

2012

# From Country to Country Club: the Landscapes of Walker Percy

Joyce Garrett Butterworth

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*FROM COUNTRY TO COUNTRY CLUB:*  
THE LANDSCAPES OF WALKER PERCY

A Thesis  
presented in partial fulfillment of requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
in the Department of English  
The University of Mississippi

by

JOYCE GARRETT BUTTERWORTH

July 2012

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## ABSTRACT

When Walker Percy emerged on the literary scene in 1961, the American landscape had begun to transform in new and dramatic ways. As more and more Americans moved from city centers to suburban developments, Percy found that, in more ways than one, the center would not hold. This American cultural transformation was well underway when Percy wrote *The Moviegoer*, perhaps the first novel from the American South to have as its subject matter a suburban dilemma. Challenging, as Percy does, traditional notions of southern place and community, this thesis seeks to discover in Percy's body of work whether the rise of suburbia affected the South and its literature differently. More importantly, I wish to expose the ways in which Percy demonstrates that this geographical decentralization mirrored a universal psychological dislocation.

Herein, I take a closer look at *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and *The Second Coming* (1980), two novels that portray country club communities in the South. Through these depictions of “new old” golf courses, Percy interrogates the (im)possibility of finding “authenticity” or a “sense of place” in any landscape, southern or northern, (sub)urban or rural, natural or artificial.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the faculty who inspired me at the University of the South, a real place.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Hearty thanks to the friends, family, and faculty who have supported me in all my pursuits. Special thanks to my parents, who have been sources of persistent inspiration, love, praise, reassurance, and support, and to Kyle McKinnon, who continues to support me completely.

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## I. INTRODUCTION: SUBURBIA AND PLACE IN THE POSTSOUTH

*Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world...*

—William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

*The center did not hold.*

—Walker Percy, *Love In The Ruins*

When Walker Percy received the National Book Award for fiction in 1962 for his debut novel, *The Moviegoer*, he did so alongside Lewis Mumford, who received the nonfiction award for his book, *The City in History: Its Origins, Its Transformations, and Its Prospects*. Mumford's book is a massive undertaking that does just what its title suggests: it traces the history of the city from ancient group habitats to more modern incarnations, ultimately turning to the twentieth century to examine the ways in which cities had begun to transform through the rise of the metropolis. Mumford investigates the emerging suburban America, which began to dominate the landscape as the centrifugal movements that created the metropolis began to replace the centripetal tendencies that created cities. To say the least, Mumford offers some rather harsh indictments of suburbia. One is particularly unforgiving, in which Mumford describes the modern incarnation of the suburban “community”:

In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge: a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the



same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to a common mold, manufactured in the central metropolis. (486)

By 1962, indictments like these of the suburbs as homogeneous, consumerist wastelands had infiltrated intellectual communities as well as popular media. The title of David Riesman's 1958 essay "The Suburban Sadness" is particularly telling. In the essay, Riesman describes the suburban sentiment as, "an aimlessness, a pervasive low-keyed unpleasure which cannot be described in terms of traditional sorrows" (377).<sup>1</sup>

That Mumford's and Percy's books won the National Book Award in 1962 reveals the cultural significance of the suburban movement as it was manifest during the postwar moment of the early sixties. As Jim Cullen asserts in *The American Dream* (2003), "[i]n the sixties, a previously latent unease with suburbia would become more explicit and intense..." (154). While Percy's book is not an outright indictment of suburbia (as Mumford's is at times), it certainly has at its core a suburban conundrum. Binx Bolling, *The Moviegoer's* memorable protagonist, lives in Gentilly, a suburb of New Orleans; and while he claims at times to live in the suburb contentedly, he admits early in the novel that "[his] exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception" (18). Binx's exile is not only geographical; it is also emotional, psychological, and temporal. Indeed, the term "suburban" often seems to refer more to a mindset than to a location.

An earlier study from David Riesman, *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), focuses on this changing mindset. Riesman analyzes the ways in which man's "social character" shifted from "inner-directed" in the nineteenth century to "other-directed" in the twentieth, a shift which he

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<sup>1</sup> Riesman's essay is most useful to my study for its title: it gives a term to what Walker Percy refers to variously as "malaise," "despair," and "everydayness." I will use the term "Suburban Sadness" broadly throughout this study, evaluating both its usefulness and its limitations.

attributes to a changing American society—namely, the “revolution...from an age of production to an age of consumption” (6). Riesman defines the “inner-directed person” as one who lives by a “psychological gyroscope,” that keeps him “on course” and ultimately “capable of maintaining a delicate balance between the demands upon him of *his* goal in life and the buffetings of his *external* environment” (16; emphasis added). While the inner-directed person “cannot be satisfied with behavioral conformity alone” (15), the other-directed person seeks just that: he requires approval from without, from his “peer-group,” the pressures of which are “reinforced and continued...by mass media: movies, radio, comics, and popular culture media generally” (21). This other-directed individual is characterized by “an exceptional sensitivity to the actions and wishes of *others*” (22; emphasis added). These early observations about social character—the individual's reliance on a peer-group, his increasingly unstable psychological gyroscope—seem in many ways to be precursors to the Suburban Sadness. Indeed, Cullen points out in *The American Dream* that Riesman's early sociological analysis “would resurface in later studies as highly characteristic of the suburban personality” (152-3).

To be sure, any number of Percy's suburban characters might be aptly described as this kind of “self-conscious, consumer-minded” individual, suffering from a “free-floating sense of anxiety” (Cullen, on Riesman, 153). For example, Percy narrates the decline of the Barrett family from one generation to the next in *The Last Gentleman* (1966), a decline that can be defined as a shift from inner-direction to other-direction:

Over the years his family had turned ironical and lost its gift for action. ... The great grandfather knew what was what and said so and acted accordingly and did not care what anyone thought. ... The next generation, the grandfather, seemed to know what was what but he was not really so sure. He was brave but he gave

much thought to the business of being brave. . . . The father was a brave man too and he said he didn't care what others thought, but he did care. More than anything else, he wished to act with honor and *to be thought well of by other men*. (9-10; emphasis added)

Even in his nonfiction, Percy alludes directly to this notion of “inner-direction” and “other direction.” In his parodic self-help book, *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), one section asks, essentially, what is the cause of depression. One option is: “Because the self nowadays is other-directed rather than inner-directed and depends for its self-esteem on its perception of how others evaluate it—something like a beggar in a crowd with his hand out?” (74). Another option is “Because modern life is enough to depress anybody? Any person, man, woman, or child, who is not depressed by the nuclear arms race, by the modern city, by family life in the exurb, suburb, apartment, villa, and later in a retirement home, is himself deranged” (75). Thus, Percy sees this “depression” as perhaps being derivative of both the “other-directed” self and “the modern city.”

