

SECULAR SPIRITUAL QUESTS IN MODERN AMERICAN NOVELS, 1922-1960

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For my children: Owen, Amelia, and Nathaniel.

I hope I wrote everything right, too.

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## Abstract of Dissertation

### Secular Spiritual Quests in Modern American Novels, 1922-1960

In this dissertation, I investigate the ways that spiritual narratives have been represented in secular modernist novels and examine and deconstruct the secular/spiritual binary commonly used in their critique. In light of revised theories of secularization that suggest the so-called secular age was never all that secular to begin with, I argue for increased attention to modes of individual spiritual experience. In the opening chapter, I examine how conventional narratives of 20<sup>th</sup> century American secularization and modernity have limited the scope of literary criticism. As other disciplines, particularly philosophy and sociology, revise and deepen their approaches to spirituality, I argue that this nascent postsecularism is not simply a description of our current historical moment, but can be deployed as a critical practice to revise and correct dominant interpretations of 20<sup>th</sup> century literature that overlook the significance of embedded spiritual narratives. The chapters that follow examine how these novels represent spiritual identity in a culture that has, as Lyotard wrote, rejected grand narratives but not the desire for a transcendent spiritual position that the grand narratives once accommodated. In chapter two, "The Transcendent Promise of War," I argue that Willa Cather's *One of Ours* and Saul Bellow's *Dangling Man* demonstrate how spiritual quest unfolds in the context of national conflict, with the battlefield imagined as a location for spiritual transcendence. Chapter three, "A Bridge from Man to Man": Spiritual Connections in *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider*" considers how Claude McKay and Richard

Wright's novels express spiritual identity as shaped by participation in or rejection of community. The fourth chapter, "Ongoing Conversions: Spiritual Uncertainty in *All the King's Men* and *The Moviegoer*" identifies a turn toward provisional spiritual solutions that emphasize the process of spiritual quest over a clear spiritual teleology in Robert Penn Warren and Walker Percy's novels. These readings, intended as additive and, in some cases, reparative interpretations of novels whose spiritual content has often been overlooked, lead to a more nuanced understanding of American modernism and contribute to a richer understanding of the development of the American spiritual narrative.

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## Chapter 1: Modern American Secular/Spiritual Quest

The post-WWI twentieth century is often characterized as secular, a time in which Americans, haunted by a senseless and bloody war, turned away from the grand narratives—religion chief among them—that gave transcendent meaning and purpose to individual lives. In a recent collection of essays entitled *Meaning and Modernity*, the editors offer a definition of modernism that features secularization: “The substitution of religious faith by systematically organized skepticism” (Madsen xiv).

Yet despite this seeming rejection of God and institutional religion, the literature of this period teems with characters searching for a way to make sense of their material as well as spiritual selves. Indeed, this dissertation will argue that increased emphasis on the secular does not diminish serious consideration of spiritual life in literature; rather, the challenge of finding spiritual identity and direction deepens in the context of a secular cultural atmosphere. To rely on the generally accepted secular/spiritual binary in our readings of early- and mid-twentieth century American fiction is to obscure the hybrid spiritual position these writers imagined: neither traditionally religious nor fully secular, their characters and narrative voices uneasily move between the two in an effort to create a third spiritual position that draws from both.

This dissertation examines six modernist American novels (broadly defined as post-WWI, pre-1960s) whose characters seek ontologies that explain and perhaps enable them to transcend the suffering and sadness they feel and observe

around them. My work shows that these searches, though in most cases not acknowledged as spiritual, are driven by what Karen Armstrong calls the “desire to cultivate a sense of the transcendent” (9).

More broadly, I add my voice to the growing field of postsecular studies by demonstrating the useful application of postsecularism as a critical practice and not just a current period in history. Dominant interpretations of modernist American novels were formulated in the context of assumptions about secularization that sometimes uncritically accepted the secular/spiritual binary, and devalued and minimized the role of the spiritual in American culture. While postsecular studies is generally focused on developing theories that explain the current and recent cultural landscape, I mobilize its revised positions about the secular/spiritual to produce interpretations that endeavor to enrich, and in some cases, correct existing critical interpretations.

Critical approaches that imagine the secular and the spiritual in opposition to each other are not limited to the novel, nor to the years between 1922 and 1960, but I have limited my study to these categories for several reasons. My focus on the individual experience of spiritual searches made the novel an obvious choice, since novels more than any other form provide sustained access to consciousness. Further, the novel is often defined as the literary form dependent for its very existence on modern secular culture: Ian Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* explicitly ties its emergence in the eighteenth century to the reading public’s “increasingly secular tastes” (50); Donna Tartt characterizes “the novel in its history and genesis is an emphatically secular art form: the product of a secular society, addressing primarily

secular concerns” (25). Destabilizing the secular/spiritual binary has implications not just for interpretations of individual texts, but for defining and historicizing the form itself: uncovering important evidence of spiritual seriousness in these novels weakens the notion that the novel represents the triumph of the secular in literature.

I chose the modernist period because modernist writers are famously interested in writing the complex interiority of their characters. Since the quests under study are concerned with individual rather than collective spiritual experience, the selected novels are in the first person, attending to the experiences and consciousness of a single narrator/protagonist, or in the third person free indirect, where the narrative voice is largely tied to a single character’s point of view.

Willa Cather’s *One of Ours*, Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man*, Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem*, Richard Wright’s *The Outsider*, Robert Penn Warren’s *All the King’s Men*, and Walker Percy’s *The Moviegoer* are deeply embedded in particular religious heritages, even as many of their characters struggle to free themselves from them, and even though many of the novels are not widely regarded as religious stories.

Finally, I chose these particular novels to demonstrate the reach of the secular/spiritual quest across many of the categories normally applied to critical inquiry. Though the secular/spiritual quests are informed individually by specifics of geography, economics, and race, they are not limited to any one of those categories. The secular/spiritual quest is not northern or southern, not black or white, not urban or rural, not wealthy or poor. In my selection of primary texts, I

seek to show the wide-ranging usefulness of applying postsecular critical practices to the so-called secular age.

### **Reconsidering Secularization**

This project, while conceived in 2002 based on discussions and observations in a graduate seminar, has coincided with attempts from many scholars, particularly in sociology, to revise the theory of secularization, which imagined a completely secularized society as the end point of a fully modernized society. Secularization theory contended that as the world becomes more modern, it necessarily becomes more secular, and imagined a teleology in which the vestiges of religion eventually disappeared. In the past few years, much attention has been lavished on secularist, or perhaps more accurately, anti-religious publications from essayists and critics like Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Sam Harris,<sup>1</sup> who call themselves The Four Horsemen. While strong secularist voices are registering on the cultural map, they are clearly not the only or even the loudest voices. Secularization theory has run into trouble in the face of rising religious fundamentalism within the United States and around the globe.

Outside of academia, religion is a recurrent topic in the press, politics, and popular culture. Novels with religious themes continue to populate the bestseller lists, like Dan Brown's *The DaVinci Code*, William P. Young's *The Shack*, and Wally Lamb's *The Hour I First Believed*. During the 2008 presidential election, scores of articles appeared about the crucial Evangelical Christian voting bloc and both the Democrat and Republican attempts to court their support. Religious rhetoric is alive

and well in politics and world affairs.

In almost all areas of study, scholars and researchers are contesting the idea that a secular modernity was ever as firmly entrenched as was once believed. Jurgen Habermas explains, “An ever smaller number of sociologists now support the hypothesis, and it went unopposed for a long time, that there is close linkage between the modernization of society and the secularization of the population” (“Notes”). What’s more, overcoming religion may not be all that some in modernity imagined it to be. Habermas identifies the risks involved in losing our religion:

[There is a problem that] faces all modern societies once the religious traditions that point beyond the purely human realm have largely lost their former authority. I observe palpable regressions into new forms of paganism which undercut the ego-identity that was achieved by means of the major religions. If that is the case, then how can, if not the substance, then at any rate the humanizing power of traditions that protect us against such regressions, how can the legacy of religion be salvaged for the secular world?

Of course, reports of the death of religion may be greatly exaggerated. M.H. Abrams notes in *Natural Supernaturalism*, published in 1971, that “secular thinkers have no more been able to work free of centuries-old Judeo-Christian culture than Christian theologians were able to work free of classical and pagan thought.” Robert Bellah similarly argues that none of the twentieth century ideological movements were able to supplant religious heritage—in fact, many of them have “acted it out in parody even as they imagined themselves rejecting it.”

The notion, widely accepted through the mid- and late-twentieth century, was that civilization would continue on an inevitable march toward a fully secular culture. Narratives of secularization predicted that the disenchantment of the world begun in the Enlightenment would continue until all vestige of enchantment had been snuffed out: Copernicus and Galileo's scientific discoveries set the world on a path that could only lead to the disavowal of all forms of the supernatural. Surely if the sun as the center of the universe was threatening to the Catholic Church in the 16th century, then by the end of the 20th, after centuries more scientific discovery, there would be no more Catholic Church. Regardless whether one cheers or despairs over present levels of religious influence, there is, clearly, still religion in the world.

Thus, scholars are reconsidering the secular. Why and how it is different from previously theorized? Did secularization simply stall out? Under this model, society became as secular as it could possibly get, but the world could go no further. This revision finds fault with the teleology of the old theory, but not with its basic tenet that we have been becoming less religious on the whole.

Others identify renewed interest in religion as return or reemergence. As Michael Hoelzl and Graham Ward explain, this model assumes continuity with historical forms of religion; the forms of religion (re)appearing now are identical to those experienced in the past (2). This revitalization is but the swinging of a pendulum: we devalued or lost sight of religion, but have corrected our course and now we are moving back toward a greater role for the sacred, as evidenced by higher attendance in houses of worship on Saturdays and Sundays.

A third model takes issue with the notion that what we are witnessing is a

simple return, since that would imply that religion had in fact disappeared or retreated significantly in the first place. The reemergence model suggests that during the so-called secular years past, religion had gone underground, hibernating until conditions were right for its return. This is clearly not the case. One need look no further than Karen Armstrong's 2009 *The Case for God*, a great deal of which traces religious thought post-Enlightenment.

The idea that the sacred and secular are separate, distinctive categories is itself insufficient. The categories of secular modernity—sacred/profane, religious/secular, theist/atheist—belong not only to the secularist, but also to religious studies and even to theology. That is, the meaning of each category depends on the presence of the other. If the very definition of the secular relies upon its contrast with concepts of the sacred, a historical teleology of absolute secularism is impossible.

And yet, despite this Derridean *différence*, the prevailing narratives of western modernity emphasize the waning influence of the religious, the supernatural, and the mythical upon the average person. According to Armstrong, the root of this trend lies in the Enlightenment, when theologians and clergy adopted the positivism of Rousseau in a misguided attempt to compete with emerging scientific discoveries.

Armstrong argues that much of what is seen as a natural conflict between science and faith is a consequence of epistemological misunderstanding. She describes different realms of experience in the premodern world: *logos*, concerned with the practical, tangible realities of life, and *mythos*, reserved for existential

questions and making sense out of human experience. According to Armstrong, it is only quite recently that humans have blurred the lines between these separate epistemologies. Modern people, in Armstrong's view, were so impressed with their advances in the realm of *logos*, that they became convinced that it was the only valid way of knowing anything. *Mythos*, and its reliance on metaphor, analogy, and apophatic spiritual practice began to appear wholly inferior to the positivism of *logos*.

The favored status of *logos* persists, particularly in the academy, and is evident even in Robert Orsi's characterization of the "usually hidden and unacknowledged" division of religious studies into good/bad schema, where "good religion, constructed as rational, word-centered, nonritualistic, middle class, unemotional, compatible with democracy and the liberal state, was what was taught and endorsed in academic environments; for everything else the discipline developed a nomenclature of marginalization (cults, sects, primitives, and so on)" (Orsi 15). This good/bad construct reflects a theory of secularization that presumes a gradual replacement of all public displays of religion by rational, civil religion.

If even religious studies scholars are prone to this model, it's no wonder that academics in other fields have, as Tracy Fessenden points out, tended to regard "*all* visible forms of religion ... as irrational, regressive, and threatening to the democratic project" (*Culture 2*):

Secularism enters into American literary studies as both a historical assumption (religion figures only minimally in the development of American literature, and less so over time) and a critical practice



(religion therefore fails to warrant the kinds of attention we give to other social formations in American literary history, including gender race, sexuality, and class). (2)

Outside of the classroom and the library, there are real-world consequences for underestimating religion's role in history and current affairs. The problem, as Armstrong conceives it, is not just that we undervalue a particular epistemology, but that misapplying *logos* (that is, using it outside its "realm of competency") by requiring scientific accuracy from the axial religions produces unnecessarily dogmatic and dangerous forms of religion that in turn attempt to misapply *mythos* to science. Far from ridding the world of fundamentalism, privileging *logos* in all areas of thought has led to a return of the repressed religious, distorted from its original intent and driven by fear of further marginalization.

Fessenden, too, warns that uncritical acceptance of American secularization "may in fact work to strengthen the hold of a particular strain of conservative Christianity in American public life" (*Culture* 3). American secularization is not the mere disappearance of religion; however, this over-simplified narrative "hides the violence and coercion that have attended the formation of American democratic space in the guise of the neutrality and universality of the secular" (*Culture* 217).

This leads to another reason to revise secularization theories: as a corollary to Bruno Latour's phrase, we have never been secular, either; the so-called secular era was never really that secular to begin with. Fessenden's *Culture and Redemption* asks us to remember that the supposedly secular United States "is broadly accommodating of mainstream and evangelical Protestantism, minimally less so of

Catholicism, unevenly so of Judaism, much less so of Islam, perhaps still less so of Native American religious practices that fall outside the bounds of the acceptably decorative or ‘spiritual’” (3). Secularism has indeed been determined by a very specific form of “good” religious faith *cum* civil religion.

Fessenden’s point is reminiscent of Mircea Eliade’s argument that modernity has naturalized certain cultural characteristics so that even those with origins in the sacred are seen as completely secular. For example, where the new world was at first considered a Christian paradise where one could experience spiritual rebirth, as evidenced in the earliest Puritan conversion narratives, secularized civil religion re-positions America as an economic Garden of Eden, where one’s rebirth was meant to be financial. Eliade rightly suggests that a re-mythologizing is required in order to regain a sense of the spiritual beginnings of the American Dream. Instead of revealing how sacred myth masks economic principles, one must seek to reveal how secular principles, economic and otherwise, have veneered older spiritual ideologies.

Taking this line of thought even further, Gianni Vattimo argues in *Belief* that the secular is not necessarily a movement away from religious thought, but a *continuation* of religious thought. Vattimo, known for regarding the history of Being as a history of weakening (that is, moving away from strong structures associated with violence), maps the weakening trend over the history of Christianity and finds that “secularization—the progressive dissolution of the natural sacred—is the very essence of Christianity” (50). Further, “the dissolution of the sacral structures of Christian society, the transition to an ethics of autonomy, to a lay state, to a more

flexible literalism in the interpretation of dogmas and precepts, should be understood not as the failure of or departure from Christianity, but as a fuller realization of its truth” (47).

Vattimo generally regards the pre-Christian sacred as tied to the strong structures and violence, and interprets the New Testament and as a surprising countermeasure against the violent and authoritarian sacred. The Christian God, appearing in human form and emptying itself (*kenosis*), is an example of weakened divinity at odds with the what he calls the natural sacred, tied to authoritarian strength. The ongoing process of secularization is not to be seen as the absence of God or faith, but rather the continued weakening of structures of the sacred. Vattimo sees secularized faith a corrective weakening and fully compatible with the Christian concept of *kenosis*.

Vattimo’s position is similar to Karen Armstrong’s in that it problematizes the notion that reason is antithetical to faith. But rather than chastising science for stepping on faith’s toes, Vattimo sees the rise of secular-scientific as a development of faith. In this framework, the weakening of strong structures and grand narratives is the realization of “the history of salvation” (52) not its elimination.

Armstrong, Fessenden, and Vattimo all provide convincing evidence that rather than a simple return of the religious, we are experiencing what Hoelzl and Ward call a new visibility of religion “that is far more complex and nuanced than the simple re-emergence of something that has been in decline in the past but is now manifesting itself once more” (1). Scholars are acknowledging ongoing religious influence in secular culture and the growth of religious fundamentalisms around the

world regardless of which model most accurately reflects current religious activity. Under the broad canopy of postsecular studies, a wide range of disciplines (though predominantly sociology and philosophy), are developing strategies for studying and theorizing the interactions, overlaps, and constituencies that exist along a spectrum of religious identities and experiences.

John McClure succinctly defines postsecularism as “a mode of being and seeing that is at once critical of secular constructions of reality and of dogmatic religiosity” (ix). No longer subscribing to theories of postmodernity that predicted the end of religion altogether, the postsecularist recognizes what Vattimo writes in his book *Belief*: “disenchantment has also produced a radical disenchantment with the idea of disenchantment itself; or, in other words, that demythification has finally turned against itself, recognizing that even the ideal of the elimination of myth is a myth” (29). But neither does postsecularism reject the secular in order to privilege the sacred; rather, equally unwilling to commit to dogmatic theisms as to dogmatic atheisms, it recognizes the contingent nature of both.

### **Postsecularism in Literature**

As postsecularism comes to greater prominence in cultural studies, literary scholars are beginning to take notice. McClure’s book, *Partial Faiths*, argues that contrary to the claims of Lyotard, Jameson, and other secularists who have led postmodern studies, the American postmodern is “something like a religious revival” (143). But unlike McClure’s contemporary texts, which embrace re-enchantment and supernaturalism “with the vulgar exuberance of a tabloid

headline,” and are “replete with instances of extraordinary, improbable, and miraculous events” (17), these earlier 20<sup>th</sup>-century narratives are much more reserved. The narratives I examine precede both chronologically and psychologically the contemporary agnostic seekers McClure discusses, but they lay the groundwork for contemporary modes of spiritual engagement. These characters are only slowly becoming aware that the secular structures by which they understand the world may not be wholly sufficient. Nonetheless, they experience many of the existential issues of postsecularism in the midst of so-called secularist modernity.

Confusion over what exactly constitutes spirituality or religion is not new. In *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James makes important distinctions, for instance, between institutional religion and personal religion. Institutional religion, most easily identifiable, focuses on dogma, rite, and ritual, and is often practiced by many in a community. Personal religion, on the other hand, while it may be connected to an institutional religion, need not be.

James defines personal religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine” (36). This definition is necessarily broad; many things that prompt a quasi-religious response are in no way connected to organized, institutional religion. For example, one might joke that so-and-so is a devotee of baseball—it’s his religion. How do we distinguish between an object merely beloved and one somehow divine? James provides this distinction by characterizing personal religion as grave and thoughtful, saying that there is

something “solemn, serious, and tender about any attitude which we denominate as religious,” with such solemnity marked by “neither a curse nor a jest” (44-5).

It is difficult, however, to use the term religion, even with the “personal” qualifier, and not imagine the institutions that have for so long and so greatly been associated with all religious feelings. What James called personal religion might today be called spirituality—the religious impulses that can exist independently from the institutions that may describe them.

James Baldwin’s *Go Tell It on the Mountain* provides a useful example for clarifying the distinction between religion and spirituality. Most of the novel is set in a New York City storefront church. John Grimes, fourteen, has vast experience with the difference between religion and spirituality. His father Gabriel, a lay preacher at the church, is both verbally cruel and physically abusive. He uses religion as a weapon against his wife and children, and his position of religious authority to create terror in others. As we learn Gabriel’s history, it becomes clear that his religious commitment is not borne out of spirituality, but rather out of a chance to exercise power and superiority over others.

On the other hand, John takes his spiritual life extremely seriously. Even at the movies—a non-religious space that nonetheless allows John spiritual sanctuary—he considers the state of his soul, his beliefs, and the kind of person he wants to be. While at church, his family members’ thoughts stray to everything but the divine while John undergoes a serious spiritual experience. Baldwin suggests that despite John’s deviations from the institutional church’s requirements (John struggles with homosexual feelings), his is the most developed spirituality. Indeed,

John exhibits precisely the attitude of solemnity toward this church service and the possibility of interacting with the divine that William James identifies as a precondition of the spiritual.

These distinctions are more than semantics. Academia has long considered the role of religion primarily in terms of the institutional church. Religion is analyzed in literary studies for its social components and influence, such as the role of churches in the abolitionist movement, the social gospel movement and Great Depression relief efforts, or the more recent emphasis on fundamentalist Christianity's production of a Republican voting bloc. These topics, while fruitful avenues of exploration, focus on institutional religion. If they turn at all to the personal, they limit their inquiry to the external results of personal belief, and do not adequately consider the interior aspects of spirituality. Thus, in literary criticism, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* is commonly interpreted solely as an indictment of the church, its restrictive position on sexuality, and its harsh social policing of congregants, with almost no one considering *Go Tell It* in terms of spirituality.

Distinguishing between religion and spirituality allows greater nuance in investigating the spiritual world outside of the institutional church. Furthermore, it puts pressure on the sacred/secular binary and allows exploration into the way these categories overlap.

While I undertake this project against the backdrop of the "new visibility" of religion in contemporary culture, I also aim to analyze the texts as products of their own historical moment. Written between 1920 and 1960, these novels fall into the category of modern literature, but on a broader historical scale, they are artistic

products of late-modernity on the cusp of the postmodern. Thus, I want to explore both how they function as artistic expressions of spirituality in their own time, and how we read those spiritual searches from our position in the postmodern, and, arguably, the postsecular world. As such, I draw heavily on William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* and Charles Taylor's *Varieties of Religion Today*. James' arguments about how the modern individual seeks, finds, explains, and feels about spirituality at the beginning of the 20th century forms the basis for the spiritual searches in the novels I address. I am equally indebted to Charles Taylor's reexamination of James, which interrogates James' position with a century of hindsight. As such, my approach considers how literary spirituality operated in James' time, and how a re-engagement with James can help formulate modes of spirituality in literature in our own time.

Beyond James' categorization of personal religion or spirituality as discrete from institutional, collective religion, it's useful to put further pressure on the concept of spirituality, especially once extricated from notions of religious institutions. One whose spirituality closely connects to an institutional religion inherits a set of values, a moral code of conduct, approved by the religious tradition. But non-religious people can also have a strong sense of ethics and morality—a functioning, stringent code of conduct of their own. In James' view, morality alone is an "athletic" attitude of endurance; one behaves in a certain manner, adopts a particular attitude in order to do battle with the world around him or her (53). Put another way, the emphasis in a morality is on exterior behaviors, in spirituality, on interior understanding and motivation. Characters like Warren's Jack Burden and



Cather's Claude Wheeler are aficionados of athletic moralities: each cycles through a number of assumed behavioral codes in attempts to transform himself, and yet each still feels unfulfilled and exhausted by his efforts.

What is this interior motivation, then, and why do only certain people (and certain literary characters) seem to possess it? James divides the world into two types of beings: the "sick souls" that see despair, pain, and suffering all around (151-2), and the simple, ignorantly happy people, whom James calls the healthy-minded, who have "a temperament organically weighted on the side of cheer and fatally forbidden to linger, as those of the opposite temperament linger, over the darker aspects of the universe" (95-6). Charles Taylor subcategorizes James' sick souls into three divisions: those seized by a sense of their own sinfulness, those who fear evil in the world, and those whose "religious melancholy" (34) is defined by a powerful sense of meaninglessness. For this type of sick soul, "the world now looks remote, strange, sinister, uncanny" (James 170), and "things seem unreal, distant, as though seen through a cloud" (Taylor 35).

As Taylor points out, melancholy is nothing new, but has historically specific definitions. He explains the premodern context of the melancholy subject:

The sudden sense of the loss of significance, which is central to melancholy, or *accidie* or *ennui*, used to be experienced in a framework in which the meaning of things was beyond doubt. God was there, good and evil were defined, what we are called to cannot be gainsaid; but we can no longer feel it. We are suddenly on the outside, exiled. *Accidie* is a sin, a kind of self-exclusion, for which there

can be no justification. (39)

This premodern melancholy, then, was a loss of enthusiasm for that which was understood to be an immanent reality. One can imagine that within this premodern context, a few rounds of James' athletic morality might help the melancholy subject return to her earlier experience of authentic religious feeling. Not so in the modern context, where "melancholy arises in a world where the guarantee of meaning has gone, where all its traditional sources, theological, metaphysical, historical, can be cast in doubt" (Taylor 39). In this modern world, you can't fake it 'til you make it; all the athletic morality one can summon is puny in the face of the possibility of ultimate meaninglessness, which Taylor calls "the recognized modern threat" (41).

### **Spirituality in the Modern Novel**

In the following chapters, close readings will show how these novels' seeking characters are deeply situated within James' construct of religious melancholy, even though they themselves do not recognize it as particularly religious. The characters examined in these chapters all fit the sick-souled, melancholy type. They are clearly contrasted with the once-born around them. Cather gives us the serene Evangeline Wheeler, unable to understand why Claude can't pull himself together. Percy's sick soul Binx Bolling finds his cousin Nell Lovell, whose very name reveals that she loves all and blindly accepts her own goodness and the goodness of the world around her, disgusting. In *Dangling Man*, Joseph's sick-souled sense of the world as distant is reinforced by his physical withdrawal from the normal activities of day-to-day life, and contrasts with his brother's willingness to coast along and take the

world as it comes.

