

**Recovering the Creature:**  
**Storytelling and Existential Despair in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer***

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“The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy.”

Steven Weinberg,

epilogue to *The First Three Minutes*

“What follows is a work of the imagination.”

Walker Percy,

preface to *The Moviegoer*

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## Introduction

In 1954, seven years before his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, was published and won the National Book Award, Walker Percy penned a stunning essay on modern man's experience of alienation. The topic itself was hardly novel at the time. A cottage industry of cultural commentators was bemoaning the conformity and false optimism of the era, suggesting that beneath it lay a deep discontent. Holden Caulfield had been rallying angst-ridden teens against the phonies for three years. And the existentialists Camus and Sartre had long before argued that, worse than simply concealing some discontent, this rampant phoniness was really a means of denying the truth that life is absurd and meaningless. Against all these voices, it hardly seemed to merit special attention when one more chimed in to affirm that the modern condition was one of alienation.

But Percy's essay avoids the relatively easier moves of contemporary social critiques—the blaming of consumerism and mass media; the idolization of the rebel; the sophisticated embrace of nihilism; and so on. In “The Loss of the Creature,” later collected in the book *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy offers neither indictment nor preaching. Instead, he provides a set of stories that are astonishing in their insight into the modern condition—all the more so because of their simplicity and accessibility. He tells us of García López de Cárdenas, the first European to discover the Grand Canyon, and asks: do modern tourists, flocking by the millions to visit the national park, see the same sight that Cárdenas did? Or is the success of the tourist's sightseeing measured instead by the degree to which his experience matches up to his expectation of it?

Many modern tourists understand that this experience of experience is a loss. To compensate, they strive to leave the beaten path—to wander off the trail and discover something new, so that they might recover that authentic experience of the canyon. The tourist may in fact succeed in his recovery by leaving the beaten path; but if he encounters fellow tourists who have set out with the same notion, he once again loses sovereignty over the experience. Even the facts of the canyon's status as national park—the Bright Angel Lodge, its guard rails, signage, and so forth—set beyond reach the very experience they intend to facilitate. The only way the tourist truly sees the canyon is “by avoiding all the facilities for seeing the canyon” (48).

Percy artfully extends this story to the core of modern existence, showing that at the heart of the alienation of the modern person is a striving for authenticity that is always hindered by the person's own self-consciousness of that striving. Society, in turn, attempts to appropriate this search as a “need” which must be “fulfilled”—like the need for eating and procreation—and in so doing places it at an even further distance. What we find in Percy's analysis is not an indictment of society, nor a condemnation of man to eternal despair, but an affirmation of the longing of the human creature, and a hint at how we might go about recovering our sense of the world.

The authenticity Percy seeks is not something that can be planned and supplied by society like a food drop to a starving village. This is because “the person is not something one can study and provide for; he is something one struggles for. But unless he also struggles for himself, unless he knows that there is a struggle, he is going to be just what the planners think he is” (63). Through the history of this struggle, the person forms a

story—his or her own story. And so, several years later, Percy came to understand that the way he had to communicate his message was not by writing philosophical essays, but by telling one such story of that struggle.

So we arrive at Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Walker Percy's 1961 novel *The Moviegoer*. Binx is adrift, alienated from a mundane world that provides his life with no meaning. On the surface, Binx appears to be a direct descendant—perhaps even a replica—of the archetypal alienated young man found in many novels of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Binx is aware of his emptiness, and fully conscious of the apparent absurdity of life; where previous novels merely depicted existential despair, Binx discusses it openly, even seeming to play with it. He seeks to understand and own his despair through a “search,” which provides the novel its loosely-defined plot.

Percy's turn on well-established characters and themes could be taken as simply an inevitable addition of ironic distance onto the existentialist novel. Percy himself, in his 1957 essay “The Man on the Train,” describes what such an ironic distance might entail: “The modern literature of alienation is in reality the triumphant reversal of alienation through its re-presenting. ... Its motto is not ‘I despair and do not know that I despair’ but ‘At least we know that we are lost to ourselves’—which is very great knowledge indeed” (93). But if Percy's characterization of “the modern literature of alienation” is correct, then it was the first existentialist novels themselves that introduced an ironic distance from alienation through their re-presentation of it. Something else, then, must be afoot in *The Moviegoer*.

Percy's expansion on existentialist themes cannot be further explored until the nature of existential despair is properly understood. A particularly compelling framework for understanding the historical antecedents and the implications of existential philosophy is offered by the work of the contemporary moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. His 1981 book *After Virtue* argues that both public and personal moral questions can only be rationally answered within the context of some public social tradition. Such a tradition must articulate a set of attitudes, behaviors, and modes of living defined in terms of a shared social good. According to MacIntyre, such traditions began breaking down in Western society with the onset of the Enlightenment—which was itself an expression of their failure to remain coherent. Existentialism, then, is a philosophy of life absent the purpose, meaning, and order which can only be found in the context of such traditions. While it purports to reveal human life in its true form as empty, it in fact articulates, on MacIntyre's account, a state of morality which is a contingent feature of modernity.

Writing of *The Moviegoer's* depiction of modern malaise, Carl Elliott aptly describes the attitudes that accompany existential despair, noting that “when we try to articulate it we ask questions like: Is this all there is? What is the sense of life? How does it all fit together?” (179). Existential despair is far from a high-minded or abstract issue; on the contrary, as Elliott explains, “This is not idle philosophizing: it is a practical question about action. Who am I supposed to be, and what am I supposed to do next?” Elliott argues that Binx Bolling is unable to formulate answers to basic, practical questions of action. And such also is MacIntyre's characterization: because existentialism asserts the falsity of such concepts as intention, purpose, and belief, a central dilemma of

existential despair is the inability to make sense of basic actions—meaning that one can neither claim to understand the actions of others nor formulate sensible actions for one's self.

Given MacIntyre's characterization of existential despair as the inability to conceive of intelligible actions, a tentative answer can be given to the question of what distinguishes *The Moviegoer* from previous existentialist novels, and how it thus expands the genre. A hint at the answer comes from the title itself: why is moviegoing, rather than some other sort of wandering, the manifestation of Binx Bolling's existential search? Art in general—but film in particular—seems to have a special role to play in how Binx understands the world, and to have particular capabilities that allow him to conceive of ways to conquer his despair. Some of these capabilities derive from the fact that Binx lacks any sense of structure, purpose, or identity to his life. Movies are able to provide these senses for him, even if they are fictional: Binx frequently describes his own actions and the situations in which he finds himself in terms of movies and actors he has seen. And indeed, role-playing is a recurrent feature of the novel, as Binx and a number of other characters exhibit the behavior of various movie archetypes and clichés. Without having any sense of his own identity from which to answer the “basic, practical questions of action” in his life, Binx finds it easier to adopt the attitudes and language of movie heroes.

Yet though MacIntyre's account is crucial to understanding the nature of Binx's existential despair and his subsequent search, it is not sufficient. MacIntyre's theory is, by its own admission, only a preliminary formulation, for he notes that there are competing

accounts of what exactly constitutes an intelligible human action, which correspond to distinct and rival social traditions. The question of how to rationally decide in favor of one account of intelligible action over another is a matter that he leaves for his later work. And in the same way that MacIntyre's theory is incomplete in and of itself, a very similar set of questions remain when it is applied to *The Moviegoer*—for the most distinctive feature of Binx's moviegoing is not simply that it provides roles for him to play. More than this, movies also seem to provide Binx a way to validate reality—to give real life a sense of legitimacy that it lacks on its own, and that only movies can provide.

The most profound pleasure that Binx finds in watching a movie is when his own situation is reflected within it: when the movie depicts a man in the throes of existential despair going to watch a movie; or, as happens once, when the movie was filmed in the very neighborhood in which he is sitting and watching it. The “re-presentation” that Percy describes in “The Man on the Train,” then, is not simply the ironic distance or the conciliatory control of self-awareness; it is also a peculiar power that arises specifically from an *artistic* re-presentation. The nature of that power is further hinted at in one of the most mysterious and compelling passages of the novel:

Last week ... I experienced an accidental repetition. I picked up a German-language weekly in the library. In it I noticed an advertisement for Nivea Creme, showing a woman with a grainy face turned up to the sun. Then I remembered that twenty years ago I saw the same advertisement in a magazine on my father's desk, the same woman, the same grainy face, the same Nivea Creme. The events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized, the thirty million deaths, the countless

torturings, uprootings and wanderings to and fro. Nothing of consequence could have happened because Nivea Creme was exactly as it was before. (80)

When Binx re-experiences an image he had not seen since before World War II, he finds himself unable to believe that reality could have changed since his first experience of the image. For Binx, aesthetic experience is fundamentally tied to—and in many ways determines—his feeling of what is literally true about the world. Binx’s aesthetic consumption is thus crucial to understanding his narrative consumption and his existential wandering.

While Alasdair MacIntyre’s theory can provide an initial understanding of existential despair in *The Moviegoer*, an exploration of the novel may in turn provide initial answers to the questions explicitly left unanswered by MacIntyre. This exploration must proceed in three stages. First, it must be established that Walker Percy deliberately used conventions of 20<sup>th</sup>-century novels of alienation so that *The Moviegoer* could engage with and expand upon the genre. Once it is clear that the novel addresses similar thematic content to books like *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Stranger*, we can use MacIntyre’s framework to offer a preliminary understanding of the nature of modern alienation as depicted within the genre. And finally, a fuller exploration of Binx’s moviegoing and his “search” will be undertaken in order to understand how *The Moviegoer* significantly expands upon the literature of alienation.

This work will thus put Percy and MacIntyre in conversation. It will show how MacIntyre’s philosophy provides a sophisticated diagnosis of the malaise experienced by

Binx Bolling and the society he inhabits. And that diagnosis will, in turn, indicate necessary additions to MacIntyre's theory. Finally, the conversation between these two thinkers will further our understanding of what exactly, on their account, the human creature has lost, and how we might set about recovering it.

### 1. "The Essential Loneliness of Man"

Writing 23 years after the novel's publication, Lewis A. Lawson affirms that "It is by now pretty generally agreed that the theme of Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961) is contemporary man's experience of alienation" (70). Indeed, most of the references to Binx Bolling that are found in critical literature describe him as an alienated Southern protagonist, a "troubled young man", and so forth (Charon 600). An early paperback edition of the book describes it as "a *Catcher in the Rye* for adults only," attempting to attach Percy to the coattails of J.D. Salinger but unfortunately shortchanging the originality of the novel's accomplishment (Simmons 605). In criticism, the novel is most often found grouped with other works, as Binx is usually seen as but one more character in the literature of alienation. The primary virtue of *The Moviegoer*, then, is typically seen not as its exploration of new themes, but its repetition of familiar themes in a new setting.

Given an outline of just the plot and character details of the novel, its relative lack of distinction from its forebears would seem sensible. By 1961, the literature of alienation was both well-established and familiar to wide literary audiences. The existentialist novels of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus had held strong influence in philosophical and literary circles since their publication in the 1920's and 30's. And in America, through the works of Salinger, Ernest Hemingway, and the Beats among others, the alienated young male protagonist had gained such mainstream literary success that by the early 1960's he was struggling to remain alienated. Percy himself was well aware of this literary precedent, and extensively discussed existentialist philosophy in his essays. This

engagement lends credence to the idea that his employment of existentialist conventions in his fiction is deliberate. The issue of alienation is even discussed directly in the novel. A particularly noteworthy example is when Binx, describing the literary work of family friend Sam Yerger, reports that his first novel “dealt, according to the dust jacket, with ‘the problem of evil and the essential loneliness of man’” (168). This description might as well have been on the dust jacket of an early edition of *The Moviegoer* itself.

Percy’s first task in expanding upon the literature of alienation was to establish his story within it. In this task he appears to have been regarded as largely successful, likely both because of Binx’s direct discussion of the theme and because of Percy’s deliberate engagement with the conventions of the genre. It is a central contention of this thesis that the book is more than *just* another novel of alienation. Yet it is still a novel of alienation, and it cannot be understood apart from the ways that it inherits from that genre. This inheritance will be crucial later to understanding how it advances the tradition.

Binx’s activities are primarily sensory, a trait inherited from (among others) Mersault of Albert Camus’s *The Stranger* and Jake Barnes of Ernest Hemingway’s *The Sun Also Rises*. Binx spends his days, of course, moviegoing, but also watching television, driving around with no particular destination, and canoodling with the string of young secretaries that work for him—sometimes bringing them along on his driving and moviegoing expeditions. He experiences genuine pleasure in these activities, and even expresses true affection for the women he is courting, confessing, for instance, that for the two weeks since he hired his new secretary Sharon, he has “thought of little else”

but her (65). He even, after a somewhat questionably flattering analysis of her physical characteristics, declares, “I am in love with Sharon Kincaid” (67). There is little evidence to suggest that Binx is being intentionally ironic (as he often is) or deceptive, but descriptions such as “Her bottom is so beautiful that once as she crossed the room to the cooler I felt my eyes smart with tears of gratitude” give cause to wonder whether he is entirely serious (65). His true attitude toward women is more accurately characterized earlier in the novel, when he comments upon the discomfort he feels at spending time on a houseboat with an overeager friend from his old fraternity: “To tell the truth I like women better. All I could think about in that swamp was how much I’d like to have my hands on Marcia or Linda and be spinning along the Gulf Coast” (40). Despite his occasional intimations to the contrary, Binx’s flirtations with women are part of his sensory consumption rather than an expression of any genuinely romantic impulse.

Binx’s sensory consumption ties his character’s behavior to that of his famous alienated forbears. His is a less apathetic consumption, however, than Mersault’s mindless and faintly animalistic eating, drinking, and fornication, or Jake Barnes’s stoic hedonism. His pleasure is genuine, but it is hardly purposeful; in fact, when asked directly by his great-aunt, “What do you think is the purpose of life—to go to the movies and dally with every girl that comes along?”, he responds “No” (226). His behavior appears instead as a simulacrum of some more genuine activity; according to Lawson, it signifies his acceptance of despair—the best way to pass the time until the apocalypse of atomic war comes, for “until that time, he can only practice seduction, turn to desire, by which physical incarnation permits consciousness to be embodied, if only for a few

minutes” (83). Regardless of one’s opinion about the religious overtones of Lawson’s analysis, it can be agreed that the same could be said with equal validity of Camus’s Mersault, among others. Clearly, at least for some critics, the nature of their despair is quite similar.

And indeed, Binx shares the most characteristic trait of the protagonists of every novel of alienation: a lack of any sense of purpose to his life. Like Jake Barnes, Binx is a war veteran (Barnes of World War I, Binx of the Korean War) whose life has become directionless since returning from combat. He is a stockbroker, a profession which provides him with a shallow, Franklinian utilitarian pleasure, but which is otherwise unimportant to him. A week before his thirtieth birthday, his great-aunt urges him to commit to some noble and worthy profession, like cancer research. “Don’t you think a thirty year old man ought to know what he wants to do with his life?” asks Aunt Emily (55). Binx says yes, and the novel occurs over the course of the week leading up to his birthday, a week which he promises to spend deciding what he wants to do with his life so that he can provide his aunt with an answer. Yet Binx gives the question no serious thought over the course of the novel, suggesting that, at the least, it is not particularly important to him. But it is more than just unimportant; for like Mersault, Binx not only has no sense of purpose—he cannot even make sense of what a sense of purpose means, and why others are so concerned with it. Percy’s work follows the genre of alienation established in part by both Hemingway and Camus, but it is more like the work of Camus than Hemingway in that it depicts a particularly *existential* alienation, in which despair

results not so much from living without purpose, but from living in a world in which the concept of purpose itself has become incoherent.

This gap of understanding between Binx and the other characters further establishes the novel's genre, for another of the defining characteristics of the literature of alienation is the inability of the protagonist to communicate with others and to make sense of their actions and intentions. (Indeed, it should hardly need noting that alienated protagonists are not only alienated from the world, but additionally and especially from other people in it.) This gulf is evident from the first line of the novel, when Binx informs us, "This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch .... [S]he wants to have one of her serious talks. It will be extremely grave ... a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do" (3). But he adds, "It is enough to scare the wits out of anyone, yet I confess that I do not find the prospect altogether unpleasant." When he has the talk with his aunt, she urges him to find an honorable profession, bemoans the modern decline of civilization, and impresses on him her grand idea of the old form of noble manhood—implying an imperative for him to take up the mantle of this dying tradition. Binx tells us, "She is right. I will say yes. I will say yes even though I do not really know what she is talking about" (54). We discover, then, that Binx is not scared of these talks with his aunt because he simply cannot make sense of her concern, and has learned to placate her.

