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The Sound and the Fury,  
Symbolizing Something

*Maritain and Percy on the Paradoxical  
Miracle at the Limits of Language*



*For my son, Søren*

In *Ransoming the Time*, Jacques Maritain suggests that, “a treatise on the sign and on the symbol, such as I hope someday may be written, would on the one hand endeavor to winnow out what is essential in the extensive intellectual elaboration to which medieval thinkers subjected this matter,” and on the other hand would link the conceptual procedure thereby established with, “the scientific investigations of our own time.”<sup>1</sup> We who live under an extremely perspectivist sky, where the pantheon of academic gods giddily or cynically proclaim a total fissure between sign and signifier, recognize the scholastics’ now subversive understanding of a “really intrinsic proportion between signs and that which they signify.”<sup>2</sup> As Stanley Rosen relates, those who are obsessed with language in our time tend to come to the conviction that there is, finally, nothing but interpretation, that “there is nothing ‘out there’ but ghosts of uninteresting truths; truth is superstition.”<sup>3</sup> Against this Maritain insists not that there is a literal link

1. Jacques Maritain, “Sign and Symbol,” in *Ransoming the Time*, translated by Lorin Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1941), 217.

2. *Ibid.*, 219.

3. Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 192.



between sign and signifier, but that there is a, “certain presence—presence of knowability—of the signified in the sign; the former is there *in alio esse*, in another mode of existence.”<sup>4</sup>

Signs, while used by humans, play a great part in the psychic life of animals. For animals, as for humans, signs *do something*, and yet the sign is also, “the keystone of intellectual life.”<sup>5</sup> In order to trace how this key to the intellect is turned, one must sort out the distinct meaning of a sign. “An animal employs signs without perceiving the relationship of meaning. To perceive the relationship of meaning is to have an *idea*—a spiritual sign.”<sup>6</sup> Maritain contends that the miraculous quality of the perception of meaning is most remarkably evident in the awakening intelligence of blind deaf-mutes, “imprisoned souls.”<sup>7</sup> The philosopher-novelist Walker Percy, who in many ways worked out Maritain’s requested “treatise on the sign and the symbol” also pauses before the blind deaf-mute’s consciousness of *meaning*, considers it singularly important in the study of signs and symbols. Helen Keller’s teacher could help her to interpret the word as a *signal* that “*did something*,” but what she “could not make [Helen] understand was that the word *water* was not a command to *do something* with water, but *meant*, denoted water.”<sup>8</sup> Once, by a mysterious flash of insight, Keller understood that this “is” water, “what she had to know immediately was *what everything else was!*”<sup>9</sup> Consciousness, moving from sign to symbolized meaning, requires that everything *be something*, but finds paradoxically that the “one thing in the world which by its very nature is not susceptible of a stable symbolic transformation is *myself*.”<sup>10</sup>

A hermeneutic informed by both Maritain and Percy’s philosophies of language, sign, and symbol, will guide us as we engage with Percy’s novel *The Moviegoer*, in which the protagonist Binx Bolling articulates creative intuitions regarding the “miserable, anxious awareness” paid for the gift of language, and comes to find in his mentally disabled but linguistically luminous brother Lonnie an almost holy truth about our use of symbols. Percy and Maritain find in those who suffer from limits in language a revelation of the miracle of symbols that *mean something*.<sup>11</sup> By bringing the semiotic

4. Maritain, “Sign and Symbol,” 220.

5. *Ibid.*, 221.

6. *Ibid.*, 220.

7. *Ibid.*, 220–221.

8. Walker Percy, “Symbol as Hermeneutic in Existentialism,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 16, no. 4 (1956): 525. Emphasis in original.

9. *Ibid.*; emphasis in original.

10. *Ibid.*, 527; emphasis in original.

11. See Peter Augustine Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood: The Return to Realism in American Thought* (New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 192.



treatise Maritain calls for and the creative intuition in Percy's poetry into dialectical relationship, we will perhaps fall in love with language, perhaps come to see that love is impossible outside of human symbolization, outside of *homo symbolificus*—man the symbol-monger.