Most definitions of modernism emphasize that modern subjects found themselves unable to conceive of the world through Lyotard's grand narratives—the totalizing explanations of the world, the nation, and the self. Each of the novels in this project is set roughly at its time of publication, and as such, neither the character nor the author has the benefit of retroactively contextualizing the spiritual search from the position of the postmodern. The spiritual untethering feels to each character an exceptional burden. Cather's Claude seems surprised that the ways of understanding the world that worked for others aren't working for him in the shadow of the Great War. In five displays of stunning egotism, Bellow's Joseph, Wright's Cross Damon, McKay's Ray, Warren's Jack Burden and Percy's Binx Bolling each tie his spiritual sorrows to his own intellectual superiority. The rest of the world, from these characters' perspectives, is just too dumb to realize life's fundamental existential troubles.

This unending self-centeredness drives melancholy characters toward ideologies that have the potential to extinguish the self. Dissatisfied with consuming piecemeal philosophies, these characters seek an ontological experience that consumes the individual, one that requires him to let the experience wash over him and submit. The spiritual position they desire would not just fend off chaos, as an ethical worldview might, but would transcend it. Ideal spirituality—which the questing characters pursue—provides not just a defense from the world, but helps one rise above it. The problem in all cases is an inability to find any system both totalizing and totally rational.

While the chapters that follow will examine each character's search in detail, their quests can be roughly divided into two categories in terms of their epistemological perspectives. Some characters reject any imperfect epistemology whole cloth. *The Outsider's* Cross Damon, for example, throws out all politics, all religion, and all friendship because none of these approaches to understanding the world can explain everything; Cross is left even more isolated and despairing than ever. *One of Ours'* Claude Wheeler bounces from place to place, from one epistemological approach to another, each time expecting the next to offer the key to a meaningful life.

The questing figures who end up feeling somewhat satisfied with the direction of their searches accept the absence of a totalizing epistemology, and the presence instead of a series of perspectives from which to understand the world. These relatively successful searches recognize that there is no endpoint to the process of trying to understand the world and the self in relationship to it. Warren's Jack Burden recognizes that neither the Great Twitch nor his version of idealism can account for the complexity of events in his life. Instead, he tries to understand the world in terms of individual relationships, some requiring a scientific epistemology, others a religious one, and still others an economic approach. *The Moviegoer's* Binx Bolling learns that "the search is all"; that perhaps the only way to eke out meaningful existence is to keep trying, even though it seems hopeless. It is precisely this type of agility and epistemological flexibility that offers the characters some degree of spiritual transcendence.

This elastic spirituality prefigures the American spiritual trajectory of the postmodern era. While these characters are outliers—seemingly alone in their need to search for a different way of understanding their spiritual selves—most of our contemporary religious understanding involves highly individualized spiritualities: various fragmented epistemologies that have grown up in place of any generalized way of knowing and understanding the world. Postmodern people attempt to mend the remnants of the old grand narratives into a bricolaged spirituality that John McClure calls “partial faiths.” McClure cites *Angels in America* playwright Tony Kushner’s assertion that he and his characters are “sort of comfortable with the discomfort of being an agnostic” as a way into the idea that the postmodern seeker accepts partial faiths; indeed, that partial knowing is as good as it gets. Perhaps Percy’s Binx Bolling comes closest to this postmodern spiritual position when he acknowledges that as a mortal human being, he will never wholly know the truth of God and God in the world, and instead will have to settle for simply continuing to try to muddle through anyway.

### **Literary Criticism and the Sacred/Secular**

The nascent postsecular studies field provides a corrective to the sacred/secular binary by providing a third category through which to understand spirituality in more recent literature. McClure, for instance, focuses his partial faith concept on novels written after 1980. However, the bulk of critical approaches to literature produced in the earlier part of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century tends to duplicate the sacred/secular binary. Texts that have explicitly religious content are often mined

for representations of religion and faith or interpreted to explicate a particular theological concept. This approach regards spirituality seriously, but tends to use literature in the service of a particular religious position.

On the other side of the binary, literary critical trends have favored theoretical approaches that privilege politics, sexuality, gender, or economics. Within the broad “identity studies” movement, spiritual identity has been largely overlooked. Contemporary consideration of religion is often limited to an external critique of “the church” as a monolithic cultural institution that forms, disseminates, and enforces civic and moral codes.

Accordingly, a writer like Flannery O’Connor, whose Catholicism profoundly influenced her work, gets the religious studies treatment: recent scholarship includes explorations of Thomism and theophany,<sup>2</sup> and exercises in denominational identification.<sup>3</sup> But O’Connor’s stories take the distinction between institutional religion and personal spirituality very seriously. Her characters are paragons of institutional religious piety, but O’Connor routinely chastises them for the emptiness of their spiritual selves. In “Revelation,” for example, Mrs. Turpin characterizes herself as a religious, god-fearing woman, but passes the time in the doctor’s waiting room developing a hierarchy of humanity based on race and economic status. When the not-so-subtly named Mary Grace finally jolts her out of her comfort zone by throwing a human development textbook at her, Mrs. Turpin must look at her spirituality, not just her institutional affiliation.

At the other end of the spectrum, Baldwin scholarship that addresses the spiritual content of his work does so almost exclusively in terms of the institutional

church's engagement with race and/or sexuality.<sup>4</sup> Michael F. Lynch characterizes this secularized socio-political slant in Baldwin criticism as "the refusal to take seriously or to examine [Baldwin's] obvious and admitted obsession with religion" (42). Indeed, Lynch seems to be the lone voice redirecting attention toward interior spiritual experience, "the individual's need to find sources of affirmation and grace outside the church," in the secular world of Baldwin's oeuvre.

My fundamental approach to this project is based upon the need for more voices like Lynch's to intervene in a critical debate that extends beyond the confines of Baldwin studies, a debate to which the dominant theoretical perspectives in literary criticism have not been particularly receptive. In their introduction to a special issue of *Social Text* devoted to studying secularism, Janet Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini identify academic reluctance to disturb these limited critical approaches. They explain that while critical theory generally purports to deconstruct binary oppositions,

...investigating and potentially destabilizing the religion/secularism opposition ... has proven to be a tricky proposition in an academy that is often leery of any appeal to things religious. Part of the reason for this skepticism is that the religion/secularism opposition is fundamentally implicated in claims about reason. ...to set critical pressure on the religion/secularism binary is to shift further the already shifting grounds of the intellectual enterprise, including the Left's intellectual enterprise. (1)

Indeed, academics are wary of surrendering the intellectual high ground conquered

by the Enlightenment; Jakobsen and Pellegrini note that “secularism is at the heart of the intertwined Enlightenment narratives of modernization, rationalization, and progress, all of which depend on the overcoming of religious dogma by reason” (4). The academy’s secularism aims to level the playing field among oppressed and oppressive peoples, “but this very claim to the universal allows for a simultaneous positing of inequality, of the specifically moral superiority of Enlightenment values and those who adhere to them in comparison to those who adhere to the exclusionary values of a particular religion” (9).

The problem is that the intellectual enterprise, with all its reliance on reason, is still just one more approach situated within and shaped by a number of social and economic factors that are in turn situated within their own specific historical moment, and thus equally subject to critique, despite their claims of objectivity. In her book *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Donna Haraway implicates herself in this type of problem:

[We] would still like to talk about *reality* with more confidence than we allow the Christian right’s discussion of the Second Coming and their being raptured out of the final destruction of the world. We would like to think our appeals to real worlds are more than a desperate lurch away from cynicism and an act of faith like any other cult’s, no matter how much space we generously give to all the rich and always historically specific mediations through which we and everybody else must know the world. (185)

This religion-phobia leads to Jonathan Culler’s assertion that any treatment of



religion in academe requires us to “compare Christianity with other mythologies [and] make the sadism and sexism of religious discourse an explicit object of discussion” in an attempt to avoid “contributing to the legitimation of religious discourse.” While Culler disregards the potential for personal spirituality that may exist within or without a formal religious institution, the novels I present in this project confront Habermas’ challenge to salvage a workable spiritual life in the secular world.

### **Overview**

The chapters that follow examine how particular texts imagine a viable spiritual life. In chapter two, “The Transcendent Promise of War,” I investigate the ways in which the battlefield offers a potential solution for the spiritually bereft in Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* and Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man*. These two texts, published in 1922 and 1944, allow me to examine the modes in which war was imagined to have served personal spiritual needs during both World Wars. Both texts present the possibility of spiritual transcendence through participation in battle, but their constructions of the soldier are an amalgamation of the idealized roles of the chivalrous nobleman, the dutiful patriot, and the impossibly masculine warrior. Though they may be individually considered outmoded, these roles are conflated to create the image of a warrior more sophisticated and self-aware than his predecessors. These modernist soldiers have progressed beyond the old grand narratives, but have not evolved so far as to abandon the desire for a transcendent spiritual position that the grand narratives once accommodated. I examine how

each text approaches this problem: Cather's country-bred protagonist from a position of innocence and inexperience; Bellow's hardened city-dweller from a skeptical and intensely critical perspective.

In *One of Ours*, protagonist Claude Wheeler experiments with a series of locations around which to attempt spiritual transcendence. I analyze Claude's childhood Christianity and subsequent disillusionment with institutional religion, his dalliance with academia, and his marriage, and track the ways in which these locations first attract Claude, fill him with hope, and then fail to provide the sense of spiritual wholeness he sought there. I then conduct a detailed examination of how Claude's growing awareness of World War I, his enlistment in the army, and his journey to the front serve as his entry point to a sense of spiritual belonging.

Bellow's questing character, Joseph, has already attempted to define himself through the organizing philosophies of intellectuality and political affiliation. *Dangling Man* is his self-examination during a year-long period of waiting to be called up for service in World War II. Where Claude wandered somewhat aimlessly, Joseph feels compelled to undertake a rigorous examination of his emotional and spiritual life in the context of a secular world ("the stage has been reset and human beings only walk on it" (88)) and the burden that "each of us is responsible for his own salvation". One can no longer be born into a belief system and have it satisfy. Like Robert Bellah's sociological observations about the expectation that one must figure out one's religious conviction on one's own, rather than simply accepting dogma handed down from family tradition, Joseph strikes out to catalog his inner life and see where it leads him. Though unrelentingly reasonable, he cannot shake

the unreasonable expectation that his existential struggles will be solved by participating in the war. Joseph's struggle is to reconcile his continuing desire for existential peace with his intellectual belief that it probably doesn't exist.

The third chapter considers Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Richard Wright's *The Outsider* (1954). "A Bridge from Man to Man": Spiritual Connections in *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider*", examines how secular/spiritual quests are shaped by racial identity, experienced both individually and collectively. McKay's characters' spiritual searches are expressions of dissatisfaction with their positions within the black community and the identities projected upon them by those both outside the community and within it. I reinterpret *Home to Harlem* as a search for spiritual meaning conducted in the context of a haunting sense of absence that the protagonist is unable to name, a sense deepened by cultural expectations about race, and sublimated in romantic desire.

I examine Wright's *The Outsider* (1954) as a spiritual quest narrative, rather than strictly an existentialist text. Wright draws from both Christian and atheist/secular existentialism to form an agnostic spiritual sensibility. Cross Damon is conscious of the emptiness and senselessness of his life. Though Cross has rejected Christianity, he has been deeply affected by a devout mother, and cannot seem to escape from either's influence. He talks about how modern man has "moved beyond religion," and yet often experiences things with a "religious intensity." Though he doesn't believe in anything in particular, he still experiences an impulse to believe in something. In this chapter, I examine that impulse, his search for a tenable spiritual outlook that accounts for the base and transcendent natures that

coexist in humanity. He wants to find out whether there is something in the secular world that can function as a meaning-creating structure in the way that religion had in the past. In *The Outsider*, Damon considers two such replacements: first, total commitment to the Communist Party; second, total commitment to the nihilistic self.

The fourth chapter, "Ongoing Conversions: Spiritual Uncertainty in *All the King's Men* and *The Moviegoer*" considers the Robert Penn Warren and Walker Percy novels as texts that attempt to negotiate ontologies that bridge the secular/sacred divide. Though Robert Koppelman refers only to Warren in this excerpt from a piece in *The Mississippi Quarterly*, it is equally applicable to Percy:

[He] comes closer than any American modernist to resolving the tensions between the discredited belief systems of the past and the consequent cultural and spiritual void of the present that we find so frequently in the work of his contemporaries. His yearning for significance in the world suggests a modernist adaptation of the premodern belief in the fundamentally symbolic and divine meanings of things and events. (Koppelman 106)

While neither novel ends with a protagonist who has figured out a wholly satisfactory spiritual identity, both characters come to terms with the recursive, unending nature of the spiritual search. In *All the King's Men*, Warren details a spiritual journey for his protagonist, Jack Burden, that moves from disengagement to nihilism to acceptance of a spiritual self always subject to revision and reinterpretation. This never-ending process mirrors the way Burden describes the act of writing down his story—a description that allows me also in this chapter to

engage with Anthony Paul Kerby's work on narrative theory.

A close reading of *The Moviegoer* reveals Binx Bolling's perception of his own life as meaningless, his search for relief from meaninglessness, and the ambiguity of his success. I argue that his search does not reach a pat conclusion, but that he finds sustenance in the idea of the ongoing process of the quest—an idea similar to Sacvan Bercovitch's depiction of Puritan spiritual narrative as "the anguish of process." I discuss Percy's diagnosis of American society as "the age of the theorist-consumer," dislocated and confused about personal identity, and ill-equipped to begin to find it; I also consider the implications of a theoretical/consumerist culture and the ways in which Percy believes such a culture obstructs authentic spirituality. I reframe Percy's work by using it in a conversation with early American spiritual narratives—in particular, with the spiritual writing of 18th-century preacher Jonathan Edwards. Though Edwards operated under vastly different material and cultural circumstances, both he and Percy perceive an unattainable spiritual perfection nonetheless worth seeking out. Percy's dissatisfaction with modern spiritual laxity, his desire for a rigorous spiritual ethic, and his recognition that authentic spirituality is, even under the best circumstances, ephemeral, recalls Edwards' sermons on holiness and the complexity of its definition and attainment.

In conclusion, I will argue the importance of being open to literary interpretations that include spirituality even in texts that appear to be secular. If Stanley Fish is right to anticipate that religion will soon "succeed high theory and the triumvirate of race, gender, and class as the center of intellectual energy in the academy," then literary studies must be willing to move beyond the explicitly

religious and consider the varied, subtler forms of spiritual exploration to which authors in even the most secular times have devoted their energies.

## Chapter 2: The Transcendent Promise of War

Despite the fragmentation and alienation that seem to define the twentieth century, a sense of cultural cohesiveness expresses itself in some of the narratives of the World Wars. The Great War, in its unprecedented scale and significance, and World War II, in its crusade for justice and freedom, seem to provide locations for virtues otherwise discordant to the modern consciousness.

The novel, with its extended literary treatment of subjectivities, is a particularly appropriate medium for examining the convergences of spiritual meaning and war. Though certainly national stories, the great wars are also individual stories. Joanna Bourke considers how in all the major military conflicts of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, soldiers used language to “[attempt] to achieve meaning in the midst of the chaos and terror” (358).<sup>1</sup> Not only did personal moral boundaries disintegrate for soldiers expected to risk their own lives and take the lives of others, but cultural moral boundaries were also shifting, as the entire enterprise of war combined virtuous nationalist rhetoric with state-sanctioned brutality.

It’s no wonder, then, that in the midst of moral chaos, every available discourse that could contribute to sense-making was called into service. In the preface to *The Great War and Modern Memory*, Paul Fussell remarks on the significance of war and its memorial literature, noting that “life feeds materials to literature while literature returns the favor by conferring forms upon life.” Fussell uncovers not only the ways that wartime experience was aestheticized in literature, but also how the experience of war was understood in a literary way even as it was

happening. He devotes an entire chapter to the significance of “myth, ritual, and romance” in understanding and describing the Great War, noting that many soldiers narrated their experiences of going to and returning from battle in language that closely resembled the language of conversion.<sup>2</sup>

What’s more, according to Fussell, this spiritually inflected language represents not just a resurgence of religious faith in the face of bodily harm, but rather an amalgam of Christianity, pagan legends and superstitions (115). More than shorthand for description, this symbolic language used “precedented motifs and images” to understand an experience of “unprecedented meaning” (139).

Fussell and Bourke emphasize that spiritual language is a powerful means by which we attempt to create meaning, regardless of whether one embraces the religious heritage of that language, and no matter how provisional the meaning created may be. Similarly, Karen Armstrong, in *The Case for God*, argues that religious and spiritual ontologies “help us live ... with realities for which there [are] no easy explanations and problems we could not solve: mortality, pain, grief, despair, and outrage at the injustice and cruelty of life” (318). While Armstrong sees these unsolvable problems present in all stages of history, they seem to prompt especially urgent questioning during times of war.

Another dimension of these wartime novels is the relationship between gender and spirituality, and between gender and war. Tracy Fessenden, commenting on the enduring influence of Barbara Welter’s cult of true womanhood, remarks on the way changes in nineteenth century gender roles permanently affected American religion. Fessenden reminds us that *the true woman* was not just



female, but a normative term for the white, middle-class, Protestant female, and that by connecting religion to this narrowly defined concept of femininity, religion also became subject to similar elisions and erasures in its definition. In the same ways that the cult of true womanhood normalized gender roles, Fessenden argues, it also narrowed accepted definitions of religion to a certain white, middle-class strain of Protestantism. Furthermore, the gender binaries encoded in the cult of true womanhood “[preserve] another conceptual split as enduring and potentially distorting as the separation between gendered spheres: the divide between the religious and the secular” (“Gendering Religion” 167). Thus, the feminine/masculine binary is intimately tied to the binary of sacred/secular. If attention to the spiritual is culturally fixed, however wrongly, as a feminine trait, where does that leave spiritually inclined men like the protagonists of Willa Cather’s *One of Ours* and Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man*?

While Joseph and Claude seek spiritual answers, they are confronted at every turn with evidence that pushes back against spiritual quest as a legitimate masculine undertaking. Both characters worry about their masculinity. Claude constantly seeks to enforce spirituality as a feminine trait: “Women ought to be religious; faith was the natural fragrance of their minds. ... A woman who didn’t have holy thoughts about mysterious things far away would be prosaic and commonplace, like a man” (Cather 1041). Clearly, religious feeling is the proper domain for women, and so Claude is only permitted access to spirituality through women. His entire being, inclined to spiritual search, is marked as feminine, down to his feminized name, considered a “sissy name” (1211).

Neither does Joseph conform to 1940s masculinity; indeed, he acknowledges he is not as tough as he should be. In an age of “hardboiled-dom,” keeping a journal is “self-indulgent, a weakness” (Bellow 9); contemporary masculinity implies a rejection of these “soft” ontological questions. His notions of gender roles are also entrenched—he is irritated by his wife’s resistance to his attempts to shape her opinions, but still relies on her to support him while he sits alone in his room every day (98).

Given their concern with how (in)appropriately they fill social expectations of gender roles, it’s not surprising that these characters are drawn to the one experience that can definitively seal their status as real men.<sup>3</sup> Claude and Joseph can conceal, if not outright reject, their feminine traits by participating in war, which, Adams explains, “provides a pivotal arena for actualizing masculinity, perhaps precisely because it historically excludes women and with them ostensibly anything feminine” (Adams 8).

If the serious consideration of the spiritual is a feminine issue, then the appeal of war to these characters becomes clearer. Adams describes war as “an antidote to the effeminization of American men, at most, and a means to achieve manhood, at least” (1-2); by assuming the mantle of ultimate masculinity—warrior and soldier—men affirm their acceptability within their gender. Having secured a masculine identity, at least in the eyes of the witnessing culture, Claude and Joseph are relieved of the threat of the feminine in their spiritual lives.

In the readings below, I examine how Willa Cather and Saul Bellow employ spiritual language and the practice of spiritual attitudes in the context of the

heightened anxieties of wartime. For the protagonists of Cather's *One of Ours* and Bellow's *Dangling Man*, the prospect of war represents not merely fear or dread, but an opportunity to form a spiritual identity lost in the peacetime world.

### **The Great War and Claude Wheeler's Quest**

Recent Cather studies have seen the publication of provocative scholarship on *One of Ours*, such as Steven Trout's consideration of the novel as a memorial of war, and Merrill Maguire Skaggs' analysis of Cather's treatment of war in relation to Faulkner. Indeed, much of the scholarship focuses on its status as a war novel, following on earlier controversy over the story's realism and accuracy.<sup>4</sup> While this is doubtless important and rich work, it is nonetheless well-trod ground, dating back to Hemingway's oft-quoted accusation that Cather has stolen ideas for the battle scenes from the film *Birth of a Nation*.<sup>5</sup>

However, Phyllis Rose calls attention to the "religious or spiritual dimension existing somewhere below or above consciousness" (142) present in Cather's work. *One of Ours* is "about" war, and yet it is also—and not contradictorily—about Claude Wheeler's attempts to define that religious and spiritual dimension for himself. The onset of war catalyzes his most promising attempt to do so.

We meet Claude in the liminal space between adolescence and adulthood. He is, as we might say now, in the process of finding himself, and as such is deeply concerned with authenticity. Cather says that Claude "is not so much afraid of loneliness as he is of accepting cheap substitutes; of making excuses to himself for a teacher who flatters him, of waking up some morning to find himself admiring a girl

merely because she is accessible. He has a dread of easy compromises, and he is terribly afraid of being fooled" (Cather 34). Though interested in leading a serious life of purpose, he has not determined how he will discern the hallmarks of a life of quality craftsmanship from the cheap knockoff.

So far, he hasn't been able to trust fate: "Claude had come to believe that the things and people he most disliked were the ones that were to shape his destiny" (31). From this, we learn not only of Claude's less than harmonious relationship with his peers, but also that he believes in something outside of himself influences his life. He is desperate for something to "reach down from the sky and pick [him] up" above the mess of humanity; occasionally "he would spring to his feet, turn over quickly in bed, or stop short in his walk, because the old belief flashed up in him with an intense kind of hope, an intense kind of pain,--the conviction that there was something splendid about life, if he could but find it!" (103).

This reading of *One of Ours* examines Claude's attempts to convert his "intense hope" into a workable framework for an authentic, quality life. He is haunted by the fear of becoming spiritually stagnant, and thus conducts a search for a narrative that will make him more than a decaying part of nature:

The debris of human life was more worthless and ugly than the dead and decaying things in nature. Rubbish...junk....his mind could not picture anything that so exposed and condemned all the dreary, weary, ever-repeated actions by which life is continued from day to day. Actions without meaning.... He wondered how he was to go on

through the years ahead of him, unless he could get rid of this sick feeling in his soul. (223)

Drawing from discourses of Christianity, intellectualism, romantic love, and wartime heroism over the course of the novel, Claude constructs a spiritual philosophy he hopes will allow him to transcend the limits of his own life.

The desire to become part of something larger than oneself is not limited in Cather's work to *One of Ours*. Rose, among others, discusses *My Antonia's* Jim Burden's spiritual sense of peace at becoming part of the vast landscape of the Nebraska prairie: "Cather presents Jim at his happiest, most fully alive, when he has become a mere creature on the earth, sitting in his grandmother's garden, resting his back against a sun-warmed pumpkin, his individuality transcended" (125). Claude, too, seeks to transcend his individuality, but rather than becoming a "mere creature," he is determined to carve out a place for himself that rises above creaturely existence into the spiritual.

Claude's earliest, most enduring, source of spiritual education was his mother, Evangeline Wheeler (note the proximity to the word *evangelist*). Mrs. Wheeler finds satisfaction in the Christian church and has little curiosity about alternative narratives of the world: "The history of the human race, as it lay behind one, was already explained; and so was its destiny, which lay before. The mind should remain obediently within the theological concept of history" (25). While Claude is disgusted with the weakness he sees in the local minister Brother Weldon, "Claude's mother was not discriminating about preachers. She believed them all chosen and sanctified..." (30). Mrs. Wheeler nurses the hope that he will come to

accept the faith she has chosen; she thought “the trouble with her son was that he had not yet found his Saviour” (103).

