroom, across the hall: “When he came out, he had on the same sweaty shirt. There was, however, a slight but fairly distinct change in his appearance. He had acquired a cigar, and lighted it. And for some reason he had an unfolded white handkerchief draped over his head” (175). The handkerchief has a practical purpose, of course—Zooey will use it to cover the telephone receiver so he can better disguise his voice—but it also suggests a kind of cosmic humility, like a nun’s habit or perhaps even a
hairshirt. Clearly, Zooey feels that he needs to cover his head before entering what is essentially sacred ground for the Glass family: his late brother Seymour’s bedroom.

He sits in silence in this room for some time, reading the quotations from literary and religious figures that fill the bedroom. I have already argued that this palimpsest of proverbs, more than any other single image in Salinger’s fiction, suggests religious multiplicity. But Zooey is less interested in these quotations than in a piece of cardboard with one of Seymour’s diary entries written on it. It is a description of Seymour’s 21st birthday:

Several acts of vaudeville tonight for my entertainment. Les and Bessie did a lovely soft-shoe on sand swiped by Boo Boo from the urn in the lobby. When they were finished, B[uddy] and Boo Boo did a pretty funny imitation of them. Les nearly in tears. The baby [that is, Franny] sang “Abdul Abulbul Amir.” Z. did the Will Mahoney exit Les taught him, ran smack into the bookcase, and was furious. The twins did B.’s and my old Buck & Bubbles imitation. But to perfection. Marvellous. (182)

These tiny acts of love that so pleased Seymour serve as a reminder to Zooey that the individual members of his family are absolutely irreplaceable; and second, that his failure and intellectual narcissism have been dogging him his entire life. The Glass family’s show consists of five acts of self-expression: The adult Glasses perform their vaudeville schtick, Franny sings her song, Zooey tries (and humorously fails) to imitate an actor. The other two acts are imitative: Buddy and Boo Boo impersonate their parents, and Waker and Walt imitate Seymour and Buddy. These impersonations, are by no means meant to take the place of the people on whom they are based—Salinger is careful to have Les and Bessie laugh at Buddy and Boo Boo’s dance, and Seymour calls the twins’ impersonation of himself
“Marvellous.” Their shifting between personalities by no means eliminates the reality of their individual selves.

Impersonation now becomes very important for the movement of the story, as Zooey calls his sister from the private phone line in the bedroom. His conversation with Franny is an elaborate impersonation of his brother Buddy in which he does his best to console her. Obviously, there is a practical necessity to his impersonation: Franny is already fed up with Zooey but is happy to listen to Buddy. But there is a spiritual necessity, as well. Zooey’s first conversation with Franny is a series of preachy monologues, occasionally interrupted by her protests. But when he pretends to be Buddy, the conversation is radically different. He gives no advice and certainly does not lay into her the way he had half an hour earlier; instead, he listens patiently as she complains about Zooey. This performance is a gift to Franny the way the twins’ impersonation of Buck and Bubbles was a gift to Seymour. He is not trying to trick her; he has no ulterior motives. (Indeed, just a few pages later, he tells her that “at least you know there won’t be any goddam ulterior motives in this madhouse. Whatever we are, we’re not fishy, buddy” [196]). He wants someone to listen to Franny, and having squandered his opportunity to do so as Zooey, he tries again as Buddy. As with the impersonations at Seymour’s birthday parties, no one is fooled. After talking to him for a few minutes, Franny recognizes “Buddy” as Zooey, and he tells her to “go on with your Jesus Prayer if you want to” (195), apologizing for his earlier sermon to the contrary.

This scene does not suggest, however, that Salinger concedes that Franny was wholly right and that Zooey was wrong. For his failed impersonation of his brother proves chiefly that the specificity of the individual self breaks through whatever façade is constructed around it—even as the façade retains a certain integrity. Zooey, the great actor, is
nevertheless Zooey and recognizable as such in every role he plays. Likewise, Christ is Christ, even though Franny would like to remake Him in the image of Seymour or Heidi’s grandfather or St. Francis. The two simple poles—Franny’s implicit thesis, later echoed by the “new agnostics,” that the doctrinal content of faith doesn’t matter so long as one has the ritual down, and Zooey’s antithesis, that saying the Jesus Prayer to the wrong Jesus is worse than not saying it at all—have melted into a strange and complicated synthesis. This synthesis is best represented by an aphorism Seymour told Zooey when he was a boy. The Glass children were all involved with a radio show called *It’s a Wise Child*, and Seymour tells Zooey, early in his run on the program, to shine his shoes for the audience. The absurdity of this statement should be clear—Zooey was going on the radio, not television, and no one would know if his shoes were clean or not. Besides that, Zooey explains, “The studio audience were all morons, the announcer was a moron, the sponsors were morons, and I just damn well wasn’t going to shine my shoes for them” (200). Seymour’s response gets to the heart of his personality and relationship to his brothers and sisters:

> He said to shine them anyway. He said to shine them for the Fat Lady. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, but he had a very Seymour look on his face, and so I did it. He never did tell me who the Fat Lady was, but I shined my shoes for the Fat Lady every time I ever went on the air again.

(200)²⁷

²⁷ That Zooey was instructed to perform for “the Fat Lady” softens much of his apparent cruelty to his mother, whom he has addressed as “Fatty” throughout the story. Bessie, too, is the object of a sort of religious devotion—and she offers a sacrament, as Zooey explains to Franny: “You don’t even have sense enough to *drink* when somebody brings you a cup of consecrated chicken soup—which is the only kind of chicken soup Bessie ever brings to anybody around this madhouse” (196).
Zooey has a very specific, very literal Fat Lady in mind as a child, but it is not until he is an adult that the true meaning behind Seymour’s commandment comes to him: “There isn’t anyone out there who isn’t Seymour’s Fat Lady” (201). One must perform to the best of one’s ability for everyone in the entire universe, including or especially those whom one finds repugnant, including “your Professor Tupper, buddy. And all his goddam cousins by the dozens” (201). And the reason is a striking one. “Don’t you know who that Fat Lady really is?” Zooey feverishly asks his sister. “Ah, buddy. Ah, buddy. It’s Christ Himself. Christ Himself, buddy” (202). Here we have the specificity of orthodox doctrine and the multiplicity of syncretism brought together: One performs one’s art, in the end, for the one and for the many. In the end, the one and the many are the same thing—which is not at all the same thing as saying that the one is subsumed in the many.

There is a lesson here, perhaps, for those who, like Armstrong, Carse, and Wright, are overeager to throw out the importance of doctrine and religious specificity in their defenses of religious rituals and attitudes against the onslaughts of the new atheists: Doctrine is heavy and often unpleasant, but to dispense with it altogether leaves one floating in the spiritual ether, like Franny Glass at the end of the story bearing her name. But there is also a lesson for those who, like Zooey, would cling too staunchly to doctrines: It is impossible even to live in the world, let alone to love one’s neighbors, if one is too willing to use doctrine as a battering ram—and at any rate such an approach leaves one useless in helping others through their spiritual crises. Salinger’s pair of stories offers a tertium quid—a way to integrate doctrine and ritual, orthodoxy and syncretism, the one and the many.
CHAPTER FOUR

‘NEVER THE RIGHT FOOD’: THE PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL WORLDS IN FLANNERY O’CONNOR’S ‘WISE BLOOD’ AND JOHN UPDIKE’S ‘RABBIT, RUN’

“The blizzard, the blizzard of the world
Has crossed the threshold,
And it has overturned
The order of the soul.
When they said, ‘Repent, repent,’
I wonder what they meant.”

The New York Times columnist Ross Douthat describes the 1950s and early 1960s as a kind of golden age for American Christianity—the last and greatest gasp at relevance for the varied traditions that make up the church in the United States:

It was the last moment in American life when the churches of the Protestant Mainline still composed something like a religious establishment capable of setting the tone for the culture as a whole. It was a period that saw the reemergence of Evangelical Protestantism as a significant force in American life, trading decades of self-imposed, often-paranoid isolation for cultural engagement and ecumenical revival. It was the peak, in certain ways, of the American Catholic Church, which had passed from a mistrusted immigrant faith to an institution almost unmatched in confidence and prestige, admired even by its fiercest Protestant rivals for the loyalty of its adherents and the vigor of its leaders. Most remarkably, perhaps, it was an era in which the black church, heretofore the most marginal of American Christian traditions, suddenly found itself at the center of the national story and claimed a moral authority unmatched before or since. (21)
What’s more, says Douthat, this period is a golden age for Christian writers, from T.S. Eliot and W.H. Auden to Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene to Allen Tate and Walker Percy. One would have to go back to the age of the Puritans to find a more theologically grounded American literary culture—and, since the Puritans were not known for their love of fiction, no era in American literary history features more theologically grounded novels and short stories than this “Indian summer for orthodox belief” (21). Certainly it is difficult to think of a major American author who came of age after 1968 and who is as grounded in Christian doctrine and practice as the ones already mentioned; only Marilynne Robinson fits the description.

This chapter deals with the work of two of the most theological midcentury American novelists: the Lutheran-cum-Congregationalist(-cum-Episcopalian) John Updike, and the staunchly Catholic Flannery O’Connor. Updike and O’Connor are not quite contemporaries, but neither do they belong to different generations: O’Connor was born on March 25, 1925, and Updike was born not quite seven years later, on March 18, 1932. Even so, O’Connor’s head start meant that she was publishing when Updike was still in his formative years: He recalls her as one of “the idols of our college years” (“Writer” 3), but Updike graduated from Harvard in 1954, meaning that much of O’Connor’s most important work came after he’d entered the adult world himself. If O’Connor seems of a different age than Updike, it is likely because she died young, in 1964, whereas he lived a long life, finally succumbing to lung cancer in 2009; additionally, his fiction, prized and hated in equal measure for its graphic depictions of human sexuality, seems of more recent vintage than her comparatively

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28 O’Connor published *Wise Blood*, her first novel, in 1952, and some of the stories in her first collection, *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, followed in the next two years—but the collection itself was not published until 1955. The idea that O’Connor would have been among Updike’s “idols” when he was in college is spurious, though not utterly ridiculous.
chaste prose. But the two writers were creating their best-known work at roughly the same time: O’Connor’s most famous stories were published from 1955 to 1964, and Updike’s most-lauded fiction—the novels *Rabbit, Run* (1960) and *The Centaur* (1963) and the short stories that make up *Pigeon Feathers* (1962)—come from the same era.

The two also share similar concerns; in particular, they are likely the two most explicitly theological American writers of the mid- to late-twentieth century. Updike has claimed, for example, that during this period he “thought of my novels as illustrations for texts from Kierkegaard and Barth” (“Remarks” 852); and O’Connor, though she sometimes mocked the idea of “being a Cathlick writer!” (*Habit* 133), nevertheless suggested that “The Catholic writer, insofar as he has the mind of the Church, will feel life from the standpoint of the central Christian mystery: that it has, for all its horror, been found by God to be worth dying for” (“Church” 146). And yet neither O’Connor nor Updike saw their vocation as a form of preaching; their duty, as they conceived it, was to present the world as it was, in the light of “the central Christian mystery” without directly spelling that mystery out. As such, their operations occasionally cross on a thematic level. In particular, Updike’s second novel, *Rabbit, Run*, intersects in intriguing ways with O’Connor’s first, *Wise Blood*: Both novels deal with a male character who lives, for explicitly religious reasons, outside of the mores of mainstream society. But the conclusions drawn by these two novels are contradictory. O’Connor’s Hazel Motes, in his desperate attempt to escape from God’s call, ends up performing a painful bodily penance and, presumably, finding God present in his suffering. Updike’s Harry Angstrom, on the other hand, does his best to find God’s active presence in the world but ends up alienated from that presence, consumed by the physical world in which he seeks it. What accounts for the difference? Why does O’Connor’s protagonist find
redemption at the end of her novel, whereas Updike’s gradually loses the very possibility of it? The difference, I will suggest, is that O’Connor largely repudiates the physical world, while Updike apotheosizes it; in other words, it is not possible for Hazel Motes to lose himself for very long in his material condition, whereas Harry Angstrom can substitute the good world that God created for the Creator Himself. What is more, the emptiness of the material world in O’Connor’s novel demands a self-sacrificing motion that is only possible rather than necessary in Updike’s work; if, as Christ puts it, “whoever wishes to save his life shall lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake shall find it” (Matthew 16:25), this losing is much easier in a universe like the one O’Connor creates than the one Updike creates.

**Wise Blood: Breaking the Spell**

Updike himself notes that O’Connor’s fictional universe is rather unpleasant, to put it mildly:

> The bad news can be told full out, for it is not the only news. Indeed it is striking how dark, even offhandedly and farcically dark, the human condition appears as pictured in the fiction of Waugh and Spark and Graham Greene and Flannery O’Connor. We scan them for a glimpse of mollifying holiness, and get instead a cruel drumming upon the world’s emptiness. (“Remarks” 851)

*Wise Blood* is not bereft of descriptions of the physical world; indeed, it contains several lush descriptions of the world around Hazel Motes. But O’Connor’s descriptions rarely present the world as a thing of staggering beauty. Take, for example, the initial description of the landscape that Haze sees through the train window on his way to the godless city: “The train
was racing through tree tops that fell away at intervals and showed the sun standing, very red, on the edge of the farthest woods. Nearer, the plowed fields curved and faded and the few hogs nosing in the furrows looked like large spotted stones” (9). Mrs. Hitchcock tells Haze that the scene is beautiful, but that’s not exactly accurate; it’s closer to the truth to say that the scene is “saturated” than to say that it’s “pretty.” We might apply the same adjective to Mrs. Hitchcock herself, who is subject to one of O’Connor’s great comic descriptions: “It was Mrs. Hitchcock in a pink wrapper, with her hair in knots around her head. She looked at him with her eyes nearly squinted shut. The knobs framed her face like dark toadstools. . . . Her face became purplish except for little white marks over it that didn’t heat up” (18). The novel—along with the rest of O’Connor’s corpus—is full of disgusting images like this one.

But why does O’Connor paint the physical world with such a bleak brush? It would be tempting to answer that she is a twentieth-century Gnostic who separates the physical world from the spiritual world completely, seeing the former as hopelessly debased and the latter as the only hope for humanity. This is, in fact, precisely the argument that Josephine Hendin makes in her infamous early examination of O’Connor’s fiction, *The World of Flannery O’Connor*. The stories of *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*, Hendin alleges, demonstrate a major gap between the physical and spiritual worlds: “O’Connor consistently opposes the spiritual and physical, keeping them so separate and dual that no one seems to have both a mind and body at the same time” (63). And Hendin is not alone in her seeing Gnosticism in O’Connor’s fiction. Sarah Gordon, for example, claims that O’Connor imbibed a “Cartesian dualism” from other conservative literary figures like T.S. Eliot and Allen Tate and thus that her work, following her own Catholic tradition, frequently associates “the fleshly with the female” (96-97), over against the more spiritualized male. And Lorine
Getz goes so far as to say that some of O’Connor’s fiction is positively Manichaean “in its insistence on cosmic dualism” (127). In “The Lame Shall Enter First,” she says, O’Connor separates matter and spirit into separate realms that cannot be united, at least by any human effort.

But these accusations of Gnosticism in O’Connor ignore both the Catholic Church’s stern and steadfast rejection of Gnosticism—and in O’Connor’s thought, lest we forget, “one finds not a whisper of dissent from the central teachings of Roman Catholicism” (Crews 151)—and O’Connor’s own rejection of this viewpoint. She lays her view of the material and spiritual worlds out in a 1962 letter to Charlotte Gafford:

The writer whose point of view is Catholic in the widest sense of the term reads nature the same way the medieval commentators read Scripture. They found three levels of meaning in the literal level of the sacred text—the allegorical, in which one thing stands for another; the moral, which has to do with what should be done; and the anagogical, which has to do with the Divine life and our participation in it, the level of grace. (Habit 468-469)

O’Connor is no gnostic, then; she does not repudiate the material world as empty of meaning or as wicked. Rather, the material world must be read anagogically in order to find God’s very real, if hidden, presence in it. And yet O’Connor’s style demands a very particular treatment of the material world. She is, in her own words, “a realist of distances” (“Some Aspects” 44), by which she means that, writing for a reading public that does not share her core theological convictions and commitments, she must exaggerate the appearance of the “real world.” As she memorably puts it, “to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost-blind you draw large and startling figures” (“Fiction” 34). She must therefore downplay the
presence of the spiritual world in the material world—except in very special circumstances—in order to demonstrate the gap between literal and anagogical nature. We have our answer, then: The physical world—and the bodies of the poor Southerners who inhabit it—is revolting because it is a mere reflection of the spiritual world. We must not hate the world around us, but we must recognize that, at its best moments, it is a reflection of something higher; if we fail to recognize this, the world becomes corrupted and debased.

Hazel Motes, for much of the length of *Wise Blood*, is marked by a willful refusal to recognize the true nature of the material and spiritual worlds. In his eyes, he flees the vindictive ghosts of his family. Having abandoned his early quest to be a preacher like his grandfather, he nevertheless wears “a hat that an elderly country preacher might wear” (10). His face is apparently a reproduction of his grandfather’s, and many people throughout the novel mistake him for a preacher when he wears this hat. He cannot escape his family line, try as he might. Nor can he escape the Christianity connected with his heritage. Early on, he has a flashback wherein his grandfather explains exactly what will happen to him in the action of the novel: “Jesus would never let him forget he was redeemed. What did the sinner think there was to be gained? Jesus would have him in the end!” (22). Nevertheless, Haze attempts to exchange his familial piety—problematic though it may be—with a sexualized knowledge of the material world.

In line with her exaggerated portrayal of the physical world as debased and empty, O’Connor consistently presents sexuality as disgusting. Certainly it is intimately attached to the city where Haze flees from his past. He enters the sexual world at the same time he enters Taulkinham: in a truly revolting train-station bathroom:
The walls of this room had once been a bright cheerful yellow but now they were more nearly green and were decorated with handwriting and with various detailed drawings of the parts of the body of both men and women. Some of the stalls had doors on them and on one of the doors, written with what must have been a crayon, was the large word, WELCOME, followed by three exclamation points and something that looked like a snake. (30)

This combination of sexuality, excretion, and childlike innocence (it is written in crayon, after all) turns the reader’s stomach—but apparently not Haze’s. After all, he writes down a prostitute’s address from the wall and visits her later in the evening, meaning to lose his virginity and enter the world of sin and pure materiality. We first meet Leona Watts as a dismembered body, as Haze looks through a crack in her shade “directly at a large white knee” (32). The description severs the prostitute’s body parts from her soul—an appropriate rhetorical strategy, since the rest of her body is equally horrifying: “Mrs. Watts was sitting alone in a white iron bed, cutting her toenails with a large pair of scissors. She was a big woman with very yellow hair and white skin that glistened with a greasy preparation. She had on a pink nightgown that would better have fit a smaller figure” (33). The description is anything but arousing—Mrs. Watts’s body overflows its coverings in a gratuitous fleshiness, an image of the physical world’s encroaching onto spiritual turf. Again, however, it does not dissuade Haze, and neither does Mrs. Watts’s mockery of him.

His ideas of sexuality, it must be admitted, are skewed. This incident with Mrs. Watts is an echo, decades later, of a disgusting carnival show that he had seen as a small boy. After he pays his money, he is led into a tent: “They were looking down into a lowered place where something white was laying, squirming a little, in a box lined with black cloth. For a
second he thought it was a skinned animal and then he saw it was a woman” (62). In the debased world of *Wise Blood*, sexuality is dehumanizing and disgusting, not at all something to be embraced or earnestly pursued. Haze sleeps with Mrs. Watts but does not seem to receive any pleasure, even physical pleasure, from it. O’Connor wryly remarks that “Since the night before was the first time he had slept with any woman, he had not been very successful with Mrs. Watts” (59). She mocks him each time he returns to her house, and yet he keeps coming back for more joyless, pleasureless sex—a despairing retreat into the physical world and away from the spiritual source of life.

He has certainly come to the right city to conduct his negative quest. Taulkinham is O’Connor’s iconic representation of the modern world—a world that is not so much hostile to Christian faith as it is utterly indifferent to it. As Haze walks through the city early in the novel, for example, the physical world is suddenly filled with signs of the spiritual world to which it is (however obliquely) connected:

> The black sky was underpinned with long silver streaks that looked like scaffolding and depth on depth behind it were thousands of stars that all seemed to be moving very slowly as if they were about some vast construction work that involved the whole order of the universe and would take all time to complete. (37)

But underneath all this wonder—the heavens’ “declaring the work of His hands” (Psalm 19:1)—human life putters on as in an ant farm. The citizens of Taulkinham go about their earthly business without so much as a thought for the eternal mysteries above them: “No one was paying any attention to the sky” (37). O’Connor’s point here is quite clear: The divine purpose behind the universe is apparent, but nobody even bothers to look for it.
This same indifference emerges in the conversations between the novel’s characters. When Mrs. Hitchcock convinces herself that Haze is a preacher, for example, her first thought is not to ask about her soul but “to get close enough to see what the suit had cost him” (10). Her refuge in vulgar materialism allows her to deal with the implicit spiritual realm she finds in him even as he flees it: “She felt that that placed him and looked at his face again as if she were fortified against it now” (10). We must remember, as we watch Haze run away from Jesus, that the rest of the world hardly cares to run. Instead, they concern themselves with material and monetary pleasures, and, like the man who sells the potato peeler, cannot recognize a difference between “These damn Jesus fanatics” and “These goddam Communist foreigners” (41). Haze is obsessed with the Christ He is running away from, but no one else shares his obsession. Out of nowhere on the train, he asks a group of women, “Do you think I believe in Jesus? . . . Well I wouldn’t even if He existed. Even if He was on this train.” One woman’s response demonstrates her confusion and indifference: “Who said you had to?” (16). Likewise, when his army buddies are heading off to a brothel, he tells them that he doesn’t want to do damage to his soul. Their response is to tell him “that nobody was interested in his goddam soul unless it was the priest and he managed to answer that no priest taking orders from no pope was going to tamper with his soul. They told him he didn’t have any soul and left for their brothel” (24). Even those characters who talk about Christianity do so in the shallowest possible terms, often in the manner of the modern spiritual uplift that would come to be associated with the New Age movement and the Oprah Winfrey Show. When Haze says to Mrs. Hitchcock, “I reckon you think you been redeemed,” her response is a parody of the moralistic therapeutic deism that sociologists Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton identify as the primary religion of 21st-century American
young people: “After a second she said yes, life was an inspiration” (14). The modern world is not interested in redemption; it is interested only in inspiration. Thus Haze’s remarks as he preaches much later in the novel—“If you had been redeemed . . . you would care about redemption but you don’t” (140)—are truer than he perhaps realizes. The people around him are utterly blind to the spiritual behind the material; it is no wonder they can’t look up at the miraculous sky, and it is no wonder that their bodies are as vulgar and disgusting as the empty world they live in.

Haze is, perhaps, a step ahead of them, in that at least he takes Christ’s existence or non-existence seriously. As he says to Asa Hawkes, “Nothing matters but that Jesus don’t exist” (54). This pronouncement will be echoed in O’Connor’s most famous story, “A Good Man Is Hard to Find,” in which a serial killer, about to murder an entire vacationing family, takes a moment to wax theological:

Jesus was the only One that ever raised the dead . . . and He shouldn’t have done it. He thrown everything off balance. If He did what He said, then it’s nothing for you to do but throw away everything and follow Him, and if He didn’t, then it’s nothing for you to do but enjoy the few minutes you got left the best way you can—by killing somebody or burning down his house or doing some other meanness to him. No pleasure but meanness. (132)

The Misfit may be a sociopath, but he understands religious reality far better than the respectable grandmother he shoots at the story’s climax. She, after all, “is a proper lady who would gladly reduce Christian faith to sociology or culture or personality development if, in so doing, she could save her own life” (Wood, Flannery 38). It is the Misfit who recognizes, ruefully, “that the Giver of Life cannot be dismissed as a mere holy man or eminent ethical
figure but must be adjudged as either the incarnate God or else a wholesale fraud” (38). And if He is the latter—if no God exists to hold things together—then the only alternative is abject nihilism. Haze, too, recognizes this ugly truth; the citizens of Taulkinham, in their indifference and their pat spirituality, are far closer to the grandmother in spirit. Haze is misdirected—he is, in fact, in open rebellion—but at least he has his priorities straight. Better to be Milton’s Satan than Rhonda Byrne.

Haze is the novel’s emblem of the spiritual man trying his damnedest to dispense with his soul; his counterpart is Enoch Emery, O’Connor’s alternatingly hilarious and horrifying portrait of the spiritually decimated modern human being. Enoch is an eighteen-year-old country bumpkin who has been sent to Taulkinham so that he will be out of his father’s hair. He finds the city a place of extreme ugliness and alienation, telling Haze of its residents, “all they want to do is knock you down. I ain’t never been to such an unfriendly place before” (47). Haze, of course, is as unsympathetic toward poor Enoch as everyone else in the city is—but for different reasons. He’s too concerned with metaphysical (ir)reality to care about Enoch’s emotional problems. Enoch himself has no more than a vague religious sense, embodied in the “wise blood” of the novel’s title, but having no connection to Christ’s Church, he has no way to properly exercise it. Thus he attempts to create a new religion out of the materials of his everyday life. This process begins with his job at the zoo, which puts him in “the heart of the city. He had come to the city and—with a knowing in his blood—he had established himself at the heart of it” (80). The heart of the zoo is the museum, which Enoch views in ambiguously religious terms: “There were columns at the front of it and in between each column there was an eyeless stone woman holding a pot on her head. A concrete band was over the columns and the letters, MVSEVM, were cut into it. Enoch was
afraid to pronounce the word again” (96). And the heart of the museum is a desiccated mummy which Enoch fears and worships:

There was something, in the center of the park, that he had discovered. It was a mystery, although it was right there in a glass case for everybody to see and there was a typewritten card over it telling all about it. But there was something the card couldn’t say and what it couldn’t say was inside him, a terrible knowledge without any words to it, a terrible knowledge like a big nerve growing in him. (81)

Enoch’s religious impulses demand expression, but the modern world, with its scientific objectivity and its naturalism, gives him no option other than the mummy. Presumably if he could understand the words on the card, the mummy would lose its religious force, but he is too stupid to read scientific prose, and so the mummy is an emblem of the sacred for him. Tellingly, he builds an entire ritual built around his daily viewing of the sacred mummy, and he feels that he cannot break from this ritual even when Haze is with him and in a hurry. His “wise blood” compels obedience.

