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Bildung and Flânerie: Aesthetics, Genre, and Modes of Development in The Moviegoer

by

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As Jack Bolling or “Binx,” protagonist of Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* (1961), reflects on his reading habits, he notes, “Until recent years, I read only ‘fundamental’ books, that is, key books on key subjects....During those years I stood outside the universe and sought to understand it” (69). He describes the peak of this experience: “The greatest success of this enterprise, which I call my vertical search, came one night when I...read a book called *The Chemistry of Life*. ...The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over....But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search....Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion” (70). *The Moviegoer* is an odd novel, as its totality is not so much a seamless narrative as it is many vignettes like this one stacked atop each other. The vignette above ties together two elemental, and nearly opposing, models for self-development or cultivation in the novel, the “search” of Binx’s idiosyncratic discourse: the first is *Bildung*, the German word for training, growth, and development, and the second is the *flânerie*, the French term used by scholars and philosophers to describe the nineteenth-century practice of aimless observation of everyday life in urban spaces by aesthetes. The form of the book itself, disjointed and episodic, challenges the expectation of sequential narrative development, and in turn elevates this question of developmental processes. Ideas of development are also central thematic concerns in the novel, manifest to readers not only in its protagonist’s choices and actions, but in his highly self-conscious ruminations on the modes of development that he enacts in his own life.

The two opposing modes of development are presented, as seen above, as the “vertical search” and the “horizontal search.” The vertical mode aligns with the sort of development that one might find in a classic *Bildungsroman*. The term *Bildung* will be used to refer to the process of journeying, growing, and developing that occurs within the *Bildungsroman*. The vertical

search entails the intentional search for knowledge in the “elevated” and normative field of “Culture” (memorably defined by Matthew Arnold as “the best that has been thought and said”) with the hopes of elevating oneself or one’s understanding (Arnold, i). In turn, the vertical search embraces given norms of cultural value just as the process of *Bildung* does through the protagonist’s goal of maturing and socializing into an acceptable role within society. Further, the spatial aspect of Binx’s term gestures to the physical and emotional “growth” that, unlike biological growth, proceeds in a progressive, vertical and teleological manner. As indicated in the quote above, however, Binx invokes the ideal of *Bildung* only to supplement it with a different, even opposed, “horizontal” mode of development. The very title of the novel mounts a challenge to the norm of the vertical mode of development: especially at midcentury, before the wide diffusion of auteur theory and of New Wave experimentalism, going to the movies is not conceived of as elevating but as pure leisure and diversion shared with millions of ordinary fellow consumers. Binx’s love of Hollywood cinema, with its mass appeal and immediacy of presentation, over literature and other high art, whose merits come through prolonged edification, signals a mistrust of the growth and development of the vertical vector of *Bildung*. Perhaps because the question of development, fraught with an inherent tension between the vertical and the horizontal, is so central in *The Moviegoer*, the novel itself resists the normative mode of progressive development of plot and character that is central to the novel genre, and especially to novels that gesture to the *Bildungsroman* subgenre by featuring a youthful protagonist navigating their place in society. From a broad angle, *The Moviegoer*’s plot is largely static. Throughout the novel, Binx seems repeatedly called on to complete a final and crucial aspect of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Having arisen in the late eighteenth-century work of Goethe, the *Bildungsroman* was for a long time the dominant model for development of literary

characters. Illustrating the significance of the genre, Franco Moretti labels the “*Bildungsroman* as the ‘symbolic form’ of modernity” (5). It typically consists of a young protagonist experiencing loss and subsequently going on a journey whose conflict and difficulty result in a more mature, confident, and socially acceptable identity. Throughout numerous conversations, other characters close to Binx imply their sense that Binx is beginning, or perhaps delaying the start of, the *Bildung* process. Binx internally rejects this notion each time it is implied and insists that rather than the vertical development of the subject of a *Bildung*, he has “undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search” (Percy 70).

This choice, in turn, informs his actions: he performs each task in a stylized and highly self-conscious manner. In many of these actions, including his keen and obsessive habit of observation while he idles, he departs decisively from the characteristic striving of the subject of *Bildung*. He inhabits, instead, the horizontal mode of the *flâneur*. The idea of the *flâneur* became popularized in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century as a way of describing a new figure seen in the streets of Paris, a figure that has proved influential in theories and histories of aesthetics, beginning with the work of Charles Baudelaire and Walter Benjamin.¹ This figure’s efforts are driven by a curiosity about the nature of their urban environment, awash in the transformative powers of modernity. Baudelaire, in *The Painter of Modern Life*, writes that for the *flâneur*, “Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion” (7). The act of strolling around the city ascribes to the *flâneur* a horizontal movement, and the idea of idle observation as an end in itself departs fundamentally from the sort of singularly driven quest to grow and mature in the *Bildung*. The horizontal method of *flânerie*, which Binx embraces for most of the novel, rejects the vertical method of *Bildung*. Perhaps it is unsurprising, then, that the cumulative development of plot seems to take such a backseat to a more meandering and fragmented narrative.

Nonetheless, the final pages of the novel deliver what most interpretations agree is a radical and significant change in Binx Bolling.

This thesis examines the tension between two aesthetic tendencies with deep roots in Western culture and the novel: the “vertical” development associated with the concept of *Bildung* since the late eighteenth century and the “horizontal” model associated, since the early nineteenth century, with the *flâneur*. The novel draws much of its energy from this tension. Between the two poles of *Bildung* and *flânerie*, Walker Percy plants an array of characters who are emblematic of different models of living. Upon closer examination of the novel, it is evident that Binx’s identity, enigmatic and charming, is exactly a product of his resistance to the many models of existence offered to him. His most interesting traits arise from a negativity of space and ideas that harbor him from the peril of living out one single life path. For a time, he achieves this negativity through the practice of *flânerie*. To fully understand *The Moviegoer*, one first has to understand the stratified range of potential models for life that Percy lays out. This thesis seeks to explicate an internal project of the novel: Percy’s pitting the vertical *Bildung* and the possibility of its fading utility against the horizontal *flâneur*. Furthermore, in light of the novel’s conclusion, which signals an apparent collapse of horizontal *flânerie* as a sustainable mode of being, this paper explores the possibility that Percy dialectically resolves the disjunction between these two concepts, as demonstrated by Binx’s transformed state in the epilogue.

Critical Perspectives on *The Moviegoer*

Since its 1961 publication, *The Moviegoer* has attracted a range of scholarship that, perhaps fittingly, is somewhat desultory and lacks a central through-line. The most useful work for my purposes views the novel through a literary-historical or aesthetic lens. Richard Pindell’s

“Basking in the Eye of the Storm: The Esthetics of Loss in Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer*” attempts to square William Faulkner’s southern literary tradition with Percy’s. While the object of Quentin Compson’s “loss” in Faulkner’s work is, simply, Caddy, the object of Binx’s loss remains opaque, and is gestured at only with the phrase “malaise.” Pindell ultimately uses this difference as an entry point into an insightful analysis of Binx Bolling. He submits that Binx’s many abstract terms for subjective states (malaise, rotation, repetition, certification) are part of a verbal trick, or cunning, that allow Binx to escape the very sense of loss that he fears. Pindell sees Binx’s style as “the point at which he inhabits space, recovers the universe” (228). Below, I will engage his argument about verbal ingenuity as a performative and essential act when discussing the nature of *flânerie* and the horizontal search. Pindell’s treatment of style allows for a more meaningful investigation of Binx’s ostensibly superficial *flânerie* and helpfully elucidates the important differences between the protagonists of Faulkner and Percy. In another piece involving a giant of twentieth-century thought, Edward G. Lawry wrote about the potential of *The Moviegoer* as an illustration of Heideggerian concepts.

Published as “Literature as Philosophy: *The Moviegoer*,” it presents a case for using *The Moviegoer* to better understand key concepts within Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. He begins by comparing Binx’s notion of “everydayness” with Heidegger’s. Lawry writes that “Everydayness is identified with despair. Yet there is a peculiar ambiguity to everydayness too. Binx is uncertain whether or not people who seem to be sunk in everydayness are so because they are running away from the search or because they have completed the search” (549). For this reason, Binx struggles to identify those who are, to borrow Heidegger’s terms, authentic and those who are inauthentic. Lawry claims that the mark of achieving authenticity, in *The Moviegoer*, is explicitly not just living an extraordinary life. In turn, he implies that Binx is seeking a model of

authenticity, and that various characters—Sam Yerger, Emily Cutrer, Eddie Lovell—fail to serve as this model “because each of them has already found the answer to their search” (Lawry 549). Rather than being merely a stand-in for middle class conformity, “everydayness” is to “be lost in the world” (Lawry 551) and “to be lost in the world in this sense, is precisely to know your way about the world. The more thoroughly you know the world you live in, the more confidently you take part in the great drama of the world, the more likely it is that you are ‘lost’ in the world—swallowed up in it” (Lawry 551). While Lawry’s argument ultimately seeks to use *The Moviegoer* as an instrument to clarify and exemplify Heideggerian concepts, he nevertheless clarifies a good deal about *The Moviegoer* itself along the way. His argument, in defining the measures of authenticity and inauthenticity by which Binx Bolling judges different life paths, will prove useful when examining the various models of life that Percy scatters across the novel. The next work that proves useful in this argument also deals with the themes of authenticity and performance in the novel. In this way it is in a natural dialogue with both Pindell’s and Lawry’s works.

Thomas Bonner Jr.’s “New Orleans and Its Writers: Burdens of Place,” links the question of authenticity to the choice of New Orleans as the novel’s primary setting. Bonner quickly dispels the notion that readers can take New Orleans as a stand-in for any random Southern city, noting that “New Orleans stands apart from the myth of the South” (197). New Orleans, Bonner writes, is a city that has always struggled with identity: “Never comfortable with being...entirely American, clearly not pleased during the Spanish occupation, and noticeably angry with the French for ceding it to Spain initially and then selling it to the United States, New Orleans has had its own identity that resembles metaphorically its insular geography” (197). Bonner, citing the struggles of Faulkner and Fitzgerald to fully “understand” New Orleans, claims that Percy

does understand the city. Bonner suggests that Binx’s habit, seemingly idiosyncratic, of saying a local place or neighborhood is “certified” once it has been seen on the screen of a television or cinema, is a more pointed reflection of New Orleans. He notes, “When one considers the history of parades in New Orleans...as well as many of the feature films of New Orleans...Percy’s observation hits hard that life here may not be reality but art, often bad art, and yet provocative in its way, and that it becomes reality only when perceived by a medium accessible through the senses” (Bonner 202). Though referencing moviegoing, Bonner implicitly suggests that accessing the reality of New Orleans requires some artistic lens. Thus, Bonner’s analysis works in interesting tension with Pindell’s. Bonner argues that to understand New Orleans in particular, one must aestheticize their experience with Binx-esque verbal transformations, while Pindell suggests that this need for verbal cunning is highly specific to Binx’s inner world. That both read the narrator’s frequent aestheticization of daily life as definite and essential, whether to access reality, to escape malaise, or both, is clear. This thesis will contextualize the themes of authenticity, performance, and aesthetic transformation, explicated by Lawry, Pindell, and Bonner, to demonstrate the highly important aspects of Binx’s horizontal search and its *flânerie*. Previous scholarship helps to explain both why Binx takes up a life of *flânerie* and the specific mechanisms within his particular form of strolling and observing.

