

Binx Bolling and the Third Stage: Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*

B. D. Tucker

It is a privilege to be asked to contribute something in honor of my esteemed senior colleague, Professor Hamada. He has been a warm friend and kind advisor for many years. Although this short article in no way can convey my great respect for Professor Hamada, I dedicate it to him in the hope that he will forgive its shortcomings and accept it as a small tribute and token of the honor I feel for him and the thanks I wish to express to him.

* * * * *

Binx Bolling, the narrator and chief character of Walker Percy's first published novel, *The Moviegoer*, is said by many critics and by Percy himself to have moved from Kierkegaard's first stage, the aesthetic, at the beginning of the novel, to the third stage, the religious, at the end of the novel.¹ As Percy said, "Binx jumps from the esthetic clear across the ethical to the religious."² However, in a recent book, *The Fiction of Walker Percy*, John Edward Hardy states: "The trouble with the Binx of the epilogue is not that he has changed too much, or too abruptly or unaccountably, but that he has not changed enough. . . it is Binx in his immediate personal relationships who is insufficiently changed, or if changed, changed for the worse."³

Hardy makes a strong case to support his opinion, and there may

be many readers who are persuaded by him. A work of art, once published, must be judged on its own merits and not on the author's intentions, and if Hardy is right we must accept his judgment no matter what the author says. There is perhaps enough ambiguity in *The Moviegoer* to support more than one interpretation; nevertheless, I should like in this paper to show that Binx has indeed changed and that he has entered at least tentatively into the religious stage.

Walker Percy was born in Birmingham, Alabama on May 28, 1916. In 1929 his father, a lawyer, committed suicide, and in 1931 his mother was killed in an automobile accident.⁴ Walker and his two brothers were adopted by his father's cousin, William Alexander Percy of Greenville, Mississippi, a planter, lawyer, and poet.⁵ He graduated from the University of North Carolina in 1937, and received his degree as Doctor of Medicine from Columbia in 1941. While serving a residency in pathology he contracted tuberculosis, and during his enforced rest in a sanitarium he read widely in literature and philosophy. Although he recovered after two years and started teaching pathology at Columbia, he had a relapse and gave up the practice of medicine.

Walker Percy published a number of articles and wrote two long, unpublished novels before *The Moviegoer* was published in 1961 and received the National Book Award. Since then Percy has had published *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *The Message in the Bottle* (essays, 1975), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), *Lost in the Cosmos* (mainly essays, 1983), *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), and numerous articles, reviews, and books published in limited editions.

On the basis of his six novels and other writings many critics consider Percy to be one of the most important and best novelists now writing

in the United States. There is also general agreement that, although Percy portrays with great accuracy the society, speech, and mores of the South, he is very different from every other Southern novelist. His novels can all be enjoyed for the stories they tell, the well-drawn characters, the humor, and the style, but any perceptive reader will soon notice that there are intellectual, philosophical, or religious ideas behind the words and actions of the main characters which are not usually found in fiction. To understand these we must look at some of the influences on Percy's philosophical and intellectual development.

At the time he was convalescing from tuberculosis, Percy did a great deal of reading.⁶ Among the writers he paid especial attention to were Dostoevski, Kafka, Camus, Sartre, Heidegger, Marcel, and Kierkegaard. It is particularly the last who seems to have influenced him, and it is possible to see the Christian existentialism of Kierkegaard in many of Percy's works.

Kierkegaard fiercely criticized German idealistic philosophy, especially that of Hegel, which posited a world-spirit shaping history, ideas, and peoples in a vast system of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis toward a higher goal. Kierkegaard felt that this deemphasized the individual and the individual's responsibility to make decisions, to choose, and to make commitments in the concrete world of here and now. He also condemned the complacent society of Denmark and the Church which seemed to reflect the self-satisfied ordinary life of its members rather than challenging them to commit themselves radically to God by faith.

Kierkegaard saw individuals living on three levels or stages.⁷ The first stage he called the aesthetic. People in this stage or sphere live for their happiness, guided by their senses, following the easiest way to

receive pleasure. They may consider themselves Christians and go to church, but their Christianity is only a kind of decoration which does not really alter their lives. The second stage, Kierkegaard called the ethical. People in this stage have strict standards of conduct and set themselves goals to achieve by their effort. They believe in self-discipline and often regard dependence on religion to be weakness. The third stage is the religious stage, and for Kierkegaard this meant a radical dependence and faith in God. People in the religious stage participate fully in the things of this world and in human relationships. Outwardly their lives may not seem to be very different from those of others, but their inward life, their goals, and the meaning which they see in all things—all these are transformed.