As many have suggested, this interior shift in the individual seems to parallel the dramatic shift in the American landscape in the first half of the twentieth century. But to what degree can the aimlessness, as Riesman calls it, be attributed to the landscape itself? While Binx Bolling's exile in *The Moviegoer* is indeed psychological, it remains foremost *geographical*; and Percy's choosing Gentilly as a setting for this debut novel reflects a significant (and ongoing) sociohistorical American moment. If the defining migration of modernism was from the farm to the city, from the pastoral to the industrial, then the journey that defines postmodernism<sup>2</sup> is from the city to the suburbs, from the industrial center to a simulated, planned, and constructed pastoral: “The matter of the industrial city with its rapid urbanism, jarring modernity, and

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2 For a thorough discussion of “The passage from modernity to postmodernity in contemporary culture,” as well as the postmodern “experience of space and time,” see David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell, 1990).

mixtures of races and classes prompted its anti-matter of the exclusive suburbs of bucolic beauty, resolutely anti-modern, anti-urban, exclusive, selective, restricted” (Hanlon, Short, and Vicino 28).

In giving rise to a new breed of middle-class Americans with consumer-based ideals and interests, the centrifugal movement of metropolitanization also necessitated the mass consumption of automobiles and the rise of the interstate system, to the detriment of the landscape. Indeed, at the most basic and literal level, the postmodern journey occurs in an automobile on an interstate.<sup>3</sup> With interstates and automobiles came billboards, shopping centers, motels, and fast food—the building blocks of the postmodern world. Cullen identifies car ownership as one of many “American Dreams,”—a dream that actually changed the face of the American landscape: “At the most fundamental level, the car transformed the physical geography of the metropolis.” He goes on to point out the way in which cars “hastened the decline of cities by *decentralizing* many of their social functions and by draining financial resources away from their infrastructure” (149; emphasis added). This notion of decentralization will become increasingly important to my study. The rise of suburban America, it seems, encapsulates a moment in which—perhaps for the first time—the landscape itself reveals that the center did not hold.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, by the early sixties, not only was the urban landscape being dramatically transformed, but the American Dream itself seems to have been reincarnated in a distinctly suburban context. As the title of his book makes clear, Cullen explores this subject thoroughly,

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3 At the conclusion of *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air*, Marshall Berman's exhaustive study of modernity, he examines the ramifications of the interstate system in New York, citing the countless neighborhoods whose destruction came with the interstate—destruction that (paradoxically) occurs in the wake of “progress” (New York: Penguin, 1982), 287-348.

4 Percy often alludes to W.B. Yeats, especially the poem “The Second Coming,” which laments in the aftermath of the First World War that “Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; / Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world” (3-4). Percy seems to have found in this new generation the failure of the center, manifest both in the self and in the landscape.

defining the role the suburbs play in the American Dream(s) of home ownership and upward mobility. Furthermore, he aptly points out that the automobile contributed more to the suburbs than just a way to get there: the suburbs borrowed from Henry Ford and the automobile “its means of construction.” Following the Second World War, developer Abraham Levitt, contracted by the government to build “more than two thousand homes for war workers in Norfolk, Virginia,” borrowed mass production techniques revolutionized by Henry Ford to build houses, eventually “develop[ing] a system for laying dozens of foundations every day.” Levitt and his sons would later return to New York to mass produce homes (according to Cullen, “At the height of production, thirty houses went up in a day”) in a new development that would be named Levittown. The first Levittown serves as a useful touchstone for suburbia as it is generally understood.<sup>5</sup> While making possible the dream of home ownership, Levittown also exemplifies suburban stereotypes like homogeneity and racial exclusivity: Levitt, in fact, “refused to sell to African Americans for fear that it would hurt his business” (Cullen 150-152).<sup>6</sup> It is perhaps the inception of this kind of development—whose homes were mass produced overnight to be nearly identical—that began to blur the line between the American Dream and the suburban nightmare. This line becomes particularly hazy when we consider the wide array of both positive and negative depictions of suburbia in popular culture, from the fifties to today.

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5 I should take this opportunity to distinguish between this type of suburb—the postwar Levittown-type suburbs—and America's older suburbs. Riesman makes this distinction clear early in “The Suburban Sadness” by asserting, “I am, of course, not implying that all suburbs are alike, or mean the same things to their residents, or suffer from the same sorts of meaninglessness” (375). He insists that his essay focuses on the “ideal-typical suburb, more nearly approximated by the newer post-War developments and tract housing than by older suburbs” (376).

6 Percy dramatizes Levittown's racism in his 1966 novel *The Last Gentleman*, in which protagonist Will Barrett, after hitching a ride with “pseudo-Negro” Forney Aiken (a white photographer impersonating a black man) stops in Levittown. The scene escalates when several Levittown residents, mistaking Barrett for a real estate agent who wishes to sell to a black man, confront and assault him. The sequence is a satirical jab at John Howard Griffin's book, *Black Like Me* (1961), an account of Griffin, made up as a black man, traveling through the racially segregated south. Griffin sought to expose the problematic race relations of the region. The scene in *The Last Gentleman* suggests that perhaps Percy wished to reveal racism to be a nationwide problem, not strictly a southern one.

## IMAGINING SUBURBIA

Both the Suburban Sadness and the American Dream pervade many early images of suburbia in film, television, and, to a lesser extent, literature. These diverging sentiments spring from the rise of suburbia's being linked inherently to the postwar era. As with the Levitt developments, the need for housing increased as men returned from the war. Many of these veterans suffered from a feeling of purposelessness when faced with the task of merely existing during peacetime. As I shall discuss below, for Percy's characters this struggle takes the form of "the malaise," the "everydayness" of things, and "despair." Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, for example, sinks into the malaise after returning from the Korean War and settling into suburban life in Gentilly. In *The Lonely Crowd*, Riesman examines the notion of everydayness as it relates to the postwar existence. The "other-directed" individual fails to find justification in everyday life, and thrives instead in calamity:

...one realizes that emergencies in a modern society help recreate social forms into which people can with justification pour their energies. People need justification and, as inner-direction wanes, look for it in the social situation rather than within themselves. ... We need to realize that each life is an emergency, which only happens once, and the "saving" of which, in terms of character, justifies care and effort. Then, perhaps, we will not need to run to a war or a fire because the daily grist of life itself is not felt as sufficiently challenging, or because our external threats and demands can narcotize for us our anxiety about the quality and meaning of individual existence. (297)

Indeed, many fictional suburban characters struggle inwardly to cope with their outwardly idyllic suburban settings, simply because there is apparently not challenge enough. Early suburban

portrayals reflect either the superficial ideal of suburban life, or the underlying angst of the Suburban Sadness, or, in many cases, both.

