Will Barrett's Four Forefathers: Percy's Vision of Polarities and Ambiguities

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In an interview several years ago, Walker Percy commented that no one except an "apostle," and thus not even a "genius," has the authority to come to someone and tell him the "news." It follows, says Percy (whose source for this view is Kierkegaard), that "a novelist least of all has the authority to edify anyone or tell them good news, to pronounce Christ King."[1] It is not surprising therefore that in his complex characterization of Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and its sequel *The Second coming* (1980), Percy does not come forward and tell us the "news." Cleanth Brooks, commenting on Percy's reluctance to "edify" his readers—particularly in *The Last Gentleman*—says, "I confess that when I first read *The Last Gentleman*, I was thrown back hard upon myself by what didn't happen. . . . The satirist, even a Jonathan Swift, must be careful not to preach."[2] The fact is, Will Barrett is an enigma—to Percy and to us. He is a man possessed, a man driven by an irresolvable ambivalence, the polarities of which seem to nourish and stimulate him more than they frustrate and trouble him, though they do some of that too. Barrett's lifelong quest for personal integration, in other words, never comes to completion. He gets caught in the tensions between opposing ideological texts for the "news," as it were, and at the end of each of the two novels we see a Will Barrett for whom ambiguity is axiomatic. Indeed, ambiguity and the ambivalence it perpetuates in his consciousness constitute a way of life that is neither affirmed nor negated by Percy—a way of life, in short, that is not being advanced as the "apostle's news."

Barrett's way of life is plotted on a self-perpetuating continuum of new and strange encounters that sustain and gratify his need for ambivalence. And what is interesting about these encounters is that they are tied in principally with his sometimes conscious, sometimes subconscious search for a forefather. For Barrett that means, essentially, an authority figure in the abstract who presumably will take him out of his fugues and identity crises. Percy himself has said that Barrett's character derives from Gabriel Marcel's conceptualization of man as "*homo viator*, man the wayfarer, man the wanderer . . . man as pilgrim, in transit."[3] "Barrett didn't know where he was," says Percy; "he really existed in what Kierkegaard would call the religious mode. He was a real searcher. He was after something. . . . The book is nothing but a journey. . . . first, rotation—he's wandering around through the South—but then repetition. He goes back home to a place like Greenville, and there he stands in front of his father's house. . . . I think Kierkegaard says, 'Every man has to stand in front of the house of his childhood in order to recover himself.' So Barrett is obsessed with this thing that had happened, his father's suicide . . . which actually had shocked him so much he's almost become a hysteric. He was deaf in one ear."[4]

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[1] John Carr, "An Interview with Walker Percy," *The Georgia Review* 25 (1971): 326.

[2] Cleanth Brooks, "Walker Percy: In Celebration," *Humanities* 10.3 (1989): 8.

[3] Carr 325.

This return to the place of his deceased father is the first of Barrett's attempts to get in touch with a forefather. It is followed by his attempts to communicate with the "forefather" personages of Sutter Vaught and a Catholic priest, Father Boomer, in *The Last Gentleman*, and then, many years later, with the personages of his deceased father again and a second priest, Father Weatherbee, in *The Second Coming*. Barrett's encounters with these four forefathers might be said to regulate and perpetuate his lifelong odyssey in philosophical ambiguity and psychological ambivalence. A study of what prompted these encounters and of the encounters themselves will reveal the complexities of that peculiar predisposition in Barrett and validate its significance in his life. In *The Last Gentleman* the tension in Barrett's psychological evolution is predicated upon the polarity of immanence and transcendence. Early in the novel the willful Will, a humidification engineer at Macy's department store in Manhattan who is determined to come out of his fugues and attacks of amnesia, declares, "I shall engineer the future of my life according to the scientific principles of analysis and self-knowledge."[5] His purchase of a high-powered telescope (which at $1,900 wipes out his bank account) symbolizes his technologically programmed, and therefore intensely analytical, intent to get at the ultimate hidden truth of things about himself and his world and to order his life accordingly. His psychoanalyst, Dr. Gamow, says skeptically and somewhat sarcastically, "'Do you intend to become a see-er [with this instrument] which [you think] will enable you to see the truth once and for all?'" (37). Barrett's subsequent commitment to immanence—that is, to a world in which a man's sense of himself is limited to his experience with conventions and institutions and in which therefore intuitiveness and transcendence play no part—governs his motivations as he takes on the role of *homo viator* and moves from Kierkegaardian "rotation" to Kierkegaardian "repetition." The rotation, as Percy explained above, is Will's wandering around the South looking for a way "to live him a life." During much of this rotating he is in the company of members of the Vaught family, themselves practitioners of "immanence"—with one exception. Sutter, the elder son, a medical doctor, has renounced immanence and is experimenting with "transcendence."