In addition to these philosophically and geographically oriented studies, some critics have approached the novel through a biographical lens. Andrew Hogheems’s “None of the Above: Walker Percy’s Postsecular Narrative” seeks both to better understand Percy and to better understand why his work has been grouped away from that of other postsecular writers. In particular he criticizes John McClure’s choice to leave Percy and his works out of his broad study in *Partial Faiths: Postsecular Fiction in the Age of Pynchon and Morrison*. McClure,

Hogheem explains, “finds these diverse texts converging around narratives of ‘partial return’ which “trace the turn of secular-minded characters back toward the religious” (3) but withhold the comfort of certainties that would result from a full-fledged embrace of religion” (94).

Hogheem criticizes McClure’s choice to leave out writers who “write from within the context of Abrahamic religious traditions” (Hogheem 94). His analysis plainly urges for more scholarship that brings Walker Percy into conversation with those other noted post-secular writers. This argument does not seek to enter Hogheem’s debate with McClure. However, in framing this novel as one that pins the fading model of *Bildung* against the model of *flânerie* and consequently locates a concealed and quasi-religious synthesis of the two, this argument likely supports Hogheem’s contention. Though there is plenty more excellent, albeit isolated, scholarship on *The Moviegoer*, the four pieces above establish my argument’s foundational themes of authenticity, performance, and verbal transformation.

Cinema and Superficiality in *The Moviegoer*

The primacy of film and visual media in *The Moviegoer* might seem like a simple novelistic quirk, but Percy, in 1962, wrote at a time when countless theorists had begun to take up the issue of mass media’s numbing effects. Herbert Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, expounds at length the ways in which technology functions to homogenize, control, and pacify society. Writing in part, but not only, about mass media, he asserted that “In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination” (Marcuse xxlvii). Marcuse’s more general

skepticism toward technological progress was a prevailing part of the zeitgeist in critical theory. This background makes Percy's novel all the stranger. The protagonist, in the face of vast and transformative technological change, tacks toward, not away from, the whirlpool of mass media. He routinely views films with a very peculiar, almost ritualistic, type of engagement, but his relation to film does not end there. Percy's narrator provides a hyper-aware commentary that frequently stylizes his words and actions to mimic the aesthetic intensities of movie scenes. In this way, Binx's *flânerie* guides him toward the phenomenon of Hollywood film. Moreover, his cinematic habits of thought and action show that he engages with the phenomenon on a deeply personal level.

In this way, the relevance of authenticity in *The Moviegoer* touches on not only an abstract Heideggerian definition, but also on the more material way that Hollywood's artifice interacts with authenticity. This interaction turns out to be more intricate than one would reasonably expect, as evidenced by the fact that the authenticity-concerned narrator also occasionally styles himself after one or another great male film character of the time. Just as authenticity proves relevant among multiple levels, the notion of performance discussed by Pindell has greater weight because of its cinematic connotations. Thus, *The Moviegoer* makes performance and authenticity omnipresent themes.

Thomas Bonner argues that New Orleans exists as more of an artistic simulacrum of a city rather than a typical urban reality. He links the meandering "search" of the narrator to a belief that Percy felt New Orleans "may not be reality but art, often bad art" and that it "becomes reality only when perceived by a medium accessible through the senses" (Bonner 202). He supposes that Binx's highly stylized way of moving through life embodies a sense that only through this sort of acting can one access the reality of the city. Lawry, also seeking to

understand the ubiquity of cinema, role-playing, and acting in the novel, has a different explanation. His assertion that Binx seeks authentic models of living over inauthentic models fits with Bonner's claim that Binx is on a quest to access the reality, and not the "bad art," of New Orleans. Lawry, however, identifies the impediment to this as "everydayness," the quality that marks one as "lost in the world." In this case, however, "the more thoroughly you know the world you live in, the more confidently you take part in the great drama of the world, the more likely it is that you are 'lost' in the world—swallowed up in it" (Lawry 551).

Curiously, this definition of "everydayness" underscores the importance of New Orleans's role. This is a city where the opportunity to "act" or "perform" is offered in a variety of forms. Aunt Kate tells a young Binx, after the death of his brother, that she needs him to "act like a soldier" for their family (Percy 4). Much later in life, as an adult, Binx is called on to join his family's krewe in the Mardi Gras parade (Percy 34). In inserting the notion of "acting" into such varied situations, the former metaphorical and grave, the latter literal and superficial, Percy establishes the question of "acting" as one that will persist throughout the entire novel. Further, this question gives depth to the novel's frequent cinematic allusions.

The line spoken to Binx when he was only a young boy—"act like a soldier"—signals that the question of authenticity has, as he sees it, always been a hinge proposition of great importance. Binx thinks in retrospect, "I could easily act like a soldier. Was that all I had to do?" (Percy 4). In a sense, the rest of the novel unfolds with this question of authenticity as its centripetal force. Bolling seems to take on many different roles—he even "plays" a soldier, serving in the military—throughout the time from that moment in childhood to his present state as a thirty-year-old. The issue of authenticity and performance is inescapable in *The Moviegoer*, and it turns out to be relevant along many different time horizons. The idea of, say, acting like an

overworked, world-weary Dana Andrews during a short exchange in the office, is just as present in the novel as is the concept of planning and living out one's life in imitation of a Tolstoy character (Percy 105, 171). It is noteworthy that, as Scott Byrd points out, the longer the time horizon or the more esteemed the character, the more likely it is for Percy to describe them in literary rather than cinematic terms (Byrd 177). At any rate, Bonner's work assists in understanding part of why *The Moviegoer* features so many characters who are so plainly acting and further assists in exploring the link between Kate and Binx.

What is truly noteworthy about this preoccupation of Binx is that few other characters in the novel seem to have the same hesitancy about how to act and how to live. In turn, Percy presents many of these other characters as far more stable and coherent than Binx himself. Yet, this stability and coherence, it seems, comes from the comfort of submitting oneself to being a "type." Whether the "type" is a stern and wise Aunt or a gregarious salesman, it provides a certain scaffold as to how one ought to act. Percy scatters the novel with a broad range of characters, whose lives are always scrutinized by the narrator and often grouped into different options of how one can choose to live. This analysis borders on the metaphysical, as Binx intuitively synthesizes his various impressions about a character into a coherent type. These various types are not laid out to be, like Jung's archetypes, a collectively exhaustive and mutually exclusive set of roles, nor are they as infinite as the compilation of "types" that populate realist novels. Percy writes these various "types" into plenty of characters: Emily Cutrer, Jules Cutrer, Sam Yerger, Eddie Lovell, and even unknown passersby in public.

Percy provides a colorful and wide stratification of these "types" of characters, often vastly different from each other. Yet they all share the same quality of coherence and stability of being, which Binx lacks and indeed avoids as inimical to his "search." In turn, this span of stable

types works as a counterweight to Binx's search. Often, Binx analyzes each character with a vigor that reveals his own need to internally justify his way of living and further justify his refusal to follow the path of that particular type. In examining the specific models of life that Percy writes into the novel, one better understands the logic driving Binx to so intentionally exit the *Bildung* process and enter the horizontal mode of *flânerie*. Of note is that Kate is the only other character who seems to resist becoming a type, and this resistance emerges from her own sort of search.

Aunt Emily and Genteel Charm

Although Percy wrote many models of life into *The Moviegoer*, the one offered by Aunt Emily looms largest. In fact, her model is not so much offered as repeatedly imposed upon Binx. Emily lives with her husband, Jules Cutrer, in the Garden District, a lavish neighborhood of New Orleans populated by the city's white "old money" elite. The opening lines of the novel certify Emily's significance for Binx:

This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch. I know what this means. Since I go there every Sunday for dinner and today is Wednesday, it can mean only one thing: she wants to have one of her serious talks...either a piece of bad news about her stepdaughter Kate or else a serious talk about me, about the future and what I ought to do. (3)

From the very first page, Binx establishes that Emily is a figure of authority. The quote above emits the image of a matriarch who stewards the family's reputation and assets and ensures its future by surveilling and guiding her children and nephews. Furthermore, the mention of weekly dinners signals an ordered and predetermined nature to her life. The traditional and rhythmic

connotation of Sunday dinner, combined with this deep sense of familial obligation, underpin Emily's model of being.

Throughout the novel, Emily's model of being serves as a touchstone: not one to whose standard Binx strives, but one that Binx uses to orient his own model of being. His relation to Emily's conventional way of life is perimetric. He does not resist the model by fleeing New Orleans or thumbing his nose at her Southern values. He stays close to her, but importantly not too close, living, as he says, "uneventfully in Gentilly, a middle class suburb of New Orleans" (Percy 6). Furthermore, his career, working as a stockbroker, is not horribly offensive to Aunt Emily's values. Rather, he explains that his family was just "somewhat disappointed" in his "choice of profession," and that they probably wished that he gone into law or medicine (Percy 9). Thus, Binx does not fashion his life as an aggressive rebellion against the model of life that Emily symbolizes. Instead, this passive resistance—staying close to home but not living at home, choosing a decent career but not the right career—treats Emily's model of life as an object of contemplation rather than a compulsory script to be lived out.