The late fifties saw the first of a long line of film and television portrayals of postwar suburban America.<sup>7</sup> The popular television series *Leave It To Beaver* (1957-1963) is set in the fictional suburban town of Mayfield. The town provides a backdrop as romanticized and idealized as the Cleaver family themselves, whose values are archetypically suburban—consumerism, family, morality, and social status. The majority of the scenes take place within the Cleaver home, the actual façade of which—white picket fence and all—was housed on the studio's lot. Ward Cleaver, the man of the house, is a veteran of the Second World War, a fact that is generally alluded to only in passing. In one episode, “Beaver's Hero” (1959), Beaver hopes to impress his classmates by bragging that his father was a war hero. He is later disappointed to learn that his father served only as an engineer in the war, and that his time in the service was less romantic than he had imagined. Needless to say, the program depicts a fairly unblemished postwar America, largely due to the fact that each episode comes from the point of view of the young son, Theodore “Beaver” Cleaver. Fittingly, this childish perspective offers a suburbia of childlike innocence.

At the other end of the suburban spectrum are films like *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1956). Based on Sloan Wilson's novel of the same name, the film offers a more complex portrayal of the same suburban America. As in *Leave it to Beaver*, the home itself is a significant structure, which seems to hold the possibility for either success or failure in the young Rath's struggle to survive their postwar angst. Betsy Rath states early on, “I hate this house. Its ugliness,

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<sup>7</sup> For more thorough discussions of suburban issues in film, television, and literature, see David Banash and Anthony Enns, “Introduction: Suburbia,” *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies* Fall 2003: 1-7; and Robert Beuka, *SuburbiaNation: Reading Suburban Landscape in the Twentieth-Century American Fiction and Film* (New York: MacMillan, 2004).

its depression, its defeat. It's a graveyard of everything we used to talk about," later adding that, "ever since the war" she has seen a change in her husband. Indeed, the Second World War did change Tom Rath, and the film contains a number of flashbacks to his time in combat—flashbacks that aptly serve as a stark contrast to his postwar struggles of settling into an apparently meaningless new job (fittingly, in public relations at a major television network) and prying his children away from the television. For Betsy Rath, though it seems at first that the American Dream for her was such that happiness was imminent if only she and her family could afford the right home in the right neighborhood, we later discover this "ugliness... depression... defeat" underlies a postwar misery for her, too.

More recently, the television series *Mad Men* presents suburbia and the postwar problem in a way that is strikingly similar to *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*. At the series' beginning, Don Draper enjoys a wildly successful advertising career in 1960s Manhattan. But his life in Manhattan starkly contrasts with his home life in the suburbs, where he has a lovely home, two children, and a beautiful and miserable wife, Betty. Don constantly has flashbacks to both his humble upbringing and his time in the Korean War. It is eventually revealed in the series that Don is a war deserter who returned only to reinvent himself completely, assuming a new name and a new identity. Like Betsy Rath, Betty Draper finds herself dissatisfied by her outwardly perfect life. The suburbs of *Mad Men* create a blank slate for Don's elaborate performance of his new identity, but they ultimately fail to fulfill him.

As I've shown, this postwar problem of individual existence in everyday life haunts the (white, middle-class) men of suburbia. Women like the fictional Betsy Rath and Betty Draper, though, are certainly not immune to the Suburban Sadness. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) outlines what she calls the suburban trap for women, asserting that it is both



physically and psychologically binding. This assertion reinforces the notion that the Suburban Sadness is more mental than geographical:

It is easy to see the concrete details that trap the suburban housewife, the continual demands on her time. But the chains that bind her in her trap are chains in her own mind and spirit. They are chains made up of mistaken ideas and misinterpreted facts, of incomplete truths and unreal choices. They are not easily seen and not easily shaken off. (77)

Gender roles—as well as high social and personal expectations (both met and missed)—permeate the households of these early portrayals of suburban life. This is certainly true of Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* (1961), which was published contemporaneously with Percy's *The Moviegoer*, and was also a finalist for the National Book Award that year. Yates's main characters, the Wheelers, find themselves endlessly dissatisfied with and critical of the suburban home they begrudgingly inhabit. The novel tells the story of Frank and April Wheeler as they make plans to escape their suburban ennui. They plan to move to Paris, a place that April has romanticized because of Frank's experience there during the Second World War. It is in this period of planning their escape that they find their only happiness in the novel. But soon April Wheeler becomes pregnant, which cancels their plans for Paris, and she finds herself psychologically, emotionally, and physically unable to prevent herself becoming further bound by the chains of feminine motherhood and domesticity. The dystopian suburbs of *Revolutionary Road* are ultimately detrimental to the Wheelers, and the novel ends tragically and hopelessly as April dies of blood loss in a failed attempt to terminate her unwanted pregnancy.

Yates's novel might be guilty of perpetuating what Timothy Dow Adams describes as the Suburban Myth, “the intensely negative image of suburbia fostered during the late 1950s and early 1960s” (47). Adams provides a laundry list of

symbolic images [that call] up intensely negative feelings in numerous commentators: split-level, rambler, ranch-style, and Cape Cod houses arrayed along repetitious, curving streets, each house with a picture window, a barbecue grill, a two car garage (one car a station wagon, the other a family sedan), and a sumptuous lawn, slightly marred by crab grass. (47-48)

In *Revolutionary Road* Yates conspicuously—and shamelessly—calls attention to a number of these images, with a clear message *against* the possibility of happiness in suburbia. Indeed, Yates's novel embodies this Suburban Myth, as many of the ills that the Wheelers battle are attributed to the suburbs themselves. In this light, *Revolutionary Road* might be considered a foil for *The Moviegoer*, despite their shared suburban setting. Unlike Yates, Percy fails to fulfill a number of expectations in writing about suburbia: while the Wheelers have lost hope, Binx has only just decided that hope may be a possibility; while the suburbs are for the young Wheelers the hauntingly idyllic place where dreams go to die, for Binx they are at times a landscape full of possibilities.

But eventually the suburbs' possibilities fail Binx Bolling, and he finds himself dissatisfied with the “Little Way” of life in Gentilly. The possibility of “the search” for Binx begins as the novel begins, as he discovers that he is “onto something”:

But things have suddenly changed. My peaceful existence in Gentilly has been complicated. This morning, for the first time in years, there occurred to me the possibility of a search. I dreamed of the war, no, not quite dreamed but woke with

the taste of it in my mouth, the queasy-quince taste of 1951 and the Orient. I remembered the first time the search occurred to me. I came to myself under a chindolea bush. Everything is upside-down for me, as I shall explain later. What are generally considered to be the best times are for me the worst times, and that worst of times was one of the best. My shoulder didn't hurt but it pressed hard against the ground as if somebody sat on me. Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search. (10-11)

That the search for Binx is linked implicitly to the war (in this case, the Korean War) echoes Riesman's argument in *The Lonely Crowd*. Here and throughout his fiction, Percy's characters are perhaps a bit formulaic in their search out of the everydayness and their need to find, to borrow Riesman's words, the "meaning of individual existence." Binx's being "onto something" essentially equates to his becoming aware that the suburbs have no place on the search: they are a cul-de-sac of professional and spiritual malaise.