This is a very oversimplified summary of some of Kierkegaard's ideas, but we shall try to make clear their application to *The Moviegoer* and add more substance later on in this paper.

John Bickerson Bolling, called "Binx" by most of his friends, and "Jack" by some of his relatives, is the narrator and main character of *The Moviegoer*. As a well-educated, intellectual and ironic observer of life, he may be compared to Nick Carraway, in *The Great Gatsby*, Jake Barnes in *The Sun Also Rises*, or Jack Burden in *All the King's Men*. In his radical alienation from society, however, he seems closer to Mersault in *The Stranger*, by Camus, although his characterization is highly original, and his appearance in Percy's first published novel heralded something quite new in American literature.

Except for the Epilogue, all the events of the "present" time in the novel occur during the week preceding Mardi Gras and Ash Wednesday about 1960 or a few years before; and except for a short trip to Chicago,

they all occur in New Orleans and the adjacent districts. The significance of the time, juxtaposing the frivolity, absurdity and pleasure seeking of Mardi Gras with the solemn and religious meaning of Ash Wednesday is of symbolic importance in the novel and has a close connection with the three stages.

The novel begins with Binx receiving a note from his Aunt Emily asking him to come to lunch. Binx thinks that she wants to have a serious talk with him, and that it is likely she will want to discuss his future and what he "ought to do."⁸ As we shall see, Aunt Emily is the chief representative of the ethical stage in this novel, and already in the first paragraph the serious ethical thrust of her personality pressing on Binx's life becomes apparent. This calls up a memory of when Binx was eight years old and his brother Scott had died. His Aunt, who was in charge of him, told him, "Now it's all up to you. It's going to be difficult for you but I know you're going to act like a soldier."⁽⁴⁾ The image of a soldier, doing his duty and giving his life, if necessary, for his country without concern for self, symbolizes to Emily the ideal of ethical dedication.⁹

But Binx has disappointed Aunt Emily. Far from being the serious and idealistic person she wants him to be, he seems to fritter away his time in a very ordinary job as a stock broker, trying to have affairs with his pretty secretaries, and wasting his time going to all sorts of movies. Once he had "dreamed of doing something great. But there is much to be said for giving up such grand ambitions and living the most ordinary life imaginable,"⁽⁹⁾ he remarks. From this it would appear that Binx is no different from millions of other American citizens in the secular, materialistic society of today, working to get money in

order to be a consumer of the best products so that he may increase his pleasures. In short, Binx seems to be a perfect representative of the aesthetic level in Kierkegaard's scheme, one who lives for his senses, a hedonist or sensualist.

Yet there are early signs in the book that Binx's case is not so simple. The epigraph of the book may be the first clue, for it is a quotation from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: ". . .the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair." Unless the reader is familiar with the rather difficult writings of Kierkegaard, this quotation's connection with the novel will not be immediately apparent, but very soon in the first chapter we find that Binx is aware of something, and that he is not as "sunk in the everydayness of his own life"(13) as he at first seems.

Just after Binx has admired an aluminum manufactured product ("how smooth and well-fitted and thrifty"), there is an abrupt alteration:

But things have suddenly changed. My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search. I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. . . .My shoulder didn't hurt but it was pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. Naturally,

as soon as I recovered and got home, I forgot all about it. (10-11)

The memory here is of the Korean War when Binx was wounded in the shoulder and almost died. Binx does not explain what the connection with this and the search is, but the reader may imagine that something like the following might have occurred to a soldier, not in great pain, but knowing that he might die as he watched a small beetle scratching around in the leaves: "Great nations and ideological systems are waging war against each other. The air is shattered by explosions and the sky darkened by smoke, and I lie here dying. But my life is of no significance to this beetle; nor is the war, nor anything around except the bit of muck he is searching for under that leaf. And what have I been searching for in this life which is about to end? What is its meaning, and what is its purpose?"

Walker Percy is far too good a novelist to write all this out like a problem in geometry, but yet I think he intended the intelligent reader to supply something of this sort which Binx's restraint—the stiff upper lip—would not permit him to express in words. A few pages later Binx, mostly avoiding the first person singular, continues:

What is the nature of the search? you ask.

Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked.

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn't miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair. . . .

What do you seek—God? you ask with a smile.

I hesitate to answer, since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves and to give such an answer would amount to setting myself a goal which everyone else has reached—(13)

Binx then goes on to say that 98% of Americans believe in God according to the polls “and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker.”(14)

We begin to notice echoes of the epigraph in this quotation, the despair which “is unaware of being despair.” But what is this despair? It is “being sunk in everydayness” to such an extent that we are not aware that there is any search to be made, for we think we have already found “the good life,” and as for “God,” 98% of Americans think they already possess this “God” and that no further search is necessary. Binx is being ironic here for he knows that the “God” in whom these 98% of Americans believe is a domesticated “God,” a projection of themselves, made in their own image, who makes no demands on them, but merely confirms their prejudices and self-satisfaction. It is not the God of the Old Testament prophets, the righteous Judge, nor the One who told us to deny ourselves and take up the cross.¹⁰ And Binx makes this clear when he asks rhetorically, “Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?” (14)

Although Binx claims not to know the answer, readers soon become aware that, in fact, he knows very well that they and he himself are all

sunk in everydayness, a "life" which is meaningless and without purpose, illuminated by no transcendent light from eternity, and without depth or mystery. Chapter One ends with a conversation with Eddie Lovell which is totally insincere and without any real communication. Binx describes Eddie's talking: "His lips move muscularly, molding words into pleasing shapes . . . a good machine. . . . No mystery here!— . . . He understands everything out there and everything out there is something to be understood." (18-19) Binx is not exempt from the insincerity either, and when Eddie says conventionally, "Come see us!" Binx answers just as dishonestly, "I will!" knowing very well that he will not. (21)

The difference between Binx and Eddie (or most of the people in the book) is that Binx is aware of his despair and Eddie is not. For Eddie it is not despair. For Eddie "this is how one lives." (18) He is completely self-satisfied, or at least he seems to be on the surface, and probably would say he is leading "the good life." But to Binx it seems to be no life at all, and later in the book he says, "For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead." (99) This occurs in a chapter in which Binx talks with Eddie's wife, Nell, who tells him:

. . . "Eddie and I 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. Do you know what it is?"

"No."

"To make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better off." (101)

This sounds like a very good goal, but a few moments later after Nell has continued talking, Binx wonders, “. . . why does she talk as if she were dead?” The conversation ends in the same way as with Eddie: “Come see us, Binx!” And Binx answers just as insincerely, “I will!” The chapter ends, “We part laughing and dead.” (102)

Why does Binx say that the Lovells and he himself are dead? It is because all they do and say and think is controlled by the mass society of which they are a part. They do not act as autonomous individuals but obey the prevailing opinions of the crowd and class to which they belong. They read the *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran because it was popular at the time and was a pale substitute for the spiritual and religious tradition of Christianity which they have never taken the trouble to try to understand and which, if truly understood, would be too radical for them to accept. Their identity is formed by doing successfully whatever is modish and fashionable at the time. And Binx too, though he knows the irony of it, satirizes himself by saying that he takes “pleasure in doing all that is expected of” him, and establishing his “identity” by putting his wallet filled with “identity cards, library cards, credit cards,” (6) his notebook, keys, and pocket slide rule in a little pile and gazing at them. But then he realizes that they could “have belonged to someone else,” and he pokes “through the little pile in search of a clue just as the detective on television pokes through the dead man’s possessions, using his pencil or a poker.” (11) Once he really sees and understands this, however, the search becomes possible.

Binx, then, and most of the other characters in the book are living on Kierkegaard’s first level, the level of the unexamined life, without

meaning or purpose except to feel pleasure and the approval of the other automatons who are governed not by an authentic self responding to transcendent truth, but by the spirit of this world. So they move on towards death and there, as the Psalmist says, "They lie in the grave like sheep; death is their shepherd."¹¹ Binx knows this, but he does not have a strong enough belief in God to make "the leap of faith," and so continues to lead his ordinary life in Gentilly, his Little Way of making money, seeking pleasure and escape in movies and affairs with his secretaries, but still looking for clues to the meaning of life and signs from beyond this world. He compares himself to Robinson Crusoe, (89) looking for signals, but busying himself with the things of his island home.¹²

As we have seen, the novel opens with a summons from his Aunt Emily, and Binx knows she will once again challenge him to leave his sanctuary in Gentilly and enter into a sterner and more challenging sphere. At first, though, Aunt Emily's request is somewhat simpler. All she wants Binx to do is to take his step-cousin Kate to a certain place to watch one of the Mardi Gras parades. Aunt Emily is actually his great-aunt, the youngest sister of his grandfather, and Kate is the daughter by a former marriage of Emily's husband, Jules Cutrer. Five years younger than Binx and a close companion since their childhood, she is now engaged to Walter Wade, but she is a manic-depressive and has shown suicidal tendencies. For some time she has hardly gone out of the house, and Aunt Emily wants Binx to help her overcome her fear of the world.

