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THE SECOND COMING (1980) has been read as a celebratory affirmation of the restorative powers of love in the modern world. Like all of Percy's protagonists, Will Barrett, hero of both *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and *The Second Coming*, is a perennial seeker. But unlike Binx Bolling, Dr. Thomas More, and Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, Will actually discovers the objects of his pursuit.

When the novel opens, Will Barrett is experiencing spells of physical and psychic dislocation: he inexplicably falls down on golf courses and suffers extended fits of involuntary memory. Recently widowed, Will comes to recognize that he and his wife had been virtual strangers to each other and that he is equally estranged from his only daughter, Leslie, "a dissatisfied nearsighted girl whose good looks were spoiled by a frown which had made a heavy inverted U in her brow."[1] While Leslie quells her discontent through "new-style" Christianity, her belief in "giving her life to the Lord through a personal encounter with Him" (152), Will rejects the dogmatic forms of both old and new-style Christianity. Well into middle age, he finds himself detached from family, friends, and God and slowly losing hold of whatever tenuous connections to the world he had hitherto maintained.

A second line of narration interwoven with Will's story centers on Allie, a young woman tired of conforming to the demands of her parents and of attempting to achieve socially determined goals. Having

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made straight A's yet "flunked life," Allie has a breakdown and stops using rational discourse (99). She is committed to a mental hospital but eventually escapes with the intention of seeking legal counsel. She takes refuge in an abandoned greenhouse located on a piece of property she has recently inherited. The last thing she expects is that a man—a lawyer—will fall through the roof of her greenhouse. This is precisely what occurs when Will attempts to resolve his existential crisis by proving or disproving the existence of God. In order to do this, he descends into a cave that extends into the side of a mountain, where he will await a sign of God. If the sign appears, his reasoning goes, he will possess the certainty that God exists and thereby gain what he feels is necessary to continue living. If no sign is forthcoming, he will die, and others will profit from his death, which will attest to God's absence or at least to his unwillingness to make his existence known. Will's experiment is, however, interrupted by a toothache. Forced by nausea and excruciating pain to abort his plan, he climbs towards the mouth of the cave. On the way he falls through the roof of Allie's greenhouse, which buttresses the cave. The events that follow certainly seem to suggest that Will and Allie each move from individual alienation to intersubjective union. She nurses her unexpected guest back to health, and they fall in love and plan to marry. While Allie intends to start a small business, a nursery, in her greenhouse, Will plans on returning to the practice of law. They will buy a garden home, have a child, and even employ the itinerant characters who have appeared at various points in the story (a detail that promotes the sense of narrative closure)—Kelso, a fellow patient at the mental hospital, Mr. Ryan, a contractor, and Mr. Arnold, a cabin notcher. The latter two are living in a resthome but are eager and fit enough to be employed. Will and Allie even seem to establish a kind of ideal discourse together; he understands every oblique comment she makes, follows the metonymic associations of her speech, and, because she does not always understand conventional language, promises to fulfill her need for an interpreter. Critics have praised the relationship of Will and Allie in language verging on the rapturous. Jac Tharpe notes, "In love they are reborn, Allison immanent, Will transcendent, Allison speaking in tongues their holy idiocy, Will listening at last without deafness."[2] According to Patricia Lewis Poteat, theirs is "a quiet tale of love and life hard-won and finite and good."[3] Most recently, John Edward Hardy has written, "Percy's *The Second Coming* is in the first place a love story, a story of earthly love, and quite a beautiful love

story. Beautiful love stories, plausibly 'affirmative' love stories, are extremely rare in fiction that purports to treat in any way realistically the life of our unhappy times."[4]

Lending authority to Percy's remark that *The Second Coming* "may be the first unalienated novel written since Tolstoy," the majority of critics read the text as a *depiction* of the overcoming of existential alienation.[5] They identify Will Barrett as the agent of such an overcoming and thereby tacitly regard the narrative as a mimetic transcription of that event. Ted Spivey writes, "for the first time in his work, Percy actually shows in detail what it means to live the ordinary life joyfully. . . . He portrays two characters who by finding the secret of communication through the shared discovery of themselves and of God are able to see ordinary life illuminated by joy."[6]

The popularity of the novel seems largely due to its didactic appeal. The novel holds out the promise of meaning to the reader, who is led to believe that he or she, too, can have access to significance in life. Will's experience is said to disclose "stratagems for being" that potentially apply to the world beyond the text,[7] and Percy is accordingly seen as "tempting readers to identify with his people," a statement that would seem to suggest that Percy encourages his readers to use the novel as a manual for their own extra-textual situations (Broughton xv).

To my knowledge only one reader of Percy, Doreen Fowler, has expressed reservations about the success of the novel in any sustained way. Her analysis is interesting because it implicitly raises questions about the relation between Will Barrett's quest for knowledge on the one hand and the project of the critic/reader on the other. Fowler points to an ambivalence in Percy's fiction that is particularly manifest in *The Second Coming*. She writes:

> Try as he will to offer constructive criticism, to suggest alternative modes of living, to root out the source of the modern malaise, Percy's very manner of presentation frequently seems either to defuse or to invalidate his answers. A fundamental ambivalence polarizes his fiction as Percy tries to make his art stretch to straddle two widely disparate views of life—a heroic, idealistic attitude and a more practical, empirical position. Because Percy refuses to commit himself entirely to one view, his answers are often contradicted by opposing suggestions in the novel, creating a precarious balance of opposites.[8]

The ambivalence Fowler identifies concerns the status in the novel of absolute knowledge. On the one hand, "*The Second Coming* counsels acknowledgement of man's inability to see" (Fowler 122). On the other hand, even at the novel's conclusion, Will continues to pursue absolute knowledge.

Fowler believes that the cave episode offers extreme resistance to interpretation. She provides a number of possible readings of the episode without deciding in favor of any single one. She first suggests that "Percy is implying a substitution— Allison/love for God. Will was looking for a manifestation of God and found Allison, who offers the possibility of love (Fowler 122). Or perhaps, she speculates, Percy is implying that absolute knowledge exists but remains inaccessible to man. She compares Will's search for knowledge to the Platonic allegory of the cave as well as to the flight of Icarus. Whereas the first analogy suggests that "Man's inability to see the truth does not necessarily mean that the truth does not exist, the second association is a reminder of man's limitations and a lesson in acceptance of those limitations" (Fowler 120, 122).

The overdetermination of the cave experiment, laden as it is with possible meanings, does not lend itself to any one reading; Fowler is thus compelled to generate various alternatives that, upon closer consideration, appear mutually contradictory and raise further questions: if Will is reminiscent of the figure of man in Plato's epistemological allegory, but with the added hubris of Icarus, why is he not punished like Icarus when he attempts to approach the light of absolute knowledge? Why is he instead rewarded with the discovery of love? And if Fowler is correct in stating that Will learns that "one can act and must act despite limited understanding," why does Will not know this (121)? As Fowler notes, after Will finds his answer and is "asked what the answer was, he replies, 'I don't know.'"

The scene in the novel in which "the answer" is apparently disclosed makes it increasingly clear not only that Will is ignorant of all solutions but more important, that the urgency of his desire for knowledge is derailed through narrative irony. In that scene, Will says to Allie, "There is something . . . I want to tell you. About me. . . . It's what I learned in the cave and what I am going to do" (243). Instead of continuing, Will becomes quiet and watches the rain outside. Once he does begin to speak, the narrator relates not his words but Allie's reaction to

them. When Allie has trouble understanding the meaning of his words, the narrator does not supplement her reaction with another perspective. The reader is thus compelled to rely on her perception alone. Furthermore, when Will finally addresses the issue of the cave and its significance, his voice is drowned out by an electrical storm. It is as if the tension Fowler identifies between two contradictory but discrete "views" in the novel is, in this scene, circumscribed through a series of narrative devices that displaces Will as the novel's epistemological center. While Fowler herself notes the divergence between narrator and protagonist, the terms of her own analysis compel her to override the competing narratorial presence. She does this by appealing to an unexamined norm of mental health. She writes, "We see the world through [Will's] eyes, and the narrator tells us that Will is crazy. If we discount Will's views as psychotic, what view does the novel offer? We have Will's world or none; there is no alternative. And despite the narrator's warnings, Will does not appear insane" (118). Fowler must silence this other narratorial voice, because it seems to pose a danger to interpretation: it threatens to revoke the one view proffered by the text and thereby to place the critic in the uneasy situation of having no firm grasp of the text's meaning.