The problem is that his much-ballyhooed “wise blood” amounts to his merely following his instincts at all times. On the day when Haze visits the park, for example, Enoch “knew when he woke up that today the person he could show it to was going to come. He knew by his blood. He had wise blood like his daddy” (79). But it is more than a stretch to call this wisdom—Enoch is much closer to the instinctual action of animals than to Solomon. Thus, every day, he goes to the zoo and looks at the caged beasts, who “didn’t do anything but lie around. Enoch watched them every day, full of awe and hate” (82). He simultaneously
hates the animals and longs to be one of them. Eventually, his instincts will lead him around in a way that is half-divine and half-animalistic:

Enoch Emery knew now that his life would never be the same again, because the thing that was going to happen to him had started to happen. He had always known that something was going to happen but he hadn’t known what. If he had been much given to thought, he might have thought that now was the time for him to justify his daddy’s blood, but he didn’t think in broad sweeps like that, he only wondered; then before long he would find himself doing this or that, like a bird finds itself building a nest when it hasn’t actually been planning. (129)

He certainly experiences this instinct as a religious method—thus, he sees the mummy as a holy artifact and painstakingly prepares his wardrobe to contain this sacred item after he steals it from the museum—but standing outside of his mind as we do, readers are clued in that any divinity in these actions is a mere remnant of something that human beings used to have more fully, something stripped from them by the apathy and general godlessness of the modern world. By the end of the novel, Enoch has succumbed fully to his animal nature, as signified by the gorilla suit that he steals and puts on. Now totally animal, he is also totally alienated; in his final scene, he scares a young couple away from a quiet place and sits alone on a cliff overlooking the city.

The distance between Haze—the prophet despite himself—and Enoch—who longs to be a prophet but lacks the necessary calling and thus collapses into modern materialism—is demonstrated by a pair of images in the novel. Haze is quite literally haunted by Christ, and early in the novel, O’Connor writes that “he saw Jesus move from tree to tree in the back of
his mind, a wild ragged figure motioning him to turn around and come off into the dark where he was not sure of his footing, where he might be walking on the water and not know it and then suddenly know it and drown” (22). Much later, O’Connor parodies this image of Christ-as-specter with the painting of a moose that hangs in Enoch’s rented room:

The look of superiority on this animal’s face was so insufferable to Enoch that, if he hadn’t been afraid of him, he would have done something about it a long time ago. As it was, he couldn’t do anything in his room but what the smug face was watching, not shocked because nothing better could be expected and not amused because nothing was funny. (132-133)

Thus, the false religion that Haze invents—the novel’s famous Church Without Christ—appeals enormously to Enoch, with his vague religious longings and his utter inability to see beyond the literal and the physical. Haze invents the church (equal parts fundamentalist swagger, consumerist salesmanship, and blasphemy) as part of his ongoing attempt to escape his destiny as a preacher—but of course this means only that he has become a preacher of a different sort. He will escape, he believes, by embracing the polar opposite of Christianity:

“I’m member and preacher to that church where the blind don’t see and the lame don’t walk and what’s dead stays that way,” he announces to a crowd that could not care less what he has to say. “Ask me about that church and I’ll tell you it’s the church that the blood of Jesus don’t foul with redemption” (105). But he fails to recognize that, in pursuing the opposite of God, he is pursuing God—certainly to a much higher degree than those around him.

The Church Without Christ is, as its name suggests, a mirror image of the Christian Church, and thus Haze feels the need to find “a new jesus . . . one that’s all man, without blood to waste . . . one that don’t look like any other man so you’ll look at him” (140-141).
He searches for an idol even as his twisted Church becomes itself an idol; thus, he takes his anti-faith every bit as seriously as any devout Christian takes her own religion. We see this in his disgust with the other false religions in the novel, such as the lapsed Catholicism of a young man who goes to a whorehouse with him. The young man refuses to join the Church Without Christ “because he was a Lapsed Catholic” (147) who needed to repent of his sin or else suffer the eternal consequences. When Haze tells him that there is no such thing as sin, “the boy only shook his head and asked him if he would like to go again the next night” (147). Again, we see Haze taking his disbelief much more seriously than most of the novel’s characters take their ostensible belief. But the truest foil for the Church Without Christ is, of course, Hoover Shoats’s Holy Church of Christ Without Christ, which somehow manages to pervert the principles of both the Church Without Christ and Christianity proper. Haze is many things, but he is not a con-man; he is deadly earnest when he says that “The only way to the truth is through blasphemy” (148). Shoats, on the other hand, is out for a buck, and so he combines some of Haze’s language with the Gospel of Hope: “Every person that comes onto this earth . . . is born sweet and full of love. A little child loves ever’body, friends, and its nature is sweetness—until something happens” (150). Haze, of course, is far less optimistic; his own Church Without Christ offers no hope to the bastard or the blasphemer.

Enoch Emery is the only person other than Haze who cares at all about the Church Without Christ, although, true to form, he takes Haze’s sermons absolutely literally. After he hears Haze’s call for the “new jesus,” he identifies this figure with the mummy from the museum and steals it, keeping it in his bureau until he can present it to Haze. But Haze is unimpressed by the new jesus, and he throws it against the wall, where “The head popped
and the trash inside sprayed out in a little cloud of dust” (188). Sabbath Lilly Hawks, the promiscuous daughter of a fraudulent prophet, is horrified by his actions but explains them perfectly: “I seen you wouldn’t never have no fun or let anybody else because you didn’t want nothing but Jesus!” (188). Haze destroys the mummy, the blasphemous new jesus of the Church Without Christ, instinctively, without even having to think about it, because something in him wants to protect him from this final blasphemy. He sees what Enoch and Sabbath can’t: The Church Without Christ and its desiccated messiah will not stand, and even as he runs to a new city to preach the false gospel, he says, “I don’t want nothing but the truth!” (188). Once again, he is far more orthodox than he believes himself to be, especially when compared to true creatures of the modern secular world like Enoch Emery.

God catches up with Haze in the way God typically catches up with Flannery O’Connor characters: by stripping him of everything that allowed him to run away from God. In Haze’s case, it is his car—a broken down Essex that he buys for fifty dollars—that allows him literally to run away. When he buys the Essex, he tells the salesman, “I wanted this car mostly to be a house for me . . . I ain’t got any place to be” (73). But he’s unaware of his deeper motivations for buying the car, just as he’s unaware of how to drive the godforsaken thing. He uses the car as a way of running from the God who pursues him, turning him into a sort of wandering pilgrim in reverse. “Nobody with a good car needs to be justified” (113), as he says to Sabbath Lily Hawks. That he denies this—“I don’t have to run from anything because I don’t believe in anything” (76)—does not make it any less true. And the highway on which he drives is a Dantean nightmare, “ragged with filling stations and trailer camps and roadhouses. After a while there were stretches where red gulleys dropped off on either
side of the road and behind them there were patches of field buttoned together with 666 posts” (74). And yet God enters into this hellish scene, albeit in a strange and terrifying way:

The sky leaked over all of it and then it began to leak into the car. The head of a string of pigs appeared snout-up over the ditch and he had to screech to a stop and watch the rear of the last pig disappear shaking into the ditch on the other side. He started the car again and went on. He had the feeling that everything he saw was a broken-off piece of some giant blank thing that he had forgotten had happened to him. (74)

God’s presence here does not make the highway any less of a hell for Hazel, who is in open rebellion against Him. That God chases him even into hell brings to mind Psalm 139:8: “If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there” (KJV). Haze cannot escape God, and when he makes his final attempt at escape late in the novel, he “had the sense that the road was really slipping back under him. He had known all along that there was no more country but he didn’t know that there was not another city” (207). He cannot run any further; the landscape itself conspires against him and loops him back to God.

The Essex is also, of course, the instrument of Solace Layfield’s murder, and the car itself seems almost demonic after this is committed: “The Essex stood half over the other Prophet as if it were pleased to guard what it had finally brought down” (204). It’s not surprising that, after the murder, Haze no longer treats even blasphemy as a route to truth, saying instead that “you couldn’t even believe in that because then you were believing something to blaspheme” (206). At this point, he believes only in the car. It is thus a mercy, a tragic sort of grace, when the patrolman kicks Haze’s car over the embankment, stranding him on the highway and completely eliminating that which he held onto instead of Christ.
After he does this, he offers Haze a ride to where he was going, but Haze quietly tells him he wasn’t going anywhere at all. He has at last ceased running. This, in the end, is the major motion of *Wise Blood*: Haze seeks to flee from the spiritual world into the material world, but he finds it so lacking that he must return to God. He has been given a grace not offered to a thoroughly modern and materialist man like Enoch Emery.

But this grace is a tragic one, one that makes enormously painful demands of Haze. Like the Christian shades in Dante’s *Purgatorio*, Haze must suffer for his sin before he can be allowed to enter Paradise. But this is not the suffering of the damned; it is above all teleological suffering, suffering directed toward the end goal of the purgation and purification of his soul. It is, in short, penance, one of the most sacred rites of the Catholic Church. Sinners must make restitution to those they have harmed by their sins,

But sin also injures and weakens the sinner himself, as well as his relationships with God and neighbor. Absolution takes away sin, but it does not remedy all the disorders sin has caused. Raised up from sin, the sinner must still recover his full spiritual health by doing something more to make amends for the sin: he must “make satisfaction for” or “expiate” his sins.

(*Catechism* 366)

Penance is less a punishment than a self-correction; one presses oneself physically in order to cure oneself spiritually. But there is good penance, and there is bad penance, and O’Connor makes it clear that Haze has tried the latter before. After being face-to-face with a disgustingly sexual carnival show as a boy, he attempts a self-imposed penance, filling his shoes with rocks and then walking for a mile. But this penance is conducted for wrong motives, and Haze finds it ineffectual: “He thought, that ought to satisfy Him. Nothing
happened” (64). The problem, of course, is that penance requires true contrition and repentance, and young Haze—damaging his body to “satisfy” God rather than to change his own spiritual condition—has neither.

Thus, the novel ends with a superficially similar but internally different act of self-imposed penance: Haze blinds himself with quicklime and puts barbed wire around his chest and rocks and glass in his shoes. The blinding, too, recalls an earlier event in the novel: Asa Hawkes, in a truly bizarre bit of illogic, “had promised to blind himself to justify his belief that Christ Jesus had redeemed him” (112). But Haze’s self-blinding is not of this sort. Nor is it one that the modern world, exemplified in this case by his landlady, can understand. She wonders “what possible reason could a person have for wanting to destroy their sight? A woman like her, who was so clear-sighted, could never stand to be blind” (211). The joke is on her, of course, for she, like everyone else in the novel, is spiritually blind. Haze, on the other hand, blinds himself to keep himself from looking at the material world that so tempted and distracted him. He puts rocks and glass in his shoes to keep himself from running away from God anymore. Eventually he walks away from the landlady, and the meaning of this is ambiguous: “he is still walking, and probably to the reader it is not completely clear if he is walking toward Jesus or still attempting to escape Him” (Baumgaertner 177). But the novel’s ending—“she saw him moving farther and farther away, farther and farther into the darkness until he was the pin point of light” (232)—suggests that Haze has finally found the redemption he has spent his adult life fleeing from. And he finds it through a penitential repudiation of the physical world.
It might be tempting to see Harry “Rabbit” Angstrom as Updike’s version of O’Connor’s Hazel Motes, but the more apt comparison is to her idiot emblem of the modern material world, Enoch Emery—he of the vague spiritual longings and the instinctual faith in nothing in particular. Rabbit is certainly not as stupid as Enoch; few literary characters are, after all, and despite Rabbit’s own working-class background and lack of education, he has Updike’s erudite voice in his head. But he gropes just as blindly for transcendence, and with even more disastrous results: Like Enoch, he lacks a fundamental consciousness of the nature of God’s work in the world, and like Enoch, he throws himself headlong into the debased, material facts of his existence. The reader, however, is inclined to like Rabbit much more than she likes Enoch, and perhaps she will even agree that he is the prophet of the Unseen God that he occasionally believes himself to be.

Rabbit’s charisma is such that even the critics who view him as a moral failure are inclined to quietly admire him at the same time. Thus, Richard Gilman can admit that “Rabbit, Run is a grotesque allegory of American life,” while simultaneously affirming that “it is a minor epic of the spirit thirsting for room to discover and be itself, ducking, dodging, staying out of reach of everything that will pin it down and impale it on fixed, immutable laws that are not of its own making and do not consider its integrity” (15-16). But Rabbit’s charisma is dangerous in that it conceals a nothingness, as it were, at the heart of his being. The English word charisma comes to us from the Greek word χάρισµα, which suggests grace more than personal charm. And it is certainly true that various people in Rabbit’s life see him as fundamentally grace-giving; this is especially true of old Mrs. Horace Smith, for whom
Rabbit works as a gardener during his first abandonment of his wife. “All winter I was fighting the grave,” she tells him, “and then in April I looked out the window and here was this tall young man burning my old stalks and I knew life hadn’t left me. That’s what you have, Harry: life” (192). While he is working in her garden—which she not accidentally calls a “religious duty” (192)—he frames himself as a dispenser of grace:

He lops, lifts, digs. He plants annuals, packets the old lady gives him—nasturtiums, poppies, sweet peas, petunias. He loves folding the hoed ridge of crumbs of soil over the seeds. Sealed, they cease to be his. The simplicity. Getting rid of something by giving it to itself. God Himself folded into the tiny adamant structure, Self-destined to a succession of explosions, the great slow gathering out of water and air and silicon. (117)

Life and grace, then, at least appear to converge inside Harry Angstrom’s 26-year-old frame, and there is no doubting his often beneficial effect on those around him. His lover, Ruth, for example, sees her relationship with Rabbit as redeeming her past terrible relationships with men: “God she used to hate them with their wet mouths and little laughs but when she had it with Harry she kind of forgave them all, it was only half their fault, they were a kind of wall she kept battering against because she knew there was something there and all of a sudden with Harry there it was and it made everything that had gone before seem pretty unreal” (126). Even Reverend Eccles, who ostensibly begins talking to Rabbit in order to convince him to return to his family and his social duty, finds him irresistible. As he explains it to Rabbit’s parents, “There’s a great deal of goodness in your son. When I’m with him—it’s rather unfortunate, really—I feel so cheerful I quite forget what the point of my seeing him
People—women and men alike—are drawn to Rabbit because they feel he gives them something (call it grace or life or something else entirely) they cannot receive elsewhere.

Connected to this grace-giving quality in Rabbit is his steadfast religious insistence that he is after a mystical experience of the divine. He affirms his general faith in God throughout the novel, telling Ruth, who is an atheist, that God’s existence “seem[s] obvious” (79). The morning after his initial adultery, he stands in Ruth’s window listening to the church bells ring, and prays silently, “Help me, Christ. Forgive me. Take me down the way” (78), though his prayer for divine forgiveness is certainly not accompanied by any kind of repentance. He has a number of theological conversations with Eccles; most notably, he tells the reverend that “I don’t know all this about theology, but I’ll tell you, I do feel, I guess, that somewhere behind all this . . . there’s something that wants me to find it” (110). This (non-)theological statement is inherently bound up in the physical world, by its very dismissal of it; when Rabbit says this, Updike tells us that “he gestures outward at the scenery; they are passing the housing development this side of the golf course, half-wood half-brick one-and-a-half stories in little flat bulldozed yards containing tricycles and spindly three-year-old trees, the un-grandest landscape in the world” (110). Rabbit’s concept of religion becomes clear: stuck as he is in unhappy physical circumstances, he seeks his “something” in order to transcend the physical world. And yet he is doomed to fail, and Updike’s theology will turn out, in some ways, to be the opposite of O’Connor’s.

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29 There is at least the hint, in Eccles’s interactions with Rabbit, that the minister is sexually attracted to him. Indeed, when Updike issued slightly revised editions of the Rabbit series in 1996, he added a scene to Rabbit Redux in which Rabbit, riding a city bus, encounters a defrocked Eccles, and the implication of homosexuality becomes clearer (though never more than an implication): “his arm touches Rabbit’s. He always had a certain surprising masculinity, but Eccles has become burlier, more himself” (172).
Rabbit’s failure to transcend happens for two reasons. The first involves Updike’s writing itself, which is famously lush and descriptive. He brings all of his powers of expression into every scene he creates, especially in an early novel like *Rabbit, Run*. Witness his overpowering description of something as mundane as Chinese food:

> Eager saliva fills his mouth. He really hasn’t had any since Texas. He loves this food that contains no disgusting proofs of slain animals, no bloody slab of cow haunch or hen’s sinewy skeleton; these ghosts have been minced and destroyed and painlessly merged with the shapes of mute vegetables, plump green bodies that invite his appetite’s innocent gusto. Candy. Heaped on a smoking breast of rice. Each is given such a tidy hot breast, and Margaret is in a special hurry to muddle hers with glazed chunks; all eat well. Their faces take color and strength from the oval plates of dark pork, sugar peas, chicken, stiff sweet sauce, shrimp, water chestnuts, who knows what else. Their talk grows hearty. (55)

Various critics have, over the years, accused Updike of merely showing off with such detailed descriptions of the physical world, but his theologically minded interpreters have found an alternate explanation. Working from Updike’s own admission that Christianity “tells us that truth is holy, and truth-telling a noble and useful profession” (“Remarks” 851), James Yerkes suggests that “in the process of such truth-telling, Updike believes that one in fact comes upon the awareness of Sacred Presence in human experience” (11). Updike therefore describes the world in such painstaking detail because he believes that telling the whole truth in all its intricacies will reveal the presence of God in the world, even in “the un-
grandest landscape in the world.” Rabbit cannot transcend the world looking for the presence of God because, in Updike’s theological aesthetics, the presence of God is in the world itself. The second reason that Rabbit cannot reach transcendence is that, despite his high-minded claims to be looking above—or at least on the other side—of physical existence for the “something” that wants him to find it, he seems frustratingly uninterested in looking for it anywhere but in the barest and most animalistic physicality. His particular interest in Rabbit, Run is sex. As Eccles notes with equal parts amusement and scorn, “It’s a strange thing about you mystics, how often your little ecstasies wear a skirt” (111). Indeed, Rabbit rather clearly thinks of sex as a way of getting behind the ungrandness of the world to the “something” behind it. He attempts to make his adultery with Ruth into a sacrament, for example, referring to their first night together as their “wedding night” (69) and kissing “the place on her fingers where a ring would have been” (68). When he returns to Janice, much later in the novel, he wants nothing more than to make love to her, though the doctor has cautioned her that she must avoid sex for several weeks after giving birth. The crying baby bedevils his desire: “What does it want? Why won’t it sleep? He has come home from church carrying something precious for Janice and keeps being screened from giving it to her” (208). That his lust is redoubled after a morning in church demonstrates the connection between sexuality and spirituality for Rabbit; his ecstasies do generally wear skirts.

And yet sexuality is clearly a replacement for an earlier, though no less physical, method of approaching God: sports. Rabbit excelled at basketball in high school, setting a county scoring record that lasted four years before being broken. When Updike describes Rabbit’s prowess on the court, he uses the same sorts of quasi-religious terms he uses to describe his sex life. As the novel opens, Rabbit joins a pickup game with a group of
teenagers, and it exhilarates him: “That old stretched-leather feeling makes his whole body go taut, gives his arms wings. It feels like he’s reaching down through years to touch this tautness” (6). He thinks of basketball when he teeters on the verge of existential anxiety and despair: “He imagines himself about to shoot a long one-hander; but he feels he’s on a cliff, there is an abyss he will fall into when the ball leaves his hands” (23). And when he deserts Janice and drives aimlessly south, Updike combines sex with sports in a single indelible image of attempted transcendence: “The last quarter of a basketball game used to carry him into this world; you ran not as the crowd thought for the sake of the score but for yourself, in a kind of idleness. There was you and sometimes the ball and then the hole, the high perfect hole with its pretty skirt of net” (34). The image is sexual as much as it is athletic, and it becomes clear that Rabbit wants to use the physical world to escape the physical world, to dive into the physical world to get beyond the physical world.

Needless to say, these efforts are doomed to failure. Rabbit’s sexuality, though described in vivid—and sometimes nauseating—detail, fails to bring him any closer to the “something” that he claims to seek. Despite his sacramental pretentions for his first night with Ruth, “he feels impatience that through all their twists they remain separate flesh” (73); sex has ultimately failed to impart the grace that he had hoped for: “He looks in her face and seems to read in its shadows an expression of forgiveness, as if she knows that at the moment of release, the root of love, he betrayed her by feeling despair. Nature leads you up like a mother and as soon as she gets her little contribution leaves you with nothing” (75). Marshall Boswell points out that Ruth is consistently associated with nothingness in Rabbit, Run, from her aggressive atheism to her description of orgasm as “falling through [to] Nowhere” (75). Sex with Ruth cannot lead to “something” because Ruth is an emissary of “nothing”:
“Rabbit’s despair, she seems implicitly to understand, is not directed at her but at the blind, obdurate fact of sexuality itself” (Boswell 56). Sex is, for Ruth, little more than a bodily function. When Rabbit asks her how many men she has slept with, she replies, crassly, that “It’s like asking how many times you’ve taken a crap. O.K., I’ve taken a crap” (159). If Rabbit wishes to form a spiritual-sexual bond with someone, Ruth is not an optimal choice. This is not to say that his sexual experiences with his wife, Janice, come any closer to providing him the transcendence and divine communion that he seeks. His sexual behavior with her is uniformly aggressive and ugly. She refuses his advances after the birth of their baby, and he is disgusted enough to go back on his lofty, high-minded, spiritual ideas about sexuality: “he realizes she hasn’t had it for three months and in all that time has got an unreal idea of what sex is. She has imagined it into something rare and precious she’s entitled to half of when all he wants is to get rid of it so he can move on, on into sleep, down the straight path, for her sake. It’s for her sake” (213). But of course it is not for her sake, and ultimately he tries to masturbate himself against her body and against her will—as selfish a sexual activity as one can imagine. Sex has not only failed to offer him a spiritual experience; it indirectly leads to the drowning of the Angstroms’ newborn daughter, after Harry deserts his wife again and Janice gets drunk while giving her a bath.

Likewise, athletics cannot provide a lasting method of transcendence because the human body only maintains its physical peak for so long. By the action of Rabbit, Run, Harry is already a has-been at 26; the teenagers whose pick-up game he crashes see him not as a viable athletic competitor but as a potential pedophile. In high school, Updike implies, Rabbit was a big fish in a small pond, but in the grand scheme of athletic competition, he is a nothing. Even so, he cannot understand why no one but his old coach, Marty Tothero, tells
him what an incredible athlete he was. Tothero seems to have filled Rabbit full of destructive and deceptive clichés about the value of athletic competition; as he puts it, he saw his duty as to make his players “feel the—yes, I think the word is good—the sacredness of achievement, in the form of giving our best. . . . A boy who has had his heart enlarged by an inspiring coach . . . can never become, in the deepest sense, a failure in the greater game of life” (54-55). But Rabbit is just such a failure—his heart has been enlarged in all the wrong ways, and this former high-school basketball star will die at 56 of a heart attack. In retrospect, Tothero’s wisest words to Rabbit are not his malarkey about the nobility of athletic achievement but an offhand remark: “Oh Harry, you can’t understand an old man’s hunger, you eat and eat and it’s never the right food” (43). By *Rabbit at Rest*, Harry will understand completely.

*Heart* is an important word in *Rabbit, Run*. The novel’s epigraph comes from Blaise Pascal: “The motions of Grace, the hardness of the heart; external circumstances.” Rabbit, of course, sees his heart as being open and as dispensing grace to all of those around him; the reader, especially after Updike shows us events from Ruth’s and Janice’s perspective, is inclined to doubt that this is the case. Nevertheless, it is certainly true that Rabbit acts chiefly with his heart rather than from his mind; in other words, he is not a great thinker, preferring to work instinctually to solve problems. This preference is clear from the earliest pages of the novel: He leaves Janice on a whim, and the reader gets no more than a vague whiff of this decision until it has already been accomplished. “His acts,” the narrator says, “take on decisive haste” (21), and he runs on this haste until he is well out of Pennsylvania, at which point his heart fails him. The road circles back, and Rabbit is too exhausted to fight it: “if he’d trusted to instinct he’d be in South Carolina now. He wishes he had a cigarette, to help him decide what his instinct is” (34). *Instinct* is perhaps an even more appropriate word than
heart, suggesting as it does the same kind of animality as Harry Angstrom’s high-school nickname. Rabbit consistently follows his instincts, even when they lead him into a wall. “All of a sudden,” he tells Eccles, “it hit me how easy it was to get out, just walk out” (91). It is no wonder he concludes to himself that “Funny, the world just can’t touch you once you follow your instincts” (94).