### **SUBURBIA AND THE PROBLEM OF "PLACE"**

When Percy arrived on the literary scene, then, suburbia was simultaneously reviled and embraced. And while film and television made use of suburban settings early and often, novelists did not take to this new frontier as willingly. Percy was one of the "few [novelists that] have turned to the suburban setting as subject" (Adams 49). Timothy Dow Adams's article "Neither out Far nor in Deep': Religion and Suburbia in the Fiction of John Cheever, John Updike, and Walker Percy" provides a useful analysis of the ways these openly Christian authors have used

suburbia in their fiction, arguing that Percy's writings “have as a constant theme the recovery of religion in an age of malaise” (51). The suburbs for Percy provide a fitting backdrop for this postmodern, postwar despair. As is the case with Binx Bolling, Percy's characters often seem to dwell contentedly in the suburbs, only to discover over the course of the novel the extent of their underlying despair. Their eventual awareness of their own despair, though, is the very thing that can relieve them of it. Percy's epigraph in *The Moviegoer*, from Søren Kierkegaard's *The Sickness Unto Death*, aptly and succinctly describes the plight of many Percyan characters: “...the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair.”

Adams notes in his essay that “[Percy] is not thought of primarily as a suburban author, possibly because of the commonly held notion that suburbs are located only in Westchester County, Connecticut, or Pennsylvania, never in the South” (50). Though Adams does justifiably categorize Percy as both southern and suburban, it is right to hesitate to classify Percy's fiction as “suburban” for the same reason it is problematic to classify Percy as a “Southern writer” to begin with (despite the fact that all his novels take place primarily in the South, and all but one take place primarily in some form of suburbia). In his 1977 essay, “Walker Percy: Not Just Whistling Dixie,” novelist Richard Ford responds to the unfortunate habit of “critics” to pigeonhole “southern writer[s]” (Ford’s quotation marks) in terms of their being “*like Faulkner*.” He goes on to assert that “Percy is *not* like Faulkner, nor like anybody else...” (561). Ford writes that while Percy's fiction often centers around southern characters in southern settings, this is merely because “the south is simply the landscape he knows, the demography he’s most familiar with, loves best, and feels most comfortable in the midst of.” Ford insists that Percy in no way “limit[s] his vision,” but rather that he “intends to do the opposite: to observe the boundaries so that he can erase them, while giving his narrators firm, if temporary, ground from which to see

and speak to the rest of the country” (561). Ford's words can be applied easily to Percy's “suburban” classification: Percy was likely most comfortable writing of suburban settings because he was brought up in one of the first southern suburbs. Moreover, Walker Percy resisted this classification. Percy writes in his essay, “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise,” “We are all familiar with an entire literature about the ennui of life in suburbia and the split-level nightmare. Yet this literature itself is generally even more boring than the life it portrays” (205).

What are we to make, then, of the southern, suburban, “(non)places” of Percy's fiction? Percy is a transitional figure in the southern canon, and his fiction is often associated with the “postsouthern” turn.<sup>8</sup> Percy seems to have one foot planted firmly in the historically-conscious mode that characterized the Southern Renaissance, and one foot boldly stepping forward, aware of the need to move away from Faulkner. Martyn Bone, in *The Postsouthern Sense of Place in Contemporary Fiction* (2005), points to Walker Percy as perhaps the first postsouthern novelist, noting, “When Lewis Simpson introduced the term 'postsouthern' to the literary-critical lexicon, he had in mind the work of Walker Percy.” Bone writes that, “Simpson identified Percy's concern with the transformation not only of the South's literary mind but also of its social space,” reading *The Moviegoer* “as a proto-postsouthern literary representation of a changing social geography” (55). Thus Percy's footing in “Southern” literature is indeed a precarious one, not least because of his propensity for suburban settings, a wholly new “social geography” on the American (and southern) landscape.

Percy's suburbs are a far cry from the settings that earned Southern Renaissance literature its famed “sense of place,” a signifier of “Southernness” in literature that is as elusive and indefinable as it is eminent. Loosely defined, a piece of southern literature has been said to have

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<sup>8</sup> Lewis Simpson first coined the term “postsouthern” in “The Closure of History in a Postsouthern America,” *The Brazen Face of History*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980) 255-276.

a “sense of place” when its characters have a closeness to the land, or when it is set in a small town, or when the landscape is as prominent as any other element in the narrative. While “sense of place” as a signifier is problematic for a number of reasons,<sup>9</sup> many have attempted to define it. For space to qualify as *place* requires meeting a few criteria. For one, place must be situated organically in a shared history. “Sense of place,” then, often equates to a sense of the past as it manifests itself in the landscape. Critical analyses of place in (southern) fiction emerged increasingly in the fifties and sixties, even as suburbia began in earnest to spread through these “places” like a disease on the American landscape. Eudora Welty writes in her oft-quoted 1956 essay “Place in Fiction” that “...place is forever illustrative: it is a picture of what man has done and imagined, it is his visible past, result” (792-3). Frederick J. Hoffman's 1961 essay “The Sense of Place” examines the function of place in then-current (“Modern”) Southern literature: “The quality of a place inevitably derives from its existence in time; and as persons inhabit a place, they provide meaningful elaborations upon its intrinsic nature. Place may therefore be defined as the present condition of a scene that is modified through its having been inhabited in time” (61). Compare Welty's and Hoffman's definitions of place to what Adams writes of suburbia: “Suburbs are inauthentic because rather than developing organically, they are developed artificially and instantly, with only economics and convenience as hallmarks” (61).

These definitions suggest that places exist in perpetuity; suburbs do not.<sup>10</sup>

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9 I should take this opportunity to expound a bit on why “sense of place” is a problematic signifier of *any* regional literature. Scott Romine aptly poses the question, “how can any regional literature be distinguished by so ambiguous a basis? ... Places are, after all, found everywhere and in all literatures, and it is doubtful that even a rigorous poetics could reliably identify a 'sense of place' that is distinctly southern” (“Where is Southern Literature?: The Practice of Place in a Postsouthern Age,” in Jones and Monteith, eds., *South to a New Place* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 23. Nevertheless, “sense of place” is nearly universally agreed upon as a defining characteristic of Southern Renaissance literature, if not all “Southern” literature, largely due to the characteristically “southern” experience with place due to rural isolation and agricultural experience.