If we consider Fowler's summary of the salient characteristic common to all of Percy's heroes, a further, even more unsettling danger emerges. She notes:

> Like all of Percy's protagonists, [Will] needs to know. He questions as naturally as he breathes; wonder is his nourishment . . . he is determined to unveil the hidden truth, sharing with all of Percy's heroes a will to understand. . . . All of these characters are distinguished by the same quality—a formidable thirst for knowledge. They weigh, question, hypothesize, and interpret every word, gesture, and posture in an unending quest for meaning. For them, life is a search. (121–22)

In characterizing Will Barrett and the other Percyian protagonists, Fowler aptly, if inadvertently, describes the literary critic, who weighs, questions, hypothesizes and interprets every word, gesture and posture in an unending quest for meaning. And yet, it is precisely with respect to the search for knowledge or signs of presence that the narrator pronounces the following judgment on Will:

> Madness! Madness! Madness! Yet such was the nature of Will Barrett's peculiar delusion when he left his comfortable home atop a pleasant Carolina mountain and set forth on the strangest adventure of his life, descended into Lost Cove cave looking for proof of the existence of God and a sign of the apocalypse like some crackpot preacher in California. (186)

If the narrative voice destabilizes readings of the novel that privilege Will's perspective, it also reveals a collusion between certain questions of interpretation and madness. The author/narrator's comment about the madness of Will's hermeneutic inquiry implicitly pertains as well to literary analysis that views the text as supplying "answers" or "solutions" to existential problems. It would be tempting, because reassuring, to draw a distinction between sane and mad forms of literary analysis; and yet, if we acknowledge that all reading is motivated by a will to understand, the narrator's comment renders *all* interpretation, regardless of its aim, mad as such. The question is not whether we can avoid this madness but whether the narrative of Will's mad quest can help us to recognize and understand the madness of understanding that generates this and every reading of the novel.[9]

Keeping in mind that Will's quest for meaning thus allegorizes the reader's, I'd like to begin my analysis by considering the connotations of Will Barrett's name. Fowler points out that it emblematizes the hero's will to discover, to "bare it." An additional, more oblique play on the name intimates the nature of the impulse to reveal; Percy's narrator queries, "Where does such rage come from? from the discovery that in the end the world yields only to violence, that only *the violent bear it away*, that short of violence all is in the end impotence?" (165, my italics). This passage suggests that the hermeneutic enterprise of "baring it" may itself entail a violence that is indissociable from a certain phallic strength—short of this violence, all is impotence; I will return to the implications of this violence later.[10]

Certain details of Will's cave-experiment outline the contours of the violence that may be indigenous to the uncovering of knowledge. As mentioned earlier, Will was forced to abort his experiment. The following passage describes the reasons for Will's change in plans:

> Unfortunately for the poor man awaiting the Last Days and raving away at God and man in the bowels of Sourwood Mountain directly below thousands of normal folk playing golf and

> antiquing and barbecuing and simply enjoying the fall colors—for on the following day at the height of his lunacy the cloud blew away and the beautiful days of Indian summer began, the mountains glowed like rubies and amethysts, and leafers were out in force—unfortunately things can go wrong with an experiment most carefully designed by a sane scientist. A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming, after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe. In the case of Will Barrett, what went wrong could hardly be traced to God or man, Jews or whomever, but rather to a cause at once humiliating and comical: a toothache. So in the end not only did he not get an answer to his peculiar question, not a yes or a no or even a maybe—he could not even ask the question. How does one ask a question, either a profound question or a lunatic question, with such a pain in an upper canine that every heartbeat feels like a hot ice pick shoved straight up into the brain? The toothache was so bad it made him sick. He vomited.
>
> There is one sure cure for cosmic explorations, grandiose ideas about god, man, death, suicide, and such—and that is nausea. I defy a man afflicted with nausea to give a single thought to these vast subjects. A nauseated man is a sober man. A nauseated man is a disinterested man. (199–200)

In this passage, the author/narrator assumes an ironic, omniscent position over his "poor" character. Speaking in the name of sanity and appealing to the values of immediacy and groundedness embodied by the prosaic activities of the world above the cave, he poses a rhetorical question at the end of the first paragraph that emphasizes the inevitability of Will's failure to ask the profound question. At the same time, the hyperbolic rhetoric of the second sentence in the second paragraph—"I defy a man . . ."—ironically calls attention to the artifice of the situation he claims is inevitable: while it may be true that no nauseated man could deny that nausea "cures" cosmic explorations and grandiose ideas, it is also the case that this most natural, unpredictable, and prosaic of afflictions—a toothache—is, here, a fictive construct. Not God or man, Jews or whoever, but the author/narrator, composes this "humiliating and comical scene." As such, the "cure" for Will's epistemological itch is as consciously constructed as the "natural" infirmity; it displays a narrative logic that emulates the principle of the vaccination, which

cures the disease through the disease and thereby reveals the nature of the sickness. In Will's case, the toothache that cures belongs to a series of images that establish a relationship between three elements: orality, aggression, and the search for knowledge.

The orality associated with knowledge already informed Will's entry into the cave, itself an oral cavity of sorts. Before Will even ventures inside, he experiences the cave buccally: "He opened his mouth. Clean ferrous ions blew onto his tongue" (196). Oral imagery recurs in the episode, as for example, when Will turns "past a lip of rock" (196).

Teeth and toothaches are also mentioned in connection with Allie's father. The author/narrator describes the anatomy of his smile, which extends "back to his eyeteeth . . . all his expressions, even frowns, occured within the smile" (99). His salient attribute is an aggressiveness that manifests itself as the will to abuse the mouths of his patients with his instruments—he is, fittingly, a dentist—and their ears with his unsolicited speeches. In the following passage, Allie, who used to assist her father's dental hygienist, reflects upon her father and his medical practices:

> He had passionate and insane views on every subject. She was certain that one reason he had taken up dentistry was so he could assault helpless people with his mad monologues. In he'd come, smiling and handsome, hands scrubbed pink, breath sweet with Clorets, and while she kept the patient's mouth dry with a suction tube, he'd stuff the same mouth with hot wax and crowns and fillings and fingers and then he'd come out with it. (99)

The patients of Allie's father are victims of an aggression legitimated by his position of authority yet barely dissimulating his blatant sadism. While Allie is not directly in her father's line of fire, the silence to which she, as his assistant and daughter, is relegated doubles the silence imposed upon the patients. Nevertheless, even in their most inflamed manifestations, the attacks by Allie's father remain rhetorical, as for example when he declaims, "'Do you know what I'd do with all of them? Line them up against that wall and go down the line with my BAR'" (99), the father declaims, speaking of "coal miners, hippies, queers, Arab sheiks, Walter Cronkite, George Wallace . . . media Jews, Miami Jews . . . Ronald Reagan . . . Roosevelt(!), Carter, Martin

Luther Coon, Kennedy, Nixon . . . the Mafia, Goldwater . . . [and], J. Edgar Hoover" (99).

In contrast to the father's verbal attacks, another scene of oral paternal aggression is more overtly physical. Will's father commits suicide in a way that marks the most emphatic intersection of orality and violence: he fires a double-barrel gun into his mouth. In an extended and graphic meditation on his father's death, Will attempts to come to terms with its significance. The meaning of the death is perhaps the most difficult and knotted issue in the text; it conjoins questions of interpretation—what it means for Will to "bare" the significance of his father's death—with problems of inter- and intra-subjective aggression.

As an adult reflecting back upon the suicide, Will relates it to an event that preceded it. When he was a boy of thirteen, he had gone on a quail shoot with his father, who misfired, wounding Will and himself. According to one reconstructed account, the father had been beset by a dizzy spell and lost his balance, accidently discharging the double-barrel shotgun and injuring both Will and himself. Years later, Will realizes that this account is false. He reconstructs another chain of events based on the number of shells retrieved by a Negro guide after the accident. This other account proves that his father had consciously intended to kill Will and then himself but had changed his mind at the last second and missed Will. The father eventually commits suicide, although he does not attempt to take Will's life a second time. In his reconstruction, Will links the attempted filicide/suicide and the suicide sequentially. He sees the suicide as the belated execution of whatever his father was trying to accomplish on the quail shoot. Will reflects:

> The sorrow in your eyes when I came over and sat beside you in Georgia—were you sorry you did it or sorry you didn't. . . . Sorry you didn't do it. Because the next time you took no chances and did it right, used both barrels, both thumbs and your mouth. (143)

According to Will, his father achieves "the next time" what he initially did not get right the first time. While the second attempt only takes one life, the "overkill" apparent in the use of two barrels and two thumbs is also overdetermined, given that originally Will's father was going to shoot both Will and himself. Will accounts for his father's shift in plans by incorporating the recollection of the hunting trip into a fantasy of epistemological transmission:

Ah then, so that was it. He was trying to tell me something before he did it. Yes, he had a secret and he was trying to tell me and I think I knew it even then and have known it ever since but now I know that I know and there's a difference.