Even his belief in God is instinctual. “Doesn’t it ever, at least for a second, seem obvious to you?” he asks Ruth, for whom “It seems obvious just the other way” (79). It might be tempting, then, to equate Rabbit’s instinct with faith. But this is at best an incomplete interpretation, as Eccles points out. “You don’t care about right or wrong,” he tells Rabbit on the golf course. “You worship nothing except your own worst instincts” (115). We can amend Eccles’s diagnosis a bit if we recognize that Rabbit also worships his own best instincts. His instinctual longing for freedom and transcendence is not a bad thing; it falls in a line with Augustine’s famous observation that God “has made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you” (1.1.1). But the full extent of Rabbit’s problem becomes clear when we allow Karl Barth—Updike’s favorite theologian—to weigh in. Barth affirms the sort of built-in religious impulse that Augustine posits and that Rabbit seems to demonstrate, but he cautions that this impulse (or instinct) is never enough. When faced with the limits of the material world and with our own broken and divided conscience, our impulse leads us not to God but further into ourselves: “We come to our own rescue and build the tower of Babel” (“Righteousness” 14). Updike himself has noted that his novels tend to have a “yes, but” quality to them: “Yes, in Rabbit, Run, to our inner urgent whispers, but—the social fabric collapses murderously” (Samuels 33). Rabbit’s instincts—often his concrete, physical longings for sex or sports or that something that is waiting for him to find it—wake him from
the slumber of what Heidegger calls everydayness, but they cannot lead him to the Christian
God whose existence Updike himself affirmed, with varying degrees of orthodoxy and
passion, until the end of his life. The novel’s epigraph is *Pensée* 507, but it could just as
easily have been one from earlier in the same chapter: “If it is an extraordinary blindness to
live without investigating what we are, it is a terrible one to live an evil life, while believing
in God” (§495). One of Rabbit’s most cogent defenders remarks that, at the novel’s climactic
scene, Rebecca June’s funeral, “of all those gathered there, only Rabbit believes in God”
(Doner 30). This statement is probably true—“yes, but” Rabbit is nevertheless blind, cruel,
and selfish to the point of solipsism. It is hard not to agree with Ruth when she calls him
“Mr. Death himself” (260). His belief in God—not as unqualified as it initially seems—leads
him to a new and deadly Tower of Babel, one erected deep inside his physical body as a
shrine to it. “You’re not just nothing,” Ruth tells him at their last meeting, “you’re worse
than nothing” (260). For all his life-affirming and grace-giving—for everything his instincts
have led him to—Rabbit has ended up even deeper in nihilism than Ruth, who is
“consistently associated with the nothing” (Boswell 53). He no longer gives anything; he
only takes—from Ruth, from Janice, from Eccles, from the society that he feels unjustifiably
superior to. Much earlier in the novel, he sums up his philosophy to Ruth: “When I ran from
Janice I made an interesting discovery. . . . If you have the guts to be yourself . . . other
people’ll pay your price” (129). But they will do so only until they refuse to do so, and by the
end of the novel—having abandoned his wife for a third time, and having been abandoned by
his mistress—Rabbit is homeless, with no one on his side. “Harry’s quest fails for lack of
love” (56), as Edward Vargo puts it, though I would modify the statement a bit. Harry’s quest
fails for misdirected love of the sort that Walker Percy describes in *Love in the Ruins*: “I
believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all. Generally I do as I please” (6). Rabbit lacks Tom More’s sophisticated palate, perhaps, but their shared immersion in the physical world and its pleasures is obvious.

The novel ends, appropriately enough, with Rabbit’s running yet again; this time, however, he runs without any concept of an end goal, runs just to run: “His hands lift of their own and he feels the wind on his ears even before, his heels hitting heavily on the pavement at first but with an effortless gathering out of a kind of sweet panic growing lighter and quicker and quieter, he runs. Ah: runs. Runs” (264). The ending is profoundly ambiguous, but its echoes of Wise Blood are interesting. Jill Pelaez Baumgartner says that, at the conclusion of O’Connor’s novel, Haze “is still walking, and probably to the reader it is not completely clear if he is walking toward Jesus or still attempting to escape Him” (177). The same may be true of Rabbit here—the reader cannot know whether he is running away from society toward God or away from both society and God, both of whom wish to curtail his freedoms by making certain demands of him. Either way, it is clear that his attempts at escaping the physical world (Updike’s final sentences suggest a lifting) are made only through the very physical act of running.

The biggest difference between Haze and Rabbit has to do with how they respond to their failure to transcend. Haze, of course, turns ultimately to the Catholic doctrine of penance, mortifying the flesh to transcend the physical world to which it is so attached. But Rabbit refuses even vague, Protestant forms of penance: “Be a good husband,” Eccles
instructs him. “A good father. Love what you have left” (241).\textsuperscript{30} Rabbit refuses these instructions when he denies his responsibility for his daughter’s death and flees his family and her funeral. In fact, the novel’s only action of the ritual of penance is one that Rabbit enforces on someone else, rather than on himself. When he learns that Ruth once had a sexual relationship with his high-school rival Ronnie Harrison, Rabbit demands that she perform oral sex on him—“a ritual act of atonement” (Vargo 81) that will “prove you’re mine” (Updike, \textit{Rabbit, Run} 161). This action, of course, gratifies rather than mortifies his flesh, and it imparts grace to neither him nor Ruth; instead, it codifies his selfishness and hardens his heart even further. Penance saves Haze by removing from him the temptations and distractions of the material world; Rabbit has neither the courage nor the inclination to turn to penance; after all, Updike tells us that “Harry has no taste for the dark, tangled, visceral aspect of Christianity, the \textit{going through} quality of it, the passage into death and suffering that redeems and inverts these things, like an umbrella blowing inside out. He lacks the mindful will to walk the straight line of a paradox” (203). He is left with only the physical world, lacking the ability to go beyond it, and as the novels telling his story bear on, he more and more loses even the desire to find the something that once wanted him to find it. By the time of \textit{Rabbit Is Rich}, twenty years after \textit{Rabbit, Run}, God has “shrunk in Harry’s

\textsuperscript{30} We are clearly not meant to think much of these instructions, however, and they are a long way off from O’Connor’s severe enforcement of penance. Jeff Campbell notes that “Rabbit is irresponsible and inarticulate, but he is closer to the truth than Eccles, who cannot love in a meaningful way and who has quit fighting and accepted a role in an institution whose central assertions he does not really believe” (117). Or, as Reverend Kruppenbach—the older pastor who critics have argued represents the voice of Karl Barth in the novel (Wood, \textit{Comedy} 214)—puts it: “There is nothing but Christ for us. All the rest, all this decency and busyness, is nothing. It is Devil’s work” (147). It is an interesting thought experiment to imagine what might have become of Rabbit if he’d been given an O’Connor-esque ritualistic penance to mortify his flesh instead of Eccles’s bourgeois platitudes; one wonders if he might have found the unseen world that he claims to seek.
middle years to the size of a raisin lost under the car seat” (353), able to be retrieved only occasionally and only by the sheerest of physical pleasures: flying in an airplane, making money, having sex, and eating. Harry’s death of a heart attack at age 57 is a testament to the reality of the Barthian Tower of Babel: the way that a man can have all the right longings and follow them in all the wrong directions, especially if he is willing to make new physical rituals out of old spiritual problems. Rabbit is no Hazel Motes; he is much closer to Enoch Emery, a modern man stripped of genuine spiritual understanding who replaces what he has lost with physical instinct.
CHAPTER 5
EROS IN WALKER PERCY’S ‘THE LAST GENTLEMAN’

“I did my best. It wasn’t much.
I couldn’t feel, so I tried to touch.”
- Leonard Cohen, “Hallelujah”

Walker Percy’s indebtedness to the philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard was so evident (and so often pointed out) that it became something of a private joke midway through his career. In the self-interview he conducted for Esquire in 1977, “Questions They Never Asked Me So He Asked Them Himself,” Percy responds curtly to his own question, “Do you have any favorite dead writers?” with a pair of humorously unpleasant sentences: “None that I care to talk about. Please don’t ask me about Dostoevski and Kierkegaard” (159). Percy brought critical curiosity on himself, of course, and he sealed his fate regarding Kierkegaard on the opening pages of his first novel, the epigraph of which he took from The Sickness Unto Death. Indeed, despite Percy’s request to himself, it would be difficult to overestimate the Danish philosopher’s influence on the American novelist; according to one critic, “it was Kierkegaard who had ‘opened up’ the area of religion to Percy, who had previously been so steeped in the traditions of Southern Stoicism and scientific atheistic humanism” (Dewey 110). In interviews, Percy has shown a particular affinity for Kierkegaard’s so-called “spheres of existence” (elucidated in many books throughout his career, most notably Either/Or, Fear and Trembling, and Stages on Life’s Way), although the use to which he puts Kierkegaard’s schema in the novels tends to warp Kierkegaard’s original intentions.

For example, in a 1971 conversation with John C. Carr, Percy compares The Moviegoer to a man “jump[ing] from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious. He
has no ethical sphere at all” (66). Even more interesting is his explanation of *The Last Gentleman* in the same interview. Will Barrett, he says, is in certain ways similar to Binx Bolling, but he is set apart by his very real amnesia:

> He was worse off because he was sick; he was really sick. He didn’t know where he was. Half the time he was in a fugue of amnesia, and he’d go into a fugue and come out of a fugue, and he’d wake up somewhere, not knowing where he was yet. He really existed in what Kierkegaard would call the religious mode. He was a real searcher. He was after something. (66)

This is an appealing description of a strange and difficult to understand protagonist, and yet it falls flat upon closer inspection. Will Barrett is indeed a “searcher,” but his location in the Kierkegaardian religious sphere is by no means certain or assured; at the very least, he is tempted by the joys and lures of the aesthetic and ethical spheres, and it is more accurate to say that Will flits rather indiscriminately among the spheres throughout the novel, never ultimately settling in any of them.

Furthermore, Percy’s explanation of the Kierkegaardian spheres in *The Last Gentleman* is thrown into disarray by the appearance—fourteen years after the publication of the novel and nine years after Percy’s explanation to Carr—of a sequel, *The Second Coming*, which begins with an older Will Barrett firmly settled in the ethical sphere. The most reasonable explanation is not that Will has shifted back and forth between the ethical and religious spheres for his entire life—after all, Kierkegaard gives no sign anywhere that such a movement is possible—but that the Kierkegaardian spheres are at best an imperfect method of analyzing *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*. Without abandoning a Kierkegaardian analysis altogether, I suggest in this chapter and the next that a reading that
utilizes the traditional Christian distinction between two kinds of love, ἔρως (eros) and ἀγάπη (agape), allows for a deeper understanding of Percy’s method and philosophical perspective in the two Will Barrett novels.

While the Greek term eros is the source of the English adjective erotic, its meaning is by no means confined to sexual desire or expression. Karl Barth cautions against seeking the meaning of eros “only in sexual love, or in degenerate and excessive forms of this love” (Church 178). The meanings of eros go far further and deeper than this sexual caricature. The word, says Barth, found “particularly forceful expression in the Mystery religions and in thinking influenced by outstanding philosophers like Plato and Aristotle and later Plotinus” (179)—indeed, it is eros that the attendees of Plato’s Symposium discuss, and they define the term in ways ranging from the primarily physical to the spiritual and virtuous. It is more accurate to say that eros is the highest expression of Greek attitudes toward love. Certainly this is how Christian theologians have tended to speak of the concept. When Barth goes about contrasting eros to agape, therefore, he looks for its highest and most noble expression, since “If we are not merely to conceive but to grasp what Christianity and its ‘love’ so resolutely rejected, nothing less than the best of what is held out to us by the plastic works of time will suffice” (182). Anders Nygren agrees, going so far as to suggest that eros is dangerous for Christians specifically because it goes beyond the merely sexual—as he puts it, “Between Vulgar Eros and Christian Agape there is no relation at all” (51)—and into the heavenly realms of Platonism:

The heavenly Eros . . . in its most sublimated and spiritualised form, is the born rival of the idea of Agape. Each of them in its own way shines with the light of heaven, and, alien as they are to one another from the beginning, they
have nevertheless enough in common to prevent them from entirely passing each other by. (51)

Nygren also notes “that when the New Testament speaks of love it makes large use of the word ἀγάπη, but consistently avoids the word ἔρως” (33). And just as the authors of the New Testament avoid using eros, the word agape is a relatively minor one in pre-Christian Greek thought, “unknown in classical Greek and only sparingly used in Hellenistic” (Barth, Church 177). It seems as though the New Testament authors, wishing to avoid the many pagan connotations of eros, picked an obscure competing term and endowed it with new meaning. In so doing, they wished to avoid treating agape, or Christian love, “as a higher and more spiritualised form of Eros, and [to suppose] that the sublimation of Eros is the way to reach Agape” (Nygren 52). The authors of the New Testament—and the theologians who study them—therefore steadfastly contrast eros and agape. The two may have things in common, but they cannot be substituted for each other.

But what is the difference between Greek love, even in its highest Platonic forms, and Christian love? Barth is quick to point out that the difference is not between God’s love on the one hand and man’s on the other. “On both sides,” he says, “we have to do with man, and with one and the self-same man in the case of the Christian. It is man who loves either in the one way or the other” (Church 183). And yet to exhibit agape rather than eros enacts a real change in the individual man or woman; or, as Barth puts it, “in the two cases he is the same man in very different ways” (184). The next temptation is to suggest that eros is founded solely on human nature, whereas agape is a method of loving by which humanity can transcend its own limitations and convene with divinity. But the difference is just the opposite:
Agape-love takes place in affinity, eros-love in opposition, to human nature. As we see, they both take place in relationship to it (and in this they can be compared). But in the one case the relationship is positive, in the other negative (so that they cannot be compared). In this antithetical use and character, in which the one unchanging human takes on form but which differ as Yes and No, being related only in respect of their object, eros and agape go their divergent ways. (185)

To live in eros, then, is to deny something essential to one’s humanity, whereas to live in agape is to be more fully alive, more completely human. A person’s choice between the two is therefore foundational to the way he or she lives, and Barth describes the difference between the two as the difference between anthropocentrism and theocentrism. Eros is the ultimate form of self-expression, a “love which is wholly claim, wholly the desire to control, wholly the actual attempt to control, in relation to God” (187). Nygren puts it in even starker terms, calling eros “egocentric love” and suggesting that in it, “the religious relationship is dominated essentially by man. The distance between man and the Divine is not insuperable. Man is akin to the Deity, or is maybe himself a Divine being . . . to come to himself, therefore, is to come to the Divine” (205). In the erotic system, man is the measure of all things.

Agape, by contrast, is unselfish; it grows from human submission to the divine will and consists in the fact that [a person] accepts God as his eternal Counterpart, and therefore his own being as that of one who is elected by this God, being
absolutely sheltered by his preservation and help, but who is also called by Him to thanksgiving, responsibility, obedience, and prayer. (Barth, *Church* 186)

Agapic love preserves the creator/creation distinction, “a border-line that can never be crossed from man’s side. Any thought of man’s raising himself up to the Divine life is felt to be sheer titanic pride, which . . . represents the highest degree of godlessness” (Nygren 206). *Agape* is therefore wholly dependent upon divine grace—a person’s relationship with God can come only from God’s voluntary lowering of Himself to the human level, as Christians maintain God did in the person of Jesus.

From this “vertical” relationship springs forth all of a person’s “horizontal” relationships, and *agape* brings not only “togetherness with God” but also “with his fellow man: not in isolation; not in opposition or neutrality to this other; not united with him in a subsequent relationship; but bound to him basically and from the very first” (Barth, *Church* 188). Human interaction and community under the agapic system resemble Martin Buber’s “I-Thou” relationship, as Barth himself suggests (188). Buber proposes two “words” that model human relationships: “I-It,” in which one person treats another primarily as an object; and “I-You”,[^31] in which one person treats another as a sort of second subject, in a strange grammatical revolution:

[^31]: The traditional translation of Buber’s German phrase *Ich und Du* is “I and Thou,” but translator Walter Kaufmann avoids this terminology for what seem to me very good reasons. Contemporary English lacks German’s formal/informal distinction for second-person pronouns; in earlier versions of the language, *you* was the formal pronoun and *thou* the informal. But *thou* has fallen out of everyday usage: “The world of Thou has many mansions,” says Kaufmann. “Thou is a preachers’ word but also dear to anticlerical romance poets. Thou is found in Shakespeare and at home in the English Bible, although recent versions of Scripture have tended to dispense with it. Thou can mean many things, but it has
Whoever says You does not have something for his object. For wherever there is something there is also another something; every It borders on other Its; It is only by virtue of bordering on others. But where You is said there is no something. You had no borders.

Whoever says You does not have something; he has nothing. But he stands in relation. (55)

The erotic/I-It relationship thus involves a person’s attempt to control—it can hardly be called a “relationship” at all, in that two subjects are not put in relation to each other. But in an agapic/I-You relationship, one person approaches another person with her “whole being” (54); she becomes more who she is in treating another as a person who exists outside of her desire for him. Buber, too, suggests that “The You encounters me by grace—it cannot be found by seeking. But that I speak the basic word to it is a deed of my whole being, is my essential deed” (62). It is clear that the agapic/I-You relationship is one that proceeds based on humility and grace and that it proceeds downward before spreading outwards; in other words, human beings receive the potential for agape from their relationship with God, and then they utilize it in their relationships with one another.32

It is precisely the conflict between erotic I-It relationships and agapic I-You relationships that we see in Percy’s The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming. This distinction merges with Percy’s use of the Kierkegaard stages, however, and so eros becomes entwined with Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and ethical spheres, and agape is connected to the

32 This last point is true, at least, for Christian theologians. While Buber certainly includes the divine/human relationship under the category of the I-You, he does not demand that it precede human/human I-You connections.
religious sphere. It is easy enough to see how *eros* fits with the aesthetic sphere; after all, the famous section of *Either/Or* in which Kierkegaard demonstrates the life of the aesthete is called “Diary of the Seducer,” and sexual pleasure is a major way that the aesthete staves off the boredom so inimical to his lifestyle. It is less obvious, however, that the erotic can merge comfortably with the ethical, which in Kierkegaard’s schema involves an absolute commitment to someone or something outside of oneself. Indeed, this merger is an innovation on Percy’s part and involves his redefinition of the ethical sphere in his nonfiction. For Percy, an adult convert to Catholicism, the ethical sphere clearly involves attempts to live a “good life” apart from the instructions of the Church, whose influence has declined precipitously over the past several centuries. But with the decline of the Church came an increasing inability for men and women to transcend their earthly existences. Percy notes that two routes rose up to take religion’s place in human self-transcendence:

> With the disappearance of the old cosmological myths and the decline of Judaeo-Christianity and the rise of the autonomous self, science and art, one the study of secondary causes, the other the ornamental handmaiden of rite and religion, were seized upon and elevated to royal highroads of transcendence in their own right. Such transcendence was available not only to the scientists and artists themselves but to a community of fellow scientists and students, and to the readers and listeners and viewers to whom the “statements” of art, music, and literature were addressed. (*Lost* 141)

Both the scientist and the artist are committed to something outside themselves: science and art. And yet both of them find themselves alienated by the “problems of reentry” related to their transcendence (142). This problem is more evident in the artist than in the scientist, in
part because “In the age of science, scientists are the princes of the age” and thus are “sustained in [their] transcendence by the exaltation of the triumphant spirit of science and by the community of scientists” (141). The artist has no such luxury and turns in many cases “to neurosis, psychosis, alcoholism, drug addiction, epilepsy, florid sexual behavior, solitariness, depression, violence, and suicide” (142). Percy, as a scientist-turned-artist, sees both professions as modern manifestations of the Kierkegaardian ethical—and he sees that both, left to their own devices, lead to despair.

This end is not the only thing they have in common. Indeed, despite the popular conception that science and art are mutually opposed to each other in terms of goals and spirit—“the one logical, left-brained, unemotional, Apollonian, analytical, discursive, abstract; the other intuitive, playful, concrete, Dionysian, emotional” (143)—Percy insists that they have in common a certain methodology: “both are practiced at a level of abstraction” (143-144). The problem thus becomes the role of the scientist or the novelist when she is not practicing science or writing her novel. Having successfully, though momentarily, transcended the world around her by her science or her art, the scientist or novelist must find a way to reintegrate with her world, and it is in this difficulty of reintegration that we see the problem with the ethical sphere and its connection to eros. The ethical sphere, as Percy sees it, is an abstraction, and it encourages ethicists—scientists, artists, businesspeople, spouses—to abstract the world around them. And if Martin Buber is correct that the proper relationship between the individual and the world is an I-You relationship, no abstraction can ultimately be healthy or beneficial. Abstraction creates Its, but agape requires Yous.
We see the destructiveness and abstraction of the erotic ethical most clearly in Percy’s analysis of his debut novel, *The Moviegoer*. Percy represents the ethical sphere in the figure of Binx Bolling’s Aunt Emily, in many ways a gender-reversed version of Percy’s own beloved Uncle Will, who adhered to the belief system sometimes called Southern Stoicism. Stoicism flourished in the aristocratic South in the 19th century, but it revealed its real power after the Confederacy’s defeat in the Civil War:

Its most characteristic mood was a poetic pessimism which took a grim satisfaction in the dissolution of its values—because social decay confirmed one in his original choice in the wintry kingdom of self. He is never more himself than when in a twilight victory of evil, of Modred over Arthur. (Percy, “Stoicism” 85-86)

Percy’s language here is telling: The Stoic is firmly in the ethical sphere, in that he is committed to a system outside of himself. And yet in this commitment, he abstracts himself from the world and inters himself “in the wintry kingdom of self.” In Southern Stoicism in particular—and by extension, in the ethical sphere in general—one commits oneself to *eros* in its finest and highest form.33

Such is the case for Aunt Emily, who tellingly describes herself as “an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice” (23). She finds herself horrified by the behavior of her nephew, who avoids respectability and responsibility so far as he is able and covers his aesthete’s alienation by compulsively attending film screenings and sleeping with a string of empty-headed secretaries. She spends much of the novel advising Binx to

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33 Indeed, if we conceive of *agape* as Christian love in its highest and noblest forms and *eros* as Greek love in its highest and noblest forms, we would expect a philosophical system like Stoicism—in either its Greco-Roman or its Southern forms—to side with the latter against the former.
enter medical school—in other words, to enter the ethical sphere as a scientist, a “prince of the age.” Her reasoning is remarkably Stoic:

I don’t quite know what we’re doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in the dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fibre of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man. (54)

Aunt Emily’s language here reveals that, in the universe Percy has created, while the ethical sphere may be more noble than the aesthetic—Binx’s commitment to a life of medicine would doubtless be preferable on a social level than his aesthetic frivolity and seductions—it is no less selfish. The world be damned, she says. “A man must live by his lights and do what little he can.” Such a lifestyle would do nothing to counteract the abstracting autonomy Percy so condemned in Lost in the Cosmos.

The philosophical thrust of The Moviegoer is to compare Aunt Emily’s erotic/ethical Stoicism to a more obviously Christian view of human destiny. As Ralph C. Wood puts it, Emily “fails to see that Binx is asking a far more fundamental question—not the question of whether he should do this thing or that, but whether he should do anything at all—the vocational question” (14). The vocational question belongs to the province of religion, and to get there, Binx must embark on what he calls a “search,” which “is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life” (Percy, Moviegoer 13). This “search” is the pull of the religious sphere and of agape, and it is, as Percy presents it,
the fundamental fact of properly lived human life. The human being is not the abstraction scientific discourse makes of it but is instead a wayfarer, on the way to meet God but stuck for a time in this earth. This is what agape and the religious sphere look like for Percy and his characters. It is no wonder, then, that Percy describes Binx’s search as fundamentally opposed to Aunt Emily’s erotic/ethical worldview. “In the end,” he told an interviewer in 1971, “Binx jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious. He has no ethical sphere at all. That’s what Aunt Emily can’t understand about him. He just doesn’t believe in being the honorable man, doing the right thing, for its own sake” (Carr 66). To move from the aesthetic to the ethical is an improvement in some ways—especially if one is Kierkegaard’s Judge Vilhelm—but in Christian terms, in terms of the difference between eros and agape, it is no change whatsoever. To embrace agape, one must turn one’s back on selfish love altogether.

Eros and agape primarily manifest themselves in Percy’s two Will Barrett novels—1966’s The Last Gentleman and 1980’s The Second Coming—in Will’s sexual relationships with Kitty Vaught, in the first novel, and her daughter Allison Huger, in the second. And yet to the sexual storylines of the Barrett saga Percy adds a religious component. The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming are the story of Will Barrett’s movement from the aesthetic to the ethical, and then from the ethical to the religious sphere. In practical terms, this movement is the movement from religious apathy to empty religious ritual, and then from abandoned religious ritual to ultimately redemptive but non-religious ritual. Percy, the convert to Catholicism, cannot abandon ritual completely, but as an existentialist he can argue that the former rituals and language of his religion have been worn down to a nub by the postmodern world. As he puts it, “The Christian novelist nowadays is like a man who has
found a treasure hidden in the attic of an old house, but he is writing for people who have moved out to the suburbs and who are bloody sick of the old house and everything in it” (“Notes” 116). Will Barrett, too, feels how worn-out religious practice and language are. Thus, he—in many ways the representative Percyan man—must create a new language and a new sort of ritual, and in so doing moves into the religious sphere and begins practicing agape love in one fell swoop.

When we first meet Williston Bibb Barrett, in the opening pages of The Last Gentleman, he feels that he is perched on the edge of something important, perhaps even transcendent. Heretofore, he has lived his life in “a state of pure possibility,” but on the morning we meet him as he lies in Central Park, thinking about women and the universe, he believes he is ready to commit to a single choice, to believe “that he was not destined to do everything but only one or two things” (4). The narrator’s language in this scene involves the movement from the Kierkegaardian aesthetic—in which one must keep one’s options forever open or risk boredom—to the ethical, but the narrator is not necessarily trustworthy in his evaluation of Will’s condition and decisions. He almost always treats Will with a great deal of irony, and often, as in this case, he gives the reader what Will would like to be true, rather than what is true. Indeed, the bulk of Will’s problem in The Last Gentleman is that he is happy neither in the aesthetic world of pure possibility nor in the ethical world of solid commitment.