After lunch Binx dutifully asks Kate and is refused, but Aunt Emily does not seem to be too upset by this when he tells her later, and then

it is that she begins to put pressure on Binx to reconsider his life. She actually thinks he should be going into scientific research but modestly settles on asking him to consider entering medical school. In fact, Aunt Emily has made all the preparations for this to take place. Binx, however, is noncommittal and Aunt Emily asks him,

“What is it you want out of life, son? . . . Don’t you feel obliged to use your brain to make a contribution? . . .—you have too good a mind to throw away. I don’t quite know what we’re doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fibre of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man.”
(53–4)

Aunt Emily’s position is that of Stoicism, ethical integrity and dignity in the face of a civilization which may be doomed. She summarizes it later in a note to Binx quoting the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius: “Every moment think steadily as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection and freedom and justice.” (78) It is an aristocratic ethic, based on *noblesse oblige*, and the idea that the family honor and tradition of the Bollings must be continued in the last male representative of the family. As an aristocrat she has a low opinion of democracy and the century of the common man, but she believes that she and her class must act with ethical purity in making contributions to society

and for truth no matter how unworthy that society may be. She is not thinking of the self-indulgences which Nell Lovell calls "contributions," but some great scientific achievements or altruistic philanthropic work. She does not need divine sanction for she does not believe in God. She does not ask for reward except to know she has been true to herself and to her lights. She represents the ethical stage in this novel.

This seems like a noble ideal. Why does Binx react negatively to it? I think we can perceive several reasons, although these are not spelled out in the novel. First, Binx probably judges that the contributions which Aunt Emily advocates are abstract and not for particular human beings. There is no love involved. Aunt Emily despises many of the very people she would help. She would do it for her own pride, and so it is a kind of self-centeredness. To use Martin Buber's terminology, it would be an "I—it" relationship, not an "I—Thou" relationship.¹⁹ Of course, we may object to this that the scientist who finds a cure for some disease may save thousands of lives even though he may never see any of those whom he has saved, but Binx has no confidence that he will be able to do anything of the sort.

Second, in Aunt Emily's pessimistic view of a world doomed and without God, Binx can probably see no reason to work for something which will soon be destroyed or to prolong lives which have no meaning and may be filled with more pain than joy. If death is the end and all there is of the life of the many, which is, in Hobbes's words, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short," then why seek to lengthen it? Whether ideas like this were in Binx's mind we do not know, but in

any case he declined to accept Aunt Emily's views, or, metaphorically, to move onto the ethical level.

The religious stage in the novel is represented by only one person, Binx's half-brother, Lonnie Smith. After Binx's father died in World War II, his mother, Anna, married Roy Smith and had seven children. Lonnie is the fourth child and second son, but as his brother Duval had died, he is now the oldest son. However, Lonnie is suffering from a fatal illness and is confined to a wheelchair. The Smiths are all Roman Catholics and are considered "devout" because they attend Mass regularly, but it becomes quite obvious that, except for Lonnie, they cannot be considered on what Kierkegaard calls the religious level. Binx says of them: "The Smiths, except Lonnie, would never dream of speaking of religion—raising the subject provokes in them the acutest embarrassment." (159) At Mass only Lonnie receives communion and the others lapse into a "blank-eyed vacancy." (160)

Although Lonnie is physically almost helpless, Binx does not feel sorry for him. Lonnie "has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ." (137) And Binx says he "would not mind so much trading places with him. His life is a serene business." From this it would appear that Binx admires Lonnie's faith and wishes he had it himself, and although Binx is like the Smiths in not speaking about the religion of his inner heart, he seems to enjoy conversing with Lonnie about religious matters. From these conversations it is apparent that Binx has a considerable knowledge of Roman Catholic doctrine and even of technical ethical and ascetic matters. He speaks with Lonnie with complete seriousness and sympathy, and it is hard to doubt that

Binx is actually not far from having this faith which he seems so much to admire.