He describes the Garden District, where Aunt Emily lives with Jules, as having an intolerable "genteel charm" (Percy 4). In describing this model of gentility, Binx concurrently supplies the explanation for why he cannot also inhabit it. About the possibility of living in the Garden District, he writes, "whenever I try to live there, I find myself first in a rage during which I develop strong opinions on a variety of subjects and write letters to editors, then in a depression during which I lie rigid as a stick for hours staring straight up at the plaster medallion in the ceiling of my bedroom" (Percy 6). This sort of quick, cheeky dismissal is emblematic of Binx's style of thought. Also emblematic of his thought, though, is that beneath his amusing description of this genteel charm is a genuine idea. The depression that he references in the quote seems to

come not so much from the letter-writing or opinion-espousing. Rather, in entering into a genteel existence that is already so established, so legitimized and respected by all types of social institutions, Binx begins to lose his authenticity. This life seems to be one that is too prefigured and scripted for our narrator. His words “rigid as a stick,” congruently, paint the image of a deeply inauthentic, or inanimate, person (Percy 6). The quest for authenticity, and the thorny logic of such a quest, repeatedly closes off many options of how to live for Binx. However family and social bonds prevent Bolling from fully disavowing every option that life presents. For all his obscure and solipsistic thinking, Binx’s love for his family always shines through in their familiar exchanges. When Binx does visit Emily, she playfully chides him, to which he thinks, “as always we take up again where we left off. This is where I belong after all” (Percy 26). In turn, he is faced with the knowledge that he could never live in the Garden District and the sensation that at the same time, he belongs there. That this feeling of belonging is enmeshed in a sense of obligation to Emily, and all the Bolling family values that she represents, accentuates the difficulty of this philosophical double bind. It is in response to this double bind that Binx enacts a subtle and internal resistance rather than a resistance of youthful and reckless abandon.

The tension of this double bind revives itself many times over. When Binx fends off requests to join the Neptune krewe for Mardi Gras, he says Emily “looks at me in disgust—with all her joking, she has a solid respect for the Carnival Krewes, for their usefulness in business and social life” (Percy 32). Aunt Emily, and all that her particular model of life brings with it, seems genuine in her disappointment with Binx’s refusal to take part in the parade. He is, quite literally, not doing the sort of acting that she requested him to do as a young boy after his brother’s death. The pleasant irony in the novel is that Percy designs a situation in which it seems

perfectly normal that Binx, the immature and performative protagonist, disappoints Emily, the authoritative Aunt, in his refusal to join a Krewe and dress up for Mardi Gras. This irony emerges from the fact that for Binx, performance is important a way to achieve authenticity, while for Emily performance is, in this case, merely a way to further solidify one's cultural and communal standing. As a result of these varied relations to the notion of performance, joining the Krewe and dressing up is pragmatic in Emily's eyes, but painfully inauthentic in Binx's.

As the encounters with Emily continue, the initial image of her as a doting Aunt broadens to that of an Aunt clutching to older ideals. When she plays the piano casually, Percy writes of how her "fingernails clicking over the keys, comes back to the tune, the sweet sad piping of the nineteenth century, good as it can be but not good enough" (Percy 48). Here the novel opens up onto a broader assertion: that there is something lacking in Emily's traditional sensibility. This "sweet sad piping of the nineteenth century" is a key piece of her personality and, more broadly, of this model of living. Emily is unable to release her nostalgia for the arts, ethics, and values of the nineteenth century, even as changes like rapid secularization and the arrival of nuclear weapons render those values obsolete.

If Aunt Emily does not function as an appealing model of living for Binx, his issues with her worldly outlook are easy to spot. In inhabiting such a particularly romantic life—the genteel life in the Garden District, where one bemoans the erosion of faith, values, and the nuclear family—Emily thrusts a narrative upon the world. This thrusting of a narrative upon the world is, for Binx, part and parcel of the inauthenticity of inhabiting, or acting out, a role. Appropriately, then, Binx is not comfortable acting out a rebellion against Emily's way of living, for this too would merely be a different form of acting, or inauthenticity. Instead, he is careful to walk a middle path. This is why for most of the novel, he ignores her outright plea for him to go to

medical school (Percy 53). In this reading, Emily's choice of medical school is by no means accidental. The institution of medicine, for her, radiates with associations of intelligence, responsibility, and prestige. It is because of the romantic charm around the institution of medicine that Emily sees medical school as a fitting final step for Binx's process of development into the man that she wants her nephew to be. Yet, because medical school seems like such a fitting final step in the *Bildungsroman* narrative frame that Emily imposes, Binx senses inauthenticity in it. She asks, "What is it you want out of life, son?", to which Binx replies, "I don't know'm. But I'll move in whenever you want me" (Percy 53). Unsatisfied, Emily pushes on, asking, "Don't you feel obliged to use your brain and to make a contribution?", to which Binx says "No'm" (Percy 53). He indulges her chiding but does not—until the very end—budge from his position of polite refusal.

The Catos

It is not that Emily is wholly stuck in the past. In fact, she offers her own opinion on the problem of modernity, saying about an old photograph, "We'll not see their like again. The age of the Catos is gone. Only my Jules is left. And Sam Yerger" (Percy 49). Here Emily is likely referring to Cato the Elder, a Roman senator, soldier, and cultural conservative, who took a great interest in farming and agriculture. In other words, Cato is in many ways the logical masculine ideal in Emily's eyes, in conformity with a moonlight-and-magnolias portrait of the Southern benevolent aristocrat, and her words acknowledge how modernity has begun to nullify the possibility of, or need for, this sort of man. The "Catos," then, represent the next type within the novel. Very quickly, Binx takes issue with the notion that either Sam Yerger or Jules Cutrer are, in fact, "Catos." He notes to himself:

This is absurd of course. Uncle Jules is no Cato. And as for Sam Yerger: Sam is only a Cato on long Sunday afternoons and in the company of my aunt. She transfigures everyone. Mercer she still sees as the old retainer. Uncle Jules she sees as the Creole Cato, the last of the heroes—whereas the truth is that Uncle Jules is a canny Cajun...but no Cato. All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble or the ignoble. (Percy 49)

These two Catos lead vastly different lives. Yerger is, as Lawson points out, “a newspaperman and a novelist and a Hemingway wannabe” (416). Yerger attempts to help sort out the situation with Kate and he does, like a Cato might, take charge and give direction as if he is bound to do so by duty. His life, extraordinary as it is, seems to be one that Binx knows is not for him, although not because, as Emily might suggest, “the age of Catos is gone” (Percy 49). Binx himself thinks, “Sam is only a Cato on long Sunday afternoons and in the company of my aunt. She transfigures everyone” (Percy 49). The use of “long Sunday afternoons” carries a good deal of import. In one phrase, Binx convincingly suggests that Sam’s aura of classical statesman is merely a mirage. Long Sunday afternoons are the times when, having gone to church already, Yerger might sit around with friends like Emily and Jules and regale them with stories of his travels, offering some writerly wisdom in the process. He exists as a Cato only when his setting and his company are both imbued with the right mix of nostalgia and melancholy.

In light of Binx’s hyper-awareness of narrative structures in his own life, his numerous literary references, his creativity, and his wandering, his own absence of writerly dreams is strange. It is one thing for him to not become a novelist, but for him to not even speak on the possibility of doing so is more surprising. In the epilogue, however, Binx notes, “Reticence,

therefore, having a place in a document of this kind, it seems as good a time as any to make an end” (Percy 237). His direct acknowledgment of a “document” reveals that Binx is, in fact, the fictional author of *The Moviegoer* (Percy 237). Binx seems to hold Kierkegaard’s skepticism of the fruitfulness of becoming a novelist who moralizes righteously about society’s decay.

Kierkegaard complicated his writings with contradictions, paradoxes, and pseudonyms to skirt the risk of becoming a writer like Yerger, and Binx fittingly takes great pains not to write righteous moralizing into *The Moviegoer*. In the epilogue he notes with a heavy homage to Kierkegaard, “As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject. For one thing, I have not the authority, as the great Danish philosopher declared, to speak of such matters in any way other than the edifying” (Percy 237). In a sense, Binx chooses to end the novel at the exact moment when, having approached a resolution, he might otherwise begin the masculine moralizing that presumably runs through Yerger’s writings. The epilogue reveals Binx to be both a medical school student and a novelist, and it merits later consideration that Binx, in embracing these roles, accepts aspects of both Emily’s and Sam’s models of life.

As for the other Cato, Jules Cutrer—whom Binx asserts is “No Cato”—it is curious how different his life is from Sam Yerger’s (Percy 49). Explicating the differences and commonalities between the two allows for a better understanding of the type that Emily idealizes. Jules is Emily’s husband and Binx’s uncle, and he has employed Binx as a stockbroker for several years. Binx writes:

Uncle Jules is the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified. He has made a great deal of money, he has a great many friends, he was Rex of Mardi Gras, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the

world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him. I see his world plainly through his eyes and I see why he loves it and would keep it as it is: a friendly easy-going place of old-world charm and new-world business methods where kind white folks and carefree darkies have the good sense to behave pleasantly toward each other. No shadow ever crosses his face, except when someone raises the subject of last year's Tulane - L.S.U. game. (Percy 31)

The most telling line is the first, where Binx claims that Jules's victory is "total and unqualified" (Percy 31). The hyperbole in Binx's words falls short of outright ridicule, but it also cancels out what might otherwise sound like envy. It seems that for Jules, his victory in life might very well be "total and unqualified"—he is wealthy, respected, popular, and happy in his role as a bastion of New Orleans's genteel community—but perhaps that is precisely the type of victory that Binx perversely fears. Jules's deft maneuvering of, and subsequent immense success in the "City of Man" makes his world perfectly coherent. Binx, in the passage above, hardly seems to envy this coherence. As Lawry writes about Heidegger and the logic of *The Moviegoer*, "The more thoroughly you know the world you live in, the more confidently you take part in the great drama of the world, the more likely it is that you are 'lost' in the world—swallowed up in it" (551). Thus, by taking part so confidently in the drama of the City of Man, Jules does become swallowed up in the world. In doing so, he forfeits some degree of authenticity or subjectivity.

Although Binx has no real gripe against Yerger or Jules, his lighthearted descriptions of their grand lives telegraph his suspicion about extraordinary endeavors in the modern world. In becoming the Hemingwayesque novelist and the Benevolent Patriarch respectively, Yerger and Jules act out roles that have their own coherent bundle of expectations and connotations. Percy

positions Binx as a sympathetic skeptic: aware of the appeal of living out a role but doubtful that he himself could put aside the question of authenticity and pursue a victory in the world that is “total and unqualified” (Percy 31). The strain of their extraordinary efforts to portray this role—writing, adventuring, becoming a dignified and wealthy patriarch—only highlights the vast distance between them and their model, whose immense historical significance makes Jules’s and Yerger’s feats seem comparably banal. In turn, the “Catos” of New Orleans have all the inauthenticity of playing a role without any of Cato the Elder’s timeless legacy.