His dissatisfaction stems from his temporal-spatial dislocation. Will comes from a long line of southern gentleman, adherents to the system of Southern Stoicism that Percy describes in his nonfiction. And yet decay has entered into the family line. Will’s great-grandfather was the perfect Southern Stoic; he “knew what was what and said so and acted
accordingly and did not care what anyone thought” (9). But his son, Will’s grandfather, was less committed to this system that demands above all things commitment. Percy’s narrator tells us that he “seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure” (9-10). With the falling away from the ethical sphere comes a splintering self-consciousness and an epistemological turn: “He was brave but he gave much thought to the business of being brave” (10). By the time we get to Will’s father, we find a man paralyzed by self-consciousness, a man who desires the trappings of the ethical sphere without the absolute commitment that it demands from its adherents: “The father was a brave man too and he said he didn’t care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other men. So living for him was a strain” (10). The situation is even worse for Will, who largely lives as an aesthete but dives, as it were, into the ethical sphere from time to time, often with disastrous results.

His position is neatly encapsulated in his life in New York. He is, of course, a Southerner, the descendent of a bold and noble stoic, and yet when he, like his father and grandfather before him, attends Princeton University, he does terribly. One problem is that, at Princeton, he is crushed by the weight of his family history and his own expectations for himself. He occupies the same dorm room that his grandfather had decades before, and the knowledge of this flattens him:

After a moment the young Southerner, who still sat at his desk, tried to get up, but his limbs were weighed down by a strange inertia and he moved like a sloth. It was all he could do to keep from sinking to the floor. Walking around in old New Jersey was like walking on Saturn, where the force of gravity is eight times that of earth. At last, and despite himself, he uttered a loud groan,
which startled him and momentarily silenced his classmates. “Hm,” he muttered and peered at his eyeballs in the mirror. “This is no place for me for another half hour, let alone two years.” (15)

From Princeton, with its disabling connection to his ethical past, Will heads for New York City, a location Percy consistently presents as a no-man’s land, “full of people from small towns who are quite content to live obscure lives in some out-of-the-way corner of the city. Here there is no one to keep track” (9). For Will, then, New York City is an aesthetic space in which he can escape from the demands of his ethical family history.

And yet Will is consistently hounded by the ethical sphere. For reasons that Percy never makes exactly clear—they are likely not clear to Will himself—he sees a psychiatrist several times a week for years on end, and in the cozy ethical/scientific high-rise office, he amiably conforms to every expectation his analyst has of him. What is more, Will joins a number of social groups—all of whom are, like the ethicist, committed to a single idea or identity:

For example, he had fallen in with an interracial group which met at a writer’s apartment in the Village on Friday nights. It did not strike him as in the least anomalous that on Saturday night he met with the Siberian Gentlemen, a nostalgic supper club of expatriate Southerners, mostly lawyers and brokers, who gathered at the Carlyle and spoke of going back to Charleston and Mobile.

Will thus plays at the ethical sphere—out of, it seems, a sincere desire to join it—and yet total commitment to multiple ideas is, in fact, a total commitment to none of them, and his stabs at ethical living only send him further into the aesthetic sphere.
Certainly his relationships are characterized by *eros*. He treats women, in particular, as vehicles for his own pleasure. When “an attractive and healthy brunette” engages him in some tedious small talk, he thinks “what a pity it was he might not have sport with her without talking to her” (21-22). Will has more successful erotic encounters with Midge Auchlinloss, the daughter of a friend of his father’s, but the two do not have anything approaching a mutually loving relationship:

Though they liked each other well enough, there was nothing to do, it seemed, but press against each other whenever they were alone. Coming home to Midge’s apartment late at night, they would step over the sleeping Irishman, stand in the elevator and press against each other for a good half hour, each gazing abstractedly and dry-eyed over the other’s shoulder. (26)

Their relationship, needless to say, belongs under the category of “I-It”—it is selfish, erotic love. Even when Hurricane Donna causes them both to see the world through renewed eyes, their sexual relationship does not change very much; after the storm has passed, they go back into the elevator “where they strove against each other like wrestlers, each refusing to yield an inch” (26). Love, for Will, is a zero-sum game, and his actions are erotic whether he is in the aesthetic or the ethical sphere.

The commitment he believes he is on the cusp of making in the novel’s opening lines, then, marks his would-be transition from the aesthetic to the ethical sphere but promises to do nothing at all to move him from erotic to agapic love. Nor is this yearning for the ethical anything new in his life, as the narrator slyly remarks a few chapters later. Will buys an expensive and high-powered telescope that he hopes will make him a kind of scientist, but, as the narrator points out, “It must be admitted that although he prided himself on his scientific
outlook and set great store by precision instruments like microscopes and chemical balances, he couldn’t help attributing magical properties to the telescope” (29). The degree to which he yearns for the ethical/scientific, then, is exactly the degree to which he cannot fully embrace it. His psychiatrist, Dr. Gamow—otherwise a pompous fool whom Percy uses to mock psychiatry as a field of human discovery—seems to recognize this, asking Will, “Could it be that you believe there is some ultimate hidden truth and that you have the magical means for obtaining it?” (37). Dr. Gamow points out, quite rightly, that Will frequently feels a sort of semiotic urge just before the onset of a “fugue state,” a short-term amnesiac spell that leaves Will utterly disconnected from logic and thought. As such, Will’s fugue states recall Kierkegaard’s “teleological suspension of the ethical,” in that they are a momentary release from the universal strictures of reason and ethics, an entrance of sorts into the ethical sphere. Indeed, Robert Coles suggests that Will “has been granted by the author the gift of periodic release from the ‘everydayness’ Binx Bolling fought so hard in the moviegoer” (178). The problem, of course, is that these breaks from the aesthetic and the ethical are both momentary and involuntary, and since the religious sphere and the agapic love it engenders demands an absolute commitment, Will’s method of entry is unsatisfactory and ultimately ineffective.

What is more, Will—quite understandably—dislikes these fugue states and fights against them. Throughout The Last Gentleman, he is unconcerned with the religious sphere and desires only the commitment to the ethical, in both its scientific and its romantic forms. As he leaves Dr. Gamow’s office for the last time, for example, he declares his allegiance to the scientific method: “I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles and the self-knowledge I have so arduously gained from five years of analysis” (41), he thinks, apparently unaware that he has so gamed the system of analysis that he
cannot possibly have gained any real insight from it. When he does set up his telescope in Central Park, he grows obsessed not with the peregrine falcon he follows at first, but with two women who conduct an odd ritual at a park bench. He watches as a “Handsome Woman” leaves a note for a younger woman, and then stakes out this spot every day for hours. When he sees the Handsome Woman on a subway car a few days later, he follows her, eventually ending up in a hospital room in Washington Heights. This is how Will Barrett meets the Vaught family, who give him a purpose and a commitment, for better or for worse.

The Vaughts have found themselves in New York under dire straits. The youngest of them, Jamie, is dying, and his family has brought him to see the best doctors in America. At the time Will meets them, they are about to return to Alabama, where Mr. Vaught is an incredibly successful car salesman. They invite Will—with his amazing gift for ingratiating and for “divining persons and situations” (50)—to join them, and Will, who has already decided that Jamie’s older sister, Kitty, is the love of his life, agrees. The Vaughts represent for Will an opportunity to join the ethical sphere, both in their connection to his gentlemanly ancestry (Mr. Vaught was a friend of Will’s father and uncle) and in their offer of commitment—and yet his voyage south and his life with the Vaughts in Alabama fail to secure him a position in the ethical sphere. Rather, they destabilize his life even further, ultimately, perhaps, giving him the opportunity to transcend both the ethical and the aesthetic spheres, to move from erotic to agapic love.

This is not to suggest that the Vaughts themselves are representatives of the religious sphere—particularly not the Vaughts we and Will meet in the hospital room. Mr. and Mrs. Vaught are representatives of conventional Southern manners and morality, and their utter
lack of concern for religion is best demonstrated in an incident involving Jamie. As their older son, Sutter, explains it to Will:

My father was a Baptist and my mother an Episcopalian. My father prevailed when Jamie was born and he wasn’t baptized. You know of course that Baptist children are not baptized until they are old enough to ask for it—usually around twelve or thirteen. Later my father became an Episcopalian and so by the time Jamie came of age there was no one to put the question to him—or he didn’t want it. To be honest, I think everybody was embarrassed. It is an embarrassing subject nowadays, even slightly ludicrous. Anyhow Jamie’s baptism got lost in the shuffle. You might say he is a casualty of my father’s ascent in status. (223)

Religion, then, is for Mr. and Mrs. Vaught primarily an exercise in class status, and a ritual like baptism—far from being a sacramental connection with God, as Christian theology would have it—is a mere social rite to be performed or not performed at a person’s leisure. As Percy himself asks elsewhere, “How can one possibly write of baptism as an event of immense significance when baptism is already accepted but accepted by and large as a minor tribal rite somewhat secondary in importance to taking the kids to see Santa at the department store?” (“Notes” 118). Obviously, Jamie’s parents hold this second notion of baptism, marking their indifference to religious matters.

Jamie himself chiefly belongs to the ethical sphere in its most modern and scientific form. We are told that he sees Will “as a fellow technician, like himself an initiate of science, that is, of a secret, shared view of the world, a genial freemasonry which sets itself apart from ordinary folk and sees behind appearances” (65). Throughout the novel, he reads “books of
great abstractness, such as *The Theory of Sets*, whatever a set was” (161), and when eventually he enrolls in college, he decides to study chemistry, and the textbook he receives is “as stubby and thick as a German handbook. Hefting it, you felt like a German: a whole body of knowledge, a *Wissenschaft*, here in your hand, a good chunky volume” (201). Percy has chosen his German expression carefully here; *Wissenschaft*, which means simply *science*, refers both to Hegel’s *Wissenschaft der Logik*, the philosophical height of what Kierkegaard would call the ethical, and to Fichte’s philosophical term *Wissenschaftslehre*, which “derives all knowledge and science from a self-evident axiom: ‘All other propositions will have only a mediate certainty, derived from it, while it must be immediately certain’” (Inwood 959). All of these things suggest that Jamie is dedicated to the scientific method and to objective—if abstracted—truth. And yet Jamie also reads a book about the possibility of extraterrestrial life, about “radio noise from the galaxies, noise that might not be noise” (211). It is also significant that Will gives Jamie his expensive telescope—his emblem of scientific exploration of religious matters—early in the novel, for Jamie is drawn to the metaphysical and the unscientific by his position on the edge of the abyss. And yet, as his sister Val, a nun, points out, this sort of exploration is bound to fail: “I’ve noticed . . . that it is usually a bad sign when dying people become interested in communication with other worlds, and especially when they become spiritual in a certain sense” (211). For Val, who is a more or less traditional Catholic, spirituality and religion are two distinct things, and one cannot approach the religious sphere as either a scientist or a spiritualist. Will himself will learn this lesson near the end of *The Second Coming*.

The “Handsome Woman” whom Will follows into the hospital turns out to be the Vaughts’ ex-daughter-in-law, the estranged wife of their oldest child, Sutter. Rita is probably
the novel’s closest analogue to Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer*, in that she is a self-righteous representative of the ethical sphere in all its worldly wisdom. She speaks in psychological terminology and devotes herself to liberal causes. Kitty, at least, is impressed:

She showed me something I never dreamed existed. Two things. First, the way she devoted herself to the Indians. I never saw anything like it. They adored her. I saw one child’s father try to kneel and kiss her foot. Then she showed me how a thing can be beautiful. She kept Shakespeare’s sonnets by her bed. And she actually read them. (115)

Kitty believes that “Rita is the most unselfish person I know” (117), but this statement says far more about the people whom Kitty knows than it does about Rita, whom Percy never paints as the slightest bit unselfish. Kitty says that “she devoted herself to the Indians,” but she gives no proof, and in fact, the only evidence she has—the child’s father prostrating himself in front of Rita—suggests that Kitty is more interested in the devotion the Indians give to Rita rather than the devotion Rita shows (or does not show) to them. That Kitty combines Rita’s love of beauty with her (non-)devotion to the Indians suggests that the aesthetic and ethical spheres, for Percy, are united in their selfish orientations. Rita uses her ethics as a method of control, particularly of Kitty, who is nothing if not open to suggestion. However, she has about as much luck telling Will what to do as Aunt Emily does steering Binx into medical school; thus, Will frustrates her and she opposes his relationship with Kitty on supposedly ethical grounds.
Kitty herself belongs rather squarely to the aesthetic sphere. Her name suggests Heideggerian/Augustinian curiosity, as in “curiosity killed the cat”\textsuperscript{34}—and she is interested only in the most ephemeral of subjects. When Will tells her that he would like to marry her and thus cement an ethical connection between them, she is perfectly willing to play along with him, but the idea of marriage is never more than a game for her. The most telling moment in Will’s relationship with Kitty occurs just after they have slept together for the first time. Will attempts to engage her in conversation, with disastrous results. Will begins by talking about a noble, ethical ancestor of his, and Kitty interrupts him:

“Would you take me to a dance?” asked Kitty, her head turned away.

“Sure. But what is curious is that—”

“I’ve been dancing five hours a day for years and I can’t remember the last dance I went to.”

“—he did not feel himself under the necessity, almost moral, of making love—”

“I love to dance.”

“—in order that later things be easy and justified between him and Miss Trumbull, that—”

“My grandmother composed the official ATO waltz at Mercer,” said Kitty.

“—that even under the conditions of siege he did not feel himself under the necessity, or was it because it was under the conditions of siege that—”

\textsuperscript{34} She has this significant name in common with Joseph’s lover from Saul Bellow’s \textit{Dangling Man}. 
“You’re so smart,” said Kitty, shivering and huddling against him.

“Oh, I’m so cold.” (112)

Their conversations go nowhere because both of them are self-obsessed: Will, in this case, through the ethical sphere of his noble ancestry and Kitty through the curious distractions of the aesthete. Unsurprisingly, Kitty describes their relationship as “A little experiment by Kitty for the benefit of Kitty” (109), but his motivations are just as selfish as hers. After all, he sees her as a means to the end of marriage rather than as an important agent in her own right.

Something in Will resists his relationship with Kitty. When he first declares his love for her, for example, he thinks, “Do I love her? I something her” (104)—hardly the grand romantic gesture he wants to make. And while he accepts the sex she offers as almost a form of grace, it repels him at the same that that it attracts him: “Kitty too, he would have to say, was an armful of heaven. The astounding immediacy of her. She was more present, more here, than he could ever have calculated. She was six times bigger and closer to life. He scarcely knew whether to take alarm or to shout for joy” (109). His alarm springs from an unconscious recognition that the sex Kitty offers represents erotic love when what he seeks, perhaps without knowing it, is *agape*. Kitty thus becomes the agent of Will’s alienation, allowing him to flit rapidly back and forth between the unsatisfying aesthetic and ethical spheres—but always erotically. Spending time with Kitty confuses Will: “But what am I, he wondered: neither Christian nor pagan nor proper lusty gentleman, for I’ve never really got the straight of this lady-and-whore business. And that is all I want and it does not seem too much to ask: for once and all to get the straight of it” (180). He cannot get the straight of it because he sees only two choices: aesthetic seducer and ethical husband. But what he most
needs is to be lifted above this dichotomy and into the religious sphere of *agape*. But this transcendence clearly cannot take place as long as Will is in a relationship with Kitty.

There are two other Vaughts whom Will does not meet until later in the book. Valentine Vaught—now known as “Sister Johnette Mary Vianney,” suggesting a movement from erotic to agapic love—is a nun who serves black communities in rural Alabama and is the novel’s clearest representation of the religious sphere. She approaches Will midway through the novel and demands a religious duty of him. “Mr. Barrett,” she says, politely but firmly, “I don’t want Jamie to die an unprovided death. . . . I don’t want him to die without knowing why he came here, what he is doing here, and why he is leaving” (210). Val’s request—or demand—of Will is that he bring Jamie the Gospel on his death bed. Will, of course, who is decades away from the religious sphere himself, is horrified and bewildered: “Excuse me, but apart from the circumstance that I do now know what the word ‘salvation’ means, I would refuse in any case to accept any such commission” (212). And yet Val’s request worms its way into Will’s heart enough so that he will return to it at the end of the novel.

Val’s brother Sutter is a much more complicated figure. He is a diagnostician—“the greatest diagnostician since Libman” (181), according to his ex-wife. Rita focuses on his extraordinary ability to diagnose medical problems, which borders on the supernatural, but Sutter is equally adept at diagnosing the spiritual ills of the society around him. Late in the novel, Will finds a notebook written by Sutter and attempts to use it as a guidebook for his own behavior. Sutter’s observations about the world around him are striking, both because they ring true in 1966 and in our own day, and because they are virtually identical, in places, to certain of Walker Percy’s musings in his nonfiction. In particular, Sutter sees through the
sexual mores of his society and recognizes the degree to which *eros* in its basest and most physical form dominates interpersonal relationships:

Lewdness = sole concrete metaphysic of layman in age of science = sacrament of the dispossessed. Things, persons, relations emptied out, not by theory but by lay reading of theory. There remains only relation of skin to skin and hand under dress. Thus layman now believes that entire spectrum of relations between persons (e.g., a man and woman who seem to be connected by old complexus of relations, fondness, fidelity, and the like, understanding, the comic, etc.) is based on “real substratum of genital sex. The latter is “real,” the former is not. (280)

Compare this passage to Percy’s later *Lost in the Cosmos*, in which the author gives a variety of answers to the problem of modern promiscuity. One of these sounds suspiciously like Sutter’s notebook:

Western man is promiscuous because something unprecedented has happened. As a consequence of the scientific and technological revolution, there has occurred a displacement of the real as a consequence of which genital sexuality has come to be seen as the substratum of all human relationships, of friendship, love, and the rest. This displacement has come to pass as a consequence of a lay misperception of the physicist’s quest for establishing a molecular or energetic basis for all interactions and of what is perceived as Freud’s identification of genital sexuality as the ground of all human relationships. (43)
That this response is only one of ten that Percy gives to the question, however, suggests that we must be careful not to ascribe Sutter’s views on sexuality and society to Percy himself. It is far more likely that Percy sees the truth and value of Sutter’s explanation but recognizes that it is not a complete description of twentieth-century sexuality, let alone of twentieth-century humanity.

Adding to the distance between author and character is Sutter’s own rather abhorrent behavior. This great diagnostician of the emptiness of modern sexuality succumbs to virtually every sexual vice the modern world affords him. But he does so as something akin to a principled stand; abstracted from the self, as all modern people are, he “choose[s] the only reentry into the world which remains to us. What is better then than the beauty and the exaltation of the practice of transcendence (science and art) and of the delectation of immanence, the beauty and the exaltation of lewd love?” (354). His science and his pornography are one and the same, and together, they are the only route open to him, his only hope of having his self exist in a world of selves. Percy, the Catholic convert, sees another way and thus sees Sutter’s attempts at “reentry” as shallow and ultimately damaging (though still preferable to the easy psychiatric and sociological answers of people like Rita and Dr. Gamow). Because of his disagreements with his author, Sutter is in a unique position in the novel: He is able to point out the various ways that the society around him fails to live up to its highest ideals—and Will needs him to do so—but he cannot furnish an example for Will to follow. He is a spiritual guide, but a twisted and crooked one: He guides Will only insofar as he refuses to guide Will. Will follows him for most of the second half of the novel; finally fed up, Sutter tells him, “You either want me to tell you to fornicate or not to fornicate, but for the life of me I can’t tell which it is” (381). Like the reader of Søren Kierkegaard’s
Either/Or, Will must choose between the aesthetic and ethical spheres—or else find the tertium quid.

The bulk of The Last Gentleman is Will’s zig-zagging attempt at making a choice between the three spheres, none of which he can stand for more than a short time. Percy encodes into the plot of the novel an ironic subversion of the “quest” motif in literature. Will’s quest takes the form of a movement south, a return, as it were, to his ancestral homeland. He will follow the Vaughts home to Alabama, accompanying Jamie in a recreational vehicle tellingly named Ulysses. The camper itself suggests the wide-open adventure of the American male—Huck Finn’s lighting out for the territory—but its name points instead to the ethical quest of Homer’s Odysseus, returning home through hell and hardship in order to reunite with his wife and son. Once again, Percy has grouped the aesthetic and ethical spheres together and set them off from the religious sphere, which remains dim to Will Barrett.

Nor does the quest provide any lasting satisfaction for Will. The trip, like the novel itself, features a number of detours, the most notable of which is Will’s falling in with Forney Aiken, a white man in apparently convincing blackface, set on writing a journalistic “series on behind-the-scene life of the Negro. The idea had come to him in the middle of the night: why not be a Negro?” (130). The parallel here is between Aiken’s laughable attempts at transforming himself into a black man and Will’s attempts at transforming himself into the sort of Southern gentleman his great-grandfather would have recognized: Both are doomed to failure. Furthermore, despite Aiken’s ostensible commitment to social change and the betterment of the human condition, his life is saturated in cheap sex, as suggested by his name: “Forney Aiken” is a hick’s joke on “fornicating.” And Aiken has little problem with
fornication, though he couches it in a thin ethical veneer. Speaking of his friend Mort Prince, an erotic novelist who has written a book called Love, he says, “You know what that guy told me with a straight face. I asked him what this book was going to be about and he said quite seriously: it was about ----ing. And in a sense it is! . . . But it is a beautiful piece of work and about as pornographic as Chaucer. Indeed it is deeply religious” (137, bowdlerization Percy’s). Percy’s disdain for literary attitudes like Prince’s is made clear by his thoughts about John Updike’s Couples:35 “As much as Percy admired Updike as a thinker and prose stylist, he was puzzled by his treatment of sex—his elevation of coitus to a kind of ultimate epistemology, and his minute depiction of the act itself. Percy could not help feeling that the effect was, despite all intentions, pornographic. High pornography, to be sure, but still pornography” (Tolson 351). Percy thus does not mean us to be impressed with the ethical posturing of Mort Prince and Forney Aiken; they serve as further proof that Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and ethical spheres both belong under the heading of the erotic.

Percy further subverts the “quest” motif by ending Will’s movement south—a movement that initially seems as though it will take up the bulk of the novel—after sixty pages or so. And while the journey at first seems to spiritually refresh Will, he finds the suburban New South inhabited by the Vaughts and their friends, golf-coursed and subdivisioned, something close to uninhabitable. He is utterly alienated by the South, specifically because its residents do not appear to share his alienation; after all, as the narrator puts it, “it is much worse to be homeless and then to go home where everyone is at home and then still be homeless” (186). The New South crushes him beneath the weight of its ethical contentment; he recognizes that there is nothing wrong “with a Mr. and Mrs.

35 Updike is, along with Norman Mailer, a likely source for Mort Prince, although The Last Gentleman predates Couples by a few years.
Williston Bibb Barrett living in a brand-new house in a brand-new suburb with a proper address” (186-187), and yet the prospect throws him into a tailspin because he needs something higher, whether he knows it or not.

While Will’s specific circumstances are quite unusual, Percy rather clearly means for him to stand in for the entirety of modern humanity. In an essay published in 1956, a full decade before The Last Gentleman, Percy discusses two methods modern people use to attempt to curb their alienation and despair: rotation and conversion. Rotation refers to the crossing of zones in an attempt to flee one’s distasteful and alienating situation; the classic American example, of course, is Huck Finn’s floating down the Mississippi. This sort of journey works to heal alienation because the traveler “is on the Mississippi, which, during the entire journey, flows between states: he is in neither Illinois nor Missouri but in a privileged zone between the two” (“Man” 89). While Percy does not explicitly say so, it is clear that rotation is the escape method favored by the Kierkegaardian aesthete, who wishes to float above commitment, never giving himself fully to anything. The other method of healing alienation is conversion, which also involves motion and travel. But there is a difference: “But this is not rotation, for it is a deliberate quest for the very thing rotation set out at any cost to avoid; the rider has turned his back upon the new and the remote and zone crossing, and now voyages into his own past in the search for himself” (95). Conversion thus corresponds to the ethical sphere, in which a person attempts to ground herself by commitment to something higher—in this case, the past. It should be clear that Will’s journey south involves both rotation and conversion: He is returning, in some ways, to the location of his childhood, but he does so initially by floating above the world around him in the camper. He returns to the South, but only by passing through a no-man’s land of rotative
travel. Both, as we learn, are doomed to fail, because both the ethical and the aesthetic spheres belong to erotic love. Will must ascend to the agapic.

He begins doing so with a second quest. This one begins on a whim. Jamie, Will, and Kitty have enrolled for classes at a university, but on the way to school one morning, Jamie announces, “I’ve decided to quit school and go out west” (247). Will does not miss a beat; he almost immediately turns the car around and heads back to the Vaughts’ house to get the camper and begin this journey. Kitty, ever the aesthete, cannot even begin to understand Jamie’s desire, focusing instead on the Tennessee game that is to take place that weekend. But Will does not want to leave her, and so he asks her to come with them to New Mexico, as his wife. This proposal is an action of extraordinary bad faith. The journey to New Mexico is at its heart an attempt to enter the agapic religious sphere; after all, the trip ends in Santa Fe (“Holy Faith”), and Will demonstrates his willingness to sacrifice his plans and desires to Jamie’s in his immediately agreeing to head west. But Will attempts to turn this religious quest into an ethical one, even though marriage to an aesthete like Kitty would inhibit his ever living the agapic life that could satisfy him spiritually. Kitty is, in fact, delighted when Rita talks Jamie out of his trip, at least until after Christmas. Will is disgusted, though he lacks the courage to tell Kitty his true feelings:

What he could not tell her was: if I can marry, then you can travel. I can even stand this new horsy conjugal way, this sad poilu love with you, if you will hit the road with me. Jamie is dying, so he needs to go. But I need to go too. Now the pantry’s got us, locked in, with a cold potato love, and you the chatelaine with the keys at your belt. (256)
Thus begins Will’s final struggle between agape and eros (at least in The Last Gentleman; the struggle will begin anew in The Second Coming, albeit in slightly different terms). He still wants to hold onto both kinds of love, but he is beginning to sense that he must choose between them. Sexuality and domesticity—both of which are embodied by his impending marriage to Kitty—have become noxious things. Will’s language in the things he cannot say to his paramour suggest as much. The “sad poilu love” Kitty wishes to share with him refers to a French term for World War I infantrymen; literally, the word means “hairy one,” and taking both senses at once suggests that their love is both animal and violent, setting one against the other. Furthermore, Will feels he is trapped in Kitty’s conventional domestic world, locked in a pantry by a fierce female guard. While he will periodically continue to long for the erotic ethical life throughout the rest of this novel, this scene is a turning point for him, the spot where he is most clearly given Kierkegaard’s either/or: He must choose between eros and agape—and nothing in his life matters except that choice.

