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A record of one researcher's wanderings through Walker Percy's private library in the Rare Book Collection in Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, this study provides an account of the character and extent of Percy's collection as well as a survey of selected examples of marginalia that his books contain. Opting for an impressionistic approach that relies on selective browsing in those portions of the library that Percy seems to have read with particular attentiveness, it does not aspire to offer an exhaustive catalog of the library's contents or perform a meticulous literary analysis that establishes sure connections between the books Percy read and those he wrote. Rather, the essay attempts to describe the broad contours of Percy's collection and capture the flavor and basic characteristics of his annotations in a relatively small sample. It also discusses some of the vexing perplexities involved in working with the library of a deceased writer and the ambiguous rewards of studying marginalia, a fragmentary, incomplete genre of writing that often withholds as much as it discloses.

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Listening to the Dead:  
Marginalia in Walker Percy's Private Library

by  
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## **1. Introduction: A Visit to the Percy Library**

Since the Rare Book Collection at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill acquired it in 1999, the Walker Percy library, the author's own private collection of some 2600 books, has occupied two unremarkable ranges of beige shelving off an ill-lit corridor in a storage area at the back of Wilson Library. Off limits to the public, accessible only through a massive metal security door, these shadowy hinterlands located behind the airy spaces of the high-ceilinged reading room are apt to strike the first-time visitor as a remote region where books and objects too antiquated or fragile for public display are consigned to a kind of twilight bibliographic afterlife. Passing through the security door, one first encounters drab rows of funerary urn-like cardboard boxes stacked on shelves. Further down a linoleum corridor, faintly lit by buzzing panels of fluorescent light, uncataloged materials sit in dim untidy piles on shelves along the wall. In a far cul-de-sac gray shafts of daylight spill onto the floor from an unseen window, unexpected natural illumination that does little to lift the melancholy air of disuse and neglect that pervades this region. Shadowy ranges of stacks march off into the distance, their shelves crowded with books and objects whose dusky obscurity seems to check the impulse to investigate further and ask questions about them almost as soon as it arises. There is a smell of old paper and dust.

Following Rare Book Collection Curator Charles McNamara into the dimness on my first visit to this restricted area, I have the vague sense that while the things stored

here might have once possessed some power to arouse curiosity, to delight and edify, they have since their arrival in this shadowy storage area gradually lost all distinctiveness and interest. They have, it seems to me, succumbed to the fate of all objects that have outlived their brief period of usefulness, become relics rather than tools for research—things people once used rather than things that are useful today. I begin to wonder whether the Percy library, a dead man's collection of books that may yet have some meaning for present day scholars, has lost whatever value it may once have had after steeping for several years in this atmosphere of sepulchral stillness and obsolescence. Does the library still have any living relevance, or has it too become a casualty of time and neglect? The signs do not look promising.

I have come to this storage area by special arrangement with McNamara following several weeks of intensive but troublingly inconclusive study of selected items from the Percy library in the main Rare Book Collection reading room. Seated at one of the long gleaming tables, I have examined three or four books from the Percy collection at a time, choosing titles from a Microsoft Access database of the library that the staff has provided me and filling out call slips to have them retrieved. I have seen The Fall and The Stranger by Camus in cheap paperback editions; I have seen Sartre's Nausea and Dostoevsky's Short Novels in more durable New Directions and Modern Library hardbacks. I have seen texts in linguistics, patristics, and philosophy, novels by William Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, and Saul Bellow. All of them bear ample evidence of Percy's cramped, backwardly sloping script in notations in the margins; all of them, so interviews with the author and biographies of Percy report, were books he considered of particular importance to him as a writer and thinker.

But while I have studied and transcribed numerous specimens of Percy marginalia, and attempted to use the database to draw what conclusions I can about the library as a whole, I have increasingly begun to feel that what knowledge that can be gained about the author from his library is piecemeal, inconclusive. I know the titles of at least some of the books Percy owned during his lifetime; I know from his marginalia which ones he read with particular attentiveness. And I know, from that rather small subsection of the marginalia that I can actually decipher, something of what flashed across Percy's mind as he read. But what, ultimately, has my research amounted to? My answer so far, I must confess, is not very much: a list of books he may or may not have read; a scattering of rather unremarkable markings in the margins; scattered distinct phrases floating in a vast sea of illegible annotations that rarely rise to the level of the kind of coherent, fully formed statement of the kind one might find in an essay or novel. It is, in short, the sort of conjectural, fragmentary evidence we can gather about the dead from the things they leave behind. It is my somewhat superstitious hope today that viewing Percy's library *in toto*—gathered together on the shelves, not a scattering of unrelated titles but an organic interrelated whole—will somehow reveal to me, in a flash, the library's deeper significance, and give me reasons to think that my research is not merely a fruitless rambling through the inscrutable effects of the dead.

Charles McNamara flicks on a light switch; the library is suddenly lit up before me in a gritty institutional light. My first vision of it is not particularly encouraging; it is distinctly disheartening, in fact. Looking down the two rows of shelves, I am left with melancholy sense of orphaned objects that have taken on that sad air of chill impersonality and inertness which settles, like some annihilating layer of dust, upon the

possessions of the deceased, snuffing out what significance they had when their owners were alive. Separated from the vivifying intelligence that made sense of them and gave them life, the contents of the library have now become, it seems, merely books, nothing more. My eye catches a few titles I have looked at during my sessions with a handful of books in the reading room: Faulkner's The Sound and the Fury, Kierkegaard's The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises. I have carefully taken notes on their marginalia, transcribed heavily underlined passages, spent time reading in them in order to better understand the marginal notations sprinkling their pages. I am saddened to find that seeing them here on the shelves in their places, arranged in alphabetical order with other members of the library, does not lead to any new insights about them or produce any new understanding of the larger collective whole of which they are a small part.

We begin to walk around the two ranges on which the Percy library is shelved. Slate-gray, soot-colored, and dirty ochre books file by us, their drab ranks occasionally broken by the bright splash of a vividly colored paperback spine. As we walk, Charles McNamara tells me a few particulars about the library and the circumstances of its acquisition. Lynn Roundtree, a Percy enthusiast and scholar, appraised the library; McNamara himself traveled to Covington, Louisiana, several years ago to negotiate the terms of transfer of the books to the Rare Book Collection with Percy's widow, Mary Bernice ("Bunt") Percy. The books we see here, he tells me, do not represent the entirety of the original Percy library: before they were boxed up to be shipped to North Carolina, the Percy family sorted through the collection to remove items of sentimental importance as well, McNamara implies, as any books of unusual value, including some rare editions

by Percy himself. Nor, he adds as an aside, was the library arranged in alphabetical order by main entry as it is now, but in some idiosyncratic scheme of Percy's own devising. So, I think rather forlornly, what we have of the Percy library was already in some sense incomplete, fragmentary before it even arrived in the Rare Book Collection; its original shape, arrangement, and extent are irrecoverable. We walk and browse, walk and browse. McNamara mentions that it was Percy's custom to place those books he needed most on a small book truck that he wheeled next to the bed on which he read and wrote his books. We discuss Percy's peculiar supine working habits for a moment, and remark on the seeming impossibility of getting any work done while lying in bed. It is leave-taking conversation, the kind of penultimate exchange of remarks one engages in before wrapping up a piece of finished business.

My visit to the Percy library quickly reaches its end. Charles McNamara has a class to teach, and I one to attend. I do not press for a longer stay. My visit has been a special favor, a kind privilege afforded only to library science students engaged in peculiar projects involving the Rare Book Collection, and I do not wish to importunately test its limits. Perhaps more importantly, my visit to the library has not produced any of the sudden clarity or striking revelations about the collection that I had hoped it would; it seems highly doubtful now whether an extra 30 minutes would deliver what my brief quarter hour here has failed to provide. I have seen the Percy collection as I had wished to, and been left with an even sharper sense of the ambiguous and doubtful rewards of studying his library, and a powerful impression of its deadness. I have a superstitious sense that remaining here longer in these ill-lit stacks might leech away what remaining confidence I have about the project I have—imprudently, it seems now—embarked upon.

As we are leaving, we pause one last time to examine a blue paperback uncorrected proof copy of Martin Amis's London Fields, a slashing, satiric novel that offers a portrait of a dystopic future London riddled with crime and vice. I have looked at it briefly in the reading room, and mention that there is a snapshot of one of Percy's relatives stuck in the pages; McNamara thumbs through the book to find it. It is not clear whether Percy read this novel, which was sent to him by its American publisher in the hopes of finding an advocate and perhaps an enthusiastic blurb-writer for an author not well known in this country at the time. What is striking about the book is the long scrawled black-inked note in Percy's hand that starts on the book's back endpapers, continues to the back cover, and leaps to the front cover before resuming inside on the half title page.

The ropy black strands of Percy's script are not entirely legible; only a few distinct phrases leap into clarity. "American Catholics have not yet discovered that they can write novels," he writes. "They still think that novels have to be edifying, that things have to come out right, but the present is not really...." The note slopes off into jagged illegibility. On another page, I can make out: "Not many good Catholic novels—not nearly as many as there are Jewish novels—why?" They are only a few scattered phrases, but I have a sudden sharp sense, as immediate and palpable as hearing his voice for an instant, of Percy's crotchety, skeptical mind effortfully working out these thoughts on paper. The pithy intimacy of this brief, barely legible handwritten notation restores to me, all at once, a sense that the library is not merely a chaotic assembly of books that have been deprived by their owner's death of any larger collective meaning, but a living record of Percy's thoughts and feelings that captures that most intangible and elusive of human experiences, reading. The library is, I see suddenly, a living representation of the

intellectual landscape he lived and moved in—a landscape in which it is still possible to catch him in the act of thinking and reading via the marginal notations he has left behind. I find myself eager to look at more books from the library, to resume my research with a renewed confidence.

But this moment of recovered faith in the library's value, it seems, has come at an inopportune time. My visit to the Percy library—the last I shall make, as it happens—is truly over. Charles McNamara turns out the light; darkness covers the library again. As I take a last look down the two dusky rows of shelves, it seems to me that the books have taken on their former mummy-like inertness. Do they house any living traces of their former owner, or are they dead? Are they a living monument to Percy's intellect, or a kind of bibliographic tomb in which only a few desiccated husks of his thought remain? I cannot tell, and there is no time to think on it further. We leave the books in the darkness in which we found them, and walk back up the passageway towards the security door that leads to the lighted public spaces of the library.

## 2. The Percy Library: Light and Lacunae

Spending time in the working library that a well-known author has left behind after his death brings many such moments during which one seesaws abruptly from elation to glum disenchantment, and back again. Sudden excitement at the discovery of a revelatory fragment of marginalia or an unexpected title is quickly followed by a weary exasperation at the commonplace dullness of many of the author's other markings, and a querulous irritation at the stubborn muteness of most of the books in the library, their refusal to yield up diverting tidbits of data that will either obligingly confirm one's own sense of the author's character or tantalizingly challenge it. Boredom alternates with delighted surprise, wonder with petty uninterest. A book that had seemed one day rich in data may suddenly reveal itself to be dishearteningly barren of substantive evidence the next. A sudden vivid impression of the author's mind and personality in some marginal notations can be replaced, in an instant, with a powerful sense of his absence.