Peter Augustine Lawler notes that Percy, "agrees with Aristotle and Saint Thomas that discovering the truth and communicating it to others may be the greatest of the human pleasures," even as, "man experiences himself as an alien because he cannot, through language or thought, formulate or locate his own place in a cosmos that is otherwise dyadic."<sup>12</sup> *Dyadic* is a word used by Percy's semiotic mentor Charles S. Peirce to mean composed of "stimulus-response sequences."<sup>13</sup> Percy, with Peirce, distinguishes *dyadic* (response-stimulus) from *triadic* behavior in order to differentiate human use of language. In *triadic* behavior the self stands *apart* from stimulus-response sequences and uses symbols to navigate through them.<sup>14</sup>

In order to distinguish between dyadic sign use and triadic symbol use, Percy establishes the two categorizations of *environment* and *world*. He first sets before us the organism as an open system that maintains homeostasis in spite of all changes in an environment. The organism responds to those segments of its environment to which its genetic code has been predisposed to through evolution.<sup>15</sup> In such a case, segments of the environment without biological significance are ignored. Learning, in an environment, consists of modifying certain neurons in the organism's central nervous system in such a way that it will "respond to certain signals in an environment by a behavior oriented toward other segments of the environment."<sup>16</sup> An environment allows for only dyadic relations.

The triadic moment occurs when organism B understands sign A as "meaning" something, as more than a signal to flee or approach.<sup>17</sup> While a signal is *received* like any other stimuli in an environment, a symbol or a "sign requires a sign-giver."<sup>18</sup> When the sign and symbol user crosses the triadic threshold, she has, in addition to her environment, a *world*.<sup>19</sup> Important for Percy is the crossing as it happens in blind-deaf-mutes, a crossing that contains great meaning and mystery. In *The Message in the Bottle*

12. *Ibid.*, 81.

13. Walker Percy, *Lost in The Cosmos* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), 86.

14. See *ibid.*

15. See *ibid.*, 91.

16. *Ibid.*, 91.

17. *Ibid.*, 96.

18. *Ibid.*, 97

19. See *ibid.*



he muses that, “three short paragraphs in Helen Keller’s *The Story of My Life* veiled a mystery, a profound secret, and . . . if one could fathom it, one could also understand a great deal of what it meant to be *Homo loquens*, *Homo symbolificus*, man the speaking animal, man the symbol-monger.”<sup>20</sup> Helen had always responded to stimuli like any good animal. If she wanted cake, she spelled it in the hands of her teacher Miss Sullivan. But one day on a walk a threshold was crossed:

We walked down the path to the well-house, attracted by the fragrance of the honeysuckle with which it was covered. Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word *water*, first slowly then rapidly. I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that “w-a-t-e-r” meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. The living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free! There were barriers still, it is true, but barriers that could in time be swept away.

I left the well-house eager to learn. Everything had a name, and each name gave birth to a new thought. As we returned to the house every object which I touched seemed to quiver with life. That was because I saw everything with the strange, new sight that had come to me. On entering the door I remembered the doll I had broken. . . . I felt my way to the hearth and picked up the pieces. I tried vainly to put them together. Then my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow. I learned a great many new words that day.<sup>21</sup>

Maritain, considering the blind-deaf-mute experience, maintains that in order for one to *know* the relationship of signification of which they are to make use,

some external help is indispensable. . . . The miracle of awakening to the life of thought will come to pass precisely when—thanks to the patiently repeated attempts of the teacher who refuses a desire and suggests a sign, an *artificial, conventional* sign, intended to obtain the satisfaction of the refused desire—the child suddenly will *discover* by some sort of sudden eruption of the idea, the signification of this conventional sign . . . and from that moment on progress proceeds with astonishing rapidity.<sup>22</sup>

20. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: The Noonday Press, 1993), 30.

21. *Ibid.*, 35.