Will escapes Kitty’s imprisoning domesticity through a series of chance happenings—or perhaps divine interventions—rather than through any conscious choice of his own. Sutter steals away with Jamie in the middle of the night, and Rita sends Will out—without Kitty—to find them. When Kitty sneaks out and meets up with Will “just over the saddle of the farthest ridge, the last wrinkle of the Appalachians” (283), further extremes are necessary to get Will to commit to the quest instead of to Kitty. They head for their college campus, and while Kitty walks to her sorority house to get her textbooks, Will is set upon by a group of rioting students, who attack him, knocking him unconscious and freeing him at last from the erotic trap of Kitty’s desire. As he struggles to remember who he is and where he is going, he finally makes the decision to pursue his quest instead of his libido:
He had forgotten Kitty and left her at the university and now remembered nothing more than that he had forgotten. There was only the nameless tug pulling him back. But he had also forgotten what Sutter told him the night before—*come find me*—and recorded only the huge tug forward in the opposite direction. He shrugged: well, I’m not going back because I’ve been there. (294)

His amnesia has freed him from distraction, the same distractions that keep modern people mired in average everydayness, the lure of the erotic aesthetic and the equally erotic ethical, and allowed him to move west across the country in search of a religious life. Will certainly does not realize this is what has happened, of course; his amnesia fixes it so that he does not understand why he is moving westward. The vague pull toward Santa Fe simply appeals to him more than the vague pull toward Alabama. But we would expect this from an author who utilizes Kierkegaard’s spheres of existence, in however mixed a form. It is the ethical sphere, after all, the world that Will must leave behind, that represents universal reason and logic, and to enter the religious sphere, Will must suspend that sort of thinking. His amnesia allows him to do just this.

It is an imperfect rescue, however. As the days wear on, Will finds himself frequently pulled back toward erotic love and Alabama, always in the form of Kitty Vaught. Even once he arrives in Santa Fe, he cannot quite bring himself to enter the religious sphere; instead, he distracts himself from his mission with thoughts of what he has left behind:

I’m through with telescopes, he thought, and the vasty galaxies. What do I need with Andromeda? What I need is my Bama bride and my cozy camper, a match struck and the butane lit and a friendly square of light cast upon the
neighbor earth, and a hot cup of Luzianne between us against the desert cold, and a warm bed and there lie dreaming in one another’s arms while old Andromeda leans through the night. (358)

In all cases, Will is brought away from these reveries by returning to Sutter’s “casebook,” his collection of musings that reveal the hollowness of the modern world, with its eros covered by a thin veneer of decency and Christian language. Again, while Sutter cannot direct Will where he needs to go, he can certainly point out the wrong directions, leaving Will to apophatically determine his path.

And despite a number of distractions—the lure of Kitty, of course, but also a brief return to his family home and another encounter with Forney Aiken, the “pseudo-Negro”—Will does eventually make his way to Santa Fe, where Jamie, Sutter, and his destiny await him. Jamie is in the hospital, having taken a turn for the worse; his face is blotched with purpura, “splotches of horrid color like oil slicks” (362). And yet Jamie’s illness has an unreal quality to it, brought on by Sutter’s refusal to properly document it and inform the Vaughts of its severity; Will is disturbed not only by Jamie’s appearance but also by his own ease in getting to the patient. Jamie alternates between cool disregard of his own situation—he cracks jokes; he plays cards for hours on end—and “attacks” in which it seems that he is ready to leave the world. Will stays with him almost constantly, leaving only to fetch items that Jamie requests and to take cryptic and confusing directions from Sutter. At one point, for example, Sutter instructs him to “Call Val. Tell her how sick Jamie is. He likes Val and wants to see her but doesn’t want to send for her himself,” before abruptly changing his mind: “No, I tell you what to do . . . Call Rita” (368). This matched thesis-antithesis resolves itself into a Hegelian synthesis: “Yes, call Rita and Val and tell them to keep it to themselves
and come on out” (368). Sutter has presented Will with a clear choice between the erotic ethical sphere, represented by Rita, and the agapic religious sphere, represented by Val. The choice of which of them to call has been his choice throughout the novel: How should he live? Is it even possible to call for both of them?

It takes a few days, but Will does eventually make his choice: He calls Val and tells her that her brother is dying, but her response is not what he might have hoped it to be: “If anything happens before I get there, you’ll have to attend to it,” she tells him. “You’ll have to see to his baptism if I don’t get there in time” (392). Will is not Catholic, of course; he is not even a Christian, and so he resists this charge, quite understandably. But Val is unyielding. She does not care about his personal commitment—she cares that the ritual of baptism is performed. Baptism is, according to Catholic doctrine, “the basis of the whole Christian life, the gateway to life in the Spirit (vitae spiritualis ianua), and the door which gives access to the other sacraments” (Catechism 312). It is arguably the most important ritual in the Catholic faith, by virtue of its being chronologically prior to the others. Will’s hesitance to perform this ritual is understandable, but from a Catholic perspective, Val’s insistence that he do so regardless of his personal lack of faith is equally understandable. While Protestant theologies tend to see personal faith as the most important aspect of religious ritual—indeed, many Protestant groups seek to eliminate formal ritual altogether, on the grounds that it stands opposed to a vibrant personal faith—the function of the ritual is primary to Catholic soteriology. In other words, it is not the faith of the priest that sanctifies a sacrament like baptism. The power rests in Christ, who inhabits the sacramental action, and the sacraments “are efficacious because in them Christ himself is at work: it is he who baptizes, he who acts in his sacraments in order to communicate the grace that each sacrament signifies” (292).
The technical theological term is that “the sacraments act ex opere operato (literally: ‘by the very fact of the action’s being performed’)”: It follows that “the sacrament is not wrought by the righteousness of either the celebrant or the recipient, but by the power of God. From the moment that a sacrament is celebrated in accordance with the intention of the Church, the power of Christ and his Spirit acts in and through it, independently of the personal holiness of the minister. Nevertheless, the fruits of the sacraments also depend on the disposition of the one who receives them. (292)

This distinction is absolutely essential for a novel like Graham Greene’s The Power and the Glory, in which a hypocritical “whisky priest” with barely any faith left administers the sacraments to a group of Mexican peasants during a time when the government actively persecuted Catholics. Despite the priest’s personal failures, the sacraments have validity because Christ works through the ritual itself rather than through the faith of the communicant. Percy, in sending his protagonist to New Mexico, almost certainly means to evoke The Power and the Glory here, suggesting that, despite Will’s lack of faith, the baptism Val charges him to perform will work ex opere operato and will have validity.

As it turns out, however, Will does not have to perform the baptism himself; he has only to summon the priest, who performs the ritual for a mute, nearly comatose Jamie. Neither the priest nor the ritual offers the sort of clear redemption one might expect from a Catholic novelist. Father Boomer is a rather dry man who treats death as an average, everyday occurrence rather than as a life-ending, life-changing phenomenon; Percy compares him to a “storekeeper” (404) and says that as he holds Jamie’s dying hand, “he curled his lip absently against his teeth in a workaday five-o’clock-in-the-afternoon expression” (406). The
baptism itself is profoundly ambiguous, since Jamie cannot speak. His two contributions to his own entry into Catholic life and death are to defecate and ask how he can know that the doctrines of Catholicism are true. (“If it were not true . . . then I would not be here” [404], replies the beleaguered priest.) Throughout the ritual, Jamie keeps his eyes fixed on Will, as if asking Will to carry him through the ceremony. It goes without saying that Will does not believe in the efficacy of Catholic baptism. In fact, just before the ritual begins, he tells the priest that he is an Episcopalian, not a Catholic. But the faith of the intermediaries—the unbelieving Will, the skeptical Sutter, the worn-out and workday priest—does not matter, because according to Catholic doctrine, Christ Himself performs the baptism. The ritual is efficacious.

Will seems to recognize the importance of what happened on Jamie’s deathbed. He follows Sutter out of the hospital, asking “What happened back there?” (407). Sutter, true to form, refuses to give him an easy answer; he demands that Will sort it out for himself. But it is clear that Will has been changed by Jamie’s death and deathbed conversion: He loses his interest in going back to Kitty in Alabama, and he begs Sutter not to go on the date he has planned for the evening. The novel ends ambiguously, with Sutter’s stopping his car to let Will in. A third quest has begun—and the reader has every reason to hope that this one, prompted as it is by Jamie’s baptism, will be into the heart of the agapic religious sphere.
CHAPTER 6
THE MOVE TO AGAPE IN ‘THE SECOND COMING’

“And the light came from her body,
And the night went through her grace.
All summer long, she touched me,
And I knew her, I knew her
Face to face.”
- Leonard Cohen, “Our Lady of Solitude”

The ending of Walker Percy’s *The Last Gentleman* is sufficiently ambiguous that contemporary critics could generally see it as a tentative resolution of Will’s problems, and yet Percy’s introduction of further complications fourteen years later doesn’t ring false in any way. Martin Luschei, for example—the author of the first book-length study of Percy’s fiction—suggests that the novel’s ending is at least hopeful. As Will returns to Alabama, Luschei writes, it may be that “he can survive the hazards of promoting Chevrolets in Poppy’s agency and feeding the chickadees with his certain someone. We have to give him an outside chance . . . Perhaps the grace of inwardness will now enter his life and he will hear” (167). Richard Pindell is similarly hopeful: “Will, we note, is at the conclusion of the novel less the fugitive of history . . . and less the prisoner of science” (68). According to Pindell, Will’s final “Wait” at the end of the book “betokens, we can hope, an orientation at once chastened, almost suppliant, and alert, toward news” (68). Robert Coles is even more optimistic, although he does not frame his analysis in terms of the Kierkegaardian religious sphere. In the novel’s final paragraphs, Will “decides: I want to get to know this doctor, about ten years my elder, and I will make that as plain as possible; so, for once I will reach actively outside myself” (187). If Will does not reach the religious sphere in Coles’s reading, he at least opens himself up to the possibility of doing so.
Simone Vauthier, on the other hand, plays up the ambiguity of the ending, suggesting that “Just as the action [of the novel] leaves the hero groping toward a new orientation, free to accept or not ‘the message in the bottle’ that has thus indirectly reached him, so the narration leaves the reader wondering about ‘what happened’” (95). Panthea Reid Broughton is unusual among pre-Second Coming critics, in that she sees the ambiguity of the novel’s ending as tilting away from Will’s ultimate quest: This tilting is, in fact, Percy’s failure:

Thus the problem with the book’s ending is that Percy is conceptualizing in terms of that very mind / body split he and his characters deplore. He gives Will both Kitty (sex, responsibility, immanence) and Sutter (theory, knowledge, transcendence), as if having both of them will enable Will to complete his own personality. . . . This double vision is I believe rather like a rock fault beneath a city: it threatens the coherence and solidity of his otherwise very beautiful and sound work. (114)

Percy does not seem to have conceived the ending of The Last Gentleman as a purposeful “rock fault,” but, with the 1980 publication of The Second Coming, Broughton’s analysis proved the most cogent of all of Percy’s early critics. Will, given the erotic/ethical and the agapic/religious in equal measure at the end of the first novel, has found that he cannot, as it were, serve two masters.

Percy did not begin writing The Second Coming as a sequel to The Last Gentleman. Instead, after already having written a hundred pages of the novel, “my character just sort of became Will Barrett in middle age, still lost after 20 years of ‘achieving his goals’” (Atlas 183). This retroactive continuity is only partially successful: The timelines of The Last Gentleman and The Second Coming never quite match up, and certain details of Will’s
childhood have to be twisted and squeezed in order to fit into both novels. Most notably, *The Last Gentleman* heavily implies that Will grew up in Alabama and that his family is located mostly in Louisiana—but in *The Second Coming*, we learn that he spent most of his childhood years in Mississippi. While it is certainly possible for both continuities to be true, it requires a certain willful suspension of disbelief. Likewise, *The Last Gentleman* is set in the early 1960s, as we know from its reference to Hurricane Donna. In *The Second Coming*, however, which seems to be set in the late 1970s, Kitty Vaught (Huger) has a daughter who is twenty or so years old. Kitty must have married her husband nearly immediately after the action of *The Last Gentleman*; again, this is not impossible, especially given Kitty’s noted flightiness in the earlier novel—but it stretches credibility. It is even harder to reconcile Will’s age in the two novels: He is 25 in *The Last Gentleman* and seems to be at least 50 in *The Second Coming*.

Even with these discrepancies, however, Percy was right to transform the nascent *Second Coming* into a sequel to *The Last Gentleman*, for—while the later novel has to stretch its biographical facts—thematically, it picks up right where the earlier book left off. We left Will in Santa Fe, running after Sutter Vaught’s car and struggling to choose between the erotic/ethical and the agapic/religious. Decades later, he has made his decision, having firmly entered the ethical. The later incarnation of Will Barrett is a respectable and retired businessman living in North Carolina in the aftermath of his wife’s death—he plays golf, he donates to charitable causes, and he waits for his daughter, Leslie, to get married. He also spends an astounding amount of time holding pistols to the side of his head: “He held the muzzle against his temple. Yes, that is possible, he thought smiling, that is one way to cure the great suck of self, but then I wouldn’t find out, would I? Find out what? Find out why
things have come to such a pass and a man so sucked down into himself that it takes a gunshot to knock him out of the suck” (14). Will’s spiritual sickness is caused by his long residence in the Kierkegaardian ethical sphere. After the events of The Last Gentleman, Will married “a rich hardheaded plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman” (72) and made a successful life for himself as a lawyer. As the decades wore on, he became overwhelmingly comfortable, far removed from the amnesiac “fugue states” he had experienced in the 1960s. But his life of comfort leads to this new sort of dissatisfaction, the chafing of the erotic/ethical against the skin of this man who had once leered at the agapic/religious. A new sort of spell erupts in his life: This time, instead of forgetting everything, he remembers everything, the weight of his history and memory weighing him down so much that he cannot even stand upright.

Robert Coles argues that Will’s fugue states in The Last Gentleman serve as a kind of grace because they do not allow him to pursue the interests that would distract him from his religious quest. Likewise, it makes sense to view Will’s “spells” in The Second Coming as a form of grace that will make the ethical sphere intolerable for him. Thus, his first spell “happened . . . on the day after he had received the local Rotary’s man-of-the-year award for service to the community” (5)—after he has received a trophy celebrating his commitment to the ethical. But Will’s position is only one manifestation of the ethical in a world that is full of such manifestations, whether they be scientific, Christian, or businesslike. The ethical sphere, with its focus on the absolute and the universal, has moved further and further away from understanding the individual—and the world in which Will lives leans heavily on technology, the social sciences, and “objective” standards. Hence the following scene on the golf course:
We used to call this club a spoon, he thought, not a three-wood. What do you think? he once asked an ancient black caddy at Sea Island. That’s a spoon shot, the caddy said with a certain emphasis and a rising cadence and handed him the club with the complex but clear sense of what a spoon could do.

Now you choose a numbered club from the back of an electric cart. (6)

The world, in other words, has moved away from the linguistic and the intersubjective, relying instead on the artificial and the numbered. With this move comes a certain abstraction, brought on by the phony objectivity of the pseudoscientific ethical world and by humanity’s selfishness and inability to achieve real intersubjectivity—note how the golfer has moved from discussing his shot with his caddy to coldly choosing his club himself. A few pages later, Will looks through his own body: “Who can see his own wrist? It was not a wrist but The Wrist, part of the hole into which everything was sucked and drained out” (14). He is abstracted from himself—he can see his own body parts only as members of giant Hegelian categories. There is a sense in which Will’s problem is a form of self-absorption. After all, he spends a good deal of time staring at himself. But Percy does not posit self-absorption as a surfeit of individuality; rather, it is an absence of the truly individual, a refusal to see oneself outside of categories. Suicide might be a solution—it would certainly remove Will from categories and “cure the great suck of self,” but it would also be an utter canceling of individuality, and, as he notes, “then I wouldn’t find out, would I?” (14). Whatever the solution ultimately is, it cannot be to abandon Being altogether—although that is the only way out Will can recognize at the beginning of the novel.
Will recognizes—however inchoate and subconscious the recognition—that the (post-
)modern world around him has fallen into decay, but he is nearly alone in this recognition. 
Even Percy’s narrator turns on him: Throughout the novel, the narrator slyly offers 
psychological explanations for Will’s behavior and emotions—but then he, even more slyly, 
rejects them out of hand. For example, in the third paragraph of the novel, we are told that 
“For some time he had been feeling depressed without knowing why. In fact, he didn’t even 
realize he was depressed. Rather was it the world and life around him which seemed to grow 
more farcical with each passing day” (3). The reason that Will does not “even realize he was 
depressed,” of course, is that he is not—he is responding in a reasonable way to the decay of 
the modern and postmodern worlds. The problem is that most people don’t feel the way Will 
does, and so there is a conflict between how he sees the world and how the rest of the world 
sees it. They tend to look at him and say that he is depressed or deranged, but he wonders if 
“perhaps it is possible, especially in strange times such as these, for an entire people, or at 
least a majority, to deceive themselves into believing that things are going well when in fact 
they are not, when things are in fact farcical” (4). Psychology, it seems, is part of the 
erotic/ethical/scientific complex that fails to see the world in the religious terms in which it 
exists; thus, any psychological or medical explanation for Will’s dissatisfaction is bound to 
fail to live up to the facts.

In fact, Percy paints psychology as positively harmful, as we see in the example of 
Allison Huger, the novel’s female protagonist. Allison begins the novel in a mental 
institution, to which she seems to have been committed because of her own failure to live in a 
North Carolina fully immersed in the dry and passionless ethical sphere. She experiences 
psychology as a constricting and punishing force, undergoing frequent bouts of electroshock
therapy that leave her unable to remember anything about herself. She is forced to communicate with herself by the use of memos that she writes herself before undergoing the treatments that will leave her unaware of the basic facts about her existence. In one of these, she tells herself that “You’ll be very hungry after the buzz (remember?) and tired and sore. You’ll feel like a rape victim in every way but one” (29). Science and psychiatry—representatives of the ethical sphere—are not just unhelpful; they are violating forces, openly destructive.

But if science provides no answers to Will’s and Allison’s spiritual conditions, the institutional Church may be even worse. We learn very early on in the novel that Will has become disgusted with theological conversation, in part because he lives, as he notes, “in the most Christian nation in the world, the U.S.A., in the most Christian part of that nation, the South, in the most Christian state in the South, North Carolina, in the most Christian town in North Carolina” (13). But Christ’s presence is nowhere to be found in this town—he is so immersed in Christendom (the institutions and officers that have sprung up around the faith) that he has completely lost sight of Christianity (Christ’s actual call to the individual). “A mystery,” Will writes in a letter to Sutter Vaught, who lives completely apart from society in the southwestern desert, “If the good news is true, why is not one pleased to hear it? And if the good news is true, why are its public proclaimers such assholes and the proclamation itself such a weary used-up thing?” (189). The answer is that Christianity has become a species of knowledge, a merely ethical activity—and since Will’s problem is that he has grown weary of the ethical sphere, Christendom can offer nothing to relieve his spiritual longings. It is a faith built on social busy-ness, as exemplified by Jack Curl, the unctuous Episcopalian minister who is more interested in using Will’s money to build a retirement
community than in saving his soul. Will asks him if he believes in God, and it takes several
pages for him to give him a straight answer. Clearly, Christendom has lost whatever mission
it once had, succumbing instead to the social respectability of the ethical erotic.

Percy includes in the novel a noxious twin brother to Christendom, a sort of half-
hearted community of atheists who refuse to take their atheism particularly seriously. The
novel’s best representative of this atheist Christendom is Lewis Peckham, who cheerfully
reports his disbelief and reads Dante’s *Divine Comedy* “for the structure” (151). Will wants
none of it. “Why was Lewis’s unbelief so unpleasant?” he asks himself. “It was no better
than the Baptists’ belief. If belief is shitty and unbelief is shitty, what does that leave?” (151).
Both Christendom and atheist Christendom are marked by their lack of passion, their lack of
existential seriousness. They represent “two classes of maniacs. The first are the believers,
who think they know the reason why we find ourselves in this ludicrous predicament yet act
for all the world as if they don’t. The second are the unbelievers, who don’t know the reason
and don’t care if they don’t” (190). The modern world, theist and atheist alike, has given up
on meaning, but the problem is not a lack of belief. In some ways, Kierkegaardian
Christendom—once limited to the dry dogmas of the State Church—has been extended to all
Americans of all formal faiths. New age mysticism and shallow spirituality dominate the
landscape of the novel, to the extent that Will wonders

Who were the believers now? Everyone. Everyone believed everything. We’re
all from California now. Yet we believe with a kind of perfunctoriness. Even
now Kitty was inattentive, eyes drifting as she talked. In the very act of
uttering her ultimate truths, she was too bored to listen. (287)
Percy’s characters believe everything, in other words, but they care about nothing. If faith is being willing to stake your life on a specific something, no one has any. All they have is belief: empty, shallow belief. The *tertium quid* which Will seeks is at its root an attempt to find that meaning that they’ve abandoned—and it is intimately connected to the agapic religious sphere, with its ultimate self-giving passion for God.

When he eventually finds this *tertium quid*, he finds it in both sexuality and spirituality. *The Second Coming* is Percy’s only novel that one could reasonably consider a love story, albeit a strange, twisted, and philosophical one. The novel marks Will’s progress from *eros* to *agape*, from a purely sexual love to one founded on mutual care and concern:

> There are insistent and frequently sinister sexual overtones in Will Barrett’s feelings about virtually everyone with whom he comes in contact—not only Kitty, but his daughter Leslie, and Jimmy Rogers and Ewell McBee, even the old men at St. Mark’s convalescent home—as well as in his ugly little habit of playing with guns when he is alone. But the love affair with Allison somehow redeem, in several senses of the word, all the rest. (Hardy 188)

Allison Huger makes a similar movement. Her life before the asylum was firmly in the erotic and ethical spheres, as we see in the description of her relationship with an older lover named “Sarge”:

> Sarge and I in bed looking at a picture book and he doing the things in the book with me he thought he wanted to do and I doing the things I thought he wanted me to do and being pleased afterwards then suddenly knowing that the main pleasure I took was the same as doing well for my father: look at my report card, Daddy, straight A’s, A Plus in music. (94)
Here the ethical and the erotic are combined by their common dispassion—the sex Allison shares with Sarge is akin to a student’s attempt at getting good grades, and there is no evident mutual concern between the two of them. A less sexual though no more agapic love is the one between Will and his daughter Leslie. He complains in his long letter to Sutter that “There is no cheaper word” than love: “I can’t say tell her I ‘love’ her, because I don’t really know what ‘love’ means except as it applies to one’s feeling for children—and then it may only mean one’s sense of responsibility for their terrible vulnerability, which they never asked for” (196). This is not passion; it is duty, and while duty has many aspects to recommend it, it’s not what Kierkegaard and St. Paul demand. If Allison and Will are ever to move out of the ethical/aesthetic/erotic and into the religious/agapic, they must learn passion. They must become intimately connected with their lives. Thus, The Second Coming also marks Percy’s progress from a chronicler and mocker of modern erotic foibles to a positively Christian novelist; as Hardy notes, in his earlier novels, “he was consistently very good at representing amorous activity in its more genially laughable aspects . . . But before The Second Coming there is no successful representation of the love of a man and a woman that is at once solemn and full of delight” (188). Percy himself thus matures as a writer at the same time that Will Barrett and Allison Huger mature as characters.

But it will take Will and Allison a long time to come together in this way, and in the meantime both of them face a variety of obstacles. The most fearsome of these is Allison’s mother, Kitty Huger (née Vaught), who was, of course, Will’s paramour decades before. It is Kitty and her “grinning dentist-husband” (130-131) who have sent Allison into the mental institution, and it becomes clear over the course of the novel that they do not have her best interests in mind. Allison has been given a plot of land and an island off the coast of Georgia
by her late aunt, and the Hugers approach Will to develop a legal approach to taking her inheritance away from her. But Kitty wants more than legal advice. Stuck in an unhappy though materially successful marriage, she aggressively propositions Will throughout the novel—and he is tempted. If, in *The Last Gentleman*, Kitty pulled him toward the ethical sphere, in *The Second Coming*, she pulls him toward the aesthetic by drawing him toward an affair with her. The difference is chiefly Will’s: Kitty represented the aesthetic sphere even in *The Last Gentleman*, but he tried to force her into the ethical; here, however, having spent decades in the ethical sphere, he is no longer interested in marrying Kitty and settling down. He wants only sex from her, and Kitty—who once played the part of the demure coquette—is more than happy to oblige: “She was bolder, lustier, better-looking but almost brawny, a lady golfer, brown and freckle-shouldered. Her voice was deeper, a musical whiskey-mellowed country-club voice with a laugh he didn’t remember. When she sat, she straddled good-naturedly, opening her knees” (131). Her aggressive eroticism threatens to distract Will from the religious quest he develops midway through the novel—and he will periodically lose track of what he is doing by thinking about “Kitty’s ass” (153). But the erotic aestheticism that Kitty represents can only hurt Will; thus the similarity between her married surname, Huger, and the German Luger that he periodically presses against his temple.