This welter of contradictory emotions that a writer's library can provoke in those who study it arises in part from a disturbing tension that exists between the vast amount of factual data that an author's books can provide about his reading and the irrecoverability and elusiveness of that activity, which takes place not on paper but in the silent, invisible spaces of the mind—a mind that has ceased to be. Titles, authors, editions, sizes, bindings, font types, pages marked and pages left blank: an author's library abounds in such information, which can be easily recorded and analyzed through established

bibliographic practices. Marginalia too, when legible, can be easily transcribed, interpreted and evaluated. Yet the knowledge one hopes to gain through such meticulous compiling of evidence—what the author read exactly and when, what he felt and thought as he read, and how such reading ultimately bore fruit, through some mysterious process of literary cross-pollination, in his own works—is not completely graspable through the study of his books, even when they are rich in marginalia, which after all can represent only a mere fraction of the author’s total response to a work. One may occasionally obtain, through the study of his books, a fleeting glimpse of the author in the act of reading and thinking, and get a vague sense of how his mind darted and leapt as it interacted with a text. Yet ultimately little of this ineffable experience can be recorded for study. Attempting to capture what is distinctly palpable among a writer’s books but ultimately irrecoverable is a simultaneously tantalizing and deeply frustrating experience. This sense of frustration is all the more keen when the owner of the library in question is Walker Percy, an author whose involvement with books was, to a degree unusual even among writers, fierce, rigorous, passionate, and lifelong.

A record of my own experience examining the Walker Percy library in the winter of 2006, this essay attempts to provide an account of the shape, extent, and distinctive features of the Percy collection at the same time that it describes some of the perplexities and rewards of spending time with the books of a well-known writer. Opting for an impressionistic, indirect approach that relies more heavily on selective browsing than on a thorough examination of large swaths of the Percy collection, it does not aspire to offer an exhaustive catalog of the library or attempt to perform a meticulous literary analysis that establishes sure connections between what Percy read and what he wrote. Rather, it

offers an account of one researcher's flyovers of the library and his occasional alightings in those sections of it that Percy seems to have read with particular intensity and attention. While it is my intention to point out to future visitors to the library those portions of it that seem particularly rich in material for research, I also hope to describe its silences and lacunae, its gaps and blanks, and what it ultimately withholds, tomb-like, from those who spend time browsing in it. Percy's library, I will suggest, is alive and yet dead: it bristles with vivid evidence of a life spent in a fierce, impassioned engagement with books, but denies us the clear explanations and unmistakable clues to its meaning that only the living can provide. A closed bibliographic world that has taken on its final, permanent form, it is also in some way a living network of texts that form unexpected relationships and meet in odd, chafing juxtapositions which, like two unlike stones struck together to create a spark, briefly illuminate heretofore shadowy aspects of their owner's character.

### **3. Looking at Percy's Library: Methods and Means**

Too vast to be fully comprehended through less formal scholarly techniques like browsing and random sampling, too sketchily cataloged to be useful to the scholar hoping to quickly obtain exact bibliographic data about editions and publication dates, the Percy library in its present state is not especially easy to use—not least because the library as a whole is off limits to the public. Selected items can be retrieved by filling out call slips at the Rare Book Collection service desk, whose disarmingly obliging staff seems almost personally gratified when researchers inquire about the Percy collection; visiting the library in person, however, is not permitted. The cloistered inaccessibility of the library is perhaps a necessity, given the value and distinctiveness of its contents. Placing the books beyond the immediate reach of the public does have its costs, however. Perhaps most grievously, it denies users the gratifying if doubtfully illuminating experience of seeing it as a whole, all of its separate pieces in their places, back to back on the shelves.

My own dissatisfaction with viewing the library piece by piece in the Rare Book Collection reading room eventually prompted me to apply for a more intimate, behind-the-scenes view of the library. I am not entirely certain, however, whether my private quarter-hour audience with the collection, stirring though the experience was, truly furnished me with more insights than my viewings of fragments of it, two and three at a time, at the reading room tables. In a collection so large, a partial, incomplete view may be all one can hope to gain. This may not be quite the scholarly liability that it seems at

first. It is well to remember that snapshots, fragments—a sequence of short takes—can often reveal much about the entirety of a subject if they are studied carefully, whether the whole in question is a building, a journey, or a life. Often such brief glimpses show us more than a complete view would. This thought often consoled me during my research, which was conducted—very much out of necessity—on the less is more model.

In my viewing of selected pieces of the library, the Microsoft Access database of the Percy collection, which the Rare Book Collection generously provides to researchers on a CD-ROM, was an invaluable but flawed tool. In addition to providing title, author, publication, and date data for all of the books in the collection, the database also indicates which books in the library are heavily annotated and which are less extensively marked up. The database, however, appears to have been compiled in some haste by student workers who were not always perfectly mindful of the tricky differences between publication dates and printing dates, or attentive to other bibliographic details that can assist in the clear identification of a book. Due to the omission or imperfect transcription of title and publication data, I was not always able, for instance, to find perfect matches between items on the CD-ROM and records in the OCLC database, and therefore had some difficulty in establishing with exact certainty what editions of books Percy owned. Furthermore, while the database identifies which books in the library contain marginalia by Percy, it does not provide much information about the extent and nature of his annotations—an understandable omission, given the size of the library and time and budget constraints that likely made meticulous notation of the characteristics of Percy's books impossible. But the lack of precise information about the marginalia in particular books inevitably gave my search for items with distinctive marginalia a certain

haphazard, shot-in-the-dark character: books that the database indicated would have “heavy” markings often featured only emphatic underlining or indexing of significant passages on the back pastedowns, not the idiosyncratic notations I had hoped to find. On the other hand, striking examples of characterful marginalia sometimes flashed out unexpectedly from the pages of books that seemed initially barren of interesting markings.

Despite its crudities, the database does permit users to look at the library from a number of different angles and perspectives, a partial compensation for the Rare Book Collection’s sequestration of the library in an area closed to the public. The database is far more than just a list. Books can be sorted by descending or ascending publication date, or alphabetically by author or title, permitting researchers to quickly gain a sense of its distinguishing features: authors who figure prominently in it, and authors who are missing; the dates when most of the books were published; subject strengths and weaknesses. And the query function of Microsoft Access enables users to cull from the interminable main book table shorter lists of books that contain only items with heavy marginalia, or those with light. This particular feature was of great assistance to me in my research.

My own study of the library began with a reading of novels by Percy, biographies of and interviews with author, and scholarly articles, which provided me with an understanding of the sweep of Percy’s reading over his lifetime as well as with a list of books that were of particular importance to him. Examining those books that Percy is known to have read with particular attentiveness seemed the most profitable and rapid means of comprehending the whole of the library through a relatively small sample. I

used the Access database as a finding tool to locate those items on the list that were heavily marked up, and in a more general sense as a kind of telephoto lens to get more intimate views of a collection I was prevented at first from seeing up close. All in all I recalled about 35 books from the collection. The books were brought, three at a time, to my seat at one of the reading room tables. Equipped with notebook paper and a pencil, I opened them, inspected them carefully from cover to cover, and transcribed for later study specimens of Percy's marginalia and passages in the text that he heavily underlined or marked. On several occasions I recalled the same books twice in the hopes of deciphering marginalia that I had failed to unravel on my first viewing. Future researchers of Percy's library will be dismayed to learn that private notations are only occasionally clearly legible; a slight majority of Percy's marginalia remained indecipherable to me, lost in a blurred scribble of hastily formed letters and cryptic abbreviations. It is well to remember that this is a private library, after all, a realm where Percy made notes purely for his own benefit, not for others. Much of what he jotted down is lost to those who follow his tracks through his books.

## 4. A Survey of the Percy Library

An author's private library, in its final form, is in some sense a kind of biography. A corpus of mute books does not, of course, document births, marriages, deaths, affairs, successes, or any of those more banal, humdrum events of a writer's life that literary biographies busy themselves with chronicling, nor does it provide a narrative that stitches together these assorted fragments of biographical data into a cohesive arc. What a library does offer is an intellectual portrait that documents the shaping of a writer's mind, the texture of his sensibilities, his literary propensities and aversions. It tells us in what intellectual directions he traveled, and how far; it shows us, through its absences and omissions, those places that he avoided. It reveals, through those curious, unexpected items that seem to jostle uncomfortably up against our understanding of an author, hidden proclivities and sympathies in a writer's character that underlay, like a not completely perceptible subtonic in a musical composition, his dominant personal and intellectual style. It provides, through publication and printing dates, a record of what books he owned—and perhaps read—early in his life, and what books he acquired close to his death. A writer's library cannot capture—except fleetingly, through marginalia—that elusive, ineffable experience of an author's reading. Yet it does offer such ample, detailed data about an author's literary tastes and intellectual interests that it provides, in toto, a kind of biographical outline of considerable sharpness and authority.

Walker Percy's library is the record of a mind of an uncompromising and rather dour erudition with a strong inclination towards the abstract and the philosophical and what seems to be an almost ascetic resistance to the purely aesthetic appeal of literature. It reveals an intellect that was tightly focused and saturnine rather than wide-ranging and playful, painstakingly learned rather than virtuosic and dazzling, intensely interested in a few select subject areas rather than omnivorously hungry for a smattering of learning in many. The library's contents tell of a deeply conservative sensibility more inclined to the disciplined, plodding study of books rather than to the sensuous, indiscriminate consumption of them characteristic of many authors. And yet Percy's library contains numerous surprises that check one's initial impression of him as a monkish, curmudgeonly scholar fixated on a few select works of existential philosophy, theology, and semiotics. Peculiar unexpected books, odd outlying subject areas, and a distinctly unconventional taste in fiction reveal him to have been a complex man of many contradictions whose characteristic intellectual mode was tempered by unpredictable propensities that make him less easily summarized than he at first seems. What the library can't tell us exactly—which books he read, when exactly he read them, what he thought and felt as he read—adds an additional layer of cloudy uncertainty to the portrait it paints of him, and gives what judgments we can make about Percy based on his library a distinctly conjectural cast.

Though statistics and numbers cannot capture the largely ineffable and mysterious relationship Percy had with his books, they can give us a rough portrait of his reading that shows its broad contours if not its nuances. Percy's library, the Microsoft Access database tells us, is made up of 2653 books, though the presence of a few blank records

and a few perhaps mistakenly duplicated items suggests a total slightly less than that. The overwhelming majority of them have publication dates in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: only four date from the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the earliest being a rare 1853 edition of Die Erbförster, a play by German Romantic writer Ludwig Otto. Indeed Percy seems to have had little of the antiquarian or connoisseur of fine bindings and first editions about him; most his books are quite unremarkable trade editions issued by major publishers, a good many of them cheap mass-market paperbacks that he used for multiple readings.