22. Maritain, “Sign and Symbol,” 221; emphasis in original.



Keller's experience intersects with the scholastic insistence (which in a sense is both pre- and post-modern) that there is a, "certain presence—presence of knowability—of the signified in the sign; the former is there *in alio esse*, in another mode of existence."<sup>23</sup> For Ferdinand de Saussure, the sign is "a union of signifier (the sound-image of a word) and signified (the concept of an object, action, quality)."<sup>24</sup> Percy calls the relation between the sign (signifier) and referent (signified) "a particularly mysterious property."<sup>25</sup> This mystery is located in the "troublesome copula 'is,' when Helen said that the perceived liquid 'is' water (the word). According to Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist linguistics, "the referent of a signifier is merely another signifier."<sup>26</sup> Derrida is in this way an echo of the ancient rhetorician Gorgias, who argued that "that by which we reveal is logos [words], but logos is not substances and existing things. Therefore, we do not reveal existing things to our neighbors, but logos, which is something other than substances."<sup>27</sup> Michel Foucault, laboring in this non-vineyard of deconstruction, argues that what is needed is to think *difference*, discontinuity, "to dissociate the reassuring form of the identical" because, "we are difference."<sup>28</sup> But, cautions Rosen, this rejection of the metaphysics of presence, of, we can add, the medieval theory of *in alio esse*, places us as players in a nihilistic world of absence. "If the world is a text written by *difference*," he writes, "it is a tale told by an idiot, a nonsubjective subjectivity or idiot savant, hence a tale full of sound and fury, signifying nothing."<sup>29</sup> Percy grants deconstructionist postmoderns of Derrida's ilk a nod, and then he shakes his head, no: The word "water" *is water*, but then again it is not.

Percy dramatizes the problem of organisms in environments responsive to signals versus humans in worlds using signs and symbols in his novel *The Moviegoer*. One Sunday when the narrator Binx, a film-ingesting stock market agent, is home visiting his mother and family, he attends Mass with them. Although the family falls into a great commotion over getting to Mass, the moment it begins they become, in a sense, the pre-symbolizing "imprisoned souls" described by Maritain, deaf and mute to the meaning around them: "it is as if it [Mass] were over before it began—each has

23. *Ibid.*, 220.

24. Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 103.

25. *Ibid.*, 97.

26. Stanley Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 47.

27. Quoted in Alice Gillam, "Classical Rhetoric," in *Theorizing Composition*, edited by Mary Lynch Kennedy (London: Greenwood, 1998), 16–26.

28. Rosen, *Hermeneutics as Politics*, 47.

29. *Ibid.*, 66; emphasis in original.



lapsed into his own blank-eyed vacancy."<sup>30</sup> In this context we witness a purely dyadic response when, "the bell rings for communion," that is, when the bell signifies that the bread and wine are now body and blood.<sup>31</sup> Roy, Binx's stepfather, responds to the bell as though it is what Percy comes to call a "signal."<sup>32</sup> For a dog, the word "ball" is merely a "signal" to which the dog responds like many other stimuli from his environment. When you say "ball" the dog goes to look for it. Roy behaves a bit like a Pavlovian dog. The bell rings, signifying that the Eucharist, source and summit of grace, *is*. And yet when the bell rings, "Roy gets heavily to his feet and pilots Lonnie [Binx's handicapped half-brother] to the end of the rail," where he is to receive the sacramental host.<sup>33</sup> All Binx sees of Lonnie is "a weaving tuft of red hair." We know that Lonnie, in the presence of the Eucharist, begins to tremble, because "when the priest comes to him, Roy holds a hand against Lonnie's face to steady him. He does this in a frowning perfunctory way, eyes light as an eagle's."<sup>34</sup> We, with Binx, are in a sense spectators seeing only a shade of what is happening at the communion rail. Is Roy dutiful but disengaged while Lonnie, shaking, experiences something mystical connected to the Eucharist? Does Roy move from a moment of stimulus-response to a moment in which he understands that Lonnie, or communion, simply *is*? The metaphor "eyes light as an eagle's" offers both clarification and confusion. Are Roy's eyes glazed-over-light or sharpened-light, like an eagle's? Either way, Percy estranges the experience of Eucharist by juxtaposing the signal-response to the bell with the real presence of the Eucharist, which, more than a signal or symbol, is a sacrament.

In "Sign and Symbol," Maritain describes a sacrament as "something external and sensory which signifies an effect of interior sanctification to be produced."<sup>35</sup> In the Catholic tradition, sacraments are signs "in a supereminent manner: they effect that which they signify (if the subject does not put obstacles in their way by his contrary disposition)."<sup>36</sup> Friedrich Theodor Vischer, seeking proof for his hypothesis, read in the sacrament of the Eucharist a central instance of the identity between the sign and the signified. Against this imposition of theory, Maritain insists that:

30. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Avon Books, 1961), 129.