The Romantic and The Salesman

Late in the novel, as Bolling and Kate return home from Chicago, they ride on a bus alongside two characters who are rather plainly meant to be types, or models, contrasted against one another. Percy describes them thus: “the first [is] a romantic from Wisconsin; the second [is] a salesman from a small manufacturing firm” (Percy 214). In a brief episode, these strangers serve as counterweights to each other. The unnamed romantic, quietly reading *The Charterhouse of Parma*, Stendhal’s 1839 novel about the Napoleonic wars, fails to impress Binx, who notes that “he has just begun to suffer from it, this miserable trick the romantic plays upon himself: of setting just beyond his reach the very thing he prizes. For he prizes just such a meeting... Now having encountered such a one, me, the rare bus friend, of course he strikes himself dumb” (Percy 215). The very fact of Binx’s only referring to this character as the “romantic” underscores the hyperbolic degree to which he stands as a mere type, despite his pretensions otherwise. The romantic reveals that he is taking a break from college to live in New Orleans where he will load bananas, and Binx suspects that he is hoping to “find himself a girl” (Percy 216). Binx forecasts that he will eventually find himself “propped at the rail of his ship in some

rancid port” with nothing to do but “ponder his own loneliness” (Percy 216). Yet, it is declared that the romantic “(i)s a moviegoer, though of course he does not go to the movies” (Percy 216). Binx seems almost sympathetic to the romantic’s plight, but he sees a crucial misstep in his mode of searching and predicts a self-sabotage as he pursues a liaison in the narrower sense of “romantic.” There is a proportional relationship between Binx and the romantic. In each moment, Binx acts with a careful, almost cinematically informed, style, but he plans the broader arc of his life in a way that rejects the long narrative development of movies. The romantic, conversely, is awkward in moment-to-moment conversation and does not have any affable wit or stylized behavior at hand. Yet he acts out the broader, cliched arc of a film character who leaves home to truly experience life’s adventures in a strange, new city. It is ironic that the romantic, who does hold some notion of a “search,” executes his search in the form of this scripted journey to New Orleans. The difference between the romantic and Binx might be that the romantic has not grasped the difference between the vertical search and the horizontal search, and in turn he exerts his energy for a melancholic search in a striving way that is, despite its aim, deeply vertical. This attachment to the vertical explains the way in which the romantic, despite his seeming rejection of societal norms, seems to strive for the sort of extraordinary and adventurous life that Sam Yerger led.

What is curious about this description, which reflects poorly on the romantic, is the level of familiarity evident in Binx’s analysis. Although not much of a romantic at present, it seems likely that at some point along the way, whether in the Korean War or in college, Binx was just this sort of romantic, and found himself with nothing to do but “ponder his own loneliness” (Percy 216). The romantic’s plight, and Binx’s quick diagnosis of it, highlights both the strength of understanding that Binx gains by crafting out a negative, detached role for himself, and the

loneliness with which Binx is still so familiar. The romantic, conversely, tries to live a role wherein he acts like someone who is lost in the world, but by the logic of *The Moviegoer* this attempt fails to bring him authenticity and does not even supply the consolation prize of a “total and unqualified” victory in the City of Man (Percy 31). Having treated the romantic life, Percy writes that it is the salesman, sitting next to the romantic, who strikes Binx as the “better metaphysician” (Percy 216).

Binx reacts to the salesman, surprisingly, in a markedly different way. As the latter talks up the knife that he sells, Bolling listens, mesmerized. Though his description has a touch of irony, Bolling does find something innately satisfying about the salesman and his knife. The knife, the salesman himself, and the straightforwardness of his goal—selling—all emit an appealing coherence and stability. Binx describes the knife as “a simple ell of tempered and blued steel honed to a two-edged blade” (Percy 216). When the world is a labyrinth of authentic and inauthentic roles, there is something peculiarly comforting about the simplicity, elegance, and concreteness of a knife. In this way, Percy might be comically alluding to the appeal of a Kierkegaardian philosophy built on the importance of singular, puncturing leaps from realm to realm, as opposed to the slow process of growth and development embedded in the idea of *Bildung*. As opposed to the muddy, metaphysical world of protean definitions that occupy the mind of the narrator, a sleek knife is something palpable, capable of cutting through the contradictions that frustrate Binx.

It is no wonder that Binx is mesmerized. Congruently, the salesman describes his task as an easy one, stating “all in the world you have to do” is “walk into the office...and ask the man how much is his bush hog blade. He’ll tell you about nine and a half a pair. Then all you do is drop this on his desk and say thirty five cents and you can’t break it” (Percy 216). In stark

juxtaposition to the lonely and melancholy romantic, the businessman is remarkably unselfconscious and untroubled. Binx suggests that “businessmen are our only metaphysicians, but the trouble is, they are one-track metaphysicians” (Percy 217). The image of this salesman is strikingly similar to the Heideggerian image of someone who knows their way around the material world strikingly well. This resemblance raises once more the issue of authenticity, which seems to play a part in spoiling so many of the potential models of life. To know one’s way around the world so well, to have such finely tuned metaphysics for merely one track, is to be lost in the world. The salesman resembles Jules Cutrer in this way; he lives and operates in the City of Man with joyful confidence. In Binx’s eyes, it might even be a plus that the salesman is not, like Jules, a bastion of a genteel community. He is merely a salesman with a single goal. In this way, the salesman displays a sort of humility: he does not try to rise above his station in life, seeking the prestige of medicine, the hallowed introspection of the romantic, or the glory of extraordinary endeavors like the “Catos.” The salesman’s role is almost so inauthentic, so unapologetically one-dimensional, that it gives Binx pleasure to behold it in the same way that he likes to behold the elegance and grandiosity of Hollywood characters on screen.

Of course, Binx never quite revisits the model of the salesman, but this encounter exemplifies Percy’s many gestures to the possibility for transcendence that the likes of postmodern figures like Warhol and DeLillo saw within the culture of mass-produced commodities. Ultimately, Percy’s decision to place the romantic and the salesman literally alongside each other succeeds in illuminating the salience of their respective models and capturing the novel’s substitution of everyday “horizontal” observation over transcendence of the everyday through “high” culture in a romantic mode.

Bildungsroman* and *Wanderjahr

In each encounter between the aforementioned characters, there is always a layer of mediation between the narrator and the person who is the object of Binx's analysis. He remains skeptical of each model of living provided to him, and this skepticism creates a distance between Binx and the other converser. In some cases, such as Aunt Emily's imploring him to become a doctor, he can hardly articulate the reason for his resistance to the plan. In that instance, he cites that Emily wrongly mistakes Binx for a bright young man due to his quietness and treats the notion that he is fit for medical school as a wrongly derived conclusion. He never, however, actually says that he could not, or does not want to, become a doctor. In the initial conversation in which Emily raises this issue, Binx truly loses interest and hope precisely when Emily offers up the term *Wanderjahr*. Aunt Emily casually comforts him about his last few years by saying, "You're doing something every man used to do. When your father finished college, he had his *Wanderjahr*, a fine year's ramble up the Rhine" (Percy 55). Disheartened, Binx thinks "If I thought I'd spent the last four years as a *Wanderjahr*, before 'settling down,' I'd shoot myself on the spot" (Percy 55).

In invoking the *Wanderjahr*, Percy implicitly gives more color to the context of Aunt Emily's nineteenth-century convictions. *Wanderjahr*, which translates literally to a year of wandering and exploration, is the term for the tradition of young men taking a year of their life after college to travel before settling down. Even now, the *Wanderjahr* survives in US culture, albeit in a watered-down form, as the tradition of taking a "gap year" before or after college. The modern tradition has the same connotation of adventure and self-discovery as the *Wanderjahr*.

Goethe popularized, or perhaps codified, this tradition through his novel, *Wilhelm Meister's Wanderjahre* (1821). Indeed, only pages earlier than the above passage, Emily tells

Binx that when she and Jack Bolling (Emily's brother and Binx's father) visited 1920s Germany as young adults, Jack "met two of his buddies from Charlottesville and Princeton and they took off helter-skelter up the Rhine. Off he went with a bottle of *Liebfraumilch* under one arm and *Wilhelm Meister* under the other" (Percy 50). Percy thus establishes the concept of the *Wanderjahr* as one of extreme relevance in understanding the novel. Emily views it as acceptable and ascribes value to it: Jack Bolling once had his own *Wanderjahr* in Germany, and Binx Bolling is notably repulsed by the notion that he is on his own *Wanderjahr*. In light of Binx's ever-present concern with authenticity (an anxiety underscored by the presence of Goethe's novel as a guidebook of sorts, emphasizing the inauthenticity and self-consciousness of the endeavor), his fear of engaging in, or even having engaged in, a tradition about which so much has been written and reified in culture, is worth pursuing.

Aunt Emily, after mentioning the *Wanderjahr*, asks Binx, "Don't you think a thirty year old man ought to know what he wants to do with his life?," urging Binx to commit to tell her his plan in seven days, on Ash Wednesday (Percy 55-56). Binx's trust in Emily's good intentions allows her to ask such penetrating questions without provoking offense. She is one of the few characters whose authority Binx both respects and fears. In turn, her request for Binx to tell her "what he wants to do with his life" in seven days is a momentous event in an otherwise meandering novel. Emily establishes a gravity around Binx's decision, and the very fact of her request implies that she feels her nephew's development into a man is not yet complete. The mention of a *Wanderjahr* and of *Wilhelm Meister* both gesture at the broader process of development that Emily envisions for her nephew. These German motifs serve to indicate the socially sanctioned, even expected process of development for not only the Bolling men, but for

all young people in Western culture. Percy demonstrates that Binx, despite his best efforts, is being *understood* by his aunt, Emily, through the vocabulary of the *Wanderjahr*.

As such, it is important that the *Wanderjahr*, conceptually, is a subcomponent of the broader model of *Bildung*, which Goethe also codified in literature by virtually inventing the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. The *Wanderjahr* is a year for innocuous and indeterminate adventure, and that year takes place within a broader multi-year journey to psychological growth, the *Bildung* process. In contrast to the joyful and comparably brief meandering of a *Wanderjahr*, the *Bildungsideal* as a whole is considerably more serious and consequential for a young man. The *wanderjahr* itself merely allows time for what one might expect: broadening of one's worldview, self-discovery, self-cultivation, and the final chance to exercise and excise one's youthful curiosity. Thus, it is noteworthy that Emily so confidently sees Binx's past few years through the lens of the idealized *Wanderjahr*.

This background also makes it all the more noteworthy that Binx balks with such atypical revulsion at the notion that *he* has been on a *Wanderjahr*. The visceral reaction to the premise of Emily's statement, and his particular disappointment at the realization that he and Emily "do not understand each other after all," has broad implications (Percy 55). To admit that he has been on a *Wanderjahr* for four years would trivialize the search, his serious wandering, and his highly stylized way of engaging with life. The *Wanderjahr* premise trivializes those things because it cauterizes them by placing them in a demarcated stretch of time, with a beginning and end, for discovery and adventure. In this premise, the *Wanderjahr* inevitably ends at some point and Binx inevitably goes to medical school and enters professional life. Thus, the stakes of his search, and to some degree everything else he does with intention, are lowered to almost nothing. If Binx's

life is merely a process of *Bildung*, he might have not invested such time and energy into fashioning his very particular life in Gentilly.