Claude is aware that his mother thinks his problems could be solved by a closer involvement with Christianity:

He knew, too, she was always hoping to hear that he at last felt the need of coming closer to the church. She did not harass him about these things, but she had told him once or twice that nothing could happen in the world which would give her so much pleasure as to see him reconciled to Christ. (49)

Though he has not been “saved”, he has given serious thought to theology. As a teenager, Claude struggled with whether to accept his mother’s perspective. He took decisions about religion seriously; this period is described as “a painful time of doubt and fear when he thought a great deal about religion. For several years, from fourteen to eighteen, he believed that he would be lost if he did not repent and undergo that mysterious change called conversion” (49). Claude did not take decisions about faith and belief lightly, but he ultimately decided against a strong identification with Christianity:

Now he dismissed all Christian theology as something too full of evasions and sophistries to be reasoned about. The men who made it, he felt sure, were like the men who taught it. The noblest could be damned, according to their theory, while almost any mean-spirited parasite could be saved by faith. ‘Faith’ [...] was a substitute for most of the manly qualities he admired.... (50)

Though he does not accept the rules and regulations of his mother's Christianity, he is still intrigued by the notion of faith. He does not reject the label of Christianity—"Though he wanted little to do with theology and theologians, Claude would have said that he was a Christian" (50). Claude is still attracted to religious faith as a thing of beauty, particularly in women: "The more incredible the things they [women] believed, the more lovely was the act of belief" (127). Intellectually, Claude does not accept the story of Christianity; he senses, though, something wonderful at work when he observes his mother's faith: "To him the story of 'Paradise Lost' was as mythical as the 'Odyssey'; yet when his mother read it aloud to him, it was not only beautiful but true" (127). Claude's spiritual burden is to find an outlet for this mystical beauty that he can believe in; something that can be real to him in the way that the Garden of Eden is real to his mother.

In Claude's view, the primary deficiency of Christian theology is its loopholes and lack of reliance on strong logic. His focus on logic informs Claude's turn to the university as a possible location for the spiritual home he desires. Indeed, it was logic that stopped him from praying for the French soldiers he read about in the papers, noting that the other side would be praying for their soldiers, too, and it didn't make sense to reduce the conflict to a pray-off when so many other material, strategic, and ideological factors are at play. Otherwise, the fact that the Germans seemed to be winning would have been evidence, as he facetiously suggests, that they "must naturally be more pious than the French" (1073). Presumably, the university would be the ideal place for someone so invested in reason. Rather than

allowing any “parasite” to be saved by mere faith, the hallowed halls of education would offer praise and reward to intellectual agility and sound logic.

Indeed, Claude finds some sense of joy and possibility at the university. He “usually came out from ... lectures with the feeling that the world was full of stimulating things, and that one was fortunate to be alive and to be able to find out about them. His reading that autumn actually made the future look brighter to him; seemed to promise him something” (37-8). One possibility of a future in this context is revealed to him through his interactions with the Erlich family. Their house is filled with the iconography of the university—books everywhere: “The number of books astonished him almost as much; the wainscoting all around the room was built up in open bookcases, stuffed with volumes fat and thin, and they all looked interesting and hard-used” (40). But more important is the intellectual development he undergoes with the Erlichs: “He caught himself using words that had never crossed his lips before, that in his mind were associated only with the printed page” (45). Not only does Claude finally have other people with whom to discuss intellectual matters, he also turns inward and examines his own rationale and motivations. In his conversations with the Erlichs he must substantiate his positions, and thus, despite the fact that “he had grown up with the conviction that it was beneath his dignity to explain himself,” he begins to prepare for social occasions with the Erlichs by trying “to think things out and to justify his opinions to himself” (44).

This new intellectual outlook transforms the way Claude thinks about the stories he has known since childhood. Rather than seeing *Paradise Lost* as a



straightforward story of God's power over creation, he tells his startled and distressed mother that "Milton couldn't have got along without the wicked" and then defends this dispassionate analysis: "It just struck me that this part is so much more interesting than the books about perfect innocence in Eden." Claude has abandoned childlike innocence, as represented by his mother's religious reading of Milton, in favor of the knowledge of the university and a more scholarly critical interpretation.

And yet, Claude can not completely disregard the pull of the spiritual. Of all the subjects available to him, he writes his thesis on Joan of Arc, whose story he first heard as a child from his mother. This time, he approaches the story with his new reliance on logic and reason:

Claude put a great deal of time and thought upon the matter, and for the time being it seemed quite the most important thing in his life. ... Claude flattered himself that he had kept all personal feeling out of the paper; that it was a cold estimate of the girl's motives and character as indicated by the consistency and inconsistency of her replies; and of the change wrought in her by imprisonment and by 'the fear of the fire.' (61)

But reason and logic can't fully explain Joan of Arc. From the "fragmentary" description he'd heard from his mother, Claude "knew the essential facts about Joan of Arc, and she was a living figure in his mind. She seemed to him then as clear as now, and now as miraculous as then. ...he was perfectly prepared for the legend of Joan of Arc, and often thought about her..." (62). Despite his hard work on the thesis,

Claude can not extricate the facts from the myth, nor does it seem that he would want to do so even if he could. He prolongs his trip to hand in the thesis; he regrets its completion. It seems that the world of the intellectual, while appealing and initially satisfying, cannot satisfy his sense of the miraculous that persists around the Joan of Arc story. The intellectual work seems unlikely to stay with him in the same way the religious legend has—once he parts with his thesis, the sense of accomplishment and fulfillment in the intellectual endeavor will dissipate.

When Claude's academic career comes to end and he returns home to run the farm, Claude turns to another potential source of meaning and fulfillment. His burgeoning relationship with Enid seems to have the same sort of life-defining potential that he had first found at the university:

When he was with her, he thought how she was to be the one who would put him right with the world and make him fit into the life about him. His marriage would be the first natural, dutiful, expected thing he had ever done. It would be the beginning of usefulness and content; as his mother's oft-repeated Psalm said, it would restore his soul. (145-6)

Marrying Enid is meant to remedy several layers of Claude's problems: not only will it help him fit into his community by making an expected, sensible decision about settling down, but it will also give him purpose. He conflates the idea of marriage and establishing a household with the spiritual restoration available to his mother through religion.

Indeed, he puts his faith in romantic love as if it were a religion. He brushes off early signs that he and Enid might not be a good match by endowing marriage with supernatural capacities: "Everything would be all right when they were married, Claude told himself. He believed in the transforming power of marriage, as his mother believed in the miraculous effects of conversion" (176). When Enid shows little enthusiasm upon their engagement, he doggedly insists that his love will be enough to sustain him, even if Enid doesn't reciprocate. He convinces himself that "human love was a wonderful thing, [...] and it was most wonderful where it had least to gain" (196).

Surely Claude has little to gain. Enid has made it quite clear that she's not cut out for marriage, but Claude has so deeply invested in the potential of romance that he is deaf to her straightforward objections:

Enid was meant for him and she had come for him; he would never let her go. She should never know how much he longed for her. She would be slow to feel even a little of what he was feeling; he knew that. It would take a long while. But he would be infinitely patient, infinitely tender of her. It should be he who suffered, not she. ... He would shed love upon her until she warmed and changed without knowing why. (145)

As their relationship becomes more and more strained, he clings to the transcendent power of love for as long as he can. He first tries to convince himself that "if his wife didn't love him, it was because love meant one thing to him and quite another thing to her" (210), but finally realizes that marriage has not delivered

the sense of purpose and meaning he had longed for. He again turns to the spiritual, though not Christianity, for a way to understand himself:

These people whose hearts were set high needed such intercourse— whose wish was so beautiful that there were no experiences in this world to satisfy it. And these children of the moon, with their unappeased longings and futile dreams, were a finer race than the children of the sun....He agreed, for the most part, that it was better not to think about such things, and when he could he avoided thinking. (207-8)

His worldly attempts at satisfaction having met with disaster, he looks to the supernatural for explanation. Shortly thereafter, Enid deserts him for China, and she is scarcely heard from again. Claude could not reconcile his desire for reason with Christianity, nor could he resolve his attraction to the mythic with cold intellectualism; his romantic venture has combined both of these disappointments: “Platitudes, littleness, falseness...His life was choking him and he hadn’t the courage to break with it” (220).

It is with this overwhelming sense of desperation and failure that Claude finds the war. Long before he becomes an officer, he begins to see potential in the conflict overseas. Reports of the great battle at Marne glimmer with the mythic aspect he had fleetingly experienced in the Joan of Arc project, and has witnessed in his mother’s faith:

There was nothing on earth he would so gladly be as an atom in that wall of flesh and blood that rose and melted and rose again before the

city which had meant so much through all the centuries—but had never meant so much before. Its name [Marne] had come to have the purity of an abstract idea. (173)

In addition to the appealing notion of ideological purity, the war supplements individual purpose with a moving sense of scale; as a soldier, Claude would be absorbed into a force greater than himself.

When he sails for Europe, everything takes on an epic significance. Individuals and material objects alike are transformed into the vital elements of a grand adventure. As Claude observes the ships in the harbor, the life that had once been commonplace becomes mythic; the language reverberates with a sense of the portentous:

When great passions and great aspirations stirred a country, shapes like these formed along its shores to be the sheath of its valour. Nothing Claude had ever seen or heard or read or thought had made it all so clear as these untried wooden bottoms. They were the very impulse, they were the potential act, they were the ‘going over,’ the drawn arrow, the great unuttered cry, they were Fate, they were tomorrow! (269)

The emphasis is on the timelessness of Claude’s task; as the men prepare to embark for Europe, “to die for an idea, a sentiment, for the mere sound of a phrase”, we are told that the scene was “ageless” (274).

Claude believes he has finally found a viable way to create meaning for himself—something that not only directs his day-to-day activity, but that feeds his

desire for participation in the mythical. His participation in the war is couched in the language of the religious, much like the rhetoric of Christian salvation:

But the miracle had happened; a miracle so wide in its amplitude that the Wheelers [Claude's family], —all the Wheelers and the rough-necks and the low-brows were caught up in it. Yes, it was the rough-necks' own miracle, all this; it was their golden chance. He was in on it, and nothing could hinder or discourage him unless he were put over the side himself—which was only a way of joking, for that was a possibility he never seriously considered. The feeling of purpose, of fateful purpose, was strong in his breast. (312)

Instead of undeserving sinners being saved by an unimaginably powerful God, Claude and the other boys are unremarkable farmers being saved by an unimaginably significant world war. In the same way that Christianity has provided people like his mother with a context that surpasses the particulars of individual circumstance, Claude perceives the war elevating its participants beyond their humble beginnings. He muses that, "Taken one by one, they were ordinary fellows like himself. Yet here they were. And in this massing and movement of men there was nothing mean or common; he was sure of that. It was, from first to last, unforeseen, almost incredible" (284). The comparison is pushed beyond the suggestive when Cather references Matthew 3:9: "Out of these stones can my Father raise up seed unto Abraham" (284). In its Biblical context, John the Baptist is speaking about God's ability to create worthy descendants out of humble origins; for Claude, it is the war's power to transform run of the mill boys into great men.

That notion of greatness is central to Claude's adoption of the war as an avenue for transcendence. Religion had too easily rewarded dull people like Brother Weldon, academia had flattened the magical Joan of Arc, and Enid had bulldozed the notion of extraordinary romance. Finally, Claude seems to have found something that not only allows its participants the option of a larger-than-life status, but practically thrusts it on them. Upon hearing the news of his friend Victor Morse's death, Claude muses, "What other age could have produced such a figure? That was one of the things about this war; it took a little fellow from a little town, gave him an air and a swagger, a life like a movie-film,—and then a death like the rebel angels" (375). Claude's friend David Gerhardt points out that it is through none of their own doing that they have assumed these roles when he says, "Oh, this affair is too big for exceptions; it's universal. If you happened to be born twenty-six years ago, you couldn't escape" (354).

Claude seems much more secure in the existential framework of the war than in his previous forays into intellectualism and idealized love. In light of his experiences in Europe, the stressful, failed attempts at figuring out his place in the universe seem laughable: "Life had after all turned out well for him, and everything had a noble significance. The nervous tension in which he had lived for years now seemed incredible to him...absurd and childish, when he thought of it at all. He did not torture himself with recollections. He was beginning over again" (411).

The war has allowed Claude to piece together the most attractive pieces of other philosophies to create a system of belief that plays like a greatest hits collection. The chivalric elements he'd sought in marriage are satisfied by the

romantic justifications of war as masculine duty, but without the emasculating bother of an uninterested wife. In the war, he must use his mind to strategize, to plan, to lead; he utilizes the reason and logic he learned at the university, but with concrete results instead of as a purely academic exercise. These things alone, though, would not suffice; the war also provides the shimmering, mythical facet that elevates it to the spiritual. He concludes that “ideals were not archaic things, beautiful and impotent; they were the real sources of power among men. As long as that was true, and now he knew it was true—he had come all this way to find out—he had no quarrel with Destiny” (420). The war has allowed Claude to synthesize a spiritual approach that appreciates logic, but allows for destiny, that deals in worldly violence, but in service of a higher calling.

Of course, Cather’s final analysis of the situation is not nearly so pat. As I will discuss further in the conclusion to this chapter, no one is so sure that Claude’s spiritual discovery would have ultimately sustained him. Because he is killed on the battlefield, Claude never faces the challenge of making this hybrid spirituality work in a more mundane, peacetime existence.

### **The Second World War and Bellow’s *Dangling Man***

Twenty years later, Saul Bellow’s *Dangling Man* presents another protagonist searching for meaning in the shadow of war. Joseph has volunteered to serve in World War II and quit his job in anticipation, but due to a number of problems with paperwork, he’s “dangling,” left with not much to do while he waits for the call to service. Like Claude, he also lives in a liminal space, though for Joseph, almost thirty



years old, it is the no man's land between civilian life and military service rather than between childhood and adulthood.

Joseph's existence has always been marked by an active inner life, at least until depression set in and stifled it. He describes himself as being acutely aware of his inner self and his self-possession; he considers himself a scholar of the Enlightenment, the Romantics, and the ascetics. He has a philosophical outlook—he is always looking to the world of ideas and balancing them with practicality.

Like Claude before him, he feels removed from the world, set apart from humanity. His practical side recognizes that this may not be unique—"all human beings share this to some extent"—and yet it does not erase the "feeling of strangeness, of not quite belonging to the world, of lying under a cloud and looking up at it" (30). Though his wait to go off to war exacerbates these feelings, they are not the only cause. In his first journal entry, he says that "the seven months' delay is only one of the sources of my harassment. Again, I sometimes think of it as the backdrop against which I can be seen swinging. It is still more" (12).

Joseph fights what he sees as an animal nature by seeking out friends who might help him evolve beyond it. The first location he seeks for solace is a social group, which he describes in spiritual terms:

What he wanted was a 'colony of the spirit,' or a group whose covenants forbade spite, bloodiness, and cruelty. To hack, to tear, to murder was for those in whom the sense of the temporariness of life had shrunk. The world was crude and it was dangerous and, if no measures were taken, existence could indeed become—in Hobbes'

phrase, which had long ago lodged in Joseph's mind—'nasty, brutish short.' It need not become so if a number of others would combine to defend themselves against danger and crudity. (39-40)

But his friends disappoint him; they cannot live up to the standards he has set for them, nor can he keep them himself: "One was constantly threatened, shouldered, and, sometimes invaded by 'nasty, brutish, and short'; lost fights to it in unexpected corners. In the colony? Even in oneself. Was anyone immune altogether?" (56).

Not only is no person immune, it seems no system is immune to cracks and failures. Joseph has been investigating various approaches that might hold off the "nasty, brutish, and short," but has yet to find any that satisfy for long. For characters like Joseph and Claude Wheeler, an imperfect system—whether communism, scholarship, friendship, or romance—is a useless system, abandoned once discovered imperfect.

Academic pursuits do not fill the void. While Joseph always has a supply of books and a wife who encourages him to read, they no longer engage him. Books and the world of ideas used to inspire and transcend—with them, he felt free of the everydayness of life:

In the old days, ... I read constantly. I was forever buying new books, faster, admittedly, than I could read them. But as long as they surrounded me they stood as guarantors of an extended life, far more precious and necessary than the one I was forced to lead daily. If it was impossible to sustain this superior life at all times, I could at least keep its signs within reach. When it became tenuous I could see them

and touch them. Now, however...I find myself unable to read. Books do not hold me. (10)

Joseph also speaks of a time in which he was deeply embedded with the Communist Party, but as he demonstrates in a public and embarrassing tirade during a job interview gone wrong, he is deeply disillusioned with politics. Ten years after parting company with the Party, Joseph is still disappointed that the communists didn't live up to their political promise. Communism hasn't just failed to be revolutionary, it had, in Joseph's view, deepened suffering by stifling free thought: "...I thought these people were different. I haven't forgotten that I believed they were devoted to the service of some grand flapdoodle, the Race, *le genre humain*. ... By the time I got out, I realized that any hospital nurse did more with one bedpan for *le genre humain* than they did with their entire organization" (34).

Joseph knows suffering—he knows his own psychic suffering from depression and is even able to put it in perspective with the other horrors of human experience; he says he “was still an apprentice in suffering and humiliation” (67). He believes that the human condition is suffering: “no one could plead for exception; that was not a human privilege” (67). And though now Joseph is experiencing a greater degree of pain than he had in the past, these ideas are not new to him, as evidenced by his musings on the death of an old University friend, of whom he “always suspected that he had in some fashion discovered there were some ways in which to be human was to be unutterably dismal” (83).

He sees evidence of this suffering all around him, even in the products of humanity. The blighted landscape of the city is evidence of the internal blight:

“There could be no doubt that these billboards, streets, tracks, houses, ugly and blind, were related to interior life” (24). When reading the newspapers, he connects all the misery to the shared human condition, and tries to feel a connection to them: “they were my generation, my society, my world. We were figures in the same plot, eternally fixed together” (25).

But despite theoretical sympathy for the world’s suffering, Joseph seems incapable of translating theory into practice. Though he acknowledges the human condition involves universal suffering, he cannot imagine that anyone he actually interacts with could be suffering on the inside. He quickly and violently dismisses Vanaker, the sad old man in the boarding house, a rejection that is all the more poignant because Vanaker represents the culmination of a lonely, isolated, “dangling” life. Joseph imagines his old Comrade Jimmy as unendingly superior and unperturbed. His in-laws, and even his own brother are imagined as happy-go-lucky souls, unaffected by any inner suffering. Joseph's inability to see the incongruity of his judgment of others against his Romantic view of a suffering mass of humanity underscores the extent to which his former immersion in philosophy and literatures has failed him in matters of human interaction.

Joseph has glimpses of transcendence—what it would mean to rise above the suffering he experiences and sees all around him. As he listens to a recording of a cello performance, he is moved by its representation of human suffering. He imagines the music asking him to meet that suffering “with grace, without meanness” (67), and yet feels unable to meet that standard on his own, saying he is “too weak for it” and could not sufficiently “command the will.” How can he meet the

challenges before him? He asks, “in what quarter should I look for help, where was the power? Grace by what law, under what order, by whom required?” (68). We know that in the past he has looked to his books, but can no longer find fulfillment there, and that he has broken with communism as well. What is left?

He hears in Haydn’s music that he can become a “whole man,” up to the task of life, with the help of God, and wonders that that the answer “went so easily to the least penetrable part...the seldom-disturbed thickets around the heart” (68). But he cannot submit to this instinct—“No, not God, not any divinity” (68). God is an idea from a different age: “Six hundred years ago, ... Satan and the Church, representing God, did battle over [man] ... But since, the stage has been reset and human beings only walk on it” (88-9). As a modern man living after the Enlightenment, the God instinct butts up against his intellect and he wonders, “was there no way to attain that answer expect to sacrifice the mind that sought to be satisfied?”

The demands of a world with no God are crushing: with no help from above, humans must transform themselves into Gods. It's as if he's saying that on this modern stage, for tonight’s performance, the role of God will be played by people.

And why not? After all, as Joseph says, “we have been taught there is no limit to what a man can be” (88), and as such, “each of us is responsible for his own salvation, which is in his greatness” (89). But Joseph is also aware of the risks such self-reliance carries with it. Under this construction of a godless world, the individual must be great enough to save him or herself, but must also must also be vigilant against the danger of “priz[ing] oneself crazily” (88). Joseph guards against this, saying his denial of the divine is not just hubris: “I was not so full of pride that I

could not accept the existence of something greater than myself, something, perhaps, of which I was an idea, or merely a fraction of an idea. That was not it" (68). But there seems to be some amount of pride involved in his confession that the "great crime" of submitting to the idea of a God would be doing so while suffering: "...What a miserable surrender that would be, born out of disheartenment and chaos; and out of fear, bodily and imperious, that like a disease asked for a remedy and did not care how it was supplied. ... Not with such a desperate emotion or such a crucial need for an answer. Or such a feeling of loneliness." Joseph is caught in a cyclical dilemma: he can no longer bear the suffering in his life and longs for a remedy, but cannot submit to a possible remedy while he is suffering.

Joseph has found himself at an impasse; he is unable to cope with life's troubles alone, but unable to find a system up to the task. Literature and philosophy no longer engage him, his political engagement has been nothing but disappointment, and he now must actively reject the divine in order to maintain his rationalist street cred: "Out of my own strength it was necessary for me to return the verdict for reason, in its partial inadequacy, and against the advantages of its surrender" (68).

Though he recognizes his own need to come to the answers to his most persistent questions on the strength of his own intellect, he is bewildered by his wife Iva's similar desire. Though he has condescendingly tried to educate her over the course of their relationship, it is years into their marriage that he wonders, "Was it possible that she should not want to be guided, formed by me?" (97-8). He resists any experience outside of his own rational, immanent world, and yet acknowledges

that “no one came simply and of his own accord, effortlessly, to prize the most truly human traditions, the heavenly cities. You had to be taught to struggle your way toward them...you had to be towed out of the shallows” (98). But Joseph is, as his suffering and unhappiness communicates to all around him, still in the spiritual shallows. He will not be towed out, not even when the Haydn piece throws him a line.

This fear of imperfection haunts him in many of his musings. As he considers his induction into the war, an induction he has long sought and anticipated, he claims that when he is finally called, “he shall go and make no protest” (84): a rather weakly felt sentiment from someone who has endured one bureaucratic nightmare after another to pursue an opportunity to fight. Part of this wishy-washy approach is based in a wish to differentiate himself from his wealthy brother who complains that he can’t get by on anything less than 12 pairs of shoes in a year. Joseph says he “would rather die in the war than consume its benefits” (84), but once again grossly oversimplifies the issue. Surely there is a middle ground between war martyr and shoe-hoarder, but Joseph requires all or nothing from every position. Jo Brans, in an essay that examines how Joseph is simultaneously hero and antihero, notes that Joseph’s task is to decide “...which is more important, submission to the human community, without which civilized life is impossible, or protection of the integrity and uniqueness of the self” (437). Joseph can see no way to reconcile these two approaches—he feels that every system requires him to sacrifice the self or reject community.

Joseph acknowledges his problem with systems during his imaginary conversations with his alter-ego, The Spirit of Alternatives. He asks this spirit for help in finding a way to live in the face of the ugliness and pain of the world—"a plan, a program," or "an ideal construction" (Bellow 140). Joseph recognizes that the world is full of these competing constructions, all of which claim to be the true or best way to face the world: rationalism, self-sufficiency, Romanticism, religion, etc. But each of these constructions is imperfect: the rational construction can't account for the beauty and magnetism of the idea of God; the divine doesn't conform to his experience of a rational, immanent world; total self-sufficiency strikes him as either prideful or a shameful put-on. Joseph's ideal construction would be one that "unlocks the imprisoning self" (153), but none of the constructions he has thus far encountered can fit the bill because of their imperfections. Their flaws keep him from existing freely within a single one. On the other hand, neither can Joseph exist freely outside of constructions altogether. He can't completely reject them because his rejection is not free from flaws either--he sees pieces of value in each construction, despite its imperfection as a whole.

Joseph's depression—his dangling year—exists because he simultaneously requires the freedom of a perfect system and rejects its possibility. As each system proves itself imperfect, he is left more and more on his own, to struggle to solve life's mysteries with no help from any outside source.

How can this be resolved? Bellow's answer is a simple one: it cannot. Because rejecting every system has left him totally alone, Joseph must let go of the "impossible aims" of a perfect way of being and move back toward community



(165). Joseph can only do so after confronting his ordinariness; his position as one seeker among many: “We are all drawn toward the same craters of the spirit—to know what we are and what we are for, to know our purpose, to seek grace” (154).<sup>6</sup> Only when he realizes that he is not alone in his quest can he begin to escape from his year of depression and immobility. In another imagined conversation with the Spirit of Alternatives, he acknowledges that “everybody else is dangling, too” (165), and that if no one else can hope to answer these questions definitively, then neither will he unless he really believes his own fate to be categorically different from that of all other men.

As spring returns to Chicago, Joseph returns to the world of the living. He no longer dangles, but his new position is not a victory. Though he acknowledges that his total independence was unsuccessful—he “had not done well alone” and “to be pushed upon oneself entirely put the very facts of simple existence in doubt” (190-1)—he has not come into community with any other person or system. His return to the world is an escape from his year of circular puzzles of philosophy, but not a triumphant one: “[Joseph] must come back to the validity of immediate human experience, of the shared life of the species caught in its cycle of birth of life and death. For [Joseph]...the return is a defeat, but a necessary, enlivening defeat” (Brans 445). Joseph accepts that he cannot continue to live in his head, but must act.

Though both characters come to provisional peace with their spiritual selves, neither Cather nor Bellow provides a pat resolution. The reader is left skeptical about the success of the characters’ new-found ontologies.

Claude constructs a hybrid position as a resolution of all the existential troubles he has faced: he sees himself as part idealized individual warrior, part member of a community of soldiers. As such, he can be great while no longer being entirely self-reliant. Community and individualism meet on the battlefield in a way they cannot at home. War is the medium by which he can construct a spiritual position that accepts the otherwise useless Romantic self. The individual warrior resonates with a modern sense of rationalism, self-reliance, and exceptionalism.