31. See *ibid.*

33. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 129.

35. Maritain, "Sign and Symbol," 225.

32. See Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 88.

34. *Ibid.*

36. *Ibid.*, 226.



The sacred words, "This is my body" in no way assert an identity; they operate (as an instrumental cause) a change (transubstantiation). Far from resting upon an identity between the sign and the signified, the sacrament of the Eucharist adds to the relationship of sign to signified that of cause to effect and implies the intervention of the First Cause producing the most radical change of which we can conceive, a change which affects being in so far as it is being.<sup>37</sup>

We will soon see that this change *in being* of which Lonnie partakes is paralleled, *in alio esse*, in his language. "Lonnie's monotonous speech gives him an advantage," Binx says, "the same advantage foreigners have: his words are not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out: do you love me? And it is possible to tap back: yes, I love you."<sup>38</sup> "Language is the house of Being," as Heidegger famously and succinctly phrases his philosophy of the word as it relates to human being-in-the-world.<sup>39</sup> Lonnie's language, more than most of our language, seems to authentically house being.

After Mass, Lonnie finds Binx, who tells him "I don't think you should fast. . . . You've had pneumonia twice in the past year. It would not be good for you."<sup>40</sup> Lonnie says he is fasting "to conquer a habitual disposition." He uses the peculiar idiom of the catechism in ordinary speech. Once [Binx relates], "he told me I needn't worry about some piece of foolishness he heard me tell Linda, since it was not a malicious lie but rather a 'jocose lie.'"<sup>41</sup> With his particular language, Lonnie can, like a poet, recover mystery, can, in a sense, "wrench signifier out of context and exhibit it in all its queerness and splendor."<sup>42</sup>

Before we can speak of this recovery of signifier and signified, we must trace the devolution signs undergo. Percy argues that at first the "signifier serves as the discovery vehicle through which the signified is known," as in the case of Helen Keller, "discovering water through *water*."<sup>43</sup> Afterward, the signifier is transformed by the signified. The signifier *water* becomes informed by the utterly loose-substance-spray of chill when a shower is first

37. Ibid.

38. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 131.

39. Martin Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, translated by Peter Hertz (San Francisco: Harper, 1982), 63.

40. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 131.

41. Ibid.

42. Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 106; emphasis in original.

43. Ibid., 105.



turned on, by the heavy, down-ward tending rush of water going down the throat. Finally there is, “a hardening and closure of the signifier, so that in the end the signified becomes encased in a simulacrum like a mummy in a mummy case.”<sup>44</sup> For instance: FIRST TOURIST: What is that? SECOND TOURIST: Oh that, that’s only Niagara Falls. In such an instance, Percy observes, “a devaluation has occurred,” as the thing itself—in this case water—has, “disappeared into the sarcophagus of its sign.”<sup>45</sup> The unique looseness and soft-hardness flow or spray of water is, “assigned to its class of signs, a second-class mummy in the basement collection of mummy cases.”<sup>46</sup>

Nietzsche posits roughly the same semiotic process in “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” although his primary aim is to critique scientific abstraction. Humans first generalize sensuous perceptions, transforming these sensations into concepts, cool concepts that convince them they can master the world. “Something becomes possible” he writes, “in the realm of these schemata which could never be achieved in the realm of those sensuous first impressions, namely the construction of a pyramidal order based on castes and degrees, the creation of a new world of laws, privileges, subordinations . . . something regulatory and imperative.”<sup>47</sup> Nietzsche cherishes the transformation of sense-perceptions into metaphor, because, he contends, every metaphor is individual and unique and therefore beyond classification, beyond scientific good and evil. Scientists construct a great edifice of concepts, an edifice that resembles in its rigid regularity the “Roman *columbarium*.”<sup>48</sup> Percy seems to see Nietzsche’s devolution via science as something performed more popularly—by all humans. Still, Nietzsche in prescription and Percy more in practice posit poetry as the source by which the world undergoes a rebirth that ransoms it from its tragic, conceptual coma. Whereas for Nietzsche concept-making is part-in parcel with the human will to truth, driven by a will to use words to make man more powerful than he actually is, for Percy man, who has devalued language through symbolization now dead, is more reminiscent of the “Last Man” we meet in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. For we can wonder if it is in part at least because the symbols “love,” “creation,” “star,” and “hap-

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.