This *Wanderjahr* framing, in turn, devalues how he has spent his time after the war. To be clear, the argument is not that Binx simply cannot face the truth that he is on a *Wanderjahr*. He seems to have succeeded in at least temporarily escaping that tradition, yet Aunt Emily's words force him to realize that his success in doing so is not so obvious. Furthermore, whereas *The Moviegoer* mostly presents vignettes spliced together, Emily's words remind Binx that, whether he likes it or not, his life will unfold over the course of years into *some* long and connected narrative. In this way, the novel questions Binx's attempt to shrug off the old traditions of *Bildung* and even the *Wanderjahr*.

Importantly, Binx has disavowed the prospect of a vertical search, which turns out to be closely aligned with processes like *Bildung*, already. Soon after the conversation with Emily, he privately recounts the time when he "stood outside the universe and sought to understand it" (Percy 69). This took place several years before the novel's main narrative, and he describes his daily routine in that era as reading "fundamental books" with occasional breaks for walks or movies (Percy 69). However, the vertical search fails Binx. He describes the culmination of this attempt to understand the universe: finishing a book "called *The Chemistry of Life*" gave him the sense that "the main goals of my search were reached or were in principle reachable" (Percy 70). No sooner does Binx begin to glimpse the possible zenith of this vertical search than does he encounter the "difficulty...that although the universe had been disposed of, I myself was still left over" (Percy 70). Percy here expresses the notion, which he would continue to develop many times over in his career, that there is something hauntingly empty in the chase to understand the universe through hard science alone. He saw a widening gap between the hard sciences'

increased ability to explain the universe, and their failure to bring the social sciences, and even philosophy, the same increased ability to explain much at all about the soul, mind, and heart. This gap is why Binx feels “that although the universe had been disposed of, I myself was still left over” (Percy 70).

Percy conjoins the vertical search for universal understanding with the *Bildungsideal*. Binx’s past vertical search included not only books of science, but also literature and philosophy. Thus, when he became disillusioned with the redeeming possibility of the vertical search for world understanding, he became disillusioned with lofty ideas and Great Books altogether. To engage knowingly in a process of *Bildung* would be, for Binx, to engage in a total act of self-deception. This would be self-deception because consciously entering into a tradition as preformed and revered as the *Bildung* means to become something of a character, to play a role. Thus, even a successful enactment of the *Bildungsideal* that delivers a “total and unqualified” victory like Jules’s might leave Binx feeling that he himself “was still left over” (Percy 31, 70).

Binx’s disavowal of the vertical search thus extends to the cultural tradition of trying to grow and develop in hopes of raising one’s place in society. As Lawry explains, the concept of everydayness in the novel expresses what it is to be lost in the world, and “to be lost in the world in this sense is precisely to know your way about the world” (551). Both the vertical quest for knowledge and the traditional *Bildung* process are activities that seek to strengthen the extent to which one knows their way about the world. The former provides this through intellectual understanding, and the latter through a more personal insertion of oneself into their mature and rightly found place among society. The *Bildungsideal* and its promise of psychological maturity is plainly a vertical quest for growth, able to take any number of forms.

This reticence to engage in the vertical search for knowledge is the same reticence to take part in narrative traditions of growth and development like the *Bildungsroman*. Binx, then, is openly skeptical of all forms of development and advancement. Part of what makes *The Moviegoer* such a dynamic novel is how Percy guides the skepticism of the narrator in many different directions and across many different planes; that is, Binx is examining and seeking to understand the model of life that each character represents, and simultaneously attempting to sort out more abstract, impersonal models of life (the *Bildung*, the *Wanderjahr*, and eventually the horizontal search of the *flâneur*). The dual examination of the characters and of these broader dichotomies (vertical and horizontal) are related, though. It is merely that most of the characters met, save a few, are clustered toward the vertical end of the spectrum. Only a few characters—Binx and Kate—seem to be near the horizontal pole of being. Despite the apparent confidence of the primary horizontal wanderers, such as Binx, the novel expresses a deep uncertainty about the horizontal search.

In trying to better understand Percy's decision to write a novel that is so uncertain about the relevance of *Bildung* as a developmental model in the midcentury US, it is useful to look to the work of Joshua D. Esty and Franco Moretti. Both Esty and Moretti perform extensive literary studies on nineteenth- and twentieth-century works that signal an instability in the genre of the *Bildungsroman*. Esty analyzes George Eliot's *The Mill on The Floss* as a novel that he argues is "anti-*Bildungsroman*" (143). His argument leans on the setting of *The Mill on The Floss*, which occurs in England and captures the impact of the industrial revolution between the early and late nineteenth century. Esty reads Eliot's work as declaring that modernity "generates absolute losses both materially and epistemologically: there are objects, documents, people, values, experiences and knowledge that can neither be preserved nor recollected from the past" (147).

He also claims that the novel “exposes and challenges the recuperative rhetoric of nationalism that seeks to deny those losses and to emphasize the survival of a rural English core” (147). He argues that these challenges of modernity inform individual development. As a result, he claims, the novel endorses a “continuous self that remembers, perseveres, and endures,” rather than a self that accepts loss as part of development. The sum of this work, Esty acknowledges, goes plainly against what Franco Moretti defines as “the classical *Bildungsroman* of Goethe,” which “establishes a set of stable public values and then presides over the successful ‘adjustment’ of the protagonist” (149). Esty’s work clarifies what it looks like for a work to be “anti-*Bildungsroman*,” or at least to question the typical structure of the *Bildungsroman*. Franco Moretti, on the other hand, takes a broader approach in analyzing the trends of many late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century novels, and he seeks the broader goal of determining when the genre of the *Bildungsroman* ended.

Moretti declares 1914 the year that the genre of *Bildungsroman* came to a close (more precisely, became impossible or unnecessary) and proceeds to investigate this idea. Moretti observes that, as opposed to the deconstructing force of psychoanalysis, “*Bildungsroman* attempts to *build* the Ego, and make it the indisputable centre of its own structure” (236). This centering is precisely the sort of spatial model whose destabilization Binx embodies across many dimensions for the bulk of the novel. He intentionally brings himself to the periphery of numerous realms. As a stockbroker, Binx’s engagement with the world is purely tangential: rather than building business or underwriting stocks, he merely buys and sells stock, adding money to the financial market and selling for gains on the margin. Physically, Binx’s small basement bungalow in Gentilly is very much on the periphery of New Orleans’s significant culture and social offerings. In social and familial interactions, Binx remains on the periphery

both in the moment to moment of dinner parties and in the broader picture of involvement with family affairs. All of this demonstrates very well how the life he leads in the narrative is, from the start, fundamentally anti-*Bildung*. Moretti's piece helps to establish not only that Binx's life for the bulk of the narrative goes against the *Bildungsideal*, but also why this is the case. Moretti notes that the writers of the early twentieth century began to question the *Bildungsroman* as something whose "parts are not held together by chronological relations, but only by the...unifying gaze of conscious memory" (235). In turn he proposes, the novel shifted, and "the novel's meaning is thus no longer to be found in the narrative, diachronic relation *between* events, but rather *within* each single 'present', taken as a self-contained, discontinuous entity" (236). Moretti's concise description captures the way in which *The Moviegoer* operates. The novel often feels like an endless pile of vignettes and semi-events, wherein one's sense of an unfolding narrative is repeatedly stymied. In *The Moviegoer*, the notion of a plot exists only in the vague knowledge that on Ash Wednesday, Emily expects Binx to tell her what he plans to do with his life. This deadline is largely forgotten, or repressed, for most of the novel. The primary recurring conflict unfolds between everydayness and Binx, as the latter tries to grapple with the former. Importantly, that primary surface level conflict, in the final pages, falls away as the repressed plot begun by Emily's call makes a stormy return to the center stage.

In describing Joyce's *Portrait of The Artist as a Young Man*, Moretti notes that just after establishing Stephen's "artist's soul," Joyce's next chapter contains "neither visions nor rebirths...but idle conversations to kill the time; no menacing institutions, but a banal everydayness; the seer has turned into a young pedant, for whom epiphany is just a tricky philological riddle" (Moretti 241). Curiously, Moretti reads this final chapter of *Portrait* as a definitive failure of construction on Joyce's part. However, he notes, this failure was born out of

a refusal to choose between what Moretti sees as the two counterbalances of the *Bildungsroman*: on the one hand, epiphanies, piercingly traumatic events, and on the other hand satellites, the form of narrative background “events that qualify and enrich” the story (Moretti 233). He proposes that Joyce’s refusal to arbitrarily choose, and the novel’s subsequent structural failure, is what enabled the literary evolution beyond the *Bildungsroman*. *The Moviegoer*, written seemingly as post-*Bildungsroman*, complicates Moretti’s model considerably. Its long series of vignettes, one could say, represent Binx’s attempt to create a queer composite of the two counterbalancing elements mentioned above. They contain both the piercingly exciting events that might typically bring trauma and the background events that might typically provide a sense of narrative normalcy, but both come in the form of short, truncated scenes. Likely Percy fashions the novel this way because the latter background events, with all their everydayness, merely unsettle Binx. He fears them and remains highly skeptical of the narrative stability provided by their mundanity. Hence, he needs to stylize his own idiosyncratic everyday interactions with the stuff of Hollywood cinema. Likewise, the piercing events that should bring a character trauma only bring Binx good feelings of authenticity and liberation from the false sense of narrative. The resulting narrative presents both piercing and background events that are spliced up like bits of film, almost democratized.

In trying to articulate what a “problem” for a genre looks like, Moretti proposes that *Bildungsroman*’s problem was trauma (244). He writes that “the trauma introduced discontinuity within novelistic temporality, generating centrifugal tendencies toward the short story and the lyric; it disrupted the unity of the Ego, putting the language of self-consciousness out of work; it dismantled neutralized spaces, originating a regressive semiotic anxiety” (244). Fittingly, semiotic anxiety is precisely what Binx has; he does not wander in a desert of meaninglessness

but conducts himself very cautiously in a world loaded with meaning, always concerned that he might accidentally implicate himself in a role which he does not desire. Although the rigor of his close reading draws him away from making such broad statements, Moretti's piece comes to suggest that the trauma of World War I was the puncturing event, traumatic itself and too powerful for the *Bildungsroman* to shield itself from. Fittingly, Percy scattered within *The Moviegoer* myriad allusions to past wars and the potential for nuclear catastrophe (Osborne 108).