He was trying to warn me. He was trying to tell me that one day it would happen to me too, that I would come to the same place he came to, and I have, I have just now, climbing through a barbed-wire fence. Was he trying to tell me because he thought that if I knew exactly what happened to him and what was going to happen to me, that by the mere telling it would not then have to happen to me? Knowing about what is going to happen is having a chance to escape it. If you don't know about it, it will certainly happen to you. But if you know, will it not happen anyway? (62– 63)

Will's fantasy of epistemological transmission may function as a compromise formation blocking his recognition of another possible meaning of the episode, namely, that the attempted filicide was a sign of the father's lack of love, a fear that could have been reenforced by Will's loss in childhood of his mother, who had died at a young age. The father's suicide would thus seem like a second act of parental "abandonment." The fantasy prevents Will from arriving at such a conclusion. To Will's question, "Was it love or failure of love?" (143) that made the father pull up at the last second, the fantasy answers, "love." In the second paragraph of the passage above, Will poses a series of questions that reveals both his hope that the transmission of knowledge will foster immunity from "it" as well as his fear that even knowledge cannot change the course of events. Despite his hope, however, Will cannot but repeat his father's experience precisely in the act of believing his father has taught him a lesson; it will become evident that Will's acquisition of knowledge actually participates in a process of symbolic suicide that structurally replicates the real death of the father.

The "secret" Will believes he learns from the father's suicide pertains to the convolution of death-in-life. He thinks,

The name of this century is the Century of the Love of Death. Death in this century is not the death people die but the death people live. Men love death because real death is better than the living death. That's why men like wars, of course. Bad as

> wars are and maybe because they are so bad, thinking of peace during war is better than peace. (252)

The confusion of death and life manifests itself in different forms of aggression, both inter- and intrasubjective. The following passage characterizes the relation of Will's grandfather to the other as intersubjectively aggressive, or sadistic, and that of his father to the other as intrasubjective, or masochistic: "Both his grandfather and his father had enemies. One, like Ivanhoe, had enemies he hated. The other had the guilts like [Lord] Jim and an enemy he hated, himself. And one had the shotgun, the other the Luger. What do you do when you are born with a love of death and death-dealing and have no enemies?" (141). While Will makes a genealogical distinction when he aligns sadism with his grandfather and masochism with his father, the two forms of aggression are not mutually independent; sadism turns out to be another manifestation of masochism. Will's father discovers his enemies in the external world. Will reflects,

> I was never so glad of anything as I was to get away from your doom and your death-dealing and your great honor and great hunts and great hates (Jesus, you could not even walk down the street on Monday morning without either wanting to kill somebody or swear a blood oath of allegiance with somebody else). (72)

Inasmuch as the self-hatred of Will's father compels him to assume a hostile position vis-à-vis an intersubjective other, his masochistic belligerence is in fact a version of sadism. Conversely, while Will's father wants to kill another, and does attempt to kill his son, he is not differentiated from the object of his aggression: "*You and I are the same*," he says to Will just before the shooting incident (56). If we take the father's words *à la lettre*, they signify the absence of a defined identity, the merging of self and other in an imaginary moment characterized by the unstable polarities of love and aggression.

The confusion of self and other corresponds to a condition of semantic deficiency. Will's father attempts to account for the blurring of particular oppositions such as life/death and war/peace in terms of a lack in language:

> One night after the war and during the Eisenhower years the father was taking a turn under the oaks. The son watched him from the porch.
>
> 'The trouble is,' the man said, 'there is no word for this.'
>
> 'For what?'
>
> 'This.' He held both arms out to the town, to the wide world. 'It's not war and it's not peace. It's not death and it's not life. What is it? What do you call it?'
>
> 'I don't know.'
>
> 'There is life and there is death. Life is better than death but there are worse things than death.'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'There is no word for it. Maybe it never happened before and so there is not yet a word for it. What is the word for a state which is not life and not death, a death in life?' (122–23)

If Will's father cannot find the proper word for the state of death-in-life, Will by contrast seems able to arrest the confusion by discovering the missing name. The following passage suggests that the acquisition of the name arrests the confusion of death and life, self and other:

> Ha, there is a secret after all, he said. But to know the secret answer, you must first know the secret question. The question is, who is the enemy.
>
> Not to know the name of the enemy is already to have been killed by him.
>
> *Ha*, he said, dancing, snapping his fingers, and laughing and hooting, *ha hoo hee*, jumping up and down and socking himself, *but I do know. I know. I know the name of the enemy.*
>
> The name of the enemy is death, he said, grinning and shoving his hands in his pockets. Not the death of dying but the living death. . . . I know your name at last, he said, laughing and hooting *hee hee hooooee* like a pig-caller. (251–52)

Will celebrates his discovery of the name because he believes it will save him from ending up like his father. He thereby gives a negative answer to the question he had posed earlier, "If you know, will it not happen anyway?"(63). Yet, it is precisely the identification of the forms of death through the discovery of the "name" of the enemy that reveals

the scandalous connection between knowledge—"I know. I know. I know the name of the enemy"—and a particular mode of violence: knowing and naming, or knowing as naming, creates discrete identity—life versus death, enemy versus enemy—within the very economy of sado-masochism that Will had attributed to his father and grandfather. Will thinks,

> Death in the form of death genes shall not prevail over me, for death genes are one thing but it is something else to name the death genes and know them and stand over against them and dare them. I am different from my death genes and therefore not subject to them. My father had the same death genes but he feared them. (254)

While Will Barrett believes that naming will engender the death of the death, to the extent that the repudiated "gene" of death is a part of himself, the act of naming becomes inseparable from a masochistic splitting of the self into an aggressive opposition between self and other. An inescapable ambivalence is thus associated with naming: while it is an indispensable cognitive process, it functions by imposing hostile borders that displace and divide identity in representing it. In designating his other through a genetic metaphor, Will creates an identity through a fictionalizing act of projective expropriation. This act ironically replicates the very antagonism he believes he is evading. In this respect, the "secret" answer to the "secret question" is yet another form of suicidal dissolution.[11] As such, the "secret" reveals that the constitution of identity through naming is synonymous with a form of symbolic suicide. The meaning of the father's death thus points to the *modus operandi* of the process of naming as such. Within the logic of Will's fantasy of epistemological transmission, the suicide becomes an allegorical staging of the process of naming. Hence, the gesture of rejecting the father's death as other, as something from which Will can escape, expresses Will's desire to reject the process of naming itself. That is, Will's fantasy of epistemological transmission coupled with his determination to make his father's death mean something can be understood as an expression of Will's desire to evade the divisive effects of the subject's insertion into the symbolic order.

In summation, Will makes himself audience to the scenario of naming by installing the death of his father in a narrative of epistemological

transmission; he places himself in the role of recipient of "secret" knowledge and thereby attempts to contain the contents of the secret and protect himself from its effects. This gesture of containment actually replicates the very violence Will endeavors to elude. For to reject his father's death, and symbolically the act of naming, is to replicate structurally the process of naming itself.

To the extent that Will's recollection of the hunt performs a psychic service, it functions like fantasy as Abraham and Torok define it:

> Fantasy is in essence narcissistic: rather than make an attack on the individual, it attempts to transform the world. The fact that it is often unconscious indicates, not that it is irrelevant, but that its frame of reference is a *secretly maintained* topography.
>
> Thus the task of understanding a fantasy becomes specific: to pinpoint concretely, what topographical change the fantasy is called on to resist.[12]

According to the logic of the fantasy, Will's narrative of epistemological appropriation protects his psychic constitution from the narcissistic loss suffered through the acquisition of the name, that is, through the accession into the symbolic order with its attendant intrapsychic splitting of the ego. Furthermore, Will's refusal of the loss, which he accomplishes through its narrativization, conforms to the pattern of one fantasy in particular that Abraham and Torok isolate and discuss, the fantasy of incorporation. "Whereas in the mechanism of introjection, language articulates and thereby supplements an absence, by *representing* presence . . . it is because the mouth cannot articulate certain words, cannot utter certain phrases . . . that in fantasy one will take into the mouth the unspeakable, the thing itself" (6). According to Abraham and Torok, the words of introjection are available as long as the loss they signify can be recognized: there must be "*auto-apprehension*" of the absence of the object (6). The substitution of incorporation for introjection is thus the response to a verbal inhibition. To the extent that naming creates identity by dividing the non-identical, it is an act of symbolic suicide that enables self and other to become knowable entities, that is, knowable as entities, and whose efficacy depends on the inhibition of the knowledge and articulation of its constitutive violence: were the created self to recognize the process of its differentiation in a moment of self-consciousness, the borders that divide and create

the self would dissolve. Thus, the father's death can only stage the act of naming *for* Will, because the father himself cannot be subject and audience of the scenario in which he participates, just as Will, in turn, cannot comprehend that he repeats the self-divisive act performed by his father. Since he cannot acknowledge through mourning the loss of the narcissistic object, he instead objectivizes the process of naming through a narrative of paternal suicide. Will's reconstruction thus superimposes the fantasy of rejecting representation on the grounds of its "suicidal" violence onto the real event of the hunting accident. As if to underscore the fantasmatic nature of the reconstruction, Will confuses the object of mourning. The following two passages reveal that rather than mourn the loss of the father, Will mourns his own death:

> All these years he had thought he was in luck that it didn't happen and that he had escaped with his life and a triumphant life at that. But it was something else he had escaped with, not his life. His life—or was it his death?—he had left behind in the Thomasville swamp, where it still waited for him. (275)

> I thought he missed me and he did, almost, and I thought I survived and I did, almost. But now I have learned something and been surprised by it after all. Learned what? That he didn't miss me after all, that I thought I survived and I did but I've been dead of something ever since and didn't know it until now. (301)

The rupture with the father, through which Will attempts to assert his difference from him and which the text marks as a process of self-differentiation, engenders the ironic repetition of the very pattern of expulsion and incorporation that structured the father's suicide. What Will rejects as other, a love of death, returns as the object of his ambivalent desire: Marion, his late wife, literally and figuratively incorporates the fatal relation between identity and death that he rejected:

> After he married Marion, she seemed happier than ever, gave herself to church work, doing so with pleasure, took pleasure in him—and suddenly took pleasure in eating. . . . She ate and ate and ate. She grew too heavy for her hip joint already made frail and porous by polio. The ball of her femur drove into the socket of her pelvis, melted, and fused. She took to a

> wheelchair, ate more than ever, did more good works. . . . She truly gave herself to others—and ate and ate and ate, her eyes as round and glittering as a lover's. (151)

The repetition of the phrase "she ate and ate and ate" suggests that Marion holds a kind of fascination for Will; it is as if he is encountering a specular double of himself, the recognition of which he must resist; hence the sense of distance he establishes from her by portraying the chronology of their relationship as divided by a mysterious rupture: "suddenly," and, by implication mysteriously, everything changed.

Marion's own attempt to reject internal alterity manifests itself in the role she assumes as perpetual, voluntary mourner: "When an old person died at St Mark's, often there was no one to claim the body. Marion would go to great lengths to trace the family and arrange the funeral. Yamaiuchi would chauffeur them in the Rolls, leading the way for the hearse to distant Carolina towns, Tryon or Goldsboro" (126). In becoming a custodian of the dead, Marion locates and thereby attempts to confine death to a position outside of herself. This process of division and confinement cannot be arrested, however, since placement of the death "outside" generates a narcissistic urge to reappropriate the obliterated other, to exhume its corpse and consume it as part of the self that is lost in the process of delimiting inside from outside, death from life:

> After the funeral in an empty weedy cemetery they would head for the nearest Holiday Inn in time for the businessman's lunch. Marion, animated by a kind of holy vivacity, would eat the $2.95 buffet, heaping up mountains of mashed potatoes and pork chops, and go back for seconds, pleased by the cheapness and the quantity of food. Like many rich women, she loved a bargain. (126)

Like Will's father, Marion kills herself through a process of violent oral incorporation. A comparision of the descriptions of the deaths reveals their structural affinity. In the lurid rhapsody that follows, Will imagines his father's suicide:

> I remember now. I cleaned the gun when I got it back from the sheriff in Mississippi. Both barrels. Wouldn't one have been enough? Yes, given an ordinary need for death. But not if it's a love of death. In the case of love, more is better than less, two

> twice as good as one, and most is best of all. And if the aim is the ecstasy of love, two is closer to infinity than one, especially when the two are twelve-gauge Super-X number-eight shot. And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself, the cold-steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck-you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world. (143)

The rhetorical force of this passage derives from the dense overlay of themes and images that are held together by an almost incantatory rhythm and sequence of repetitions. The passage fantasizes the violent event of suicide in figural language borrowed from the rhetoric of intimate self-enclosure and thereby communicates the interrelation of perfect self-union or identity and infinite multiplication, identity as the non-identical. The violent combination of the rhetoric of intimacy and the theme of suicide also reflects the double edge of the experience Will reconstructs: in describing his father's death, he is fantasizing his own symbolic death as well. To indicate that the suicide exhibits an extraordinary desire for death is not to suggest that there are no ordinary suicides; the extraordinariness and scandalousness of the father's death resides in its very ordinariness. The perversity of the desire for death is not exceptional; rather, the suicide is "the logical and ultimate act" of a universal process that the father's death makes visible.

In the gun's doubleness condenses the masochism of the samurai and the aggression of fuck-you love that doubles back on the self. This redoubling is stressed through the chain of syncopated repetitions of numbers and consonants (particularly "b," "f," and "g") that impels the narrative forward while making it fold back upon itself. The cold steel extension of gun into mouth engenders a chilling union of self, an encircling or creation of identity that is at once an explosion whose ambivalent volatility emanates from the chiastic conjunctions of imagery—death in germination, the dissolution of the self in its uniting depicted as a flowering and scattering of stars around the world. "This

coming to end all coming" reads as a self-reflexive allusion to the novel's title, thereby suggesting that a certain ambivalent violence, a death in flowering, marks the production of the text as well, a point I will return to later. As if to emphasize that the quail shoot is a pretext, in both senses of the word, for the allegorization of the constitutive process of naming, the narrative reinscribes the bird of the filicidal hunt into the father's suicidal target, the "*quailing* mortal flesh" [my italics].

In terms of the logic of incorporation, the "unspeakable" process of naming is here taken back into the mouth in the form of the gun.[13] The method of the father's suicide dramatizes the interrelation of death and the constitution of the self: the orality of taking a double-barrel gun into the mouth reflects both the desire to reincorporate the lost part of the self that has been split through the creation of identity, to take it back into oneself, and the sado-masochistic aggressivity of the self vis-à-vis its expropriated other, which is stimulated by the need to keep the other out of bounds of the self.

Neither the phallocentricity of the suicide nor its ambivalence can be assimilated here to distinctions of gender. Rather, the act of naming, to which both sexes are subject, is itself gendered. Both Will and Allie react against this phallocentricity, Will by repudiating the suicidal act of naming, and Allie by experiencing discomfort when she sees the gun/phallus:

> He [the policeman] had a large high abdomen. From a wide black cartridge belt a heavy revolver in a holster was suspended. The belt crossed his abdomen just below its fullest part. The position of the belt and the weight of the pistol created in her a slight discomfort. She wished he would hitch up his pants. (39)

A pattern of ejection and incorporation structures Marion's death as well. The following passage begins by describing Marion as a monstrous object of Will's fascination; the description condenses detail upon detail in its documentation of Marion's shopping list, gathering momentum as it mimetically expands to her appetite:

> It had been a pleasure for him to please and serve her. Only he, she said, had the strength and deftness to lean into the Rolls, take her by the waist while she took him by the neck, and

> in one quick powerful motion swing her out and around and into the wheelchair. . . . To the A & P, then push her by one hand and the cart by the other while she snatched cans off the shelves, Celeste pizzas, Sara Lee cream pies, bottles of Plagniol, brownies, cream butter, eggs, gallons of custard ice cream. . . . She ate more. She grew bigger, fatter, but also stronger. She ate more and more: Smithfield hams, Yamaiuchi's wife's shirred eggs, Long Island ducks. Cholesterol sparkled like a golden rain in her blood, settled as a sludge winking with diamonds. A tiny stone lodged in her common bile duct. A bacillus sprouted in the stagnant dammed bile. She turned yellow as butter and hot as fire. There was no finding the diamond through the cliffs of ocherous fat. She died. (151–52)

Intratextual resonances of the father's death in this passagealign the two deaths: the allusion to Yamaiuchi's wife establishes an implicit link, via a common cultural denominator, to the samurai self-love of death; the sparkling golden rain of cholesterol winking like diamonds in dark sludge recalls the stars flung in the dark universe; and just as in the passage on the suicide the force of the image of destruction through vital growth derives from its chiastic pairing, here, as well, the conjunction of bacillus sprouting in stagnant bile renders fatal disease in terms of life-affirming proliferation. The cold rain of cholesterol and the heat of jaundice echo the confluence of cold gun metal and warm quailing flesh, while the onanism of the double-barrelled fellatio, the "taking oneself into onself," finds its counterpart in the images of the driving, fusing and melting of the ball of Marion's femur into the socket of her pelvis and her glittering lover's eyes. At the same time, the erotic imagery in the two scenes retains a sense of violent self-abuse. The masochism of naming is inscribed into these images of flesh: Will's father turns his rifle on himself in an act that punishes flesh, and Marion amasses flesh, thereby destroying her own skeleton and poisoning her own blood.[14]