46. Ibid.

47. Friedrich Nietzsche, “On Truth and Lying in a Non-Moral Sense,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, translated by Ronald Speirs (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 146.

48. Ibid., 147.



piness" have been devalued through deadening use that the Last Man asks, "What is love? What is creation? What is longing/What is a star," blinking as he asks, blinking still as he says, "We have invented happiness," a happiness called so with words but hollow.<sup>49</sup>

Percy contends that the "semiotician most acutely aware of this devolution of the sign and its renewal through the defamiliarization of art is the Russian formalist Victor Schklovsky."<sup>50</sup> For Schklovsky, as perception becomes habitual it also becomes automatic, unconscious. Were someone to compare the sensation of speaking in a foreign tongue, for instance, for the very first time, "with the sensation of performing this same operation for the ten thousandth time, then he would no doubt agree with us. It is this process of automatization that explains the laws of our prose speech with its fragmentary phrases and half-articulated words."<sup>51</sup> Through this "algebraic" method of thinking, "objects are grasped spatially, in the blink of an eye. We do not see them, we merely recognize them by their primary characteristics. The object passes before us, as if it were prepackaged."<sup>52</sup>

We are given a glimpse of this mode of language and its accompanying thinking in *The Moviegoer*, in Binx's mother. Binx tries to "shake her loose from her elected career of the commonplace" by asking her whether his deceased father was a good husband. "Was he!" she says. "And what hands! If anyone ever had the hands of a surgeon, he did."<sup>53</sup> Binx takes this in: "My mother's recollection of my father is storied and of a piece. It is not him she remembers but an old emblem of him."<sup>54</sup> For a moment, because of Binx's prodding, she is shaken from her commonplace, and she recalls a time when her husband would not eat: "It was like he thought eating was not—*important* enough. You see, with your father, everything, every second had to be—."<sup>55</sup> She breaks off, and upon prompting responds, "I don't know. Something." Binx again asks what was wrong with him, but she only replies, "He was overwrought" in "her regular mama-bee drone and again my father disappears into the old emblem."<sup>56</sup> Most of the time, his mother knows not her husband but sarcophagous signifiers pointing not to him but to, in Binx's

49. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translated by Adrian Del Caro (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 9–10.

50. Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device," in *Theory of Prose*, translated by Benjamin Sher (Elmwood Park, Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 1990), 106.

51. *Ibid.*, 5.

53. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 123.

55. *Ibid.*, 124.

52. *Ibid.*

54. *Ibid.*

56. *Ibid.*



words, “an old emblem.” Again: for Percy and Shklovsky, art is a prime device through which the object, hidden behind the emblem, disappeared into its sarcophagus, can be recovered. In Shklovsky’s infamous rendering:

And so, in order to return sensation to our limbs, in order to make us feel objects, to make a stone feel stony, man has been given the tool of art. The purpose of art, then, is to lead us to a knowledge of a thing through the organ of sight instead of recognition. By “enstranging” objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and “laborious.” The perceptual process in art has a purpose all its own and ought to be extended to the fullest.<sup>57</sup>

Derrida ends with the devolution of the signifier that can do nothing but point us to another signifier. Shklovsky and Percy grant this devolution but the virtue of hope obtains in their souls: they believe in the resurrection of signification, that what the sarcophagus once contained *in alio esse* will be raised from its deadness. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy leads us to knowledge of the Eucharist through the organ of sight instead of recognition. He estranges the Eucharist through art in the scene of Lonnie’s shaking tuft of red hair and Roy’s accompanying eagle eyes. Literally in *The Moviegoer*, Lonnie leads us to knowledge of a thing, but not quite through the organ of sight as opposed to recognition. He *estranges* objects by using the “peculiar idiom of the catechism in ordinary speech.”<sup>58</sup> Shklovsky writes of the artist who, rather than *naming* things, describes them as if seeing them for the first time. Lonnie, like Hellen Keller, *names* things in such a way that they are seen as if for the first time, and it is in this Edenic moment that we stand in a sense as if beside Adam as he named animals for the first time. Lonnie, like Adam, names things in order to master them. Of course Lonnie is speaking of quite the animal—sin, and (again) he does not get at it by means of a metaphorical snake. Listen as he further interacts with Binx over the question of conquering a “habitual disposition”:

“What disposition is that?” [Binx]

“A disposition to envy.”