A survey of the publication dates of the twentieth century books in Percy's library shows that a majority of them date from the 1950s (738), with smaller but not necessarily steadily declining numbers for books published in the decades that followed. There are 465 that date from the 1960s, 412 from the 1970s, and 535 from the 1980s, a decade in which there appears to have been a slight increase in Percy's new book buying if not in his reading. There are 13 books dating from the 1990s, 10 of them from 1990, the year of Percy's death, suggesting that Percy continued collecting and reading books until the very end of his life. (The few with publication dates after 1990, two of them mysteries, are perhaps interlopers, books of family members that somehow migrated into the collection.) Prior to the fifties, the decade in which he began publishing his work, Percy seems to have acquired books at a slower rate: there are only 287 published during the 1940s, 88 during the 1930s, 43 dating from the 1920s, and 17 from the 1910s.

Publication dates only give a very hazy and uncertain picture of Percy's book acquisition and reading habits over the span of his lifetime. They reveal only the decades in which the books were published, not precisely when Percy read them or even exactly when they were purchased; and since many of his books are contemporary editions of

older works, they do not present an accurate account of the full chronological sweep of the items in his library. What can be said based on the dates is that the library is composed largely of books that Percy acquired during the active phase of his career as a writer, following his marriage to Mary Bernice Percy in 1946 and his move to Louisiana, where he made his home first in New Orleans and then, from 1948 on, in Covington. Prior to this relatively settled period, Percy was in a peripatetic phase of early manhood during which it is difficult to collect books, moving back and forth from Mississippi to New York, where he attended medical school, with occasional periods at Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac, New York, and at Gaylord Farm Sanatorium in Wallingford, Connecticut, to receive treatment for the tuberculosis that he contracted in 1942 (Samway, Walker 122). It was at Saranac and Wallingford that Percy began in the intensive, transformative program of reading of Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, Marcel and other authors that led to his decision to abandon medicine in order to write and largely formed his personality as a writer (Tolson 183). To judge from the publication dates in the Microsoft Access database, it appears that only a few of these important, influential books from this early crucial phase of his reading survive in the library, though later editions of them do exist. This is largely—though not wholly—the library of a working writer, not that of an apprentice or tyro, its marginalia that of a skilled and practiced reader, not that of a beginner.

### **Theology and Philosophy**

In broad outline, Percy's library privileges philosophy and theology over fiction, books about semiotics and works on language and speech over works of poetry and drama.<sup>1</sup> Though there are numerous works of fiction in the collection, primacy of place is

given to the abstract and the theoretical. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the author with the largest number of works in the collection is Søren Kierkegaard, the Danish philosopher and theologian whose works Percy read with intense absorption throughout his life. There are 25 separate books by Kierkegaard in the library, a number of them Princeton University and Yale University Press editions published in the mid and late 1940s and early 1950s, including Repetition, Fear and Trembling, Stages on Life's Way, and The Concept of Dread. Of particular interest among the Kierkegaard books is a heavily annotated copy of The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treaties, which contains "The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle," an essay Percy described as "the most important single piece that Kierkegaard wrote" (Dewey 113). Thomist philosopher and literary theoretician Jacques Maritain occupies nearly as prominent a place in the library, with 20 separate works, including Art and Scholasticism in a heavily marked-up Charles Scribner's Sons edition published in 1947. There are ten works by Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk and writer with whom Percy carried on a friendly correspondence (Tolson 315-16); ten extensively annotated books by Gabriel Marcel, the Christian existentialist thinker and dramatist; ten by St. Augustine; and nine by G.K. Chesterton. Represented by six books, Heidegger figures prominently among the philosophers in Percy's collection; Ernest Cassirer, whose books on symbolism and language informed Percy's thinking about semiotics and signs (Castex 57), an abiding preoccupation throughout his life, has eight. There are eight books by Carl Jung, whom Percy rarely mentions in his non-fiction and letters; six by Susanne Langer, including Philosophy in a New Key, the subject of Percy's first published philosophical essay

(Tolson 242); and nine by Jacques Ellul, the Christian thinker who wrote about technology's destructive usurpation of the place of Christian faith in the modern era.

### **Science**

Nearly equal in size as the block of books on theology and philosophy is the library's collection of works in science, semiotics, and language, subjects in which Percy maintained an enduring interest throughout his lifetime. Percy's deep attraction to science began long before he completed his undergraduate degree in chemistry at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and began medical training as a pathologist. As a teenager he was a zealous disciple of H.G. Wells and Julian Huxley's work The Science of Life (Tolson 97-98), and seems to have read nearly as many books about "science or scientific heroes" during his book-hungry adolescence as literary classics and novels (Tolson 105). Though his reading of Kierkegaard led to an awareness of "some of [science's] shortcomings" (Brown 11), Percy noted in a 1960s interview that "my devotion to science is still with me" (Brown 11), and advanced the rather striking view that the craft of fiction and the practice of science are not antithetical activities, since the common objective of both is knowing and "discovering reality" (Cremeens 27). Percy's medical training and scientific frame of mind perhaps accounts for his novels' peculiar mixture of chilly, almost clinical detachment and sensuous lyricism.

If Percy remained devoted to science after his conversion to Catholicism and the beginning of his career as a novelist, however, his numerous books on the subject suggest that his enthusiasm was tempered by an awareness of the corrosive effects of science on faith and a desire to reconcile the claims of science and religion. Slightly outnumbering works on scientific method and the history of science are books that address the ethical

implications of science and the fraught, uneasy relationship between science and religion. Works in this class are a heavily marked-up copy of Jacques Maritain's Science and Wisdom, which approaches science from a Thomist standpoint; several books by Julius Friend (What Science Really Means and Science and the Experience of Man), the Christian scientist who offered his house and the use of his library to Percy and his wife during their first residence in New Orleans (Tolson 201); and Max Otto's Science and the Moral Life. Black Mischief by David Berlinski, a scientist who has in recent years become identified with the intelligent design movement, is the most recent work (1986) on science in Percy's collection and is in some ways representative of the library's scientific holdings as a whole: deeply committed to the scientific method, Berlinski strives in this work towards a vitalist understanding of the universe that is heterodox in the scientific community but consoling to Christians like Percy eager to square faith in God with a devotion to science.

### **Language and Semiotics**

Percy's preoccupation with language and semiotics was perhaps even more central to his identity as a writer than his ambivalent interest in science; indeed, Percy once averred in an interview that all his writing emerged from the "extraordinary realization that the human has a different way of understanding signs than any other creature" (Presson 221). To Percy language was "the Delta factor," a miraculous capacity for "symbol-mongering" and communicating through signs that distinguished humankind from other animals and suggested, in its improbable anomalousness in creation, the "touch of God" in the life of man (Percy, "Delta" 45). Far more than the result of a genetic quirk that permits humans the capacity to speak, language, in Percy's view, is responsible for "all

the manifold woes, predicaments, and estrangements of man—and the delights and savorings and homecomings” (Percy, “Delta” 41). To some degree all of Percy’s works, his novels and essays included, address the dilemmas of symbol-making beings grappling with the difficulties of establishing connections through language with others and with God. As John F. Desmond has observed, “Both his novels and philosophical essays explore the nature of semiotic community, the web of sign relations that constitute the real, though invisible, relationships between beings” (6).

Percy’s deep concern with language and semiotics is reflected in the numerous works on linguistics, numbering over 100, in his library. The collection is remarkable for its diversity of perspectives on language and the broad range of years it covers: beginning with books published in the 1940s, when Percy’s interest in language was first kindled, it stretches to the 1980s, when Percy was planning an ambitious work on the theoretician of language Charles Sanders Peirce (Samway, “Introduction” xvii). It includes technical works such as Otto Jespersen’s Growth and Structure of the English Language and John Lyons’ Language and Linguistics: An Introduction, as well as densely theoretical volumes by Ernst Cassirer, including Philosophy of Symbolic Forms and Language and Myth, both heavily annotated by Percy. Piaget’s Language and Thought of the Child, M.M. Lewis’s Infant Speech, and Martha Coonfield’s Them Children: A Study in Language Learning are among the books in the library that concern the linguistic capacity of children, an interest of Percy’s that was perhaps sparked by the discovery of his younger daughter’s hearing impairment shortly after her birth in 1954 (Tolson 254).

Roland Barthes (Empire of Signs and Writing Degree Zero and Elements of Semiology, neither heavily annotated) and Ferdinand de Saussure (Course in General

Linguistics), more commonly encountered on the reading lists of university courses in literary theory, make somewhat unexpected appearances in Percy's library, as do several works by Noam Chomsky, whose views on the origins of language were strikingly at odds with Percy's. The latter's presence in Percy's collection is evidence of Percy's patient willingness to contend with the ideas of his ideological opponents, if only to arm himself with rhetorical fodder for use in his own essays advocating contrary positions. There are works on psycholinguistics by Hans Horman; several exhaustively annotated books by Ludwig Wittgenstein, including the Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus; and two books on semiotics by Umberto Eco, Role of the Reader: Explorations in the Semiotics of Texts, quite heavily marked, and Theory of Semiotics. It is an astonishingly variegated and deep collection, indicative of Percy's restless, probing curiosity about language and of the relentless application with which he educated himself about a topic of great importance to him.

### **Literature**

While they are not without their surprises, the large blocks of texts on theology, philosophy, language, and science in his library mostly confirm what we already know about Percy from his essays and novels, and reveal little that is new except perhaps the painstaking, laborious conscientiousness of Percy as a reader and book collector. They suggest a man of a rather conservative temperament deeply drawn to a few select subjects that he apparently read with an exacting thoroughness. Percy's smaller collection of literary works, however, is far more revelatory and unusual, both in what it includes and what it excludes. It is oddly selective, uneven, lacking in many of the standard novels in the English literary canon. Taken all together, Percy's literature collection is a reflection

of a highly original, idiosyncratic literary intelligence, one impatient with conventional literary genres and forms and characterized by a deep attraction to the experimental and avant-garde.

Percy's distinctive literary biases and enthusiasms are quite well documented in his essays, in interviews, and in biographies. Perhaps the most striking of his statements about fiction is his claim not to read much of it at all—a claim the large number of novels in his library would seem to belie. “I don't read much fiction, to tell you the truth,” he said in a 1960s interview. “I average about a novel a month” (Brown 15). Of the fiction he did read, he preferred novels by Russian and French writers on account of their metaphysical orientation and their interest in a “radically new novelistic form” that freely combines philosophical and fictional genres (Cremeens 31).

When asked in interviews what novels had strongly influenced his own work, Percy responded with remarkable consistency throughout his career as a writer. Among European and Russian novels, he considered Camus's The Stranger and Sartre's Nausea particularly important (Abadi-Nagy 73); of the Americans, he names only Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, though he did occasionally profess a strong admiration for William Faulkner (Claffey 70). Percy was never particularly attracted to the English novel due to its preoccupation with the secular realm of social relations and politics and its relative lack of interest in the spiritual travails of the kind of alienated, God-haunted characters that heavily populate Russian and French fiction (Percy, “Notes” 103). Perhaps more interestingly, Percy disavowed any spiritual or thematic kinship with the school of southern writers in which he was always habitually lumped by reviewers and critics

(Keith 9). With the exception of Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty, their ranks in Percy's library are small.