Indeed, *The Moviegoer*, in the context of Esty's and Moretti's analyses, is very nearly a novel *only* about the end of the *Bildungsideal*. The majority of the novel, taking place in the seven days leading up to Ash Wednesday, features a character who embodies the ways in which modernity has *already* destabilized the idea of *Bildung* and made it seem futile. However, the destabilization of *Bildung* in *The Moviegoer* has important differences from the destabilization in *The Mill on The Floss*. For one, *The Moviegoer* opens upon a protagonist who, as was previously established, gave up on the vertical search and the *Bildung* process several years ago. Unlike *The Mill on The Floss*, the narrative *begins* with a character already living a life detached from normative value systems. Emily's ultimatum, that Binx must inform her of his life plan in seven days, is the call for him to return to the *Bildungsideal*. She hopes openly that Binx will pick a path of growth and development. In turn, *The Moviegoer* might be best described as a novel that performs two distinct and important maneuvers around ideas of *Bildung*. Percy, at length and with his gaze set on the destabilizing forces of modernity, makes clear why the *Bildung* process couldn't sustain its original form in the midcentury US. Yet, by beginning the novel with the premise that the *Bildung* process could not survive modernity, he sets the stage for further investigation. Through the definitive growth and transformation of Binx in the epilogue, the

novel asserts that some vestigial element of the *Bildungsideal*, itself possibly something lost to modernity as Esty would say, demands recovery from the past.

Though cool and calculated in manner, Bolling operates largely in a state of metaphysical desperation. Having long ago come to terms with the incompatibility of the *Bildungsroman* and vertical search, Binx needs the horizontal search to be a sufficient mode of living. The novel's warped melding of Moretti's two counterbalances ("kernels," the traumatically piercing events and "satellites," the background events meant to establish normalcy and narrative) is a clue. Although Percy, like Joyce, veers away from the typical mix of these two *Bildungsroman* elements, it is telling that Percy, writing decades after 1914, still seems to need them in some form. The inability to leave the old elements of the *Bildungsroman* behind as well as Binx's eventual failure to carve out a sustainable way of living by merely welding these two elements points to the novel's conclusion. The conclusion, which will receive more treatment later, resolves the dialectic of the horizontal and vertical searches in a new way. However, Binx's coherence, his decision to both become a medical doctor and to marry Kate, and his narrative voice (refined but still idiosyncratic), suggest that he has subsumed within a new mode of being the lessons and values of both the horizontal search's *flânerie* and the *Bildungsideal*. Over the course of the novel, Binx's obvious failures—namely the disappointment of Aunt Emily—bring him to realize the futility of his horizontal wandering, and he is forced to reevaluate his mode of being. This nuanced engagement with the *Bildungsideal*, which manages to reflect on the genre without neatly entering the genre, gives Percy's work a broader space to work in, liberated from traditional expectations of plot development.

Rather than blazing a path to some new, highly stylized form of the novel, Percy wrote works that gained attention, certainly, but typically received the vague label of "post-secular" or

“Southern.” Andrew Hogheem details at length the collective failure in academia to fairly label and categorize Percy’s writing. This failure, which seems at first borne out of the genuine strangeness of his writing, might be due to the way the novels, like Binx Bolling himself, exist in a sort of negativity. Percy tries to sort out the question that might reasonably follow the demise of the *Bildungsroman*: Where is there to go from here? He begins *The Moviegoer* with the answer of the horizontal search and *flânerie*. Although he ultimately revises his answer to a combination of both the horizontal and the *Bildungsroman*, the horizontal requires its own treatment, especially since that is the predominant mode of Binx for most of the novel.

Before moving on to deal with the horizontal search more directly, it is important to address an aspect of *The Moviegoer* that complicates any talk of *Bildung* at its core. From one angle, the notion of *The Moviegoer* as even related to the *Bildungsroman* genre seems ridiculous. After all, the main character is twenty-nine years old, which far exceeds the typical coming-of-age years of the genre. Binx is an adult, and this adulthood is certified in meaningful ways: he fought in the Korean war, he graduated college, he has a job as a stockbroker, and he is financially independent. In this way, he seems to be fully out of the stage of youth, and it should be no revelation that he is not on the vertical path of growth and development as a *Bildungsroman*’s protagonist should be. Despite this, Percy imbues the novel with a sense of something lacking, a sense that something material needs to happen. Aunt Emily, for example, whose opinion is of outsized importance, speaks to Binx as if he has not finished maturing. Further, Binx seems to agree, even if he does not say as much. When she suggests he is on a *Wanderjahr*, he does not correct her and explain what it is he has actually been doing with his life. After this, he merely replies, “Yes,” when Emily asks, “Don’t you think a thirty year old man ought to know what he wants to do with his life?” (Percy 55).

The implication—that he does not know what he wants to do with his life—reflects something about the horizontal mode of *flânerie*, which of course is what Emily reads as a *Wanderjahr*. The motif of *flânerie* leads to a highly stylized and intentional engagement with the world each day, focused on the immediacy of experience in urban life. This focus, taken as the aim of the *flâneur*, pointedly rejects the sort of developmental project that would give one's whole life a narrative arc in the traditional sense of the *Bildung* process. In other words, the lack of growth and development, which Emily sees as badly needed in her nephew's life, is almost an outright aim, rather than an unplanned error or temporizing strategy, of Binx's life course.

The Horizontal Search and the *Flâneur*

The *flâneur* figure spends his days walking idly around Paris, observing and analyzing the flow of modernity in urban public spaces.² The *flâneur*, importantly, has the upper-class economic means to stroll around so unhurriedly. Baudelaire's "The Painter of Modern Life," one of the seminal sites of the *flâneur*, dwells on Monsieur G., the painter Constantin Guys, as the *flâneur* par excellence. Baudelaire writes that Monsieur G. was a "cosmopolitan," and "not precisely an *artist*, but rather a man of the world" (6). As a cosmopolitan, the *flâneur* was rankled neither by a scarcity of money nor a scarcity of time. Further, Baudelaire elaborates on the purposeful distinction between being an artist and a man of the world: "By the second, I mean a man of the whole world, a man who understands the world and the mysterious and lawful reasons for all its uses; by the first, a specialist, a man wedded to his palette like the serf to the soil" (6-7). Describing the point at which Monsieur G., gazing out at a crowd from a cafe, begins his *flânerie*, Baudelaire writes:

Lately returned from the valley of the shadow of death, he is rapturously breathing in all the odours and essences of life; as he has been on the brink of total oblivion, he remembers, and fervently desires to remember, everything. Finally he hurls himself headlong into the midst of the throng, in pursuit of an unknown, half-glimpsed countenance that has, on an instant, bewitched him. Curiosity has become a fatal, irresistible passion. (7)

Driven by curiosity, the *flâneur* sought access to a deeper understanding of urban life, and the way to this understanding was a purposeful immersion and submersion into the crowd. The figure of the *flâneur* very quickly became representative of the very object of its analysis, modernity in urban spaces.

In framing *The Moviegoer* as a novel whose narrator decides to switch from the ostensibly outdated *Bildungsideal* to the mode of the *flâneur*, it's important to acknowledge the inherent imbalance in between these two concepts. While the *Bildung* connotes an urgent and often years-long process of development, the *flâneur* describes a figure, or a role, rather than an elongated process. The very unhurried nature of *flânerie* explicitly spurns the notion of urgency and development. For this reason, the *flâneur* is often described within the short time frame of his daily activity of strolling and observing, rather than within the broad frame of his entire life. Percy demonstrates a keen awareness of this imbalance between the cumulative, developmental nature of *Bildung* and the brief, snapshot-like nature of the *flâneur*. In that vein, probing the way that he writes a character who inhabits the figure of the *flâneur* helps to elucidate the broader dialectical swings within the novel.

Although the *flâneur* sustained itself as a concept and as a phenomenon in cities, it hardly gathered the immense historical weight that the *Bildungsideal* held in the culture of New

Orleans. After all, the many models of life offered by the characters mentioned above are largely models built within the strictures of the *Bildung* process. Aunt Emily, Sam Yerger, Jules Cutrer, and even the Salesman, are all characters whose propulsion through life derives from a firm desire to grow and succeed, whether as a matriarch, novelist, investor, or knife salesman.

This makes Binx's choice of a life of *flânerie*, and the fact of his confidence and cinematic finesse in daily life, all the more distinctive. After deciding that the vertical search, drawn from the *Bildung* model as we have seen, is not worthwhile or even possible, Binx takes up the "horizontal search" (Percy 70). It is strange that, despite all the well-documented scholarship around Binx's interest in the horizontal search and the well-known scholarship describing the *flâneur* as a figure fundamentally interested in the horizontal, none of *The Moviegoer's* scholarship deals with this connection.

The precise point at which Binx embraces life as a *flâneur* is the same aforementioned point at which he abandons his vertical search. This moment occurs years before the novel's central events. Having spent time engaging with the touchstones of Western culture in hopes of some grand world understanding, Binx finds that his search for knowledge has explained the universe, but not himself (Percy 70). He writes, "Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion" (Percy 70). This is the mind that the reader is dropped into at the start of the novel: the mind of someone who wanders seriously.

As Pindell sees it, this serious wandering is performative. Seeing that the vertical search repeatedly inflicted upon him the feeling that "though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over," Binx locates a new mode of being that wards off the malaise of feeling "left over" (Percy 70). The threat of malaise inherent in the vertical search and *Bildung* process resembles the threat that Esty spots in *The Mill on The Floss*: "the process of maturation

generates absolute losses for Maggie: there are moods, sensations, relationships and experiences that cannot survive into adulthood” (147). Binx doubts that he can retain his sense of self and authenticity if he fully enters into the *Bildung* process. Although he does not define it as such, Pindell’s elaboration on the performative aspect of Binx’s horizontal search fits into the motif of the *flâneur*.