If Will believes that his knowing about knowing, his consciousness of death-in-life, will enable him to master the violence of the process of naming, Allie rejects the process entirely.[15] She recognizes the non-identity between word and thing and within the word itself. According to her, "words often mean their opposite" (81). The non-identity of

language provides the occasion for others to coopt meaning from her or to assign her their meanings: "No matter what she said or did, her mother would make her own sense of it" (100). And so she protests, "Stop trying to make sense of my nonsense" (92). In the following passage, which reads like an American counterpart to Kafka's *The Penal Colony*, the letter is incised into Allie's body. Allie reflects on her past life of conformity:

> Sarge: spending week with him at Nassau doing what I pleased or what I thought of as doing as I pleased. Sarge, a thin mustachioed blond Balfour Salesman (fraternity and sorority jewelry) from Durham, who knew his catalogue of pins and drop letters and crests so well that he had won a salesman-of-the-month trip to Nassau. Tickets for two. I, not a sorority sister, Sarge not a fraternity man, but he 'pinned' me with four different pins, Chi O, Phi Mu, KD, Tri Delt, and we thought that was funny. Sarge always going by the book, usually the catalogue but in Nassau another book, Sarge and I in bed looking at a picture book and he doing the things in the book with me he thought he wanted to do and I doing the things I thought he wanted me to do and being pleased afterwards then suddenly knowing that the main pleasure I took was the same as doing well for my father: look at my report card, Daddy, straight A's, A Plus in music. (92)

The violent imposition of the name is figured here as a quadruple pinning of the fraternity letters onto the body. These Greek letters, like the alienating picture-book images that function as blueprints for erotic experience, inscribe the demands of representation upon the self.

Allie chooses to reappropriate control over herself by rejecting linguistic convention. She withdraws into her own private language. In the hospital her doctor administers a variety of treatments and insists on the therapeutic value of the joke. He tells Allie jokes "to give her a 'language structure' so that she, who had stopped talking because there was nothing to say, would have a couple of easy lines, straight man to his comic" (85). The word Allie uses to describe the violence of the shock treatment that is supposed to jolt her back into meaningful discourse recalls the violence of the name as embodied by Ewell McBee, the allegorical figure for the word: she calls the process a "buzzing" (89).

After Allie escapes from the hospital, she must relearn how to communicate with others. This is no less than a rediscovery of herself, because in rejecting language she has rejected identity as such. Much of the novel traces her reaquisition of language, beginning with her rediscovery of the name:

> She gazed at the photograph on the license. She read the name. Earlier in the Gulf rest room she had looked from the photograph to the mirror then back to the photograph. The hair was shorter and darker in the photograph, the face in the mirror was thinner, but it was the same person.
>
> She uttered her name aloud. At first it sounded strange. Then she recognized it as her name. Then it sounded strange again but strange in a different way, the way an ordinary word repeated aloud sounds strange. Her voice sounded rusty and unused. She wasn't sure she could talk" (26–27).

Upon meeting Will, her resistance to language temporarily returns: "What to call *him*? Mr. Barrett? Mr. Will? Will Barrett? Bill Barrett? Williston Bibb Barrett? None of the names fit. A name would give him form once and for all. He would flow into its syllables and junctures and there take shape forever. She didn't want him named" (231). But contrary to her previous experience, the effects of Will's language upon her are not negative. When he is speaking to her, his language has a tactile but positive effect: "Even though he was not touching her, his words were a kind of touching" (245). Allie wonders, "Was he saying the words for the words themselves, for what they meant, or for what they could do to her" (243). The ideal nature of their communication is suggested by the replacement of the inscriptive Greek letters by the gentle gaze, as if to imply that Will and Allison transcend language. In contrast to the Greek letters that impale, pierce, and control, Will's "looks did not dart, pierce or impale. They did not control her" (220). Similarly, the first time Will meets Allie, he notices her "fond hazed eyes" (76); reflecting later on the encounter he remembers "her soft dazed eyes" (77).

To the extent that the novel has a "happy ending," the introduction of the love story certainly seems to mark a turning point.[16] And yet, certain details of the novel's conclusion cannot help but generate a sense of *déjà vu* in the reader. The life Allie and Will envisage together

bespeaks a reclusive self-enclosure reminiscent of the father's and Marion's deadly self-encirclings: the couple plans on developing a self-sufficent colony, a community outside of the community. When they venture out of the greenhouse together for the first time, they check into the Holiday Inn, a site strongly associated with the death-in-life they supposedly have overcome but which haunts the description of a meal Allie eats there: Will "fetched two plates from the buffet, Tennessee pork sausage, sweet potatoes, butter beans, corn on the cob, ten pats of butter, corn bread, buttermilk, and apple pie. . . . She began to eat. She ate fast and ate it all" (308). The accumulation of detail, the repetitive syntax of the final two sentences, and the lipoid yellowness of the foods cannot but evoke the memory of Marion's deadly feasts.

Perhaps the most remarkable quality of the relationship concerns an unresolved question that a comment by John Hardy registers, albeit as a denegation; Hardy writes that while Will's feelings towards others carry "insistent and frequently sinister sexual overtones," the love affair "*redeems*" these other relationships.[17] This statement is extraordinary in light of the numerous references in the text to the possibility that Allie and Will could be father and daughter. When Will first meets Allie, the narrator relates, "For one moment she was as familiar to him as he himself" (76). Allie has the same thought. She asks herself, "Was he someone she had known well and forgotten" (106), and then immediately thereafter nearly asks Will if he is her father:

> 'Are you—?'
> 'Am I what?'
> 'Are you my—?'
> For a moment she wondered if she had considered saying something crazy like 'Are you my lover?' Or 'Are you my father?' (106)

Kitty, Allie's mother, overtly suggests to Will that Allie may be his daughter: "Sometimes I have the strongest feeling that you could be or ought to be her father— ha! fat chance, yet there is a slight chance, remember?" (161). Allie eventually poses the question of incest explicitly:

> 'Could you be my father?'
> 'Hardly.'
> 'Remind me to look up hardly.'
> 'Okay.'

'How do you know you're not my father?'
'If I were I wouldn't be here.'
'Then why is it I seem to have known you before I knew you. We are different but also the same.'
'I know. I don't know.'
'Then why does it seem I am not only I but also you?'
'I don't know.' (242)

While the circular logic of Will's answer—the fact that he is there proves that he is not Allie's father—seems to invalidate his credibility, the text offers no reason to doubt Will. Had Will's relationship with Allie been incestuous, it is unlikely that it would have been discussed so explicitly in the novel, given that, as Freud has shown, traumatic material is most often expressed through symptomatic displacements. Rather, Will's ambiguous "Hardly," which is barely a yes or almost a no, suggests that the theme of incest may function as a decoy or compromise formation dissimulating another transgression that cannot be articulated within the discursive logic of the plot and that instead disrupts that logic.[18]

This unspeakable transgression is registered as a rupture in a scene in which Will discloses an important piece of information to Allie: "Because your mother and I are old friends, among other reasons, she has asked me if I will be your legal guardian—God I hate this beard, I meant to ask you to buy me a razor" (242). An odd disjunction in the form of a dash separates two apparently unrelated and peculiarly incongruous thoughts: the serious question of Allie's future and the comparatively insignificant remark about the stubble on Will's face. Nevertheless, a connection emerges if we consider a secondary meaning of the word "beard." A beard is "a person used as an agent to conceal the principal's identity."[19] It is also the pubic hair. In colloquial usage, a beard is a woman who poses as the heterosexual partner for a homosexual male. The pubic overtones of the name of Allie's mother, Kitty, suggest the possibility that she is the hateful beard who, by appointing Will Allie's legal guardian, plays cover or beard to a certain unarticulated sexual relation. Details in the text seem to support this possibility: the first time Will sees Allie, he mistakes her for a young boy, and even after he realizes that she is a girl dressed in oversize man's clothes, he mentions that her haircut makes him think of the expression "'boyish bob'" (76). At the end of the novel Will thinks of Allie's "lean muscled

boy's arms" (334), and lest Will's desire be mistaken for an indeterminant homoeroticism, Allie's full name specifies the identity of the desired object: she is Allison, Alli-*son*.

The reinscription of the father/son relationship into that of the lovers ironically undercuts the linearity of the plot; the resolution of the novel becomes an imaginary inversion and repetition of the attempted filicide which itself was replaced by the intra-subjective aggressivity of naming. We traced this same structure of ironic repetition in Will's narrative of epistemological transmission: Will embodied his attempt to reject the splitting of the self, and the narrative ironically reinscribed it into the act of rejection.