The fiction collection of Percy's library exemplifies the crotchety iconoclasm of his literary sympathies with striking vividness. Experimental twentieth century works of fiction predominate, many of them by European authors; standard nineteenth and twentieth century English novels are few. There are no less than three separate English language translations of Jean-Paul Sartre's Nausea, one of them a 1949 New Directions hardback edition that features some of the most distinctive marginalia in the library; Charles Dickens and George Eliot, meanwhile, are represented by two works and one work respectively. There are eleven works by Albert Camus, among them extensively annotated copies of The Fall and The Stranger; Anthony Trollope has one. The French Catholic novelist François Mauriac, always a formally adventurous (some would say slovenly) writer, appears 11 times in the collection in translated editions of such works as Viper's Tangle and Woman of the Pharisees, the latter lightly annotated. Also included among the library's ranks of foreign novelists in translation are Heinrich Böll, with six works; Peter Handke, German translator of Percy's works and a novelist of daring stylistic inventiveness, also with six books; and Alain Robbe-Grillet, whom Percy described as "the most impressive novel in the Nouveau Roman" (Schricke 247), with four works.

Except perhaps for a group of 14 Faulkner novels, only one of them heavily annotated, and a cluster of nine books by Henry James, Percy's collection of fiction by American authors is no less strikingly unconventional than his selection of novels in translation, favoring the experimental over the traditional, the formally daring over the technically

staid. Donald Barthelme, the avatar of experimental fiction who published Percy's essay "The Loss of the Creature" when he was the editor of Forum (Tolson 265), is represented by nine books, the genre-bending William Gass, whose novels and short stories are curious matings of the essay form with fiction, by five, including a marked up copy of his short-story collection, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country. There are several works by John Hawkes, Richard Bausch, and John Barth, none of them practitioners of traditional fictional forms. Percy's fondness for the novels of John Updike and John Cheever, both of whom are well represented in the library, is perhaps slightly more conventional; his oft-professed "sympathy with the renaissance of Jewish writers" such as Saul Bellow, Bernard Malamud, and Joseph Heller, however, is not (Brown 15), given his pronounced Catholic commitments. Each of the latter group has several titles in the library. Percy seems to have been particularly taken with Mr. Sammler's Planet, to judge by the annotations in his 1970 Fawcett paperback copy.

Twentieth century English novels are few and far between in Percy's library. Fellow Catholic convert novelists Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene are well represented, with ten and eight works respectively, but the slight marginalia in Percy's copies of their novels suggest that Percy's interest in them was perfunctory, the guarded admiration of one Catholic novelist for another rather than a genuine enthusiasm based on a sense of artistic kinship and shared aesthetic aims. Novels by nineteenth century writers are also fairly sparse, with the important exception of Fyodor Dostoyevsky, who has 12 entries in the library, several of them duplicate copies of Notes from Underground, one of them intensively marked up. Also curiously underrepresented in Percy's library are women writers. Percy's library is in general a profoundly male literary realm in which female

voices are rarely heard; those few women admitted to its ranks, like Flannery O'Connor, tend to be writers who practiced a kind of sexual self-effacement in their work, disavowing a consciously female perspective. Works of drama, and somewhat surprisingly, poetry, are also largely missing from Percy's collection. Percy's novels employ a supple, incisive language that is "poetic" in the startling aliveness of its imagery and determined avoidance of trite, hackneyed phraseology, but the chief literary inspiration for Percy seems to have been works of prose, not poetry.

### **Miscellaneous Oddities**

Percy's collection of literature is the sometimes surprising reflection of a stubbornly idiosyncratic literary sensibility, but it does not, in the main, conflict radically with what we know of his character and tastes. There are, however, books in the library that seem strikingly at odds with the popular image of Percy as a stern, puritanical moralist deeply preoccupied with grim questions concerning the existential aloneness of humanity and the dislocating effects of contemporary secular culture on the spiritual life of man. It is somewhat startling to discover that Percy was evidently susceptible to the sensual, worldly fizz of Colette, who is represented by five novels in his library, including The Pure and the Impure, her most sexually frank and provocative creation. Likewise, Edmund White's gay coming-of-age novel A Boy's Own Story seems an anomalous interloper in the library of an author who had always cast a cold, suspicious eye on sexual excess and unconventionality. Christopher Isherwood's Goodbye to Berlin is a similarly unexpected entry here, as are the three novels by Andre Gide. Other books in the library startle for quite different reasons. Norman Brown's Love's Body, for instance, seems now an antiquated counterculture relic, a compendium of banal sixties clichés about

erotic love and the life of the emotions that would seem to have little appeal for the caustically conservative Percy, who was scornful of New Age bromides and therapeutic substitutes for orthodox religion. It may be that Percy read it to harvest New Age banalities to put in the mouths of the counterculture hippies and cultural drop-outs he harshly satirizes in Love in the Ruins, in many ways his weakest and least convincing novel.

The Opus Dei Personal Prelature is a more worrying entry in Percy's library, suggesting the extent to which his allegiance to the far right-wing of the Catholic Church rigidified during the last years of his life. As for the ribald, spectacularly offensive joke collection Truly Tasteless Jokes Two, which makes a surprising appearance in Percy's library, it is likely the kind of garden-variety novelty or vulgar gag item that somehow finds its way, by stealth or by gift, into any sizeable collection of books, no matter how lofty or erudite its general character, and its presence here should probably not be made too much of. On the other hand, the seven works by Tennessee Williams in Percy's library, among them The Rose Tattoo and Suddenly, Last Summer, seem in their lurid romanticism and Gothic extremities of emotion so radically out of character with the other books in Percy's collection as to be truly startling finds here. All of these odd, unexpected items—and others like them—illuminate, in rapid, fitful bursts of light, heretofore shadowy areas of Percy's intellectual physiognomy, revealing a streak of sensuality here, a hint of coarseness there, a disagreeable reactionary crotchiness a little to the left. Some of them cause one to wonder, if only briefly, whether the Percy one thought one knew is the real Percy after all.

Ultimately, however, the conclusions one can draw about Percy from his library are flimsily conjectural. One simply does not know. There is very little that one can say with certainty. The most basic contextual information that might help one make sense of the books in his library is missing. It is impossible, for instance to determine in most cases precisely how and where the books were acquired, and under what circumstances. What books did Percy personally select, which ones are gifts, and which are donations of publishers perhaps eager for a blurb or a favorable reading? In a limited number of cases, dedications and inscriptions on endpapers are of some help in answering such questions, but the exact provenance of the majority of his books remains a mystery. Without such precise knowledge, it is presumptuous to draw any sure conclusions about Percy based on the mere presence of a book in his library. An odd, unexpected title in the collection might be an item that Percy bought himself and read, or it might be a gift that Percy received and shelved without interest, its text block unbreached.

An additional area of uncertainty is the precise date when Percy actually read the books in his library. Though publication dates of books can offer a rough estimate, they cannot establish the date with the exactitude that would enable one to forge useful connections between the books Percy was reading at a particular time and the books he was writing then. Percy's habit of repeatedly annotating the same copies of books over several decades, adding marginal notation on top of notation, makes it all the more difficult to sort out his multiple readings into a clear chronology. Perhaps a more serious conundrum is determining, in the absence of marginalia, whether Percy actually read all of the books in his library at all. Creased spines and dogged-eared pages in books provide some evidence of use, but do not constitute conclusive proof that Percy himself read

them. Without such knowledge, it is difficult to draw reliable connections between items in his library and his own works.

In the end, what one is largely left with after a study of an author's library is only information about titles and authors and editions and bindings: a collection of data about inert objects that in many cases suggest nothing beyond themselves, and lead to no certain conclusions about the author who owned them. What one had most hoped to gain from a study of an author's books—that intimate understanding of an author's experience of reading, what he felt and thought as his eyes moved across the pages—is largely missing. Books are simply incapable of containing a human phenomenon so evanescent and intangible; it escapes from their pages like some ineffable vapor, irreclaimable, irrecoverable. Almost nothing of it remains—except, of course, in those fugitive remnants of the experience of reading that are captured in marginalia. Percy's library abounds in such annotations, and it is to these scattered markings, and to the extremely sketchy nature of the information they can provide, that my study next turns.

## 5. Percy's Marginalia

Marginalia, as the foremost scholar of this peculiar literary genre, H.J. Jackson, has observed, “bring us as close as we can get to a reader’s immediate mental processes” (“Editing” 78). Like a sieve, they capture in print at least some of that impalpable stream of thought and feeling that rushes through readers’ mind as they read, giving concrete form to one of the most private and elusive of human experiences. They record, with an electric spontaneity and directness, readers’ initial, uncensored responses to texts, before careful reflection and the passage of time have hardened vivid first impressions into fixed judgments and immovable opinions. And in a general sense they provide a kind of general map of readers’ snaky, uneven progress as they trek through the pages of books, showing where they lingered, where they set up camp for a prolonged study, and where they made rapid, heedless progress, leaving whole paragraphs and chapters untouched, like travelers on a whirlwind bus tour of Europe who reserve their attention for the Eiffel Tower, the Leaning Tower of Pisa, and the Coliseum, and sleep through Grenoble, Turin, and Livorno.

As the witlessness and banality of the notations found in any number of books in public and university libraries can attest, marginalia in its crudest and most rudimentary form is little more than a species of bibliographic graffiti that librarians perhaps justifiably lump in with book vandalism and defacement—one variety of user “feedback” that is strongly discouraged, not welcomed. Rote hash marks and underlinings,

scatterings of asterisks and exclamation points reveal almost nothing about the thought processes of readers; inarticulate grunts of “yes” and “no” and “dumb” in the margins of books hardly comprise material for a substantive study of reader responses to texts. More expressive, articulate varieties of marginalia, however, can shed light on the shadowy, mysterious ways that readers interact with books. And in the case of well-known writers, marginalia can potentially offer a great deal more. Such annotations can provide invaluable record of an author’s intellectual wanderings, document responses to the books of friends and acquaintances, and present a vivid portrait of the mind of a writer in the heat of action—thinking, disagreeing, savoring, scorning. And for those authors who had a flair for the elegant rhetorical riposte and quickly dashed-off bon mot, like Coleridge, marginalia is almost a legitimate form of literature in its own right, worthy to be classed among his larger oeuvre.

A writer’s marginalia, however, should be approached with some caution, for they are often not quite the goldmine of valuable information about an author that they promise to be, and are frequently lacking in the kind of gem-like epigrams and searing insights one expects to find. As H.J. Jackson reminds us, marginalia by their very nature “have an equivocal status, if they have any status at all. They arise out of a prior, printed text; they could not exist without it; they do not make sense without it; they are naturally subordinate to it—some would say, parasitic upon it” (“Editing” 72). In other words, a writer’s marginalia are not free-standing comments that can be cleanly detached from the pages on which they appear and studied independently, but rather fragmentary excerpts from a dialogue with a text that must be read thoroughly to understand their import. Quickly dashed off in the heat of reading, moreover, they rarely display the kind of

stylistic finesse and acuity of expression that one almost unwittingly expects from a celebrated writer. Furthermore, even the most brilliant writers often rely on the same basic repertoire of markings of underlinings, fists, asterisks, exclamation marks, and brief phrases that other readers employ when reading, and rarely rise to the level of a more expansive response. Depending on the penmanship of the writer, the marginalia may be nearly illegible, a blurred scrawl of misshapen letters in which only an occasional phrase or word can be clearly described. And of course one of marginalia's chief limitations is that they can capture only a murky snapshot of a writer's total emotional and intellectual response to a book, which isn't easily compassed in a brief dashed-off phrase or emphatically underlined passage.