Traveling alone in the Vaught family camper, "The Trav-L-Aire," Barrett moves out of "rotation" and into "repetition," a crucial move because it launches him into ambiguity and ambivalence—in other words, into the tensions evolving from his encounters with his four forefathers. Barrett searches for his identity by returning to his hometown of Ithaca, Mississippi, where he engages in a remembrance of things past—a "repetition" as it were—of what had been the strongest psychological presence in his life up to this time: his deceased father, a gentleman lawyer and civic leader, a man committed to immanence and to social progress. It is actually he, not his son Will, who is "the last gentleman," both "last" and "lost" because he was driven to suicide when his mind got derailed from its ordained "gentleman's" track with its one-time strength-giving cross-ties of sane traditions and moderately flexible institutions. For Barrett's father, an enlightened man confronted with bigots, anarchists, and radicals in an Ithaca that no longer respected "gentlemen" and brotherhood, his inherited institutions had lost their savor and strength. A new world was emerging, and he as both a liberal and a gentleman had tried to live with the changes, indeed even to champion some of them. But he finally realized that the task was gargantuan. The decadence of a whole town could not be effectively challenged and reformed by one man. He retreated into loneliness, desolation, and finally suicide. Will's father was a Ulysses that never got away from what became his "homeless" home—Ithaca. Tightly enclosed in his "gentlemanhood," he never got beyond Kierkegaard's second mode, "repetition," and into the third mode, "going to the desert." And so his son, another potential Ulysses, the wayfarer and wanderer, comes back to Ithaca to find out from the ghost of his forefather who he, a cerebral "engineer," is. But Will doesn't stay in Ithaca long. He reflects on the last conversation he had as a teenager with his father: With a recording of the Brahms's *Requiem* playing in the background, Will asked his father, "'Why do you like to be alone?'" "'In the last analysis, you are alone,'" his father replied. "[Then] he turned into the darkness of the oaks." Will pleads, "'*Don't leave.*' The terror of the beautiful victorious music pierced his very soul." "'I'm not leaving, son'" said the father (331). But he did leave. Minutes later Will heard the suicide rifle shot from the attic, a blast that permanently deafened him in one ear and that haunted him for years to come. Will later evaluates his experience in Kierkegaardian "repetition": "I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place," he says of his forefather/father. "He had missed it! It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in solitariness . . . but—he wrung out his ear—but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraness of the iron and the bark" [thus the "now"] (332). Soon after this, Will leaves "repetition" in the leveed-in world of Ithaca and "goes to the desert," thinking as he does that he has moved beyond a psychological entrapment in a nihilistic, death-wishing, no longer viable "gentlemanhood" that is the hallmark of his beloved but truly deceased "gentleman" forefather in Ithaca. That psychological kinship, it turns out, lies sublimated in Will's subconscious for many years, but it makes a dramatic return, as we shall see, in *The Second Coming*. Freewheeling into the Kierkegaardian desert now, Will finds his second forefather, Dr. Sutter Vaught, whose puzzling but provocative philosophy is called the "orbit of transcendence" and which Will reads about in the doctor's infamous notebook. "Sutter's notebook had the effect," says the narrator, "of loosening Barrett's synapses, like a bar turning slowly in his brain . . . [but doing so] not unpleasantly" (309).

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[4] Carr 328.

[5] Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966) 41; subsequent citations are to this edition and will appear in the text.