Perhaps one of the things which prevents Binx from expressing belief in words (and therefore in his mind) is the abuse of those words in mass media. One example is the radio program, "This I Believe." All the speakers profess that they like everyone, but Binx notices that when it comes to particular persons, they often hate them. They all believe in "the uniqueness and the dignity of the individual," but Binx finds that they "are far from unique themselves" (109) and are all very like each other. With this kind of abuse of words, the very concept of the word "belief" comes into question.

It is the same with the word "love." On the way to Chicago Binx sees a counseling column in a newspaper on marital love which makes it sound as though love were a matter of physical techniques to manipulate the erogenous zones in a skillful way. (189-190) When words like "belief" and "love" are used in these ways, the reality which the words are supposed to signify becomes confused in our minds, and it is hard to find their true meaning. This may be why Binx does not express his faith in words or in conventional ways, and why some readers may not think he has any real faith even at the end of the novel.

Binx says, "My mother's family think that I have lost my faith and they pray for me to recover it. I don't know what they're talking about." (145) This is because the word "faith" to the Smiths means only formal acceptance of a set of doctrinal statements and the performance of certain acts, such as attendance at Mass. To Binx, however, faith demands total commitment to God, the "Wholly Other," Absolute and Transcendent. Such a commitment has almost no

relationship to what the Smiths call “faith,” and so far Binx has not been able to make this commitment. He speaks of his “unbelief” being “invincible from the beginning,” but here Binx may be making a distinction between “belief” such as the Smiths have, acceptance of a set of propositions, and “faith” which Binx sees as a binding “inter-subjective relationship” of the self to an “Absolute Thou”—God. Since the word “faith” conveys different meanings to different people, and this is true of many words, Binx feels it impossible to speak about his faith without being hopelessly misunderstood, and therefore keeps silence. It is also true that if Binx were to speak about his faith at length, the book would become more like a theological treatise than a novel and few people would read it. As it is, *The Moviegoer* is a good story, full of interest often amusing, and popular with many readers.

Binx continues: “My father’s family think that the world makes sense without God and that anyone but an idiot knows what the good life is and anyone but a scoundrel can lead it.” (146) Again Binx says he doesn’t know what they are talking about, but I think we can take this with a grain of salt. In his notebook that sleepless night, after the thoughts we have mentioned, Binx scribbles:

REMEMBER TOMORROW

Starting point for search:

It no longer avails to start with creatures and prove God.

Yet it is impossible to rule God out. . . .

Abraham saw signs of God and believed. (146)

Until now all Binx’s attempts at the search have failed because he has tried to begin from himself, a creature, just as Descartes did. God’s

“existence” cannot be proved from within creation, for that would make “God” a part of the creation, or at least tangential with it, and deny God’s transcendence. God can only be perceived by faith, and faith is a gift of grace. It “is impossible to rule God out,” to prove that there is no God, but it is also impossible to find God by reason alone, without revelation. Binx’s mention of Abraham who saw signs, or revelations, is highly significant in the Kierkegaardian scheme, for Kierkegaard regarded Abraham as the model for the Knight of Faith in *Fear and Trembling*.¹⁴ It is from this point that Binx begins his pilgrimage towards faith.

After Mass that day Binx has his conversation with Lonnie on religious problems, after which Lonnie asks Binx, “Do you love me?” When Binx answers affirmatively, Lonnie says, “I love you too.” (165) Such an exchange would be unthinkable for the other Smiths, or for most Americans, but Lonnie’s deep faith and his innocence make it possible. There is a deep irony in this expression of pure Christian love, which Binx might interpret as a sign of God’s grace, for when Binx took his secretary, Sharon, to the Smiths’ fishing camp at Bayou des Allemonds he was expecting it to be unoccupied, and he was hoping to experience a very different kind of “love” unsanctified by grace or sacrament. And in the short chapter which follows immediately after Lonnie’s confidence, Binx is put in his place when he tries to fondle Sharon, who rebukes him, “. . . don’t you mess with me.” (166) Can this be another sign of grace, pushing the still unregenerate Binx away from the aesthetic stage toward the religious?