A partial survey of Walker Percy's voluminous annotations, which can be found in a full 680 of his 2653 books, offers a lesson in the ambiguous rewards that the study of an author's marginalia can provide. On the one hand, they reveal him to have been a ferociously attentive, aggressive reader who approached texts, including works of fiction, with an almost scientific, clinical rigor, seeking not aesthetic pleasure so much as some more concrete, precise objective: acquiring knowledge about an unfamiliar field, developing fluency in the vocabulary of a discipline in which he was interested, informing himself about the views of his ideological adversaries. They show that he read and annotated important books multiple times, often correcting and editing earlier marginalia. Perhaps unsurprisingly, they illustrate the same preference for works of theology, philosophy, semiotics, and science that his library as a whole suggests. Yet Percy's markings demonstrate that he was also a careful, astute reader of fiction who was as attentive to stylistic felicities and technical characteristics as he was to the thematic

and philosophical underpinnings of novels and short stories. And there are numerous phrases in which Percy's distinctive tone of crotchety, sardonic amusement sounds with uncanny vividness.

Distressingly, however, a great deal of Percy's marginalia is barely legible, particularly those fragments of it that appear to date from later periods of his life, when he seems to have become a much more rapid, slapdash note-taker, much less fastidious with his penmanship. Moreover, much of it—particularly those instances of it found in works of semiotics and science—consists of relatively uninteresting underlining, starring of passages, and listing of important pages on the back endpapers of books<sup>2</sup>; it is mainly in the fiction that Percy expresses his reactions in full phrases and complete sentences that offer a more explicit indication of what he was thinking as he read. Finally, since Percy seems to have recorded many of his thoughts about his books in the spiral bound notebooks he kept throughout his life (Tolson 196), the marginalia within his library can be said to represent only a small fraction of his total response to reading—the scattered leftover crusts rather than the core of the loaf.

Though Percy, to judge by a survey of the heavily marked up works in the Microsoft Access database, annotated works on theology, semiotics, philosophy, and science far more frequently than the novels and short stories in his collection, my admittedly circumscribed study of some 35 heavily annotated books reveals that his annotations of the former class of works tend to be dismayingly staid and respectful, lacking in the jousting élan and cantankerous energy that characterize his marginalia in works of fiction. When reading philosophy and theology, Percy seems to have read like an attentive, dutiful student, assembling lists of pages with important content, starring and

underlining passages, sometimes writing out verbatim entire sentences, summarizing points, but rarely engaging with the text confrontationally or rising to the level of a fully articulated sentiment. Even when annotating works advocating positions contrary to his own, Percy is a docile, carefully attentive reader, refraining from vitriolic commentary and combative ripostes. His annotations in works of non-fiction convey a fierce, absorbed concentration and a disciplined thoroughness, but not a striking independence or daringness of mind.

The copy of Søren Kierkegaard's The Present Age and Two Minor Ethico-Religious Treatises in many ways offers a representative sample of the somewhat unenlightening marginalia found in many other non-fiction works in the library. As he does in his other annotated books, Percy uses the back endpapers and pastedown to create an index of significant passages; the front preliminaries and pastedown are reserved for more general reflections or a continuation of the index if he has run out of room in the back.<sup>3</sup> A portion of a typical list in this book identifies important passages by topic with a brief keyword: "37—the public; 49—talkativeness; 58—anonymity; 61—curiosity." Like many of the other books in the library, this copy exhibits marginalia in pencil and in blue ink, suggesting multiple readings. In the text itself, Percy limits his markings to stars in the margin and occasional numbers beside the text that correspond to numbered notes in the bottom or top margin; rarely does he aggressively circle passages or connect notations in the margins with passages in the text using markings that slash across several lines of text, as is typical in the fiction. Occasionally he will emphatically bracket or underline passages. In Kierkegaard's essay "The Present Age," an excerpt from a much more discursive review of a novel by Thomasine Christine Gyllembourg-Ehrensvar, Percy

boldly underlines the following passage, which asserts that religious truth resides in the individual, not in the masses—a view in keeping with Percy’s querulous independence of mind and suspicion of popular, watered-down religious sentiment:

But it is precisely by means of this abstraction and this abstract discipline that the individual will be formed (in so far as the individual is not already formed by his inner life), if he does not succumb in the process, taught to be content, in the highest religious sense with himself and his relation to God, to be at one with himself instead of being in agreement with a public that destroys everything that is relative, concrete, and particular in life... (39-40)

In the essay, “The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle,” this sentence emphasizing the divine authority of the apostle is heavily underscored:

An apostle has no other proof than his own statement, and at the most his willingness to suffer anything for the sake of that statement. His words in this respect will be short: ‘I am called by God; do with me what you will, scourge me, persecute me, but my last words are my first: I am called by God, and I make you eternally responsible for what you do against me.’ (159)

On the back pastedown, Percy copies a sentence from “The Difference Between a Genius and an Apostle” verbatim in his own hand: “The individual man can’t be conceived as differing from all other men by a specific quality (otherwise all thought would cease as in fact it quite consistently does in the sphere of paradox-religion and of faith)” (150).

Substantive markings that document Percy’s thinking about the work in more expansive detail are largely absent, however. The marginalia records only the most meager fraction of Percy’s dialogue with the text; the greater part of the exchange is inaudible, like a telephone conversation marred by staticky interference.

The laconic sparseness of his markings in The Present Age is disappointingly typical of Percy’s marginalia in many other books, particularly in works on theology and philosophy. Those annotations in the first volume of Gabriel Marcel’s The Mystery of

Being, for instance, amount to a light snowfall of pencil markings rather than the dense blizzards of marginal comment one would expect in a book by an author who had such a significant influence on Percy's thinking. Lacking the indexing on the endpapers, the book contains only scattered underlining and a few brief notations on the front pastedown. Its primary interest is the reference to "WAP"—evidently William Alexander Percy, Percy's cousin, who took custody of him and his brothers following his parents' violent deaths—next to a passage in which Marcel describes the "summary, inexpert judgment" we often give of people we know intimately when asked to offer an opinion of their character (54). References to "WAP" are somewhat common in Percy's library, evidence of the central place his kinsman—a lawyer and man of letters whose sentimental aestheticism contrasted strikingly with Percy's own skeptical, distrustful relationship with literature and art—continued to occupy in his imagination throughout his life.

Marcel's Homo Viator exhibits slightly more extensive markings, with dense indexing on the back pastedown and firm handwriting in both lead and fuchsia pencil on the preliminaries. "Ego and its Relation to Others" is the most heavily marked up essay in the volume, though the essays on Rilke at the back of the book interestingly feature marginalia nearly as extensive; "The Mystery of the Family," "Obedience and Fidelity," and "Value and Immortality," meanwhile, show no annotations at all. As for Kierkegaard's The Sickness Unto Death, it contains scarcely any marginalia in the first few chapters, or in the sections specifically addressing sin ("Socratic Definition of Sin," "Sin is not a Negation"); the chapter "Despair is This Sickness," on the other hand, is quite intensively marked up, perhaps illustrating Percy's greater concern with the

existential sadness that arises from man's alienation from God and his incapacity to achieve a fully integrated selfhood in a secular, spiritually dislocated world. Indeed Percy's novels, though Catholic in outlook, do not exhibit that intense, fascinated consciousness of human sin, particularly carnal sin, that the novels of fellow Catholic writers Graham Greene and Evelyn Waugh do. Even in Percy's most candidly sexual work, Lancelot, the primary sin is that of pride, hubris, not cupidity and lasciviousness.

An association copy of Pascal's Pensées presented to Percy and his wife at Christmas by Shelby Foote and his then wife Peggy is chiefly interesting for the dedication on the preliminaries ("Bunt and Walker, Christmas 1948—Peggy and Shelby") and a child's fighter plane sticker on the front cover, an irreverent detail indicative of Percy's relative indifference to physical condition of the books he used. The text exhibits underlining and marking and the occasional cryptic and only partially decipherable note, like the following example found on the back endpapers: "All is fornication except 'it'—modern wayfarer—made so by science." There are no fiery flashes of sentiment, no illuminating exegeses of knotty passages. Heavily underlined passages like the following provide the only explicit clues to Percy's thinking about the book:

Not in this way does Scripture, which knows the best things that are of God, speaks of him. On the contrary, it says that God is a hidden God, and that since the corruption of nature, He has left them in a blindness from which they can be freed only by Jesus Christ, except for whom all communication with God is cut off. (88)

In the margin next to the famous sentence in which Pascal expresses his fear of being "engulfed in the immensity of spaces which I know not" (36), Percy interestingly references Kierkegaard, whose name appears with striking regularity in his annotations in works of non-fiction and fiction alike. To judge by the frequency of these citations,

Kierkegaard was a constant intellectual companion in Percy's sojourns through books, a guide who provided a philosophical framework that could be usefully applied to works of fiction and non-fiction alike. Yet occasional appearances of Kierkegaard's name, unsupplemented by a more complete explanation of the thematic link Percy saw between marked passages and the work of the Danish theologian, do not ultimately shed much light on what Percy thought as he read. Though such intertextual references are tantalizing, they yield far less than they promise on first glance.

Not all of the library's annotated works on theology contain marginalia of such dismaying opacity and meagerness, however. Several notations in his copy of St. Augustine's Confessions are strikingly personal and intimate, leaping out from the page with startling vividness. On the back endpapers there is the standard indexing of passages, and the same scattering of markings within the text. On the front pastedown of this perhaps most famous of all narratives of religious conversion, however, Percy makes this boldly candid admission regarding his outsider status as a Catholic convert and the oppressively intellectual character of his religious faith: "A convert's protest: I may have its zeal, but what I miss, what I have been robbed of, is the natural climate of the faith—a convert is always, never escapes polemics." Slightly above this note is another jarringly personal annotation in which Percy relates "an astonishing fact—a few years ago I could not understand this book." Percy evidently means that prior to his conversion to Catholicism he was incapable of comprehending the experience of finding a spiritual home in an alien faith, the drama of rootless spiritual questing ending in fulfillment.

Similarly intimate in tone is a less legible annotation concerning faith and language below these that references the Cure D'Ars, St. Jean-Baptiste-Marie Vianney, the

nineteenth century French priest noted for his humility and tireless efforts as a spiritual counselor and guide. “If I had the courage, the words, the genius, I could say the right thing like the Cure d’Ars, Come, Ben ... accept the Lord Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior—the truth is the tyranny of words.” In addition to these striking specimens of marginalia, the book also exhibits heavy markings in Chapter 10, Book Seven, which chronicles Augustine’s spiritual travails when he was 30. This was an age of crucial, pivotal importance for Percy, who made the momentous decision to abandon medicine for a career in writing at 30, and for Binx Bolling, the protagonist of The Moviegoer, who leaves behind a life of idle, compulsive womanizing for the deeper commitments of marriage and family just as he reaches that critical milestone in life. St. Augustine’s Confessions was evidently a work of great personal significance to Percy that drew from him marginalia of an unusually intimate nature. In his annotations we seem to hear Percy’s voice with startling immediacy.