If the renunciation of the taboo of filicide reflected the necessity of becoming (a) subject to and through the symbolic order, the possibility of incest registers the desire to evade that order. Moreover, the suggestion of incest occupies a pivotal position in the text: Will's remark that he could "hardly" be Allie's father indicates the point where the mimetic and self-reflexive lines of narrative converge. In this respect, Will's remark is overdetermined. According to the discursive logic of the text, he is not Allie's father, so "hardly" in this context means no. At the same time, within the novel's symbolic economy the relationship is yet another version of the desire to reappropriate the loss accrued to the self in its constitution. As such, the suggestion of incest is the final element in a series of substitutions: it stands in for the homoerotic bond between father and son that in turn substitutes for and symbolically reverses the attempted filicide, which itself is an allegorical staging of the scenario of naming. Thus Will is Allie's father—just a little, "hardly," to the extent that geneological relations in the novel express linguistic predicaments.

Insofar as the father insures both the creation and rupture of the self—the creation of the self as ruptured—he becomes the object of an ambivalence expressed through the figure of the Negro guide. Will explicitly acknowledges the struggle between the Negro guide and the father; he notes that when the father shot the dog on the hunting trip, he "could as easily have shot the guide" (165), and that "his father, known as a nigger-lover, cursed the guide like a nigger-hater" (164). The Negro guide also discovers the evidence, the empty shells, that help to establish that Will's father had attempted to kill him. The notable absence of Will's mother in the text suggests another attempt

to preserve the pre-symbolic dyadic relation; in addition, the mother is mentioned only once in the novel, by a figure who metonymically lines up with the Negro guide: D'Lo, the black servant who cared for Will as a child, says, "You poor little old boy, you all alone in the world. Your mama dead, your daddy dead" (255).

As a figure of social marginality, the Negro guide can be said to pose a challenge to the symbolic order from the margins of that order itself. This function also extends to another socially marginalized character, the Jew. Throughout the novel Will is haunted by the question of the Jew's significance. He constantly asks himself and others, "Are the Jews a sign?" The author/narrator makes the following comment about this question: "It is not at all uncommon for persons suffering from certain psychoses and depressions of middle age to exhibit 'ideas of reference,' that is, all manner of odd and irrational notions about Jews" (15). If the narrator does not dispute that the Jews may be signs, he does label as delusive the idea that the Jews refer to something outside of themselves. Like the Negro guide, the Jew embodies the desire to exceed or repudiate the symbolic order and as such signifies something about that order. Ethel Rosenblum is the primal Jewish figure in the text:

> Suddenly he knew why he remembered the triangular patch of woods near the railroad tracks where he wanted to make love to Ethel Rosenblum. It was the very sort of place, a nondescript weedy triangular public pubic sort of place, to make a sort of love or to die a sort of death. (156)

The significance of Ethel is, from the very beginning, ambivalent, to the extent that Will's desire for her occupies the same space as death. Ethel becomes the object of desire at the moment Will literally falls into a text whose title indicates the nature of that shared space:

> Once in his life had he set foot on this unnamed unclaimed untenanted patch of weeds, and that was when he saw Ethel Rosenblum and wanted her so bad he fell down. So keen was his sorrow at not having his arms around her, his fingers knotted in her kinked chalk-dusted hair, that he flung himself down in a litter of algebra books, ring binders, *Literature and Life*, down into the Johnson grass and goldenrod, onto the earth smelling of creosote and rabbit tobacco." (11)

Deprived of Ethel, Will falls onto the place of *Literature and Life*. The action of flinging recalls the "brain cells flung like stars" in the description of the suicide and thereby reaffirms the continuity between death and the fall into language. Will's desire derives from his fascination with Ethel's ability to create unity out of difference:

> She could factor out equations after the whole class was stumped, stand at the blackboard, hip hiked out, one fist perched cheerleaderwise on her pelvis, the other small quick hand squinched on the chalk, and cancel out great a2-b2 complexes *zip zip slash*, coming out at the end: a/a = 1, 1 = 1! Unity! . . . No matter how ungainly the equation, ugly and unbalanced, clotted with complexes, radicals, fractions, *zip zip* under Ethel Rosenblum's quick sure hand they factored out and canceled and came down to unity, symmetry, beauty. (11)

Ethel's mathematical abilities are the specular inversion of the suicidal multiplication of the self. Whereas that process moved toward infinity and expansion, Ethel reduces and cancels difference. Insofar as the alternative to the paternal suicide was filicide, which was characterized by the lack of differentiation between self and other and which was prior to the act of naming, Ethel's unity is also prelinguistic; as such Will's recollection of Ethel expresses his desire for unity and not a state of being; indeed, as Ethel's surname, Rosenblum, intimates, this desire is bound up with the death-in flowering of the father's suicide. Moreover, the images of her hip hiked out, her pelvis, and her fist (through its roundness) recall the fusing of the ball of Ethel's hip into the socket of her pelvis and thus aligns Will's desire for Ethel with his desire for Marion. It also suggests a continuity between Marion's fatal attempt to reincorporate the lost self and Ethel's ability to create unity.

I mentioned earlier that the description of the father's suicide contained a self-reflexive allusion—"the coming to end all coming"—to the novel's title. It suggested that an ambivalent violence, a death in flowering, pertained to the novel's production as well. The connection between the suicidal dispersion of naming and *The Second Coming* is more explicit in the passage in which Will holds an imaginary dialogue with his dead father, who seems to beckon him from the grave to follow his example. In that dialogue the father refers to suicide as "the second, last, and ultimate come to end all comes" (312).

In the context of the self-reflexive references, the scene of the at-

tempted filicide/suicide is significant, because it not only narrates the logic of naming, it is itself implicated in that very logic and stages this implication. The scene returns repeatedly, even compulsively, in the novel and with great clarity. It appears to have the status and significance of a kind of primal scene; it was the only event that "had ever happened to him [Will] in his life. Everything else that had happened afterwards was a non-event . . . nothing else had ever happened to him" (53). If we consider that the shoot is presented as a *reconstruction*, a tension emerges analogous to that surrounding the discussion of incest between the traumatic nature of the material and the form in which it is presented. The reconstruction is coherent, precisely detailed, and fully accessible to Will's consciousness; it is subject to neither the distortions nor displacements that typically alter traumatic memories, which raises the possibility that this crime, like the issue of incest, might be an alibi for another, more unspeakable transgression that resists narratization. A repetition links the attempted filicide to another incident and thereby strengthens the possibility that the "real," reconstructed event is a symbolic displacement or screen memory for the other scene. When the novel opens, Will is playing golf and slices out-of-bounds: "As he searched for the ball deep in the woods, another odd thing happened to him. He heard something and the sound reminded him of an event that had happened a long time ago. It was the most important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it" (7). The "most important event" he immediately refers to is not the hunting incident, which the narrator states was the only event "that had ever happened to him [Will] in his life" (53). There are thus two events that are supposedly of primary and unmatched significance. The only way to reconcile these competing claims is to assume that both separate events are, in fact, identical.

The other event with the same status as the filicide attempt concerns the piece of land that was the site of Will's desire for Ethel. Will's memory of the land is triggered by a sound. The memory returns "as if the scene lay before him" (10). Its uncanny vividness futher establishes its affiliation with the memory of the shoot, since that recollection also displays the heightened presence typical of the screen memory:

> Instead of the brilliant autumn-postcard Carolina mountains, he seemed to see a weedy stretch of railroad right-of-way in a small Mississippi town. It wasn't even part of the right-of-way,

> but no more than a wedge-shaped salient of weeds angling off between the railroad tracks and the back yards of Negro cabins. It was shaped like a bent triangle, the bend formed by the curve of tracks. Perhaps it was owned by the railroad or perhaps by the utility company, because in one corner there was a small metal hut. Or perhaps it was owned by the city, because at the end of this narrow vista of weeds rose the town water tower. Or perhaps it belonged to no one, not even the Negroes, a parcel of leftover land which the surveyors had not noticed on their maps. (10)

Despite the narrator's claim that this land is unremarkable, the persistence with which he returns to it belies the claim itself. The narrator refers to the land as a "nondescript sector of earth . . . this unnamed unclaimed untenanted patch of weeds . . . [a piece of] leftover land . . . this non-place . . . this surveyor's interstice . . . [and] the only place not Jew or Gentile, not black or white, not public or private" (11–12).