Part IV which follows covers the trip to Chicago. Kate, who is suspected of having tried to commit suicide again, asks Binx to take

her on his business trip to Chicago so that she may escape the plans that Aunt Emily and Sam Yerger are making to control her life. It is on this trip in the train that Binx seems to make a commitment to marry and care for Kate, knowing that she may not recover from her manic-depressive state. It is true that at the end of Part II Binx seems to be making a proposal to Kate, but it is at a time when Kate is in a disturbed state, descending from a manic state in which she is full of euphoria and self-confidence, so that it is she who asks Binx, "Are you asking me to marry you?" (116) When Binx answers, "Sure," we cannot be certain that this is a serious promise, for Kate soon sinks into a depressive state, and the words seem to be forgotten. And it is after this, in Part III, that Binx goes off with his secretary, Sharon Kincaid, in an attempt to have an affair with her, so we cannot think that the commitment weighed very heavily on him.

But in Part IV, the commitment is renewed, and this time it seems very serious although the circumstances and words used are not conventional. Again it is Kate who seems to take the initiative in a disturbed psychological state. Knowing her own weaknesses she says to Binx, "What I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do." And then she asks Binx, "Will you tell me what to do?" (197) When Binx answers, "Sure," and then repeats it when Kate asks him again, it sounds very much like the two-fold vow in the wedding service. It is significant that this vow is a commitment not based on love, but on loyalty. Whenever Binx mentions love, Kate rejects it: "Love! What do you know about love?" (192) And she herself says, "I don't know whether I love you, but I believe in you . . ." (197) When Binx embraces her and tells her that he

loves her, she says, "No love, please." (198) As we have suggested before, this is probably because the word "love" has lost its meaning. And later when they try to "make love," (to illustrate another use or misuse of the word), they fail. As Binx confesses, "The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit" failed them. (200)⁴⁵

When Aunt Emily finds that Kate is gone and finally traces her to Chicago she summons them back and pours out her wrath on Binx for abusing a trust, but she does so in fine controlled rhetoric, concealing her anger behind sarcasm and irony. Her long speech in the first chapter of Part V brilliantly defines her position as guardian of the aristocratic traditions of ethical responsibility. But as she talks she picks up a letter opener in the shape of a sword from a helmeted figure on the inkstand and gestures with it. (221) The tip of it was once bent by Binx in trying to open a drawer, (224) and the bent sword of the Bollings seems to symbolize the outdated traditions of the old Southern aristocracy which now seem to have little relevance to society. While she talks several servants are cleaning the house with modern machinery in the home owned by her husband and paid for through his shrewd business practices as a capitalist broker. Binx makes no defence of himself, and she dismisses him with a cool handshake as though he were a stranger. (226-227)

Kate, who has heard it all in the next room, arranges to meet him at his home and there Binx goes to wait for her. His commitment to Kate is not yet quite firm in Binx's mind and he is still in the aesthetic or sensual stage. As he waits for Kate impatiently and realizes that it is his thirtieth birthday, he thinks of his "dark pilgrimage on this

earth” and becomes a prey to despair and desire. He contemplates with disgust this age of “scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle,” and his words are full of irony and sarcasm. All are humanists and almost all believe in “God,” and they are all “dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall . . .” (228)

In his deep depression he laments, “Nothing remains but desire . . . My search has been abandoned . . . I have to find a girl.” (228) Here it is any girl, not a person, a subject, a woman, but an object, an “it.” Giving in to desire he tries to call Sharon, but grace intervenes again, and Sharon is out. Her roommate is there, however, and when she says that Sharon is with her fiancé, Binx even tries to lure the roommate out. But just at this moment, he is saved again by grace for he sees Kate driving in to meet him and closes his telephone conversation with a reference to “my own fiancée, Kate Cutrer.” (231)

Here begins the last scene of the book, except for the Epilogue. Binx notices that the school is closed and people are occasionally entering the church next door. When he sees that those who come out of the church have a black smudge on their foreheads, he realizes that it is Ash Wednesday, a day of solemn penitence, and that they have received the sign of ashes as a symbol of their sinfulness and mortality. (232)

Kate asks Binx why he had not told Aunt Emily that they were planning to be married, and when Binx asks, “Are we?” she replies without hesitation, “Ycs.” (232) Existentialism emphasizes the need

to make choices, decisions. Yet Binx seems never to take the initiative, only to acquiesce in an almost passive manner. When Kate asks him if he is going to medical school, he replies that he will if his Aunt Emily wants him to. (233) Hardy says, "The velleity of his inclination at crucial junctures is so delicate as to be hardly discernible to the unprejudiced observer. Binx does not choose between Sharon and Kate."¹⁶