Kitty’s re-emergence in Will’s life is symptomatic of his broader spiritual problems. In *The Last Gentleman*, of course, Will suffered from amnesia, going into periodic “fugue states” and losing track of everything. But in *The Second Coming*, several decades and millions of dollars later, he has the opposite affliction: “Today for some reason he remembered everything. Everything he saw became a sign of something else” (51). From the pure possibility of the fugue state, Will has moved into a terrifying semiotic *mise-en-abyme*. 
Likewise, while in *The Last Gentleman*, he was disconnected from the past and the present, in *The Second Coming*, Will is disconnected from the future, even the immediate future. Thus, he has trouble living his everyday life. Percy’s narrator tells us that Will has trouble even playing golf because “he had no idea whether he would hit the ball three feet or three hundred feet. Did it even matter?” (65). He is unable to plan, unable to hypothesize far enough into the future to differentiate between alternatives. He therefore must live in the present (when he is not stuck in the past). Living moment-to-moment is popularly considered a beneficial way to live—but Will’s loss of the future is a loss of teleology and meaning. To lose the future is to be disconnected from the apocalyptic:

Like prophecy, apocalypse sees time as significant because of God’s revelation. The Deity is known not primarily in the cycles of nature but in human events that move toward the achievement of a divine purpose. Percy has commented on such biblical teleology in discussing Will Barrett’s “post-Christian shakiness about historic time,” a disorientation that affects all of Percy’s unstable wanderers in the twentieth century. (Ciuba 6)

In *The Last Gentleman*, suggests Robert Coles, Will was “granted by the author the gift of periodic release from the ‘everydayness’ Binx Bolling fought so hard in *The Moviegoer*” (178). In other words, his amnesia protected him from all the things in everyday life that would distract him from his ultimately religious mission. Here, the opposite problem—total memory, even the conversion of anticipation into memory—suggests a complete absorption in ethical everydayness, that is, in Heideggerian *das Man*. He is unable to transcend the circumstances of his selfish, successful life, and he must find away around this road block if he is to enter the religious sphere.
Significantly, Allison Huger suffers from amnesia, just as Will did in *The Last Gentleman*. But her amnesia is different than his: For one thing, it is brought on by the electroconvulsive therapy she has undergone, rather than being a natural outgrowth of her spiritual condition, as Will’s was; for another thing, she has thought ahead and written herself a letter that explains her situation to herself. Thus, Allison’s amnesia is not as disruptive to her own spiritual quest as Will’s was to him. In fact, it may even help her, since her own journey in *The Second Coming* is primarily about freedom. When she is locked in the mental institution, she recognizes her problem as one of damaged volition. “One thing I must do,” she thinks, as her parents talk to her doctor, “get past the point where I need other people to make plans for me” (98). Having all her decisions made for her keeps her as a permanent child—she cannot even enter the ethical sphere, much less the religious, if she cannot make her own decisions and commitments.

She thus finds in her escape from the institution the first free action she has ever made; it is her recognition of her existential freedom, in fact, that allows her to escape the hospital in the first place. This recognition “could not be found,” as she says, “by asking somebody or by reading a book” (40). It must be lived: “What was my (your, our) discovery? That I could act. I was free to act. Is this something everyone knows or thinks he knows or, if he knows, knows in the wrong way? With gold-tinted corneas everything looks like gold but it’s fool’s gold” (40). It may be that she does not realize that she is free to act until she goes ahead and acts. Certainly this realization is transgressive or at least transcendent—it requires the sort of new vision that Percy brings to all his protagonists eventually. It is significant that, in the chapter after Allison escapes the hospital, Will sees a hawk flying through the sky:
Earlier he had seen a bird, undoubtedly some kind of hawk, fly across the fairway straight as an arrow and with astonishing swiftness, across a ridge covered by scarlet and gold trees, then fold its wings and drop like a stone into the woods. It reminded him of something but before he could think what it was, sparks flew forward at the corner of his eye. (47)

This incident with the hawk is meant to recall Will’s previous obsession (in *The Last Gentleman*) with a peregrine falcon in Central Park. The falcon serves as an emblem of Will’s displacement and homelessness, but this hawk, which, unlike Will, “was not of two minds” (48), suggests freedom and possibility instead—the sort that Allison has just achieved in her breakout.

The novel’s two protagonists, then, must overcome what are to some extent opposite problems in order to come together and enter the agapic religious sphere. Will, whose spiritual senses have been dulled by decades of blandly ethical (if erotic) living, must move beyond mere commitment to actual passion, the sort of direct connection with and obedience to God that Kierkegaard finds in the story of Abraham and Isaac. Allison, on the other hand, has just broken free of the controlling hands of her parents and doctors. She has just found out what actual freedom feels like, and she is not ready to cede it for any sort of commitment whatsoever. Instead, she wants to live alone in a greenhouse on the land her aunt left to her and make a life for herself by herself. If Will must move beyond mere commitment, Allison must learn what commitment looks like. They will learn their lessons, of course, from each other—and in forming an agapic relationship together, in learning to submit their fears and desires to each other, they will enter the religious sphere together, which is to say that, in
forming an agapic relationship with each other, they will each and both form an agapic relationship with God.

In keeping with orthodox Christian theology, it is a form of grace that allows them to do so—a grace that comes to Will, at least, in the midst of his affliction. Will meets Allison while playing golf; he slices his ball off the course and into her greenhouse. He has been slicing the ball for some time now, and Percy tells us that “He had come to see it as an emblem of his life, a small failure at living, a minor deceit, perhaps even a sin” (45). But grace descends to him in the midst of this “sin,” and his wild swing allows him to meet the woman with whom he will eventually ascend to the religious sphere. He is not ready to do so just yet, however, and so he approaches her the way only a man firmly planted in the ethical can: He offers her money for the window, even though she has no interest in it whatsoever; she cares only about the peace he has disturbed: “I was lying in my house in the sun reading that book. Then plink, tinkle, the glass breaks and this little ball rolls up and touches me. I felt concealed and revealed” (76). He approaches the situation as an ethicist; she approaches it as a resident of Aristophanes’s Cloud Cuckooland, so fried by electroconvulsive therapy that she is not part of any of Kierkegaard’s spheres. Nevertheless, the two have a strange sort of connection, albeit one that will take the rest of the novel to completely develop. Grace has entered their lives; it is now up to them to become aware of it and to accept it.

But for Will to do this, he must abandon the tired, worn-out ethical sphere that he inhabits. As in the previous novel, one of the manifestations of the ethical/erotic is the code of the Stoic Southern gentleman, a code which Will admits his family has held in the place of religious beliefs:
My people? Yes, they were Episcopalians but at heart they were members of the Augusta Legion and in the end at home not at St. John o’ the Woods but with the bleached bones of Centurion Marcus Flavinius on the desert of the old Empire. They were the Romans, the English, Angles, Saxons, Jutes—citizens of Rome in the old Empire. (Percy, *Second* 137)

The problem is that this Stoic/gentlemanly code cannot possibly maintain itself through the generations. Will’s great-grandfather, as we learned in *The Last Gentleman*, followed every line of the code exactly; he “knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought” (Percy, *Last* 9). He famously “met the Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan in a barber shop and invited him then and there to shoot it out in the street” (9). But from those ethical heights, the Barrett family was all downhill. Will’s grandfather “seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. He was brave but he gave much thought to the business of being brave” (9-10). And his father, of course, turned the code in on himself: “he said he didn’t care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and to be thought well of by other men. So living for him was a strain” (10). Ultimately, as we learn in *The Second Coming*, the Stoic code becomes the impetus for Will’s father’s suicide—and, in a development it takes us the entire novel to discover, his attempted murder of his son on a hunting trip decades earlier. Will realizes the full weight and decay of the code while talking to Kitty in his middle age:

“Where we came from [says Kitty], if you fell out with somebody, you didn’t smile at them and go around behind their backs. You called them out and had it out with them.”
That’s right. [Will thinks.] We call ourselves out and have it out with ourselves. Famous one-man shoot-outs. (Percy, *Second* 142)

As the generations wear on, the Stoic code maintains all of its power but loses its outward focus; thus, its incredible weight and importance becomes directed internally, leading to despair, self-condemnation, and suicide. The entire ethical/erotic sphere does the same—however much of an improvement the ethical is over the aesthetic, it can lead only to despair. The ethicist’s code collapses in on itself, and the erstwhile gentleman finds himself in an empty shell of a belief system. Suicide is therefore a rational plan, although only those fed up with the ethical can see the rationality of it: Those characters still satisfied with the ethical life think Will is insane.

Ideally, Christianity would provide Will with a way out of his ethical despair, but as I mentioned earlier, the Christianity in the world of this novel has completely morphed into a cold and passionless Christendom: an ethical religion divorced from any genuine connection to God. Jack Curl cares nothing for Will’s soul; he is interested only in his money, for the building of the consummately ethical project of a retirement community. Will sees him as “God’s own con man” but notes a lack of being at his core: “when you took a good look at him, this sweatyEpiscopal handyman, this godly greasy super, you saw in an instant that he was not quite there. Looking at him was like trying to focus on a blurred photograph” (125). He lacks the passionate, agapic connection with God that marks the religious sphere—just the sort of connection that one would expect from a clergyman. Thus, he is unwhole, both personally and occupationally. Will’s daughter, Leslie, meanwhile, is the sort of evangelical, “born again” Christian that was extremely popular in the late 1970s. She is also in the running for the novel’s least pleasant character, “a tall sallow handsome dissatisfied
nearsighted girl whose good looks were spoiled by a frown which had made a heavy inverted U in her brow as long as he could remember” (127). Leslie, strangely enough, uses the language of the Kierkegaardian religious sphere (as do many real-life evangelicals, knowingly or unknowingly); she demands of her father that he “Have a personal encounter” (135) with Jesus Christ. But her version of Christianity, utterly divorced from the institutional Church and from ritual, is also utterly divorced from self-sacrificing love, from agape. She uses her supposed encounter with Christ as a bludgeon for everyone else in her life, particularly her father. “It was impossible,” thinks Will, “to envision her personal encounter with Christ as other than a crisp business transaction” (160). Her belief system can clearly offer no hope to Will or to anyone else who is fed up with the ethical sphere.

And yet Will longs to believe. He seems to have married his late wife partially in order to have her Christianity transfer over to him—to “get Jesus Christ in the bargain” (156)—but he can conceive only of ethical approaches to belief, such as Pascal’s Wager: “Let us weight the gain and the loss in wagering that God is. Let us estimate these two chances. If you gain, you gain all; if you lose, you lose nothing. Wager, then, without hesitation that He is” (Pascal 81). This is a passionless, rational, and ethical form of belief, one that Will clung to for years, but it ends up producing nothing but apathy in him. From time to time, he sees something more in religious belief:

Yet once he saw [Leslie] at the end of a prayer meeting when everyone smiled and cried and hugged each other. She had removed her thick glasses. It made her look naked and vulnerable. She smiled and hugged and cried too. It struck a strange pang to his very heart to see her like that. For some reason, tears sprang to his eyes too. What to make of all this melting belief? Did he like her
better cool and distant behind her glasses? What was wrong, he asked himself, with opening up and loving everybody? What was wrong with their loving Jesus? I don’t know. Something. (160)

Eventually, the crumpling of the ethical sphere will produce in Will a dichotomy: He must either prove the existence of God beyond a shadow of a doubt, or else he must commit suicide, as his father did. Either God exists and there is something beyond the blandly ethical, or else the universe is meaningless and he cannot inhabit it any longer.

So he devises a plan: He will crawl into a cave on Lewis Peckham’s property and call God’s bluff. He will demand that God reveal Himself to him, or else he will starve himself to death in the cave. He writes a long letter to Sutter Vaught, explaining the plan and his motivation behind it—this letter is the thematic and philosophical centerpiece of the novel. The world that he inhabits is an insane one, he tells Sutter, made up of the Christian, who if “either half-assed, nominal, lukewarm, hypocritical, sinful, or, if fervent, generally offensive and fanatical” and of the atheist, who is “crazy because he finds himself born into a world of endless wonders, having no notion of how he got here, a world in which he eats, sleeps, shits, fucks, works, grows old, gets sick, and dies, and is quite content to have it so” (189). Neither belief nor unbelief—as they are practiced among the people whom Will knows—offer any kind of solution to the problem of living, and Will finds himself “surrounded by two classes of maniacs” (190), the Christians and the atheists. Will, in his attempt to tip God’s hand, wants to discover a third option, a tenable form of belief that will offer him a way out of the stagnation of his life, family history, and general philosophy.

This is an admirable goal, to be sure, but Will is wrongheaded in the way he approaches it. He should have read Pascal a little more closely; just before he formulates his
Wager, the philosopher asks, “Who then will blame Christians for not being able to give a reason for their belief, since they profess a religion for which they cannot give a reason? They declare, in expounding it to the world, that it is a foolishness, stultitiam; and then you complain that they do not prove it!” (80). If Pascal is right—and Percy the Christian existentialist almost certainly thinks that he is—then one cannot receive the sort of theological certainty that Will seeks. His language in describing his plan to Sutter is undeniably ethical/scientific. “My project is the first scientific experiment in history to settle once and for all the question of God’s existence,” he writes. “As things presently stand, there may be signs of his existence but they point both ways and are therefore ambiguous and prove nothing” (192). The results, as he sees it, whether God reveals Himself or not, will be positive: “Will it not be a relief to all of mankind to have this dreary question settled once and for all, proved or disproved? Imagine! We shall no longer have to listen to preachers haranguing unbelievers about God’s existence, and professors haranguing people about God’s non-existence and mythic structures?” (193). It is an elegant experiment, even impressive in some ways, but it ignores the role of faith in the religious life: If faith is, as the book of Hebrews has it, “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (1:11, NAS), then Will’s scientific attempt to bring God out of the shadows and into the light of human reason is an attack on faith. Such an experiment can reach only the conclusions that inform its premise—at least according to Søren Kierkegaard’s *Philosophical Fragments*:

[A]nyone who wants to demonstrate the existence of God (in any other sense than elucidating the God-concept and without the reservatio finalis that we have pointed out—that the existence itself emerges from the demonstration by a leap) proves something else instead, at times something that perhaps did not
even need demonstrating, and in any case never anything better. . . . If, at the moment he is supposed to begin the demonstration, it is not totally undecided whether the god exists or not, then, of course, he does not demonstrate it, and if that is the situation in the beginning, then he never does make a beginning.

(43-44)

To believe in God, in other words, is to not require proof of God’s existence—and to require proof of God’s existence is to presuppose that God does not exist. God can be approached only subjectively—that is, only through faith. The sort of objective-scientific-ethical demonstration that Will seeks to perform is at best useless, and it is probably more accurate to call it erotic in the sense of selfishness in the face of a divine Other. After all, “the one who has objective Christianity and nothing else is eo ipso a pagan” (Kierkegaard, Concluding 43). The god who would lie at the end of Will’s experiment is not the God of historic Christianity; it is a false god.

Kierkegaard, in fact, seems to anticipate Will’s little experiment in the Concluding Unscientific Postscript:

So, then, there is a man who wants to have faith; let the comedy begin. He wants to have faith, but he wants to assure himself with the aid of objective deliberation and approximation. What happens? With the aid of approximation, the absurd becomes something else; it becomes probable, it becomes more probable, it may become to a high degree and exceedingly probable. . . . Now he is all set to believe it, but, lo and behold, now it has indeed become impossible to believe it. (211)
To have God’s existence and God’s intervention in the world proved beyond a shadow of a
doubt is to eliminate all capacity for belief, since faith rests not in the sunlight into which
Will wishes to drag God but in the shadows that he finds so intolerable in the meantime. “Let
the comedy begin,” says Kierkegaard, suggesting that Will’s experiment will not end in the
tragedy one might expect from tracking an omnipotent Being that does not wish to be tracked—but in comedy, both in the sense of the humorous and of the happy ending.

The humor begins, as it usually does in Percy’s fiction, almost immediately—and the
joke is almost entirely on Will. He codes his experiment as a sort of quest, but he lacks the
wherewithal and courage to code himself as any sort of hero or pilgrim. Thus, as he descends
into the cave to sit and wait on God, he takes a supply of ethchlorvynol pills with him. These
pills, he hopes, will eliminate the boredom and anxiety of waiting in the cave. “There will be
plenty of time for asking God—that is called prayer!—between knockout drops,” he tells
himself. “I am no hero! to sit here for a month and starve without a drug is too much of a
bore to consider” (212). Will is apparently unaware that ethchlorvynol can cause users to
hallucinate: Even as he attempts to approach this religious problem scientifically, his fear of
boredom—an aesthetic fear if there ever was one—will keep him from receiving a scientific
answer. After all, what scientific journal would accept results from an observer on
hallucinogenic drugs? Still, Will’s attitude going into the cave is grandiose, even as the
novel’s third-person narrator is skeptical. “Unfortunately,” we are told, “things can go wrong
with an experiment most carefully designed by a sane scientific. A clear yes or no answer
may not be forthcoming, after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe” (213). Kierkegaard
and Pascal couldn’t have put it better: If there is a God worth believing in, that God will not
reveal Himself in the way that Will, the scientist of the ethical-erotic, demands; God will
appear only in ways that reserve room for doubt, because God can be approached only by faith, and faith always requires a dialectical doubt.

The “muddy maybe” with which God presumably answers Will’s demands is wordless. It comes, first, in the form of a toothache too powerful even for the ethchlorvynol, a toothache that completely distracts him from the question he means to have answered. With the toothache comes an intense bout of nausea—an affliction that Percy surely means to connect back to Sartre’s novel of the same name, in which Antoine Roquentin cannot achieve a satisfactory self-definition because of the suffocating presence of other people in the world. *The Second Coming* provides a solution, an antidote to Sartrean alienation, in the form of the agapic religious sphere; that Will succumbs to nausea in the cave primes the reader to expect Percy’s answers to Sartre’s questions. Percy’s biographer Jay Tolson notes Sartre’s importance to Percy’s thought, especially during the latter’s stay at Trudeau Sanitorium, during which he read the work of the existentialists: “Percy’s enthusiasm for Sartre may seem strange. After all, Sartre’s militant atheism could not have been more different from Percy’s convinced fideism. But Percy found the difference a tonic and a challenge” (238). *The Second Coming* is the result of this challenge, and Will’s nausea prompts us to view the novel this way. He awakens, some time after entering the cave, in so much pain that he cannot possibly continue his mission, and he tries to find his way out of the cave in the dark. After some time, he succeeds, but he does not exit the way he came in; instead, he falls headlong through a hole in the cave and into Allison’s greenhouse.

This fall is, in fact, the pivotal moment of the novel. Will has gone into the cave as an erotic, scientific ethicist, demanding that God reveal Himself to him—but Percy codes his
fall as a Kierkegaardian leap of faith, a teleological suspension of the ethical that will allow him to encounter God without understanding Him. It is a painful process, to be sure:

[T]his was a fall through air not vines or bushes, through air and color, brilliant greens and violet and vermilion and a blue unlike any sky, a free-fall headfirst with time enough to wonder if he might not be dead after all, what with this tacky heaven and the great black beast of the apocalypse roaring down at him, eyes red, jaws open and ravening, when, wood splintering first then exploding into kindling, he hit the table, then concrete, but not too hard, with one shoulder mostly but with the back of his head some. (226)

Percy’s language is such that it is occasionally unclear whether Will is falling or flying, sinking or rising, descending into hell or ascending into heaven. The scene suggests rebirth: The wood of the table, which has been set in its particular form for a long time, splinters into kindling, allowing it to serve a higher purpose; likewise, Will, who has been trapped in the erotic ethical sphere for decades, will soon be capable of entering the agapic religious. And that it is Allison’s greenhouse into which he falls suggests the important role she will play in his movement—and the role, just as important, that he will play in hers.

Will’s presence in the greenhouse—where he stays for several weeks—throws Allison’s life into a certain disarray. She has, after all, exercised complete control over her own existence since leaving the mental hospital, but complete self-control presupposes solitude, and it is precisely her solitude that is shattered by Will’s leap of faith. At first, she sees him as “a problem to be solved, like moving the stove” (233): that is, while he is unconscious, she is able to treat him as an object among objects; she is able to view him scientifically and objectively. Percy tells us that “She could do anything if nobody watched
her. But the moment a pair of eyes focused on her, she was a beetle stuck on a pin, arms and legs beating the air. There was no purchase. It was an impalement and a derailment” (233). His language here recalls both T.S. Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” (“I have known the eyes already, known them all— / The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase, / . . . I am formulated, sprawling on a pin, / . . . I am pinned and wriggling on the wall” [55-58]) and Sartre’s comments on the look of the Other. This look, according to Sartre, is the source of shame, since the Other inserts himself “between myself and me” (Being 302); thus, we come to know ourselves in new and horrible ways when in the presence of the Other:

[T]he Other has not only revealed to me what I was; he has established me in a new type of being which can support new qualifications. This being was not in me potentially before the appearance of the Other, for it could not have found any place in the For-itself . . . But this new being which appears for the other does not reside in the Other; I am responsible for it as is shown very well by the education system which consists in making children ashamed of what they are. (302-303)

It is this shame and horror that Sartre refers to in his famous pronouncement that “Hell is—other people!” (No Exit 45). The presence of the Other is always noxious (or nauseous) on some level because it forces a person to confront the sides of herself that she cannot see. But if the presence of the Other is always noxious, then genuine community is not possible.

If The Second Coming is a response, in some ways, to the challenge of Sartrean existentialism, then Allison must move from seeing Will’s conscious presence in the greenhouse as a problem to be solved or as a disruption of the life she has created for herself to seeing it as a potential route into what Gabriel Marcel—also responding to Sartre—calls
“intersubjectivity.” Intersubjectivity is precisely the condition that takes place when people stop seeing one another as problems to be solved or as servants to be summoned and start seeing them as *Thous*; it is “the realm of existence to which the preposition *with* properly applies, as it does not properly apply . . . to the purely objective world” (Marcel 180). Allison is certainly drawn toward this realm by her encounter with Will. Whereas her encounters with other men, especially her sexual and quasi-sexual encounters, leave her cold and disturbed, she is able to relate to Will, even before they speak to each other: “The man watched her from the bunk but she didn’t mind. His look was not controlling or impaling but soft and gray and going away” (242). And while he gives her a list of tasks to accomplish for him, he never treats her as a mere means to an end. “I don’t mind being in your debt,” he tells her. “You won’t mind my saying that I would do the same for you, and take pleasure in it, and furthermore can easily see our positions reversed” (244). Their relationship is one of reciprocity, the hallmark of an agapic, intersubjective I-Thou relationship.

Once two people make a genuine connection, says Marcel, “They are together in what we must call an elsewhere, an elsewhere, however, which has a mysteriously intimate character” (178). The greenhouse, an otherwise unexceptional place, becomes this *elsewhere* for Will and Allison. For the time that Will stays there after his fall, they are largely cut off from the rest of the world, engulfed in the “sort of call which is really like a kind of prayer” (179), as Marcel puts it. They lie in the greenhouse during a thunderstorm, for example, and “the lightning was almost continuous, ripping and cracking in the woods around them. Facets of glass flashed blue and white. It was like living inside a diamond” (264). The greenhouse,

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36 Besides her former relationship with “Sarge,” which Percy consistently paints in vaguely predatory terms, Allison is accosted by a hiker who puts his hand on her thigh, to no effect: “Mainly she was embarrassed for him” (240).
their shared elsewhere, is a place of great value and great protection, and the love they share there has a metaphysical aspect. Allison wonders: “What I need to know and think I know is, is loving you the secret, the be-all not end-all but starting point of my very life, or is it just one of the things creatures do like eating and drinking and therefore nothing special and therefore nothing to dream about? Is loving a filling of the four-o’clock gap or is it more?” (258). If love is merely a creaturely reaction to stimuli, then it can never be anything more than eros—but if it is indeed a great metaphysical secret, a starting place for a dive into the mysteries of the universe, then it must be agape.

Will spends a relatively short amount of time in the greenhouse with Allison, however—just over thirty pages in the Picador edition—and in the remaining hundred pages of the novel, he must learn how to reconcile his time in her intersubjective elsewhere with the life he must live in the outside world. His attempts at this reconciliation do not lead to a rousing success, to put it mildly. He has barely made it back to his Mercedes before he begins drinking and fixating on his traumatic childhood, “a badly flawed frazzled shaky American, as hollow-eyed as a Dachau survivor, still smelling of cave crud, in a perfect German machine” (268-269). He passes out in the car, under the weight of bourbon and his father’s suicide, and is awakened by Kitty, who has left her husband at last and would like to rekindle her sexual relationship with the man who, unbeknownst to her, has just begun one with her daughter.

Kitty’s sexual aggression is just one of the things that threaten to drag Will away from his new life of intersubjectivity. After he leaves her, he goes home, where he looks at his guns and collapses into another living memory of his childhood. Then he showers, shaves, and puts on a set of clothes his daughter has left for him—the uniform of the ethical
sphere: “They made him look like an agreeable youngish old man, like a young Dr. Marcus Welby. All he needed was a pipe. He found a new pipe on the dresser! And a Bible” (289). Leslie and her husband, as it turns out, have joined forces with Jack Curl, and the three of them “have some wonderful ideas for the love-and-faith community you and Jack are planning” (290). He also calls his friend Bertie, who informs him that his most recent birthday—which, significantly, was the last day he spent with Allie—makes him eligible for the Seniors golf tournament. Will is genuinely tempted: “Why not play golf with hale and ruddy Seniors for the next thirty years?” (292), he thinks. All of these things—the clothes Leslie picked out for him, Jack Curl’s community, the Seniors golf tournament—are calls back to the ethical sphere, and while Will is being called, he momentarily forgets that his sojourn in the ethical sphere ended with his holding a pistol to his head. He seems to have decided to resume his old erotic ethical life, but a violent form of grace—the sort one would expect in a Flannery O’Connor short story—intervenes. He accidentally drives in the wrong lane on the highway and is forced to swerve into a ditch. His head hits the windshield, but he is not knocked unconscious. Instead, he enters the sort of fugue state he suffered from decades before, a condition that kept him, in the past, from being bogged down in the details of everyday life. In short, his temporary amnesia keeps him from giving his money to Jack Curl and leaving for the Seniors tournament with Bertie; it keeps him from being subsumed in average everydayness and from eventually achieving total despair.