This behavior does not appear only with his aunt; Binx in general keeps up the appearances that society and his family expect of him. "I am a model tenant and a model citizen and take pleasure in doing all that is expected of me," Binx informs us early in the

novel (6). This wry assertion both relates Binx to the passive behavior of characters like Mersault and establishes a precedent for later art of alienation, evident in works like the 1999 film *American Beauty* or the 1997 song “Fitter Happier” by Radiohead; in both works, ironic statements about being a model citizen living a productive life in suburbia are the quintessential utterance of modern alienation. It is uncertain to what degree Binx’s statement is intentionally ironic, for he does indeed demonstrate from a young age what can only be characterized as pleasure in doing what others expect of him. When Aunt Emily informs him at age eight that his brother has died, she assures him, “It’s going to be difficult for you but I know you’re going to act like a soldier” (4). “This was true,” he informs us, “I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?” For a time, it seems indeed that acting is all he has to do. Later, as a freshman in college, he is recruited to join the Delta house by upperclassman Walter Wade (later the fiancé of Binx’s cousin and romantic interest Kate Cutrer, and the same overeager friend he would join on the houseboat). After showing him the house, Walter asks, “Did you or did you not feel a unique something when you walked into this house? I won’t attempt to describe it. If you felt it, you already know exactly what I mean” (37). Binx tells him “straight off that nothing would make me happier than to pledge Delta on the spot, if that was what he was getting at.” Binx actually has no idea what he is getting at, but he has learned how to sense what response people are expecting, and Walter is unable to distinguish Binx’s forgery from a genuine reply.

It is not just Binx’s behavior that helps establish *The Moviegoer* in the alienation genre, but also Walter’s, for the genre is additionally marked by the presence of

characters whose actions appear phony to the protagonist. This awareness is certainly one of the defining traits of protagonists like Salinger's Holden Caulfield, and Binx likewise senses phoniness in most of the people he encounters. Few, however, seem phony to the same degree as Walter. This sense begins with Walter's recruitment of Binx into the fraternity, and their relationship continues to be characterized by these types of exchanges. Years later, in the present-day of the novel, Walter attempts to convince Binx to join his krewe (a private club that stages a Mardi Gras parade), telling him, "We've got a damn good bunch of guys now" (34). Binx notes that "Ten years ago he would have said 'ace gents'; that was what we called good guys in the nineteen forties," strongly suggesting his sense that Walter's behavior is affected. This style of speech is characteristic of Walter throughout the novel, as is Binx's tendency to placate Walter's constant suggestions that he join in on some or another activity of good-old-boy society.

This type of relationship itself is characteristic of Binx's interactions with most of the characters in the novel. At another point, Binx runs into his cousin Nell Lovell, who informs him that she and her husband "have re-examined our values and found them pretty darn enduring. To our utter amazement we discovered that we both have the same life-goal. ... To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off" (101). Though Binx placates her just like Walter, he wonders, "why does she talk as if she were dead? Another forty years to go and dead, dead, dead" (102). As in *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Stranger*, the most direct manifestation of the protagonist's alienation from other people is his sense that their behavior is phony. Yet this passage makes clear that what is at stake for Binx is not just his inability to relate to

others, but his conviction, like Mersault's, that the pervasive artificiality of society functions to conceal the despair that lies within every member of it.

A subsequently crucial element of characterization that is common to both the alienation genre and *The Moviegoer* is Binx's own adoption of this artifice. Not only does he learn to maintain appearances by placating people and humoring their requests of him, but he couches his speech in similar patterns of affectation. Early in the novel, Binx is accosted by Nell Lovell's husband Eddie (whose brother had been the first fiancé of Kate Cutrer, until his death in a car accident). Eddie's speech is—like that of Kate's new fiancé Walter—marked by jocularisms like his repeatedly referring to Binx as “Fellah!” (20-1). His speech elicits similar banalities from Binx: when Eddie speaks with seeming earnestness about how good Aunt Emily has been to Kate, Binx replies, “That's mighty nice, Eddie”; and when Eddie asks with even more seeming earnestness about how Kate is doing, Binx replies, with complete falsity but all apparent sincerity, “She seems fine now, Eddie. Quite happy and secure.” Binx's imitation is sufficiently convincing that Aunt Emily at one point refers to Walter and he as “Rosenkranz and Guildenstern”—and indeed, when Binx implies affectation in Walter by saying that “ace gents” is “what *we* called good guys in the nineteen forties,” he also implies that his own behavior is affected (33-4).

Binx imitates the behavior that he sees as characteristic of his society. Yet he views that very behavior as phony, so that even if we do not believe his assessment of others, we must regard Binx's own behavior as phony. Whether it is just the reader or Binx himself who is meant to be aware of this phoniness is not yet clear (although it will

be crucial later to answer this question). The one person who certainly can sense it is Kate, who chooses to rebel rather than follow Binx in conforming, making her the only character in the novel who typically does not exhibit phony behavior. Reproaching his appeasement of Aunt Emily, Kate asks, “How do you appear so reasonable to Mother? ... She thinks you’re one of her kind .... A proper Bolling. ... But you don’t fool me” (43). And Binx, attempting at Aunt Emily’s insistence to convince Kate to attend the Mardi Gras ball, asks with her apparent sincerity, “Don’t you want to see Walter as krewe captain?”, to which Kate replies, “Don’t you dare patronize Walter” (47).

Whether Binx is aware of it or not, Kate is quite correct that he regularly placates, patronizes, and otherwise acts insincerely toward others, and the dénouement of the novel centers on the fact that his attempts at propriety are not always successful. For though Binx can placate, he never views himself as engaging in intentional dishonesty—and so, for all of his sophisticated adult angst, he is characterized by an almost childlike inability to lie. Like Mersault in his trial at the hands of society, Binx is put to the test over the course of the novel (primarily by Aunt Emily), and it neither occurs to him that he should lie in order to save himself, nor that he is really in need of saving. When asked repeatedly whether he feels some obligation to use his intelligence for the betterment of society, he always replies with honesty that he does not. When his aunt finally realizes that their relationship has been an artifice on his part to maintain stability, she disowns him, expelling him completely from the old aristocracy whose values he has imitated but failed to genuinely maintain. Like *The Stranger*, *The Moviegoer* concludes with the protagonist’s final rejection by the old society whose values have been revealed as

meaningless to him. But Camus's philosophical project was much more direct than was Percy's, and so the significance of the ending of *The Moviegoer* is far less clear, particularly in regard to whether the fate of the protagonist is meant, like that of Mersault, to construct a moral imperative—or rather whether it is a diagnosis and a warning. Each novel of alienation *does* contain some diagnosis, however, and before any moral imperative can be ascertained, the diagnosis must be fully understood.

## 2. The Loss of the Creature

One of the most cogent frameworks for diagnosing the nature of existential despair follows from the work of Alasdair MacIntyre, whose 1981 book *After Virtue* attempts to provide a rational basis for moral theory. MacIntyre begins with an observation about the state of modern moral discourse, noting that the central moral questions of today seem to be ultimately unresolvable. He provides three examples of contemporary moral debates—over abortion, just war, and medical licensing—and repeats the common rival arguments typically provided in these debates. The first important feature of such rival arguments (which should be obvious to anyone who has engaged in the maddening task of participating in these debates) is that though each one is logically valid, the respective concepts they use are incommensurable. This feature is closely related to the fact that the concepts employed in each argument have been divorced from larger theories and contexts of which they were originally a part. There is, then, no apparent rational way to compare the rival claims of each argument, and so a decision to accept one over another has the appearance of being personal and non-rational.

Yet despite the necessity of some personal and non-rational choice, the arguments all purport to be impersonal and rational, in that they “presuppose ... the existence, independently of the preferences or attitude of speaker and hearer, of standards [of morality]” (9). This presumed appeal to universal standards, combined with the apparent arbitrariness of accepting any particular standard, has resulted in a doctrine that MacIntyre calls *emotivism*, the idea that “all evaluative judgments and more specifically

all moral judgments are *nothing but* expressions of preference, expressions of attitude or feeling” (11-2, his emphasis throughout). But MacIntyre argues that emotivism is only a valid theory of the *use* of particular moral utterances on particular occasions, rather than of the meaning of moral utterances in general. It is therefore a central thesis of *After Virtue* that the interminability of moral arguments today is a contingent feature of modern culture, rather than an inherent feature of moral questions.

That contingency traces back to the Enlightenment, during which moral questions were first considered as distinct from theological, legal, and aesthetic questions, and so subsequently a project of conceiving an independent rational justification for morality became a central concern of Northern European culture. MacIntyre traces in detail the history of how various philosophers tried and failed to conceive of such standards, each noticing the failures of his predecessors but committing new errors in addressing them. The result was an overall failure of the project that continues to the present day, resulting in the three observed features of modern moral arguments: their use of concepts divorced from their original contexts within a variety of now-fractured traditions; their subsequent incommensurability and the necessity of a person’s seemingly non-rational choice to accept one over the other; and, despite this, their implicit claim to impersonal and rational justification.

MacIntyre’s diagnosis of the decay of moral tradition provides a remarkably apt description of the society depicted in *The Moviegoer*. “In a world of secular rationality,” MacIntyre writes, “religion could no longer provide such a shared background and foundation for moral discourse and action” (50). It is precisely that world in which we

find our poor Mr. Bolling adrift. Emotivism, according to MacIntyre, arises whenever a society's understanding of itself as inextricably bound to some unifying tradition breaks down. This tradition must include, among other things, some conception of a shared social good; a set of descriptions of the types of lives that are worth and not worth living; and an understanding of which human traits are virtues and which are vices, justified in terms of their effect on the social good.<sup>1</sup> In modernity, such a breakdown first began on a broad scale during the Enlightenment, but MacIntyre is careful to note that it did not immediately affect every part of the Western world, and that some societies underwent such a breakdown at later dates.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the cultural self-understanding of the characters in *The Moviegoer* indicates their awareness that their society is in the final stages of such a breakdown. Philip E. Simmons describes the novel's depiction of "the threat of urbanization to the rural and frontier way of life" and the "mythoi of the fall from grace and the loss of the values of the aristocratic, agrarian old South" (613, 603). This myth is precisely the

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that this concept of a tradition is distinct from that found in the rhetoric of modern American political conservatism. MacIntyre notes, "We are apt to be misled here by the ideological uses to which the concept of a tradition has been put by conservative political theorists. Characteristically such theorists have followed Burke in contrasting tradition with reason and the stability of tradition with conflict. Both contrasts obfuscate. For all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought, transcending through criticism and invention the limitations of what had hitherto been reasoned in that tradition; this is as true of modern physics as of medieval logic. Moreover when a tradition is in good order it is always partially constituted by an argument about the goods the pursuit of which gives to that tradition its particular point and purpose" (221-2). And so "modern conservatives are for the most part engaged in conserving only older rather than later versions of liberal individualism. Their own core doctrine is as liberal and as individualist as that of self-avowed liberals."

<sup>2</sup> He notes, for instance, that Jane Austen's focus on the question of how best to achieve the good life, as understood within a society with a clear conception of what the good life is, makes her "the last great representative of the classical tradition of the virtues" (243). MacIntyre's comment on Austen should not be construed to imply that the society depicted in her work was the last to *understand* itself according to his conception of a tradition, as he also describes other such societies which postdate that of Austen. Rather, he means that she was the last to clearly *articulate* such a conception of her society—and, in her insights into what such a conception requires of its adherents, the last also to further the larger tradition.

conception Aunt Emily has of herself and the Bolling family; as Simmons notes, she views herself as its guard, and Binx as its “last scion” (606).<sup>3</sup> From the beginning of the novel, she senses with no small amount of righteous indignation that Binx is not up to carrying on this defense, asserting conversationally but not unseriously, “The barbarians at the inner gate and who defends the West? Don John of Austria? No, Mr Bolling the stockbroker and Mr Wade the lawyer” (33). Over the course of the novel, she comes to realize that it is not just that Binx is unable to “defend the West” against the barbarians, but that it is he himself who is at the inner gate—for if he is indeed the last scion of the tradition, then his complete indifference and inability to understand it is the surest sign that it has come to an end.

Thus Aunt Emily’s fruitless appeal to an older order establishes that *The Moviegoer* depicts New Orleans society in the immediate aftermath of a breakdown of the type described by MacIntyre. Percy lends credence to this characterization of the novel in an essay in the collection *The Message in the Bottle*: writing of his unique status as an author, he asserts that what the Christian novelist “sees first in the Western world is the massive failure of Christendom itself” (111). Binx and Aunt Emily both also sense

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<sup>3</sup> Simmons aptly characterizes the Bollings as “an old Southern family with some aristocratic *pretensions*,” rather than as genuine aristocrats or former aristocrats (606, emphasis added). The reality of their family situation is, again, less important than its self-conception. But the fact that—beyond the reality that the values of that self-conception are crumbling—the conception itself may have been something of a delusion is not insignificant. For the central depiction of existential despair is not a condition in which one cannot fulfill a conception of action, or even in which one cannot choose such a conception, but rather in which the frameworks that give rise to such conceptions have been revealed as arbitrary and artificial—and thus as functioning to mask the will to power of those who propagate them.

So it is perhaps also not insignificant that, as Simmons notes, Binx’s aunt “quotes Marcus Aurelius to him as a guide to his conduct,” for Marcus Aurelius was a Stoic philosopher, and, according to MacIntyre, Stoicism represented an early rejection of key facets of the classical tradition—a crucial step toward establishing the understanding of morality that led to the Enlightenment Project (Simmons 606; MacIntyre 169).

that this breakdown has occurred. As Binx notes, “For her too the fabric is dissolving, but for her even the dissolving makes sense” (54). Their attitudes represent the two plausible and mirror reactions to that breakdown. On the one hand, Aunt Emily recalls a time when the old tradition structured society, and indignantly clings to it even though she understands that its organizing power has dissolved. On the other hand, Binx senses that the old codes of behavior now appear as artifice in the people who still follow them (including himself), but he has never known a society in which they were otherwise.

*The Moviegoer*, then, depicts a protagonist on the cusp of a society before and after a breakdown of the tradition required to make rational sense of public and personal moral questions. Binx and Emily represent not just the two plausible reactions to such a breakdown, but the two sets of attitudes and beliefs necessary to articulate it: an indignant but incoherent defense of the old ways on the one hand (for a tradition, on MacIntyre’s account, dissolves precisely when it fails to maintain a coherent understanding of itself); and on the other, a dismissive belief that the old ways have been unmasked and rendered irrelevant by new theories.

The nature of those new theories is hinted at extensively in the novel. According to Lawson, Binx’s struggle is in fact to overcome his father’s abandonment, both in the literal sense that his father was distant and then died, and in the fact that he has inherited his father’s despair and rejection of God. Lawson claims that at the novel’s conclusion, Binx has reclaimed his faith, and thus “has found a new Father and can forgive the one he lost” (84). This claim should be regarded with skepticism, for when Binx first mentions his “search” he is evasive about whether it is for God, and suggests that those who

already claim to have found Him might very well themselves be sunk into the despair he seeks to escape (13-4). Additionally, he later claims, “My mother’s family think I have lost my faith and they pray for me to recover it. I don’t know what they’re talking about”—and at the novel’s conclusion, he gives no indication of having any more of an idea what they are talking about (145). However, Binx’s comment that “any doings of my father ... is in the nature of a clue in my search” indicates the importance of Lawson’s insight that Binx is attempting to escape the same despair that afflicted his father (71). Binx asserts that “English romanticism ... and 1930 science” killed his father, and since this is not literally true (he died in a plane crash), Lawson claims that, on Binx’s account, these were the sources that thrust his father into despair (Percy 88, 25).

Whether or not Binx’s account of his father’s despair is accurate, Lawson is correct that these sources must play a role in Binx’s own despair. In fact, Binx reveals their role when he states, “Until recent years, I read only ‘fundamental’ books, that is, key books on key subjects .... During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it” (69). The books that he mentions, Lawson argues, continue in the tradition of “the romantic idealism so pervasive in English higher education in the latter half of the nineteenth century,” which Binx alludes to as having killed his father (Lawson 71). This previous pursuit, which Binx refers to as his “vertical search” (in contrast to the “horizontal search” that he undertakes in the present-day of the novel), ended on the night that he read *The Chemistry of Life*, and subsequently realized that “the universe had been disposed of” (70). Binx, then, conceives of the old traditions to have been dissolved by the British secular humanistic philosophy of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

According to Walker Percy, in an essay in *The Message in the Bottle*, “the hero of the postmodern novel is a man who has forgotten his bad memories and conquered his present ills and who finds himself in the victorious secular city. His only problem now is to keep from blowing his brains out” (112). Such precisely is the state of Binx Bolling. For Percy, the modern secular humanist sees himself as an organism “with certain inalienable rights, reason, freedom, and an intrinsic dignity .... But what he doesn’t realize is that as soon as he looks upon his own individuality and freedom as ‘values’, a certain devaluation sets in” (20, 21). On Percy’s account, this devaluation marks the transition from modernism to postmodernism, “when men discovered that they could no longer understand themselves by the theory professed by the age” (25).

The type of dissolution described by Percy in his essay is the same that is depicted in *The Moviegoer*, and (so this thesis contends) the same that is articulated in detail by Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue*. It is no small coincidence, then, that the theories each author specifically claims as responsible for this dissolution occupy the same historical space. In addition to the “1930 science” and turn-of-the-century English romanticism that Binx alludes to in *The Moviegoer*, Percy’s essays explicitly attack the psychological theory of Behaviorism that first rose to prominence in the 1930s.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile MacIntyre claims that emotivism was first articulated in a modern context at Cambridge in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a theory of the contemporary usage of moral utterances (14). Percy and MacIntyre, then, are not just both concerned with the general pattern of the decay of

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<sup>4</sup> See in particular “The Delta Factor” and “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process” from *The Message in the Bottle*.

traditions, but in fact with the *same* instance of dissolution—to which the English intellectual culture of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was a response.