To some extent this is true, and yet we should be careful not to judge Binx too harshly by his words for, as we have already seen, he distrusts words and the pronouncements people make about themselves. The existential decision is not what a person says but what a person does, and Binx *does* marry Kate and he *does* enter medical school. It is true that Binx appears to have been ready to choose the "Little Way," to marry Sharon or have an affair with her. But at that moment he thought that Kate had abandoned him, and Binx *was* weak; he was a sinner and subject to all the temptations of the flesh of the aesthetic stage. If he is the hero of this novel, he is the absurdist hero, a weak and imperfect man. But Kierkegaard says, "... the movements of faith must constantly be made by virtue of the absurd, yet in such a way, be it observed, that one does not lose the finite but gains it every inch."¹⁷ Abraham, the Knight of Faith, by the leap of faith and by virtue of the absurd was prepared to commit the most criminal act of murdering his own son, Isaac, whom he loved more than himself, but by virtue of the absurd he gained Isaac and all the blessings of God.¹⁸

On Ash Wednesday Binx is aware of his sin, his weakness, and his denial of Kate. Although he may not have agreed with all of Aunt Emily's criticisms of his character, he knows that some of the things

she has said are true, and he thinks she may have persuaded Kate of his unworthiness. Under these circumstances it is not so strange that he does not assume with self assurance that Kate still wants to marry him. He sees *her* decision as a sign of God's grace and he accepts it. Since Binx seems to be aware of the writings of St. Augustine, he no doubt knows that human decisions are dependent on God's prevenient grace, according to Christian theology based on St. Augustine's teaching. We are not saved by *our* decision, or *our* faith, but by God's grace. Jesus said, "you did not choose me, but I chose you."¹⁹ And it may be noted that Binx becomes slightly more positive and active after this point.

Hardy also says, "It is difficult to take the sentimental, 'urban pastoral' dream of service-station ownership at all seriously."²⁰ He may be right, but actually I do not think it is so much sentimental, as Binx's ironic joke, again having to do with the use of words. "Service" has long been an important Christian concept along with its equivalents, "ministry," and the Greek, *diakonia*. For a fuel and repair shop to take this name, which should mean "help given for love and without charge," seems to Binx an irony when the purpose of such a shop is actually to make money for the owner, and it is possible Binx might paradoxically have thought of making it a real "service" station.

When Kate asks him what he plans to do he shrugs and thinks to himself: "There is only one thing I can do: listen to people, see how they stick themselves into the world, hand them along a ways in their dark journey and be handed along, and for good and selfish reasons. It only remains to decide whether this vocation is best pursued in a service station or—" (233)

This is undoubtedly a key statement for understanding Binx and the whole novel, and it seems to me extremely well-expressed. Each phrase is significant. Binx sees himself first as a listener, not a proclaimer, for he must first listen to people and "see how they stick themselves into the world" before he can help them. He will not be too forward in telling them what to do for he distrusts the language which has been so misused as to make all signals unclear. "Words strain, crack and sometimes break . . . slip, slide, perish, decay with imprecision . . ." as the poet tells us.²¹ ". . . how they stick themselves into the world . . ." implies that this earth is not our permanent home, but that our earthly life is only a temporary short journey before the eternity we must face after death. Binx signifies that he has joined the human family in fellowship and mutual relationship, handing others along and being handed along on the dark journey. We know that one of the people he will help along is Kate, and there will be many others both in his family and among his patients. He says he is doing this "for good and selfish reasons." It is "good" because it will be doing the will of God in showing love to others, and it is "selfish" in a good sense, for it will lead to his own salvation, which means showing true love to his "true self." Jesus told us to love our neighbors as ourselves,²² and this true love of ourselves may also include denying ourselves for a higher goal. Therefore, although Binx uses the word "selfish," this is not the same as "selfishness."