Unfortunately, the other effect of this amnesia is his surrender of his autonomy to the same ethical-erotic medical establishment that puts Allison through shock treatment. He boards a bus to Georgia but, remembering something of his quest, demands to get off. He wakes up in a hospital in Durham, North Carolina, strapped to a table. He is surrounded by
the various representatives of the ethical sphere: the doctors, of course, but also Jack Curl, Vance Battle, and Will’s daughter, Leslie, who chillingly tells him that “When the scientists get through with you, we want a piece of you” (301)—an image of dismemberment that suggests both scientific objectivity and an erotic fascination with the body. The scientists, meanwhile, have a simple, materialistic explanation for Will’s spiritual problems: a (fictional) disease called Hausmann’s Syndrome, the symptoms of which include “depression, fugues, certain delusions, sexual dysfunction alternating between impotence and satyriasis, hypertension, and what [Hausmann] called wahnswrinige Sehnsucht—I rather like that. It means inappropriate longing” (302). These symptoms have certainly characterized Will’s life, but the last in particular presents him with a choice: Was his experience with Allison the product of mere “inappropriate longing,” or was it a genuine incident of Marcellian intersubjectivity, something that cannot be approached either by the science of Dr. Hausmann or by the Christendom of Leslie and Jack Curl? Will does not have the strength to choose the latter option, and so he is put into a nursing home, a loss of freedom that comes as a relief to him: “Yes, he felt exactly as he felt when he was drafted into the army, a dazed content and a mild curiosity. His life was out of his hands” (305). He has succumbed ultimately to the erotic-ethical sphere, a sphere in which the individual pales in the face of the oppressive universal.

He spends several weeks living the life that his daughter and priest have planned for him: resting in the nursing home, watching Kojak on television, playing golf, taking his medicine, and not suffering pesky symptoms like longing for a better life. His peace is shattered when Kitty Huger enters the nursing home and assaults him, blaming him for Allison’s being “hopelessly regressed” (316), not speaking to anyone or even eating since he
left her. Kitty’s report on her daughter suggests that Allison, deprived of her intersubjective, agapic relationship with Will, is unable to function in the world at all. Kitty tells him that she and Dr. Duk—the novel’s clearest representative of the erotic-ethical sphere—are going to go that afternoon and take Allison away from the greenhouse forever. At first, he is not shaken by this news, but as the day wears on, he begins to feel that he is a pilgrim on a quest, one that he cannot even properly identify. He ends up, of course, at Allison’s greenhouse, and finds her both eating and talking. The two abandon the greenhouse for a Holiday Inn, where they resume their relationship and plan its future: They will marry, he will away give his inheritance from Marion—the fruits of his years in the ethical sphere—and retake the bar examination, working as a law clerk in their intersubjective paradise. They will each live for the other in a perfect image of *agape*:

The single truth is I love you. The several subtruths are: I love your dearest heart. I also love your dear ass, which is the loveliest in all of Carolina. I want your ass, it and no other, and you for the rest of my life, you and no other. I also love to see you by firelight. I will always come to see you at four o’clock every afternoon if only to sit with you if it does not please you to make love . . . because I love to sit by you and watch your eyes, which see everything exactly as it is. And to watch the line of your cheek. These are separate truths but are also subtruths of the single truth, I love you. (355)

God, it must be noted, does not directly enter into Will’s equation here, as one would expect God to in the work of a Catholic writer like Percy. And indeed, in the works of Kierkegaard, God and romance seem incompatible; Kierkegaard, after all, abandoned Regine Olsen in order to pursue his religious vocation. But Percy’s adoption, through Marcel’s
intersubjectivity of the category of *agape*, means that Will can love God and Allison at the same time, a possibility that does not even occur to him until he meets with Father Weatherbee in order to arrange his marriage. The priest makes a strange, unspoken spiritual demand of Will, one that draws him closer to the Divine, whom, we must remember, Will has attempted to approach only ethically. The novel ends with an altogether different sort of religious perspective:

Will Barrett thought about Allie in her greenhouse, her wide gray eyes, her lean muscled boy’s arms, her strong quick hands. His heart leapt with a secret joy. What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have. (360)

Allison is more than a woman, then, more even than Will’s spiritual counterpart in the intersubjectivity they share: She is a sign, an avenue of divine grace that spills out on Will through their relationship. The marriage between Will and Allison—which began in such bizarre circumstances and which in the end is incomprehensible to most people who know them—is Percy’s example of the perfect human relationship, one marked by *agape*. And because this agapic love is at its core a Christian love, their engagement in it means that they are brought close to God through it, even though they do not directly seek God in it. Will has at last found the object of the various quests he has engaged in since young adulthood: neither God nor Allie, but both God and Allie. To love a human being perfectly is to engage divine love.
Of the six writers I examine in this dissertation, Frederick Buechner is by a wide margin the least well-known. In part, this is because of a conscious decision he made after publishing his first two novels: He quit writing for a time in order to attend Union Theological Seminary in New York City and to become an ordained Presbyterian minister. The decision, at the time he made it, clearly filled him with foreboding, and his loved ones were not particularly happy about it either. In his memoir Now and Then, Buechner records the reaction of those around him:

People who admired me as a writer were by and large either horrified or incredulous. Even George Buttrick, whose extraordinary sermons had played such a crucial part in my turning to Christianity, said it would be a shame to lose a good novelist for a mediocre preacher. And deep inside myself the issue was far from permanently settled either. (12)

These reservations notwithstanding, Buechner’s tenure at Union saved, rather than destroyed, his writing career. Before he entered the seminary, he had published two books—A Long Day’s Dying (1950), a strong debut novel, and The Seasons’ Difference (1952), a very weak follow-up—and was suffering from writer’s block on a third. As he himself admits, “the only sacrifice that seemed to be required of me was to give up my career as a writer for a time,
and since that had not been going very well for me lately anyway, it was not a difficult sacrifice to make” (11). The experiences he had and the theology he learned at Union seem to have given him a topic, or at least a method of writing about the topic. *The Seasons’ Difference* is in some ways the prototype for most of the novels he would write after seminary, in that it deals with personal religious experience in a realistic urban/suburban environment, but that novel founders on its lack of philosophical gravity. It is as though Buechner feels what he wants to say about faith and the individual but cannot transfer that feeling logically to his pen. As one critic puts it, Buechner’s first two novels “appear . . . not as secular products, but rather as a way in fictional form to speak of the religious longing deep within him” (McCoy 59). But this unfulfilled longing makes those novels, especially *The Seasons’ Difference*, feel thematically incomplete.

Union Theological Seminary seems to have given Buechner a way to express the ideas in which he was interested. As he puts it, his ordination “gave me my subject and my passion, and if I hadn’t been ordained, who knows how things would have turned out. I would have been a writer, but I would have written the same kinds of books everybody else writes” (Brown 35). Likewise, Marjorie Casebier McCoy suggests that, after Buechner went through seminary, “the faith to which he gave indirect expression in his novels took on more definite theological precision without becoming any less artistic or fictional” (59). The content of his education thus becomes important for the interpretation of his novels. As he notes in *Now and Then*,

In terms of Union’s history, I couldn’t have gone there at a more auspicious time. It was in its golden age. Reinhold Niebuhr was there, and Paul Tillich was there, those two great luminaries. Martin Buber came to lecture, looking
like somebody out of a musical comedy with his stringy beard and a Yiddish accent so impenetrable that I found it impossible to understand more than a few words he said. (8)

He then mentions a series of lesser-known figures under whom he studied, but the three famous theologians he mentioned are interesting because they are all associated with theological existentialism. Certainly, Buber’s *I and Thou* is a seminal text for that philosophical tradition, and Tillich’s theological project largely consists of translating the historic Christian message into the rich language of existentialist philosophy. Niebuhr stands on the outskirts of the existentialist tradition but dips in more than once in awhile, and, according to one commentator, he “may be regarded as the major American neo-orthodox pioneer” (Smith 33)—neo-orthodoxy being the more conservative wing of Christian existentialism, with Tillich’s neo-liberalism on the other side. In terms of influence on Buechner, we can add to these three Karl Barth, whom Buechner mentions throughout his various memoirs and works of popular theology. It is safe to conclude, then, that his major theological and philosophical influences are existentialist in nature, and, as Marie-Hélène Davies notes, the influence of existentialism is a helpful one “for a man who refuses to be classified either as a theologian or as a thinker” (102). Union must have given Buechner a way to move his theology—at that time, of course, in the infant stage—into his fiction. He became the novelist he became under the influence of Tillich, Barth, Niebuhr, Buber, and the secular philosophers they influenced and were influenced by.

That influence is most clear in Buechner’s 1971 novel *Lion Country*, probably his most artistically successful work of fiction and one of the great forgotten comic novels of the last century. *Lion Country* is the first installment of what would be a tetralogy called The
Book of Bebb, which tells the story of the Italian-American New Yorker Antonio Parr, the half-charlatan Floridian preacher Leo Bebb, and the various other characters whose lives touch theirs. It is simultaneously a profoundly Christian novel and an appealingly dirty one, a combination I suspect Buechner implements in order to get past the natural roadblocks people have when reading a novel written by a minister. In his interview with W. Dale Brown, Buechner speaks of the difficulties he has had as a minister and a novelist trying to be heard by “the mostly secular literary establishment” and says that “when the Bebb books came out, I thought and my publishers thought that this could be a kind of breakthrough; they’re sort of racy and fun, and colorful things happen in them” (33-34). This turned out not to be the case, but Lion Country’s blend of religion and sexuality certainly stems from Buechner’s hope that such a blend might negate his being a minister for the masses of readers. Regardless of the book’s commercial failure—Buechner notes that “The same faithful group went out and bought them—five, six, seven, eight thousand people and that was it” (34)—the sense in which the novel is religious fiction is utterly inseparable from the sense in which it is a sexual farce—and both of these are inseparable from the sense in which it is an existentionalist object lesson.

The novel’s existentialism depends upon a few classifications found in Heidegger’s philosophy, with occasional nods toward Kierkegaard’s schema of the aesthetic, ethical, and religious spheres. I have touched on these concepts already, in my discussion of Bellow’s Dangling Man, and indeed, Buechner’s hero, Antonio Parr, has quite a bit in common with Bellow’s Joseph (and, for that matter, with Percy’s Will Barrett). The novel itself echoes Dangling Man less than Henderson the Rain King, with its exuberant and bawdy humor, its sense of spiritual quest through physical motion, and its generally upbeat and positive
ending—but both Buechner and Bellow utilize heroes who are stuck in a pattern of Heideggerian curiosity and stasis. Buechner, for his part, endows Antonio Parr with an almost unstoppable drive to change hobbies and interests every few months, a habit Antonio calls his “periods.” At the time we meet him at the beginning of the novel, he has just embarked on his latest hobby, postmodern sculpture:

Old ratchets, wheels, tongs, strappings, hasps, hinges and nails, whatever I could lay my hands on I would paint with Rustoleum black and then assemble in various interesting and I hoped entertaining ways. I resorted as little as possible to welding but used balance wherever I could or the natural capacity of one odd shape to fit somehow into or on top of or through another—entirely autobiographical, in other words—the idea being to leave the lover of my art (of me?) free to rearrange it with love in any artful way he chose. (5)

These art projects are but an emblem for his overall philosophy of life, for he has shifted from interest to interest as long as he can remember, never daring to settle on any one particular thing. But if “Permanence . . . was the enemy” (5), then Antonio is permanently homeless—and stuck, in a strange way, in that homelessness. Curiosity becomes stasis, and Antonio is forever “ready . . . to try out yet another of my periods” (5). His life, then, like his artwork, must never be fixed into place; it must always be capable of changing. But this is not the healthy change of the adaptable human being: It is a change built entirely on an unwillingness to be anything at all for very long. It is Buechner’s corollary to Bellow’s Joseph, refusing even to eat in the same restaurant two days in a row for fear of someone’s knowing him.

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I discuss these philosophical concepts in Chapter 2.
But whereas Joseph eases his anxiety by entering into a sexual relationship with Kitty Daumler, Antonio’s romantic life is defined by his celibacy, intimately bound up with his stasis/curiosity. It may well be that Antonio is a 34-year-old virgin—certainly he gives very little evidence to the contrary—but at the very least we can be sure that he has been abstinent if not quite chaste for a very long time. This abstinence locks him into his stasis, and his friend Ellie becomes the agent for that process:

I suppose I had been prudent long enough, prudent and earnest and in some miscellaneous sense faithful although welded to nothing: balanced precariously on top—in only the most remote and metaphorical sense, I assure you—of my poor Ellie and our seven-year understanding which promised to lead neither of us quickly anywhere. (6)

He is clearly in love with Ellie, though he cannot tell if she is in love with him and though he cannot for the life of him make the move required to turn their “understanding” into a romantic relationship. The only sexual pleasure Antonio can get from Ellie is surreptitious and fetishistic. For example, he lies on the floor and watches her foot pump her piano’s pedal, “a rather generous-sized foot in a heelless brocade slipper working up and down on the soft pedal while I lie there on the floor watching it at eye level” (6). His sexual life is wholly composed of frustration, and it locks him into his stasis/curiosity.

Besides—or perhaps because of—his stasis and curiosity, Antonio’s life is marked by alienation. His alienation is vaguely present from the beginning of the novel, but it really comes to the forefront in the third chapter, in which he takes a train to Armadillo, Florida. That he takes the train is important; he likes this method of travel because “Nobody can get at you in a train. You are in the world of but not of it as you flash by as free and impermanent
as the silver meteor for which my train that day was named” (20). Despite his echo of the popular injunction that Christians should be “in, not of, the world,” Antonio is not committing himself to holiness. Instead, he marks himself as a perpetual watcher, someone always on the outside of human society. Later, he will describe that same train in even more glowing terms:

You are neither here nor there, and you are neither this nor that. You are in between. I mean in between not just in a geographical sense, of course, but like an actor waiting in the wings for his cue to re-enter, or a disembodied spirit drifting between incarnations like an unconfirmed rumor. Who you were last and who you are going to be next hardly matter. The drifting is all. (23)

Antonio’s alienation is clearly part and parcel with his curiosity. He cannot connect with other human beings because of his desire to flit from interest to interest; one is reminded again of Bellow’s Joseph, avoiding restaurants he has already eaten at. Antonio refuses even to learn about the cities he passes; he “know[s] them only by name and have seen them only through the windows of year after year of trains” (23). The train—like his celibacy, like his Rustoleum-tinted art projects—is a method of avoiding human community. In this way, Antonio’s celibacy, curiosity, and stasis combine with his alienation to lock Antonio into himself.

Another emblem of Antonio’s alienation is his twin sister, Miriam, who is slowly and uncomfortably dying of myeloma as the novel opens. Miriam’s bones are nearly literally turning to dust—late in the novel, her arm snaps in two as she reaches for a cigarette in her hospital room—and as she suffers, her twin brother also suffers. “At school they were always asking us what it was like to be twins,” says Antonio. “Could we read each other’s minds,
and if one of us was hurt, did the other one feel the pain? . . . If one of us had myeloma, would the other one’s bones break? The answer, I was to learn, was yes and no” (9). Miriam’s physical death, in other words, parallels Antonio’s slow, crawling spiritual death; having a twin die is the closest thing one can get to dying, and Antonio knows that when Miriam, the other half of his embryo, dies, he will be alive but dead. Miriam seeks religious comfort, but Antonio is not particularly able to provide it for her. He can only joke at her metaphysical visions:

“The queerest thing is this feeling I have I’m going someplace,” she said,

“instead of just out, like a match. I should have been a better Catholic. Maybe I’d understand more. All last night I kept dreaming about doors opening.”

“Vaginas,” I said. “I thought everybody knew that.” (8)

His crass joke, obviously meant as a deferral of a more serious conversation, connects sex and religion in a way that will be very important for the rest of the novel, for, as I have mentioned, Antonio’s sexual problems are spiritual problems, and it is his curiosity, stasis, and alienation that keep him unhappily celibate.

The part of Antonio that he does not have access to—the sexual, animal, Dionysian part of himself—is best represented by his cat, Tom, as the details of his arrival in Antonio’s life demonstrate: “Ellie had given me a cat which she delivered to my door with a card around its neck on which, so help me God, she had written, that chaste and comprehensively innocent girl, that she hoped I could use a little pussy” (11). Antonio loves the cat and refuses to have him fixed, noting both that he is “a rather handsomely endowed tom” and that “One of us out of action at a time . . . was enough” (12). When the cat is injured and must be put on anaesthetic, he makes the connection between sexuality and religion clear. “He was drunk,”
Antonio says. “He was Dionysiac” (13). There is something holy and unsettling about Tom—in his feline body are united the two most important drives to which Antonio has little access: the sexual and the religious. The cat’s injury, furthermore, comes directly from the icon of his owner’s curiosity: his teetering sculptures: “I discovered that Tom had gotten a fish-hook in his eyelid. There were lots of fish-hooks lying around ready to dip into Rustoleum black for use with my scrap-iron creations, and by some series of gross miscalculations Tom had tangled with one of them” (12). It is clear, then, that Antonio’s curiosity directly injures the spiritual and sexual side of himself. It is equally clear that whatever sort of salvation he is to receive in this novel will have to save his sex life as much as his soul.

That salvation comes through an unlikely conduit—a fat Floridian minister named Leo Bebb, who may well be a charlatan and a sex criminal. Bebb runs the Church of Holy Love, Inc., which will ordain any man who writes in with “the suggested love offering plus a stamped, self-addressed envelope” (4). Before the action of the novel, Antonio has done just that, for reasons that are clearly rather beyond him, though he justified it to himself and to Ellie by saying that he plans on writing an exposé on Bebb and on Holy Love. Bebb clearly has a different plan; when he comes to New York City to meet his latest minister, he points out that his ministry is taken advantage of by all manner of criminals but that he does not particularly care: “When people say I’ve probably ordained all kinds of crooks and misfits—pimps, sodomites, blackmailers and pickpockets for all I know, you name it—I say judge not that ye be not judged. That’s God’s business. I am here to save souls. I am here to save your soul, Antonio Parr” (5). Indeed, while Antonio sets out to expose Bebb as a fraud, it ends up being Bebb who exposes Antonio—and in so doing, saves his soul.
The word *expose*, which Buechner uses throughout the novel, is appropriate, for Bebb is repeatedly connected with nudity and sex. Most strikingly, Ellie discovers that Bebb may or may not have gone to prison for exposing himself to a group of children on a Miami beach. As Antonio imagines it, Bebb “is smiling his climactic magician’s smile, his most effulgent and tight-hinged alley-oop of an H, as he reaches down with one hand to pull the rabbit out of the hat. Only it is not a rabbit that he pulls out and not a hat that he pulls it out of” (14). Ellie is, of course, irate when she learns of this event, and so is Antonio. But tellingly, his reaction is more ambivalent than hers:

I can’t help wondering what extraordinary events would have followed and how both our lives and, for all I know, life itself might have been unimaginably changed if I had at that exact point actually played Bebb there, stolen Bebb’s act. By a kind of sympathetic magic his crime had momentarily, in Ellie’s eyes, become my crime, and what if in full view of those same eyes I had, like Bebb, committed it, pulled my own rabbit out of my own hat? (15)

To do so, of course, would be to fight back against the forces of stasis and celibacy that have kept Antonio so alienated—and of course he cannot muster the nerve to perform this vanishing act in reverse. But the description of Bebb’s crime has brought the possibility to his mind, and from early on in the novel, Bebb’s sexual energy serves as a force pulling Antonio out of his bleak and isolated world.

In this, Bebb functions as a sort of earthy, Christian Orpheus, descending into the underworld in order to bring those he loves back. In the first scene of the novel, in fact, he stands “Halfway down the subway stairs” on Lexington Avenue, telling Antonio, “We’ll be seeing you” (3). This *we* refers not just to Bebb, not just to the Godhead he serves, but the
other characters he has pulled and is pulling up from hell. As Antonio recalls the image, he senses “them waiting for him in the shadows a dozen steps or so farther down. . . . Bebb descends to them like Orpheus with his lyre, and in the dark they reach out their hands to him while up there at the entrance to the underworld I also reach out my hands” (3). Bebb’s connection with God—which starts off hazy and ambiguous but becomes increasingly clearer as the novel progresses—gives him a sort of superhuman vitality, which he uses to pull those around him out of the stasis in which they live. This happens most evidently in Antonio’s case, of course—the transformation that gives the novel its plot—but it takes place in the lives of nearly everyone who encounters Bebb.

Bebb’s assistant, “Brownie,” is a good example. Brownie has dedicated his life to serving Bebb and his family. Officially, he is the dean of Gospel Faith College—the educational institute attached to the Church of Holy Love, Inc.—but he seems to function more as a personal servant to the Bebb family, cooking their meals, pouring their drinks, and generally doing what they tell him to do. Bebb comes very close to verbally abusing Brownie throughout the novel, but Brownie bears it with a broken smile:

Brownie’s smile—that low-hung rack of glittering teeth, that fiercely sincere set of horn-rimmed eyebrows, those pale eyes staring out at you. The smile of a man at a joke he has not quite heard the punch-line of? The smile of a man caught cheating at a pay toilet? The smile of a little man who has just been kicked in the crotch by a big man? It was all of these and none of them. (33)

Antonio, quite understandably, cannot fathom why Brownie accepts so much abuse at the hands of the Bebbs. But when he asks him, the answer shocks him: Decades earlier, in Knoxville, Tennessee, Bebb raised Brownie from the dead.
Brownie’s description of his resurrection is thematically important to the novel, because it combines Bebb’s religious vitality—his power to save souls on behalf of God—with his sexual energy. Brownie, the story goes, was walking to work after a thunderstorm, when he stepped into a puddle of water that had been electrified by a broken power line. Bystanders attempted to resuscitate him, and eventually a doctor showed up and pronounced Brownie dead. It was Brownie’s roommate, a barber named Billy, who wanted to try desperate measures; thus, Bebb, who was selling Bibles door-to-door at the time, was called in to see what he could do. After asking Billy if he believed “in the Holy Ghost, the lord and giver of life” (97), Bebb commanded Brownie’s lifeless body to get out of bed:

Billy said at first he didn’t think anything was going to happen. I just kept on laying there with my face about the same color as the pillow, but then Billy thought he saw something move. Now, because I am not telling this in mixed company, dear, but just to another member of the male sex, I do not mind telling you that what Billy said he first thought he saw move was my private parts—just a very faint movement down there the way it can happen sometimes for no reason and you don’t even notice it, but I was wearing only my underdrawers at the time so Billy noticed. Then he thought he saw some color returning to my face, and Mr. Bebb held his arm out, crooked at the elbow, and after a while I reached out and grabbed hold of it and pulled myself up to a sitting position. (98)

Clearly, this description is rich with thematic importance. Brownie had descended, one assumed, into the underworld, and Bebb, like Orpheus, dragged him out through the power of the Holy Spirit. But for the resurrection to occur, Brownie must be stripped almost naked,
and the first part of him to re-emerge from hell is his genitals. In some sense, therefore, Brownie’s resurrection is sexual in addition to being spiritual—to be brought to Christ, in the world of Leo Bebb, is the same as being brought back to life, which is the same as being awakened sexually.

Brownie’s sexual awakening, however, is by no means complete, a fact which frustrates Bebb and leads him to heap a tremendous amount of abuse on his assistant. It is heavily implied in *Lion Country* and its sequels—though no one ever states it outright—that Brownie is gay. His nickname, of course, suggests anal sex, and he tiptoes around his ambiguous prior relationship with Billy, his “roommate” in Knoxville; further, the specific insults that Bebb uses toward Brownie late in the novel are telling. “Now, you take a man like Brownie,” he says, “and you ask yourself where the Almighty went wrong. Well, I tell you it’s not the Almighty went wrong, it’s Brownie went wrong. The Almighty gave Brownie life, and Brownie never lived it. He just shoved it up his ass” (94). We have here another reference to anal sex, but Bebb makes it clear that Brownie’s homosexuality is a facet of his steadfast failure to come fully alive.\(^{38}\) Indeed, instead of living the life Bebb resurrected him for—instead of being a full sexual self, which would presumably involving his having sex with women—Brownie turns to homosexuality and masturbation. “What have you got against getting married, Brownie?” Bebb asks him, not entirely rhetorically. “The trouble with you is the only sex you get is in the bathtub” (94-95). Though Brownie has been brought back to life—though he has been, in Evangelical terms if not Evangelical

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\(^{38}\) Incidentally, Buechner himself does not seem to have any theological problem with homosexuality; he says in one of his non-fiction books that “To say that morally, spiritually, humanly, homosexuality is always bad seems as absurd as to say that in the same terms heterosexuality is always good, or the other way round. It is not the object of our sexuality that determines its value but the inner nature of our sexuality” (*Whistling* 68).
circumstances, “saved”—part of him still lives in hell; as Bebb puts it, “there’s people like Brownie that hold their own past against themselves till it gets where they can’t break loose out of it any more” (94). The death that still clings faintly to Brownie keeps him from fully living his life and from being a complete sexual being.

Buechner’s point here is that Bebb’s power to resurrect the dead is imperfect—no one whom he “saves” will be complete because the postlapsarian world does not allow for completion, let alone perfection. Bebb, like Orpheus, can pull his friends and family out of the jaws of death, but the underworld will always hold on, at least a little bit, and that Bebb’s method of resurrection is so distinctly sexual grounds the entire enterprise in the very fragile human body. And yet this connection to the fragility and messiness of the body is exactly what a person like Antonio—who has been so alienated by the modern world that he has retreated almost entirely into his intellect—needs most in the world.