The main text of the notebook is actually a form of existentialism. Sutter's "orbit of transcendence" is the quest for a heightened but human mystical quality of semiconsciousness—in other words, the quest for the existential transcendent Self. Why, one might ask, is it so important to Sutter? Because he can no longer abide the world of "immanence," which in existential terms would be "the absurd." Going to the desert meant for Sutter transcending "the absurd," yet never being altogether disengaged from it, since he is orbiting it rather than rocketing forever away from it. It is a semi-mystical flight of the mind in which one plays the symbolic role of the Swede, Sutter's word for one who is totally committed to the naked sponsorship of the Self—that is, the naked self happily casting off the frivolous and pretentious styles and fashions of a corrosively institutionalized kind of life-style. Institutions, says Sutter, are masks—symbolic clothes—behind which the authentic existential self remains concealed. Sutter's frequent references to the Swede's "pornography" are meant to be symbolic of the nude orbiter's bold and lusty intercourse with the elemental life force of his own mystic being, an intercourse that produces the only authentic essence in his existentially quickened life.

But Sutter is somewhat reluctant to play forefather to Will Barrett, whose experience in "repetition" in Ithaca has left him psychologically fatherless. In the first place, Sutter is himself experiencing some self-doubts about his involvement with the orbit of transcendence and, like Barrett's first forefather, is contemplating suicide. But more important even than that are Sutter's doubts about Will's readiness for a course in transcendence. He says, "Barrett thinks he must be self-actualizing and altogether successful in a self-conscious cultivation of joy, zest, freshness, and the right balance of adult autonomous control and child-like playfulness" (246). Cerebration and a program are not the access routes to transcendence. Furthermore, Sutter reiterates to the tenacious Barrett that he needs to come into transcendence on his own, in any case, if he is to come into it at all. However, there is no doubt that the doctor turned philosopher is flattered to find someone who is taking him as seriously as Barrett apparently is and whose curiosity about what it is that Sutter is onto is not going to go away any time soon. He therefore gives in and offers to be a forefather, as it were, and show Will how to go to the desert and in due course find his launching pad, perhaps, for rocketing into the orbit of transcendence. But the ever tentative Barrett's initiation to the desert is interrupted by a call from immanence, a call the culmination of which, as it turns out, is from Barrett's third forefather. He goes to Tucson, Arizona, to be with Jamie Vaught who is hospitalized there with a terminal illness. Percy's choice of town and state here is inspired: in Tucson it is "too soon" for Barrett to "arise on his own" from Arizona to the orbit of transcendence. He is not yet ready to make a commitment that requires turning his back on immanence and the absurd. But Sutter is often there in the hospital room also, particularly when Jamie is just moments away from death, and that presence of Sutter is what keeps the polarity that Barrett is caught up in dramatically alive when Jamie's room becomes a microcosm of immanence with the arrival of Barrett's third forefather—namely, Father Boomer, who has come to administer the rites of baptism to Jamie. Ambivalence is having a field day in the consciousness of the engineer. Father Boomer and immanence have the stronger pull on him at first. This all began with a phone call to Barrett from Jamie's sister Val, a nun from Alabama, who instructed Barrett to get a priest into Jamie's room right away; it would be too dangerous to wait until she could fly out to take care of things herself. Immanence has called. The voices of orthodoxy and institutionalism are ringing again in Barrett's good ear, and he says to Father Boomer, "'I'm an Episcopalian. . . . Jamie professed no faith, so it is all the same which of you ministers, ah, ministers to him'" (397-98). In the scene of utterly failed communication that follows between Father Boomer and Jamie, Barrett acts as mediator and strives with the moral fortitude of a convert himself to *make this baptism work, to make it "boom" as it were when the "Boomer" himself* fails in that effort. Barrett interprets for the priest every gesture and every incoherent utterance that Jamie makes. In spite of what Percy describes as the priest's "graceless and perfunctory" manner, Barrett tries his best to talk away the apparent distrust and disbelief he realizes Jamie is expressing toward Father Boomer—even at the moment of the baptism itself, which is administered in a ludicrously makeshift manner with a bent sucking tube from Jamie's water glass. It is as if Barrett were filling in for Val, the Alabama nun who will be arriving later. Meanwhile, Sutter, the other witness to the baptism, is visibly disgusted and thus anxious to get this meaningless ceremony ended—meaningless to Jamie as well as to himself. Accordingly he dismisses Father Boomer "curtly," much to the embarrassment of the uncomprehending Will who "followed the priest into the corridor where he wrung the priest's hand and thanked him twice" (407).