Like the trajectory of the golf ball, which leads out-of-bounds, the over-determination of the triangular plot of land as well as its topography point to a text beyond the limits of the novel, "The Delta Factor," which is the introductory essay in Percy's collection of writings on semiotics entitled *The Message in the Bottle*. "The Delta Factor" opens with the following passage:

> In the beginning was Alpha and the end is Omega, but somewhere between occurred Delta, which was nothing less than the arrival of man himself and his breakthrough into the daylight of language and consciousness and knowing, of happiness and sadness, of being with and being alone, of being right and being wrong, of being himself and being not himself, and of being at home and being a stranger.[20]

Alluding to Revelation 1.8, Percy inserts between the Greek letters Alpha and Omega the letter Delta, which according to him signifies irreducibility. The insertion identifies the biblical text of Christ's Second Coming as the site of Delta. This semiotic rewriting of the sacred text implies that the arrival of man is coterminous with the Second Coming of Christ; it turns Revelation into an allegory of the appearance

of man, a profane inversion that the novel substantiates by depicting Will's fall into the greenhouse as the arrival of Christ:

> Except for the golfer's tan of his face and arms, his skin was white, with a faint bluish cast. The abdomen dropping away hollow under his ribs, the thin arms and legs with their heavy slack straps of muscle, cold as clay, reminded her of some paintings of the body of Christ taken down from the crucifix, the white flesh gone blue with death. The closed eyes sunk in their sockets and bluish shadow, the cheekbones thrust out like knees. (219)

Bearing the same name as Christ's arrival (which Percy anthropomorphizes), *The Second Coming* can thus be read as an allegorical performance of the "arrival of Man" into the "daylight of language." This performance does not only represent the arrival; as an allegory, it points to the limits of its own performance, or, in other words, takes into account the constitutive violence subtending its own representation.

The essays in *The Message in the Bottle* articulate themes and problems my reading has identified in *The Second Coming*. Percy explains that the Delta factor refers to the intersubjective phenemenon of naming or symbolizing. It occurs when an individual receives a sensory message as well as a symbol that designates or names that message and couples the two, message and symbol. The act of coupling is astonishing in Percy's opinion, because the relation between the thing named and the name itself is not motivated; it derives from the authority of a namer. The role of the authority in relation to the pairing of word and thing is crucial: it underscores the non-binarity of the sign and at the same time insures that name and thing will adhere.

In discussing the authority of the namer, Percy invokes scenarios of the discovery of language that involve individual subjects already constituted and installed within the symbolic realm. This should not overshadow the fact that the intersubjective process he analyzes is not restricted to an exchange between discrete, self-contained subjects; the Delta phenomenon pertains to the act of delimitation that occurs when subjects not only intersect in language but are intersected by language. As the opening quotation from "The Delta Factor" suggests, the breakthrough into the daylight of language is coextensive with the birth of consciousness, whose structure it also indicates: happiness/sadness,

being with and being without, being right and being wrong, being oneself and being not oneself, being home and being a stranger, are all defined by a structure of opposition, which the novel relates to the constitution of identity.

A second intertextual reference in *The Second Coming* underscores the "presence" of Percy's theoretical writings in the novel. While playing golf, Will notices a strange bird,

> undoubtededly some kind of hawk, fly across the fairway straight as an arrow and with astonishing swiftness, across a ridge covered by scarlet and gold trees, then fold its wings and drop like a stone into the woods. It reminded him of something but before he could think what it was, sparks flew forward at the corner of his eye. He decided with interest that something was happening to him. (49)

Resuming his golf game, he compares himself to the hawk, which in turn engenders a further association:

> He was of two minds, playing golf and at the same time wondering with no more than a moderate curiosity what was happening to him. Were they [the other golfers] of two minds also? . . . The hawk was not of two minds. Single-mindedly it darted through the mountain air and dove into the woods. Its change of direction from level flight to drop was fabled. That is, it made him think of times when people told him fabulous things and he believed them. Perhaps a Negro had told him once that this kind of hawk is the only bird in the world that can—can what? He remembered. He remembered everything today. The hawk, the Negro said, could fly full speed and straight into the hole of a hollow tree and brake to a stop inside. He, the Negro, had seen one do it. It was possible to believe that the hawk could do just such a fabled single-minded thing. (49–50)

The perception of the hawk's single-mindedness contrasts with Will's contrary sense of self-division. This contrast, moreover, is related to another difference that emerges between bird and man: the bird's single-mindedness is literally the stuff of fables whose persuasive force belongs to a time in Will's past. Will's sense of self-division, on the

other hand, is not a fable but a reality of his present. The hawk as well as the Negro guide also appear in the opening passage of Percy's essay "Metaphor as Mistake":

> I remember hunting as a boy in south Alabama with my father and brother and a Negro guide. At the edge of some woods we saw a wonderful bird. He flew as swift and straight as an arrow, then all of a sudden folded his wings and dropped like a stone into the woods. I asked what the bird was. The guide said it was a blue-dollar hawk. Later my father told me the Negroes had got it wrong: It was really a blue darter hawk. I can still remember my disappointment at the correction. What was so impressive about the bird was its dazzling speed and the effect of alternation of its wings, as if it were flying by a kind of oaring motion. (*Message in the Bottle* 64)

The incident of the hawk occasions the boy's discovery of the cognitive power of metaphor. Percy accounts for the boy's disappointment when the father corrects "blue dollar" to "blue darter" by claiming that the phrase "blue darter" describes something about the bird—its color, what it does—whereas "blue-dollar" promises to disclose what the bird *is*. According to Percy, when one being is conceived of in terms of another, an essential distance must be preserved between name and thing in order to protect the freedom of the viewer's private apprehension. Percy calls this "the ontological pairing . . . or 'error' of identification of word and thing" (72). This is the mistake of metaphor. Since blue dollar refers to something other than the bird that nevertheless has the same ontological status as the bird, the boy's delight derives from the disclosure of being afforded by the name "blue dollar." The efficacy of this metaphor is two-fold: in disclosing the being of the thing through the name, the metaphor simultaneously guarantees the selfhood of the naming, viewing subject. Citing Cassirer, Percy writes that the ability to name, to identify the thing, organizes the self through a process of projection in which "subjective impulses and excitations [are resolved] in definite object forms and figures" (69).

But what happens when the self submits to the mistake of metaphor, that is, when the self is both subject and object of language? Percy calls attention to the more violent counterface of the metaphoric process in "Symbol as Hermeneutic Existentialism" in which he writes,

> The whole objectizing act of the mind is to render all things *darstellbar*, not 'proper' but presentable, that is, formulable. . . . The naming judgment . . . is both existential and figurative. It affirms that this *is* something, but in so rescuing the object from the flux of becoming, it pays the price of setting it forth as a static and isolated entity—a picture-book entity. But at any rate it is the requirement of consciousness that everything *be* something and willy-nilly everything *is* something—*with one tremendous exception*! The one thing in the world which by its nature is not susceptible of a stable symbolic transformation is *myself*. I, who symbolize the world in order to know it, am destined to remain forever unknown to myself. (*Message in the Bottle* 283)

The self thus resists symbolic transformation. And yet it cannot avoid it either, since consciousness requires that everything *be* something. The self paradoxically appears as what it is not. Representation functions not as a revealing of being but as its concealing or distortion.

According to Percy, there is only one way in which the non-hypostatic being of the self can be recognized, namely, through the intersubjective gaze of another. In a passage reminiscent of the opposition between the letters that impale Allie and Will's non-piercing gaze, Percy writes, "what is revealed . . . in the discovering look of another . . . is literally my unspeakableness (unformulability). . . . I am exposed—as what? not as a something—as *nothing*, as that which unlike everything else in the world cannot be rendered *darstellbar*" (285–86). Just as the authority of the namer insures the connection between word and thing, the gaze of the other acknowledges the distance between the forms the self assumes and the self's resistance to form. By perceiving the limits of the stabilized form of the self, the intersubjective gaze recognizes the limits of the representation or *Darstellung* that the self assumes in fulfilling "the requirements of consciousness that everything *be* something." It is significant that the other reveals the "unspeakableness" of being through its gaze and not through the word: "The look is of the order of pure intersubjectivity without the mediation of the symbol. . . . It is not formulable."[21] The truth of the self's unformulability cannot be spoken, because such an articulation would have to adopt the hypostatic formulations of the symbolic process whose limits it is attempting to expose.

Like all representations, Percy's essays are fully subject to the distortions of symbolization; the accuracy of Percy's theory is thus ironically attested to by the displacements that are legible in its presentation. Specifically, the *Darstellung* of the process of metaphor arrests the ambivalence of that process, insofar as it separates positive from negative effect: when metaphor represents an object to the subject, the subject experiences the pleasure of discovery (the child's jubilatory reaction); when metaphor represents the objectivizing subject, the subject is dehumanized (becomes a picture-book entity). To the extent that both moments depend on the silent recognition of the intersubjective other, who interrupts the dyadic pairing of word and thing, their separation cannot be taken at face value but must be seen as the result of metaphoric projection.