The role of soldier, on the other hand, provides easy access to a meaningful life, replete with the romance Claude has always wanted. The war has unprecedented scope and power; Cather describes the sense of a “greater-than man force” that became a part of the American farmers’ consciousness as war broke out in Europe. Claude’s notions of war are formed in part by the majestic sense communicated in the newspapers, and in part by his family’s hired woman Mahailey, who lived through the Civil War and remembered Union soldiers as national heroes—bedraggled with lice, but kind and solicitous to the Southern family with whom they stayed—even as her brothers fought for the Confederates.

The opportunity to go to war is a spiritual experience: “to boys like Claude [the events leading to war] were life and death, predestination” (1119).<sup>7</sup> During news of the French stand at Marne, Claude further equates battle with the powerful, universal grandiosity of the cosmos, noting that “for four days men watched that name as they might stand out at night to watch a comet, or to see a star fall” (1075).

When Claude enlists, he can become “an atom in that wall of flesh and blood” (1075). As his transport ship sails from Hoboken, Cather further positions Claude as

one of many who were joyously “sailing away to die for an idea, a sentiment, for the mere sound of a phrase” (1152).

The prospect of battle transforms his perceptions of everything around him. The farmland had once seemed to imprison him; he remembers that he used to “lament that the book of History was finished; that the world had come to avaricious old age and noble enterprise was dead forever” (1139). But now, as he prepares to go overseas, it appears organized according to a greater meaning. No longer “little and dull,” it is now “a harmonious whole” (1139).

What’s more, the army provides an escape from the overwhelming loneliness that has bedeviled him from childhood through marriage. When questioned by his mother as to whether he worries about his personal safety or the safety of the transport ships that will carry him to Europe, he replies “We don’t worry about that. ... A soldier mustn’t worry about anything except what he’s directly responsible for” (1140). As a soldier, he is part of a “we,” not different and set apart from others. As a soldier, he is an “atom” in a wall, one of many to whom he can relate. The company to which he belongs confers instant status: “Seen in the mass like this...they were rather noble looking fellows” (1157). They have been pronounced meaningful by the government, too, as Claude notes when he realizes that he and his fellow soldiers had “come to be worth the watchfulness and devotion of so many men and machines, this extravagant consumption of fuel and energy” (1159-60).

Claude feels a “sense of relief at being rid of all [he] had ever been before and facing something absolutely new” (1155). While at home he was tortured by the idea that perhaps the world was “hideous only for him” (1111), and had felt like his

life was over at age 23, in the army he embraces an “idle, soothing existence” that allows him to avoid these hard questions. He rejects his status as a Wheeler as his primary identifying characteristic. When he wonder why he hadn’t joined the war effort years earlier, he blames his Wheeler-ness:

The Wheelers were terribly afraid of poking themselves in where they weren’t wanted, of pushing their way into a crowd where they didn’t belong. And they were even more afraid of doing anything that might look affected or “romantic.” They couldn’t let themselves adopt a conspicuous, much less a picturesque course of action, unless it was all in the day’s work. (1181)

Finally, as a soldier, Claude can be romantic, and he takes full advantage of the opportunity. He’s not just going to fight, he is going to participate with the most dignity the world has ever seen: “Without rage, with uncompromising generosity and chivalry” (1134).

It is difficult to determine whether this quasi-religious approach would have been satisfying in the long-term. Claude, killed in glory on the battlefield, dies believing that he has finally figured it out. But he himself has questioned how he could live at home after the war:

There was no chance for the kind of life he wanted at home, where people were always buying and selling, building and pulling down. He had begun to believe that the Americans were a people of shallow emotions. That was the way Gerhardt had put it once; and if it was true, there was no cure for it. Life was so short that it meant nothing

at all unless it were continually reinforced by something that endured; unless the shadows of individual existence came and went against a background that held together. (406)

In Europe, Claude has been able to count on the war to serve as that unifying backdrop. He has only been able to construct his spiritual sense of significance under these specific and extraordinary circumstances. In effect, the success of his brand of spirituality depends on his death in combat. He feels “no weakness” as he is mortally wounded because he is still playing against the background of war. The fighting, after all, did not endure indefinitely; had he lived to Armistice and returned to the States, he would have lost the continual reinforcement of meaning that the war had provided.

After Claude’s death, Mrs. Wheeler considers the mercy of his death:

...for him the call was clear, the cause was glorious. Never a doubt stained his bright faith. [...] She knows what to read into those short flashes of enthusiasm; how fully he must have found his life before he could let himself go so far—he, who was so afraid of being fooled! He died believing his own country better than it is, and France better than any country can ever be. And those were beautiful beliefs to die with. Perhaps it was as well to see that vision, and then to see no more. She would have dreaded the awakening, —she sometimes even doubts whether he could have borne at all that last, desolating disappointment. (458)

She, whose background is held together by Christianity, anticipates that Claude's satisfaction could not have persisted if he had been forced to confront the less glorious, more realistic accounts of the war.

Bellow's Joseph has no illusions of virtue. He goes to war with a vague hope that it will provide spiritual answers: "Perhaps the war could teach me, by violence, what I had been unable to learn during those months in the room. Perhaps I could sound creation through other means. Perhaps" (Bellow 91). However, as Brans points out, three repetitions of the word *perhaps* is not exactly confidence building. Joseph, less trusting than Claude, more entrenched in his isolation, cannot conceive of himself as Romantic warrior; his submission to the army is only an erasure of the individual.

He cannot figure out a solution to the broken systems around him, so he goes off to join a system in which he has little hope. But it will at least provide action—he will do more than argue with the Spirit of Alternatives in his journal—a never-ending conversation between different sides of himself that can't ever be resolved to his satisfaction.

Joseph has decided that he needs to act, but his first action is not to reach out to share the common humanity of his suffering with others, but to call up the draft board again and beg for his conscription: "Joseph rushes off to arms and the manhood of "hardboiledness" he so disdained initially, but his advance looks suspiciously like retreat" (Brans 446). Joseph could have decided that even though he would never be able to finally, satisfyingly answer what it means to live in the world, that he would just try to *do* it. But instead, he pushes himself into a

commitment in the war, not hoping to die, but not hoping to live. He has alienated his wife, his family, and his friends and shows no desire to repair those relationships. He has thrown up his hands and abandoned reliance on self in exchange for reliance on nothing: "...things were now out of my hands. The next move was the world's." In the war, he imagines he will be "relieved of self-determination, freedom canceled" (Bellow 191), nihilistically erasing the self instead of caving in to a self that is embedded within any imperfect system. As Brans observes, "Joseph takes action which looks superficially like heroism, but his ironic description of it leaves the author's meaning questionable" (Brans 437). War represents not the *answer* to his spiritual search, but relief from it. He gives up the quest instead of pursuing it further.

In *Dangling Man*, Bellow gives no final authorial judgment on whether this approach will ultimately be livable for Joseph. Cather, too, declines to definitively outline a successful spiritual mode of being, but suggests that even Claude's final attempt at fulfillment was doomed. Claude, like Jim Burden before, has experienced his "moment of heroic magnification" (Rose 133), but this moment is ambiguous. In the absence of a firm authorial judgment at the end of the novel, the focus must shift to the act of searching, not the specific philosophies pursued. The effect, then, is to highlight the varied locations wherein one may *attempt* to find spiritual satisfaction in the absence of formal religion. These sources may not guarantee spiritual transcendence, but throw open possibilities for mining the spiritual in nontraditional locales.

### Chapter 3: "A Bridge from Man to Man": Spiritual Connections in *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider*

While this project identifies and describes the content, processes, and goals of secular spiritual quests in general, each quest is shaped by its own particularities of the narrative voice and characterization. Though I've argued that serious consideration of religious themes has been impeded by relentless exteriority, it is impossible to investigate these interior spiritualities outside of the context of the specific characteristics of the cultures in which they persist. While secular expressions of religious impulses are common in modern American literature, the details of each spiritual quest are disparate, and deeply influenced by a host of factors operating interdependently.

In the novels *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider*, Claude McKay and Richard Wright's characters struggle with existential questions not only in the face of crumbling "universal" narratives, but also as people marginalized by their racial identity. Their search for meaningful existence relies on an understanding of themselves inseparable from their personal histories and experiences, which in turn are tied to larger cultural issues, including race.

This has two practical effects. First, it justifies approaching *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider* in terms of what they have to say about the experience of the spiritual quest for African Americans in the early to mid twentieth century. These readings contribute to understanding the specific conditions of African American literature in the early to mid twentieth century. Second, these texts can be read not



only in terms of their status as racially specific cultural products, but also as contributions to the broader genre of American modern literature.

Of course, *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider* are not the only novels by African American writers that examine strategies for coping with twentieth-century spiritual crisis, but they have several parallels that justify their joint consideration here. Both novels are set in Harlem with protagonists of roughly the same age. *Home to Harlem*, published in 1928, and *The Outsider*, in 1954, are situated on either end of the time period under consideration. Each text has long been overshadowed by its author's more renowned work: McKay's poetry and Wright's *Native Son*. But most significantly, both novels' formulations of spirituality are shaped by the relationships, tensions, and questions around individual and communal identities.

### *Home to Harlem*

McKay's *Home to Harlem* has traditionally been studied as realistic portrayal of the seamy underworld of 1920s Harlem. That its 1928 publication was at the height of the literary modernist movement has not influenced the majority of critical interpretations of the text, even though the novel expresses a thoroughly modernist sensibility in its depiction of two characters' struggles to reconcile personal identity with communal identity. Both *Home to Harlem*'s Jake and Ray wrestle with finding meaning and fulfillment in post-World War I Harlem, a period when internal and external forces compelled inauthentic performances of both public and private identity. While *Home to Harlem* may serve the purposes of those looking for a sociological study of the material conditions of life in 1920s New York, it is also

McKay's expression of how race is involved in the experience of living in the modern, unfamiliar world.

Since for many, modernism is characterized by formal and structural experimentation, McKay is often criticized as being too conservative in form to truly be a modernist. McKay's ideological leanings contradicted his creative tendencies—though he was politically radical, his artistic form was not. Wolfgang Karrer says, "McKay was caught in a dilemma: on the one hand his poems were kept in Hoover's FBI files as incriminating evidence, and on the other hand his poems were criticized for their formal conservatism." (132). Indeed, if one is to make a convincing case for McKay as a modernist, his form must be addressed. Cyraina Johnson-Roullier explains:

...an author's work must, in traditional terms, also compete with the work of other authors, based on determinations of its aesthetic value, that is, its contribution to one or more of technique, style, narrative structure, characterization, and so on. And it is precisely because of this fact that any consideration of the literary contributions of African-Americans in relation to those of the Euro-American modernists, if it is to be both viable and lasting, *must* be made on aesthetic, as opposed to sociological grounds. (133)

But must experimental form be the *only* measure of modernism? Already, critics accept some number of variations in form as equally modern. In mainstream modernism, we see Hemingway's spare minimalism as well as Faulkner's lush verbosity; we read both Virginia Woolf's and James Joyce's stream of consciousness

techniques. All are firmly situated in the modernist canon despite their formal dissimilarities, presumably because they can be conceptually bound by other characteristics of higher priority. Georg Lucács critiques the emphasis on form in “The Ideology of Modernism”: “What must be avoided at all costs is ... that exaggerated concern with formal criteria, with questions of style and literary technique” (17). Lucács goes on to compare the interior monologues featured in Joyce’s *Ulysses* and Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar*, pointing out that despite similar formal techniques, “it is not easy to think of any two novels more basically dissimilar than *Ulysses* and *Lotte in Weimar*. [...] Between Joyce’s intentions and those of Thomas Mann there is a total opposition” (17).

Indeed, one of the goals of this project is to consider the thematic continuity (including themes of alienation from the self, from community, and from master narratives that previously shaped and gave meaning to life) at work in modernist novels. As Craig Werner points out, “The problems are fragmentation, alienation, sense making: the shoring up of fragments against our ruins; what to make of a diminished thing” (117). To study the implications of these problems more fully, one must consider not only how the text is a visual and aural representation of fragmentation—a position that formal purists privilege, explicitly or tacitly—but also other outlets for expressing fragmentation. In *Crossroads Modernism*, Sanford Schwartz describes how “modernist insights investigate the divisions “between conscious ‘surfaces’ and unconscious ‘depths,’ between ordinary experience and a hidden realm of mental life of which we are generally unaware” (qtd in Pavlić 4). Modernist writers attempt to communicate these divides using all the tools at their

disposal; certainly form is one of those tools, but not the only one. If we can define modernism not by a set of predetermined formal characteristics, but rather by its attempt to express a new way of being, of living, and of thinking in the aftermath of the upheaval and tragedy of World War I, then we can expand the critical conception of what it means to be modern by mining texts that have been understudied or ignored because of their perceived traditionalism.

Often excluded from broader literary modernist studies due to formalist concerns, McKay's *Home to Harlem* McKay's work has been almost exclusively studied as part of the Harlem Renaissance—a potentially troubling critical categorization that limits the usefulness of the text to its capacity to reflect the racial uplift project of the time. Perhaps the most frequently quoted review of *Home to Harlem* is that by W.E.B. DuBois in *The Crisis*, notable not only for the fame of its author but also for the intensity of the reaction evoked: “[it] for the most part nauseates me, and after the dirtier parts of its filth I feel distinctly like taking a bath” (202). DuBois takes McKay to task for using “every art and emphasis to paint drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity and utter absence of restraint in as bold and as bright colors as he can” (202).

DuBois had plenty of motivation to react so virulently to McKay's novel: it must have seemed a direct threat to the project of the New Negro movement he was so invested in cultivating. David Levering Lewis, in the preface to *When Harlem Was in Vogue*, describes that which we know as the Harlem Renaissance as “a somewhat forced phenomenon...institutionally encouraged and constrained by the leaders of

the Civil Rights Establishment for the paramount purpose of improving race relations” (xxviii).

Though the mission privileged the power of art and literature to reach its goals, all art was not considered equally suitable to the task. As collaborators on what would become *The New Negro*, Alain Locke and James Weldon Johnson “both wanted the same art for the same purposes—highly polished stuff, preferably about polished people, but certainly untainted by racial stereotypes or embarrassing vulgarity. Too much blackness, too much streetgeist and folklore—nitty-gritty music, prose, and verse—were not welcome” (Lewis 95).<sup>1</sup> These were not just casual preferences, but were a product of the deeply felt belief that the right kind of literature could influence the position of the Negro in America; for those involved in the New Negro movement, the *Defender’s* commentary summarized their frustration with McKay: “[they] wondered why, given the low opinion of blacks held by whites, McKay wasted ‘so much time trying to prove it?’” (Lewis 225).

Overlooked in literary modernism because of its form, rejected in Harlem Renaissance because of its content, *Home to Harlem* is a bit of a literary orphan. However, looking at *Home to Harlem* as a modernist text is not intended to bring McKay into the fold of the European tradition of modernism, nor to legitimize its Harlem Renaissance bona fides, but rather to see if examining his take on these modernist themes can reveal different aspects of the African American experience that can enrich and expand our understanding of literary modernism on the whole. What follows is my attempt to read *Home to Harlem* not just to identify its modern characteristics, and certainly not to rehash debates about how well it conforms to

Harlem Renaissance ideals of racial uplift, but to employ a broader definition of literary modernism to investigate how McKay uses characterization to articulate the modern experience of spiritual alienation as it relates to alienation from community and its intersection and interplay with racial identity.

W.E.B. DuBois' idea of double-consciousness lends itself to interpret a racialized modernism experienced by and evident in the work of black modernist writers like McKay.

Focusing on the modernist (Jamesian) roots of double consciousness, however, illuminates another dimension of DuBois's thought. ...He theorized a [Jamesian] modernist self that, quite apart from being torn asunder by a racialized twoness, fluidly disperses through communal, cultural forms of contestation and affirmation. In *Black Art and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, Richard Powell notes that a 'characteristic of black diasporal cultures is their structural dependence upon an acknowledged collection of life experiences, social encounters, and personal ordeals, the sum of which promotes a solidarity and camaraderie that creates community'. (Pavlić 7)

With this in mind, we can consider double consciousness not only as an individual state of being, but as a shared experience that becomes part of the basis upon which a community is formed. It follows that the modern condition of fragmentation of identity can be translated to the larger, racially specific population. Johnson-Roullier interprets Werner's perspective as communal alienation—that all African Americans share the same experience of alienation: “the African-American

modernists, alienated because of their skin, recognize in addition that they are one of an entire people who, possessing the same genetic makeup, experience daily a similar form of alienation” (131).

My reading of the spiritual in *Home to Harlem* underscores that this de facto community that Johnson-Roullier describes does not assuage feelings of alienation, but exacerbates them. *Home to Harlem* presents black moderns who experience the same consciousness of fragmentation and alienation as whites, but suffer the added burden of an externally perceived unity and communion with others of their race. This isn't to say that there existed no common experiences among the black community (in Harlem or otherwise), but that by virtue of their position as an oppressed group, there were expectations of community that may have made feelings of alienation seem even more acute. The thought might be “Here I am, part of the Negro community of Harlem, and yet I feel no connection. I am supposed to be part of something, and yet there is distance.”<sup>2</sup>

*Home to Harlem's* Jake and Ray pine for connections based upon shared experience and feelings, but instead are assigned to communities based on superficial characteristics like race and economics. The characters face an overabundance of external, culturally-defined community, but long to discover an intentional community that springs from a sense of commonality of internal identity, ideologies, and passions.

This lack of affinity-based groupings creates pressure to self-identify as part of an extant cultural community, regardless of authenticity, that manifests in the performance of communal identity. Edward Pavlić notes that “In black modernisms,

the realm of experiential wholeness sought by modernist theorists such as F.H. Bradley, Eliot, Henri Bergson, and Pound can, at times must, be approached through involvement in communal performances” (8). Jake and Ray know they are expected to behave in certain ways that meet the demands of community roles, even if they do not have experiences that organically fill those roles.

Ray, Jake’s Haitian expatriate friend and railroad co-worker, articulates his experience of the spiritual crisis more clearly than Jake does. Ray has all the hallmarks of the modern consciousness. He senses the disconnect between the past and the present: “...in spite of the general tumults and threats, the perfectly-organized national rages, the ineffectual patching of broken, and hectic rebuilding of shattered, things, he had perception enough to realize that he had lived over the end of an era” (McKay 226). He perceives that the grand narratives that once sustained individuals and community are lost to this era, and asks “What had happened? Had they refused to come or had he left them behind? Something had happened. But it was not desertion nor young insurgency. It was death” (McKay 226). He doesn’t believe in religion; he tells Jake “My parents were Catholic, but I ain’t nothing” (176). Nor can he sustain the old faith in intellectualism that had previously sustained him; “Thought was not a beautiful and reassuring angel, a thing of soothing music and light laughter and winged images glowing with the rare colors of life. No. It was suffering, horribly real. It seized and worried him from every angle. Pushed him toward the sheer precipice of imagination. It was awful” (156).



Ray, who attended Howard University for a time, invested in the power of intellect and education, but neither allowed him to make connections with others; in fact, they have further distanced him from people.

From his perspective as an outsider, Ray diagnoses the problems of the black community. He feels his own education hasn't solved any of these problems, and says that "modern education is planned to make you a sharp, snouty, rooting hog. A Negro getting it is an anachronism" (243). In fact, he blames his own education for his own despair and loneliness, saying that "fine feelings" will "become all hollow inside, false and dry as civilization itself. And civilization is rotten. We are all rotten who are touched by it" (243). In Ray's view, the benefits and the problems of modernity are universal—"fine human traits don't belong to any special class or nation or race of people," but "all men have the disease of pimps in their hearts" (242-3). But Ray believes the black community suffers even more from civilization's degradation because its coping mechanisms are recycled versions of failed solutions already tested by the white community. In an intertextual reference to McKay's poem "White Houses," Ray says, "...we get our education like—like our houses. When the whites move out, we move in and take possession of the old dead stuff. Dead stuff that this age has no use for" (243). These statements are more than just positions on educational institutions; they reveal Ray's problematic sense of community. When he steps back and prescribes behavior for his race, he is defining a black community that he lives outside of. But he is unable to understand that he is simultaneously affirming a faith in universality of humanity that would allow him to

be included in some notion of community apart from race, and thus find some sort of spiritual solace.

Because he is black in the United States, Ray is a de facto member of the American Negro community. It doesn't matter that he doesn't feel a part of it, or that his nationality and education hold him apart from it; he is always perceived as having some inherent similarity to other blacks. Ray is a true outsider. He realizes that "he was just one of them...but he was not entirely of them" (155). He recognizes the expectations of community that his race presents. As he watches his fellow railroad workers sleep, he thinks:

They were black like him. Man and nature had put them in the same race. He ought to love them and feel them (if they felt anything). He ought to if he had a shred of social morality in him. They were all chain-ganged together and he was counted as one link. Yet he loathed every soul in that great barrack-room, except Jake. Race...Why should he have and love a race? (153).

Ray can not take comfort in his racial community, a false notion based on nothing meaningful to him. He is lost as an individual in the world, but that isolation is compounded by his inability to feel a part of the community of which others imagine him to be a member.

Furthermore, Ray, like other Jamesian sick souls, feels so alone that he can't even imagine that he is not the only person who feels separated from community. His focus on his own alienation blocks him from seeing it in others. If one considers Jake another character seeking connection and community, then Ray misses the

opportunity to create true community based not solely upon racial identity, but also on shared experiences of the insufficiency of racially defined community. Ray is searching for a way to form intentional community, but his alienation from external community clouds his judgment to the point that he is unable to see that Jake, in his own way, is just as lost.

While Ray is troubled by his inability to perform the traits that would help him fit in, Jake is an easy, natural performer. Jake's sense of external community is strong—Ray and others perceive him as the embodiment of the perfect fit in the community because he performs so well his role of a drinker, dancer, lover, and gambler. Jake appears to others as exempt from the pervasive loneliness and alienation that they experience; "Poor Jake. [...] When you saw him, talked to him, he stood forth as one of those unique types of humanity who lived alone and were never lonely. [...] He, in his frame and atmosphere, was the Alpha and Omega himself" (234). Zeddy Plummer, an old friend of Jake's, is awed by Jake's ability to fit in and flourish in Harlem: "Zeddy was excited over Jake's success in love....[Zeddy] was crazy about finding a woman to love him for himself [like Jake did]" (55).

Everyone succumbs to Jake's magnetism and charm: "...Jake was a high favorite wherever he went. There was something so naturally beautiful about his presence that everybody liked and desired him. Buddies, on the slightest provocation, were ready to fight for him, and the girls liked to make an argument around him" (103).

Over and over, Jake insists to others that he is fulfilled in this role, but his private thoughts and behavior suggest he, too, is experiencing a spiritual crisis. The satisfaction that others believe he feels doesn't actually exist. Jake can't connect with

others; he exists as a symbol for others, but he doesn't actually signify all that the others assume he does. He has mastered the performance of the external traits of someone at home in the world, but his inner life is markedly different. The reader knows that "Sometimes he was disgusted with life..." (105), and Jake even admits that "I want something as mahvelous as mah feelings" (293). Jake's initial encounters with Ray prompt him to verbalize his experience of disconnection within the perceived racial community, saying "We may all be niggers aw'right, but we ain't nonetall the same" (159). Both men experience the same kind of dissatisfaction; they simply arrive at it from different directions. While Ray's isolation is magnified by his inability to perform the necessary identity for admission into the larger community, Jake's successful performance doesn't provide the satisfaction Ray imagines it does.

Jake's emptiness may have remained completely unarticulated if not for Ray's influence. Ray is the one who nostalgically describes a more meaningful past, telling Jake that "that wonderful age had been electrified with universal ideas—ideas so big that they had lifted up ignorant people, even black, to the stature of gods" (133). Jake's emotional response is passionate; after hearing Ray talk, "Jake felt like one passing through a dream, vivid in rich, varied colors" (134). Ray has articulated the loss of possibility that Jake has felt, and will continue to perceive instinctually.

Jake experiments with abandoning his performed role in favor of emulating Ray by becoming educated. Jake admires Ray's education as a potential solution for his directionless, undefined existence:

I wish I was edjucated mahself. ... Ef I was edjucated, I could understand things better and be proper-speaking like you is....Then we [Jake and his family] could all settle down and make money like edjucated people do, instead of you gwine off to throw you'self away on some lousy dinghy and me chasing around all the time lak a hungry dog. (272-3)

He thinks schooling might give him another point of access to community, but Ray discourages him from this line of consideration, reiterating his disappointment with education and its failure to open any doors for him, saying “I don't know what I'll do with my little education. [...] I am a misfit— [...] a misfit with my little education and constant dreaming...” (274). Ray's experience doesn't immediately deter Jake. Instead, he retreats to the safety of his usual performance after another patron and friend, Billy Biasse, teases him about being soft, calling him a “heart-breaking, slobbering nigger [...] That's the stuff youse got tuck away there under your tough black hide” (273). Jake immediately reverts to his performance of that toughness, suggesting that they go on to another bar to dance and listen to jazz and drink. Billy has reminded him that the nebulous community wants Jake to continue playing the archetypal part they've assigned him, even if it doesn't provide the fulfillment of intentional community that Jake seeks.