Expecting to wait after Jamie's death for the arrival of Val and others in the Vaught family and to join in the institutional rituals of a Christian funeral service, the engineer has presumably withdrawn from his second forefather (who has no intention of attending Jamie's funeral) and embraced the world of his third forefather, Father Boomer. But that is not what happens at all. Ambivalence will have its way; the Sutter end of the polarity will reassert itself and sustain that needful tension in Barrett's consciousness. The fact is, Barrett knows that Jamie has gone to his death an unbeliever, and he also knows that something intuitive, something mystical, was going on between Sutter and Jamie during Father Boomer's ineffectual ceremony. Barrett's antennae were up and were transmitting signals coming from the two brothers' eye contact and silent communication with each other. His curiosity is rekindled, in short, and he wants that extrasensory link with Sutter that he perceived Jamie, in some noncerebral way, had with his big brother. Though presumably a convert to cerebration, Barrett the engineer does have that radar system, that sixth sense, that he doesn't quite know what to do with. And it has already been activated as we move into the colloquy between Barrett and Sutter in the final scene in the novel. "Wait!" he shouts to Sutter, who is walking toward his parked Edsel. "What happened back there?"—meaning, What was going on between you and Jamie? Sutter dismisses the question with a question of his own: "Do you have to know what I think before you know what you think?" The conversation continues as Sutter reaches the Edsel, gets in and starts the motor, making no sign that Barrett should follow. Intent on keeping Sutter from leaving, Barrett says, ""Dr. Vaught, I need you. I, Will Barrett—'and he actually pointed to himself lest there be a mistake, '—need you and want you to come back. I need you more than Jamie needed you . . ."' (409). But Sutter is not to be stopped, and the Edsel takes off with Barrett, prompted with a "final question," "shout[ing] in a dead run, 'Wait.'" "The Edsel paused," and with "strength flowing like oil into his muscles [Barrett] ran with great joyous ten-foot antelope bounds" to join Sutter. Barrett's motivations are clearly mixed. One part of him wants to keep Sutter from going to the ranch with suicide on his mind and to bring him back to the world of immanence to make a significant contribution there. But the other side—the joyous antelope-bounding side—wants to join this forefather in his *homo viator* role of going to the desert and of ultimately arising from Arizona into the orbit of transcendence. And so, *The Last Gentleman* ends on that note of ambivalence for its protagonist—a Will Barrett who never gets to a final question and who therefore cannot will himself once and for all into either one of the poles of the polarity which his two last forefather figures represent: Father Boomer and immanence, Sutter and transcendence.

Percy's story of Will Barrett's lifelong encounters with ambiguity is resumed in *The Second Coming,* where we see Barrett in his late forties, a widower, a lawyer, a bumbler, and a man in love. We soon realize that Barrett is a man in limbo again. But, interestingly, Percy has redefined the polarities that cause Barrett's ambivalence. Actually there is a pair of polarities in this book. In the first and longest one the poles are nihilism and existential affirmation, an existentialism that is very different from Sutter's problematic orbit of transcendence entertained by Barrett twenty-five years earlier and long since dismissed. The poles of this new polarity are embodied in the return of Barrett's Ithacan forefather with his death wish and in Barrett's new love interest, Allison Huger, a purist existentialist who would probably, if asked, view fathers and forefathers as personages of the absurd and thus hindrances to the attainment of existential selfhood. It takes all but the last twenty pages of the novel for Barrett to engage himself in, and then disengage himself from, the ambivalences generated by this polarity. And then when presumably he has reached certitude and made a final choice, his apparent need for ambiguity and its resulting ambivalence makes a dramatic return in the form of a new polarity: Allison Huger and her fatherless existentialism on the one hand, and forefather number four, Father Weatherbee and divine mystification, on the other.