10 Even Wikipedia contains an article on the sense of place, which asserts, “Places that lack a 'sense of place' are sometimes referred to as 'placeless' or 'inauthentic.' Placeless landscapes are those that have no special relationship to the places in which they are located—they could be anywhere. Roadside strip shopping malls, gas/petrol stations and convenience stores, fast food chains, and chain department stores are often cited as examples of placeless landscape elements” (“Sense of Place,” in *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*; (Wikimedia

But these traditional notions of place are limiting. “Place,” as it is commonly conceived, relies on (indeed, is inextricable from) an idealized agricultural tradition—a vision that was perpetuated in the 1930s by the Agrarians, who “tried to transform their proprietary ideal into a social, political, and economic reality” (Bone *viii*). As Bone contends, this already idealized vision of “place” would become increasingly untenable in the region's evolving socio-economic realities. Among these realities is the spread of real-estate development, whose very presence, by (traditional) definition, destroys the region's “sense of place.” Even the “Place, Sense of” entry in the *Encyclopedia of Southern Culture* acknowledges “the threat economic development poses to preservation of the traditional southern sense of place” (Wilson 1137-38). While the “threat [of] economic development” certainly became more pressing in the second half of the twentieth century, even the South's land- and agriculture-based economy might be said to have always, already heralded the destruction of “place.” In Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County, for example, the loss of pure, uncorrupted places dates back much further than the decline of the agricultural economy. Indeed, Faulkner seems continually to lament the loss of the wilderness, and perhaps the greatest concern throughout his fiction (most notably in *Go Down, Moses*, but certainly elsewhere, as well) is the problem of the buying and selling of land. As discussed in “The Bear” in *Go Down, Moses*, the “original sin” of Faulkner's South can perhaps be traced to “the instant when Ikkemotubbe discovered, realised, that he could sell [the land] for money...” (246).

Thus, while modernization may destroy, or at least corrupt, place qua place, in many ways it is the experience of industrialization in the South that prompted the construction and sublimation of “place” as an idea/l. Put another way, resistance to modernization in the South resulted in novelists' deepening their sense of nostalgia and sublimating of the “places” that remained—perhaps only in their imagination—that housed an apparently dying way of life. Thus

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Foundation, Inc., updated October 2009; retrieved 3 July 2012).

the place that many Renaissance writers (or perhaps, more pertinently, southern literary critics) created the elusive “sense of,” exists foremost in the southern imaginary.

It was, at least tangentially, a similar spirit of resistance to industrialization that drove the first wealthy southerners into the suburbs. Once again, it is important to note the distinction between the 1920s-era suburbs and the postwar suburbs. These early suburbs were built around the pastoral ideal, with estate-sized lots and homes. Significantly, many of those wealthy southerners who fled to the suburbs were the very proponents of the industrialization they wished to escape. Walker Percy's parents were among the first of the “New South” elite to make the suburban migration. They moved from the center of Birmingham, a city nicknamed “the Pittsburgh of the South” for its iron and steel industries, to the other side of Red Mountain, where homes were being built by “one of Birmingham's most prestigious architects, Hugh Martin” (Tolson 36). Residents of these early suburbs like the Percys seemed to seek a haven from the industrial working-class of the urban center. While this was certainly the case nationwide, white flight in the South was more conspicuously an important factor in many southerners' decision to settle in the suburbs. And unlike admittedly segregated postwar suburbs like Levittown, the financial exclusivity of these older, wealthier suburbs was self-segregating.

This exodus into the bucolically beautiful suburban landscape indicates a possibly subconscious, if slightly misguided, desire to reclaim or recreate the southern pastoral. It is this act of *recreating* that frequently earns these new developments charges (like Adams's) of artificiality, simulation, and placelessness. But charges like these are problematic. To label Percy's suburbs as “placeless” assumes a shared understanding of “place,” a word and an idea about which Percy was outspokenly skeptical. Percy's writing reveals a profound interest in place, displacement, and misplacement. He writes about “places” and “nonplaces”—as well as



the ways in which they can be experienced—in both his fiction and nonfiction. The essay “Why I Live Where I Live” outlines Percy's reasons for choosing to live in Covington, Louisiana, a small (nonplace) town which Timothy Dow Adams somewhat erroneously refers to as a suburb of New Orleans (49). Percy writes

The reason is not that it is a pleasant place but rather that it is a pleasant nonplace. Covington is in the Deep South, which is supposed to have a strong sense of place. It does, but Covington occupies a kind of interstice in the South. It falls between places.

Technically speaking, Covington is a nonplace in a certain relation to a place (New Orleans), a relation that allows one to avoid the horrors of total placement or total nonplacement or total misplacement. (3)

Percy was drawn to Covington, it seems, not only because it lacked the rather unpleasant familial associations from which Percy was eager to escape (“Total placement for a writer would be to live in a place like Charleston or Mobile, where one's family has lived for two hundred years” (3)), but also because it lacked an overbearing historical identity. Percy, it seems, sought a home that lacked an overwhelming “sense of place,” ultimately choosing placelessness: “The pleasantest things about Covington are its nearness to New Orleans—which is very much of a place, drenched in its identity, its history, and its rather self-conscious exotica—and its own attractive lack of identity, lack of placeness, even lack of history” (6). He goes on to describe Covington as it was when he first relocated there: “It had no country clubs, no subdivisions, no Chamber of Commerce, no hospitals, no psychiatrists (now it has all these). I didn't know anybody, had no kin here. A stranger in my own country. A perfect place for a writer!” (7).

That Percy's writing displays a (not entirely clean) break from “traditional” “southern” ideals springs from the dark history surrounding his “Old South” family,<sup>11</sup> as well as his own upbringing in Birmingham, Alabama, the first “New South” city. As Jay Tolson iterates, “The Percys' experience in Birmingham represents, among other things, a charged symbolic encounter between an archetypal 'Old South' family and a prototypical [sic] 'New South' city, and this encounter played a crucial role in shaping the character and imagination of Walker Percy” (25). Percy's early life reveals a great deal about his writing. Born in 1916 to LeRoy Percy, a successful, ivy-league educated lawyer, and Martha Susan Phinizy, the daughter of a “distinguished” Georgia family (Tolson 32), Percy spent his early years just a “streetcar ride” from the Five Points community, a vibrant center of urban life. The family lived on Highland Avenue, which winded its way through shaded parks and the most prestigious residences of the young city, ending at what was, at the time, the golf course for the Country Club of Birmingham —Alabama's oldest links, constructed during Percy's grandfather's tenure as president there. The family moved in 1924 to the south side of Red Mountain, from Jones Valley where Birmingham's earliest steel furnaces lay, into the previously undeveloped Shades Valley, “a beautifully wooded little valley over Red Mountain that was just beginning to be turned into an exclusive suburban neighborhood.” The Country Club and golf links soon followed in 1926. “[The house] would sit beneath tall oaks and pines near the bottom of the southern slope of the mountain and face out upon a meadow that was soon to be turned into the golf course of the Country Club of Birmingham” (Tolson 36).