This shared concern is evinced not just by the common time and place of the theories attacked by MacIntyre and Percy, but by the particular claims of those theories themselves. After articulating the theoretical claims of emotivism, MacIntyre describes its social implications. Moral utterances, he notes, contain an implicit claim that binds the listener to allegiance with them. On the account of emotivism, the sentence “This is good” means the same as “I approve of this, do so as well” (13).<sup>5</sup> But because emotivism obliterates claims to objective standards, the “do so as well” of moral utterances “entails the obliteration of any genuine distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations,” and so the central characters of modern society thus embody emotivist modes of manipulative behavior (23, 72).

MacIntyre claims that these modes of manipulative behaviors are embodied in three central characters of modernity (73).<sup>6</sup> The first is the manager, whose interest is in effectiveness, “the contrivance of means ... [to] the manipulation of human beings into compliant patterns of behavior” (74). While this mode is not obviously present in Percy’s writings, the other two are of great concern to him. He devotes much of *The Message in the Bottle* to attacking Behaviorism, a psychological theory that treats humans essentially as automatons that merely respond to external stimuli without reflection or understanding. His critique is conducted primarily on the scientific ground that it is

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<sup>5</sup> This is an example that MacIntyre uses to demonstrate that emotivism articulates as a theory of meaning what is in fact a theory of use on particular occasions—again, in this instance, a theory of the usage of such phrases at Cambridge in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>6</sup> See MacIntyre’s discussion on p. 28 of what a “character” entails.

insufficient to explain human behavior, particularly language. But at stake also in Percy's critique is his concern that, partially as a result of the widespread public acceptance of these psychological ideas, modern man views himself as little more than an "organism" with little ability to direct or form himself.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely the same set of psychological ideas that MacIntyre claims constitute the "moral fictions" that underlie the claims to legitimacy of the second central character of emotivism: the therapist. Both he and Percy recognize that the therapist's claim to power relies on his ability to contrive means of effecting emotive manipulation in the patient. The direct intention of Percy's arguments in *The Message in the Bottle* is to attack the scientific legitimacy of those means. But what is at stake in his arguments is precisely his understanding that the therapist's claims to power represent part of the larger breakdown of modern man's ability to answer the basic questions of his sense of self and his place in society.

Until those questions can be made intelligible, a third mode of emotivist behavior must emerge: that of the aesthete, "the character least likely to be victim" to modern society's moral fictions because he "specialize[s] in seeing through illusory and fictitious claims" (MacIntyre 73). This same need to unmask is notably present in our own Mr. Bolling—for the act of intimating *phoniness* in another person is precisely the act of recognizing that his or her professed intentions and assertions are illusory. And it is not just Walter Wade in whom Binx senses phoniness; he also, as noted, hints strongly at the phoniness of Eddie Lovell. And in noting the sycophancy of Aunt Emily's servant Mercer—"My main emotion around Mercer is unease that in threading his way between

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<sup>7</sup> See in particular "The Delta Factor."

servility and presumption, his foot might slip”—Binx all but declares his phoniness, even noting that “He is conscious of his position and affects a clipped speech” (22). Indeed, more than just a habit for Binx, the act of unmasking is characteristic of his interaction with the entire world. Binx, in other words, exhibits precisely the behaviors of the aesthete, one of the characters that MacIntyre sees as central to modern emotivist culture.

The remarkable correlation of *The Moviegoer* to the societal critique offered 20 years later in *After Virtue* is not due to coincidence. The two men share a Catholic faith, which commits them to a shared intellectual circle and worldview that likely contributes to their similar diagnoses of modernity; MacIntyre may even have been familiar with Percy’s work when writing his own. However, though far from improbable, such speculation is unnecessary, for the respective works of the two men turn out to be responses to nearly the same set of philosophers and ideas. As noted, the work of both men is explicitly a response to (among other things) English ideas and attitudes of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and in particular the claims of its prominent psychological theories. Those English ideas, on MacIntyre’s account, were the first modern articulation of the theory of emotivism. That theory, recall, was a response to the failure of the Enlightenment project of justifying morality; it claimed that moral questions *inherently* could only be resolved through arbitrary personal choice, rather than just as a feature of contemporary culture *contingent* upon that failure.

Yet, as MacIntyre notes, “This element of arbitrariness in our moral culture was presented as a philosophical discovery ... long before it became a commonplace of everyday discourse ... in a book which is at once the outcome and the epitaph of [the

Enlightenment project]” (39). That epitaph was the 1842 book *Enten-Eller* (English: *Either-Or*) by Søren Kierkegaard, the same philosopher whose work laces Percy’s fiction and nonfiction, and who bookends *The Moviegoer*, appearing both in its epigraph and its epilogue.<sup>8</sup> In fact, while this thesis has contended that Binx Bolling is an embodiment of one of the modes of emotivist behavior that MacIntyre identified as central to modernity—the aesthete—it was in fact Kierkegaard who first articulated this character. MacIntyre just took the work of Kierkegaard and placed it in the context of a larger narrative of moral theory—identifying it as an integral part of the history of the Enlightenment project of justifying morality, its failure (which was first identified by Kierkegaard), and the consequences of that failure. Such a placement of Kierkegaard in a larger narrative is also the work of Percy, who depicts Kierkegaard’s aesthete in the context of the final demise of the old ideals of New Orleans aristocracy. Those two larger narratives, then, turn out to be one and the same: MacIntyre’s work is a *description* of the very same breakdown of the unifying tradition of morality that Percy’s work *depicts*. The realization that *After Virtue* and *The Moviegoer* provide alternate accounts of this same breakdown will prove powerful in deepening our understanding of both works.

The most crucial consequence is that we can justifiably apply Alasdair MacIntyre’s understanding of existentialism as a diagnosis of Walker Percy’s depiction of existential despair. According to MacIntyre, the existentialist view of moral judgment (which he takes also to be characteristic of modernity in general) corresponds to a change in the conception of *selfhood* in which the narrative mode is rejected, so that “life comes

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<sup>8</sup> Binx refers to “the great Danish philosopher” in the epilogue (237).

to appear as nothing but a series of unconnected episodes” (205,4). This rejection results from a modern philosophical tendency “to think atomistically about human action,” so that in order to give an account of a human action, it is not seen as necessary to account for its place within the larger whole of a human life. This tendency rejects what MacIntyre sees as a crucial distinction between an action *as such* and an *intelligible* action. The latter is “a more fundamental concept,” because

The importance of the concept of intelligibility is closely related to the fact that the most basic distinction of all embedded in our discourse and our practice in this area is that between human beings and other beings. Human beings can be held to account for that of which they are the authors; other beings cannot. To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passions and purposes. It is therefore to understand an action as something for which someone is accountable, about which it is always appropriate to ask the agent for an intelligible account. When an occurrence is apparently the intended action of a human agent, but nonetheless we cannot so identify it, we are both intellectually and practically baffled. (209)

According to MacIntyre, it is impossible to give an intelligible account of human actions outside of a narrative mode. This is because, first, we cannot characterize an agent’s behavior independently of his intentions, which in turn we cannot characterize without reference to settings that make them intelligible both to the agent and to others

(206). We also need to account for his beliefs, and to know which of his beliefs caused his actions (207). MacIntyre notes that one important consequence of this conclusion is that “There is no such thing as ‘behavior’, to be identified prior to and independently of intentions, beliefs, and settings,” and so a science of Behaviorism, while not impossible, can be nothing but “a science of uninterpreted physical movement” (208). Thus, he notes, a Behaviorist could not offer an account of the scientific experiment itself in which the Behaviorist himself must engage, for “the conception of an experiment is certainly one of intention- and belief- informed behavior.”

Crucially, Percy notes almost *precisely* the same problem with Behaviorism and related theories. In his essay “Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method” from *The Message in the Bottle*, Percy argues that cultural elements such as language, art, religion, myth, and science are characteristically “assertory in nature,” but when science studies an element such as myth empirically, “it is evaluated not according as it is true or false or nonsensical but according to the degree to which it serves a social or cultural function” (215, 225). Yet such a belief-driven act is central to the conduct of science itself. And so because “the functional method of the sciences cannot construe the assertory act” upon which it itself is based, Percy draws the same conclusion as MacIntyre (albeit more generally) that science breaks down “not ... at the limits of the universe but in the attempt to grasp itself” (230, 233). Percy takes pains to note that his intention is not to criticize science within its proper role as a method of understanding empirical phenomena, and not to “indict reason, but on the contrary to advance the cause of a radical anthropology, a

science of man which will take account of all human realities, not merely space-time events” (224).

MacIntyre’s account of intelligible action is derived partially from the same observation made by Percy that Behaviorist anthropology cannot construe the most characteristic types of human action, including the scientific practice of Behaviorism itself. And from this observation, his account picks up exactly Percy’s project of advancing a “radical anthropology.” To characterize intelligible actions, we need to account for a set of factors—beginning, as noted, with an agent’s beliefs, intentions, and settings. But we also need reference to an agent’s long-term history of actions, intentions and purposes in order to make his short-term intentions intelligible. Finally, we must order his intentions both causally and temporally with reference to those settings, determining how his short-term intentions succeeded or failed in directing him towards his long-term intentions. In so construing these factors “we ourselves write a further part of these histories,” and so “narrative history of a certain kind turns out to be the basic and essential genre for the characterization of human actions” (208).

When an agent cannot give such a narrative account of his actions, we meet with the intellectual and practical bafflement that MacIntyre describes. Such precisely is the bafflement that Binx Bolling and others have at his own actions—for the reasons he provides for them, if any, make no reference to his history or to any long-term intentions. Because Binx cannot provide an intelligible account of his actions, we can arrive at the preliminary and tentative conclusion that Binx’s existential despair results from the narrative unintelligibility of his life. This conclusion brings us as far as but no further

than an understanding of *The Moviegoer* as a member of the genre of the existentialist novel. Much remains to understand about the novel's engagement with that genre; for where the genre's prototypical novel *The Stranger* concludes with the protagonist's embrace of his pending execution after his final realization of "the gentle indifference of the world," *The Moviegoer* begins with a protagonist who is fully aware of this indifference and has chosen nonetheless to continue living in the world, occupying himself instead with a search to understand how he might go about doing so (122).

### 3. The Fourth Man

The narrative unintelligibility of Binx's life, like that of other protagonists of the genre of alienation, is partially a result of the lack of any purpose to his life from which he could derive his intentions and make sense of his actions. But of course, it is not just that Binx is alienated from the modern world because he cannot find a purpose within it. Writing of *The Moviegoer*, Carl Elliott argues, "All human beings ... live within certain frameworks of understanding that give sense to their actions and to their lives. As Charles Taylor points out, they include understandings about what sort of lives have dignity, what counts as a good life and what counts a failure, what kind of life is worth living, and ... when a life has meaning, or sense" (178). Yet, as the previous chapter argued, these features of a framework derive their coherence from a larger type of tradition, which the novel depicts as having become fractured and lost its former ordering power over culture. Thus Elliott notes that while "in other times and other cultures a person might worry about his life being a failure *within* a given framework ... modern, twentieth-century Westerners face another problem: not that of failing to meet the demands of one's framework, like a Southern gentleman who backs down from a duel, but of being unsure of what the framework is" (179, his emphasis).

Before the novel begins, Binx has completed a "vertical search," the success of which denotes his inculcation of the British secular humanism that, on MacIntyre's account, signaled the final dissolution of classical notions of morality and selfhood. Thus, more than just being unsure of "what the framework is," Binx, as a result of his "vertical search," understands that the very notion of a framework against which actions can be

rendered intelligible has itself become incoherent. Yet when his “vertical search” has been completed, Binx notes, “The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over. There I lay in my hotel room with my search over yet still obliged to draw one breath and then the next” (70). Despite their having been rendered absurd, Binx still cannot escape the necessity of answering the “practical questions about action” that Carl Elliott claims confront the modern sufferer of malaise: “Who am I supposed to be, and what am I supposed to do next?” (179).

And so the moment Binx’s “vertical search” concludes he undertakes a new, “horizontal” search, for which “what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion.” It is this serious wandering search which constitutes the novel, set against the framing plot of Binx’s promise to his aunt to figure out “what it is he wants out of life.” Though he professes to the reader not to understand the meaning or purpose of her question, his search exactly *is* an attempt to answer the question of how he can continue to live in a world in which such questions have been disposed of.

In his climactic confrontation with Aunt Emily—in which she finally realizes that he is not just incapable of defending the old ways but is himself a sign that they are ultimately doomed—she claims that while “in all of past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageously or cowardly,” she has come to understand that Binx has “discovered something new under the sun”: that in such situations one “need not after all respond in

one of the traditional ways. No. One may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one's heel and leave. Exit. Why after all need one act humanly?" (219-20).

Confirming her claim, Binx demonstrates that he does not truly understand what she means. Yet he still maintains his affection for her, and out of his desire to please her, he says, "I try as best I can to appear as she would have me, as being, if not right, then wrong in a recognizable, a right form of wrongness" (222). Binx's misconstrual of *traditional* to mean merely *recognizable* both confirms that he is functioning under the emotivist understanding of morality and action, and points to the object of his "horizontal" search.

As noted, Binx is searching for an understanding of how he can continue to live in the world—what he should do, how he should act, and who he should be. Carl Elliott notes that all humans live within certain frameworks that provide answers to such questions; and Alasdair MacIntyre argues that, beyond the historical fact that humans *do* all live within certain frameworks, human action *must* occur within some framework in order to be intelligible. Binx's search for answers to the "practical questions about action," then, must also be a search for some framework to provide sense to his actions. Although Binx professes to understand that such frameworks have been disposed of theoretically, he cannot help but continue to grasp for one, attempting to construe some way of being in the world.

Binx's search is the main subject of the novel, so understanding the distinction between the "horizontal" and "vertical" searches is crucial. The evidence available for distinguishing between the two is scarce, as Binx only refers to the "horizontal" search

once, and only mentions his previous “vertical” search twice. But both references to the “vertical” search depict it as a scientific attempt to describe as much of the universe in as simple a fashion as possible. And both note that while undertaking the search one is “an Anyone living Anywhere”—or “no one nowhere” as Kate renders it (69, 83). It is precisely that latter rendering which provides an understanding of what the “horizontal” search is: an attempt to become Someone Somewhere. Hence the *horizontal* nature of the wandering, which directs him quite literally in a horizontal fashion across the landscape to examine the ways of being he sees in the lives of people around him, and hence also the seriousness of that search.

Binx’s grasping for a framework is an attempt to reconstitute the narrative intelligibility that his life lacks. Yet his grasping is less a direct search for some cohesive MacIntyrean account of moral theory than an attempt to answer those basic “practical questions about action.” Having dispensed with the modes of action available to him under the old traditions, his search then becomes for other intelligible modes of action that his culture may make available to him. Beyond their intelligibility, the most important feature of such modes, Binx hints, is that they be *recognizable*. And so we return to a crucial question posed at the outset: why is Binx, in his alienation, a *moviegoer* rather than some other sort of wanderer?

As noted in Chapter 1, Binx’s behavior is marked not just by his phoniness, but by his imitation and placation of others, and in addition by his wry self-awareness of these patterns—so that beyond just *being phony*, we have the sense that Binx is intentionally *acting*. This possibility is raised as early as the second paragraph in the

novel (the first and only time that Binx directly refers to acting), when Binx describes the moment that, at age eight, Aunt Emily informs him that his older brother has died, and tells him, “It’s going to be difficult for you but I know you’re going to act like a soldier” (4). Binx tells us, “This was true. I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?” Putting aside for now the question of whether acting is *all* Binx has to do, it is clear that it *is* what he decides or learns to do. Acting and role-playing, indeed, are the dominant modes of behavior for both Binx and almost every other character in the novel. In fact, the most distinguishing feature of Binx’s external behavior (yet one that has gone largely unremarked in the critical discussion of the novel) is that he clearly and even self-consciously acts as if he were a character in a movie. Movies seem to provide Binx the limitless stock of comprehensible and widely recognizable modes of action that he is searching for.

Philip Simmons argues that Binx “worries about how mass culture has become the substance of his personal past,” offering this passage from the novel as evidence:

Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*. (Percy 7; Simmons 612)

Yet contrary to Simmons's claim, Binx seems to express little worry here or anywhere else about the way that mass culture has permeated his understanding of his own history; he even says, in the sentence immediately preceding this passage, "The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie." Indeed, Binx seems most pleased when his actions and their results conform to recognizable movie patterns.

This pleasure is evident in many situations throughout the novel, but in few instances more so than when he is acting out some courtship ritual from a movie. At the beginning of Book Two, Binx has just hired a new secretary, Sharon Kincaid, and has become infatuated with her. Sharon, he immediately notes, carries around a copy of the novel *Peyton Place*, and, in comparing it to the book *Arabia Deserta* that he is currently reading, it is at this point in the novel that Binx describes his former occupation with the "vertical search," "a time when this was the last book on earth I'd have chosen to read," as he instead read only "fundamental" books like *War and Peace* and scientific texts (69). Books like *Arabia Deserta* and *Peyton Place*, he implies, fall under the purview of the "horizontal" search. The modes of action in these two narratives may have consequences for Binx's interaction with Sharon.