The first polarity germinates from Barrett's midlife identity crisis in which a summons from his deceased father to seek the oblivion of death takes Barrett into the bowels of the Lost Cove cave in North Carolina ostensibly to look for proof of the existence of God and for a sign of the apocalypse and the Second Coming of Christ. He does not receive the sign. Thus, in quest now of a substitute for the Second Coming, Barrett finds it in Allie, whose existential love provides the mystification of a human rather than divine Second Coming in Barrett's troubled life. The First Coming—that is, Christ in the Church—had provided Will with no mystification. Father Boomer of Tucson, Barrett's third forefather and prototype of the First Coming, is very much out of the picture, as it were. "What a surprise," Will says in reference to his union with Allie, "that discovering you've been dead all these years, you should now feel . . . alive?"[6] But the specter of his first forefather visits Barrett again. Asleep in a Holiday Inn motel room with Allie at his side, Barrett dreams of his father and his father's obsession with death: "Come, what else is there?" the elder Barrett says to his son. "Make your own bright end in the darkness of this world, this foul and feckless place, where you know as well as I that nothing ever really works, that you were never once yourself and never will be. . . . Close it out. . . . Go like a man. . . . You've got my genes" (337). Barrett awakens from his dream in a state of perplexity. He gets up, goes to his car, takes the guns out of the trunk, reflects upon the implications of his owning them, and then—his mind finally made up (uncharacteristically, I might add)—hurls the guns over a cliff. This is of course a symbolic act, one in which Barrett perhaps once and for all casts out the specter of an inviting death and turns to life instead—this life, here and now, a life based on human love and no longer needful of fathers and forefathers.

But the last twenty pages of the novel say otherwise; indeed, the closing scenes suggest that for Barrett the need for ambivalence is compulsive. Allie and existential love is not enough; a fourth forefather is summoned to set up another polarity. The mystical image of an old priest, Father Weatherbee, unexpectedly enters Barrett's consciousness, complicates and muddles that existential "Second

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[6] Walker Percy, *The Second Coming* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980) 324; subsequent citations are to this edition and will appear in the text.

Coming" he thought he had witnessed and empathized with in his relationship with Allie, and takes him back into ambivalence and its needful wear and tear on his psyche as well as on his conceptualization of a Second Coming in his "religious" life.

The event that prompts this shift in Barrett's brain is as follows. With none of the deference he had shown Father Boomer in Tucson, Barrett approaches Father Weatherbee with the bold request that the priest perform his and Allie's marriage rites even though they are both unbelievers and do not wish to enter the church. Barrett attempts to justify his position by telling the priest, "I believe I am on the track of something"—in other words, his existential love of Allie, though he does not reveal this to the priest. Soon aware that Father Weatherbee is not in the least interested in or impressed by that "something," whatever it might be, Barrett, with a tenacity reminiscent of his *homo viator* encounters with Sutter Vaught in *The Last Gentleman,* impulsively "grip[s] the old man's wrists as if he were a child." And right then the shift in his brain takes place. Immediately he senses that Father Weatherbee "look[s] at him with a new odd expression," and Barrett is transfixed for an instant by some strange, mystical quality in that expression. For a moment he feels dominated and possessed by the priest's stare. Then the countenances of Father Weatherbee and Allie flash simultaneously before his hallucinated view into a new polarity—a new balanced antithesis, as it were—and, as is his custom, away Barrett goes into a new phase and dimension of ambivalence: "What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Could it be that the Lord is here, masquerading behind the simple silly face [of this priest]? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have" (360). There is exultation in Barrett's pronouncement. In limbo again, he is drawn ambivalently toward an existential Second Coming in the countenance of his beloved Allie and a contrasting divine Second Coming which he sees prefigured in the mystical countenance of Father Weatherbee. Barrett is gravitated toward both these poles, just as he had been toward both poles at the conclusion of *The Last Gentleman*—that is, "immanence" (including Father Boomer's orthodoxy) and Sutter's "orbit of transcendence."