Pindell’s suspicion is that performance, in particular performance of verbal transformation, is key to Binx’s ability to survive without succumbing to “loss” or “malaise.” Thus, Pindell finds great importance in the famous passage:

Evening is the best time in Gentilly. There are not so many trees and the buildings are low and the world is all sky. The sky is a deep bright ocean full of light and life. High above the Lake a broken vee of ibises points for the marshes; they go suddenly white as they fly into the tilting salient of sunlight. Swifts find a windy middle reach of sky and come twittering down so fast I think at first gnats have crossed my eyelids. In the last sector of apple green a Lockheed Connie lowers from Mobile, her running lights blinking in the dusk. Station wagons and Greyhounds and diesel rigs rumble toward the Gulf Coast, their fabulous tail-lights glowing like rubies in the darkening east. Most of the commercial buildings are empty except the filling stations where attendants hose down the concrete under the glowing discs and shells and stars. (Percy 73)

Bolling is not, Pindell claims, idly waxing poetic, but recovering the beauty of his mundane surroundings through a cunning feat of language (227). He elaborates that “the extraordinary emphasis on spatial, aerial, and kinetic phenomena is a kind of derealization of the world that, in effect, sets forward the style as the prime reality” (227). This feat of verbal transformation

sustains Binx. The simple observation that the world, and New Orleans in particular, is beautiful, would not be enough. Rather, Pindell suggests that language holds a higher importance for Binx, both in its power to decay and renew. In this way, Percy presents an interesting and fresh iteration of the *flâneur*. This concealed urgency within Binx's *flânerie* distinguishes him from the many *flâneurs* of Paris, whom Baudelaire notes are rarely as special as Monsieur G. What is unique is that Binx needs this method of *flânerie* not for edification, but for the essential survival effort of warding off "malaise" and "loss." In part, the unexpected intensity and necessity behind Binx's *flânerie* is a result of Percy's attempt to play out the figure of the *flâneur* along a time horizon just as long as the typical *Bildung* process.³ In turn, this decision to write a narrator who is a *flâneur* for the course of years, and not a single day, allows Percy to grapple with the tensions between the socially sanctioned vertical search and an idiosyncratic horizontal search in a more nuanced manner.

Useful in further explaining the significance of Binx's *flânerie* is Thomas Bonner's scholarship on the importance of New Orleans as the particular city where the novel takes place. His writing details the extent to which New Orleans held a particularly artificial texture of reality for the writers of the mid-twentieth century. Tracing the city's own protean sense of identity through its many changes in governance (French, Spanish, American), Bonner emphasizes that Percy, among others, saw in New Orleans a simulacrum of a typical American city. Writers, or *flâneurs*, whose task is understanding the reality of a particular urban environment, become destabilized by this artificial and shifting quality of New Orleans. In turn, Bonner reads Binx's performative moments of verbal craft as, like Pindell says, necessary to sustain himself. However, Bonner's slight twist on the argument is that New Orleans in particular "becomes reality only when perceived by a medium accessible through the senses" (Bonner 202). Both

Bonner and Pindell, then, rightly observe that Binx's ingenuity is of deep importance in his continuously enacted effort of carrying on without being "cut loose metaphysically speaking" (Percy 75).

The Limits of *Flânerie*

The role of the *flâneur* and the idea of the horizontal search, is complicated subtly throughout the novel and explicitly at the end. There are hints that Binx is aware that his horizontal mode of being leaves something unaccounted for throughout the novel, but it is in the final two sections that Percy offers the clearest illustration of the shortcomings of the horizontal search. This illustration culminates with Aunt Emily's cold denouncement of Binx's ways, but the context that builds to that moment is important enough to recapitulate.

Kate, Binx's first cousin and Emily's daughter, makes an impromptu decision to join Binx on his business trip to Chicago (Percy 182). She makes this decision on the morning before the trip, and evidently neither Binx nor Kate thinks to inform Emily of the plan. This omission is worsened by the context of Kate's situation: she is a mentally unstable twenty-five-year-old and has made a suicide attempt within the last several days. One can easily imagine Aunt Emily's panic, hidden from the reader, at the disappearance of her daughter. This disappointment crystallizes into a full disillusionment with her nephew by the time she puts together what has happened and calls Binx at the hotel in Chicago. As he answers the phone, Binx notes "my aunt's voice speaks to the operator, then to me, and does not change its tone. She does not bother to add a single overtone of warmth or cold, love or hate, to the monotone of her notification—and this is more ominous than ten thousand williwaws" (Percy 212). In other words, she speaks to Binx like he is a perfect stranger, and at that a stranger who deserves neither kindness nor

trust. Binx invokes powerful winds, ominous and invisible, to communicate the haunting impact of Emily's rapid change in demeanor toward her nephew. This is a noteworthy deviation from Emily earlier in the book who, even when scolding her nephew, could not hide the love in her words. Her words on the short phone call are terse and practical, as she merely confirms that Kate is with him and that Kate is okay (Percy 212). Aunt Emily, Binx likely knows, withholds her lengthier and weightier judgment for their in-person encounter upon his return to New Orleans.

However, she allows herself one simple and probing question about the failure to inform her where Kate was, which is "Why didn't you tell me?" (Percy 212). Binx, hardly one to be laconic with his own narration, writes only "I think," and, evidently coming up empty-handed, says merely, "I can't remember" (Percy 212). This excuse appears, at first glance, to be a throwaway on Binx's part, and it very well might be. It certainly reads that way to Aunt Emily, as those words are the last of the section, implying that she then simply hung up the phone. However, the phrase "I can't remember" gestures importantly back to the imbalance between the subject of *Bildungsideal* and the *flâneur*. For the *flâneur*, daily lived experience is a pile of vignettes or a series of snapshots, which do not connect but repeatedly rupture the seamless flow of narrative. The very act of remembering is embedded in the idea of narrative coherence, and not very much in Binx's *flânerie*. Percy set out to write a novel about what life, over the course of years, might be like for someone who lives like a *flâneur*. The words, "I can't remember," given the primacy of the questions around narrative in *The Moviegoer*, signal a singularly destabilizing force hitting upon the model of the *flâneur*. In writing the model of the *flâneur* along durations more customary in narratives of the *Bildung* process, Percy finds the former's resistance to narrative deeply problematic for anyone who tries to live as the *flâneur*. Indeed,

Baudelaire himself notes that the genius of Monsieur G. is “nothing more nor less than childhood recovered at will” (8). Fittingly, the final affront that evaporates Emily’s respect for Binx, and in turn evaporates the potential of *flânerie* for Binx, has an almost childish simplicity. He did not maliciously hide the plan to bring Kate. Rather his life of *flânerie* simply didn’t guide him to think of something so banal and practical as alerting Emily to the plan.

Although Aunt Emily’s phone call with Binx initiates the destabilization of *flânerie* as a viable mode of living, it does not complete it. When he visits her upon his return from Chicago, the scene opens as she is in the middle of her lecture. Animated with anger, Emily’s words offer a judgment of Binx’s character and, on a broader level, a condensed description of the tension that Percy has been teasing out:

First, is it not true that in all of past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageous or cowardly, with distinction or mediocrity, with honor or dishonor. They are recognizable. They display courage, pity, fear, embarrassment, joy, sorrow, and so on. Such anyhow has been the funded experience of the race for two or three thousand years, has it not? Your discovery, as best I can determine, is that there is an alternative which no one has hit upon. It is that one finding oneself in one of life’s critical situations need not after all respond in one of the traditional ways. No. One may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one’s heel and leave. Exit. (Percy 220)

The first half of the above quote reaffirms the *Bildungsideal*, both its sense of narratorial progression and its theme of compromise between individual idiosyncrasies and desires and conservative social structures, as the foundation of Aunt Emily’s understanding of the world. It is

not, however, that she believes every person lives out a successful *Bildungsideal* of developing into a doctor or a valiant Cato. Rather, she believes that in the face of conflict, inexperience, and lack of understanding, one does *something*. She allows for the possibilities of cowardice, “mediocrity,” or “dishonor,” but she had not previously believed with seriousness there to be a way of being that skirted these options (Percy 220). Or, more likely, she had not seriously believed that her nephew would dream of any other way of being. She does, albeit crudely, seem to describe Binx’s *flânerie* and his horizontal search when she says “One may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one’s heel and leave. Exit” (Percy 220). Aunt Emily frames Binx’s decision to pursue the horizontal search as a casual exiting of narrative development and the project of the vertical search. Percy, with this denouncement by Emily, refuses to grant Binx the uninhibited immediacy of experience that *flânerie* seeks. This moment abruptly forces Binx to face the fact that, *flâneur* or not, he lives in an objective world governed by linear time. Percy thus underscores that Binx’s decision to simply occupy himself with *flânerie* rather than to build a life narrative vis a vis the vertical search does not actually halt the narrative flow of his life. Furthermore, Percy presents Binx with a reminder that his action and inaction has a material impact on those whom he cares about. This reminder makes it all the more devastating that Binx is simply unable “to remember” the moments that turned out to be of crucial importance (Percy 212). This drawn-out censure is a highly destabilizing event for the novel, as both Binx’s actions and the episodic form of the novel itself, are informed by *flânerie* and the horizontal search. Emily’s long diatribe unmistakably questions those concepts, as she continues to berate Binx, returning again and again to her disbelief at his actions and her further disbelief at his apparent inability to explain them.

Throughout this scene, Percy uses a metal letter opener to illustrate the vast gap in understanding between Emily and Binx. In the middle of Emily's rant, he writes, "We both gaze down at the letter opener, the soft iron sword she has withdrawn from the grasp of the helmeted figure on the inkstand" (Percy 221). The resemblance of this letter opener to the blade advertised by the knife salesman is important, as Binx said about the latter, "I have a sense of the storied and even legendary properties of the blade, attested in the peculiar Southern esteem of the excellence of machinery" (Percy 216). Percy imbues a bundle of associations into these two metal blades, as their sleekness, significance in battle, and emblem of technological advancement encompass an array of Southern values: chivalry, industriousness, honor, and even the implied network of communication by mail occurring among genteel families. Only several lines after Emily pulls the letter opener from the inkstand does Binx note, "She seems to notice for the first time that the tip of the blade is bent" (Percy 221). This would not be so significant, except that two pages later, still facing Emily's judgments, he adds, "I cannot tear my eyes from the sword. Years ago I bent the tip trying to open a drawer. My aunt looks too. Does she suspect?" (Percy 224). The bent tip of the sword seems to signify for Binx a troublesome blemish on an otherwise perfect piece of metal. In light of the way that the salesman's well-made knife radiates with "storied and even legendary properties," the blemish of the letter opener's bent tip is very much akin to the flaw that Binx found in the vertical search many years ago, when "although the universe had been disposed of, I myself was still left over" (Percy 70). Even at this moment, as Emily's diatribe makes clear for her nephew all the shortcomings of his horizontal search—his abstract failure to live up to his family's ideals, his material failure to reciprocate Emily's love—Binx cannot help but notice the bent tip of the sword. Her words rapidly dismantle Binx's confidence in *flânerie* and the horizontal search, but they do not yet convince him of the vertical

search and *Bildung* as the obviously right and feasible way to develop. What's more, he wonders about Emily, "Does she suspect?" (Percy 224). In wondering if Aunt Emily will realize that Binx bent the tip of the sword, he foreshadows their reconciliation revealed in the epilogue, which admittedly feels, in the scene with the letter opener, quite far away. This scene ends with Binx leaving the house, and he is next found despairing in a schoolyard in Elysian Fields.