When Will Barret associates the hawk with the world of fable, he implicitly relegates the possibility of selving, of self-identity, to the past world of fiction. He sees himself, in contrast to the hawk, as divided, dual-minded. The chronological disjunction Will posits between self-identity and self-division in fact signifies a temporalization of a difference within the process of metaphor, inasmuch as Percy's theory of metaphor seems to imply that self-identity and self-division are inextricable and simultaneous effects of the constitutive power of metaphor. The impetus of narrative temporalization must consequently derive from the necessity of splitting and isolating the ambivalence of the metaphoric process. It would thus be a fiction to believe either that fables are the proper place of self-identity or that there was a time in the past when self-identity was not fabulous. The divisions of fable versus fact, present versus past, and self-identity versus self-division are themselves effects of the metaphoric process that organizes being into a representable form.[22]

The difference Will establishes between himself and the hawk signifies a structural disjunction necessary to the generation of the fictional narrative. Given that the hawk is a Percyian icon for the constitutive process of metaphor, Will's gesture of temporal distantiation from it suggests that the allegorical agent cannot comprehend the process of metaphorization. While his experience may represent this process, he cannot master its meaning, just as the significance of the scene of epistemological transmission through suicide was not accessible to Will's father, who was the agent of the transmission. In terms of

the novel's symbolic economy, the figure of the triangle of land as well as the hunting scene are images of narrative condensation that signify texts that are literally and figuratively out of bound of the novel, literally because they belong to Percy's theory of language—the wedge of land through its metaphoric similarity to Delta and the hunting scene because of its appearance in "Metaphor as Mistake"—and figuratively because their exclusion from the novel founds the possibility of narrative as such.

Critics who have written on Percy's theoretical writings as well as those who have noted the correspondence between Percy's fiction and his theory tend to over-emphasize two points: they focus on the communicative intentionality of language to the exclusion of the question of the subject's formation in language; and they assume that Percy operates within a dualistic schema without recognizing that his writings are concerned with the process that generates these oppositions.[23] Fowler's comments about the problem of knowledge in *The Second Coming* are typical of this latter assumption. She locates the source of the problem either inside or outside of man, when she reads the following statement by Allie as a comment on "innate human blindness" (120): "Imagine being born with gold-tinted corneas and undertaking a lifelong search for gold. You'd never find it" (42). What Fowler calls an image of blindness can be characterized more accurately as an image of the paradox of attempting to see the medium of sight. The person with gold-tinted corneas is not blind; it is just that everything he or she sees is tinted, as it were, with the subjective instruments of perception, which themselves cannot be isolated and viewed as a discrete object.

Allie's comment is a version of a passage from "The Delta Factor" that further specifies the medium of perception:

> The truth is that man's capacity for symbol-mongering in general and language in particular is so intimately part and parcel of his being human, of his perceiving and knowing, of his very consciousness itself, that it is all but impossible for him to focus on the magic prism through which he sees everything else.
>
> In order to see it, one must be either a Martian, or, if an earthling, sufficiently detached, marooned, bemused, wounded, crazy, one-eyed, and lucky enough to become a Martian for a second and catch a glimpse of it. (*Message in the Bottle* 29)

In this passage the magic prism, which is structurally analogous to the gold corneas, specifies through its Deltic triangularity the intimate relation between language and perception, cognition, and consciousness. The one-eyed figure who can see this magic prism fittingly frames *The Second Coming*: during his golf game, Will "paused for several seconds, wood still held in both hands, fingers overlapped, and seemed to listen for something. He gazed up at the round one-eyed mountain, which seemed to gaze back with an ironical expression" (9–10). As if to have the last word, as it were, the one-eyed figure appears on the final page of the novel as well: "Will Barrett stopped the old priest at the door and gazed into his face. The bad eye spun and the good eye looked back at him" (334). Both the silent one-eyed mountain, not an earthling but a personification of the earthly, and the one-eyed priest embody the *modus operandi* of the novel's irony. This irony does not speak but gazes at Will Barrett in order to produce a silent but legible commentary on the limits of the text's own *Darstellung*. This voiceless irony inscribes process into effect, repetition into change, theory into fiction. It enables us to recognize that the text offers no solutions or answers to the search but instead figures the discursive and dispersive structure of language that makes the search conceivable in the first place.

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NOTES

1. Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (London: Panther Books, 1980) 123.

2. *Walker Percy* (Boston: Twayne, 1983) 112.

3. *Walker Percy and the Old Modern Age* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985) 163.

4. *The Fiction of Walker Percy* (Champagne-Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1987) 187.

5. Marc Kirkeby, "Walker Percy: He Can See Clearly Now," interview, *Los Angeles Times*, 3 August 1980, 52; rpt. *Conversations with Walker Percy*, Literary Conversations Series, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: Univesity of Mississippi Press, 1985) 190–92. It should be noted that Percy explicitly states that this comment is intended "half-seriously." This raises the possibility that his remark is ironic.

6. *The Writer as Shaman* (Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1986) 147.

7. This is the subtitle of a collection of essays entitled *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State

University Press, 1979). Broughton notes that she takes the concept of the stratagem from Percy's essay "The Loss of Creature." See her Introduction xviii.

8. Doreen A. Fowler, "Answers and Ambiguity in Percy's *The Second Coming*," *Walker Percy*, Harold Bloom, ed. (New York: Chelsea House, 1986) 115–16. Note that even Fowler, who has reservations about the novel's conclusion, shares one assumption with those readers who believe that the novel does end happily, namely, that Percy's writings are meant to be read as guidebooks.

9. For a stunning reading of the relationship between madness and interpretation in Percy's *Lancelot* see Jerome C. Christensen, "Lancelot: Sign for the Times," in *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1980) 107–20; rpt. in *Walker Percy*, ed. Harold Bloom, 103–14.

10. The line "only the violent bear it away" alludes as well to Flannery O'Connor's novel of that title, and so suggests that a certain violence may be inherent in Percy's attempt to insert himself into a genealogy that would designate O'Connor as his literary foremother.

11. The performative quality of naming is allegorized in the text when Will is in his garage and "In a word, no sooner had he opened the Mercedes door and stepped out than a rifle shot was fired from the dense pine forest nearby, ricocheting with a hideous screech from the concrete floor at his foot to a thunk in the brick of the inner wall. A vicious buzzing bee stung his calf" (18). The stinging bullet was shot by a deer poacher who regularly trespasses on Will's property. The vicious stinging bee is literally, as the first line indicates, "in a word," specifically in the name of the poacher, which is Ewell McBee.

12. Nicholas Abraham and Maria Torok, "Introjection—Incorporation: Mourning or Melancholia," *Psychoanalysis in France*, ed. S. Lebovici and D. Widlöcher (New York: International Universities Press, 1980) 4.

13. Will's fantasmatic reconstruction "reads" Abraham's and Torok's theory in an interesting way; it suggests that incorporation is not only a neurotic aberration of introjection but its founding moment as well.

14. I thank Jerry Christensen for pointing out the implicit masochism of these images.

15. In an interview Percy says, "I wanted Allie to start off afresh with language. It was an experiment." Ben Forkner and J. Gerald Kennedy, "An Interview with Walker Percy," *Delta* 13 (Nov. 1981): 1–20; rpt. *Conversations with Walker Percy* (226–44): 228.

16. Robert H. Brinkmeyer, *Three Catholic Writers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985) 168.

17. 187.

18. The theme of incest was anticipated in the passage discussed earlier in which Allie experiences a spontaneous revelation, a moment of "suddenly knowing" that the exhibitionistic pleasure she took in going by the book with Sarge was the same pleasure she experienced in making good grades for her father.

19. *The New Dictionary of American Slang*, Robert L. Chapman, ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1986).

20. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975) 3.

21. 285. In his essays, Percy acknowledges his indebtedness to the existentialists, which is reflected in his own vocabulary. For a discussion of Percy's philosophical origins see Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown and Co., 1978).

22. This same movement of splitting can be traced in the distribution of topics in Percy's theoretical writings. His individual essays never address the ambivalence of metaphor as such; instead, they address either the generative power of metaphor or the reifying effects of discourse.

23. See Poteat as well as the following essays in Tharpe, ed., *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics:* Charles P. Bigger, "Walker Percy and the Resonance of the Word," 43–54; Michael Pearson, "Art as Symbolic Action: Walker Percy's Aesthetic," 55–64; J.P. Telotte, "Charles Peirce and Walker Percy: From Semiotic to Narrative Strategy," 65–79. See also Weldon Thornton, "Homo Loquens, Homo Symbolificus, Homo Sapiens: Walker Percy on Language," in Broughton, ed., *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, 169–91.