The Percy residence at the corner of Country Club Road and Fairway Drive in the pristine and exclusive new suburb would soon become the site of tragedy when, in 1929, LeRoy

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<sup>11</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Percy family's history of progressive political leadership, wealth, and despair, see Bertram Wyatt-Brown, *The House of Percy: Honor, Melancholy, and Imagination in a Southern Family* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

Percy took his own life in the attic of the home (just as Percy's grandfather had done in the home on Highland Avenue). Indeed, melancholy haunted the men of the Percy family. This hereditary depression affected the writer Percy deeply, manifest in many of his fictional characters' melancholic despair. But to call the despair of Percy's suburban characters the Suburban Sadness is a bit problematic, as it is derivative of the Percys' clinical depression. Nevertheless, the comparison is useful, as this ambiguity is evident throughout Percy's fiction. Ultimately in Percy's fiction, the despair seems to be located in psychological rather than physical terrain, an idea I will explore herein. This Percyan malaise, in life and in fiction, arises in part from a feeling of aimlessness that is linked inherently to the American postwar sentiment. The wars may vary, but the relative purposelessness of peacetime remains constant. Percy's father, LeRoy, "volunteered for the Army Air Corps" during the First World War, but "never saw a day of combat. ...a blow to the southerner's pride" (Tolson 34). William Alexander Percy, or "Uncle Will," with whom Percy and his brothers lived after the death of their parents, "served gallantly" (34), but later communicated to Walker that "daily life, by comparison, was 'isolated and lonely'" (119). Percy himself contracted tuberculosis during his medical residency, making him unable to serve alongside his younger brothers in the Second World War. As Tolson puts it, "he knew he was missing the experience that Uncle Will had described as the most important a man could face" (163). It is perhaps no surprise, then, that Percy's writings often display not only a pervasive malaise but also a desire to break from the ghosts of the past, to find the (non)places that are free from the hauntings of memory. Percy's characters often dislocate themselves internally or relocate themselves externally, but the malaise follows. As I shall explore in the chapters that follow, unlike the Suburban Sadness, this Percyan melancholy is not bound by—or necessarily caused by—geography. Rather, the social geographical decentralization that suburbia

brought to the American landscapes is mirrored by an interior decentralization of the self from the self.

## **PLACE, MEMORY, AND GOLF**

Five of Percy's six published novels take place, at least in part, in the suburbs. Of these, all but *The Moviegoer* have golf courses as focal points. Golf course communities and country clubs are everywhere in Percy's South. The rise in popularity of golf in the South was in itself a peculiar phenomenon. As Jay Tolson remarks,

...that the upper classes of the South should have taken so eagerly to this Presbyterian ordeal of a game ... signals a profound shift in southern life. After all, these were the people, men mainly, who had long been known for their love of rowdy, lusty, brutal pursuits—and not just of hunting but of games that ranged from horseracing to cockfighting, often involving violence and blood and, quite frequently, high-stakes gambling. The switch to the genteel, highly regulated game of golf meant something was afoot. The old planters—or, more accurately, the sons of the old planters—were becoming citified. And just as they were giving up the farms, so they were abandoning the old diversions for more couth activities. (27-28)

Tolson's observation might very well apply to the Birmingham Percys. The lawyer Walker Percy, the first to settle in Birmingham in 1886, who helped found one of the South's oldest golf courses, “was...a scion of one of those great planter families on whom the old order so heavily depended” (Tolson 29). That members of the New Southern elite took so willingly to the game reflects a larger trend in southern culture. Not only was the game a wholly new kind of leisure

activity for southerners, but also the clubhouse itself became a new kind of southern community, one in which “Old South” social and racial hierarchies persisted, even as the “Old South” agrarian tradition was conspicuously absent.

More importantly for the writer Walker Percy, this shift in southern leisure signals a shift in southern communal memory. For Percy's characters, the country club is the “place” of their memory. That memory and the past are linked here to a rather unorthodox “place”—one with no agriculture, no small town—reveals the extent to which Percy's novels interrogate the traditional notion of place. For Percy, the country club supplants the countryside, but the “pastoral” it simulates (sometimes earnestly, sometimes parodically) is always, already a simulation of an untenable ideal.

In the remainder of this project I will examine one Percyan character's experiences with place and memory as they are manifest on two different golf courses. Will Barrett, a man whose interior dislocation causes him to struggle to live successfully in any *place*, experiences symptoms of what I call pathological memory—he remembers either too little or too much. In my first chapter I will explicate Will's experience in *The Last Gentleman*, in which he finds himself on an “old new” golf course in suburban Alabama—one which was modeled on the Percys' Mountain Brook home. My second chapter examines *The Second Coming*, the sequel to *The Last Gentleman*, in which the middle-aged Will, overwhelmed with memory, struggles to reconcile between his temporal displacement and the spatial realm he occupies—a pristine golf course in “old Carolina.” In both novels, the golf courses become spaces through which we may evaluate and explicate Percy's interrogation of place, memory, and the Suburban Sadness.

## II. *THE LAST GENTLEMAN*: PLACE AND MEMORY IN THE “OLD NEW” SOUTH

*Old new things like fifty-year-old golf links where Bobby Jones played once were haunted by memory.*

—Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*

When Mr. Vaught proposes that Will Barrett return south with his family as a companion to his dying son, he asks him,

“...Do you play golf?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hell, man, we live on the golf links. Our patio is twenty feet from number 6 fairway. You like to sail? The Lil’ Doll is tied up out at the yacht club and nobody will sail her. You’d be doing me a great favor.” (85-86)

Will, the protagonist of Percy's *The Last Gentleman*, is a displaced southerner who, until he takes up Mr. Vaught on his offer, lived in relative anonymity in New York, suffering occasional “fugues” of amnesia and déjà vu. While the appeal of golf seems not to have influenced Will's decision to join the Vaughts on their return to Alabama, that Mr. Vaught presupposes in Will an interest in golf suggests that the sport acted somewhat as a signifier of a shared set of upper-class southern values. As Jay Tolson suggests, the introduction of golf to the South seemed at first an oddity. Nevertheless, the sport took hold. Indeed, the exclusive golf and country club culture became prevalent in the segregated deep south of the mid-twentieth century. Swiftly becoming widespread in the new southern aristocracy, this country club culture draws from both an older tradition in its social hierarchy and a newer one in its suburban setting. The clashing of the

(relatively) new and the (relatively) old confounds the amnesiac protagonist, and when Will arrives in Alabama with the Vaughnts, he concludes that “[t]he South he came home to was different from the South he had left” (185).