The former book, a nonfiction narrative of a man's travels through the desert of the Arabian peninsula, was never adapted for film, and seems to have little influence on their interaction—although Binx does, two pages before he first mentions the novel, claim that when Sharon walked in one morning "I heard a sougning sound in my ears like a desert wind" (67). But the latter novel and its film adaptation, which were wildly

popular when they were released in the late 1950's<sup>9</sup>, are prime candidates for providing the two with shared, familiar modes of action. Indeed, the content of *Peyton Place*, a salacious story of the hidden sexual mores of a small town, seems quite similar to Binx's initial interaction with Sharon, whom he lusts after and describes as "one of those village beauties of which the South is so prodigal" (65). The tone of those lusty descriptions, while never overtly ironical, is so farcical as to seem a parody of something more genuinely salacious. Although "she is not really beautiful," "her bottom is so beautiful that once as she crossed the room to the cooler I felt my eyes smart with tears of gratitude" (65). Describing her small-town heritage, he says, "From the sleaziest house in the sleaziest town, from the loins of redneck pa and rockface ma spring these lovelies, these rosy-cheeked Anglo-Saxon lovelies." He even describes his envy for the "kidney-shaped" cushion she keeps against the small of her back when sitting (67).

*Peyton Place*, however, is Sharon's choice in literature rather than his, and while he initially "took [her choice] to be a good omen," he eventually changes his mind, declaring, "My Sharon should not read this kind of stuff" (67). It is at this point that, while he continues to lust for her, he decides to "keep a Gregory Peckish sort of distance" toward her, and their interaction begins to shift into modes of action from movies, characters, and actors that are more familiar to him (68). Later, he takes Sharon out for a drive with him to meet a potential buyer of a patch of land he inherited from his father. His flirtation with her is awkward: she refers to him as "Mr. Bolling," and when she helps him negotiate a higher offer for his property, he offers her a cut of the money as thanks,

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<sup>9</sup> Tom Vallance, "Hope Lange [Obituary]," *The Independent* (December 23, 2003). <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/obituaries/hope-lange-549138.html>.

which she refuses. Binx, unsure about his decision to sell the property and frustrated at his inability to gain Sharon's affection, longs for the assuredness of Clark Gable, who "knew how to seem to work and how to seem to forget about women and still move in such a way as to please women: stand asweat with his hands in his back pockets." By the end of their excursion, and after her rebuff of his offer, he has decided to adopt that cool distance: "I go home as the old Gable, asweat and with no thought for her and sick to death with desire" (96). This behavior seems to please Sharon, because it "makes her uneasy to keep up a conversation." Binx, by acting like Clark Gable, has found a mode of interaction that is familiar to both him and Sharon, but he hints that the affectation of his acting has placed him at a distance from her.

Sharon, for her part, seems to exhibit the same behavioral patterns as Binx. When refusing his offer to take a cut of the money from the sale, she "catches herself and speaks broadly on purpose," saying "Ain't nobody giving me any money. ... I got plenty money" (96). This affected aloofness is characteristic of her response to his behavior: as noted, she refers to him as "Mr. Bolling," and though he later describes his aching desire for her bare legs, "she finds nothing amiss in sitting in the little bucket seat with her knees doubled up in the sunshine, dress tucked under," implying that she is aware of his interest and is teasing him (95). Binx comments at one point that she "is sleepy-eyed and frumpy ... like snapshots of Ava Gardner when she was a high school girl" (93). Taken alongside his descriptions of her affectation, it seems that Binx understands that Sharon, too, is an actor. But his observation that she is uneasy with conversation indicates that her acting is also, like his, conducted with a certain hesitancy, and thus serves to place the

two of them at a distance—an observation that is borne out when they finally part:

“‘Listen!’ she cries, as far away as Eufala itself. ‘I had a wonderful time!’” (96).

Yet Binx realizes that, because they are both actors, it is possible for him to produce the desired results with her if he can effect the proper mode of familiar action. And so not long after their unsuccessful outing, he tells the reader, “I . . . set in motion my newest scheme conceived in the interests of money and love, my love for Sharon” (102). Binx invents a project to increase their business that will require some extra work, and asks Sharon to stay late. He slips carefully into that “Gregory Peckish sort of distance,” calling her “Miss Kincaid” and dictating instructions to her in a knowingly authoritative manner. Acting carefully in this role, his plan begins to work:

We work hard and as comrades, swept along by a partnership so strong that the smallest overture of love would be brushed aside by either of us as foolishness. *Peyton Place* would embarrass both of us now.

By six o’clock I become aware that it is time to modulate the key ever so slightly. From now on everything I do must exhibit a certain value in her eyes, a value, moreover, which she must begin to *recognize*.

Thus we send out for sandwiches and drink coffee as we work. Already the silences between us have changed in character, become easier. It is possible to stand at the window, loosen my collar and rub the back of my neck like Dana Andrews. And to become irritable with her: “No no no no, Kincaid, that’s not what I meant to say. Take five.” (105, emphasis in original)

Binx understands that the modes of action of *Peyton Place* are unsuitable to his romantic ends, and has identified instead a movie convention that is familiar to both of them and does suit those aims: that of the romantic tension between a man and a woman working alone in a professional setting. And he explicitly spells out a necessary attribute of that mode of action: it must be *recognizable*, so that everything Binx does exhibits “a certain value in her eyes” that serves to cue her in to their respective roles within that mode. When Binx notes that it is possible for him to act like Dana Andrews (a prolific American film actor of the 1940’s and 50’s), he is marking the successful communication of those cues.

(One of Andrews’s most well-known roles happens to have been in the Western *The Ox-Bow Incident*, a favorite film of Binx’s (79-80). In that role, Andrews plays the sympathetic, confident and articulate young Donald Martin, who is falsely accused by a posse of rustling cattle from and murdering a man named none other than Kincaid. Martin writes an eloquent letter to his beloved wife, handing it to a sympathetic member of the mob before he is gruesomely lynched: when the young boy commanded to hit the horse out from under Martin cannot bring himself to do it, the horse simply walks out and Martin is left to strangle before he is finally shot. If this allusion is intentional, it lends an air of dark comedy to Binx’s role-playing, for he does seem to see himself as channeling the stoic nobility of that fated lover.)

Sharon, again, indicates her complicity in the act. After the two return from “taking five,” he tells her to “Try it again,” and notes that “she looks at me ironically and with lights in her eyes . . . . She is getting it. She is alert: there is something afoot” (106).

Binx has found a recognizable mode of action and contrived the behavior of that mode in Sharon. Understanding his commitment to that mode, he resolves, despite his overwhelming desire, not to make a move on her. Wallowing in his success, he cries to the reader, “O Rory Rory Rory”—seemingly an invocation of a movie star, which is confirmed when he later notes that during the war, “I was shot through the shoulder—a decent wound, as decent as any ever inflicted on Rory Calhoun or Tony Curtis” (106, 126). Binx reveals the information about his wound to Sharon through playful banter when she inquires about his scar, rebuffing her query at first through stoic jokes before he finally answers. When his method of delivery evokes the appropriately awed reaction from Sharon, he again invokes the movie star gods: “O Tony. O Rory. You never had it so good with direction. Nor even you Bill Holden, my noble Will. O ye morning stars together. Farewell forever, malaise” (127). Binx, it seems, has discovered how to conquer his alienation by becoming a successful actor in his own movie.

After these tentative successes with Sharon, Binx’s role-playing and invocations of the movie gods only increase. The scene where Binx reveals the source of his scar occurs after the two have just been in a minor car accident, and when Binx returns to the car to fetch his whisky bottle and nearly falls down, he says, “She is right there to catch me, Rory. I put both my arms around her” (128). And when, later, Binx understands that he has finally progressed far enough in their stoic mode of interaction that he can make his move, it occurs in an unabashedly Hollywood fashion:

“I just want to tell you what’s on my mind.”

“What?”

“You. You and your sweet lips. Sweetheart, before God I can’t think about anything in the world but putting my arms around you and kissing your sweet lips.”

“O me.”

“Do you care if I do?”

“I don’t care if you do.” (133)

Indeed, though it is not usually as overt as this passage, it is difficult to find any instances in which Binx’s interaction with his romantic interests is not marked by acting and the invocation of movie roles. This acting extends to his interaction with each of the three secretaries he employs over the course of the novel, as well as with his least trivial interest, his cousin Kate Cutrer. Kate is the only character to partially share and understand Binx’s malaise, and Binx frequently describes their interactions as taking the form of self-conscious role-playing, if not always that of movie characters. At one point he notes, “She sounds better but she is not. She is trapping herself, this time by being my buddy .... In spite of everything she finds herself, even now, playing out the role” (63). Kate herself describes feeling compelled to behave like an “actress” for the Doctor who oversees her behavioral medications (114). When she and Binx finally leave town in the last act of the novel, she describes their affair in terms of characters from a comic book (199).

During that trip, they finally consummate their relationship. Binx informs the reader of this by way of an apology to the movie god: “I’ll have to tell you the truth, Rory, painful though it is. Nothing would please me more than to say that I had done ... what you do”—that is, virtuously tuck the young heroine in bed and go to sleep in the

other room (199). Yet though Binx professes failure to Rory, it becomes apparent in his admission that he has in fact recovered something. For more important than whether he succeeds in his acting is the fact that his failure now occurs *within some familiar framework* in which he can either succeed or fail, but cannot be alienated. And so indeed Binx notes, “The highest moment of a malaisians’s life can be that moment when he manages to sin like a proper human (Look at us ... we’re sinning! We’re succeeding! We’re human after all!)” (200-1).

We can now posit a tentative answer to the question of why Binx is a moviegoer: movies, through their limitless stock of comprehensible modes of action, can recreate for Binx crucial parts of the narrative intelligibility that his life lacks. By adopting their narrative content as his own, Binx has some understanding of how he should act. But more than just providing *some* mode of action, the movies furnish Binx with modes that are widely recognizable within his culture, so that the people he interacts with also understand—consciously or not—how to relate to him as characters within those modes. By acting (successfully or not) within the frameworks that his culture has produced and certified through the movies as valid narrative modes, Binx is able to feel that he has reclaimed his humanity.

It may initially seem appealing, as indicated in Chapter 2, to conclude that Percy’s Binx Bolling is an intentional depiction of precisely the Kierkegaardian aesthete that MacIntyre sees as a central character of modern emotivist culture. There seems to be much evidence to support this conclusion. MacIntyre notes that “at the heart of the aesthetic way of life, as Kierkegaard characterizes it, is the attempt to lose the self in the

immediacy of present experience. The paradigm of aesthetic expression is the romantic lover who is immersed in his own passion” (40). Binx, as noted, is a sensory consumer like his alienated forbears. And Percy seems to go out of his way to depict Binx’s desire for romantic passion, which is the paradigmatic expression of that consumption. Further, Binx shares the aesthete’s specialty: recognizing phoniness—that is, unmasking illusory moral claims.

Yet the character of the aesthete provides neither a complete nor an entirely correct characterization of Binx. The behavior of the aesthete is not precisely characteristic of Binx because while he is indeed a sensory consumer, he is never fully immersed in his sensory consumption. Although he professes to genuinely enjoy his consumption, his ironic descriptions—particularly those of women—place him at a distance from it. Binx, in other words, is content to *act* and even *speak* to the reader as if he were in the throes of romantic passion—that paradigmatic expression of the aesthete—but at no point does his actual *attitude* toward women or anything else indicate passion. Constantly noting physical flaws alongside the beauty of the women he lusts after, Binx cannot even in the moment commit to his professed romance. Shortly after he and Sharon have become openly affectionate towards one another, he notes, “The remarkable discovery forces itself upon me that I do not love her so wildly as I loved her last night” (135). A characterization of Binx as an aesthete fails to grasp his distance from the sensory experience—and, further, does not account for why his consumption so characteristically takes the form of his adoption of movie roles. Some other characterization, then, must be furnished for Binx.

After describing the theory of emotivism, MacIntyre poses the questions, “What then would the social world *look* like, if seen with emotivist eyes? And what would the social world *be* like, if the truth of emotivism came to be widely presupposed?” (24). The answer, he says, should be clear in a general form from the theory, “but the social detail depends in part on the nature of particular social contexts.” Those social particularities turn out to be most clearly manifest in the *characters* that are “the moral representatives of their culture ... because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world” (28). The three characters that MacIntyre claims are the moral representatives of modern emotivist culture are the manager, the therapist, and the aesthete.

The character of the aesthete, according to MacIntyre, was most clearly and fully articulated through Kierkegaard’s character “A.” Yet he notes that the aesthete was also depicted (if not named as such) in Henry James’s *The Portrait of a Lady* and Diderot’s *Le Neveu de Rameau*. While each character operates in different social times and settings, these settings share the common factor that “they are environments in which the problem of enjoyment arises in the context of leisure, in which large sums of money have created some social distance from the necessity of work,” and so “the rich aesthete with a plethora of means searches restlessly for ends on which he may employ them,” especially “by contriving behavior in others that will be responsive to their wishes, that will feed their sated appetites” (25, 24). MacIntyre notes, however, that “This is not to say that the realm of what Kierkegaard called the aesthetic is restricted to the rich and to their close

neighbors; the rest of us often share the attitudes of the rich in fantasy and aspiration” (25).

An immediate feature of this description of the aesthete that distinguishes it from Binx’s social setting is the different role of wealth. While it is true that Binx has a sufficient amount of money to have “created some social distance from the necessity of work,” he is not wealthy, and feels little affinity for the aspirations to a wealthy lifestyle pushed on him by characters like Walter Wade. Work is in fact a central interest and preoccupation of Binx’s, even if it does not take the form of a struggle for his material survival. But more importantly, the culture of which Binx is a part does not emphasize an aspiration towards the attitudes of the rich in the same degree as does that of Kierkegaard’s, James’s, and Diderot’s aesthetes. Rather, *The Moviegoer* is set during the great ascendancy of the middle class in the South, and though Binx does, as noted, have family and acquaintances with “some aristocratic pretensions,” he prefers to associate with secretaries and other characters who are middle class both in status and aspiration. For members of this middle class, the question of material subsistence is not central, but neither is the question of boredom and leisure a preoccupation to anywhere near the degree that it is for the rich aesthete. The member of the middle class is instead much closer to Percy’s description both in the novel and in his nonfiction: a “model citizen” living a productive life in “the victorious secular city.”

A second distinction follows from MacIntyre’s own criticism of Kierkegaard’s philosophy. Kierkegaard posits two opposed ways of life, the aesthetic and ethical. The ethical is that way which accepts authority and moral obligation, so that in contrast to the

paradigmatic mode of the aesthetic—the passionate lover—the paradigmatic mode of the ethical “is marriage, a state of commitment and obligation through time” (40). On Kierkegaard’s account, one must make a “radical choice” to live one way or the other. Yet MacIntyre argues that there is a “deep internal inconsistency” between the notion of the “radical choice” and that of the ethical way of life. One could not consistently *choose* to accept the authority of principles freely and arbitrarily, or else they will not have any authority. “How I feel at any given moment is irrelevant to the question of how I must live,” MacIntyre argues, and so the notion that you are free to abandon principles whenever it suits you “would seem clearly to belong to Kierkegaard’s aesthetic realm” (41,2). The ethical way of life cannot be consistently lived as the result of a *radical choice* because the notion of a radical choice itself belongs to the aesthetic way of life.

MacIntyre argues that this incoherence is accounted for by “the conservative and traditional character of Kierkegaard’s account of the ethical”; Kierkegaard already seems to have “an unquestioning conception of *the* ethical,” a simple and universal set of moral principles that can easily be followed once they are chosen (43). Kierkegaard’s project, then, is to provide “a new practical and philosophical underpinning for an older and inherited way of life.” For Kierkegaard, the old tradition is still comprehensible, even if its rational justification has been lost. But one of the most notable features of *The Moviegoer* when examined through the MacIntyrean perspective is that the old traditional way is *never* given a coherent articulation; even Aunt Emily can only seem to grasp eloquently but uncertainly for it by quoting Marcus Aurelius and citing grandiose notions of manhood and heroism. If conceived of by some character in *The Moviegoer*, then, a

project of producing a rational justification for the old tradition would not only meet with failure, but would not even have a clear understanding of what it was attempting to justify. So while Kierkegaard considers the ethical and aesthetic ways of life to be in conflict, a modern defendant of the aesthetic cannot be in active opposition to the ethical in the same manner that he would have been in the social setting of Kierkegaard, for the ethical no longer even has a clear articulation of itself which can be coherently opposed.

In contrast to the state of ethical principles in Kierkegaard's culture, MacIntyre argues, "In our own culture the influence of the notion of radical choice appears in our dilemmas over *which* ethical principles to choose" (43). The modern pluralist self is "able to stand back from any and every situation ... and to pass judgment on it from a purely universal and abstract point of view that is totally detached from all social particularity." (31-2). This "democratized" self "can assume any role or take any point of view, because it *is* in and for itself nothing." In many pre-modern societies personal identity derives from membership in particular social roles, which gives life a sense of progress towards or away from a given end. But modernism is marked by the loss of this conception, which is generally regarded "as self-congratulatory gain, as the emergence of the individual freed" from the constraints of those bonds and the "superstitions of teleology" (34). What is celebrated and sovereign now is the "free and arbitrary choices of individuals" (35).

Correspondingly, where the notion of engagement in a profession which partially provided that social role "was once socially central, the notion of aesthetic consumption now is" (228). MacIntyre thus alludes to the final and most important feature that distinguishes the culture depicted in *The Moviegoer* from that of Kierkegaard's aesthete:

the far more influential and pervasive role of mass culture. In *The Moviegoer*, mass culture has more than just moved beyond the purview of the small upper class—it has in fact permeated the daily life of everyone to the extent that, as shown, it has begun to displace and determine people’s own senses of how they should act. And so in addition to MacIntyre’s list of three characters of modern emotivist culture, a fourth begins to emerge: the *actor*.