In the absence of viable alternatives, Jake tries to twist his performance to channel his anxiety and isolation; he takes one of the facets of the archetypal role—that of the lover and ladies' man—and tries to use it as a medium to access intentional community. He imbues women with all the significance, meaning, and

possibility for salvation of a religious object; they become the driving force behind his actions. He returns to Harlem from Europe after his relationship with a woman in London sours: "Jake's woman could do nothing to please him now. She tried hard to get down into his thoughts and share them with him. But for Jake this woman was now only a creature of another race—of another world. He brooded day and night" (8). Felice, the prostitute Jake has a sexual encounter with immediately upon his return to the United States, becomes a symbol for his search for the authentic human contact that other relationships lacked. The cruelty, violence, and isolation that prevail in the modern age are momentarily forgotten because "[Felice], in one night, had revealed a fine different world to him. Mystery again" (70). Felice represents the possibility of a spiritual home, of beauty, and of connecting with another human being; "That night he had felt a reaching out and marriage of spirits" (42). However, this connection is short-lived: Felice is physically absent from most of the book, though she remains constantly in Jake's thoughts. Again, Felice is a stand-in for the traditional spiritual comforts that have disappeared from the world: gone, but not forgotten.

Jake channels his frustrations and disappointments with his isolations and sense of loss into a deep yearning for a grand, all-encompassing romance. Though he insists to Ray that he is happy with his casual relationships with women, saying "young and pretty is all [he] feel[s]" (200), he secretly doubts that he will find enduring satisfaction that way:

His thoughts wandered away back to his mysterious little brown of the Baltimore. She was not elegant and educated, but she was nice.

Maybe if he found her again—it would be better than just running wild around like that! Thinking honestly about it, after all, he was never satisfied, flopping here and sleeping there. (212)

Much as Ray pined for the “spiritual masters” of eras gone by, Jake looks to outdated ideas of romance as a potential savior. Even though most of his sexual encounters are with prostitutes, who he knows can’t lay claim to elevated virtue, he can’t let go of the old notion that a woman will change his life. He resists the lessons his experiences have taught him: that women are just as unlikely as men to fulfill him. He recalls that after his experience in Europe “he had concluded that a woman could always go farther than a man in coarseness, depravity, and sheer cupidity. ... But women were so realistic and straight-going. *They* were the real controlling force of life” (70). Though Jake imagines that Felice is different from these other women, Felice doesn’t operate under those illusions. She “was aware that in her world women scratched a bit into each other’s flesh and men razored and gunned at each other over such things...” (306). But Jake still tries to make women conform to old standards of behavior that don’t fit with this “new age with new methods of living,” as evidence by his refusal to use condoms because of his continuing notion of women as more virtuous than they are, all appearances to the contrary.

In Felice’s absence, Jake tries to recreate satisfying intimacy with others, but is revolted at nearly every encounter. He is “disgusted” by Miss Curdy, who comes onto him at a late night house party, and eventually develops distaste for Rose, another woman from the Harlem night club scene with whom Jake lives for a while:

There was nothing about Rose that touched and roused him as his vivid recollection of his charming little brown-skin of the Baltimore. Rose's room to him was like any ordinary lodging in Harlem. While the room of his little lost brown lived in his mind a highly magnified affair: a bed of gold, fresh, white linen, a magic carpet, all bathed in the rarest perfume. (114)

Not only does his relationship with Rose lack spiritual or intellectual union, but she also comes to represent to Jake all the horrors of the modern age. She craves violence; she embraces that status quo. When Jake insists upon working for his living and treats her more or less with kindness, "Rose was disappointed in Jake. She had wanted him to live in the usual sweet way, to be brutal and beat her up a little, and take away her money from her" (113). The disappointment he inevitably feels after these encounters is not just because they fail to soothe and settle him down, but because they magnify his problems forming the type of connections that engender experience-based intentional community.

As Jake's efforts to use women to access community fail, he becomes more open to the idea of shedding his performance of identity in favor of a more authentic life. Still, he can only articulate that possibility by connecting it to relationships with women, Felice in particular:

But after all the willing and boasting, it would be a thousand times nicer to have a little brown woman of his own to whom he could go home and be his simple self with....That he could never be with the Madame Lauras. They expected him always to be the prancing he-



man. Maybe it was the lack of a steady girl that kept him running crazy around. Boozing and poking and rooting around, jolly enough all right, but not altogether contented. (212-13)

Here, McKay produces a secular version of the Christian notion that authentic selfhood is possible only through God: Felice becomes the possibility of authenticity personified. On a particularly beautiful day, Jake sits out in the sun and remembers Felice: “There are hours, there are days, and nights whose sheer beauty overwhelm us with happiness, that we seek to make even more beautiful by comparing them with rare human contacts.... ‘Only that cute heart-breaking brown of the Baltimore,’ he mused. ‘A day like this sure feels like her’” (281). Not only does she represent the possibility of satisfaction, but Felice could also help to further his perceived status as the epitome of a happy man, content in his ways. That his name for her is based on her racial identity emphasizes how his expectations for meaningful relationships are tied to the notion of a pre-formed black community. Jake recognizes her by the name of the night club where they met, and the color of her skin: she is the “little Baltimore brown”—the perfect complement to Jake Brown, the performer of community-mandated identity. Jake has used women to organize his identity for so long that he can not readily distinguish between improving his performance and having a meaningful relationship based on a personal connection with Felice.

Jake projects the notion of women as gateway to fulfillment onto Ray’s relationship with Agatha, which he imagines provides Ray with satisfaction. When Agatha visits Jake during his illness, Jake is overwhelmed by her presence to the point that his door transforms into “a shining panel of gold through which a radiant

vision had passed" (211). He thinks he sees the difference that separates him from Ray: "I could see the love stuff shining in them mahvelous eyes of hers when I talked about [Ray]. I s'pose it's killing sweet to have some'n loving you up thataway. Some'n real fond o' you for your own self ..." (212). The truth is that Agatha hadn't fulfilled Ray in any meaningful way; "He saw destiny working in her large, dream-sad eyes, filling them with the passive softness of resignation to life, and seeking to encompass and yoke him down as just one of the thousand niggers of Harlem. And he hated Agatha and, for escape, wrapped himself darkly in self-love" (264).

When Jake finally finds Felice again, he is convinced that this will be his chance to become himself and to make a real connection with another person. She reciprocates his feelings, and reflects the same sort of yearning Jake has experienced since their first meeting; she says, "How Ise been crazy longing to meet you again!" (299). Though their reunion begins with the old-fashioned romance—"The atmosphere was perfect, the moment sweet for something sacred" (301)—neither romance nor fulfillment last for long. The perfect allure of a potential connection

These miserable cock-fights, beastly, tigerish, bloody. They had always sickened, saddened, unmanned him. The wild, shrieking mad woman that is sex seemed jeering at him. Why should love create terror? Love should be joy lifting man out of the humdrum ways of life. He has always managed to delight in love and yet steer clear of the hate and violence that govern it in his world. His love nature was generous and warm without any vestige of the diabolical or sadistic. Yet here he was caught in the thing that he despised so thoroughly [...]. Oh he was

infinitely disgusted with himself to think that he had just been moved by the same savage emotions as those vile, vicious, villainous white men who, like hyenas and rattlers, had fought, murdered, and clawed the entrails out of black men over the common, commercial flesh of women.... (328)

Indeed, it was only a matter of hours before his renewed relationship with Felice devolved from the promise of sacred beauty into debased, unfulfilling conflict in the streets that leaves Jake “jest sick and tiah’d a everything” (329).

In the face of the quick deterioration of romance and exhausted from performing an inauthentic identity, Jake is tempted once again to follow Ray’s example, to give up and retreat from the world into relative isolation; he tells Felice “I been thinking a gitting away from the stinking mess and go on off to sea again” (332). When Ray leaves town, hiring himself out on a freighter, it is a physical manifestation of his isolation. He could not untangle his personal identity from expectations of communal, racial identity, and so separates himself from the community that he believes exists in New York, but which he can not join. Even Jake can predict that a change of scenery won’t solve Ray’s problems; he warns Ray that “The sea is hell and when you hits shore it’s the same life all ovah” (272). Instead of following in Ray’s footsteps, Jake clings to the idea of a romantic happy ending, despite mounting evidence that such a resolution is impossible. He decides to go with Felice to Chicago, in the traditional trope of winning the girl and riding off into the sunset toward a fairy tale conclusion. But all signs suggest that Felice and Jake will not be able to create any lasting fulfillment—Jake admits that “Everything’s

gotta wear out someday,” and it is likely that Jake is in for more disappointment and dissatisfaction (305). The resolution McKay provides for Jake is ambiguous, and the reader must decide whether these events are more likely to yield a traditional ending with the resolution of all conflict, or a more depressing conclusion where Jake may struggle with the same feelings of spiritual and emotional homelessness in a different city.

### *The Outsider*

Twenty-five years later, Richard Wright's *The Outsider* continues Jake and Ray's search. Cross Damon is conscious of the emptiness and senselessness of his life. Though Cross has rejected Christianity, he has been deeply affected by a devout mother, and cannot seem to escape its influence. He talks about how modern man has “moved beyond religion,” and yet is often described as experiencing things with a “religious intensity.” Though he doesn't believe in anything in particular, he still experiences an impulse to believe in something. In this chapter, I will examine that impulse, his search for a tenable spiritual outlook that accounts for the base and transcendent natures that coexist in humanity. His spiritual quest is to find out whether there is something in the secular world that can function as a meaning-creating structure in the way that religion had in the past.

Margaret Walker, in *Richard Wright: Daemoniac Genius*, says that while *Native Son* is often mined for autobiographical elements, *The Outsider* is Wright's spiritual autobiography. Much of the scholarship on *The Outsider* debates the influence of existentialist philosophy in the novel: Claudia Tate draws connections between *The*

*Outsider* and Kierkegaard; Michel Fabre shows correlations between Wright and the work of Sartre, Camus, and de Beauvoir; while Amritjit Singh argues that Wright was altogether anti-existential. I take the position, like Walker, that Wright draws from both Christian and atheist/secular existentialism to form an agnostic spiritual sensibility. Although Wright read existentialist philosophy in the years leading up to the writing and publication of *The Outsider*, the tenets of existentialism were already familiar to him. Walker notes that “it cannot be stressed enough that Wright was only discovering how close he had been to existentialism all his life;” the alienation and despair central to existentialism had long been a part of Wright’s experience as an educated black man in America (235).

Wright’s sense of alienation certainly included estrangement from the religion of his family. Walker writes that Wright could not accept the fundamentalist Protestantism of his mother’s family, that he was unimpressed by all religious faiths, but that he simply “did not know whether God existed or was immanent in the affairs of men” (231).

Wright’s agnosticism is reflected in Cross Damon’s feeling about the church. On the surface, it appears that Cross’ mother has completely driven him away from religion. It is the source of his dread—the feeling of a disapproving God floating over him at all times. The image of a God shouting NO is one not only of prohibition, but also of destruction—a God sure to smite him at any moment. His relationship to his mother’s God is that of the abject fear he experienced as a child. This God could not assist in understanding oneself or in creating meaning in one’s life.

At times, Cross' mother seems to represent all of Christianity. From an early age, Cross conflated and confused all that he knew about his mother—her love, devotion, expectations, and disappointments—with the God who sustained her. In an early passage, Wright's descriptions of God and mother intertwine, making it difficult to discern which is which, and difficult to separate his mother's loving but critical presence from the "mysterious God Whose love seemed somehow like hate" (22); the scolding disapproval seems to come simultaneously from some amalgam of the two figures. God, like his mother, possessed a "secret grace [that] granted him life" but also "hover[ed] oppressively in space above him" (22). With all this in mind, one might interpret Wright's description of Cross' conflicting emotions toward his mother as "widely distant: flight and embrace" as being equally applicable to God (21).

These competing desires help explain why, despite his rejection of Christianity, Cross has not completely turned away from the idea of religion. He still experiences some sense of religiosity: when he turns inward and examines his own desires, he experiences "a quiet sense of awe" that he recognizes as "the nearest he ever came to religious feelings" (Wright 394). Indeed, his serious consideration of the terms of existence becomes a divine object for him—it is what he lives for, it is that which drives his thoughts, his movements, and his interactions with others.

In his lectures *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, William James describes the divine as "such a primal reality as the individual feels impelled to respond to solemnly and gravely, and neither by a curse nor a jest" (45). Instead of accepting a traditional religious divinity already imbued with meaning, for some people, the

process of searching for meaning becomes the divine. As James notes in his introductory lecture, the terminology here is slippery. Cross is certainly not religious in the common sense of the word; he does not adhere to an institutional faith, or even a personalized version of an institutional faith. But he has acquired—perhaps through early exposure to institutional religion from his mother—a capacity for religious feeling. Houston says it comes from his own heart and calls it the “god notion” (565).

More significant is that Cross’ quest for defining meaningful terms for living is inseparable from religion. This is not uncommon: as Robert Bellah points out in *Meaning and Modernity*, “neither the Enlightenment nor any of the great ideological movements of the twentieth century have supplanted the axial heritage [Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam]; often they have acted it out in parody even as they imagined themselves rejecting it” (“Epilogue” 273).

Cross himself makes a similar argument in his long speech to Blimin, the Communist party enforcer, though he doesn’t realize that he himself is implicated in it. Cross explains that modern people have outgrown the religious faith of their predecessors, saying that their “minds have grown so skeptical that [they] cannot accept the old scheme of moral precepts which once guided man’s life” (Wright 481). The myths of religion gave way to reason and godlessness, but no new “system of ideas” has grown up in place of religion. People rejected faith that did not make sense to them intellectually, but still grapple with the instinct to have faith in *something*. He tells the Communists that “religion’s a compulsion, and a compulsion

seems to spring from something total in us, catching up in its might grip all the other forces of life ... and carrying them forward toward—what goals? We wish we knew” (483). The faith impulse, in other words, remains even after the objects of faith have been dismantled.

Cross’ faith impulse is evident from the earliest pages of *The Outsider*; he is a typical Jamesian sick soul, overwhelmed by suffering, and constantly trying to figure out a way to bear it all. His initial attempts involve heavy drinking, which dulls the pain but doesn’t ameliorate it. When asked if he drinks to feel better, he replies that it “makes [him] feel *less*” (3). While his personal life is in shambles, it is not just the specifics of his own life that trouble him, it’s the conditions of life in general. Unable to move past this soul-sickness, he is adrift in the world, without even the comfort of friends. Though he envies their collegiality, “he felt that they were outside of his life, that there was nothing that they could do that would make any difference. Now more than ever he knew that he was alone and that his problem was one of a relationship of himself to himself” (19).

Like *Home to Harlem*’s Ray, Cross has spent time poring over books and philosophies that might give him a clue about how to proceed in the midst of the modern condition—Nietzsche, Hegel, Jaspers, Heidegger, Husserl, Kierkegaard, Dostoevsky—but nothing has helped. While teasing Cross about his massive library, his colleagues from the post office unknowingly identify the crux of Cross’ problem. The possibility that the books might provide a way to live in a broken world gave Cross his first entry into a spiritual quest, though he did not identify it as such:



“Cross, you ain’t never said how come you was reading all them books,” Joe pointed out.

“I was looking for something,” Cross said quietly.

“What?” Pink asked.

“I don’t know,” Cross confessed gloomily.

“Did you find it?” Joe asked.

“No.” (8)

So far, Cross has found little lasting hope in modern philosophies. One friend is baffled as to “why Cross wouldn’t believe anything in the books he read. One time he was all hepped-up over one writer and the next time he was through with ‘im and was gone on to another” (8). As the novel begins, Cross has abandoned hope in books; even his friends have noticed that he doesn’t read anymore. Satisfaction in the world if ideas seems transient and sterile; while it might be intriguing, it doesn’t have any affect on how Cross feels from day to day living in the world.

Despite his experiences with modern philosophy’s inadequacies, Cross still maintains that the traditional locations for faith have been destroyed. He tells Eva “modern consciousness is Godlessness ... There is nothing but *us, man*, and the world that *man* has made” (274). This perspective operates on the assumption that others in modernity see the world as he does: that the “sufferings, terrors, accidental births, and meaningless deaths” are human creations for which “Biblical prescriptions of repentance, prayer, faith, and grace” can not atone (195-6). In many ways, he sees himself as typical of the modern man, and categorizes modernity according to his own views:

We Twentieth Century Westerners have outlived the faith of our fathers; our minds have grown so skeptical that we cannot accept the old scheme of moral precepts which once guided man's life ... . God no longer really concerns us as a reality beyond life, but simply as something projected compulsively from men's minds in answer to their chronic need to be rid of fear. (481)

Despite his tendency to universalize this condition—he speaks of all men's minds, all of the west—he considers himself exceptional for being able to identify it. Most people, Cross argues, aren't cognizant of it, and thus are vulnerable to organizations that offer ready-made outlets for the faith impulse. Without a legitimate venue for faith, people look anywhere and everywhere to find meaning:

The people of these cities are lost; some of them are so lost that they no longer even know it, and they are the real lost ones. They haunt the movies for distraction; they gamble; they depress their sensibilities with alcohol; or they seek strong sensations to dull their sense of a meaningless existence. (485)

At times, Cross experiences a sort of admiration the “real lost ones,” such as when as he sits at the bar with his post office co-workers and he envies their levity: “If only he could lose himself in that kind of living!” (35). As far as Cross can tell, these friends are the Jamesian healthy-minded: unaware of any existential dilemma. According to Cross' theory of the “jealous rebels,” society is set up to promote this kind of easy acceptance, designed to prevent people from having to grapple with the enormous task of defining a legitimate context in which to pour out their capacity

for faith. He observes that “When a man had been born and bred with other men, had shared and participated in their traditions, he was not required of himself to conceive the total meaning or direction of his life” (114-5). While this type of person is spared the difficulty of trying to create from nothing a life of purpose, he is easily susceptible to being manipulated by the power-hungry who tempt one with fraudulent ideologies.

*The Outsider* identifies two primary locations for such manipulation. The first, institutional religion, appeals to those who would prefer to go back to the historical myths of the pre-modern era, and is, as we have already seen, represented by Cross’ Chicago friends and family. The second area, politics, is attractive to those who prefer to think of themselves as intellectual, rational people, represented in the novel by the New York Communists.

Wright spends most of his writerly energy on revealing Communism as an ideological trap for those in search of a workable world view. This is fitting with the idea of *The Outsider* as spiritual biography: after a period of intense involvement with the Communist Party, Wright not only quit the Party, but disavowed it in print with his article “I Tried to Be a Communist.” And yet, in the same way that Wright depicts Cross as envious of his light-hearted post office buddies, Cross also feels jealous of those who find satisfaction in Communism. He elaborates on this jealousy in the following passage, where he sizes up Menti, a mid-level Party member:

Cross envied the strength and self-possession which Menti derived from his total submissiveness to the Party ... Without the Mentis of this world, men could not move in concerted action, whether they

wished to move to left or right, toward slavery or freedom, toward war or peace ... What was the meaning of Menti? What did he want? What could buy his loyalty? What did he need? One thing was certain, no government on earth today was really offering Menti what he really wanted ... Maybe no government could. (540)

While he admires the sense of peace Menti seems to feel, he acknowledges that the political arena provides only the illusion of wholeness. But for Cross, Communism and, to a lesser extent, Fascism are uniquely situated to appeal to the spiritually bereft person because they call attention to the fact that the current political and economic system is played out. Merely recognizing that something is rotten in modernity would be extremely attractive to someone searching for fulfillment, even if that political diagnosis didn't fully address the personal, spiritual nature of one's sense of loss.

But the party leaders do more than offer political alternatives. Cross characterizes the political leaders as completely sinister, saying that "in order to catch their prey, they deliberately spin vast spiderwebs of ideology, the glittering strands of which are designed to appeal to the hopes of hopeful men. Yes, there are men who think that ideas will lead them to freedom and a fuller life, and these are the men who are the natural victims ... " (489). His disgust for Communism has little to do with their political aims, though he doesn't care for them, and everything to do with their intentional manipulation of vulnerable spirits. In the following passage, Cross is simultaneously repulsed by and in awe of a secular system that deceitfully tries to convert others to their way of life:

It was not the objective reality of the revolutionary movement that was pulling so magnetically at Cross; it was something that that movement had and did not know it had that was seducing his attention. ... Nowhere else save in these realms had he encountered that brand of organized audacity directed at secular goals. ... He knew that their bristling economic theories were simply but vastly clever fishing nets which they dragged skillfully through muddy social waters to snare the attention of shivering and hungry men; but many men, the best of them, would not yield their allegiances on purely economic grounds and he knew that the Party knew this. (255)

When seen from this perspective, the political world is nearly indistinguishable from religious institutions. Cross is certain that both of these areas are motivated simply by desire for power. Once the basis for the ideology of Communism is understood as a power play, Cross can see that same function at work in every other ideology:

This systematization of the sensuality of power prevailed, though in a different form, in the so-called capitalistic-bourgeois world; it was everywhere, in religion as well as in government, and in all art that was worth of the name. And bourgeois ruler, along with the men of the church, had forged through time and tradition methods of concealing these systems of sensual power under thick layers of legal, institutionalized, ritualized, ideological, and religious trappings. (270)

The practical difference between religion and politics is naught: in the end, Cross sees them both as systems where the power-hungry can take advantage of those seeking solace from modernity. Cross believes himself to be in a unique position of observation; as an outsider, he can diagnose these problems; he can see their charm, but avoid falling under their spell.

If forced to choose a side, Cross would prefer to align himself with the masses and not the powerful few. His sympathy for those who look for consolation in churches or political parties is demonstrated clearly in his interactions with Bob and Sarah Hunter. When Bob, who has put himself in a position where he is totally vulnerable to the Communist party, disagrees with a Party decision, Cross pities him and even tries to persuade party officials to reconsider their decision. When that move is unsuccessful, he is somewhat generous to Bob's wife, Sarah, in her grief. Sarah, who had previously left the church, announces her intention to return to it because she is completely at a loss for what to do next. Though Cross doesn't see it as a meaningful solution, he at least recognizes that religion may be the kindest option for Sarah, whose life has been upended by the Party:

What did it matter that the church had no answer for the ills of this earth? The priests could at least tell her to stop hoping for anything in this life, to curb and deny her desires, to forget her humiliating color consciousness, her poverty, that all of that was nothing in the eyes of an eternal God. And for those who were weak, was that not right, fitting, necessary? (555)

This special perspective of the outsider is exhilarating at first—Cross delights in the game of wits he participates in with the Communists. They are trying to use him, but he will only let them do so as long as he remains in control of the extent to which he is used. The game does not last long, and ends in brutal violence. When Cross murders his Communist acquaintance and their fascist landlord, he does so because “they had wanted to play god to others,” but quickly realized that his own actions were a result of the same desire. Their attempts to be “little gods” made Cross into yet another little god. Despite his notion of himself as the untouchable outsider, his murders prompt him to identify with the power-wielding heads of institutions:

The only trouble was that he and his kind were restlessly envious of the priests, the churches, the Communists, the Fascists, the men of power ... That was it. He would have to live without that green foam of jealousy welling into his eyes and blinding him to how weak he was in relation to their organized strength. Render unto church that which is the church's, and render unto the Party that which is the Party's ... But where would *he* stand? Was there no neutral ground? (555)

Indeed, there seems to be no neutral ground. Cross' search for spiritual viability progresses to an inevitably unsatisfying conclusion once he identifies an either/or position as deceiver or deceived. He has only two choices, both inadequate to his desires: he can be lumped in with the other easily manipulated hordes, or else become a manipulator. His new life, which he imagined could be anything he chose it to be, has become even more limited than the one he left:

He had reckoned that his getting rid of the claims of others would have automatically opened up to him what he wanted, but it had merely launched him to live in the empty possibility of action whose spell, by purging reality of its aliveness, had bound him more securely in foolish drifting that he had experienced in all the past. The world became distant, opaque; he was not related to it and could find no way of becoming so. (196)

Cross' last ditch effort to relate to the world is his aborted relationship with Eva, but she can not and does not want anything to do with Cross as an "ethical murderer." His godlike behavior prevents him from having any kind of authentic relationship with her.

Cross, while denouncing ideologies that make gods of men, has made himself into his own god. His nemesis and kindred spirit, the district attorney Ely Houston, tells Cross, "You saw through all the ideologies, pretenses, frauds, but you did not see through yourself. How magnificently you tossed away this God who plagues and helps man so much! But you did not and could not toss out of your heart that part of you from which the God notion had come" (565). Here, Houston articulates the faith impulse at work and its consequences for Cross: despite his best efforts to avoid the empty gods of religion and politics, he has created an empty god out of his own subjectivity. He has neither power over other people, nor can he submit to any other power. He is utterly and echoingly alone.