Though they are not much more lively and idiosyncratic than his annotations of works by Kierkegaard, Marcel, and Pascal, Percy’s markings in books of philosophy and literary criticism do suggest a deeper, more energetic engagement with texts, as well as an abandonment of the dutiful reserve that seems to constrain his reactions to books of a more devotional character. Philosophy, the annotations in these books suggest, was an intellectual terrain in which Percy felt he could move about freely, without the restraint and reverential regard that seem to muffle his reactions to books more directly concerned with faith and God. True, despite copious annotations throughout the volume, Martin Heidegger’s Existence and Being contains few truly characterful markings. The Philosophy of Nietzsche, however, is annotated with a furious intensity, and features

markings that seem both more personal and more directly related to Percy's own works. Particularly striking is Percy's a boisterous exclamation of "He missed it!" next to a passage in Beyond Good and Evil dismissively describing Christianity as "the sacrifice of all freedom, all pride, all self-confidence of spirit" (432), and vigorous charcoal pencil underlining of this sentence in Ecce Homo: "Never have I been so happy as during the sickest and most painful periods of my life" (817). Percy's characters frequently make similar observations about the paradoxical pleasure we find in times of misfortune and ill weather, which deliver us from the wearisome burden of dailiness and put us in restorative, electrifying contact with the elemental forces in life.

The marginalia in Susanne Langer's Feeling and Form are similarly the markings of an engaged, thoughtful Percy, responding with lively interest to what he reads, speculating freely. "Could music, art, dreams, etc. be reduced to a common space?" he asks at the end of Chapter 7 next to a passage discussing the image of time (119). "The spatial illusion is music." The back pastedown finds him musing about the nature of art and its relationship to play:

1. Art dispensable (scientist picking up lovely bowl). It is elective (game)
2. In order that art be "exciting," accessible, one must first agree to play the game—It is not reality, but an analogy. A principle—one must always agree to play the game? i.e, Accept assumptions?

Percy's annotations in Ernst Cassirer's Language and Myth likewise display an alertness and intellectual vivacity, as well as an occasional willingness to object to assertions in the text. On one of the back endpapers, for instance, Percy references a passage on page 96 and notes: "Cassirer's error: in supposing that its original access to the world, the metaphor, is determination of its meaning. He is ignorant of the principle of articulation. Ex: sun—originally called "Heavenly Fire" becomes → sun!" Elsewhere on the endpapers

Percy draws diagrams that clarify the origins of myth, and makes references to the Platonic dialogue of Phaedrus in a note about the interpretation of myth.

Two works in this class of books that feature unusually dense, substantive marginalia are James Collins' The Existentialists: A Critical Study, one of the most heavily marked-up books surveyed for this essay, and Jacques Maritain's Art and Scholasticism, less extensively annotated. The annotations in the former, a survey of major existentialist thinkers including Sartre, Marcel, Karl Jaspers, and Heidegger, extend far beyond the rather decorous, timid underlining and bracketing seen in other volumes and are characterized by an interrogative energy and an keen responsiveness to the text. Reacting to a passage on the exploitative subject-object relationship of the starrer and stared-at in Sartre, Percy notes in the upper margin: "Hell is other people" (78). In a later chapter on Jaspers, Percy asks "Is existence—philosophy—threatened by a rational or realistic ontology?" in the top margin (96); a little further on, in a breathless marginal comment below a discussion of Marcel's assertion that the individual participates in a "prehistorical drama" in which he either "acknowledges the participated and contingent nature of his hold upon existence or closes out all thought of an absolute source of his being" (148), Percy observes, "Marcel thinks that proofs are in objects and thus thinks that proofs may be existential." In a note linked to this one on the following page, he exclaims, "The prerationalistic basis of skepticism and faith: yes!" (149). Perhaps significantly, the capitalized or underlined word "use" is sprinkled liberally throughout the text next to passages Percy evidently intended to reference in an essay or book review. It may be that Percy's deliberate gathering of material for his own writing gave his reading of this book a direction and focus that it lacked elsewhere, and coaxed from him marginalia of a more

pointed, explicit character. A glued-in sheet on the back pastedown that features a diagram summarizing the thought of each of the five philosophers treated in the volume may have been part of this same effort to prepare himself for composition. Whatever the circumstances under which it was read, the marginalia in The Existentialists is a valuable document of Percy's intense lifelong engagement with existentialist thought and a sensitive seismograph that registers his reactions to the text with a lively immediacy.

While not as heavily marked up as the Collins book, Percy's copy of Jacques Maritain's Art and Scholasticism, a neo-Thomist treatise on aesthetics, exhibits marginalia of comparable interest, illuminating as it does Percy's views on the moral and aesthetic function of literature and the practice of fiction. Percy seems to have been maintained a keen awareness throughout his career of the difficulties of writing novels that reflect a Catholic standpoint but avoid the kind of overt proselytizing that can so easily transform art into crude propaganda. "A good novelist," he remarked in an interview late in his life, "does not sit down and say, 'Well, let's see, since I am a Catholic and a Thomist...let me figure out how I can write a novel that will blend the two.' Only a very doctrinaire novelist—I think of some Marxist novels—would do such a thing. All that one can be sure of about such a novel is that it will be bad" (Samway, "Interview" 129). It may have been Maritain's book, which warns against the dangers of allowing faith to become a guiding aesthetic principle, that helped Percy maintain this tricky balance between artistic integrity and devotion to God, aestheticism and Christian orthodoxy. Though not particularly explicit, his marginalia are a record of a searching, thoughtful exploration of the complex relationship between the craft of fiction and orthodox belief.

Exclamation points bristle in the margin beside this significant aphorism: “If you were to make your aesthetic an article of faith, you would spoil your faith. If you were to make your devotion a rule of artistic operation, you would spoil your art” (54); on page twenty five there is a fervent “yes!” beside a passage treating the divine source of all aesthetic pleasure:

So one may say...that in the perception of the beautiful the mind is, by means of the intuition of the sense, itself confronted with a glittering intelligibility, like every intelligibility derived in the last analysis from the first intelligibility of the divine ideas. (125)

Elsewhere, on the front pastedown, Percy expresses some dissatisfaction with Maritain’s relative neglect of the process of understanding and appreciating art. “My question: how can art be studied except as what is pleasing to man and why?” he writes. “Does Maritain treat only of art in the creation, and not in the appreciation?” Further on in the notes section, which Percy seems to have read with meticulous care, Percy observes more reverently, “Beauty is a certain kind of good” (129). Only rarely rising to the level of a complete sentence or fully articulated thought, Percy’s markings in Art and Scholasticism nevertheless provide evidence of Percy’s rigorous exploration of questions about art and religion that were to preoccupy him throughout his career as a novelist.

Despite occasional flashes of insight and glimmerings of original thought, Percy’s marginalia in works of theology, science, and philosophy are in general disappointingly lusterless, displaying little of the dazzling vivacity of mind and quicksilver cleverness that one might hope to find in the marginal jottings of a famous author. The marginalia is certainly valuable in that it documents, like a set of telltale footprints, the intellectual terrain Percy traveled in extensively as well as those areas he skirted evasively; but it is not, in the main, particularly interesting to read in and of itself. The same cannot be said,

however, of Percy's annotations in works of fiction, particularly in the novels of those existentialist writers who are known to have had a shaping influence on his own writing. In the note-crowded pages of these books we find a very different Percy at work: a dynamic, imaginative reader who has an intimate understanding of the conventions of the genre and the confident judgment of a practiced writer of fiction. Where Percy is reticent and careful in his readings of philosophy and theology, he is bold and forthright, cantankerous and querulous in his traversals of novels. In these notations we catch frequent sight of the Percy we know from his essays, from interviews, and from biographies: the imposing man of letters with a sardonic independence of mind and a crotchety resistance to conventional ways of thinking and feeling. Moreover, the marginalia in the novels show us how Percy's disciplined study of philosophy and theology bore fruit in the realm of fiction, giving his thinking about the genre a distinctive intellectual vigor and muscular energy. If the notations in works of philosophy and theology reveal a cautious, uncertain Percy, a dutiful student rather than an independent thinker, the marginalia in the fiction—a form that allowed him to unite all the various strands of his intellect, learning, and feeling—lets us see Percy whole: a master of his craft rather than an apprentice or tyro.

Some of the annotations in the novels were clearly made in preparation for the seminars in literature Percy taught at Loyola University in New Orleans in 1968 and at Louisiana State University in 1974, and it may be that the conscious effort to read with the teaching of a class in mind gave his marginal jottings a kind of unnatural clarity and focus they otherwise would not have had.<sup>4</sup> Certainly the marginalia related to the classes often takes the form of questions phrased in the second person singular, a mode of

address Percy rarely employs in marginalia elsewhere. “S. has been criticized for using his novel merely to illustrate his philosophical ideas,” he notes on the title page of Sartre’s Nausea. “Do you think this is true?” On the preliminary pages of his paperback copy of The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, he asks a far more rudimentary question: “Did you like it? It is supposed to be a great book. So the question is, what makes it better than just an ordinary adventure story?” The pointed and often rather simplistic questions about theme, character and incident sprinkled throughout the text of both of these books do cause one to wonder whether they qualify as true, “authentic” examples of Percy marginalia or if they are some other more public, rudimentary form of notation that do not reflect his private thinking with absolute fidelity. It is difficult to offer a conclusive answer. While it is true that these class-based jottings are different in tone and import from Percy’s other markings, they are the clearly product of Percy’s own thinking about literature and so cannot be said to be totally different in character from Percy’s other annotations. In any case, most of the books Percy used for his classes contain ample instances of marginalia jotted down during previous private readings; books in which class-related marginalia predominates are actually few.<sup>5</sup>

Not all of the marginalia in the novels is of equal interest or distinctiveness. Percy’s annotations in his copy of The Sound of the Fury and As I Lay Dying, for instance, are curiously restricted to a careful listing of the sequence of events of the novel on the book’s front pastedown, evidently part of an attempt to study Faulkner’s fragmented treatment of time. At the top of this list, a note discloses the evident inspiration for this study, Sartre: “Sartre says F.’s decapitation of the future is all wrong. Heidegger: consciousness → is F’s despair, despair of time. Why the order?” These sparse annotations

suggest that Percy's studies in philosophy may have sometimes exerted an overbearing influence on his reading of fiction, resulting in an narrow focus on overtly "philosophical" elements of novels and a neglect of other more central qualities. The text is mostly bare of markings. Significantly, none of the other items in the library by Faulkner, whom Percy once described as "one of our greatest novelists" (Bunting 53), features marginalia. Though the database describes them as "heavy," Percy's markings in Saul Bellow's Mr. Sammler's Planet are also disappointingly meager, limited mainly to heavy underlining in the wide-ranging philosophical soliloquy of the novel's title character beginning around page 208 in his copy. The markings are, however, a noteworthy indication of Percy's interest in the sustained monologue, a mode of fictional address which he employed often in his own novels and which Bellow handles here with virtuosic skill.