As noted, the aesthetic way of life can today no longer be in direct opposition to the ethical in the manner that Kierkegaard depicted it, because the ethical lacks any coherent public articulation of itself which can be opposed. But MacIntyre implies that even in Kierkegaard’s time the two ways were not so opposed as he contended—for MacIntyre’s objection to the notion of “radical choice” is precisely that one supposedly must *choose* to follow the ethical, but that the *radical choice* is itself an action characteristic of the aesthetic way of life. MacIntyre seems to hint, then, that one can follow some simulacrum of the ethical way of life from an aesthetic mode of being. The apparent incoherence of this notion is resolved by understanding that the consumption of the aesthetic mode need not necessarily be passionate; rather, one may *act* as a person in the ethical mode would, behaving as if under the authority of long-term commitments and obligations, but then simply choose to abandon those commitments for some others. The aesthete in this scenario may appear at any given point to be in the ethical mode, but a larger history of his life would show no ends towards which he was progressing and no consistency in his attitudes—that is, no narrative unity to his actions; and hence he would

be understood more properly to belong to the aesthetic mode. The aesthete who is a consumer of ethical ways of being is embodied in the character of the actor.

As with MacIntyre's note that the realm of the aesthetic is not "restricted to the rich and to their close neighbors," the realm of the actor is not restricted specifically to those who are actors by profession. Rather, just as "the rest of us often share the attitudes of the rich in fantasy and aspiration," it is true at least in the context of the novel that many non-professional actors share the attitudes of actors in fantasy and aspiration, whether they are aware of it or not—for while almost every character in the novel behaves like an actor, only Binx and Kate have a self-awareness of this that is more than marginal (and at times ironic). But a curious paradox seems to emerge: an actor *qua* actor is a person who is devoted to becoming *someone else*—typically someone besides an actor and certainly besides himself.<sup>10</sup> Any attitudes or behaviors typical of an actor (say, narcissism or a penchant for dramatic flair) are incidental to his or her role *qua* actor. The actor, then, has no behavior in and of himself because, as MacIntyre said of the modern self, the actor "*is in and for itself nothing*" (32). The actor, that is, aspires to be not an actor; and so the person aspiring to be an actor aspires to be a person aspiring to be not an actor. Aside from the problem of this paradox, a practical question emerges: what tangible attitudes and behaviors can there be in the character of the actor that could even be aspired to?

As described, MacIntyre notes that "At the heart of the aesthetic way of life, as Kierkegaard characterizes it, is the attempt to lose the self in the immediacy of present

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<sup>10</sup> Postmodernist fare such as *Synecdoche, NY*, *Extras*, and *Tropic Thunder* aside.

experience. The paradigm of aesthetic expression is the romantic lover who is immersed in his own passion” (40). The paradigm of the actor, by contrast, is the immersion in the *actions* of the romantic lover, which must appear as a successful portrayal through the recognizability of its behavior to others, and subsequently through its success in furthering other actors’ portrayal of corresponding characters. The actor, then, is devoted not to *losing* but to *finding* the self in the immediacy of present experience. While the actor, in his similarity to the aesthete, may profess to be an expert in the unmasking of moral fictions, he betrays by his behavior a need to grasp at some narrative mode of life. Thus the actor is, like the aesthete, a character who stands over and above any social particularities; but he is additionally and inconsistently a character who still grasps for the ethical and the socially particular.

The actor understands that he is no one nowhere, but sees that this allows him also to be anyone anywhere, and so he becomes someone somewhere by consuming the social particulars provided by the narrative structures of dramas. He floats from one narrative mode to the next, always immersed in some way of being; but his rejection of the theoretical underpinnings of the narrative mode of life forces him to reject the narrative *unity* of a life, and so he can and must never commit to any of the narrative modes that he tries on. MacIntyre here might object that precisely because of that lack of narrative unity to his life, the actor must be *losing* rather than *finding* the self. The distinction to be made is that the actor *regards* himself as finding rather than losing the self through acting. Through its affirmation of stories, he sees acting as various characters in various stories to be a recovery of the narrative mode—but he is wrong, as we shall see.

The actor may be consciously aware of none of these matters, for the most successful actor is the one who immerses himself so completely in his role that he ceases to understand that he is acting. Most of the characters in *The Moviegoer*, as noted, behave as if they were movie characters, but exhibit no apparent awareness of it. They have not merely immersed themselves in their roles—they were never aware in the first place of being actors. But to understand the possibility of an actor losing himself in a role is precisely to understand MacIntyre's likely objection that actor truly *does* lose the self through his narrative immersion. He may, at some conscious or subconscious level, feel that he has found an authentic humanity in his ability to act as if he were a character in a familiar narrative, but if he truly succeeds in doing so then he has lost his own self.

The character of the actor embodies an understanding that humans must operate in a narrative mode, even if and when they consciously deny it. And so in its deep internal inconsistency the character of the actor also embodies the inherent failure of an aesthetic mode devoted to immersion in narratives; for simply being in *some* narrative mode is always the same as being in *any* and thus *no* mode. The narrative mode can only find its coherence through being lived in its entirety, from start to finish. The actor fails to understand that unless he adheres to one story, his life will dissolve into a series of fragmentary and inauthentic episodes. And since the actor cannot offer an intelligible account of his life's actions, we come full circle to the realization that the actor is, by definition, not the author of his own story, and thus lacks a crucial element of his self.

It is because Binx grasps this lack of authorship that he senses phoniness in the characters around him who appear to be acting. He understands that the person who,

through acting, feels on some level that he has found how to become someone somewhere must really be no one nowhere. And it is for this reason also that Binx's acting is always, regardless of what he may profess in the throes of his portrayal, heavily ironic. The moviegoer is the person who is on to the fact that everyone including himself is an actor, and longs to quash himself of that self-awareness, but cannot. And hence we arrive at the crucial fact that Binx's acting never does seem to truly bring him out of his despair. Even when his role-playing is successful—when he and the other actors are convinced of his portrayal—he never professes for more than a moment to have shaken the despair. It is only that, for those briefest of moments, his immersion in the role gives the illusion that he has truly become someone somewhere.

Yet there are other moments in the novel when he does genuinely seem to have shaken the malaise. For all his ironic detachment and dread of everydayness, Binx is unabashed in describing his sense of the “mystery of finding myself alive at such a time and place” (38). He in fact regularly expresses a sense of wonder at the basic feel of ordinary existence—such as the beauty of late summer afternoons (51). These expressions of awe raise anew the potential for means of recovery. These means will have further implications for our understanding of narrative immersion and intelligibility, and it is to them that we turn next.

#### 4. The Singularities of Time and Place

The previous chapter focused on the extent to which Binx Bolling's despair can be understood as his life lacking narrative intelligibility, and his moviegoing as an attempt to recover it by acting as if he were in a movie. Alasdair MacIntyre argues that "It is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives that we live out that the form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others" (212). Thus, "man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions, essentially a story-telling animal. He is not essentially, but becomes through his history, a teller of stories that aspire to truth. But the key question for men is not about their own authorship; I can only answer the question 'What am I to do?' if I can answer the prior question 'Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?'" (216). The previous chapter can be understood, then, as arguing that Binx attempts to understand what he should do by searching for stories of which he finds himself a part. But the conclusion was reached that this attempt ultimately leads Binx into a game of make-believe that even he seems to understand is phony. If Binx is searching for stories of which he finds himself a part, the question arises as to why he is unable to find himself truly a part of any of them.

The answer must partially be a matter of authorship—that is, the reason Binx is not a part of these stories is because they are *fictional*, and ipso facto he cannot be truly a part of them. There is a measure of truth to this hypothesis (an issue which will be explored more fully in Chapter 5), yet MacIntyre notes that at least in classical societies "the chief means of moral education [was] the telling of stories," and as a result of the

continuing influence of those societies it is still “natural ... to think of the self in a narrative mode” despite the theoretical dissolution of that mode (121, 206). On MacIntyre’s account, humans inherently construe their lives through narratives, and part of the task of the previous chapter was to demonstrate that, moreover, Percy’s novel depicts modern society as continuing to attempt to construe an understanding of human life through the telling and reading of stories. The central question, then, as MacIntyre notes, must not be about authorship, for people have in other cultures been able to successfully learn from fictional narrative structures by grasping and partially adopting them as their own. What, then, is absent from Binx’s life and experience of moviegoing that prevents movies from being able to genuinely inform his own unintelligible narrative?

Robert Eaglestone, in reviewing the work of the new wave of ethical criticism of the 1980’s and 90’s, gives a clue as to what may be incomplete in our understanding of narrative intelligibility thus far. He offers three broad criticisms of the “neo-Aristotelian” wing of ethical criticism of which he considers MacIntyre to be a part, and while two of these give the impression that Eaglestone overlooked most of MacIntyre’s work,<sup>11</sup> one is

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<sup>11</sup> Eaglestone’s first criticism is that neo-Aristotelian work “takes up a strong mimeticist position, suggesting that ‘we’ and art are, in deep ways, the same .... Of course, this is the illusion created ... by the traditional view of the realist novels of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries” (602). In fact, the literary works that MacIntyre examines as having moral content almost exclusively predate the realist novel. But the more important objection is that MacIntyre would consider realist works to have mimetic capabilities because humans *do* inherently make sense of their own lives in a manner similar to the form of the realist novel—that is, through intelligible narratives.

Eaglestone may respond with the criticism he makes later of *all* modern ethical criticism: that it “seem[s] to rely on an idea that literature offers a certain sort of truth, a sort of positivist knowledge which can offer—or be made to offer—axioms or propositions that correspond, even if not in a strict way to some form of reality,” when it should be focusing on the “world-revealing” aspect of art (605). It is conceivably a legitimate position not to be interested in whether a work of art says something true about the world, but

legitimate and useful for this inquiry. Eaglestone argues that the neo-Aristotelian approach “misread[s] art as philosophy”: “That is, works become sources for the exploration of ethical issues rather than autonomous artworks: precisely what makes them such good examples (their inextricable complexity) is necessarily reduced in the act of reading them” (603). This criticism is perhaps unfair to the extent that it may be directed at MacIntyre, for Eaglestone is considering him along with scholars whose work is primarily in the field of literary theory, while MacIntyre’s work is explicitly on moral theory and just happens to have implications for literary theory. MacIntyre’s exploration of narratives, in other words, is not primarily about *literature*, and so should not be construed as aspiring to give a complete account of it. Yet Eaglestone is correct that when MacIntyre’s theory *is* applied to literature—and, as a theory of the moral significance of narratives, it is inevitable that it would be—something is incomplete in its account of the content of stories. If this is the case, then that incompleteness will have significant implications for MacIntyre’s theory as well; for since his argument is that people can be morally educated through the examples provided by fictional stories, a full account of

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then Eaglestone’s second criticism becomes difficult to make sense of: he complains also that the idea that narratives are the same structure that shapes human lives is false because it misses “the jaggedness and incompleteness of life”—the fact that life is filled with random and senseless events that prevent it from having the smooth shape of stories (604). This is an important point in and of itself, but it is of crucial interest to MacIntyre himself, and he devotes several chapters of *After Virtue* to exploring and refuting it—none of which are addressed by Eaglestone.

But the more important point is that Eaglestone in this latter criticism is taking precisely the same mimeticist position in which he accuses the neo-Aristotelians of being too mired. Art, he seems to take it, can and should represent real life; he simply takes a different position on which art accurately does so. This seems to be a sensible debate to have; for Eaglestone’s central question is about how “ethics and aesthetics are one and the same”—but what relevance can art have to ethical questions if we do not attempt to ascertain whether it correctly represents human affairs?

that moral education must strive also for a full account of the experience of reading fictional stories.

What exactly might be missing in MacIntyre's account may become clearer if we examine that moral education itself. According to MacIntyre, narrative history is the "essential genre for the characterization of human actions," because in order to provide such an intelligible characterization, we need account for precisely the set of factors given in a narrative: an agent's beliefs, intentions, settings, and the long-term history of his or her actions, intentions, and purposes (208). Yet suppose we possessed such a complete (or nearly complete) narrative history of some agent. We would then be able to answer questions about why the agent took such-and-such an action in the past: we would, in short, possess an understanding of the agent's character that seemingly equaled the agent's own understanding. Yet surely our understanding of the agent's *self* could not be equivalent solely because we possessed such a narrative account; we could not, that is, fully understand *what it is like to be* the agent simply from having an account of his or her effective beliefs, intentions, purposes, and so on.

This full understanding is a matter of great practical importance, for while MacIntyre notes that narratives are the "essential genre for characterizing human action," he explains at great length that they cannot offer predictive power of an agent's future behavior. MacIntyre offers several reasons for this unpredictability, the most important of which for our purposes is the fact that an agent often cannot predict what his own future actions will be because "when I have not yet made up my mind which of two or more alternative and mutually exclusive courses of action to take I cannot predict which I shall

take” (95).<sup>12</sup> It must be noted that, if MacIntyre is correct that it is impossible to completely predict an agent’s future actions, then no account of an agent—narrative or otherwise—will be able to furnish such predictive capability.<sup>13</sup> However, it should be clear from this problem of undecidability that there must be *some* element possessed by the agent that is responsible for deciding his future actions (even if he cannot know in advance what those actions will be); but this element, furthermore, is *not* present in any seemingly complete narrative account of his past actions that may be possessed by someone else, or even by himself. What might that element be? In other words, we have concluded that narrative elements such as settings, intentions, and beliefs can provide an intelligible account of an agent’s actions; but what is it that makes those understandable as *his* actions rather than those of someone else who may read and understand perfectly a full narrative account of his life?

One may be tempted to immediately supply the answer: what makes the agent’s actions his own is the agent’s agency itself—*his* free will, his inextricability from the facts of *his* own history, his inseparability from *his* own body, and his subsequent sole authorship over *his* rather than some other person’s actions. But to supply this answer is simply to beg the question of how we may come to understand the agency of others with the same completeness that we seem able to possess in understanding the narrative history that determines their range of possible and plausible actions. As we shall see, this

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<sup>12</sup> MacIntyre notes that while it may be objected that someone *else* might be able, through some general laws of social science, to predict my actions when I cannot, it is still the case that he cannot predict his own actions, and hence also cannot predict the impact of his actions on my own. Hence “The unpredictability of my future by me does indeed generate an important degree of unpredictability as such” (96).

<sup>13</sup> This is the basis of MacIntyre’s extensive critique of the claims of “managerial expertise,” conducted primarily in Chapter 8 of *After Virtue*, “The Character of Generalizations in Social Science and their Lack of Predictive Power.”

question poses both a set of theoretical problems for MacIntyre and a corresponding set of practical problems for Binx Bolling. In the former case, we may note that the question of how to understand the agency of a character in a narrative (not necessarily fictional) may give some sense to Eaglestone's complaint that ethical criticism is too focused on "positivist" accounts of the propositional knowledge produced by literature—for another way to state his criticism is that though we may in some instance have produced a correct account of the actions of a character (again, not necessarily fictional), we have not therefore accounted for the full lived experience of that character. So also we have not accounted for the crucial issue of how some reader might come to adopt the understanding of that character's lived narrative into their own embodied history. We cannot, in other words, understand *what it is like to act* like some character until we understand *how it feels to be* him or her.

It is precisely this problem that confronts Binx Bolling. Binx, as argued in the previous chapter, puts on a number of different masks of play-acted roles, many of them overtly from movies and some simply taken from his society's stock of approved behaviors. For instance, he proposes marriage to Kate Cutrer, but she senses that the proposal is motivated neither by passion nor by any sense of long-term commitment. She is aware of his ironic distance and his play-acting, claiming, "The only way you could carry it off is as another one of your ingenious little researches," and she turns him down, saying, "You remind me of a prisoner in the death house who takes a wry pleasure in doing things like registering to vote. Come to think of it, all your gaiety and good spirits have the same death house quality. No thanks. I've had enough of your death house

pranks” (193). Kate here unknowingly echoes Binx’s comment to the reader after a gay and good-spirited conversation with his cousin Nell Lovell: “We part laughing and dead” (102). Binx’s actions, she understands, are just as phony and lacking in authenticity as everyone else’s—if not more so because of his self-awareness. Binx never directly discusses his penchant for irony, but he does discuss his detachment from the world, explaining at one point, “What is the malaise? You ask. The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, the world and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world and you no more able to be in the world than Banquo’s ghost” (120). It seems that part of the reason that Binx cannot act authentically is because he does not know how to *be in the world*.

Yet there are many moments when Binx *is* grounded in the world—entranced by it, intricately attached to and part of it. Binx spent one summer in college doing medical research with a friend in a laboratory, at first working productively,

But then a peculiar thing happened. I became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory. The August sunlight came streaming in the great dusty fanlights and lay in yellow bars across the room. The old building ticked and creaked in the heat. Outside we could hear the cries of summer students playing touch football. In the course of an afternoon the yellow sunlight moved across old group pictures of the biology faculty. I became bewitched by the presence of the building; for minutes at a stretch I sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight. I called Harry’s attention to the presence but he shrugged and went on with his work. He was absolutely unaffected by the

singularities of time and place. His abode was anywhere. ... [H]e is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. (51-2)

Binx subsequently quit research and “spent the rest of the vacation in the quest of the spirit of summer,” and so also he spent the remainder of his college career: “propped on the front porch of the fraternity house, bemused and dreaming, watching the sun shine through the Spanish moss, lost in the mystery of finding myself alive at such a time and place” (38). It seems to be only in these moments that Binx has some genuine and unironic understanding—however incomplete—of who he is and how he should act: at the very least, he understands that contemplating the “mystery” that surrounds him is central to who he is; and he also understands as a consequence of this commitment that he cannot be a scientist.