Antonio’s salvation comes about primarily through three scenes, all of which involve some combination of Bebb, religion, and sex. The first comes the first night that Antonio spends in Armadillo. Bebb has been called away to Texas, he learns, to visit an oil baron who is interested in joining the Church of Holy Love, Inc. But Antonio has dinner with Brownie and Bebb’s wife, Lucille, and then heads back to his motel for the evening. But before he leaves, Brownie offers to loan him a book for the evening. His choice is Montague Rhodes James’s anthology *The Apocryphal New Testament*. His eye is caught by the titles of the apocryphal scriptures—including, tellingly, “The Book of the Cock” (47)—but in the end he decides on this book because of “a sober biographical note about Montague Rhodes James himself” that convinces him of the scholar’s “sane and orderly scrutiny” (47-48). Antonio, in other words, longs for stability. Given that his dominant personality trait up to this point has
been his Heideggerian curiosity, his steadfast refusal to submit himself to any kind of permanence, his longing for stability can only be a good thing: As will become clear by the events of the next few days, he is being prepared for his salvation.

Though he reads through several of the apocryphal scriptures in James’s anthology—he is particularly interested in “The Book of the Cock,” which deals with a rooster that spies on Judas on Maundy Thursday—but the majority of the chapter relays his encounter with the Gospel of Nicodemus’s second section, subtitled by James “The Descent Into Hell” (50). Antonio approaches this text as though it were an opera; in fact, he views it “as a kind of sequel to Don Giovanni with the Don, that galantuomo, turned Mr. Keen, Tracer of Lost Persons, as he is led down, down, down in the Commendatore’s stony grip” (51). His choice of Don Giovanni is, of course, significant. For one thing, it connects Christ’s harrowing of hell with one of history’s great philanderers; for another, it tips the reader off that Lion Country is going to be concerned with Kierkegaard’s aesthetic and ethical spheres. Don Giovanni, after all, is Kierkegaard’s ultimate representation of the aesthetic sphere; it is the work of art that best conveys “the spirit of sensuality” (Kierkegaard 69). As such, Don Giovanni is at once profoundly Christian and profoundly anti-Christian:

As a principle, a power, a system in itself, sensuality was first posited with Christianity, and to that extent Christianity has introduced sensuality to the world. However, if one wishes properly to understand the proposition that Christianity has introduced sensuality to the world, it must be understood identically with its opposite, that it is Christianity that has chased sensuality out, kept it out of the world. (72)
As the representation of pure sensuality, then, *Don Giovanni* owes its existence to Christianity—and yet it represents everything that Christianity wishes to remove from the world. Buechner, then, takes the complicated relationship between Christianity and *Don Giovanni* (and the sensuality that Kierkegaard says it represents) and further complicates it. For if Christ’s harrowing of hell is the “sequel” to *Don Giovanni*—if the great lover of the flesh becomes the Great Lover of the Spirit—there is suddenly very little difference between sex and salvation, between *eros* and *agape*, between orgasm and religious ecstasy.³⁹

Indeed, Buechner’s rendering of the harrowing of hell is strikingly corporeal. The “opera” opens with the Hebrew patriarchs languishing in the Inferno, which appears to be somewhere between the vision of Hades one finds in the *Odyssey* or the *Aeneid* (a realm not so much of torture but of overwhelming sadness and boredom) and the vision typically presented by Christian theologians of a place “where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched” (Mark 9:46, KJV). We do not see any active torture, and yet it is clear that the dead suffer bodily as well as spiritually. Adam, for example, asks his son Seth to “Entreat Michael to give thee of the oil of the tree of mercy that thou mayest anoint thy father Adam for the pain of his body” (53). Seth returns without the balm but with good news: the Son of God will come to hell to bring them all to the tree of mercy in Paradise. This is the promise not merely of spiritual rejuvenation but of full bodily resurrection: Adam’s body suffers in hell, and it is his body that will recover once he leaves. Likewise, when Satan and Hell (who “is not only a place” in this rendering of the story but “also a person” [54]) discuss Christ’s imminent arrival, they discuss events in His ministry that involved the physical body: “Jesus

³⁹ It is important to note that the connection between Christ and Don Giovanni is Buechner’s invention, not a part of Rhodes’s translation of *The Gospel of Nicodemus*; this point is left ambiguous in the novel, however, as if to suggest that Antonio cannot tell what he brings to this story and what he finds in it.
is on his way to Hell—there is no doubt about that—but they will make mincemeat of him once he gets there. But how can they be sure of that, Hell asks. That’s easy, Satan says. He is afraid of death. Didn’t he sweat blood in the garden and ask that the cup be taken from him?” (54). Hell, ever fearful, responds with a short aria called “Remember Lazarus” in which he discusses how a man was “snatched . . . up out of Hell’s entrails” (54). Satan, that is, suggests that Christ will be easily defeated because of the weaknesses of His physical body, and Hell responds that Christ has total control over the physical world in addition to the spiritual one. The body is not a weak spot but a creation of God, and salvation will come to it as surely as it comes to the spirit.

Buechner describes the arrival of Christ in striking physical detail—far more detail, it must be said, than the Bible itself. The Don Giovanni Christ of Lion Country is “magnificently dressed in the height of eighteenth-century fashion with a cloak that flares out at his heels as he strides in and a plume in his hat and silver buckles on his shoes. He wears a grandee’s little earring in one ear and carries a rapier in his hand” (55). He quickly dispatches Satan, whom Hell drags off to torture for all eternity, and then He says something rather extraordinary: “Come unto me, all ye my saints which bear mine image and likeness!” (56). Christ is only echoing the words of Genesis 1:26 here—“And God said, Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”—but this reminder of the Imago Dei, coming on the heels of Buechner’s description of Christ as Don Giovanni suggests that men and women are also called to be lovers of the flesh along with lovers of the spirit. Buechner thus manages to suggest a sensual Christ without having Christ do anything blatantly sensual—and he also suggests sensuality as at least a partial cure to spiritual ailments. It is no wonder that this story calms Antonio down and allows him to sleep peacefully in his motel bed.
The next morning, Antonio wakes up to find Bebb standing at the foot of his bed. It is late in the morning, Bebb explains, and “I was afraid you might be dead” (56). In a sense, of course, Antonio has been dead for years, the product of his curiosity, stasis, and celibacy—and it is Bebb who will bring him back to life, just as he resurrected Brownie years earlier. Buechner reinforces Bebb’s combination of religious redemption and sexual energy by having this encounter take place while Antonio is in the nude. “Because of my disturbingly realistic dream on the train,” he explains to the reader, “I had rinsed out my pajamas in the shower the night before and gone to bed without them” (57). Thus, while he is naked for explicitly if tangentially sexual reasons, reasons that get bound up with the Don Giovanni harrowing of hell from the night before and connected to Bebb:

When I look back on our second historic meeting as it took place in Armadillo, what I see is Bebb, the International President, standing there in his sober Mother Church suit and myself half crouching on the bed as naked as the day my poor mother bore me. We are reaching out over the covers toward each other, and our two hands are just touching. It is a picture which belongs in the Sistine Chapel. (57)

This last sentence is, perhaps, a little too on-the-nose, but Buechner’s point is clear: As he has been from the novel’s first scene, Bebb is connected with retrieving people from the underworld and with sexuality, and Antonio, more than ever before, stands ready to be retrieved and initiated.

The second important scene for Antonio’s redemption is the scene that gives the novel its title. Instead of getting down to any immediately ecclesiological work, Bebb decides to take Antonio to an outdoor drive-through safari. Joining them for the afternoon is
Bebb’s adopted daughter, Sharon, with whom Antonio is immediately taken. The safari is rich with symbolic importance for the novel. Antonio, for example, is profoundly moved when Bebb makes an extemporaneous speech about the need of lions to be free. Bebb loves Lion Country Safari because

There’s no bars in this place. None of your little zoo cages with the poor jungle creatures wasting their lives away pacing back and forth, back and forth, on that cement floor until their claws are all wore off nearly—people throwing them peanuts and making crazy faces and poking at them with balloon sticks. They’re free as the breeze in this place, Antonio. Go anywhere. Do anything. If they get a notion they want to take a leak on somebody’s car, they just go straight ahead and take it. (65)

Antonio, understandably, guiltily thinks of his cat, Tom, who is in a cage in a New York kennel at the moment, but the reader more likely thinks of Antonio himself, whose stasis and curiosity keep him locked up in a cage, always moving but getting nowhere, and wearing his claws down on the cement floor. Earlier in the novel, Tom stood in for the sexual energy that Antonio constantly suppresses—but he is now at a place where that energy is allowed to flow freely. Indeed, the safari becomes a spiritual experience for him. While nothing really impresses him at first, “Little by little it began to get to me that they were lions and that they were here and that we were here too” (66). In other words, he begins to realize that he exists on the same plane as these living symbols of sexuality and vitality; he begins to come out of his own cage, to come alive, to be a complete person.

This is not to say that Antonio has arrived yet. His life is still, at least to some extent, controlled by fear. Buechner shows this quite clearly when Bebb instructs him to get out of
the car and take a picture of the lions. He is quite reasonably hesitant to do so, and yet he senses that it is important that he does. “The thought suddenly occurred to me,” he says, “that maybe this was some kind of initiation or ritual test. I remembered reading somewhere that before you got to be a full Druid, you had to lie naked in a frozen stream for a night or two” (67). That is, he sees getting out of the car as a religious rite of passage—but Sharon’s presence adds a sexual component to the ritual: “I felt her eyes upon me. If my Druidship was at stake, I felt sure, so was my manhood” (67). It is Bebb, of course, who ends up getting out of the car and taking the picture. And what a picture:

With an almost mythical smile, I thought, as though answering voices from on high, the most majestic of the male lions sauntered over to one of the females and mounted her. There didn’t seem to be any passion about it as far as I could tell, but on the other hand it didn’t seem perfunctory either—rather like two old friends seeking refreshment in each other’s company toward the middle of a hot afternoon. Bebb swung my camera around and, as nearly as I could tell, got his shot in before they uncoupled. (68)

In this passage, Buechner manages to tie together Antonio’s deepest problems—his inability to face his fears and act, his imprisonment in the cell of his stasis and curiosity—with Bebb’s solution to them. The lions mate “as though answering voices from on high,” as if Bebb arranged the whole thing to get a good picture for Antonio, as if God Himself had a vested interest in the copulation of two great cats. Further, while their sex is thoroughly unromantic—and Antonio’s visions of sex thus far in the novel, be they with Ellie or with the girl on the train, have been strikingly romanticized—it is loving, somehow. This scene is exactly the sort of thing that Antonio needs to see, and it comes as no surprise, in the next
scene, that he suddenly opens up to Bebb and Sharon and shatters, at least to some extent, the “false pretenses” (69) under which he has come to Florida. The two acts of exposure in the scene with the lions—Bebb’s exposing himself to the danger of wild animals and the lions’ exposing their sex lives to Antonio’s camera—have driven Antonio to an act of his own figurative exposure.

The result is that Antonio is accepted, more or less, as a member of the Bebb family. Buechner demonstrates this point by having him choke on a hamburger at the Lion Country food court, the result of which is “that a half-chewed crumb of it went shooting out of my mouth and hit Sharon somewhere in the neighborhood of the eye” (69). Sharon is nonplussed; Antonio tells us both that this is the moment he realized “that, despite, my failure at the lion test, Sharon accepted me as a member of the human race anyway” (69) and that she believed that “all in all, like Bebb’s lion taking their pleasure by the water hole, it wasn’t a bad idea for a hot afternoon with nothing much else to do. . . . That crumb, you might say, was the first real bond between us” (69-70). By the time the trio gets back to Armadillo, Antonio, like Sharon, is calling Bebb “Bip”—a nickname that demonstrates that he has moved far past any desire he had to expose Bebb as a fraud.

The third important scene demonstrates that it is himself that Antonio is ultimately interested in exposing. Upon returning to Armadillo, Bebb asks him to take Sharon out for dinner and gives him some money to pay for it. But before they can leave, Sharon asks if she can use the shower in Antonio’s hotel room to “wash the lion off” (74). When she comes out of the bathroom, something extraordinary happens, something Antonio believes his entire life has been leading up to:
I suppose if I tried I could remember everything, the whole sequence of what followed from the time of Sharon’s question and my answer up to the time we finally left that room a good while later. How one thing led to another, as the saying goes,. Bebb’s ad, Tom’s eye, the dream on the train, “The Book of the Cock,” the lion trying to get rid of its itch against the dead tree, and now me on my unmade bed with the Dewar’s on the windowsill and the sound of the water splashing and all that came after. (75)

These images draw together Antonio’s stasis in New York, the virginity he has not been able to shed, the Christianity he encounters at the Church of Holy Love, Inc., and the raw sexual power of the lions. When Antonio and Sharon do make love, it is he who initiates it—she comes out of the bathroom wearing only a towel, and he “reached up with one hand and touched the place just below her shoulder where she had the towel tucked in on itself” (75), pulling it off half-accidentally and half-purposefully. Buechner leaves the actual sex to the reader’s imagination, but Antonio dances around it with intensely religious language: “If I forget thee, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth” (75). It is clear that his sex life with Sharon constitutes a fundamentally religious experience for Antonio, and the reader is reminded of the first page of the novel, in which he praises her as “that willowy carnivore, that sleepy-limbed huntress, that hierodule” (3). If Bebb, earlier that day, was Christ, harrowing hell and relieving Antonio’s suffering and alienation, then Sharon has become the means of that grace. Indeed, Bebb seems to have planned this entire encounter: When Antonio drops Sharon off later that night, he gives her the bill Bebb had given him to pay for dinner. “Sharon tilted it into the moonlight to see what it was,” he reports. “ ‘Five bucks,’ she said. ‘I guess he didn’t expect
us to eat much’ ” (79). Sharon has been part of Bebb’s plan for saving Antonio’s soul, possibly from the beginning.

In 1969, a time at which he must have been conceiving and writing *Lion Country*, Buechner was invited to give the Noble Lectures at Harvard. These lectures were later published as *The Alphabet of Grace*, which remains today one of his most popular and influential works of popular theology. In this book, Buechner explores the degree to which God speaks through the everydayness of our humdrum lives. In one chapter of the book, Buechner concerns himself with “sibilants—sounds that can’t be shouted but only whispered”:

> I believe that in sibilants life is trying to tell us something. The trees, ghosts, dreams, faces, the waking up and eating and working of life, are trying to tell us something, to take us somewhere. If this is above all a Christ-making universe, then the place where we are being taken is the place where the silk purse is finally made out of the sow’s ear. (50)

Buechner’s phraseology here—“a Christ-making universe”—gets at the heart of the way he treats Bebb and Antonio in *Lion Country*.

40 If Buechner’s fifty years of work could be said to have one single theme, it is undoubtedly this one—thus a popular devotional collection of excerpts was titled *Listening to Your Life: Daily Meditations with Frederick Buechner* (HarperOne, 1992). *The Alphabet of Grace* sounds this note particularly loudly and clearly.

41 The phrase “Christ-making universe” reappears in Buechner’s autobiography *Now and Then*, where he glosses Ephesians 4:13 (“until we all attain to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ”) as “a way of pointing out that it is above all else a Christ-making universe” (53).
and alienation, and his duty, too, will be to pull others from that same abyss, to make them like Christ as he has been made like Christ. Thus, immediately after his “salvation”—immediately after he breaks his stasis and his celibacy by going to bed with Sharon—life calls him back to New York City, the site of his alienation.

His sister, Miriam, is dying, as she has been dying from the first pages of the book, and she needs him to bring her two sons to see her in her hospital room. This responsibility would normally fall to her ex-husband, Charlie, but he is quite clearly not spiritually up to the task; as Miriam puts it, “I’m sure he had to take about six phenobarbitals to steel himself for the call” (79). Charlie, as it turns out, is even more alienated than Antonio: If the latter’s central image in the first half of the novel is celibacy, the former’s is sleep. Miriam explains angrily that Charlie spends his entire life in bed:

Do you know what I mean when I say he sleeps most of the time? I mean he often doesn’t get up till noon, and when he naps, he doesn’t just nap when it’s raining or something but right in the middle of a sunny afternoon, for God’s sake, with the kids and me roaming around in bathing suits right under his window. Sleep’s his escape from life, Tono. Someday they’ll have to come wake him up and tell him he’s dead. (22)

Indeed, when Antonio flies back to New York to pick up his nephews from Charlie, he notes that “his faded blue eyes took on a faraway look as though he was remembering some old script he had worked on for educational TV” (84). Charlie is never quite all there, and that semi-absence transfers over to his two nephews, Chris and Tony, as well. Early in the novel, Antonio remarks that “in the original sense of the term at least there was something fairy-like about them—something transparent and insubstantial, a spidery quietness that seemed more
than just shyness” (21). Chris in particular is “a shadow of the shadow who was his father,” but Tony, too, “looked sleepy” when Antonio meets them at the Biltmore (83).

That Antonio temporarily abandons his trip to Florida in order to visit Miriam with his nephews suggests a major breakthrough in his relationship with the world around him. True to his curiosity and alienation, at the beginning of the novel he had done his best to avoid responsibility. When his sister hinted, early on, that she would like Antonio to adopt her children after her death—“I worry like hell about those kids,” she tells him (21)—he remains noncommittal. To adopt Chris and Tony, after all, would be a major infringement on his freedom to change “periods” as often as he wants to. It would mean “permanence, for one thing—the pieces no longer balanced one on top of the other in various interchangeable ways. And it suggested marriage—if I were to make a home for them, the least I could do would be to provide them with a mother” (22). At that point, permanence was still very much Antonio’s enemy, and the sexuality implied in finding the boys a mother was also out of the question. But now, just a few weeks later—after Florida, after Lion Country, after Sharon, and, above all, after Bebb—he barely hesitates to fly back to New York at Miriam’s request. He is prepared now to do something for someone else, to sacrifice himself, even to risk permanence to grant his sister what well may be her dying wish.

What is more, he is willing to confront Charlie about his cowardice and escapism. Charlie does not want to see his ex-wife, not because of the bad blood between them, but because seeing her die would be too painful for him. “I’ll tell you how it is with me, Tono,” he says. “I’d like to go up there with you in many ways, but in another way I’d rather not.

42 It is, of course, significant that Antonio flies back to see his sister. Besides the obvious practical matters—Antonio must get back North as quickly as possible—trains have been such a symbol of stasis and alienation that it would be highly inappropriate for him to travel back to New York by rail.
You see, I prefer to remember her the way she was” (84). Charlie’s excuse is reasonable, and his language echoes that used by many friends and relatives of dying people, but Antonio will have none of it: “That’s great for you, Charlie. You’ll be able to keep your happy memories intact that way. But suppose everybody decided the same thing? Then everybody would stay away so they could remember her the way she was, and she would die all alone there the way she is” (84). Antonio, in confronting his ex-brother-in-law, has demonstrated that his time in Florida has begun to draw him outside of himself—not only does he risk an unpleasant conversation with Charlie, but his language makes it clear that he confronts him wholly out of concern for his sister. This selfless act would not have been possible at the beginning of the novel, but Antonio’s encounter with God through Bebb and Sharon is turning him into a Christian—or, as the term originally meant, a “little Christ.” With that in mind, it is not surprising that the confrontation helps Charlie, too; after Antonio tells him that Miriam “told me . . . she thought she could take it all right, but she didn’t think you could,” he notes that “It was the first time since we had started talking that he looked fully awake” (84). As Bebb pulled Antonio out of the underworld, so Antonio tries to pull Charlie out. Charlie is thus able to be honest with himself about his motives: “The truth of it is she’s right, Tono. I’d be scared to death to go” (84). He is not brought to the sort of salvation that Antonio finds in Armadillo, but he at least stops hiding, however momentarily.

Briefly alone with his twin sister a few hours later, Antonio cannot bring himself to tell her about his adventures in Florida—while he does not say so directly, it is clear that doing so would be cruel to a person who will never again leave her hospital room—but he does manage to tell her, significantly, about Christ’s harrowing of hell, which consistently serves as a symbol of his trip. Miriam is as moved as anyone could expect her to be in her
condition: “Bene, bene, Antonio” (88), she says, and when her children come back to the hospital room a few minutes later, she gives them a final benediction in a voice that “sounded quite angry . . . and in some ways more like herself than I’d heard her for a long time. ‘Now you stay awake, Tony,’ she said. ‘You just keep your eyes open and stay awake’” (89). What she is telling him is not to turn into his father, not to become a shadow of a man who lets the world fly past him. She does not know it, but a better benediction would be, “Be like the man your uncle is today rather than the man he was last week”; Antonio, after all, is awake, possibly for the first time in his life, and he is ready to wake other people up, as well.

When Antonio flies back to Armadillo, he finds the Church of Holy Love, Inc., in an uproar. For most of the length of the novel, Bebb has been courting a Texas oilman named Herman Redpath, who has decided that he wants Bebb to ordain him and who will arrive in Florida with his enormous entourage at any moment. Redpath is one of Buechner’s strangest and most memorable creations. Bebb speaks of him in absolutely glowing terms. “The wealth of that man is beyond the dreams of avarice,” he says, “and he made every nickel of it himself. He is a fine Indian Christian and one of nature’s gentlemen” (91). He clearly sees in Redpath the opportunity to take the Church of Holy Love, Inc., to an entirely new level: “I see Holy Love swelling like a mighty stream. I see Gospel Faith expanding its activities. . . . And at the end of it all, I see an old man named Bebb living out his declining years in peace” (92). Bebb admits, much to his credit, that he is tempted by Redpath’s immense wealth—and yet by this point in the novel, after hearing how he has brought Brownie back to life and after seeing him figuratively bring Antonio out of the grave, the reader is inclined to give Bebb the benefit of the doubt. And yet when Redpath does show up, he is not as Bebb described him.
Rather than a “fine Indian Christian,” we encounter Redpath as a foulmouthed, vulgar, borderline-blasphemous fast-talker:

You take your Ezekials and your Jeremiah and your Saint Paul the Apostle all your kiss-my-ass holy joes Leo he says they were always seeing God places he was always popping out at them got up like a wheel with eyes for spokes or some damn thing a blinding light far as I can see they must have spent their whole life shitting in their pants I know I would. (106)

Furthermore, Redpath’s ordination goes as disastrously as anyone could possibly fear it would. Antonio and Sharon miss it because they are having sex upstairs in her bedroom, but eventually they are able to piece together the details. The church was packed with people, both with members of Herman Redpath’s entourage and with “a reporter from Fort Lauderdale, some hard-shell Baptists who were there primarily for the music, and a handful of passers-by who had simply wandered in, attracted by the crowd” (110). They sang some hymns and said some prayers, and then Brownie preached a sermon on Matthew 18:6: “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believeth in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea” (KJV). The verse is sadly appropriate, for next, in front of a crowd that included many children, Bebb, wearing a robe, prayed, all the time raising his arms:

Virtually everyone agrees that it was at this moment rather than earlier that it first became apparently that during all the time he had been raising his arms, his white robe had been coming farther and farther apart up the middle until here, as his arms reached their zenith, it could be clearly seen that the veil of the Temple had been rent asunder and the Holy of Holies exposed. It was here
that the terrible mystery was made manifest, the rabbit pulled white and squirming out of the magician’s darkness. (111-112)

As it has been for the entire novel, Buechner’s language regarding Bebb’s sex organ is intensely religious, and he describes the entire event as a sort of apocalypse or revelation: While the world cannot understand what has happened—and indeed, the entire crowd almost instantly disperses—Bebb has revealed God as he revealed himself. Those that have “eyes to see,” Buechner implies, will not be horrified by the revelation; those that do not will leave and call the authorities. In this sense, the ordination is not the abject catastrophe it originally seems. God has in some sense shown up in Bebb’s horrible revelation, and Antonio, who was disgusted by the thought of such a revelation only a week earlier, finally understands.

Bebb himself is unwilling to call the accident a mere accident. When Sharon asks him why he exposed himself, he can answer only that “Time comes a man wants to be known for what he is, the bad with the good of him, the weakness with the strength” (113). He even turns the incident into a lesson for his daughter:

It’s like one day you just all of a sudden get wore out playing it safe your whole life and you take a crazy chance. You go and do something they’ll see all there is to see and understand it all and wipe all the tears away out of your eyes and out of your life which maybe they will and maybe they won’t, but if you play it safe all your life through, you end up like Brownie that’s mostly dead, poor soul, safe and dead both. (114)
Sharon can certainly understand this impulse, as can Antonio; it is, after all, the impulse that has brought them together and pulled Antonio, at least, out of hell.\(^{43}\)

Herman Redpath, for all his bluster and vulgarity, would apparently agree. As it turns out, after Bebb flees Armadillo and Florida law enforcement, he heads to Redpath’s enormous Texas ranch. Antonio eventually finds him, and when he flies to Texas, Redpath approaches him and explains why he has treated Bebb so kindly: “That sonofabitch Bebb I don’t give a fart what he is or what he did time for all I know is soon as we got back here that same day after he pulled Jesus knows what-all kind of a crazy trick damn if the thing didn’t start working” (124). The “thing” to which Redpath refers is apparently his penis. He has been impotent for a number of years, and the bizarre events of his ordination ceremony have somehow given his sex life back to him. Or, as he himself puts it, “I got the life in me again thanks to that bastard” (124). Thus, he protects Bebb (he will eventually leave him a sizeable inheritance), suggesting that, underneath his crass, profane exterior, he may well be the “fine Indian Christian” Bebb always saw him as. Having Bebb in his life has drawn him out of the darkness and into a sexual/spiritual salvation. This is, of course, the same phenomenon we have observed all along in Antonio: Bebb has seen in him the life-giving minister of the Gospel that he would one day be, rather than the static, virginal atheist that he was, and he has used sex to bring him into a new life.

Buechner thus joins the Walker Percy of *The Second Coming* in affirming that sex—properly viewed and properly applied—can be sacramental, an avenue of grace. Sex, in these novels, becomes a new sort of religious expression, one removed, perhaps, from the historic

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\(^{43}\) While I suspect Sharon, too, has been pulled out of the underworld through her relationship with Antonio, we get only his side of the story in this novel and can therefore say for sure only that he has been rescued.
views of the Church, but one appropriate for the post-Holocaust age, with its intense skepticism of traditional religious forms. Buechner and Percy—joining in this sense with Updike, O’Connor, Salinger, and Bellow—use their fiction to demonstrate a new orientation of humanity toward God and a new expression of that orientation.
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