“Envy who?”

“Duval.”

“Duval is dead.”

“Yes. But envy is not merely sorrow at another’s good fortune: it is also joy at another’s misfortune.”<sup>59</sup>

57. Shklovsky, “Art as Device,” 6.

58. *Ibid.*, 131.

59. *Ibid.*, 131–32.



Binx suggests that Lonnie is not hurting the dead man Duval with his envy, but Lonnie says: "It is hurting me. You know what capital sin does to the life of the soul."

"Yes. Still and all I would not fast. Instead I would concentrate on the Eucharist. It seems a more positive thing to do."

"This is true ... but Eucharist is a sacrament of the living," Lonnie says somewhat mysteriously, implying that, *symbolically*, he is dead due to envy.<sup>60</sup>

Humans and animals both exist in environments, both use and respond to signs. Humans and animals die. But, just as only humans know the *meaning* of signs, only humans know the natural fact that death is certain. For Percy, Lawler gleans, "That miserable, anxious awareness is the price to be paid for the gift of language, for thinking about the mystery of human existence."<sup>61</sup> Through his singular relationship to language, to the symbol, to the possibility therefore of symbolic death, of death *in alio esse*, Lonnie reveals an awareness that is anxious and a lexicon with which he can ransom that mystery, and can therefore find redemption of everyday sins from the environment they have been held captive in as simple stimulus-response actions beyond human symbolization and therefore beyond human freedom. In Keller's account, immediately after she experienced language as a symbol, she experienced sorrow over shattering the doll: "my eyes filled with tears; for I realized what I had done, and for the first time I felt repentance and sorrow."<sup>62</sup> Lonnie's relationship to the language of the catechism remains *living*, and therefore he is able to "discover" sin, to *name* sin in even subtle situations.

"When I name an unknown thing or hear the name from you, a remarkable thing happens," Percy notes. "In some sense or other, the thing is said to 'be' its symbol. The semanticists are right: this round thing is certainly not the word *ball*."<sup>63</sup> But until it becomes at least in some sense the word *ball* in our consciousness, the ball will remain unknown to us. Percy, like Maritain, points to the Scholastics, whose theory of symbolic meaning he sees as far more adequate. He too touches John of St. Thomas' observation, what is fast becoming a sort of chant for us: "symbols come to contain

60. Ibid.

61. Lawler, *Postmodernism Rightly Understood*, 82.

62. Quoted in Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 35.

63. Ibid., 155-56.



within themselves the thing symbolized *in alio esse*, in another mode of existence."<sup>64</sup>

When a man names a thing, says "this is water and is cool," an unprecedented thing happens. Here man goes beyond merely interacting with things: "He stands apart from two things and says that one 'is' the other. The two things which he pairs or identifies are the *word* he speaks or hears and the *thing* he sees before him."<sup>65</sup> Until this point, until man utters *A is B*, "he will never know A or B; he will only respond to them."<sup>66</sup> In a Percy-an key: man is more foolish than a bee, but the bee cannot tell the truth; it can merely respond, react, to its environment. Unless Lonnie articulates his "habitual disposition to envy," until he articulates envy as, "not merely sorrow at another's good fortune" but also "joy at another's misfortune" he would not *know* envy, and would only respond (with joy) at the stimuli (another's misfortune) of his environment.

Soon the conversation breaks off, and the two part. After Binx kisses his half-brother goodbye, however, the latter calls him back. But, Binx narrates, "he doesn't really have anything to say," at least, he does not have anything to signal.

"Wait." [Lonnie]

"What?"

He searches the swamp, smiling.

"Do you think that Eucharist—"

"Yes?"

He forgets and is obliged to say straight out: "I am still offering my communion for you."

"I know you are."

"Wait."

"What?"

"Do you love me?"

"Yes."

"How much?"

"Quite a bit."

"I love you too."<sup>67</sup>

Here we witness a parallel to a scene in John's gospel. Just as Binx and Lonnie have just finished communion, Jesus and his disciples have just eaten breakfast:

64. Ibid.

66. Ibid.

65. Ibid., 157.

67. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 133.



When they had finished breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Feed my lambs."