Binx, it seems, needs to feel genuinely a part of the world before he can understand how to act as a member of it, and he grounds himself in the world not through an identification with some narrative, but through an aesthetic identification with particular moments of experience. MacIntyre claims, “I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” But for Binx, this question can only be answered if he can answer the prior question, “Of what *world* or *worlds* do I find myself a part?” And indeed, the attempt to answer this question is one of his central preoccupations, manifesting as his fascination with “the singularities of time and place.”

Binx does not lie when he informs us, “I always know where I am and what time it is,” for he constantly indicates his awareness of the particular look and feel of where and when he is (84). For instance, arriving at the Mardi Gras parade with Kate, he says, “It is quite dark now. The street lights make golden spaces inside the wet leaves of the live oaks. A south wind carries the smell of coffee from the Tchoupitoulas docks” (61). Exploring new places is in fact the nature of Binx’s “horizontal” search, which takes the form of “wandering seriously” through different neighborhoods around New Orleans. He seems to have a strong connection with his sense of place in his own neighborhood, Gentilly, of which he offers a beautiful and lengthy description: “Evening is the best time in Gentilly. There are not so many trees and the buildings are low and the world is all sky. The sky is a deep bright ocean full of light and life. ... Station wagons and Greyhounds and diesel rigs rumble toward the Gulf Coast, their fabulous tail-lights glowing like rubies in the darkening east ...,” and so on (72). Moreover, Binx has a strong preference for the sense of *this* particular place over others, saying of his neighborhood, “Except for the banana plants in the patios and the curlicues of iron on the Walgreen drugstore one would never guess it was part of New Orleans. Most of the houses are either old-style California bungalows or new-style Daytona cottages. But this is what I like about it. I can’t stand the old world atmosphere of the French Quarter or the genteel charm of the Garden District” (6).

It seems that Binx indeed does feel more a part of some worlds than others. Moreover, there are many of these competing worlds just within the city of New Orleans. In his 1980 essay “Why I Live Where I Live,” Walker Percy discusses the problem of

place, and the tendency of particular regions to have or lack a strong sense of place—he calls such regions “places” and “nonplaces,” respectively. Places, such as the South, can be “haunted” and “suffocating” for most writers. Nonplaces, such as Connecticut, can offer a comfortable alternative, but are prone to alienate a writer. Instead, Percy says, he prefers Covington, Louisiana, a “nonplace in a certain relation to a place (New Orleans),” which is “very much . . . a place, drenched in its identity, its history, and its rather self-conscious exotica” (3,6). This makes Covington a “pleasant backwater lost, but not too lost, in the interstices of place and time” (8).

This rhetoric of balance is strikingly similar to Binx’s own description of how he prefers the nondescript suburban Gentilly over the parts of the city with a more distinct sense of place. His distaste for the “old world atmosphere” of the French Quarter echoes Percy’s own concern about living too much in the presence of the “ghosts of the old South” (4). And in Percy’s statement that “total placement for a writer would be to live in a place like Charleston or Mobile, where one’s family has lived for two hundred years,” we gain the sense that Binx’s distaste for that “old world atmosphere” results from his alienation from the traditional ways that they represent.

Binx, we have seen, cannot make any sense of those old ways and how they could structure his life; but while he has little problem continuing to behave in accordance with them, it seems that he is deeply hostile to their aesthetic embodiment in the worlds of the old New Orleans neighborhoods. Yet we have also noted that he experiences not just a sense of disconnection from certain places, but a strong sense of connection with others, such as the old building of the laboratory. If Binx’s alienation from the narrative modes

of one world manifests as a visceral hostility to its aesthetics, then perhaps his aesthetic identification with other worlds suggests a way for him to recover a corresponding narrative mode.

Later, Binx's uncle asks him to make a business trip to Chicago, and we discover that at least part of the reason Binx is so keenly aware of time and place is because what world he is a part of seems to deeply determine the range of possibility for his sense of self:

Chicago. Misery misery son of a bitch of all miseries. Not in a thousand years could I explain it to Uncle Jules, but it is no small thing for me to make a trip, travel hundreds of miles across the country by night to a strange place and come out where there is a different smell in the air and people have a different way of sticking themselves into the world. It is a small thing to him but not to me. It is nothing to him to close his eyes in New Orleans and wake up in San Francisco and think the same thoughts on Telegraph Hill that he thought on Carondelet Street. (99)

Part of his sense of place, Binx shows, is a sense of how people “stick themselves into the world.” This “genie-soul” or “spirit” of a place, as he also refers to it, seems to profoundly affect the nature of the thoughts that people think there (86, 201-6). How does the aesthetic sense of a place determine the very possibilities for *thinking* of the people who live there? And how does this aesthetic relationship offer Binx the possibility of recovering his place in the world?

To answer these questions, we must first gain a better understanding of Percy's views on language itself. Though thinking is a personal process and language an

interpersonal process, the two are closely related, as each is necessary for the other—so an examination of Percy’s theory of language may provide insight into his view on the relationship between thinking and the aesthetic sense of place. In his essay “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process” (as well as a number of others), Percy argues that the peculiarly symbolic and assertory nature of language—its claim that a symbol and that which it names are intricately linked—fails to be grasped in principle by Behaviorism and in practice by contemporary semantic studies. This identity between *symbol* and *thing symbolized* occurs not within the structure of the language itself but during the actual event in which it is asserted by a symbol-user (this insight came to him while contemplating the story of young Helen Keller’s first revelation that the word *water* being spelled onto her hand did not just have some causal relationship with the cold wet thing she simultaneously felt, but in fact *was* that very thing). But understanding the importance of “language events” is a beginning rather than an end for linguistic studies, because

Once it becomes clear that what is to be studied is not sentence forms but particular language events, it also becomes clear that the subject of investigation in this instance is not the sentence itself but the mode in which it is asserted. The sentence can be studied only by a formal science such as grammar or logic, but a sentence event is open to a rich empirical phenomenology that is wholly unprovided by what passes currently as semantics. Nor can a neo-behavioristic psychology make sense of assertory behavior; it can only grasp a sequence of space-time events which it attempts to correlate by constant functions. But assertion—the

giving of a name to a thing, *this is water*, or the declaring of a state of affairs, *the water is cold*—is not a sequence. It is a pairing or identification of word and thing, class and thing, thing and attribute, and so on. (215)

That “empirical phenomenology” of the “mode in which a language event is asserted” is quite close to what is at stake when Binx notes that his very thoughts are affected by where he is.

MacIntyre is concerned with a very similar set of questions, particularly whether or not human assertions can be fully grasped by a characterization purely of the “sequence of space-time events” involved. He argues that “sentences of the form ‘*X* believes that *p*’ (or for that matter, ‘*X* enjoys its being the case that *p*’ or ‘*X* fears that *p*’) have an internal complexity which is not truth-functional, which is to say that they cannot be mapped on to the predicate calculus; and in this they differ in a crucial respect from the sentences used to express the laws of physics” (83). MacIntyre offers this as one reason why any mechanistic science of human action must not make reference to beliefs, intentions and purposes. Percy also concludes that any such science must be incomplete; but if the argument offered thus far is correct, then even a MacIntyrean account of an agent’s beliefs, intentions and purposes (particularly in a narrative form) cannot offer an entirely complete account of their actions.

MacIntyre himself indicates where in his theory this incompleteness resides. In the final chapter of *After Virtue*, he concludes that the two contending modern theories of morality are that of liberal individualism—the notion of the self independent of social particulars and able to make its own free and arbitrary choices—and of some Aristotelian

tradition such as his own.<sup>14</sup> “The differences between the two,” he argues, “run very deep. They extend beyond ethics and morality to *the understanding of human action*,” (259, emphasis added). It is for that reason, he says, that his argument covers such a wide variety of issues, for the understanding of human action hinges on such fundamental concepts as *fact* itself. It was precisely because seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century empiricists and natural scientists rejected Aristotelian concepts that they decided to rid their conception of fact of such notions as intentions, purposes, and reasons for action. Due to their corresponding desire to rid facts of the bias of personal experience, they also introduced the concepts of observation and experiment in order to “enlarge the distance” between “*seems to me* and *is in fact*” (80).

Percy independently reaches the same conclusion as MacIntyre that a mechanistic science of human action must be incomplete, but he does so using the reason that such a science in principle must neglect the *assertory* character of particular language events. Yet although this reason is seemingly different from MacIntyre’s reason that such a science cannot account for intentions, beliefs, and purposes, we in fact find here a striking correspondence between MacIntyre’s and Percy’s claims: MacIntyre says on the one hand that statements of belief have an “internal complexity” such that they cannot be mapped onto the predicate calculus—that is, true-or-false propositions; while Percy argues that “the quasi identification events of symbolic behavior can be grasped only by a qualitative phenomenology. This qualitative scale must take account not only of true-or-

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<sup>14</sup> As with MacIntyre’s use of the term “tradition,” the term “liberal” here does not have exactly the same meaning or usage that it does in modern political debates, for MacIntyre argues that “modern conservatives are for the most part engaged in conserving only older rather than later versions of liberal individualism. Their own core doctrine is as liberal and as individualist as that of self-avowed liberals” (222).

false-or-nonsense statements (water is cold, water is dry, water is upside down), but also of various modes of magic identification” (205). Both men point to the inherent inability of mechanistic accounts of human action to account for non-propositional forms of human assertion. But it is in understanding that MacIntyre and Percy are both essentially discussing assertions that we in fact find a deep coherence between their respective claims: for beliefs, intentions, and purposes are of course *assertory* in nature; they bind an agent to his or her actions in the same way that a language event binds a symbol to what it symbolizes.

Percy’s interest is in exploring the qualitative nature of that bond, which always occurs as an experienced human event—in contrast on the one hand to “a formal science such as grammar or logic” that studies the sentence itself, and on the other hand to narratology, which studies the relationship itself between actions and beliefs, intentions, and purposes. It is precisely the vanquishing of the legitimacy of personal experience as described by MacIntyre that Percy takes to have spawned Behaviorism, and that is thus central to his account of modern alienation in both *The Moviegoer* and *The Message in the Bottle*. Percy is, in other words, exploring the very nature of the *seems to me* that is so crucial to the “internal complexity” of the belief-informed statements and actions that interest MacIntyre. Percy’s exploration of the “empirical phenomenology of the language event” thus turns out to be (albeit not intentionally) an attempt to account for part of the theoretical differences that MacIntyre puts at stake in the conflict between neo-Aristotelianism and liberal individualism.

Percy explores this “empirical phenomenology” first through the notion of the “world” of the symbol-user: “if one makes an empirical study of sign-using animals and symbol-using animals, one can only conclude that the latter have a world and the former do not” (202). Since the “organism who speaks has a world,” it “consequently has the task of living in the world,” and so “It becomes pertinent to ask in what mode he inserts himself in the world” (204). This mode he calls “*The being-in-the-world*,” which can manifest itself in practical situations (such as therapy) as the fact that “it sometimes seems more appropriate to ask a patient *Where are you?* rather than *How are you?*” The mode of “being-in-the-world” leads directly to the question of “modes of magic identification.”

A clue to what Percy means by “magic identification” comes from the distinct similarity between this term and the term “genie-soul” that he uses in *The Moviegoer*. That term is used to describe Binx Bolling’s sense of the *feel* of particular places, and, as noted, it also refers to the effect that that sense has on the very way that he forms his thoughts. What was elided in the previous quote about Binx’s summer in the laboratory turns out to offer further insight into the nature of that effect: after informing us that his lab partner “was absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time in place,” Binx elaborates, “It was all the same to him whether he catheterized a pig at four o’clock in the afternoon in New Orleans or at midnight in Transylvania. He was actually like one of those scientists in the movies who don’t care about anything but the problem in their heads” (52). Binx’s sense of place seems to color and even determine the range of possibility for his thoughts; more than just having *some* effect, it is crucial that Binx be

able to understand the aesthetic sense of the world in which he finds himself before he can evaluate the truth or falsity of empirical propositions within it. It is not just the case that some empirical set of propositions cannot in principle account for the phenomenological components of experience, but moreover that the phenomenological components preexist and therefore determine the possibilities for empirical propositions.

Robert Eaglestone makes a similar claim in discussing the aesthetic component of art, arguing that “the sense of a proposition lies before—that is, grounds—its truth or falsity” (599). He offers an example: “If the assertion or proposition is the sentence ‘the dog is brown’ while the propositional truth could be true or false (either the dog is brown or not), the sense of the proposition (that we live in a world where there are dogs, and we agree that there are dogs, and that they inescapably have certain colors which are matters of interest to us, and so on), its ontological condition, preexists the proposition.” The sense in which a proposition is *grounded* in the world before it is understood as true or false has crucial further implications for both MacIntyre’s and Percy’s theory.

Propositions—empirical or otherwise—are to be found most characteristically in conversations. Percy accordingly considers conversation to be the most fundamental manifestation of symbolic behavior, for it is the nature of a symbol not just that it symbolizes something but that this identification is *shared* between symbol-users (hence the title of the essay: “The Symbolic Structure of Interpersonal Process”). He also considers it to be a fundamental manifestation of the human process of understanding the world, arguing, “The existential modes of human living ... can be derived only from this very intercourse: one man encountering another man, speaking a word, and through it and

between them discovering the world and himself” (214). MacIntyre similarly considers conversation to be a distinctive form of human behavior, arguing that “conversation, understood widely enough, is the form of human transactions in general” (211). To make this point, he offers the following hypothetical: “I am standing waiting for a bus and the young man standing next to me suddenly says: ‘The name of the common wild duck is *Histrionicus histrionicus histrionicus*’” (210). In order to render this utterance intelligible, he argues, we must account for precisely those elements found in a narrative, the most significant of which for this inquiry are the purposes of the young man and the contexts within which we can make sense of those purposes. Thus MacIntyre considers conversations to be “enacted narratives.”

Percy seems to agree with MacIntyre’s account of conversation, arguing that “it is not sufficient to say that one man says something and another man hears and understands or misunderstands, agrees or disagrees, rejoices or is saddened. It is also necessary to ask and try to answer such questions as: In what mode does the listener receive the assertion of the speaker? In what mode does he affirm it?” (213-4). These “modes” could be considered in part to be those offered by MacIntyre’s narrative account, but Percy adds one more question: “In what way does his own mode of being-in-the-world color and specify everything he hears? Perhaps what needs most to be emphasized is the intimate relation between the phenomenological structure of intersubjectivity and being-in-the-world, on the one hand, and the empirical event of symbolic behavior, on the other.” That “empirical event of symbolic behavior” is what occurs when MacIntyre’s hypothetical man makes his curious utterance about the duck, and so if Percy is correct, then “the

phenomenological structure of intersubjectivity and being-in-the-world” has significant implications for our ability to render human actions intelligible in a narrative mode.

Yet MacIntyre seems to argue in precisely the opposite direction. The mistake made by 17<sup>th</sup>-century and 18<sup>th</sup>-century empiricists, on his account, was “to suppose that the observer can confront a fact face-to-face without any theoretical interpretation interposing itself” (79).<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, he says, any observation can and must be put to the test by some other theory, and so there is no such thing as an observation or description conducted prior to or without the interposition of some sort of theoretical interpretation. Moreover, observers themselves require theory in order to observe, for “What each observer takes himself or herself to perceive is identified and has to be identified by theory-laden concepts.”

But Percy seems to entirely agree with this point, arguing that symbol-using animals have a world and consequently have the task of living in that world, and so “the speaking organism disposes of the entire horizon symbolically. Gaps that cannot be closed by perception and reason are closed by magic and myth” (203). Percy makes the same point that there cannot exist such a thing as an uninterpreted human observation, and where MacIntyre identifies that all observations are theory-laden, Percy argues that some of those theories may take the form of “magic and myth.” He offers an example of what he deems “magic modes of identification”: “It does not suffice, for example, to say that the assertion of a Bororo tribesman of Brazil, ‘I am a parakeet,’ is false or nonsense.

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<sup>15</sup> MacIntyre argues that there is a radical incoherence between the simultaneous empiricist rejection of the distinction between *seems to me* and *is in fact* on the one hand and, on the other, the natural scientific project of placing a great distance between *seems* and *is* due to a distrust of the bias of *seems*.

Nor is it adequate to say that it is false scientifically but true mythically. It is necessary to understand the particular mode of identification of a particular language-event” (204).

MacIntyre notably offers a similar hypothetical observation by a pre-modern person:

“The twentieth-century observer looks into the night sky and sees stars and planets; some earlier observers saw instead chinks in a sphere through which the light beyond could be observed” (79). MacIntyre clearly also considers the “mode of identification” of a pre-modern assertion to be significant beyond the fact that the assertion is obviously false.

What is the distinction, then, between MacIntyre’s notion of “theories” that interpose on observations and Percy’s notion of “magic modes of identification”?