It is from this point on that we can notice subtle changes in Binx. He takes care of Kate and reassures her in her fear and uncertainty. He promises to take her seriously and not to laugh at her but to treat her as a subject, an authentic "Thou." In their answers he and Kate

both say, "I will," (234) and again this sounds very like the marriage vows. As Martin Luschei says, when Binx kisses the blood on the feathered flesh of Kate's thumb, (234) he has "solemnized" the proposal which he made earlier in a sacramental covenant.²³

As Binx and Kate are "exchanging their vows," a middle-class black leaves the church, but because of his dark skin it is impossible to see whether he has received the imposition of ashes on his forehead or not. (233-35) In the same way we cannot see at this point whether Binx has really changed inwardly or not, but we can believe "that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bon Enfants," (235) and that God's grace has been given and probably received.

The Epilogue takes place after Binx has married Kate and entered medical school. Aunt Emily again becomes fond of Binx but decides he is "not one of her heroes but a very ordinary fellow." (237) This may seem to mean that Binx has not changed very much, but we should remember that, according to Kierkegaard, the Knight of Faith has "nothing remarkable about him, and looks and acts 'like a tax-collector' "²⁴—or we may say, like a broker or a medical student. Binx is not the romantic hero, but the absurdist hero in a divine comedy. As such, he rightly declines to say much about his search. (237)

In the final scene, however, just before Lonnie dies at the age of fifteen, he comforts Kate and the Smith children. The scene is closely parallel to the ending of *The Brothers Karamazov* in which Alyosha speaks to the boys at Ilusha's funeral.²⁵ Here Binx tells them calmly that Lonnie will die but that he does not want them to be sad: "He told me to give you a kiss and tell you that he loved you." (239)

When one of the children asks Binx if Lonnie will "still be in a wheelchair" at the resurrection, Binx says that he will not, "He'll be like you." (240) The scene ends with the children expressing joy and love in the midst of their sadness and finally Binx helping Kate with tender kindness and love.

Although Binx does not talk in detail about his faith or declare his love to Kate or the other members of his family in words, I think it is quite clear that he *has* changed and that grace is working in him gradually to alter his character and his life. Perhaps we cannot say with certainty that Binx is in the religious stage, but I think we can be sure that he is at least on the threshold.

Notes

- 1 These three stages are set forth in Soren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way*, translated by Walter Lowrie (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940). The "stages" are sometimes called "spheres," "realms," or "levels."
- 2 John C. Carr, "An Interview with Walker Percy," in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) p. 66. Quoted in Linda Whitney Hobson, *Understanding Walker Percy* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1988) p. 30.
- 3 John Edward Hardy, *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) p. 55.
- 4 For these dates see "Chronology" in Jac Tharpe, *Walker Percy* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1983). However, the date of the death of Percy's father, LeRoy Percy, is *not* 1927, but 1929.
- 5 William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1973) p. 310.
- 6 Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978) pp. 65-6.
- 7 Robert Bretall, ed., *A Kierkegaard Anthology* (Princeton: Princeton University

- Press, 1946) p. 172. See also Janet Hobbs, "Binx Bolling and the Stages on Life's Way" in Panthea Reid Broughton, ed., *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) pp. 37-49.
- 8 Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961, 1984) p. 3. All subsequent references will be to this edition and will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses in the text.
- 9 Martin Luschei makes a dialectic division of the novel with Emily representing the thesis of the Bolling tradition; Binx's bourgeois life in Gentilly "exile" being the antithesis; and Binx's "leap of faith" in the ending being the synthesis. Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1972) pp. 64-110.
- 10 Mark 8: 34.
- 11 Psalm 49: 14 in *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: The Church Pension Fund, 1928).
- 12 Percy uses this metaphor in an extended essay, "The Message in the Bottle" which has been collected in the book of the same title (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1975) pp. 119-49.
- 13 Martin Buber, *I and Thou*.
- 14 Bretall, p. 117.
- 15 Patricia Lewis Poteat explains "that the flesh has been so . . . nullified by the logical dominance of mind" since the time of Descartes "that the living body has become in effect . . . a nothing, a zero, mere flesh' . . . unfit as a vessel for love." *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) p. 64.
- 16 Hardy, p. 46.
- 17 Bretall, p. 118.
- 18 *Ibid.*, p. 128.
- 19 Ephesians 2:8, and John 15:16. Binx refers to St. Augustine's writings on page 31.
- 20 Hardy, p. 47.
- 21 T. S. Eliot, *Burnt Norton*, lines 149-52.
- 22 Matthew 22:39.
- 23 Luschei, p. 107.

24 Bretall, p. 117.

25 The resemblance has been noted by several critics, but it is mistakenly called "Alyosha's death" in Hobson, p. 41.