Percy's annotations in Nathanael West's Miss Lonelyhearts, meanwhile, suggest that he was not temperamentally attuned to the novel's peculiar mixture of astringent, cartoonish satire and moral earnestness and that the existential plight of its narrator was not sufficiently nuanced philosophically to engage him deeply. When the title character screams "But Christ is love!" to a grotesque couple who have sought his counsel (49), Percy comments skeptically in the margin, "This is true, but why does it sound so false?" What mostly interests him is Shrike's long disquisition on page 34, which he terms "a very clear recital of rotation"—more evidence of his study of Kierkegaard. A strip of notebook paper inserted in the book reiterates this point: "a perfect case history of Shrike of rotation." As for Mark Twain's The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, a book Percy once claimed to have provided a fictional model for his own novel The Last Gentleman

(Bunting 53), it may be a case of a book in which the majority of the annotations is too closely associated with the courses he taught at Loyola and LSU to be a very accurate or interesting reflection of his own thinking. Composed almost solely of the kind of deceptively simple questions professors use to coax students into thinking more carefully about a book, the marginalia exhibit a rather low level of sophistication and complexity. On the preliminary pages, Percy notes, "You remember I also asked you to decide which part you liked best." A few pages into the novel, Percy jots down basic questions related to the novel's plot: "what happens to Huck's father?" and "what does H. think of Jim at beginning? At end? Where does he change?" He seems eager to assure students that Twain's satiric treatment of the brainlessly devout Miss Watson is not intended as a criticism of religion: "So what is M.T. satirizing?" he asks. "Not religion but hypocrisy" (10). The other annotations in the novel are of a similar parochial character, and exhibit little of the acuity and insightfulness that characterize his readings of other novels in the library.

It is Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre who draw from Percy his most ardent, expressive marginalia. Daringly innovative novelists who, like Percy, succeeded at the tricky business of writing densely philosophical fiction that engages in a serious exploration of ideas while maintaining the dramatic vitality and aesthetic integrity of all true works of art, Camus and Sartre seem to have engaged every aspect of his intellect and character: his deep attraction to philosophical inquiry, his talents as a fiction writer, his religious sense, his discomfort with conventional fictional forms, and his abiding sense of the absurdity of life. Though each was an avowed atheist, their vision of an absurd, godless world populated by brooding, profoundly alienated solitaries whose

attempts to engage in some morally coherent and purposive action end in failure appealed even more deeply to Percy than works of fiction of a much more orthodox religious cast. His marginalia in The Stranger and Nausea provide ample evidence of this strong sense of artistic kinship.

Percy's marginal comments in The Stranger are quite diverse in tone and subject matter. They exhibit an acute awareness not only of the philosophical issues in play in the novel but of the technical and stylistic qualities that contribute to its total effect. Early in the book he notes the deceptive "simplicity" and "accessibility" of the Camus's style at the same time that he is considering the moral cosmology that orders the action of the novel: "If M ...doesn't believe in J.C. God, is there something in the novel which takes God's place?" (18). In the murder scene Percy is highly attentive to the "sensory crescendo" of "light, heat, pain, sound" that Camus orchestrates with sentence rhythm and language to give the novel's central event a harrowing hallucinatory quality (75). He is keenly interested in the technical difficulties of building "up the climax in an otherwise flat and insignificant story" (66), a problem he often grappled with in his own novels, whose dramatic action is often internal, culminating in inner epiphanies rather than in noisy scenes of violent incident. At the same time, his readings of Sartre's Nausea help him identify what is thematically at stake in Camus's novel, which traverses similar philosophical terrain with strikingly different results. "At climax of N.," he notes, "what did R. discover—contingency. At climax of this, what did M. discover? Absurdity of life—it makes no difference" (74). Interspersed throughout these comments on theme and style are irreverent references to popular culture and current events that give the marginalia a playful levity and a contemporary relevance. The courtroom scene provokes

a comparison with Perry Mason's courtroom (104); during Merseault's conversation about God with a prison magistrate on page 87, Percy asks, "What is C. attacking here? J.C. [illegible]? Christendom? I am reminded of the Christianization of American politics lately—the prayer breakfasts and Billy Graham at the White House"—one marginal comment that can probably be dated at some point during the Nixon administration. Elsa, the lion in the movie Born Free, gets a mention on page 123. Though many of his comments are phrased in the form of questions he evidently intended to ask students in the course on the existentialist novel he taught at Louisiana State University in 1974, they exhibit a searching responsiveness to the text characteristic of his other more "personal" annotations, and can be confidently classed with the former.

The marginalia in Nausea—dating from several different periods, to judge by the red and blue ink and pencil in which they are written—are even more extensive and wide-ranging. Here again Percy is concerned with both style and structure, with theme and ideas. Early in the novel he notes Sartre's "great preoccupation throughout with objects" (6) and his disgust with the "purely organic nature of the sexual relations" (15), expressed through what Percy describes as Sartre's "favorite adjective—viscous" (18). He is keenly attentive to the novel's treatment of Christian characters and interested in Sartre's odd tendency to "singl[e] out for attack the unbelieving humanist—the man who loves man for man's sake" (100). At the same time his remarks are strikingly intertextual, frequently invoking works by other writers that help place Sartre's novel in a broader perspective. Heidegger is cited on page 46; Kierkegaard on page 194. And on a sheet of notebook paper tipped in between pages 108-109, in the midst of a section about a child molester, Percy writes: "Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus and others are particularly fascinated by the

presence of evil—in world in general and in particular the suffering of children. Ivan Karamazov—Sartre raises a question here. The question is: is Sartre really scandalized? Or would he be pleased because it would confirm his [illegible] atheism?” The frequent references to other writers are evidence of how deeply Nausea engaged Percy, calling upon everything he thought and felt and read and knew.

Some of the most distinctive notations in the novel are those that speculate about Sartre’s peculiar conflation of the philosophical tract and fiction in Nausea and the negative aesthetic consequences of a too thorough mixing of the two genres. Though Nausea seems to have had a profound influence on Percy’s own work, his notes suggest that he was not entirely secure about its success as a novel or of its status as fiction. “Is this a novel?” he asks in the preliminary pages. On page six he repeats the question; directly afterwards, he references a critic (the name is illegible) who considered the work a form of autobiography, not a novel. Later in Nausea, at the conclusion of a turgid, interminable philosophical dialogue between the narrator and Anny, a troubled former girlfriend who seems to have provided a model for the character of Kate in The Moviegoer, Percy makes a caustic observation about the artistic costs of using characters as mouthpieces for one’s own philosophical viewpoint. “A bad novel,” he notes. “Two main characters and they both talk like Sartre” (197). The irreverent annotation suggests that Percy maintained a deep skepticism even about those works of fiction he valued most highly. Percy’s rereadings of favorite novels were not, such marginalia indicates, the sentimental journeys of an aesthete revisiting beloved literary territory, but rather bracing exercises in which he reexamined familiar fictional terrain with a unforgiving eye and a merciless critical detachment.

Other heavily annotated works of fiction in the library provide additional evidence of Percy's somewhat unexpected interest in questions of style, the mechanics of writing, and the blurry boundaries between literary genres. Despite his deep attraction to the abstract and a sometimes overbearing preoccupation with the philosophical content of fiction, Percy's marginalia suggest he maintained a journeyman's keen attentiveness to the more concrete, nuts-and-bolts elements of the craft of fiction: the depiction of scene and character, the use of figurative language, the presentation of dialogue. The notes in his copy of Hemingway's The Sun Also Rises, for instance, make as many references to style and language as it does to Kierkegaard and Heidegger. Page 45 features an appreciative note on "the great economy" with which Hemingway describes a character he has just introduced; a few pages later we find him remarking on the "notable laconic quality" of Hemingway's dialogue (58). Elsewhere Percy seems less taken with the famous stripped-down poverty of Hemingway's style. "Bad writing," he quips curtly in the margins next to a scene in which the plain, staccato sentences take on a telegram-like sameness of rhythm (22).

Percy's dense marginalia in William Gass's short-story collection, In the Heart of the Heart of the Country, suggest a similar attention to language as well as a concern with literary genre and a peculiar interest in identifying the precise nature of Gass's unclassifiable, genre-blending literary talent. On the back pastedown Percy assembles a list of pages where "typical sentence[s]" that seem characteristic of Gass's rather baroque, essayistic style can be found; in the title story in the collection, he shrewdly notes "the poet's trick of using objects to project feeling" (182). In other places Percy demonstrates an impatience with Gass's exuberant sallies of striking figurative language,

which he appears to consider out of place or perhaps self-indulgent in the context of a short story. “This story is a poem,” he declares sententiously in the title story (183). On the endpapers he notes, “I venture to say gift = more poetic than novelistic; a striking poetic metaphor, however, cannot be made into a short story.” In the Heart of the Heart of the Country also features a rare example of an intemperate, splenetic marginal outburst from Percy. “Bullshit,” he remarks in the margins next to a passage that disdainfully describes the invasion of formerly staid, reserved Midwestern farm towns by hordes of “large familial, catholic, democratic, scrambling, vigorous poor” who “give not a hoot for the land, the old community, the hallowed ways, the established clans” (182). This coarse exclamation and the skeptical remarks on other pages suggest that Percy may have been discomfited by the stylistic brio and confidence of Gass’s writing and the cocky daring with which he freely combined elements from different literary forms.

Markedly different in tone and feeling from the marginalia found in works of theology and philosophy, Percy’s annotations in novels and short stories exhibit a restless energy and an intellectual vitality that indicate how deeply the genre of fiction sustained and fascinated him. Though the library’s preponderance of works on philosophy, theology, and science suggest that he was far more attracted to philosophical abstraction than to literature, the marginalia in his books tell a different story. Literature, fiction in particular, they suggest, was the form that most fully engaged all his faculties and talents and energies, uniting all the disparate elements of his prickly, difficult character. It was in the study and practice of fiction, they tell us, that he was able to call upon most fully the vast learning he had acquired in his studies of philosophy, science, and theology. His marginalia in works of fiction, particularly in novels by the French existentialists,

confirms Shelby Foote's valedictory assertion that Percy was, despite his wide-ranging intellectual forays into subjects as diverse as semiotics and genetics, "a novelist, not merely an explicator of various philosophers and divines, existentialists or otherwise" (304).

But while the marginalia in the novels in his library shed a more searching light on what Percy thought and felt as he read than the sparse markings in his books on theology, philosophy, and science, what they ultimately reveal about Percy's total relationship with books is fragmentary. The kind of knowledge that marginalia provides about a writer is equivalent to what a feeble flashlight beam might pick up as it is cast across a vast nighttime landscape. We see a few scattered stones fitfully lit up here, the limb of what seems to be a widely branching tree a little further on. Odd glimmerings can be made out in the distance: perhaps the window of a unlit house caught momentarily in the beam of light, or the tin roof of a distant shed. Something flies by, too swiftly to make out its shape or size. There are dark shapes on what seems to be the horizon, but whether they are trees or mountains we cannot say. All we can descry are the occasional scraps and fragments that the wandering flashlight beam happens to throw into view. It is enough perhaps to make out the general contours of the land we travel, but not enough to see its full shape or extent, not enough to see all the many things, living and dead, that it encompasses.