A hint at the answer comes from an examination of MacIntyre’s analysis of the nature of such competing theories. The crucial distinction that interests him is that between theories of fact based, on the one hand, on an Aristotelian understanding of mechanisms that makes reference to final causes and thus also to intentions, purposes, and reasons for actions; and on the other, on a non-Aristotelian understanding that avowedly does not. Yet MacIntyre notes elsewhere that actions understood with reference to purposes, intentions, and final causes must always make reference to some particular social framework located in some particular historical place and time. And it is just that sense of temporal, geographical, and social particularity that is at the heart of Percy’s descriptions through Binx of the “genie-souls” of places—and that is hence also a crucial component of his “magic modes of identification.” An account of the culturally particular includes an account of that culture’s understanding of which types of lives are worth or not worth living, which traits do or do not direct an individual toward such lives, how

those lives contribute to some shared social good, and so on. Percy's insight is thus that such an account must also include an aesthetic account of *how it feels to live* within that framework, and *how the world looks* both within that particular framework and in the particular time and place in which that framework is at home.

Percy and MacIntyre both offer an account of the relationship between observations on the one hand and the "theories" or "magic modes of identification" that are intermingled with them on the other. The core distinction between the latter two concepts, then, turns out to be that on MacIntyre's account theories interpose on observations, while on Percy's account the causal relationship runs in both directions. That is, on Percy's account it is certainly the case that observations and assertions are strongly affected by the particularities of the agent's culture and his or her place within it; but he argues that cultural particularities must therefore have some phenomenological components, and thus must in turn be affected by the aesthetic senses of *being-in-the-world* of the individuals who constitute that culture.

MacIntyre often discusses specific characters that were the focus of public discussion and embodied the moral theories of specific cultures—for example, the Public School Headmaster of Victorian England, the Professor in Wilhelmine Germany, and in modernity, the manager, the therapist, and the aesthete. His discussion focuses on the ways that such characters embody their culture's understanding of beliefs, purposes, effective reasons for action, and the relationship between them. This set of questions is crucial also for Percy, particularly in his discussion of how modern man can and does go about living in the world when his purposes and reasons for action are derived from the

view of himself as an organism to be provided for by behavioral theories. Thus, as previously noted, Percy is also interested in the modes of action of therapists, particularly in their conversations with patients who understand themselves in the organismic mode. Percy describes these respective modes as crucial components of the *being-in-the-world*, and to this extent he is, as noted, in agreement with MacIntyre on the elements necessary to characterize human action.

But if the argument thus far is correct, then it is also the case that characters—indeed, that any persons living within some cultural framework in some particular time and place—have a phenomenological component to their *being-in-the-world*. Any framework will have some embodied *feel*, some way that an individual who lives within it places themselves into the physical and sensory world—that is, whether you are a Public School Headmaster living in Victorian England or a Professor living in Wilhelmine Germany or a psychoanalyst living in Cold War-era New Orleans will not only determine your potentialities for action, but your potentialities for *being*, your very sense of *how it feels to live in the world*. This *being-in-the-world* will be affected both by the particularities of the modes of action available in a culture, and by the aesthetic particularities of the location and time in which a culture exists. The *being-in-the-world* of an aristocrat (or an ersatz aristocrat) living in Cold War-era New Orleans will be distinct from that of a psychoanalyst living in that same culture; and the *being-in-the-world* of the latter will in turn be distinct from that of another psychoanalyst living in Cold War-era Chicago or in 21<sup>st</sup>-century New Orleans.

A culture's moral framework defines the potential modes of *being-in-the-world* of those who live within it, and is also embodied in those *beings-in-the-world*; but because the causation runs in both directions, it is also the case that the phenomenological *beings-in-the-world* construed by the culture and restricted by its geographic and temporal particularity will partially define that culture's modes of intelligible action—and hence also will partially define the framework itself. The latter point is crucial to consider in the hypothetical case of a person who enters a culture that is completely alien to him. On MacIntyre's account as he presents it, a person with no understanding of the theoretical framework of an alien culture he or she witnesses would be entirely unable to render intelligible the actions he observes—unable, in other words, to understand the *beings-in-the-world* of the members of the alien culture. But if the argument thus far is correct, it would in fact be the case that the person *would* be capable of gaining some partial understanding of the *beings-in-the-world* of the alien persons he observed simply through his aesthetic experience of their world. Precisely because humans are embodied beings whose interaction with the world has a phenomenological element, their theoretical understanding of the world and their modes of action within it are affected by and in turn affect the aesthetic component of their experience.

A central thesis then begins to emerge: not just that, as on MacIntyre's account, “man is in his actions and practice, as well as in his fictions essentially a story-telling animal,” but also, correspondingly, that he is essentially a world-construing and world-constituting animal (216). Such constitution is in the beginning ontological, but because humans have causal powers over the physical world and worlds in which they reside, it

also becomes physical: that is, humans living within a framework will not only have some aesthetic sense of that embodied framework, but will physically embody that framework through their artistic creations—their architecture, landscape planning, public and private paintings, and so on. And so also we find a corollary to this central thesis: because humans have a phenomenological component to their experience of the world, aesthetics are a mode of communicating the *beings-in-the-world* of embodied cultural frameworks. If one must understand how it *feels to live in the world* of a particular culture before one can understand how to *act* in that world, then the aesthetics of a culture’s artistic creations serve as a means of responding to, construing, creating, and finally transmitting the *beings-in-the-world* that ground the culture’s potentialities for action.

And so at last we may begin to make sense of Robert Eaglestone’s central preoccupation, the “world-revealing” quality of art. On his account, we are interested in discussing the propositions asserted by works of art, but because we must first discuss the qualities of the world which preexists the propositions, “Artworks in the broadest sense ... disclose or give us that world in which we live as a concrete, determinate, and specific place, revealed and enframed by those artworks” (600). Percy, in *The Message in the Bottle*, takes a quite similar stance, arguing that “The communication of meaning, positivists to the contrary, is not limited to the discursive symbol, word, and proposition; the art symbol conveys its own appropriate meaning, a meaning inaccessible to the discursive form” (288). That meaning is not just the subject matter, for the “virtual” worlds of works of art—“the virtual space of the painting, the virtual life of the poem, the

virtual time of music”—additionally symbolize “the *feelings*, the *felt life* of the artist and so of the observer.”

The question of how the *felt life* of the artist might be significant to the communication of meaning is addressed by the novelist John Gardner in his book *On Moral Fiction*, which argues that literature should strive to have moral content. Gardner claims that “a simulation of real life is morally educational,” and so literature can convey moral ideas because, when reading,

we have the queer experience of falling through the print on the page into something like a dream, an imaginary world so real and convincing that when we happen to be jerked out of it by a call from the kitchen or a knock at the door, we stare for an instant in befuddlement at the familiar room where we sat down, half an hour ago, with our book. To say that we shouldn't react to fictional characters as 'real people' is exactly equivalent to saying that we shouldn't be frightened by the things we meet in nightmares. (114, 112-3)

Gardner claims that the reader's imaginative capacities allow him or her to enter into the world of a story, and it is this notion which can give sense to Percy's claim that art communicates the *felt life* of the artist and so of the observer. On Percy's account, symbol-users share the act of identification between *symbol* and *that which is symbolized* when they utter an assertion; and since symbol-users also have a world and a mode of being-in-the-world in which such identifications are made, the assertory act of identification between two symbol-users also communicates their modes of being-in-the-world—or, as he also describes it, their *felt life*.

In the context of Percy's argument that distinct *forms* of symbolization—verbal, poetic, musical, etc.—can convey the *felt life* of the artist in distinct ways, we may finally appreciate the significance of Eaglestone's central claim: "Because we (now) inhabit multiple and often conflicting worlds, it is the artworks that reveal to us who and how we are, what these worlds are, and to some extent, what our potentialities for being are" (601). This argument has tremendous practical implications for the way in which we understand and interact with the world; he argues, for example, that "we would not think in precisely the same way about the terrors and violence of colonial power had it not been for *Heart of Darkness*, *Things Fall Apart*, *A Grain of Rice*, and *The Life and Times of Michael K*. Likewise ... it is William Wordsworth's poetry which reveals and begins a sense of how the natural world is—or was, perhaps—for us" (600-1). And so, he concludes, "What is revealed is contingent."

It is precisely this contingency that is at the core of Binx Bolling's fascination with the "singularities of time and place," and how they can either viscerally ground him in the world or take him clear out of it. His complaint about having to travel to Chicago continues:

It is nothing to [Uncle Jules] to close his eyes in New Orleans and wake up in San Francisco and think the same thoughts on Telegraph Hill that he thought on Carondelet Street. Me, it is my fortune and misfortune to know how the spirit-presence of a strange place can enrich a man or rob a man but never leave him alone, how, if a man travels lightly to a hundred strange cities and cares nothing for the risk he takes, he may find himself No one and Nowhere. Great day in the morning. What will

it mean to go moseying down Michigan Avenue in the neighborhood of five million strangers, each shooting out his own personal ray? How can I deal with five million personal rays? (99)

Later, when he arrives in Chicago, he reaffirms this feeling, adding, “one step out into the brilliant March day and there it is as big as life, the genie-soul of the place which, wherever you go, you must meet and master first thing or be met and mastered” (202). Binx understands that the *being-in-the-world* is particular not just to cultures but to times and places; and since it is unavoidably transmitted through the aesthetics of a place, Binx understands that when he travels somewhere, the particular smell of existence there must also become his own. And when this new sense of *being-in-the-world* becomes his own, Binx may either find himself or lose himself in it—but he cannot escape doing one or the other.

Binx, then, must contend with two intertwined types of contingency: the contingency of the senses of *being-in-the-world* construed and constituted by his culture; and the contingency of his being alive in this particular time and place. As always, these contingencies ultimately also amount to practical problems about action. How can Binx understand how to act in the world if his sense of *how the world feels*—how he *lives* in the world—is both contingent and, seemingly, quite volatile? How can he be a respectable medical researcher in New Orleans if the way he sticks himself into the world in New Orleans may change from day to day—and if, moreover, he might on a whim pick up and move somewhere else where people stick themselves into the world in an entirely different way? Binx, that is, cannot answer the question “How am I to act?” until

he has answered the prior question “Of what world am I a part?”, but it seems that he cannot construe a consistent answer to this latter question.

And hence it may appear that we—or at least Binx—have concluded this chapter having come no further than where we started; for it seems that Binx is no more able to answer the question “Of what world am I a part?” than he is able to answer the question “Of what story or stories am I a part?”, which was identified in the last chapter as so crucial. Yet it should be clear from the argument presented in this chapter that the nature of Binx’s inability to answer the former question is quite different from his inability to answer the latter. Binx cannot answer the question “Of what story or stories am I a part?” because he *never* genuinely feels a part of *any* of the stories that he tries on through play-acting. By contrast, his inability to answer the question “Of what world am I a part?” arises from the fact that at various times he *is* profoundly grounded in and a part of some worlds, but these worlds are in conflict with each other. And so since he cannot provide a consistent answer, he is always in danger of being grounded in and a part of no world at all. In the former case, it is a problem of an inability to identify, whereas in the latter is a problem of an extreme contingency of identification.

The contrast between these two failures of identification returns us to a question that has been posed explicitly and implicitly throughout this discussion: that of whether the ethical and aesthetic ways of life are in conflict, and if so, what the nature of that conflict is. It was suggested in the transition from the previous chapter that the apparent contingency of ethical ways of life—the fact that one may try on various narrative modes but never genuinely be a part of any of them—may be mediated by an aesthetic

identification with the *way of being-in-the-world* of an embodied narrative mode. Yet we also arrived once again (if from a different direction) at the distinctive contingency of the aesthetic mode that is so strongly argued by MacIntyre and Kierkegaard. What role, then, if any, could the aesthetic mode have in grounding the ethical? How can Binx Bolling's experience of the two help provide us with an answer? And what interpretation will that answer give us of the novel's conclusion, in which Binx seemingly embraces the ethical mode by marrying Kate and accepting the way of life his Aunt Emily insists upon? It is to these questions that we will turn in the final chapter.

## 5. Recovering the Creature

The discussion thus far has explored the depiction in *The Moviegoer* of the cultural breakdown of traditional moral theories, Binx Bolling's subsequent grasping for narrative intelligibility through moviegoing, and the possibility of his recovery from alienation through an aesthetic experience that grounds him in the world. A central tension thus begins to emerge: What are we to make of the relationship between the ethical way of life and the aesthetic—are they fundamentally opposed or deeply intertwined? We have, on the one hand, Robert Eaglestone treating Ludwig Wittgenstein's assertion that "ethics and aesthetics are one and the same" as a foregone conclusion, and searching for a way to justify it. And on the other, we have Alasdair MacIntyre reaffirming Søren Kierkegaard's argument that the ethical and aesthetic ways of life are opposed: "Each of the two ways of life is informed by different concepts, incompatible attitudes, rival premises" (MacIntyre 40). And we found from a discussion of *The Moviegoer* some support for each claim: through the character of the actor, we see that one can live simultaneously in partial forms of the ethical and the aesthetic modes, consuming narrative structures as others would consume the sensory pleasures of immediate experience—yet we find that the actor is still at the core an aesthete with no sense of self; and additionally, though Binx Bolling is able to ground himself in the world through an aesthetic experience, that experience is just as liable to vanquish his sense of self.

We can begin to resolve this conflict by returning to a hypothetical scenario raised briefly in the previous chapter: that of a person who enters a culture that is completely

alien to him—meaning that he has absolutely no knowledge of the theories that guide the actions of its members. MacIntyre in fact discusses this exact scenario when he argues that we “are both intellectually and practically baffled” when we witness a human action that “is apparently the intended action of a human agent, but nonetheless we cannot so identify it” (209). Such bafflement occurs “when we enter alien cultures or even alien social structures within our own culture” (210). That some such bafflement can and would occur in our scenario seems inarguable; yet because MacIntyre argues that that unintelligibility results from the person’s lack of knowledge of the culture’s moral theories, he seems committed to arguing that the person could have absolutely *no* understanding of the occurrences he witnessed.

Yet it is not entirely clear from the text that this is MacIntyre’s claim; and indeed, elsewhere he seems to contradict this conclusion. Discussing the connection between music and moral theories in traditional societies, he writes:

The relationship of our beliefs to sentences that we *only* or *primarily* sing, let alone to the music which accompanies those sentences, is not at all the same as the relationship of our beliefs to the sentences that we primarily say and say in an assertive mode. When the Catholic mass becomes a genre available for concert performance by Protestants, when we listen to the scripture because of what Bach wrote rather than because of what St. Matthew wrote, then sacred texts are being preserved in a form in which the traditional links with belief have been broken, even in some measure for those who still count themselves believers. It is not of course that there is no link with belief; you cannot simply detach the

music of Bach or even of Handel from the Christian religion. But a traditional distinction between the religious and the aesthetic has been blurred. (37-8, his emphasis)

On MacIntyre's account, the link between the aesthetic and ethical content of a work of art can only be fully maintained when that artwork is uttered *in an assertive mode*. There is thus a distinction between a piece of sacred music performed as an assertion of its attendant belief structures, and that work performed divorced from that context. Yet if it is the case that "it is not of course that there is no link with belief; you cannot simply detach the music of Bach or even of Handel from the Christian religion," then there *is* a crucial relationship between ethics and aesthetics. Indeed, if the argument offered in Chapter 4 is correct, then it is precisely because that piece of music originally *was* the aesthetic assertion of a set of beliefs that it is thus capable of communicating the *felt life* of those beliefs as embodied in the life of the artist. And so it must be the case that a person with no knowledge of Christianity who somehow finds himself sitting in a church listening to a work by Bach will, through that aesthetic experience, come to partially understand the embodied *being-in-the-world* of that belief, and thus will also gain a grounding for the attendant theoretical framework. Hence, we may reasonably infer, the intricate attention to aesthetics at sites of traditional cultures such as cathedrals.

And so in the more general scenario of the person who finds himself in an alien culture, we may conclude that his situation would not necessarily be one of *complete* bafflement. If he were to find himself thrust into, say, a remote tribe in the Amazon versus a city in North Korea (to pick two cultures about which a person might reasonably

know next to nothing), he would encounter bafflement in each case, but bafflements of different sorts. He would immediately discern a different “smell of existence,” as Binx Bolling calls it, simply from the distinct geographies and landscapes of the two places; but the culture would also communicate to him through the aesthetics of its architecture, clothing, tools, public artwork, and so on. These elements, when experienced collectively by the person, would constitute the “genie-soul” of the place. And since they would have both had an effect in forming the culture’s governing theories, and have been the result of those theories, we would find, as with the person in the church, that he would be able to gain some partial understanding of the culture’s theories through his aesthetic experience of its *being-in-the-world*.