Though the novel ends disastrously for Cross, his deathbed confessions to Houston reveal a potential loophole in the logic that led him there. In the absence of



any large-scale ideology that can provide existential satisfaction, Cross mourns the loss of the personal relationships he blithely sacrificed. Despite the bleak outlook that heretofore seemed inescapable—rule or be ruled—Wright provides a third options that rejects the premise of the binary. Cross tells Houston that “the search can’t be done alone ... alone a man is nothing...man is a promise he must never break” (585). Too late, he echoes the words of his mother, who early in the novel chastised him that Cross’ actions were unspoken promises. At the time, Cross dismissed his mother as an unyielding moralist, but after his failed spiritual quest, the idea of promises between people seems the only way to avoid slavish servitude to others or unchecked egotism.

This type of communion with others was impossible for Cross to participate in while under an assumed identity, always worrying about revealing too much, but he revealed glimpses of it throughout his story. In his former life in Chicago, he channels this desire for personal connection into sexual desire, much like *Home to Harlem’s* Jake. Both Dot, his teenaged mistress, and prostitute Jenny are regarded as bodies, not humans, as is evidenced in the leitmotif “woman as body of woman.” Cross manages to move beyond the idea of woman as body of woman when he confesses to Eva, but it is too late to salvage that relationship. And of course, the greatest irony is that Houston, the one person who seems likely to understand, if not condone, Cross’ behavior, is sworn to punish Cross if he shares any details.

This stab at human connection is far less developed than Wright’s critiques of political and religious ideologies. Nonetheless, it blows a hole in Cross’ efforts to restrict human experience to a series of unsolvable dichotomies. In the context of

Cross' (and to some extent, Wright's) spiritual journey, it deconstructs the sacred/secular binary. Where Cross had looked for sacred meaning and once found only secular, meaningless ideologies of power, he now allows for the possibility that those domains may overlap. Cross' final desire is not at all sacred in the strict, binary-adhering sense of the word, but is imbued with spiritual importance: "I wish I had some way to give the meaning of my life to others ... To make a bridge from man to man" (585).

Both *Home to Harlem* and *The Outsider* resist a clear delineation between sacred and secular ontologies by refusing to remain fully within one realm or the other. While the characters themselves have found no spiritual middle ground, the narrative voices acknowledge the potential for creating one.

McKay does not explicitly name a possible solution to his characters' alienation, but nonetheless seems unable to succumb to the dour implications of the modern existential crisis. Jake and Ray's fates are not decisively determined by the narrative, although it is likely that both men find they can leave Harlem, but have to take their troubles with them. McKay does not provide a solution for finding identity that comprises both authentic experience and social expectations, but neither does he conclude that there is no solution at all. Rather, McKay leaves a sense of possibility, no matter how bleak, that one can continue to seek a way of being in the world both socially acceptable and deeply fulfilling. After all, it is not a promise but the *potential* for authentic community that propels Jake on out into the world. While neither he nor Ray has found it, neither have they given up all hope; they both go out

into the world to continue their search. *Home to Harlem*, in short, emphasizes the ongoing search for spiritual wholeness, the secular spiritual quest.

Wright, on the other hand, names a potential solution, but with no possibility for Cross to test its viability. Cross' dying wish is that his spiritual impulse might have been channeled into personal connections. He yearns to find others like Houston "with whom he could feel at home" due to similar worldviews and affinities, "not because they had been born black and poor" (Wright 35). Without having had the chance to make "a bridge from man to man," Cross dies with this potential unrealized.

To be sure, neither *Home to Harlem* nor *The Outsider* is a secular conversion narrative—the holy object is not found, the pilgrim is not finally and definitively saved. However, both McKay and Wright describe modern pilgrims who continue to search for an ontology that will organize their sense of self, of the world around them, and of some transcendent world.

#### Chapter 4: Ongoing Conversions: Spiritual Uncertainty in *All the King's Men* and

#### *The Moviegoer*

Characters in the novels discussed in previous chapters tend to seek totalizing philosophies and be frustrated by imperfect approaches to spirituality and meaning. Walker Percy and Robert Penn Warren's protagonists in *The Moviegoer* and *All the King's Men* are different: they may similarly agonize over the sad state of the world, and they may have the same intellectual superiority, but they eventually are able to live with (if not fully embrace) the limitations of their ability to find a perfect system.

The basic temperaments of the novels' protagonists are now familiar: like Cross Damon, Claude Wheeler, and the others, Binx Bolling and Jack Burden are educated, disaffected, over-analytical, and generally miserable. Both novels are set in the deep South—a literary landscape famously Christ-haunted, but neither character is particularly religious. They are, once again, Jamesian sick souls: beset by the idea that something is not right in their lives and in the world around them.

Percy's Binx and Warren's Jack both undergo spiritual conversions that are more successful than those of the protagonists in the novels I addressed in earlier chapters. Both Binx and Jack survive their spiritual crises and find themselves in mature romantic relationships: each marries and devotes himself to caring for another human being as a symbol of the care he must take for the whole of humanity. Their conversions are tentative; each is satisfied to have a slight change in the way they see the world instead of requiring a sweeping change. Both characters

accept that their spiritual searches will not reach a tidy conclusion and may continue indefinitely.

### *All the King's Men*

As one of the seminal critical texts of the *All the King's Men* notes, "the most important thing that happens in *All the King's Men* is the 'conversion' of Jack Burden" (Strandberg 27). Jack's primary transformation is not a conversion in the traditional sense—there is no clear before and after, and at no point does he profess a definite belief in any god. Rather, he slowly adopts a spiritual position that values the ongoing process of sense-making and recognizes that his understanding of truth and meaning is subject to endless revision and reconsideration. Over time, Jack develops the ability to interpret the world around him as it relates to his past and future, and ultimately makes sense of his place in history through the act of narrating his own story.

While developing this process-based position, Jack undergoes several temporary conversions of attitude. Jack is familiar with traditional Christianity, but doesn't appear to have any faith. He frequently uses religious language, but in a context that has been completely denuded of any spiritual meaning. He flippantly speaks of having to "do penance" (Warren 463), he refers to the "dry itch of the soul" (566), as well as countless uses of various forms of the word God as expletives and intensifiers, but he doesn't believe in God, especially not his father Ellis Burden's God. Ellis believes in God who alone has "Fulness of Being" and "Complete Knowledge" (215) and argues that no human can ever get a handle on the shifting

and transforming landscape of knowledge and truth. Jack, as an academic, a newspaper man, and dirt-digger, rejects his father and his notion that what we think we know is unreliable and “constantly untrue” (215).

As a young man, Jack describes himself as an “idealist,” but a self-centered one. Whenever possible, he intentionally ignores the things that are going on around him.

I heard somebody open and shut the gate to the barn lot, but I didn't look around. If I didn't look around it would not be true that somebody had opened the gate with the creaky hinges, and that is a wonderful principle for a man to get hold of. I had got hold of the principle out of a book when I was in college, and I had hung on to it for grim death. I owed my success in life to that principle. It had put me where I was. What you don't know don't hurt you, for it ain't real. They called that Idealism in my book I had when I was in college, and ever after I got hold of that principle Little Jackie was an Idealist. He was a brass-bound Idealist. (44)

This type of idealism requires a lot of sleep—only when unconscious can he disregard the lives around him. He equates his sleep with a state of transcendence: “But for the present I would like there and know I didn't have to get up, and feel the holy emptiness and blessed fatigue of a saint after the dark night of the soul” (140). He imagines that refusing to engage with life is equivalent to rising above it.

However, Jack the “idealist” can only ignore so much—there are times when he is directly affected by the rest of the world. That despite his best efforts Jack

cannot always remain ignorant of what's happening around him is the source of his discomfort. In the earliest pages of the novel, he says, "The end of man is knowledge," and expresses anxiety that one never knows "whether knowledge will kill him or save him" (13). As an advisor to Governor Willie Stark,<sup>1</sup> Jack feels that he already knows too much to be the ignorant everyman "idealist" he aspires to be. He explains his disappointment with knowledge as he waits for Willie Stark to delivery a victory speech at the state capitol:

I was almost sorry, the next day as I looked out the high window at the mass of people filling the streets and the wide sweep of lawn beyond the statues in front of the Capitol, that I knew what I knew. If I hadn't known, I could have stood there in the full excitement of the possibilities of the moment. But I knew how the play would come out. This was like a dress rehearsal after the show has closed down. I stood there and felt like God-All-Mighty brooding on History. (213)

Here, Jack perceives himself as existing outside of time. He is not a part of history, but an observer. And at this point, Jack can't even credit himself as the observer with any power—he isn't an agent of change nor has he created the moment; he just watches.

But even if I didn't believe in the old man's God, that morning as I stood at the window of the Capitol and looked down on the crowd, I felt like God, because I had the knowledge of what was to come. I felt like God brooding on History, for as I stood there I could see a little chunk of History right there in front. ... Then over beyond the statues,

there were the people who weren't History yet. Not quite. But to me they looked like History, because I knew the end of the event of which they were a part. Or thought I knew the end. (215-6)

Here, we first see hints that Jack will not cling to this idea forever. When he adds that he *thought* he knew how it all turned out, he recognizes that he was not outside history—like all people, he was a part of it.

Jack begins to desert this isolating, intentionally ignorant perspective when he learns that his childhood sweetheart Anne Stanton is romantically and sexually involved with Willie Stark. He is not only upset because of his feelings for Anne, but also because he feels responsible for getting them together. At this point, with the knowledge of their affair revealed to him, Jack converts again, abandoning “brass-bound idealism” for the theory of the Great Twitch. This theory of random, chaotic happenstance absolves him of any guilt about Anne’s involvement with Stark: “The twitch was simply an independent phenomenon, unrelated to the face or to what was behind the face or to anything in the whole tissue of phenomena which is the world we are lost in” (437). With the Great Twitch, Jack can chalk it all up to chance—things happen for no reason, with no real cause, and thus he can dismiss his feelings of culpability. He later remembers, “To hell with them all, I said impartially under the stars. They all looked alike to me then. And I looked like them. That was the way it was for quite a while” (580-81). Under the Great Twitch, “he could not be called guilty of anything” (605).

Further, the Great Twitch absolves him of any responsibility to communicate with others. When he sees a carefree young couple out on the tennis court, he



thinks, “There was no use in giving them the benefit of my wisdom. Not even the great big piece of wisdom which I had learned on my trip to California. They didn’t know the wisdom of the Great Twitch, but they would have to find it out for themselves, for there was no use to tell them” (473). These young lovers might imagine that they are responsible for each other, but because Jack has embraced the freedom of the Great Twitch, he accepts no agency and no responsibility for anything.

The Great Twitch—freeing, yet lonely—is the context in which Jack becomes interested in the frontal lobotomy Adam Stanton performs on a paranoid schizophrenic. Adam’s description of the patient’s condition is remarkably similar to some of the pain and misery that Jack feels; as James Simmons notes, “Jack’s encounter with the catatonic schizophrenic is then an encounter with himself” (74). Adam says that the one thing all his psychiatric patients have in common is pain: “But always the patient seems to experience a numbing, grinding misery” (Warren 441). Jack is intrigued by the idea that there might be hope for change:

...I had seen three hangings and one electrocution, but they are different. In a hanging you do not change a man’s personality. You just change the length of his neck and give him a quizzical expression, and in an electrocution you just cook some bouncing meat in a wholesale lot. But this operation was going to be more radical even than what happened to Saul on the road to Damascus. (442)

Jack has perceived the world as a long haul of suffering that eventually ends in death. The idea that a conversion might be possible is exciting to him. Adam explains

that after the procedure, if it worked, the patient “would be different.” Jack instantly connects that change to the spiritual, asking whether the change would be like when “you get converted and baptized,” but Adam clarifies that this would be a whole new personality and not just a new set of values. After the lobotomy, he continues to imagine it as a spiritual rebirth, joking that Adam forgot to “baptize [him] in the name of the Big Twitch, the Little Twitch, and the Holy Ghost” (445).

Jack’s problem, though, is that he can’t imagine a way to change his own life in any significant way. He wonders about religious conversion—“how, if there was no change in personality, did the person get a different set of values to exercise his personality in terms of?” (443). Jack will eventually learn just that—the changes in his life are significant in that he is still himself, but understands his position differently. Jack doesn’t get a whole new personality, but he does have a conversion of sorts, to a different set of values.

After Willie Stark and Adam Stanton are killed, he begins to believe that the randomness and dumb luck explanation of the Great Twitch will be insufficient:

That day, there was a gradual piling up of events, then the rush to the conclusion, as when a great weight that has been grinding and slipping suddenly breaks the last mooring and takes the plunge. As I experienced that day, there was at first an impression of the logic of the events, caught flickeringly at moments, but as they massed to the conclusion I was able to grasp, at the time, only the slightest hints as to the pattern that was taking shape. (534)

The key to deciphering the pattern is time—he can't understand the significance of what has occurred until later. Jack continues, saying:

It was only after the conclusion, after everything was over, that the sense of reality returned, long after, in fact, when I had been able to father the pieces of the puzzle up and put them together to see the pattern. This is not remarkable, for, as we know, reality is not a function of the event as event, but of the relationship of that event to the past, and future, events. We seem to have here a paradox: that the reality of an event, which is not real in itself, arises from other events which, likewise, in themselves are not real. But this only affirms what we must affirm: that togetherness as direction is all. And only as we realize this do we live, for our own identity is dependent upon this principle. (534)

Those who survive are not doomed to ignorance; rather, they are the only ones who have the potential to gain self-awareness and a sense of identity required to endure. Endurance, then, is more than the sad survival of those who plod ignorantly through the world;<sup>2</sup> it can also provide the opportunity to tell one's story to gain otherwise unreachable understanding about the meaning of the self and the surrounding world.

It is fitting that Jack's comprehension of the pattern of events, available to him only in time, draws upon the lessons of time past. As a graduate student of history, Jack's thesis focused on the life of Cass Mastern, whose affair with a friend's wife led to his friend's suicide and caused his paramour to sell her slave, Phebe,

separating her from her family. Jack's new realization of his place in the world helps him understand the lessons he missed the first time around:

Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He learned that world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter and the drowsy spider feels the tingle and is drowsy no more but springs out to fling the gossamer coils about you who have touched the web and then inject the black, numbing poison under your hide. It does not matter whether or not you meant to brush the web of things. Your happy foot or your gay wing may have brushed it ever so lightly, but what happens always happens and there is the spider, bearded black and with his great faceted eyes glittering like mirrors in the sun, or like God's eye, and the fangs dripping. (266)

Jack, like Cass, comes to understand that he is not isolated—that his actions affect others around him, and will likely affect the course of the future. After years of viewing himself as morally and intellectually superior to Stark's henchman Tiny Duffy—"Duffy was the villain and I was the avenging hero"—he suddenly realizes that "We were bound together forever and I could never hate him without hating myself or love myself without loving him" (580). Warren emphasizes that true enlightenment involves the interconnectedness of humanity—one's spiritual fate is not determined in isolation, but in conversation with others. Jack Burden comes to this spiritual position after tragedy, but not, as was the case with Richard Wright's

Cross Damon, on his deathbed. Burden has the opportunity Cross longed for at the end of *The Outsider*: to make “a bridge from man to man” and try to communicate what he sees as a spiritual truth. For Jack, this is possible by narrating his own story.

Jack’s spiritual transformation depended upon two things: the passage of time and a clearer sense of his personal identity. These elements, central to Jack’s new outlook, are also hallmarks of narratives. In his book *Narrative and the Self*, Anthony Paul Kerby acknowledges the interrelationship between time and the quest for identity:

If we wish to grasp the nature of our specifically human existence, an existence that has a certain self-identity and consciousness of that identity, it is appropriate to begin our investigation with the question of temporality, for if one thing is to be admitted, it is that our lives are temporally determined both by the beginning and the end that our physical being exhibits and by the history that threads between, and even beyond these two poles. I do not think that what we call our self or our identity can be adequately considered outside this temporal and therefore historical framework, outside the time of our lives. (15)

Time, then, is crucial to developing meaningful self-identity, but time alone is not enough—one must also have the ability to connect the events experienced over time into a cohesive, meaningful narrative. In Kerby’s words, “narratives articulate not just isolated acts but whole sequences of events or episodes, thereby placing particular events within a framing context or history” (3). Jack could not see a

“pattern” until he could connect specific episodes with others that happened before and after; that is, he needed to create a narrative in order to understand not just the meaning of the events transpired, but where his idea of “self” fit into those events. His narrative acts as the “primary embodiment of [his] understanding of the world, of experience, and ultimately of [himself]” (3).

Of course, creating one’s personal narrative is an ongoing process. We can look at experiences as bricks used to build an individual’s master narrative—each brick is a single, distinct episode that has form in and of itself, but it also gives shape to a larger structure; it is mounted on other bricks of experience, and will serve as support for experiences yet to come. That is, “Experience is *at once* part and whole. [...] Experience gains its density and elusiveness precisely through a continuous contextualizing or meshing of part to changing whole; the relating of itself to itself” (16). The key here is to be able to accept both pieces of experience.

The inability to make the transition to a full view of experience as simultaneous part and whole is ultimately what prevents Willie Stark and Adam Stanton from enduring. Willie disregards the “parts” of experience in favor of the whole. Willie imagines the finished product of his life as a beautiful legacy of political achievement, but tries to build it out of immoral and unethical episodes. He tells Adam that “you can’t inherit that [goodness] from anybody. You got to make it, Doc. If you want it. And you got to make it out of badness” (359). He doesn’t realize that relying only on “badness” makes it impossible for him to create the legacy he desires. He doesn’t anticipate that any isolated event, like his affair with Anne Stanton, could prevent that legacy from forming. Yet, it not only ends his life, it also

destroys his dream of building a hospital that will bear his name into the future, since the project disintegrates after his death.

Adam, meanwhile, can't stop looking at the parts long enough to think about the whole. Each of his experiences must meet such strict criteria that the larger structure of his life never seems to take shape. When he finds out about his sister's affair with Stark, he is compelled to make that individual experience fit his standards of moral acceptability, and so, without regard to how this will affect the larger narrative of his life, seeks revenge on Stark by shooting him. Like Stark, his obsession with only half of the full implications of the part-whole model of experience prevents him from "filling out" his identity into the "more particular and rich" self-identity that Jack develops (Kerby 46).

Under the theory of the Great Twitch, Jack Burden sees only parts, "for to him the world then was simply an accumulation of items, odds and ends of things like the broken and misused and dust-shrouded gathered in a garret. Or it was a flux of things before his eyes (or behind his eyes) and one thing had nothing to do, in the end, with anything else" (Warren 267).

After the dramatic deaths of Willie Stark, Adam Stanton, and Judge Irwin, Jack temporarily shifts from this "parts-only" view to the opposite perspective of a completed, static whole.

After a great blow, or crisis, after the first shock and then after the nerves have stopped screaming and twitching, you settle down to the new condition of things and feel that all possibility of change has been used up. You adjust yourself, and are sure that the new equilibrium is

for eternity. ... I felt that a story was over, that what had been begun a long time back had been played out, that the lemon had been squeezed dry. (495)

But Jack as narrator looks back and sees that he was mistaken. He has become the story-teller, and uses the language of narrative to explain that he understands the part-whole relationship:

But if anything is certain it is that no story is ever over, for the story which we think is over is only a chapter in a story which will not be over, and it isn't the game that is over, it is just an inning, and that game has a lot more than nine innings. When the game stops it will be called on account of darkness. But it is a long day. (495)

It is only after he comes to accept the part-whole relationship that he can understand enough about himself to tell his own story, since "the narration of events is not a simple description of 'facts' but an interpretive activity--it is an important way in which our experiences are understood, are given form and meaning. Prior to some degree of narration, the meaning of human events for us is obscure or simply absent" (Kerby 48).

Jack had made a career out of digging up "the truth" about people, without ever considering that somehow he was responsible for the consequences of that "truth" becoming public. Now, he is able to separate factual information from a greater sense of truth—that there is something beyond facts, and some inherent responsibility to take care of others. Truth is something different than he had first imagined. As a student of history, he feels that he values truth. While he rejects any



responsibility for checking in with his father, Ellis Burden, he says, “I’m talking about [my family], and I can’t help seeing the plain unvarnished truth” (149). Anne, however, sees the insufficiency of this definition of truth, and demands, “How do you know it’s the truth? You don’t know anything about it. You don’t know what made them do what they did.” (149). Anne instinctively recognizes that the motivations and connections between events and people matter—that the cold facts look different when viewed through a lens of compassion and the web of human experience.

This idea is not entirely new to Jack; he has seen it in his doctoral research on his uncle. In his journal, Cass Mastern grieves for the pain he has caused others, and accepts that he is responsible for their fates: “I have lived to do no man good, and have seen others suffer for my sin” (264). And yet, suffering, whether earned or unearned, establishes a connection between people. On his deathbed, Cass writes, “it may be that only by the suffering of the innocent does God affirm that men are brothers, and brothers in his Holy Name” (264).

Jack abandoned his dissertation because he could not understand Cass Mastern’s sense of shared responsibility. Without understanding why Cass came to believe in the connectedness of humanity, Jack is unable to continue: “He did not have to know Cass Mastern to get the degree; he only had to know the facts about Cass Mastern’s world. But without knowing Cass Mastern, he could not put down the facts about Cass Mastern’s world” (265). The Jack who narrates the story has a different perspective, and can try to explain Cass’ motivations: “Cass Mastern lived for a few years and in that time he learned that the world is all of one piece. He

learned that the world is like an enormous spider web and if you touch it, however lightly, at any point, the vibration ripples to the remotest perimeter” (266). By the time Jack tells this story, he has come to believe that truth is not just facts, “For there is a blackness of truth, too. They say it is a terrible thing to fall into the Grace of God. I am prepared to believe that” (478).

Jack demonstrates this ontology of connectedness throughout the end of the book in his interactions with former colleague Sugar-Boy, his mother, and Ellis Burden. Thus, he decides against giving Sugar-Boy information that will prompt him to kill Tiny Duffy, who he believes is indirectly responsible for both Willie and Adam Stanton’s deaths. He repairs his long-strained relationship with his mother by denying the facts—that Judge Irwin killed himself because of a political “jam”—in order to protect her feelings. Finally, when he nurses Ellis Burden on his deathbed, he ignores the fact that Ellis is not really his father, and instead accepts as truth that he is bound to Ellis regardless of the biology of his paternity. The brotherhood of men that Cass Mastern described is now a reality for Jack; it doesn’t matter whether Ellis is his father or not, because “each of us is the son of a million fathers” (606). His new spiritual position has requires him to consider his effect on the people of his past and present in an effort to take responsibility for his role in the events of the future.

It seems that surety in his own wisdom has disappeared as he realizes his complicity in history. Jack and Anne Stanton eventually marry, and their fragile relationship and responsibility toward each other represents the solemn responsibility Jack feels for all the people he knows and even those he doesn’t. His

spiritual approach of interconnectedness of humanity requires him to approach humanity with the kind of solemnity required for the spiritual; life itself is a spiritual experience for Jack. As such, he arrives at an attitude that meshes precisely with the way William James characterized the spiritual: as “neither a curse nor a jest” (45). Life isn’t so funny as he once thought it was—he tells us that the jokes he made about a lobotomy being just like a baptism seemed hilarious at the time, but don’t seem funny in terms of his new values; indeed, “from the height of my Olympian wisdom, I seemed to find a great many things funny which now do not appear quite as funny” (Warren 445).

Jack has learned that circumstances matter, and that judgment based only on facts is not the whole truth. For instance, Irwin and Governor Stanton’s political coverup was motivated by love and loyalty to a friend; “[Governor Stanton’s] failing was a defect of his virtue. The virtue of affection for a friend” (485). Once Jack understands this, he also sees that, Ellis, the man he had grown up believing to be his father was weak but good; the Judge was strong, but had made mistakes; his mother was impossible, but still loving. The logic of these contradictions is too difficult to unwind: no one is entirely blameless or entirely admirable. Similarly, Jack’s involvement with Willie Stark has never been simple, either: “If it were absolutely either way, you wouldn’t have to think about it, you could just shut your eyes. ... But the trouble is, they are half right and half wrong, and in the end that is what paralyzes you. Trying to sort out the one from the other” (561).

The untangling metaphor continues after Willie’s death, as his wife explains that she has to believe that he was a good man. Jack also believes it, or at least that

he had greatness in him, and that “perhaps he could not tell his greatness from ungreatness and so mixed them together that what was adulterated was lost. But he had it” (593). This theme of the unknowability of ultimate goodness is key to the provisionality of the new way of being that Jack accepts: “a man’s virtue may be but the defect of his desire, as his crime may be but a function of his virtue” (608).

Jack’s solemn sense of the limitations of human knowledge and his responsibility to keep trying to figure it out as best he can is the basis for his narrative. He says:

This has been the story of Willie Stark, but it is my story, too. For I have a story. It is the story of a man who lived in the world and to him the world looked one way for a long time and then it looked another and very different way. The change did not happen all at once. Many things happened, and that man did not know when he had any responsibility for them and when he did not. (605)

Significantly, once Jack discovers his ability to create his own narrative, he returns to his long-abandoned Cass Mastern project, the journal of another man whose view of the world changed drastically as he learned about himself and his responsibilities. When Jack talks about why it took him so long to complete the project, he says, “I (who am what Jack Burden became) look back now, years later, and try to say why” (266). In this statement, he succinctly describes the power of narrative to combine the perspective that comes with time and the ability to craft meaning—the “why”—out of experience.