This patchiness is what is ultimately so frustrating and yet so tantalizing about marginalia, a literary genre which is by its very nature fragmentary, sketchy, incomplete. It allows a maddeningly partial view of a reader's mind, but withholds from us the full picture. It gives us a faint taste of his innermost thinking and feeling, but ungenerously

denies us a full mouthful. That is as true of Percy's marginalia as it is of the annotations that countless other readers have left behind in their books. No matter how many instances we see of it, when asked what we have learned from it, what it has shown us, we must ultimately answer: not so very much.

## 6. Walker Percy: A Life Lived in Books

What we do know about Percy, from biographies, from interviews, and from the testimony of those who knew him, is that he was a reader of the most rigorous seriousness and ardor, a man whose most passionate hours were passed in the company of books. His reading was vast, prolific, wide-ranging, deep. He read not for escapism or for pure pleasure, not even for that aesthetic enjoyment that many writers seek in books, but in order to learn and to know more fully, and to more fully be. His reading was transformative, life-changing—books were always there at the pivotal moments of his life, prodding him to take this course or that. Books prompted his religious conversion, and his decision to abandon medicine to write (Tolson 183); books saw him through several crises of faith, and led him to new interests when others receded or dwindled away. Books gave him fresh inspiration to work when the desire to write was at a low ebb. He read when he was very sick and he read when he was well. He read when he was a young man, and through middle age. And he read—steadfastly and constantly—through his last illness, until the very end of his life (Tolson 477).

His library of some 2600 volumes in the Rare Book Collection of Wilson Library is a monument to this life lived in books, a monument that is in part alive itself. In it we can see the full range of his interests, and the sweep of his learning. It is a measure of breadth of his intellect and the reach of his curiosity. It shows us the subjects that interested him most deeply, and those he neglected or only lightly skimmed. It reveals odd knotty

pockets of learning he cultivated, the peculiarities of his literary tastes, unexpected proclivities that do not show up in his writing. And in the library's marginalia, in the cramped, backwardly leaning script with which Percy filled the empty spaces of his books, it allows us fitful glimpses of Percy in the act of reading and thinking, carrying on a dialogue with his books that is still in some sense continuing on the pages of the library today.

But if the library offers to those who visit it a disconcertingly intimate sense of Percy's presence, it also conveys an equally powerful impression of his absence. It is, after all, a dead man's library, a bibliographic sarcophagus in which the shape of Percy's intellectual interests has been preserved—palpable but mummy-like. It has stopped expanding, taken on its final shape; it will never be enlarged or modified by the addition of another book. Like all the objects that the dead leave behind, much of its original meaning has been irrevocably lost with the departure of its owner. What we see in it is not what he saw; its original shape and arrangement and relationships are irreclaimable. And though remnants of his conversation with books remain in the library in the form of marginalia, they are too scattered and fragmentary to allow us to reconstruct more than a fraction of this dialogue. We cannot piece them together to get a clear sense of what he felt and thought as he read. The experience of reading is too quicksilver, too fleeting, too elusive—too much like life itself, in short—to leave many traces of itself behind after the reader is dead.

## 7. Percy's Marginalia: A Last Look

Near the end of my studies of the Percy Library I return to the Rare Book Collection one last time. I have completed my examination of some 35 books from his collection, sorted and typed up my notes, begun the arduous task of putting my thoughts in order and, at long last, down on paper. Something, however, is missing. At the very moment when I should have a clear, untroubled perspective on the library, attained a hard-won summit of understanding from which I can look down and see its contents spread out neatly before me, orderly and comprehensible, I find myself afflicted by the same malaise of uncertainty and confusion that beset me at earlier stages of my research. I do not know what I think about the library; I am not certain that there is anything much to think. Its books seem to me, their illustrious provenance notwithstanding, merely books—isolated, lifeless objects that gain no magical supplementary meaning by virtue of their association with Percy. The scraps of marginalia I have collected seem merely scraps, scattered fragments too paltry and in general too illegible to offer any larger transcendent lesson. The library seems a collection of orphaned objects that have in some way taken on the mute inertness and uncommunicativeness of the things of the dead. What can it offer to those of us who ramble through it? What can its sketchy, intermittently readable marginalia say to scholars who pore over it? I have no very good answers to these questions, and do not really expect at this late date to find any. It occurs to me, however, that looking at a last example of the marginalia might rekindle at least a little of my faith

in the library's importance, or arouse some faint spark of the excitement that seeing Percy's writing once stirred in me. It is this vague presentiment that has brought me back to the Rare Book Collection for a final visit.

The book I have chosen to see is the same copy of Martin Amis's London Fields that I looked at with Charles McNamara on my earlier visit to the library in the closed stacks and inspected during a previous study session in the reading room. When I last saw the book, its marginalia had seemed to give me a searingly vivid impression of Percy's mind in the act of reading and thinking, and through this a recovered sense of the value of the library as a whole. Perhaps, I think, it will do so again. I fill out a call slip, take my place at one of the reading tables, and wait.

The book arrives, an advance galley proof of the novel with bold black lettering on its pale blue paper covers. From previous inspections I know its contents and the general character of the marginalia it exhibits on its covers and endpapers, a black scrawl of ill-formed letters snaking down the length of the pages. I open it and find a letter from Michael Pietsch, a senior editor at Harmony Books in England, tucked inside the preliminary pages. Dated November 27, 1989, the letter asks Percy to read it and kindly lend his support to the novel if he likes it. A few pages afterwards I find the other inserted piece of ephemera I know it contains, a snapshot of a smiling young woman standing in a cotton field. A note on the back, not in Percy's hand, identifies the woman as "Lisa Bourdeaux, Billy's niece." The photograph is dated 4-6-90. The date of the letter and the photograph suggest that this is likely one of the last books Percy read and annotated before his death of prostate cancer in May of the same year. The book's dense marginalia

provide moving evidence of Percy's passionate engagement with books at the very end of his life.

I turn my attention to the marginalia. The ropy slackness and sloppy sprawl of the annotations on the front and back covers and endpapers do suggest that Percy was probably ill when he wrote them. The letters are enfeebled and deflated, and only intermittently legible; the phrases lack the pert backward-leaning uprightiness and forward-moving energy characteristic of Percy's other marginalia. When I look more closely at the long, mostly incomprehensible notation, I am no longer sure that it is even related to this novel. It may be that Percy used the book in lieu of a notepad during his final illness when, ill and alone in bed, other more suitable writing materials were out of reach. The abundance of empty space on the covers and endpapers of the novel certainly provides ample room for jotting down a thought that Percy was evidently eager, to judge from the swift carelessness of his penmanship, to get on paper.

I study the annotations more carefully. Distinct phrases begin to emerge from the jumble of scrawled letters, leaping into clarity. I do not recall being able to decipher this much of the annotations on earlier visits, or follow the sentences so far before they subside into incomprehensibility. "A radical change in what we call intellectual—the Amis intellect of the old modern age was generally a tired..." The words slant off into illegibility. "...More often than not a young academic," he writes on the half title, "who aims to ... minimalist." Again the sentence slips into a tangle of inscrutable script. But in the back of the novel I see a longer notation that is largely readable. "Not many good Catholic novels—not as serious quality fiction—not nearly as many as there are Jewish novels. Why? Mary Mccarthy." The note continues on the back cover, then jumps to the

front preliminaries. I read on eagerly. More of the tangled script seems to uncoil into legibility. I begin to feel that same piercingly intimate sense of Percy's caustic, curmudgeonly mind in action that struck me the last time I saw the book. "American Catholics have not yet discovered they can write novels," he writes. "They still think that novels have to be edifying, that things have to come out right in the end, but the present is not really harnessed." Though Percy's observations here about the vexed situation of the American Catholic novelist are not markedly out of character, they exhibit a fearless candor and bluntness that seem striking and novel. Perhaps Percy's dire state of health and the nearness of death afforded him a bold, careless freedom of expression on subjects about which he had once been more circumspect and reticent. I read on excitedly, eager to see what further disclosures the marginalia may yield.

Yet almost as quickly as the phrases darted briefly into the daylight of comprehensibility, they begin to dip out of clear sight again. "They recognize that as a Catholic and are kindly disposed," one sentence begins clearly enough, but ends in obscurity. "But they ... strange if not downright dirty-erotic." I switch to the front cover, conscious that some window of opportunity is closing, that the marginalia is slipping back into darkness, like some landscape momentarily illuminated by a moon moving in and out of clouds. "In the east ... tight assed graduates," one phrase begins. "Mostly of eastern schools writing wonderful novels about..." I cannot follow it further. I realize that I have lost the sense of how this note relates to the other phrases that preceded it; the marginalia is quickly fragmenting into isolated islands of distinct phrases, then into separate words, then into scrawled clumps of letters I cannot make out. The line of thought about Catholic novelists Percy had begun developing on the back page snakes

away into inscrutability. “About ... puke ... OK ... made said of the Smith...and lots of Warren and Tate have headed with,” I read. My attention is slackening; I am, I see, beginning to give up. I try one last time. “...First read Freedom and Identity...” I am unable to continue. The note slips away into incomprehensibility, moving off, irreclaimably and irrecoverably, like the mind responsible for making it, into a place where none of us can follow.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Please see the appendix for a complete bibliography of books in Percy's library mentioned in this essay.

<sup>2</sup> H.J. Jackson provides a thorough and judicious account of the wide range of markings readers use when annotating books in Chapter 2 of Marginalia: Readers Writing in Books. Percy's marginalia is largely composed of Jackson characterizes as "the most basic marks": "signs of attention" like underlining or lines across the margin, multiple slash marks, and exclamation and question marks (28).

<sup>3</sup> If H.J. Jackson's description of the indexing practices of writers and common readers alike in Marginalia is any guide (37 ff.), Percy is neither the most slipshod nor the most meticulous of indexers. He generally employs subject headings and page numbers in his indexes, but rarely takes the trouble to "group topics in separate areas on the endpapers" (38), a tactic of more fastidious annotators.

<sup>4</sup> H.J. Jackson would likely class Percy's course-related remarks, along with his notes on interleaved pages, as a "premeditated" form of marginalia that she considers "at odds with the spirit of impulsive marginalizing" (Marginalia 34). While such calculated annotations rarely have the élan and off-the-cuff freshness of marginalia jotted down in the white heat of a first reading, they still represent the thinking and feeling of their authors with some measure of fidelity and thus cannot be placed in a completely separate category from other less formal markings. When it comes to the marginalia of writers, it is even more difficult to make clear distinctions between more formal and less calculated forms of annotations, since authors' reading and note-taking are always in some sense part of a conscious, "premeditated" preparation for their own writing.

<sup>5</sup> For a full account of the content and conduct of Percy's courses at Loyola University in New Orleans in 1966 and at Louisiana State University in 1974, please see Patrick Samway's Walker Percy: A Life (264, 313-320).

Those who are interested in the notes Percy made in preparation for his courses may wish to consult Folder 7 (Camus) of the Walker Percy Papers (#4294) in the Manuscripts Department of the Southern Historical Collection at Wilson Library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The "Camus" folder is a hodgepodge of notes Percy made for his own private use and for use in his university courses, both of which included The Fall and The Stranger on their reading lists.

## Appendix

### Bibliography of Books in Percy's Library Mentioned in the Essay

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