He then said to him a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" He said to him, "Yes, Lord, you know that I love you." He said to him, "Tend my sheep."

He said to him the third time, "Simon, son of John, do you love me?" Peter was distressed that he had said to him a third time, "Do you love me?" and he said to him, "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you." (Jesus) said to him, "Feed my sheep." (John 21.15-17).

Again there is something singular about Lonnie. As Binx notes earlier, Lonnie's words are, "not worn out. It is like a code tapped through a wall. Sometimes he asks me straight out: do you love me? and it is possible to tap back: yes, I love you."<sup>68</sup> In a sense, Lonnie is a sign pointing us to Jesus. Percy posits a sign as "something that directs our attention to something else," and this directing of our attention is, "brought about by past association."<sup>69</sup> In another sense, Lonnie is a symbol, a symbol that "does not direct our attention to something else, as a sign does. It does not direct at all. It 'means' something else. It somehow comes to contain within itself the thing it means."<sup>70</sup> Having just received Eucharist, Lonnie could be read as a symbol, containing in himself the thing he means—Christ. Maritain reminds us that "the sacramental sign is no longer merely a *practical sign*, it then becomes an *instrumental cause* of which the very Cause of being makes use to produce grace in the soul."<sup>71</sup> Having received the sacrament, Lonnie becomes a symbol.

At the end of his essay, "Sign and Symbol," Maritain argues that, "Nothing is clearer than the importance of the sign in social life," because the sign, "invests human affairs with *meaning* (signification) and fills them with something more than they physically are, makes out of men and their gestures a mirror, a sign, a symbol through which passes *another thing*, and to this extent gives social life an intellectual and indeed a poetical *quality*."<sup>72</sup> In *The Moviegoer*, Lonnie may be a "Helen Keller" helping us to discover signification and therefore sin. He may be a sign mirroring Christ for Binx. Dwelling on the wonder of signification, Maritain argues that it is in

68. Ibid., 131.

69. Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, 153.

70. Ibid.

71. Maritain, "Sign and Symbol," 226; emphasis in original.

72. Ibid., 250-51.



a sense of little importance that a sign's significance be forgotten over time, or is morphed, or is indistinct. What is essential is that there be sign and signification: "Not knowing precisely what a given sign signifies, I am free to have it signify *everything* for me. In a sense, poetical joy and affective exaltation will then only be more vast and more indeterminate."<sup>73</sup> And yet, on the other edge of this *everything* hangs the great *nothing* spoken of by Shakespeare's Macbeth, for whom all of life, *everything*, is "a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,/Signifying nothing." Amidst the sound and fury of *The Moviegoer*, Lonnie may signify many things, but there is one thing he symbolizes more than any other.

Wrestling with three incarnations of the literary term "Christ-figure," Robert Detweiler "speaks of the *sign*, where the character is but Christ in disguise, of the *mythological archetype*, where the character and Christ are seen as representing the same recurring life-pattern, of the *symbol* in which a character's redemptive role in a story is indicated through some overt parallels to the Biblical Christ."<sup>74</sup> Lonnie is a symbolic sign. At the novel's end, Lonnie dies of hepatitis. The day before he is gone, Binx visits him to find that "he had conquered a habitual disposition"—his envy.<sup>75</sup> He became a living man before he died. The day his breath finally expires, Lonnie's half brothers and sisters are left outside in the car all morning, while his mother stays at her dying son's bedside. Binx, until this point an observer and interpreter, comes urgently out of the hospital room: "I have to find the children," he says hastily.<sup>76</sup> Binx comforts the children with kisses and, becoming Lonnie in another mode of existence, becomes thereby a catechetical hope:

"Binx," one of Lonnie's brothers asks, "When our Lord raises him up on the last day, will Lonnie still be in a wheelchair or will he be like us?" Binx says, "He'll be like you," to which young Donice replies, "You mean he'll be able to ski?' The children cock their heads and listen like old men./'Yes./'Hurray' cry the twins."<sup>77</sup> Binx offers to take the children to the Audubon park. The children scream *Yes!* and say, "Binx, we love you too!"<sup>78</sup> Piecing together the work of Percy and Maritain, I propose Lonnie is a sign

73. Ibid.

74. Christine Dowling, "Typology and the Literary Christ-Figure: A Critique," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 36, no. 1 (1968): 25; emphasis in original.

75. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 189.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid., 190.

78. Ibid.



symbolizing Christ and maintain that in him we find a, "certain presence—presence of knowability—" of what we find in the unbloody sacrifice of the Eucharist and in the bodily sacrifice of his life.<sup>79</sup> Christ is in Lonnie *in alio esse*.

Lonnie is both sign and symbol in the story, but his meaning bleeds beyond both in that he receives the Eucharist. Lonnie offers up the sacrament, which effects a *change in being* in him, for Binx. In the final scene, where Binx interacts with the children, we see, more than a mere change in behavior, a change in being. We see him respond to Christ's direct (and Lonnie's implied) command to "feed my lambs," and "tend my sheep." Of course the shift is not and should not be *storied*. We see him, even after his contact with what Lonnie and what the children signify, even after the remarkably childlike interaction with the children, move into a movie-like image of his beloved Kate in his mind "until my brothers and sisters call out behind me."<sup>80</sup>

Percy begins *The Moviegoer* with a quote from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*: "[T]he specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair."<sup>81</sup> Percy also contends that consciousness, from *con-scio*, "I know with," comes about through language. For he calls consciousness an "act of attention to something under the auspices of its sign ... an act which is social in origin."<sup>82</sup> One who lives in despair without knowing he is in despair is like the deaf mute who only lives through signals. They live, to use Kierkegaard's metaphor of the self, *only in the basement* for their entire lives. The basement is the *aesthetic* way of life in which one is in despair so as not to be conscious of having a self. He who lives in the basement lives in obedience only to desires, and never reaches the ethical first floor, a life lived in obedience to the required, or the religious, second floor, what he calls the ideality of actuality, where all things are made new. Binx lives in the basement, is a practitioner of the *aesthetical* way. He lives for the fiction of the movies, but *The Moviegoer* reveals that the harmful fictions which distract us are not limited to the second rate blockbusters we live our lives by.

Rather, as Simone Weil shows us in her essay "Morality and Literature," "the substance of our life is almost exclusively composed of fiction.

79. Maritain, "Sign and Symbol," 220.

81. *Ibid.*, 7.

80. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, 191.

82. Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, 106.



We fictionalize our future, and, unless we are heroically devoted to truth, we fictionalize our past, refashioning it to our taste. We do not study other people; we invent what they are thinking, saying, and doing.”<sup>83</sup> Reality may provide us with raw material, but we tend to refashion it until all values are reversed. Explicating Weil’s essay, John M. Dunaway notes that “a law of human psychology perpetuates this tendency until we are confronted with a violent shock of reality—such as contact with a saint or with affliction or crime. The only other thing that can overcome the force of fiction in our lives is the work of great literary genius” which, though fiction, is filled with the density of the real, in part because it ransoms the significance of symbols that give to us *worlds* that, existing within good and evil, grant to us the possibility of *conversion*—conversion at the level of language and conversion at the level of the soul.<sup>84</sup> Remember Maritain’s insistence that in order for one to *know* the relationship of signification of which they are to make use, “some external help is indispensable.”<sup>85</sup> For Weil, this external help can come from contact with saints, criminals, and great literary works. In *The Moviegoer*, Binx’s aesthetical, basement existence is interrupted by contact with the saintly Lonnie, and, in an entirely connected sense, with his contact with children.

While we await those encounters with affliction, criminals, and saints that can administer to us the shocking significance of the real, we are left with great poetry, poetry like Percy’s which serves pedagogically as the “external help” that makes the stones feel stony, that helps us perceive the “architecture of the abyss” behind our banally evil fictions, that shows us the Good *in alio esse*. When we are lost in our Pharisaical fictions, those “unseen graves over which people unknowingly walk” that Christ speaks of, when we succumb to sin—signs that signify nothing but other signs—great poems can serve as natural sacraments, can prepare spaces in our language which do not yet exist, opening our very being to the gravity-suspending, despair-defying, language-illuminating action of grace.

83. Ibid.

84. John M. Dunaway, “Simone Weil on Morality and Literature,” in *The Beauty That Saves: Essays on Aesthetics and Language in Simone Weil*, edited by John M. Dunaway and Eric O. Springstead (Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 1996), 100–101.

85. Maritain, “Sign and Symbol,” 221.