## *The Moviegoer*

Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* outlines a similar ontological position for its protagonist, Binx Bolling. While Percy is willing to explicitly name his protagonist's quest as spiritual, the novel does not pin down the resolution as a conversion. Percy's many interviews and essays make clear that he believed that Roman Catholicism was the best way to counteract the pressures of modernity, but *The Moviegoer* assiduously avoids suggesting the church as the answer to all problems. Instead, Percy suggests that modernity must learn to live without ready-made answers and come to terms with the continual struggle to find one's way.

He claimed in a 1990 essay that we live in a world that is post-modern and post-Christian, "possessed by a sense of dislocation [and] a loss of personal identity" (*Signposts* 309). Percy offers a name for the present age: the age of the theorist-consumer. Dominated by psychoanalysis-spawned therapeutic culture and rampant consumption, spirituality, which was once a guidepost in the quest for identity, is in modern society "miniaturized" by the theorist and reified by the consumer. Percy takes a familiar view of the consumer: one who is driven to accumulate possessions and ideas, and who uses these things to try to locate a sense of self, but any fulfillment is fleeting. Thus, the consumer, who "thought he knew what he wanted...is not...satisfied" (311). Equally unsatisfied is Percy's theorist, who applies empirical, scientific methods to a "theory of man" (309). While this theoretical method has been largely successful in interpreting the world of objects, and even to some extent the biological nature of people, Percy believes that it fails to account for

the human desire for transcendence. The theorist “is not encompassed by his theory;” rather “one’s self is always a leftover from one’s theory” (311).

In the modern age of mass-media and marketing, only easy, diluted religion is accessible by the consumer; in order to find transcendent spirituality, one must set out to look for it. Part of Catholicism’s appeal to Percy was its reliance on a long, relatively unchanging tradition of theology and liturgy that gave humanity a higher purpose than the frantic collection of money and goods or the navel-gazing of therapy and psychoanalysis.

As Percy sees it, the theorist-consumer mode of being has altered human consciousness to the point where the spiritual quest is at once overly familiar and profoundly strange, and thus must be reimagined and re-presented in a way that will be recognizable to the modern reader. Peter Hawkins, in his book *Language of Grace*, succinctly explains the dilemma of the contemporary writer who wants to explore a spiritual point of view. Formerly, there could be “a consensus between author and reader based on the shared possession of ... biblical subtext, and agreement as to the verities which are to be recalled and about the nature of true self-discovery” (8-9); writers like Percy can’t presume that consensus if they want their work to be read widely. Thus, Hawkins explains how Percy is faced with a twofold problem:

First, how can you speak about the experience of grace without assuming a knowledge (let alone an acceptance) of any religious tradition, and, secondly, how can you speak engagingly about such an experience so as to open the reader to the sense of mystery and

transcendence which the spirit of the present age has seemingly inoculated us against? Implicit in the latter half of this question, moreover, is the writer's desire not only to open the reader, but to move him or her in a particular direction. (10)

Hawkins describes Percy as a writer who wants "to tell the story of transcendent experience in a period when people commonly lack the words to express it and therefore the means by which to enter it more deeply" (4). Percy is a bit less generous with his readership. The mysteries of religion have been theorized and consumerized into irrelevance; so spiritual concerns are out of vogue. Early in the novel, Binx Bolling says he has been turned on to the "idea of a search," but he is cagey about what, exactly, he is searching for, and won't come right out and say that he is looking for God. The prevailing wisdom is that a spiritual search is passé; after all, "...all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves" (*Moviegoer* 13). Binx lives in a world where questions about God and spirituality are assumed to be finally and easily settled, and thus he is asking "...a question in which no one has the slightest interest. Who wants to be dead last among one hundred and eight million Americans? For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2% are atheists and agnostics—which leaves not a single percentage point for a seeker" (*Moviegoer* 14). There is a sense that this ground has been covered, that the questions have all been asked and answered, and that a modern American is foolish to waste any time on the subject.

By undertaking a spiritual search in this atmosphere, Binx has to wonder whether he is a maverick or a fool: "Am I, in my search, a hundred miles ahead of my

fellow Americans or a hundred miles behind them? That is to say: Have 98% of Americans already found what I seek or are they so sunk in everydayness that not even the possibility of a search has occurred to them?" (*Moviegoer* 14). Despite the instinct that this search is more important than anything else in his life, Binx must struggle with the real possibility that he's out of sync with modernity—that the answers to spirituality have been provided to everyone but him.

At the beginning of *The Moviegoer*, 30-year old Binx is fully enveloped in the theorist-consumer culture that Percy uses to characterize modernity. At the outset, Percy makes clear that Binx's consumerism is merely a distraction from rootlessness. Binx waxes poetic about his cars and is frequently preoccupied with money-making opportunities. He is a stock and bond broker--a profession that consists almost entirely of accumulating money for himself and others. He says he "discovered [his] sole discernible talent: the trick of making money" (30). Binx works for his Uncle Jules--a fellow consumer whom Binx admires, saying:

He has made a great deal of money, he has a great many friends, he was Rex of Mardi Gras, he gives freely of himself and his money. He is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him. (31)

Binx's Aunt Emily is more a theorist, modeled after Percy's uncle William Percy, a southern stoic, of whom Percy said, "it is true that he was raised on the Christian chivalry of Walter Scott, but it was a Christianity which was aestheticized by medieval trappings and a chivalry which was abstracted from its sacramental



setting” (qtd in Quinlan 26). Walker Percy was not satisfied by philosophy that simply encouraged good behavior but had no real faith at its core. Percy critiques this stoical bent in Aunt Emily: “My father’s family think that the world makes sense without God and that anyone but an idiot knows what the good life is and anyone but a scoundrel can lead it” (*Moviegoer* 146).

Emily encourages Binx to make a theory-friendly career decision, and reminds him of “discovering Euripides and Jean-Christophe” (55). But Binx is uninterested in these theoretical occupations. He tells Emily, “You discovered them for me. It was always through you...” (55). Binx says, “It is true that my family was once somewhat disappointed in my choice of a profession. Once I thought of going into law or medicine or even pure science” (9). Emily still wants him to pursue that kind of theoretical occupation and frequently mentions his “flair for research” (51).

Binx is not convinced. He has “become aware of the possibility of a search” (13), which he finds difficult to define, but is intended to relieve the despair that surrounds him, which he calls the malaise. Though he is unsure what he’s searching for, and is reluctant to specify that the search is for God, he focuses instead on escaping the despair of everyday life. He has been unable to avoid the malaise by being a consumer. It may work for a little while, as his cars have:

My little red MG...is immune to the malaise. You have no idea what happiness Marcia and I experienced as soon as we found ourselves spinning along the highway in this bright little beetle. We looked at each other in astonishment: the malaise was gone! (122)

But sadly, “On its way home the MG becomes infested with malaise” (166).

Consumerism can’t stop the sadness, it can only delay it a while.

Binx gains firsthand experience that demonstrates that theory is an inadequate refuge from the malaise, too. He watches as Emily’s step-daughter Kate learns about theory, and sees that it ultimately fails her. Kate was thrilled to discover the world of ideas with Emily. She rejected her father in favor of Emily’s “lofty regions of Literature and Life” (46). Binx realizes that soon Kate will “‘see into’ her stepmother, just as she caught up with her father” and worries that as soon as that happens, Kate will join Binx “in some kind of dead end” (46); in other words, the malaise.

He has good reason to worry. Kate is a patient in the ultimate theoretical pursuit--psychotherapy--which doesn’t seem to be helping her. She rushes out of a session with her therapist, finally disappointed in the theories Emily and the psychiatrist have been espousing. She tells her psychiatrist “Merle, how I wish you were right. How good to think that there are reasons and that if I am silent, it means I am hiding something” (115). His theory of her mind cannot explain her reality; as Percy’s essay explains, the self is “that portion of the person which cannot be encompassed by theory” (*Signposts* 312). As Binx predicted, Kate sees through the theoretical (her stepmother and the psychiatrist). Though she is initially elated by this discovery, Binx knows that this is not a happy occasion--he has been through it himself, and rightly predicts that Kate “will not feel wonderful long” (*Moviegoer* 115). Again, his worries are justified; soon after this episode, she attempts suicide.

As Kate recovers from her suicide attempt, she realizes why she's been so lost, saying:

What I want is to believe in someone completely and then do what he wants me to do. If God were to tell me: Kate, here is what I want you to do; you get off this train right now and go over there to that corner...and stand there for the rest of your life and speak kindly to people--you think I would not do it? You think I would not be the happiest girl in Jackson, Mississippi? I would. (197)

Both her father's consumerism and her stepmother's theory are within individual controls; instead Kate wants to be consumed and controlled by a greater force that will counteract the dulling malaise with something passionate. She doesn't quite find God--instead she asks Binx to tell her what to do--but she does recognize, like Binx, a desire for something more than a consumer-friendly spiritual life.

Meanwhile, even religion seems to have succumbed to the "everydayness" Binx battles. Binx's mother and her family are nominally Catholic, but their weak religious bent doesn't exempt them from the cultural problems Binx sees everywhere; his mother "wanted everything colloquial and easy, even God" (142). Unfulfilled by both southern stoicism and token Catholicism, Binx searches for something totalizing.

Binx's sickly brother Lonnie is the only character who has found this greater, consuming force. His religious faith is not miniaturized--he is thoroughly immersed in God. This type of faith doesn't come naturally to Binx. He's so hesitant to talk

about religion that he says he'd "jump in the bayou" (159) if someone brought it up. But still he sees the beauty in Lonnie's life, and admires his escape from the malaise. Unlike the theorist, Lonnie's "words are not worn out" (162)--he seems uniquely capable of love.

Lonnie's example provokes Binx to move from pondering the possibility of the search to actually beginning an active search for a more satisfying existence that transcends the ordinary. Again, it doesn't come naturally to Binx, but he finds value in the attempt:

'I don't know whether I can succeed.'

'I know you don't.'

'It seems the wildest sort of thing to do.'

'Yes.' [...]

'I'm not sure that I'll ever change. Really change.'

'You might.' [...]

'I will try! I will!'

Though this exchange between Binx and Kate refers to her continuing struggle with mental illness, it perfectly describes Binx's understanding of the search. Though there is only a glimmer of a possibility for success, it is worth the effort. Consumerism and theory have failed them, and all that is left is an endeavor for a larger, invisible faith.

Percy & Kierkegaard

Percy begins *The Moviegoer* with an epigraph from Kierkegaard's *Sickness Unto Death* ("... the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair"), and much has been made of its Christian existentialism. Though Percy was undeniably influenced by Kierkegaard, reducing that influence to a series of direct parallels carries the risk of overlooking the importance of orthodoxy in Percy's model of spiritual quest. One need only look at Jerome Taylor's book *In Search of Self: Life, Death & Walker Percy*, an extended study of Kierkegaard's stages of being and becoming evidenced in Percy's work to see how a single-minded focus on Kierkegaard can lead to a distorted interpretation of *The Moviegoer*.

Taylor examines Percy's writings on language and intersubjectivity, particularly the essay "Naming and Being," in which Percy presents the power of language to name things as the key to becoming an authentic self and to celebrate shared humanity. Taylor sees in this "a compelling statement of the utter necessity of other persons to the proper living of one's life" (118). Indeed, Binx's attachments to Lonnie and Kate are intimately connected to the sense of peace he seems to have acquired by novel's end. Where Taylor goes wrong, in my estimation, is in equating that personal attachment with spiritual transcendence. He argues that Binx's improved relationships with other people are a "secular style of faith" (9). If, as Taylor suggests, religious existence means only that "one allows something beyond himself to be the center of his life" (131), then Percy is no different than the self-help set that he continually dismisses as theorists in his theorist-consumer schema.<sup>3</sup>

Taylor claims that "in both Kierkegaard's and Percy's views, the essential element in the whole process of self-becoming is what might be called the 'miracle'"

(7), and talks about the Kierkegaardian “God-relationship” as a “leap...into help from the Beyond” (6), but then takes the miraculousness out of that leap. Taylor argues that because all that Kierkegaard requires for the religious mode of existence is “a good cause” and not necessarily a God-reference (130), the absence of an explicit reference to God indicates that Percy’s characters are only looking for a good cause.

Kierkegaard’s religious existence, in Taylor’s estimation, is “a way of living, not a matter of believing the right things” (127). The prevalence of Christian evangelism in Percy’s essays evinces his understanding of spiritual transcendence as being precisely about believing the right things, despite his reluctance to name it specifically in the novel. Percy explains his ambiguity in a 1990 interview:

If you get caught writing a quote religious novel about God, Judaism, Christianity, you are dead. You’ll be read by a few people. As one of my characters says, Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, ‘Whenever anyone says God to me, a curtain goes down in my head.’ I have to be damn careful when I talk about grace. I have to be extremely allusive. ...the language of Christianity ... is increasingly discredited....You do the best you can with it, usually by avoiding the words or using other words. (“Modern Prognosis”)

Taylor’s line of interpretation takes Binx’s silence about the specific spiritual nature of his search as evidence that “Percean characters move into the religious mode...without an awareness of God being central to their consciousness” (130). If we limit a reading of *The Moviegoer* to its parallels with Kierkegaardian philosophy, then perhaps Taylor’s claim that “Percy provides hope for modern man for whom

conventional God-awareness seems an increasingly diminished possibility” would suffice (9). But suggesting that Binx’s search ends in satisfaction that caring for others is just about the same as finding spiritual transcendence is to ignore the demands of Binx’s search.

Though Percy himself believed that genuine Catholicism was the only answer to such a malaise, Binx doesn’t settle on any definitive answer.<sup>4</sup> But one shouldn’t mistake Binx’s promise to “shy away from the subject of religion” (237) as proof that he has abandoned it altogether. The search he undertakes never arrives at a resolution; rather, we are told that “the search is all”: The only way to find transcendence is to keep looking for it. Though he never feels that he has arrived at a spiritual endpoint, Binx’s accomplishment is not that his search is completed by taking care of Kate and his young brothers and sisters, but rather that he comes to terms with the continuing nature of the search. Like Jack Burden, Binx’s story has not yet ended: its meaning will be revised again and again with the addition of new experiences that contribute to its shape as a whole.

Though at one point, Binx says the searcher is miserable because he “set[s] just beyond his reach the very thing he prizes” (215), he eventually comes to value the ongoingness of the quest. When Binx sees a black man leaving church on Ash Wednesday, he is uncertain whether the man has received ashes:

It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some

dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus? It is impossible to say. (235)

Binx is no longer frustrated, but seems to be comfortable with this uncertainty. Just as he cannot assume or dismiss the possibility of salvation for this man, he accepts that his own search for salvation will always have some level of ambiguity.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Anguish of Process**

The ongoing nature of the spiritual search, highlighted in *The Moviegoer* and *All the King's Men*, is an idea that is not limited to the modern secular world. To the contrary, one finds the problematic uncertainty of spirituality even in the most religious of people and times: Jonathan Edwards in the 18<sup>th</sup>-century Great Awakening. I want to take a brief look at Edwards' spiritual narrative in an effort to consider these novels in a broader context than the largely secular mid-twentieth century. Indeed, Edwards, known for his orthodoxy, seems to have understood spirituality as a process of becoming: always unfinished and subject to revision.<sup>6</sup>

In *The Puritan Origins of the American Self*, Sacvan Bercovitch documents the contradictory impulses of self-assertion and self-annihilation that characterize the Puritan spiritual autobiography. Bercovitch describes the spiritual autobiographers as "simultaneously demanding meaning and confessing [their] own meaninglessness, in an endless (because interminable) ritual celebration-exorcism of the Puritan self." Jonathan Edwards' brief spiritual autobiography, the *Personal Narrative*, is riddled with this push and pull between agency and self-denial. He longs to "lie low before God," but when he prays for humility, he "cannot bear the



thoughts of being no more humble than other Christians” (6). Not only is this one of many instances of Edwards’ engagement in the paradox of selfhood, but also suggests another paradox at work in the path to sanctification. Personal holiness, which Edwards says is necessary in order to achieve salvation (“The Way of Holiness” 3), is unattainable unless one can abandon the sinful self--an undertaking of difficulty given the circumstances of Bercovitch’s paradox. Unable to fully deny the self, holiness becomes an ever elusive goal, impossible to achieve, but ever to be striven for.

In “The Way of Holiness,” Edwards warns that not only is external behavior an insufficient indicator of internal holiness, but that even those who have a strong sense of inward holiness may, in fact, be mistaken. Indeed, “there are many that think they are undoubtedly in the way to heaven” but “have not the last grain of true holiness,” and face great disappointment to find themselves “sinking in the bottomless pit” upon their deaths (6). Much has been written about Edwards’ distrust of sensory experience as an indicator of salvation.<sup>7</sup> But the limitations of language’s ability to describe the intangible and the spiritual in terms *other* than the vocabulary of sensory experience make it exceptionally difficult to define and describe the holiness of the truly sanctified. Daniel B. Shea says, “God’s underived holiness could not, of course, be encompassed by words” (28); the individual’s experience of such inexpressible holiness would be equally difficult to translate into language.

Despite these difficulties, Edwards attempts a definition of holiness that consists of three parts, which he sees as equivalent, but each highlighting a different

aspect of holiness. Edwards saw holiness as the primary characteristic of God, and holiness in men as an attempt to adapt to the image of God. Thus, to be holy in the sight of the triumvirate God, one must approach holiness from three positions: that of conforming to God, to Christ, and to God's laws and commands. The laws and commands are perhaps the easiest to identify and to imitate--they are laid out in scripture. Edwards identifies Christ as closer to us than God--the "express image" of God in human form who has set an example for holiness with a perfect and sinless life. It is more difficult to express the possibility of obtaining holiness by comparison to God the Father, as Edwards indicates when he explains that it is impossible for one to conform to him "in his eternity, or infinity, or infinite power. These are God's inimitable and incommunicable attributes" (3). Rather, Edwards says that one can only conform to God's will, submitting to and embracing God's preference for the "just, right, and truly excellent and lovely" and abhorrence of all that is "evil, unjust, and unreasonable" (3). Furthermore, strained attempts to conform oneself to God's will are not enough; "it must become natural thus to be, and thus to act; it must be the constant inclination and new nature of the soul, and then the man is holy, and not before" (3). Edwards first acknowledges the impossibility of ever achieving parity with the scale of God's holiness, but requires nonetheless that the individual meet God's qualitative standards of holiness.

In attempting to define holiness, Edwards has identified its paradoxical nature. Elsewhere, he makes evident that the depravity of mankind far outweighs their capacity for godly holiness. In the *Personal Narrative*, as Edwards expresses his delight in God's holiness and his own desire to be holy in God's eyes, he also draws

attention to his continued unworthiness. His own wickedness is “perfectly ineffable,” and his “repentance was nothing to [his] sin.” In “The Way of Holiness,” he stresses that personal holiness is the non-negotiable element for salvation, and again points out mankind’s persistent sinfulness:

‘Tis impossible by reason of God’s holiness, that anything should be united to God and brought to the enjoyment of him which is not holy. Now is it possible that a God of infinite holiness, that is perfect and hates sin with perfect hatred, that is infinitely lovely and excellent, should embrace in his arms a filthy, abominable creature, a hideous, detestable monster, more hateful than a toad and more poisonous than a viper? But so hateful, base, and abominable is every unsanctified man, even the best hypocrite and most painted selpuchers of them all. (“The Way of Holiness” 8)

Though the unsanctified man is thus disgusting and unholy in his natural state, the sanctified man differs not in the degree of his monstrosity, but in his acknowledgment of it. Those whom Edwards holds up as examples of living saints—including, in the *Personal Narrative*, himself—are quick to point out their vileness and unworthiness. Again, we see the paradox of holiness: one must overcome one’s fallen nature to be holy, but one can never escape one’s tendency for sinfulness. With continued sinfulness, one can’t sufficiently conform to God’s ways; thus, holiness seems an impossible goal.

It is precisely the paradox of becoming holy that creates an interminable, continuing quest at the center of Edwards’ own spiritual life and the theology he

taught to others. This unabated striving toward an unachievable goal is aptly captured in Bercovitch's characterization of Puritan spiritual autobiography as a record of "the anguish of process" (24). The quest for holiness, as laid out by Edwards, reaches no end point; it is a continuing effort to make oneself more like God while the self that cannot be fully denied continues to assert itself and its sinfulness.

The ongoing nature of the quest for holiness is built into the morphologies of the conversion experience. Though scholars and theologians have differed over some of the finer points of the conversion morphologies, they all account for the likelihood of reverting to sin, and the possibility that the conversion process might have to be repeated.<sup>8</sup> Edwards own conversion follows this pattern: even after several false conversions in his youth, his mature conversion does not conform him to God's holiness. Despite his "dependence on God's grace and strength" he is still "greatly afflicted with a proud and selfrighteous spirit, much more sensibly than I used to be formerly" (*Personal Narrative* 6). Edwards' conversion is often noted for diverging from the standard Puritan morphologies in that it did not place as much emphasis as its predecessors on following particular steps in a particular order. But the probability of backsliding and the likelihood of having to continue striving for salvation even after a "successful" conversion was still a strong element in Edwards' morphology. In fact, the differences in Edwards' morphology suggest an even stronger sense of the continued sinfulness--and unholiness--of man. Stephen Yarbrough and John Adams remark that instead of "turning away *from* an old self toward God in fear of God's justice, Edwards experienced a turning *toward* God in

appreciation of that justice” (7). This distinction only serves to underscore the inescapability of the old, depraved self, even while attempting to move toward the holiness of God.

The paradox of holiness is resolved, for Edwards and other Christians, by the miracle of God’s grace. Though this is the theological solution, the paradox remains in the discourse of holiness, which establishes an unreachable telos of personal spiritual history. If Edwards can define holiness only as the essence of God, and if man is utterly un-Godlike and incapable of fully annihilating the sinful self, then holiness will always be an elusive goal--just out of reach even to the most pious and dedicated sojourners.

As a preacher, Edwards addressed an audience who presumably wanted to be saved and were generally accepting of the possibility of salvation. Percy, dealing with similar questions of conversion, wrote for a modern audience of theorist-consumers, for whom he claims that “the common mark...is that neither knows who he is or what he wants outside of theorizing and consuming” (*Signposts* 311). Thus, even though both wrote to encourage authentic conversion to Christianity, Edwards did so explicitly while Percy worked within a secular, skeptical context.

Both Edwards and Percy promoted an all-encompassing Christianity, strengthened against the relaxing standards of their respective historical moments. Both acknowledged the difficulty of a lasting communion with God and relied upon grace to resolve the problem of the uncertainty of the conversion process. Edwards could identify the goal of his search as holiness, even though he could not fully attain

it. Percy's protagonist, awash in the white noise of the twentieth-century, could not name the goal of his search, but could keep moving with faith toward a final, totalizing structure: a nameless version of Edwards' holiness of God.

Although we can identify a similar "anguish of process" seen in these works separated by two centuries, the key factor that sets Binx Bolling and Jack Burden—and their modern contemporaries—apart from Edwards is that they are submitting to the process without any strong faith in where it will lead them. Their ongoing searches aren't experienced in community: not only are they operating outside of any religious group, they only have tentative connections to *any* other people. These characters seem only to trust that moving—even if the direction is unclear—is better than staying stuck in the malaise.

Neither character experiences a conversion of the sort William James describes, where one emerges from a dark night of the soul "unified and consciously right superior and happy" (97), and settles into a new, fully formed pattern. They do not experience the path of the traditional protagonist, who moves quickly "from worldliness into well-ordered systems of religious belief" (McClure 4). They reside in what John McClure calls the "confusing middle zones" of the traditional conversion narrative. While McClure argues that postsecular protagonists of postmodern and contemporary literature are generally comfortable with these middle zones, Jack Burden and Binx Bolling are uneasy there, experiencing spiritual change as an ongoing process, constantly subject to revision and reinterpretation.

## Conclusion

The novels in the previous chapters are all stories of individuals in spiritual crisis. Institutional religion and communal spiritual practices are either ignored or dismissed out of hand by the narrators. Instead, each protagonist is preoccupied with figuring out a spiritual position uniquely tailored to his own experiences; each determines to write his own spiritual story. This history of individualism in congress with spirituality is perhaps the most identifiably *American* characteristic of American spiritual life as it has expressed itself from colonization to the modern era.<sup>1</sup>

The spiritual quest is by all accounts one of the oldest forms of narrative in the United States. Indeed, some of the earliest written works in the colonies were transcriptions of the Puritan conversion narratives -- autobiographies of a person's recognition of spiritual deficiency and subsequent sanctification through God's grace. Though conversion narratives were not created in America, they quickly developed, as Patricia Caldwell argues in *The Puritan Conversion Narrative: The Beginnings of American Expression*, a distinctly American flavor, and, in a departure from their European predecessors, were often required for church membership.

Puritan theology followed the Reformation emphasis on the individual's personal relationship with a transcendent deity, unmediated by clergy. Robert Bellah notes that the Calvinists translated this private relationship into public life by emphasizing spirituality as a part of everyday activities. Thus, the individual spiritual relationships became deeply embedded in community life.