Reiterating Lewis Mumford's assessment of the suburban migration is useful here: “In the mass movement into suburban areas a new kind of community was produced, which caricatured both the historic city and the archetypal suburban refuge” (486). The Vaughnts' suburban country club, though it predates the “mass movement” of the mid-century, does represent a new kind of *southern* community—one that caricatures not the “historic city” but the (imagined) “Old South.” The golf course of *The Last Gentleman* may be relatively new to the landscape, but its culture so seamlessly *imitates* traditional notions of southern community that it seems, on some level, old. “Community” is a loaded term in the study of southern literature, and an examination of this simulated community first calls for a reexamination of the constructed, nebulous idea/l of community on which the simulacrum is based. Michael Kreyling, in *Inventing Southern Literature* (1998), invokes Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* (1983) to examine the ways in which “Southern” literature constructs and is constructed by “southern” identity. The cohesion of the “southern” community, as Kreyling sees it, is based upon a “literary-cultural process of identity” (x). Similarly, Scott Romine, in his 1999 book, *The Narrative Forms of Southern Community*, puts forth a “new definition of community: a social group that, lacking a commonly held view of reality, coheres by means of norms, codes, and manners that produce a simulated, or at least symbolically constituted, social reality” (3).<sup>12</sup> With this definition in mind, we find that southern country clubs are simulacra of an already simulated reality. In this sense, the only *new* aspect of the South's country club “community” is its geography. Though it is the

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<sup>12</sup> Significantly, Romine's book goes on to examine these constructed realities as they are manifest “in five major narratives of the American South” (3), one of which is William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*.

center of a “New South” community, the Vaughnts' country club maintains—even celebrates—the social constructs of etiquette and racial hierarchy that dominated the (imagined) community of the “Old South.” In recasting the southern community, Percy's novel revises the southern narrative of “place” and “community,” and interrogates the possibility of southern identity.<sup>13</sup>

The fictional suburban community of *The Last Gentleman* is strikingly similar to the Birmingham suburb of Percy's youth. Patrick Samway argues in “Walker Percy's Homeward Journey” that Percy's fiction “represent[s]...an unconscious quest to locate his family roots and to explore those locales that were significant in his personal development” (16). One such locale is the golf links at the Country Club of Birmingham. Samway points out that, in the foreword to *The Last Gentleman*, Percy's “most explicitly autobiographical novel” (17), Percy rather unsuccessfully attempts to cover his tracks in commenting on the autobiographical elements of place in the novel:

The places do not necessarily correspond to geography. That is to say, New York is New York, but localities in Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana have been deliberately scrambled. For example, the Southern city herein set forth bears certain resemblances to Birmingham. But the nearby university is more like the state institution in Mississippi. The town Shut Off, Louisiana, is not across the Mississippi River from Vicksburg. These liberties are taken as a consequence of my impression that this region as a whole, comprising parts of Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, shares certain traits which set it apart from the United States and even from the rest of the South. (Qtd. in Samway 17)

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<sup>13</sup> Richard J. Moss's *Golf and the American Country Club* explores the cultural implications of the rise of these communities, noting that, as as entertaining in the home declined after the Victorian era, many began to flock to country clubs as the centers for community and social life (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 60-76.



The distinction between this south and other, “older” south(s) is an important one, which I will explicate further below. Equally important is an understanding of the distinction between the Vaughts' suburb and newer, postwar developments—suburbs like Gentilly in the South (where Binx Bolling lives his “Little Way” in *The Moviegoer*) and Levittown in the north (where Will is assaulted when residents believe he is a real estate agent wishing to sell to blacks (138-149)). It will be useful to identify some characteristics of the actual area from which the Vaughts' fictional home is derived.<sup>14</sup> As I mentioned in the previous chapter, Birmingham is unique in the South in that it is a city founded on industry. The city lies in Jones Valley, just north of Red Mountain, at the intersection of the north-south and east-west railroad lines, where early settlers discovered deposits of coal, limestone, and iron ore—the building blocks of steel. The steel industry brought to the city a cheap, largely African-American work force, which in turn brought racial tension. White flight was initially restricted by the city's southerly geographical boundary, Red Mountain. But with the rise of the automobile in the 1920s, the city's wealthiest residents moved over the mountain to Shades Valley. Subsequent suburban developments spread to valleys and ridges further south, but the earliest—now incorporated as the city of Mountain Brook—remains the most elite, and the most homogeneous. The suburb's exclusivity has even earned it the nickname “The Tiny Kingdom.” Those familiar with the nuanced social geography of Birmingham's suburban developments will recognize Percy's initial description of the Vaughts' home:

The Vaughts lived in a castle fronting on a golf links. It was an old suburb set down in a beautiful green valley across a ridge from the city. There were other

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<sup>14</sup> As a Birmingham native, I draw most of the information provided here from personal knowledge of the geography and history of the city. For a detailed account of the racial dynamics in Birmingham in the first half of the twentieth century, and the role of Birmingham's country club members in acts of racial violence, see Diane McWhorter, *Carry Me Home* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

ridges, the last wrinkles of the Appalachians, which formed other valleys between them, and newer suburbs and newer country clubs.

The houses of the valley were built in the 1920's, a time when rich men still sought to recall heroic ages. (189)

That the “old suburb” was built by those who “sought to recall heroic ages” implies that its very inception was kindled by a sense of nostalgia for the imagined heroism of the Old South. The community these “rich men” constructed both recalls and perpetuates this idea/l of the past.

For the Vaughnts and their social circle, the golf course and the club house comprise their communal social reality. But, as is the case in many portrayals of suburbia, this apparently idyllic way of life is not without complications. While it is clear that Mr. Vaughnt takes great pride in his home on the number 6 fairway—just as he takes pride in his other suburban insignia: his auto dealerships, his money, and his family—his younger daughter Kitty expresses a more negative view of the Vaughnts' “life at home.” Before they depart New York, the usually timid and aloof Kitty describes to Will her family's country club lifestyle in rather dystopian terms:

“My life at home. Do you know what everybody does? We live in a country club; we are not just members, we live right there on the golf links along with a hundred other houses. The men make money and watch pro football. The women play golf and bridge at the club. The children swim in meets. The mothers of the losers hate the mothers of the winners. At night Mama always gets mad at Huntley Brinkley, turns off the TV and gets off on the Negroes and the Jews and the Federal Reserve Bank. Sunday we go to church. That's what we do at home.” (115)

Kitty's uncharacteristic candor here is likely caused by the hikuli tea she had drunk with Rita, and as a result the reliability of her words is questionable at best.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless she reveals in this passage an otherwise unspoken sentiment toward the apparent meaninglessness of the family's country club lifestyle. Kitty (perhaps out of her mind) describes the cycle of golf, television, and church that defines their home life. The description might be considered the Vaughts'—and perhaps Percy's—version of the Suburban Sadness, an angst that springs not from the overbearing conformity with which many postwar suburbs are charged, but rather from the purposelessness that often accompanies a life of leisure and privilege. There is undoubtedly a gender dimension in Kitty's portrayal of the Suburban Sadness: while “the men make money,” the women become weighed down by the aimless tedium of affluence.