The Synthesis of *Bildung* and *Flânerie*

Having just depicted the thorough invalidation of its narrator's most basic principles, *The Moviegoer's* penultimate chapter ends with a Binx who is thoroughly lost, no longer safely harbored by the metanarrative of a horizontal or vertical search. The latter he found untenable years before the novel's events, and the former he finds untenable in the final chapter.

Illustrating the gravity of this epistemological impasse, Binx writes in the final chapter:

Today is my thirtieth birthday and I sit on the ocean wave in the schoolyard and wait for Kate and think of nothing. Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than I ever knew before, having learned only to recognize merde when I see it, having inherited no more from my father than a good nose for merde, for every species of shit that flies—my only talent—smelling merde from every quarter, living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight percent of people believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the

bomb will not fall—on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (Percy 228)

Binx sits on the “ocean wave,” sunken in despair (Percy 228). Percy fittingly contrasts the image of this fully grown man with the childish setting of a playground, and of particular importance is the “ocean wave,” a piece of playground equipment whose name gestures at aqueous instability and whose circular merry-go-round style of movement suggests an unceasing aspect of Binx’s fruitless tribulations. Binx, surely at his lowest moment of the novel, is convinced that he knows less than ever and that he is living in, is indeed part of, “the very century of merde” (Percy 228). He gives up his search, admitting that “it is no match for my aunt, her rightness and her despair, her despairing of me and her despairing of herself” (Percy 228). The admission of Emily’s “rightness and...despair” implicitly gives credence to the *Bildungsideal* values of her character, but still clings to the fact of these same values’ obsolescence in the face of modernity.

Percy transposes Binx’s devastation at his failures onto the surrounding landscape, and the scene is indeed apocalyptic. He writes, “watery sunlight breaks through the smoke of the Chef and turns the sky yellow. Elysian Fields glistens like a vat of sulfur; the playground looks as if it alone survived the end of the world” (Percy 231). Yet, in this disastrous present, just as Binx has been stripped of any certainty of how one ought to live in the world and he bemoans the pervasive “merde” of his world, the compost has been laid for a radically different system to emerge.

In the very moment that he perceives an Elysian Fields coated in nuclear fallout, he is speaking with Joyce, a friend of his secretary’s, from a phone booth. In the next sentence he sees Kate, sitting in her car “like a bomber pilot, resting on her wheel and looking sideways at the

children and not seeing, and she could be I myself, sooty eyed and nowhere” (Percy 231). He adds, to himself:

Is it possible that—for a long time I have secretly hoped for the end of the world and believed with Kate and my aunt and Sam Yerger and many other people that only after the end could the few who survive creep out of their holes and discover themselves to be themselves and live as merrily as children among the viny ruins.

Is it possible that—it is not too late? (Percy 231)

In a sense, the total loss of knowledge and certainty that Binx expresses above with “I know nothing more” does equate to a world-ending catastrophe for him. In describing Kate “like a bomber pilot” in the midst of this scene touched with the vocabulary of nuclear catastrophe, Percy highlights Kate’s relevance as an inadvertent catalyst in the events that culminated in Binx’s epistemological ruin (Percy 231). Throughout the disastrous Chicago trip, the scene at Aunt Emily’s, and the present scene in Elysian Fields, Kate proves increasingly important in the novel.

Only moments after spotting Kate, Binx asks Joyce, the woman on the other end of the phone, “May I bring along my own fiancée, Kate Cutrer?” (Percy 231). Though he and Kate had earlier discussed marriage in a casual way, they had made no plans and it seemed that Binx merely had been entertaining Kate’s quirkiness. Thus, these words spoken to Joyce mark the true moment of his decision to marry Kate.

In this brief excerpt, then, Percy presents not just Binx’s nadir, but the point at which Binx begins to see past the destruction of his world view and toward a new realm of possibility. Kate’s mere appearance in Binx’s field of vision brings him to wonder with atypical sincerity if there is another way to live, if they could still “discover themselves to be themselves and live as

merrily as children” (Percy 231). In Andrew Lawson’s “English Romanticism...and 1930 Science in *The Moviegoer*,” Lawson speculates on this moment. He offers that perhaps “Kate’s arrival is a motion of love, a miraculous action, and that is really what is offensive these days. Binx seems to see it as a divine presence....Both Kate’s action and the church’s presence argue that the Spirit can be incarnated; on the intersubjective level Kate reveals that love can still make a heaven of this world, and on the historical level, for the believer, Christ’s entry into time ended forever the dualism that Plato had described. With a knowledge of Christ, all things, as Paul says, may be counted as dung” (Lawson 84). While Lawson sees Kate’s arrival, a motion of love, as enabling Binx to move beyond the dualism of Platonism and toward a love of Christ, there is a way in which this reading is forced.

One can imagine a world in which Kate’s arrival guides Binx, per Lawson’s analysis, plainly toward Christian salvation. Yet it seems more the case that Kate’s arrival, indeed a “motion of love, a miraculous action” guides Binx to a nebulous yet genuine realm of mystery and love, defined less by the presence of Christ than by Binx’s newfound ability to love those around him. In particular, the strange fact of Binx’s marrying Kate, his step-cousin, reinforces the notion that Binx’s newfound ability to love remains directed to those on earth. In a world where Kate’s arrival did more surely deliver Binx to Christianity, his newfound ability to love might not retain such a pointed focus on Kate, and there might not be a marriage between step-cousins. Furthermore, even in the epilogue Binx skirts around the topic of religion with Kierkegaardian misdirection: “I am a member of my mother’s family after all and so naturally shy away from the subject of religion (a peculiar word this in the first place, *religion*; it is something to be suspicious of” (Percy 237). In light of the tones layered into this evasive

passage, it is difficult to be anything other than agnostic on the issue of Binx's religion. Far more definite, though, is the love that Binx expresses through his actions detailed in the epilogue.

Hence, this thesis argues that Binx does, as Lawson claims, move beyond a certain dualism. More particularly, though, Binx reaches a dialectical synthesis of a dualism that is expressly the vertical and horizontal dichotomy that Percy gives form to in the *Bildungsideal* and *flânerie*. Early on, Percy inserts the presence of the dialectic when detailing Kate's habit of rebelling against her mother, Emily. He notes, "Her hatred is a consequence of a swing of her dialectic. She has, in the past few months, swung back to her father" (Percy 45). Thus, reading Binx's newfound model of life in the epilogue as a synthesis of the *Bildung* and *flânerie* explains much of the material developments that occurred. Binx's newfound love, which he expressed first in his instant impulse to marry Kate, ultimately serves as a hierarchizing force by which he can resolve the tension of the vertical and the horizontal. In the brief epilogue, taking place a year after the scene at Elysian Fields, Binx discloses some of the developments: he has married Kate, they have decided to move with Aunt Emily to North Carolina, and Binx has decided to begin medical school.

In several ways, Percy's epilogue reveals a protagonist who has fulfilled many informal requirements of the *Bildungsroman* genre. Percy's decision to guide Binx to the institution of marriage, and to the prestigious institution of medicine, indicates a roundabout arrival at the typical conclusion of a *Bildung* narrative. Both of these moves, on Binx's part, display a sort of maturity and sense of responsibility that previously did not interest him. Furthermore, all of these changes demonstrate Binx's symbolic and intentional return to his cultural and familial heritage, wherein he grounds himself in the temporal sequence of that heritage. He connects to this heritage through the choice of medicine—his father's profession—and his decision to move

closer to Emily, and all of her “sweet sad piping of the nineteenth century” (Percy 48). Further, in marrying Kate, he establishes a way in which he might, surprisingly enough, carry this heritage on into the future: through a family. Moreover, the tone of the epilogue is telling, as Binx recounts all these developments directly and with a lighthearted joy. In his maturity he seems to have left behind some of the old ways of his *flânerie*, no longer musing on attractive secretaries or strangers.

However, despite all of these changes and their *Bildungsroman* qualities, underlying aspects of the epilogue refuse to affirm the notion that *The Moviegoer* resolves plainly as a narrative of *Bildung* might. For one, the fact that Binx, Kate, and Emily all move from New Orleans to North Carolina works against the notion that Binx returns to his heritage, in a literal sense, in light of New Orleans’s particular importance in the novel. In addition, the marriage to his cousin, Kate, imbues a sense of strangeness into the conclusion. The choice of his cousin—someone both so close to Binx throughout his life, yet in theory so far when it comes to whom he would feasibly marry—complicates the standard *Bildungsroman* framing of a marriage. Lastly, this epilogue occurs about an entire year after the main events of the novel. In that way, the actual events that seem to fit the *Bildung* model occur offstage, as it were, hidden from the reader, and merely recounted retrospectively and sparsely.

As a whole, these peculiarities are too much to discount. Percy feints towards the *Bildungsroman* form, but he cannot bring himself to fully embrace it. There is a hint of placid acceptance of the *Bildung* process’s incompleteness in the epilogue when Binx recounts Emily’s acceptance that he is “not one of her heroes but a very ordinary fellow” (Percy 237). In the varied ways that he frustrates the model of the *Bildung* while still giving so much credence to it, Percy refuses, and indeed may believe it impossible, to deliver a binary judgment of validation or

denial of the *Bildungsroman*. In this way, Hogheem is right that Percy's work does belong in the stories of "partial return," but it might be the case that this theme of "partial return" functions along multiple levels (94). Just as Percy's characters often have stories of a partial yet incomplete recovery of religion, *The Moviegoer* is Percy's partial yet intentionally incomplete recovery of the *Bildungsroman* genre.

Notes

¹ Foundational works analyzing the aesthetics of *flânerie* include Charles Baudelaire's *Painter of Modern Life*, and Walter Benjamin's *Charles Baudelaire: Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*.

² At the genesis of the *flâneur* as a concept, the term applied largely to men. Women in the time of Baudelaire did not have access the sort of freedom needed for such idling, and they could hardly seek anonymous immersion into crowds. As the twentieth century arrived, women slowly gained access to this freedom and writers began to describe the emerging figure of the *flâneuse*, meaning a female type of *flâneur*. Virginia Woolf in her essay, "Street-Haunting," fleshes out one particular *flâneuse*.

³ In *Either/or* and *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard writes with similar skepticism about the linear and incremental nature of the *Bildung* process. His skepticism about this extends to the way in which the *Bildung* mode of development affirms the necessity and virtue of marriage, accumulation of capital, and prestige in one's community. Tellingly, Kierkegaard's "Knight of Faith" is a highly internal figure. This idealized religious believer is described as someone who might be indistinguishable from any man on the street, and whose feats are performed in such a way as to be hidden from the casual observer. Nonetheless, in articulating the three stages of life as the aesthetic, ethical, and religious, Kierkegaard sketches out his own idea of how one ought to grow and develop in life.

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