This conclusion is plausible and satisfying. A resolution of opposites leading to a vision of certitude would seem somehow uncharacteristic of a man as compulsively ambivalent as Will Barrett is. No doubt, there are still more fathers and forefathers to be viewed and reviewed by this middle-aged man in his lifelong pilgrimage of ambiguous doings and undoings. It seems apparent that he is constitutionally resistant to clarity and certitude. There seems little doubt that tension and ambivalence sustain him and that ambiguity attracts him. Percy the novelist, but not the apostle, sees this enigmatic profile of a man in contemporary society as something new and provocative to ponder but not something that is the herald of the apostle's "news"; thus, he sees this profile as something illuminating but not edifying. Marcel's *homo viator,* man the wanderer, is just that—a journeyman without a known destination bumbling his way along with his radar working, engaging himself with first one forefather and then another, and with final truth always eluding him.

Critics have taken Percy to task for what they view as, first, his ambiguities and, second, his readiness to live with them and not work toward their resolution.

They would like him to disavow Kierkegaard's admonition to refrain from advancing apostolic news. Cecil L. Eubanks. for one, predicating his argument on the observation that "Percy has often said he writes in 'the Christian context,'" insists that "one of the fundamental traits of Christianity is the emphasis on the capacity for change . . . the belief that one can say with the prophet, 'Behold I am doing a new thing' (Isaiah 43:18-19 RSV)."[7] But "Walker Percy's novels," insists Eubanks, "portray . . . fated individuals in a world of malaise. . . . Will Barrett is inconclusive in his search for . . . 'doing a new thing'" (134-35). Indeed, Kierkegaard himself declared the Christian existentialist's need for renewal, argues Eubanks: "Kierkegaard, who may not have perceived the social implications of grace, quite correctly used the dramatic phrase 'leap of faith' as a description of what it takes 'to risk creation' and 'do the truth.' Percy's characters do not leap. They take small, unsure, timid steps toward half-realized pilgrimages" (131-32). Panthea Reid Broughton, another critic skeptical of Percy's reluctance to be an apostle, says, "Perhaps Walker Percy's fiction needs a new image; not opposing poles or equilateral triangles but a mandala which, as an emblem of integration and wholeness, cannot be dissected."[8] Doreen A. Fowler, meanwhile, baffled and in a somewhat disapproving tone, says, "Percy is poised between contradictory and seemingly mutually exclusive truths. . . . It is right and necessary that man acknowledge the limitations of his existence; it is equally right and necessary that he should not. . . . The empiricists are right, but so are the visionaries. Neither answer satisfies Percy without the other, so both appear in an uneasy equipoise."[9]

I find these criticisms (and many more of their kind) interesting but, in the final analysis, not altogether supportable. Percy's adherence to what he views as the proper role of the novelist—that is, to observe rather than to edify—is his strength rather than his weakness. The ambiguities of his novels and the ambivalences of many of his protagonists draw the reader into the confusion and the complexity of ideas and viewpoints that characterize contemporary life and contemporary thought. As the observing novelist in key with an undeniable eclecticism in the world he fictionalizes—and not therefore the ardent apostle and doctrinaire bearing the news—Percy writes with a justifiable disinterest and a disciplined focus upon the collective consciousness of contemporary America. He creates characters who are caught up in those many disorientations, equivocations, and confusions that are so critically ingrown in the collective consciousness of the postmodern world as to demand acknowledgment, concern, and a certain amount of pondering by those who take life seriously enough to reflect upon, yet not so seriously as to quarrel with, its ambiguities—ambiguities that in Percy's view just will not go away. Williston Bibb Barrett—humidification engineer, lawyer, husband, golfer, widower, spelunker, lover, real estate developer, housebuilder, internalizer, would-be visionary, self-doubter, and *homo viator* prototype—is one such ponderer of ambiguities.[10]

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[7] Cecil L. Eubanks, "Eschatology and the Politics of Grace," *Southern Quarterly* 18.3 (1980): 131.

[8] Panthea Reid Broughton, "Gentlemen and Fornicators: *The Last Gentleman* and a Bisected Reality," *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) 114.

[9] Doreen A. Fowler, "Answers and Ambiguity in Percy's *The Second Coming*," *Critique* 23.2 (1981-82): 21-22.

[10] For other related observations on Percy's ambiguities in *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, see my essay, "Certitude, Be Not Proud: Percy's View of Will Barrett's Extended Stay in Ambivalence," *Southern Quarterly* 25.2 (1987): 76-88.