Transcendentalism, with its emphasis on individualism, is a prime example of a specifically American spirituality. Thoreau's *Walden* and Emerson's *Self-Reliance*, among other transcendentalist texts, revised an already extant and entrenched individualism in the spiritual history of the United States. By emphasizing human insight and intuition, transcendentalism sought to counter the orthodox Protestant focus on logic and reason that had become deeply embedded in American spiritual communities, particularly in the northeast. Transcendentalism substituted immanent divinity for a transcendent God, but retained and even magnified the Protestant emphasis on individualism.

Just as the literature of transcendentalism replicated some of the prominent characteristics of Puritanism, twentieth-century spiritual narratives also preserve elements of earlier spiritual stories. The novels under consideration here continue to emphasize American individualism, though it is expressed differently in the early- to mid-twentieth century than it was in centuries past.

In *Habits of the Heart*, Bellah notes that in addition to growing up and leaving home, the contemporary American is expected to grow up and "leave church." Bellah describes a culture in which simply accepting the spirituality of one's family is not acceptable—one must leave the spiritual community of childhood, come to his or her own conclusions, and then, perhaps, choose a like-minded spiritual community based on individual affinities and not family tradition. Though the theological options for these contemporary spiritual journeys are limitless, emphasis on knowing one's own mind and self-sufficiency are recognizable as direct descendants of the transcendentalist approach.



The thread of individualism running through American spiritual literature also affected the relationship between the spiritual and the political, where unpopular political opinions, protected by a history of tolerance for spiritual individualism, could take the guise of spiritual rhetoric. Take, for instance, debates on slavery and its abolition in antebellum American politics. Women of all races and black men were disenfranchised; their voices unwelcome in the political sphere. However, political participation in abolitionism and feminism could be masked as spiritual narrative. A number of nineteenth-century texts, particularly the black jeremiad and the black women's spiritual autobiography, were essentially controversial political positions couched in religious rhetoric.<sup>2</sup>

Using Biblical rationale and the forms and cadences of sermons, David Walker's *Appeal* exhorted readers and listeners to stand up for equality and abolition. Walker's protégée, Maria W. Stewart, recognized by contemporary scholars as the first black political writer and feminist-abolitionist,<sup>3</sup> conflates political unity with religious duty in an 1831 speech: "Never, no never will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst, till we become united as one, and cultivate amongst ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality and virtue" (25). In a collection of the spiritual autobiographies of Jarena Lee, Zilpha Elaw, and Julia Foote, editor William Andrews argues that these spiritual narratives "helped launch a gradual ... reformation of American social, as well as religious, ideals" (22).

This strategy of couching potentially unpopular political opinion in the safe, acceptable language of spiritual reverses itself in twentieth century spiritual novels, where the spiritual is no longer safe and must be disguised by the political. Thus,

modernist spiritual stories are masked as political: *The Outsider* is about Communism, *One of Ours* is a war novel, *All the King's Men* is an account of crooked Southern politics. The underlying spiritual narratives are deliberately downplayed; as Percy put it, "if you get caught writing a ...religious novel...you're dead. You'll be read by a few people" ("Modern Prognosis"). While religious language was historically more successful at getting readers to pay attention to a political and/or secular message, in these modernist texts, political and secular language is used to code religious and/or spiritual messages.

The archive for this project, however, is understood not only as the successor to earlier modes of literary spiritual expression, but also as the antecedent to postmodern spiritual narratives. John McClure's *Partial Faiths* investigates prevailing characteristics of postmodern spiritual narratives, including those by Thomas Pynchon,<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison, and Don DeLillo. McClure categorizes his primary texts, which date roughly from the 1970s onward, as both postmodern and postsecular. In fact, McClure's understanding of postmodernism depends upon the postsecular:

In order to understand what is going on in American postmodern culture, then, we need to think in terms of something like a religious revival ... And in order to understand postmodern fiction, we need to attend to the ways in which it maintains and revises a modernist tradition of spiritually inflected resistance to conventionally secular constructions of reality. ("Postmodern/Post-Secular" 143)

On the other hand, Brian Ingrassia argues that the texts McClure presents as evidence of postmodernism's postsecularism are in fact just as secular as their modernist predecessors. However persuasive their contrasting interpretations of *White Noise* and *The Crying of Lot 49* may be, the dispute rests on a narrow binary reading of the secular and the spiritual in which modernism is understood simply as secular and postmodernism as either an extension or critique of that secularism. The close readings in this dissertation demonstrate that characterizing American modernist novels as simply secular is reductive.

The secular/spiritual content of modernist and postmodern novels is not clearly differentiated. Some of the postsecular traits McClure identifies in the postmodern novels closely resemble those of their modernist predecessors. Characters are also searching for ontological solutions, and their conclusions are often ambiguous and unsatisfying. In the novels McClure explores, "characters may be delivered from secular styles of being that have become untenable to postsecular, religiously inflected styles that help sustain them, but these alternatives still possess their own stubborn difficulties and darkneses" (7). Such a description is equally applicable to the ongoing, incomplete conversions of Binx Bolling and Jack Burden, whose spiritual trajectories are remarkably similar to the contemporary narratives that feature "another sort of conversion, characteristic of postsecular narrative, in which the turn from secularism is toward some only faintly affirmed, or weakly articulated, or dramatically marginal form of spirituality" (41).

The representations of the secular/spiritual are nonetheless in varying ways different in the modernist and postmodernist texts. According to McClure, the

postsecular in postmodernity involves “disruptions of secular structures of reality” that manifest with varying degrees of flamboyance. These disruptions range from *White Noise*’s “cautious probing” and “quiet loosening of the fabric of ‘the real’ and momentary, almost indiscernible interruptions of the ‘laws of nature’” to Toni Morrison’s *Paradise*’s more spectacular passages where “people are born again, the dead are brought back to life, gods walk the Earth, and windows open in the walls of the secular world” (*Partial Faiths* 3-4). Despite the dramatic range, all of McClure’s texts feature “substantial affirmations of the extraordinary” (4).

In the modernist spiritual narratives, there is no such supernatural interference. The veil between the worldly and the mystical remains tightly drawn; the characters seek spiritual answers without the dubious benefit of signs and wonders. The partial conversions and faiths, while present in some of the modernist texts as well, affect the characters differently. McClure notes that the postmodern protagonist “does not seem particularly uncomfortable ... nor particularly impatient to move on to some more fully elaborated form of belief and practice” and that “one does not sense, in spite of the dramatic instability of the worlds thus defined, that either the novelists or their characters are anxious to ‘straighten things out’” (4). But Claude Wheeler’s entire struggle is steeped in anxiety over straightening things out. Joseph’s depression springs from impatience with inadequate epistemologies. Even Jack Burden and Binx Bolling, whose conversions are comparatively more complete, find disquieting the terrible weight of unanswerable questions and unresolved meaning.

While McClure cites Tony Kushner's statement that he's "sort of comfortable with the discomfort of being an agnostic" as indicative of the postmodern spiritual climate (*Partial Faiths* 4), the modernist protagonists and narrative voices are profoundly *un-comfortable* with provisional faiths. In *One of Ours*, *Dangling Man*, *Home to Harlem*, and *The Outsider*, the protagonists reject imperfect ontologies one by one, discovering that each new approach eventually fails to meet their needs. In *All the King's Men* and *The Moviegoer*, the protagonists begin a tentative acceptance of provisional faiths, but do so with intense trepidation. It is "the awful responsibility of Time" that scares Jack Burden, knowing that his newfound sense of the meaning of his life might well be disrupted in the future (Warren 609).

Provisional faiths—rejected or feared by moderns, accepted by postmoderns—are reflected in the philosophies of Gianni Vattimo and John Caputo, who respond to theories of secularization by describing the *death* of the death of God: a return to the spiritual in decentralized, personal form (Caputo and Vattimo 24). In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo describes weakened religion:

[It] lacks corpulent articles of faith, a national or international headquarters, a well-fed college of cardinals to keep it on the straight and narrow, or even a decent hymnal. Think of it as a 'theology without theology' that accompanies what Derrida calls a 'religion without religion,' as a 'weak theology' that accompanies Vattimo's 'weak thought,' or perhaps even as the weak messianic theology that should accompany Benjamin's 'weak messianic force.'" (7)

This approach to religion accepts Warren and Percy's conclusions—that any grasp of transcendent meaning is ephemeral and uncertain—as its starting point. Modernist spiritual narratives reject dogmatic, hierarchical “strong” spiritual modes, but have little sense of the possibility that “a weak theology, weakened by the flux of undecidability and translatability, is more open-ended” (9). The modernist characters do not experience weakly structured spirituality as freeing, but as deeply troubling and burdensome.

This gulf in the emotional experience of the modern and postmodern narrative's spiritual seekers is at times equally evident in matter of style. Only six years after *The Moviegoer*, Pynchon's quintessentially postmodern *The Crying of Lot 49* characterized the quest for meaning very differently. J. Kerry Grant's description of Oedipa Maas' quest as “essentially a search for a source of energy that will revitalize her life” (xiii) sounds familiar to readers of *The Moviegoer* or *The Outsider*, but Pynchon's narrative voice flattens the validity of the search. Pynchon writes a funhouse mirror treatment of Oedipa's quest: in her world, character names like Stanley Koteks and Dr Hilarius are unsurprising, but the notion that Oedipa might really be onto something important on her quest appears absurd.

Of course, there are trenchant analyses that interpret Pynchon's satirical style in the novel as a critique of the culture's dismissal of meaningful searches. But Pynchon's style sharply contrasts with styles of the modernist spiritual narratives. Each of the novels discussed in the preceding chapters lacks a Pynchonesque sense of play; the narrative voices treat the characters' quests with solemnity and

importance, even when the characters themselves adopt the dismissive postures of people who don't waste their time with existential questions. *Dangling Man's* Joseph plays at being a "hardboiled" man, Jack Burden laughingly compares baptism to lobotomy, and Binx Bolling says that the religious makes him sick, but Bellow, Warren, and Percy's narrative voices are never as dismissive as their characters are. The respect with which the narrative voices treat the quests belies the protagonists' initial attempt to disregard them.

The ironic, flat affect of many postmodern novels changes the character of the spiritual narrative; examples of this tonal divide are plentiful. In E.L. Doctorow's 1971 postmodern novel *The Book of Daniel*, the protagonist tries to come to terms with the meaning of his own life in the context of the his parents' execution and sister's suicide.<sup>5</sup> Like Jack Burden, Daniel is writing a doctoral thesis about his family's history. But where *All the Kings Men* provides direct access to Jack Burden's consciousness, *The Book of Daniel* alternates between Daniel's own ironic, sarcastic perspective and an impersonal, clinical third person account, always trying to distance the reader from the protagonist. In David Foster Wallace's story "Good Old Neon," the narrator explains his search for deeper meaning in a flat, blasé voice that mirrors his expectations of how people nowadays act. He says he wasn't happy, but:

...the circle of people who seemed important to me seemed much more dry, oblique and contemptuous of clichés than that, and so of course I spent all my time trying to get them to think I was dry and jaded as well, doing things like yawning and looking at my nails and

saying things like, '*Am I happy?*' is one of those questions that, if it has got to be asked, more or less dictates its own answer,' etc. (142)

Wallace's narrator reminds us of many postmodern protagonists who may feel the same alienation and existential distress as their modernist forebearers, but are loath to acknowledge it directly.

Having addressed what I see as the key differences between modernist and postmodern spiritual narratives, I return now to the novels of my archive. Though they all more or less fit under the umbrella of American modernism, their settings and dates of publication span forty years and three wars. How do the changing historical and material conditions between World War I and the post-Korean war United States affect the spiritual narrative?

First, the details of each character and his quest are informed by the specific historical moment in which he lives. Thus we can see broad thematic and stylistic changes that roughly correspond to the chronology of their publication: *One of Ours* and *Home to Harlem*, written in the 1920s, feature protagonists more earnest and less thick-skinned about their feelings of spiritual adriftness. These earlier characters feel more isolated in their spiritual questioning. Equally distrustful of grand narratives as later characters, they are more likely to blame themselves for their inability to accept traditional meaning-creating structures. In the later books, like *Dangling Man* and *The Outsider*, the protagonists are less likely to fault themselves for finding grand narratives lacking, and more likely to see themselves as superior to those left in the culture who still cling to such outdated ideas. This



trajectory continues into *All the King's Men* and *The Moviegoer*, where the novels move hesitantly toward a postmodern model of provisional faiths.

But while the modernist period is historically differentiated, the spiritual crisis at the heart of these novels is less so. The existential crisis and the ensuing search for a new way to understand one's significance and meaning in the world maintains its shape throughout the period, and indeed, before and beyond it as well. In *The Weakness of God*, Caputo quotes Derrida on the core of the spiritual quest as the search for something outside of temporal confines: "The event that is promised by a given name [God] is what Derrida calls 'the undeconstructible.' The event is always undeconstructible because it is always promised or called for, always to come, whereas whatever actually arrives has arrived under present conditions and so is deconstructible" (6). Each of these novels has its own "present conditions" that provide particular flavor to the novel's plot, characterization, and style, but each also grapples with what Caputo and Derrida understand as ahistorical:

The movement of the event cannot be clocked by the ticktock of ordinary time but has to do with a transforming moment that releases us from the grip of the present and opens up the future in a way that makes possible a new birth, a new beginning, a new invention of ourselves, even as it awakens dangerous possibilities. (6)

Caputo explains that "... the event that is astir in the name of God cannot be contained by the historical contingency of the names I have inherited in my tradition" (9).

In these novels, then, the narrators and characters attempt to pin down the transcendent and organize it according to historical and temporal categories. I find it useful here to return to Kerby's argument that all narratives are comprised of historical moments and the synthesis of those moments into a larger form understood as outside of history:

Temporal existence is such that prior chapters of our life inform and determine, to a greater or lesser degree, later ones. Not that this 'idea' fully determines the closure of a life, for we well know that a text has many possible endings, many changes of fortune. We are not dealing here with a metaphysical predestination but rather with a transtemporal kernel of meaning ... which satisfies what appears to be our inherent need for understanding, coherence, and unity. (110)

This push and pull between part and whole plays out on a series of levels in literary criticism. The characters experience events they attempt to incorporate into their greater understanding of self and the world around them. The reader experiences the novel in a specific cultural and historical moment, but incorporates that reading experience into a larger narrative of the self.

Finally, as a literary critic, I interpret individual texts that shape the greater narrative of the function of the spiritual in modernism, and that larger narrative shapes the interpretation of the text. The parts and the whole are equally dependent on each other for their meaning. As such, I am conscious that any attempt, including my own, to reconsider large categories—literary studies, Americanness, religion—is implicated in this dynamic; the texts and the larger narrative of their meaning are

always operating on and revising each other. In the midst of these provisional negotiations, I offer this study, recognizing that dynamics of the project mirror the nature of the spiritual quests within it.

## Notes

### Chapter 1 Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Hitchens' *God is Not Great*, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*.
- <sup>2</sup> Marion Montgomery's "Fiction's Echo of Revelation: Flannery O'Connor's Challenge as Thomistic Maker" and Jack Dillard Ashley's "'The Very Hear of Mystery': Theophany in O'Connor's Stories", both in *Flannery O'Connor's Radical Reality*. Columbia, SC: U of South Carolina P; 2006.
- <sup>3</sup> Jessica Riedmueller. "The Not-So-Sophisticated Roman: The Catholic Voice of Flannery O'Connor's Southern Fundamentalist Brethren." *Philological Review*. 2005 Fall; 31 (2): 23-36.
- <sup>4</sup> Recent examples include: "Race, Religion and Sexuality in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" by Csaba Csapó, *Middle-Atlantic Writers Association Review*, 2004 June; 19 (1): 71-89 ; "Duplicity, Purity, and Politicized Morality: *Go Tell It on the Mountain* and the Emergence of the Civil Rights Movement" by Brian J. Norman and "Sacred and Silent (Man)ufacturing: Melancholy, Race and the Gendered Politics of Testifying in James Baldwin's *Go Tell It on the Mountain*" by Jermaine Singleton, both in *James Baldwin's Go Tell It on the Mountain: Historical and Critical Essays*. Carol Henderson, ed. New York, NY: Peter Lang; 2006.

## Chapter 2 Notes

<sup>1</sup> Bourke's *An Intimate History of Killing: Face to Face Killing in 20th Century Warfare*

defines the primary activity of war as killing others. She explores the ways that soldiers tried to understand their experience of war, and incorporate it into identities that previously would not have allowed for this type of moral transgression. Further, Bourke examines the ways that nations and military groups tried to normalize killing in order to encourage its hearty practice. While Bourke's goals differ from my own, her text serves to highlight our dependence on language to create meaning, particularly in situations that are nearly impossible to comprehend. Meaning, morality, and language are connected here in ways that are essential to understanding the spiritual in the early 20th century, but particularly to understanding why novels are uniquely useful for this kind of contemplation. Where else can language and meaning as applied to unanswerable moral questions have space to ruminate?

<sup>2</sup> The passage from Fussell is worth reproducing here: "Max Plowman...describes his feelings upon being relieved from a hazardous position: 'It is marvelous to be out of the trenches: it is like being born again.' To Henry Williamson, those who 'passed through the estranging remoteness of battle' were 'not broken, but reborn,' and a similar rhetoric of Conversion dominates Ernest Parker's recall of moving up the line for the first time: 'What effect this experience would have on our lives we could not imagine, but at least it was unlikely that we should survive without some sort of inner change. Towards this transmutation of our personalities we now marched.'" (Fussell 114)

<sup>3</sup> I do not undertake here a detailed analysis of the complex relationships between binaries like masculine/feminine, male/female, man/woman, but am informed by the work of Judith Butler and Susan Jeffords that deconstructs these categories as complicated and shifting concepts contingent upon particular historical and cultural conditions. It is enough, for now, to take Roger Horrocks' summative characterization of the issue: "all shades of masculine identity ... have this in common: they convey the message: 'I am not a woman'" (33).

<sup>4</sup> The critical reception, described as "hostile" by Janis Stout, focused primarily on Cather's ability as a woman to write from the male perspective in war scenes, and generally pronounced it as too sentimental. Richard Harris summarizes: "Most of the reviewers who criticized *One of Ours* on this account assumed that Claude's view of the war was Cather's view: Heywood Broun called Claude's dedication to the 'cause' overly idealistic and sentimental (13 Sept. 1922), and Mencken dubbed Cather's treatment of the war 'romance and blather'; Sidney Howard, writing in the *Bookman*, referred to *One of Ours* as 'a *Saturday Evening Post* version of *Three Soldiers*'" (from the explanatory notes for the scholarly edition of *One of Ours*, Lincoln, NE: U of Nebraska P, 2006. 634).

<sup>5</sup> In a letter to Edmund Wilson, Hemingway complains that *One of Ours* has been undeservingly well-received: "Wasn't that last scene in the lines wonderful? Do you know where it came from? The battle scene in *Birth of a Nation*. I identified episode after episode, Catherized. Poor woman, she had to get her war experience somewhere" (Hemingway 105).

<sup>6</sup> Many have noted parallels with the French existentialists in Joseph's quest for "pure freedom." I agree with Ellen Pifer's analysis, which distinguishes Joseph's spiritual desire from a more nihilistic freedom: "In contrast, however, to Sartre's vision of an absurd universe, Joseph's understanding of 'pure freedom' is teleological—the freedom 'to know what we are for.' ... Implicit in Joseph's perception of freedom, in other words, is the religious concept of 'binding.' Only through attachment to a higher purpose, a transcendent or divine principle, does the human being discover the 'pure freedom' that is identical with 'purity of the heart' ..." (38).

<sup>7</sup> Though I deal here with the American literary perspective, this link between World War I and spirituality is trans-national. Paul Fussell identifies the connection in the writing of British soldiers and several British poets in *The Great War and Modern Memory*. Thomas Mann's *Magic Mountain* reveals similar correlations in Hans Castorp's ultimate decision to join the German war effort.

### Chapter 3 Notes

<sup>1</sup> In fact, long before *Home to Harlem* was written, McKay and Locke clashed over the suitability of McKay's poem "White House", with Locke's editorial control prevailing: the poem was published under the less politically provocative title "White Houses;" another poem, "Mulatto," was eliminated altogether.

<sup>2</sup> There are obvious thematic similarities to Ralph Ellison's *The Invisible Man*, which explicitly addresses race, individualism, community, identity, and performance. *Home to Harlem* once again, as with its spiritual themes, buries the more

philosophical elements under the guise of primitive art. Charlotte Osgood Mason, philanthropist, patron, and staunch supporter of primitivism in Negro art, was delighted at *Home to Harlem's* "life and laughter ... ready to burst into such brilliant sunshine that, in the end, all the world will be robed in beauty, and all the peoples of the world will be forced to recognize the powers of re-creation" (qtd in Lewis 225).

#### Chapter 4 Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Although the quoted text throughout this chapter refers to Noel Polk's 2001 restored edition of *All the King's Men*, I do not use the name Willie Talos, which Polk proffers as Warren's original and intended name for Willie Stark. Due to the popularity of the novel and the two film adaptations, the name Willie Stark is firmly entrenched as the Huey Long-like Louisiana governor, and thus I use Stark, not Talos, throughout.
- <sup>2</sup> I have in mind here an opposition to the type of endurance expressed by many of William Faulkner's characters, like Snopes, Jim Bond, and Lena Grove, whose existence is mere survival without any hope for improvement of circumstances.
- <sup>3</sup> I will leave the question of whether this is a misreading of Kierkegaard to someone else, except to say that simply "living for something outside oneself" seems overly simplistic. A person whose life centered around, say, football, wouldn't be in the religious mode, and a person centered around another person's needs seems more like the ethical stage than the religious.



- <sup>4</sup> Following publication of *The Moviegoer*, Percy responded to more ambiguous interpretations with the assertion that the book was explicitly about Catholicism and its benefits. (Quinlan 90)
- <sup>5</sup> This beautifully written revelation is marred by the epilogue that follows, set over a year after the scene in front of the church. The mystery of grace, which Percy handled so deftly only a few pages earlier, is undercut by the saccharine treatment of Lonnie's death. The epilogue seems to emphasize Lonnie's role in Binx's transformation, rather than the "dim dazzling grace" subtly suggested in the previous chapter. Though earlier in the novel Lonnie was clearly an influence on Binx, Lonnie seems in the epilogue to become his savior--a Christ-figure who is free to die now that he's set Binx walking down the path of religious faith.
- <sup>6</sup> Here I note that in addition to shared literary preoccupations with the search for an individual transcendent religious experience, there are striking biographical parallels between Edwards and Percy, particularly in their return to orthodoxy as a reaction and response to more theologically liberal relatives. Edwards, in an effort to root out those who were merely outwardly pious, reversed lax policies for church membership that his grandfather, Solomon Stoddard, had championed. Percy converted from his family's nominal Protestantism and became a devout Roman Catholic in 1947 at the age of thirty-one. In the same way that Edwards reacted against his grandfather's relaxed theological positions, Percy's Catholicism was influenced by the shortcomings he saw in his family's spiritual history. Percy was baptized into the Presbyterian church, but his uncle

William Percy, who became his guardian at age fourteen, was a lapsed Catholic. William Percy, though devout as a child, experienced a crisis of faith and left the church “for that old staple of southern aristocrats, the teachings of Marcus Aurelius tempered by a commitment to a purely ethical Christianity” (Quinlan 23).

<sup>7</sup> Two particularly detailed investigations of Edwards’ position on experience can be found in “The ‘New Simple Idea’ of Edwards’ Personal Narrative,” by R.C. DeProspero, *Early American Literature*, 1979; 14: 193-204; and “The Art and Instruction of Jonathan Edwards’s Personal Narrative” by Daniel B. Shea, Jr, *American Literature*, 1965 Mar; 37 (1): 17-32.

<sup>8</sup> See Edmund S. Morgan, *Visible Saints; The History Of A Puritan Idea*. New York: New York University Press, 1963., Darrett B. Rutman, *American Puritanism*, New York: Norton, 1977; and Harry S. Stout, *The New England Soul: Preaching and Religious Culture in Colonial New England*. New York: Oxford UP, 1986.

## Conclusion Notes

<sup>1</sup> I have neither the qualifications or space to adequately address the entire history of American religious practice here, but I highlight a few of the more well-known spiritual movements whose adherents have produced texts widely studied in literary studies.

<sup>2</sup> That’s not to say that religion was *merely* a cover story: People fighting for racial and gender equality have been motivated by religious convictions. These political

positions were often legitimately inspired by religious principles that nonetheless softened the impact of controversial political stance.

<sup>3</sup> See Andrews, page 22 and *Maria W. Stewart, America's First Black Woman Political Writer*, ed. Marilyn Richardson. Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1987.

<sup>4</sup> McClure argues that while "Pynchon studies" has embraced interpretations that acknowledge the "aesthetic and thematic function" of the religious in Pynchon's work, critical interpretation of Pynchon-as-postmodernist often completely ignores those themes.

<sup>5</sup> *The Book of Daniel* is a semi-historical novel based on the trial and execution in 1953 of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg.

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