We can thus also qualify another significant claim of MacIntyre’s. In arguing that the empiricists falsely claimed to have confronted facts face-to-face absent of theory, MacIntyre counters that there is *no* such thing as an observation made without some theoretical interposition, and adds, “Perceivers without concepts, as Kant almost said, are blind” (79). On this account he is surely correct; but what then should we make of a hypothetical person who is thrust into the world as a “blank slate,” knowing *no* concepts of their own (as, one might suppose, was the situation of the earliest conscious humans)? Would they be literally blind? Here Walker Percy’s argument that “the speaking organism disposes of the entire horizon symbolically .... Gaps that cannot be closed by perception and reason are closed by magic and myth,” gains new significance (203). For it is the claim of this thesis that culture both *codifies* and *constitutes* its theoretical concepts not only through the creation of a stock of *narratives* in the form of myths, but

also of pseudo-magical *worlds* in the form of the aesthetic contents of its artwork. And so we find Percy claiming that culture “is not a catalogue of artifacts or responses to an environment but is rather the ensemble of all the modes of assertory activity .... [I]t is the totality of the different ways in which the human spirit construes the world and asserts its knowledge and belief” (222).

Wolfgang Iser, also attacking “eighteenth-century concepts of humanity,” makes a similar claim about the relationship between culture as a codification and constitution of human concepts: “Humans are so entangled in their environment, shaped and conditioned by what they have spun out of themselves, and challenged by the very habitat they have built for survival and self-preservation, that inevitably the interest in culture arises .... This marks the starting point for a feedback loop between humans and their culture, as ‘men are pure and simply what their culture makes them,’ a culture that they have produced for and from themselves” (88). Thus he concludes that “culture itself is a performance, not least as the artificial habitat is continuously being produced without ever being completed” (95). Iser’s argument—and this discussion thus far—may seem to lead us down a treacherous path of cultural relativism if we construe it to mean that culture and people are *merely* some arbitrary human construction or performance. Yet to accept this conclusion would be to make the same mistake that Percy claims is so characteristic in modern anthropological studies, of considering culture as no more than some behavioral need, akin to eating and procreation. This is a mistake because (though certainly, as we shall see, not only because), as Percy so aptly puts it, “although one may dispose of the world through theory, one is not thereby excused from the necessity of

living in this same world” (211). The scientist, the anthropologist, or the culturologist who sees himself or herself to have exposed the *mere* nature of humanity is still a human and bound to live according the nature of the human being. A culture still has the burden of producing modes of existence for its members, even when its moral self-understanding has been dissolved through theory.

Hence we come to further understand the significance of the *actor* as a character of modernity: for the actor embodies precisely that conflict between, on the one hand, society’s having disposed of the unifying moral framework by which people previously understood what sorts of lives to lead; and on the other, the ineradicable aspect of human nature that causes people to construe their lives in a narrative mode, and hence to produce stories. This societal tension is central to *The Moviegoer*, in which the culture has eradicated the unifying tradition that formerly provided publicly understood modes of action and living, yet is simultaneously—and seemingly incoherently—crushed under the weight of the characters and modes of action that it produces through the movies. Philip E. Simmons notes that, in the novel, “The movies thus offer a paradoxical rejuvenation, bringing to life the dead spaces of the urban environment that they themselves, in complicity with the industrialization and massification of the city, have helped kill” (617). It is this “paradoxical rejuvenation” that Binx refers to as *certification*—what happens when a movie, by presenting an aspect of one’s life (whether where you live or an element of your behavior) in a public context legitimates it as a recognized and valid mode of human existence.

As argued in Chapter 3, culture indeed *does*, contrary to Aunt Emily's assertion, continue to produce public notions of right and wrong modes of action. So why is it that Binx tries but fails to accept these publicly accepted modes of action as his own, when in classical societies such adoption is possible and indeed essential to moral education? An initial and crucial part of the answer, as should be clear, is that the theoretical faculties required to make the narrative mode coherently livable have dissolved. This thesis has contended that humans are innately prone to construe and construct their lives in a narrative mode even absent those faculties. We may even note that Binx, despite his apparent lack of purpose, in fact constructs an impoverished sense of purpose for himself in the form of his search. He even lives out an intelligible narrative through his life—for of course *The Moviegoer* is precisely that narrative. Yet clearly Binx's life is impoverished, and this is because his society cannot provide the theoretical faculties to give his life a full narrative unity. Part of those faculties must be not only a shared public conception of what sorts of lives are worth or not worth leading, but a justification for that worth with reference to a shared public good. This unitary framework is of course absent in the society of *The Moviegoer*, in which there is no conception of a public good, and the myriad modes of living certified through the movies embody mutually contradictory moral claims rather than different aspects of the same framework.

But we still find that Binx cannot even genuinely accept the modes of action of any single movie, and not just because it is not connected to some societal good or is in conflict with some other mode of action. This continuing detachment we can understand as an additional and peculiar form of impoverishment of the society depicted in the novel.

For while that society still constructs narratives, the modes of these narratives are not truly publicly available, but become inextricably linked to the personages of the actors in the movies. Hence we find Binx's fascination with the "peculiar reality" of movie stars, whose certification renders them real—and capable of granting reality to others—in a way that the ordinary person is not (17). And so we can make sense of another at first seemingly odd feature of the novel, which is that though Binx is an avid moviegoer, he seems to care nothing at all about the actual stories depicted in the movies. When he adopts a mode of action he sees in a movie as his own, he always names himself as behaving like the *actors* themselves rather than the characters. In fact, though he rattles off the names of many actors and actresses, he never once mentions the name of a movie character, nor does he ever mention any plot elements larger than particular acts, attitudes, and mannerisms of specific movie stars.

Given how little he learns from the actual stories of movies themselves, it seems that Binx is a moviegoer less because he needs their narrative intelligibility than because he needs their certified authenticity. Binx uses the word "moviegoer" only three times in the novel: once in reference to himself, once to describe his cousin Lonnie, and once to describe a romantic-seeming boy that he meets on the bus. This latter boy, as Binx says, "is a case for direct questioning," and indeed, Binx confoundingly tells us that the boy "is a moviegoer, though of course he does not go to movies" (215-6). The boy is a moviegoer, we learn, because he understands the certified modes of action and longs to live them authentically. But it is this very self-consciousness of the certified actions—the question of whether one is performing them authentically—that makes this an inherently

impossible task, which Binx refers to as “this miserable trick the romantic plays upon himself: of setting just beyond his reach the very thing he prizes.”

And so we are called to question the authenticity of Binx’s actions at the novel’s ending. After his aunt apparently disowns him, Binx ultimately agrees to marry Kate Cutrer and, as his aunt has urged, to go to medical school and become a doctor. The critical literature on the novel seems to have largely accepted the ending at face value as Binx’s redemption. Yet it must be a sham: for Binx is even more apathetic and detached from the decision to become a doctor than he was from his original conflict with Aunt Emily over the matter. And as for his engagement to Kate: shortly after his final confrontation with Aunt Emily, Binx drives to Sharon’s house and discovers from her roommate that she has become engaged; after he senses that the roommate, too, will not be receptive to his advances, he invites her to have lunch with himself and “my own fiancée, Kate Cutrer.” But it was not until just before he said this that he had decided to marry her. This act clearly does not constitute the return to the good life that Binx pretends to others that it does.

It is in that *pretending* that we can begin to understand why it is a sham: for Binx, after all, is still just play-acting. Further, we find that Kate has decided to play-act with him, and understands their marriage as something akin to committing to the role rather than just trying it on—and she even wants him to be the director. Earlier, she tells him, “Now if I marry you, will you tell me: Kate, this morning do such and such, and if we have to go to a party, will you tell me: Kate, stand right there and have three drinks and talk to so and so? Will you?” (196). Once they make the decision to marry, we find them

behaving in just this way, with Binx telling her what to do and her being glad to do it. She is glad, we come to understand, because she has granted Binx the authority of certifier of her roles. She can never behave inauthentically so long as Binx tells her what is a right way to act and she acts accordingly. He will be the author of her story, and she the actor in it. But for Binx's own story the matter is clearly not so simple.

Because of Percy's explicit engagement with Kierkegaard, we may justifiably interpret the ending as a representation of the ethical/aesthetic choice posed in *Enten-Eller*. Binx, that is, begins the novel in the aesthetic mode, but by the end, he has given up moviegoing and committed to society by becoming a doctor and getting engaged. But, as shown above, Binx's radical choice to accept the ethical mode is a failure. We can understand this failure as Percy's again having independently reached the same conclusion as MacIntyre: that the ethical cannot be simply *radically chosen*, because the notion of the *radical choice* is itself only at home in the aesthetic mode. Hence we find that Binx has simply become the consummate actor by fully committing to an ethical role. But of course, because he is still ultimately an actor, at the end we find Binx no less ironic, phony, or detached from being in the world.

In order to understand what is lacking in Binx's sham ethical choice, we must return again to the aesthetic element explored in the previous chapter. It was noted that there are moments when Binx *is* capable of being grounded in the world, through an aesthetic experience. Yet those experiences are also capable of taking him *out* of reality if they are not properly managed. What is the distinction between these two experiences that are seemingly the same, yet capable of producing precisely opposite reactions in

Binx? The answer may become clear if we reexamine a passage first shown in the introduction:

Last week ... I experienced an accidental repetition. I picked up a German-language weekly in the library. In it I noticed an advertisement for Nivea Creme, showing a woman with a grainy face turned up to the sun. Then I remembered that twenty years ago I saw the same advertisement in a magazine on my father's desk, the same woman, the same grainy face, the same Nivea Creme. The events of the intervening twenty years were neutralized, the thirty million deaths, the countless torturings, uprootings and wanderings to and fro. Nothing of consequence could have happened because Nivea Creme was exactly as it was before. (80)

Prior to this passage, Binx describes the time when, while watching a movie some years ago, "I made a mark on my seat arm with my thumbnail. Where, I wondered, will this particular piece of wood be twenty years from now, 543 years from now?" (75). After his experience with the Nivea Creme, Binx thinks back on that theater seat, and describes "a secret sense of wonder about the enduring, about all the nights, the rainy summer nights at twelve and one and two o'clock when the seats endured alone in the empty theater. The enduring is something which must be accounted for. One cannot simply shrug it off" (80). Binx, it seems, is most capable of being anchored in the world when the aesthetic experience is a repetition of an experience *from his own past*.

In *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy writes that the alienated man has three alternatives available for recovering from his alienation. The first is the reversal of

alienation through its re-presentation in literature: because it becomes shared with others, it can no longer truly be alienation. The second is “rotation,” which is when one experiences something more authentic than the expectation of one’s everyday experience—such as finding a secret gate into a hidden garden. This alternative, he argues, is preserved intact in literature, for it is just as much a rotation for the person reading as it is for the character. Yet it is unsustainable, because the new quickly becomes the old, and the alienated person or character must constantly seek new experiences. But the third alternative is repetition—the re-experiencing of an aesthetic experience from one’s own past. This alternative, unlike the first two, is “polarized” by literature. Whereas in a story someone may escape alienation through an attempt to passionately reconnect with his own past, “such a passion would not transmit aesthetically as a passion but only as the interesting” (97). This failure to transmit occurs simply because whatever past is presented in the story is not the past of the reader, and so he or she cannot experience a repetition through it.

Here we gain an additional understanding of why the movies fail to bring Binx out of despair: he cannot apply the movies’ narratives or aesthetics to his own life because the stories they depict have a history and a past that is not his own. But to recognize this is also to recognize why his supposed ethical choice at the novel’s conclusion is not genuine. For although Binx appears to have made a commitment to medicine and marriage, this commitment is not grounded in his own history. This sense of continuity is crucial, we see, to Binx’s sense of identity and self in the rare moments that he has such senses. But there is no such continuity in his final decision, for he

undertakes it with no sense of aesthetic connection to his own past. And neither, correspondingly, can or does he undertake it with any narrative connection to his own past. He has no understanding of how these decisions flowed from his own past actions and intentions; they were simply accepted as part of an arbitrary radical choice. He has rejoined the world in his actions, but he has not grounded himself in the world through some aesthetic and narrative connection to his own history.

In order to have some such grounding, Binx would have to understand how *the way life felt* in his past meaningfully relates to and caused the choices he has made in the present, and how those choices will cause life to feel for him now. Yet even such an understanding would still be insufficient to support the ethical mode. For it is important to note that it was Kierkegaard himself who first explored the concept of repetition—because it was just such a passionate connection with his own past that caused him to feel that he would never again be able to experience with his fiancée the same intense feeling that he could still remember having had at the beginning, and so he broke off their engagement and left her. And this is why Percy argues that the aesthetic stage “can in no wise be self-transcending”: it must always be frantically searching for newness, or else mired in the past (97).

It is the dual problems of frantically searching for the new and being mired in the past that finally provide us an understanding of why Binx’s ethical decision is ultimately a sham. For the ethical requires not only an understanding of the relationship of one’s *past* history to the present, but an understanding of and commitment to one’s conceived *future* in relation to the whole of one’s history. MacIntyre argues that a life that has

narrative intelligibility must be a life that has narrative *unity*: a conception of the *whole* of a life, with actions understood in reference to the final ends and purposes toward which that life is oriented. And so we understand yet another reason that the ethical mode cannot simply be *chosen* from the aesthetic: precisely because life is *not* a series of unconnected moments, a person who lives his life for a period in the mode of aesthetic consumption cannot simply escape that mode, for it becomes part of his history and thus shapes and weighs upon his future. The commitment must be to both the past and the future, understood with reference to each other and to the shape of the whole life of which they are each a part. And so MacIntyre recognizes a crucial contribution of Jane Austen to the moral tradition he describes:

When Kierkegaard contrasted the ethical and the aesthetic ways of life in *Enten-Eller*, he argued that the aesthetic life is one in which a human life is dissolved into a series of separate present moments, in which the unity of a human life disappears from view. By contrast in the ethical life the commitments and responsibilities to the future springing from past episodes in which obligations were conceived and debts assumed unite the present to past and to future in such a way as to make of a human life a unity. ... [But] by the time Jane Austen writes ... unity can no longer be treated as a mere presupposition or context for a virtuous life. It has itself to be continually reaffirmed and its reaffirmation in deed rather than in word is the virtue which Jane Austen calls constancy. (241-2)

Constancy, MacIntyre notes, must occur as an *affirmation*; but an affirmation is a form of *assertion*. And here the role of the imaginative capacity of art again becomes crucial. For while MacIntyre argues that such affirmation must be “in deed rather than in word,” a central claim of this thesis has been that a culture asserts its self-understanding not only through its actions but through its artistic conception of itself and its actions. Hence central to constancy—an adherence to the past and a commitment to the future—must be the act of imagining one’s future. MacIntyre would clearly agree with this point, for he understands that storytelling is a method of construing a society’s conception of the shape of an entire life. We understand not just our past history but our potential futures in a narrative mode. Yet if the argument thus far is correct, then a central component of imagining the future must also be imagining the aesthetic component of that future; that is, we must imagine not just the shape of our life in the future—who we will become, what actions we will take, and so on—but how that shape of life will *feel* at each stage that we live it. Literature and art serve precisely this set of functions (among many others) by allowing us to construe, imagine, and even constitute our possible future actions and embodied senses of *being-in-the-world*.

Binx Bolling, then, must identify not just with his aesthetic sense of the past but his connection to his own narrative history; and he must identify this unified sense of the past with an aesthetic and narrative imagination of his future. Until he conceives of his life as a narrative and aesthetic whole, he is condemned to inauthenticity and despair. While Percy seems to hint—both through Binx at times and through Percy’s own nonfiction—that recovery is possible, the conclusion of *The Moviegoer* is clearly

pessimistic. For on both MacIntyre's and Percy's account, the traditional understanding of human life as a narrative whole has dissolved; and without that theoretical coherence provided by a culture, no individual within that culture can truly live in the traditional mode. Binx, it seems, has been too affected by both the successful and the failed theories of his society—both the theories that destroyed the old traditions, and the old traditions which failed to maintain their coherence in the face of new theories. Binx's culture must redeem or reconstitute the old traditional coherence and the narrative mode before he can. But it is precisely that commitment to history which gives both Percy and MacIntyre such cause for pessimism—for just as Binx cannot simply by choice escape the aesthetic mode and the way it has shaped his life, neither could society, even if it chose to, simply abandon the history and influence of its modern dominant theories.

Yet it has been a central contention of this thesis that humans are by nature rather than construction prone to conceive of life both in a narrative mode and with reference to an aesthetic experience of that mode. As embodied beings, we are inescapably phenomenological, and thus also bound to aesthetic experiences of the world. But as beings with a history, a particular social time and place, and a set of ends towards which we are oriented, we are innately prone to live in a narrative mode. Modern society, inasmuch as it can be said to correspond to Percy's and MacIntyre's critiques, must also be seen as continuing to construe itself in these modes, even when certain of its dominant theories profess to have invalidated them. It is only through the dissolution of the theoretical justifications for these modes that we come to conceive of ourselves otherwise—but even then we never completely act accordingly.

Alasdair MacIntyre and Walker Percy are both inclined to think that modern society may indeed collapse under the weight (or lack thereof) of these governing theories. An analysis of that claim is beyond the scope of this work, but it should be noted that, if the central claims of this thesis are correct, then the innate human tendency to live life as a narrative and aesthetic whole persists even though it is no longer supported by dominant theories. So perhaps it is the case that this mode in fact continues to govern modern culture, and that the dominant theories enjoy proclaimed support but are not followed in the practice of human lives. If that is the case, then Percy is wrong in reaffirming Kierkegaard's claim that "the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Rather, MacIntyre shows that the specific character of despair is precisely this: it was not in despair until it invented its own awareness. Once this is understood, the recovery of the creature comes not in facing despair or tricking it, but in seeing through its illusion, vanquishing it to the past, and returning to that eternal struggle for the self through which the creature writes its own story.

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