Kitty's confession about this upper-class suburban ennui is indeed significant (if a bit parodic), but her older sister Val provides some deeper insight into her and her siblings' country club upbringing. At her first meeting with Will, Val remarks,

“A pretty links, isn't it? You know, I was one of the first people to be brought up in a suburb. ... In the past ... people have usually remembered their childhood in old houses in town or on dirt farms back in the country. But what I remember is the golf links and the pool. I spent every warm day of my girlhood at the pool, all day every day, even eating meals there. Even now it doesn't seem right to eat a hamburger without having wrinkled fingers and smelling chlorine.” (207)

For Val, returning home to the golf links of her youth triggers a memory so vivid and personal that it occupies her senses of taste, smell, and touch. But, as Michael Kreyling argues in *The*

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15 Melanie R. Benson explicates this scene, suggesting that, while Kitty's consciousness has shifted and her statements “seem like nonsense,” and “Percy parodies [her] notions [that there are 'depths opening into depths']—and Kitty's ventriloquism of them—to the point of absurdity,” her words “might for the southern man trigger suggestions of reconstruction and displacement and historical depth,” *Disturbing Calculations: The Economics of Identity in Postcolonial Southern Literature, 1912-2002* (Athens, University of Georgia Press, 2008), 160.

*South that Wasn't There*, “Memories that seem to begin as individual, mental acts of recovering one's historical past flow so seamlessly into the collective that...it is difficult to say which memories are individual and which collective” (2). This is certainly the case for Val. That she begins the telling of her memory by positioning herself not as an individual but as belonging to a generation indicates a larger cultural shift—a shift in place, to be sure, from country to city and from city to country club, but more importantly, a shift in the *communal* memory of this new generation of well-to-do southerners, for whom the places of memory belong to a newer past. The gap between present and past has shrunk, and as a result individual and communal identity springs from a recent history rather than from an ancient one. Val recognizes that the backdrop for her own memory differs significantly from what (and where) people “in the past” have remembered (or constructed) of their collective childhood. Specifically, she asserts that the places of memories in an older generation—“in the past”—were either “in town” or “in the country,” and never (until now) in a suburban country club. But Val's understanding of the communal memory of this older generation is itself a construct: she does not remember this past, this past was remembered for her, likely through cultural artifacts.

The place of Val's past—and the novel's present—is not dystopian, as Kitty subconsciously suggests. Nor is it utopian, though it certainly seeks to be.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the place is not bound by conventional temporality: it is ongoing; it is both old and new. Thus there exists an important disparity between Val's sense of this place and the “southern sense of place,” as it has been generally remembered and conceived in the South. Barbara Ladd is right to reconsider the “monolith” of place in southern literature. “Place” is inextricable from memory

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16 The suburb might aptly be read as heterotopic, as outlined by Michel Foucault, “Of Other Spaces,” *Diacritics* Spring 1986, 22-27.

and experience, and as a result “places” are often theorized as static when they are in fact dynamic. Ladd writes

the 'places' or 'topoi' that animate southern literature . . . were slave markets, cotton fields, working plantations (first with slaves, later with sharecroppers), small farms (with black day-laborers hired for practically nothing), tobacco fields and tobacco barns, small towns, 'niggertowns,' the sheriff's office and town hall where Snopeses and Sartorises divided the spoils according to their own very different sense of fairness and honor.

More recently, the slave markets have become arts and crafts bazaars, former plantations have become museums and theme parks; tobacco barns have been turned into homes for white-collar workers with a preservationist bent (mostly from out of town); tobacco fields have become mobile-home parks where sons and daughters of former farmers now own half-acres or, worse, rent; and suburban neighborhoods of seemingly prosperous African Americans in split-level homes back up into public-housing projects. (47)

I would add to the list of old and new “places,” (former) pastures that have been converted, landscaped, and repurposed into golf links. A widely known example of this from literature comes from the pasture the Compsons sold for this purpose in *The Sound and the Fury*. Incidentally, Benjy Compson, for whom “memory...stops working in a certain kind of way” (Kreyling *The South That Wasn't There* 182)<sup>17</sup> is affected by this loss most severely, meaning perhaps that those who lack the cultural connotations associated with place are able to experience

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<sup>17</sup> Kreyling poses this argument to suggest that, without memory, social and historical constructions of race may cease to exist, as Benjy understands “the blacks of the Compson compound [as] black bodies” (182). I borrow Kreyling's observation to convey that this absence of memory and thus of historical constructions may also recast traditional notions of place.

place more organically. While in Faulkner the commercialization of the pasture represents the larger decline narrative of the Compson family, Percy's golf courses lack this severity. (Indeed, if Percy gestures toward this kind of grand, Faulknerian thematic meaning, he does so with tongue in cheek. Consider Kitty's denunciation of her family's country club culture: the speech would fit nicely into a more generic suburban novel, but here it is hikuli-induced and all but ridiculous.) The "place" Val has a "sense of" may differ from the communally imagined "places" of generations before, but it is nevertheless the backdrop for fond memories of southern summertime. Place, then, is dynamic and ever-evolving. Indeed, Ladd goes on to suggest that "we might reconceptualize place as a site of cultural dynamism . . . , enabl[ing] us to shift our focus from moments or sites of narrative (or historiographical) stability to moments/sites of narrative and historiographical process" (48-49). Place for Percy's characters certainly holds meaning, but the meaning has evolved.

### **MEMORY, PLACE, AND AMNESIA**

Percy's treatment of place and memory in *The Last Gentleman* is somewhat ironic: by giving the novel an amnesiac protagonist who wishes on some level to reclaim a place he cannot easily identify with and a past he cannot readily recall, Percy interrogates the very nature of place and memory. The third person narrator—itsself an anomaly in Percy's fiction—further distances the reader from the already inaccessible notion of southern identity. This close-yet-distant narration complements the novel's transient setting. Indeed, the novel cannot be said to "take place" in any one place. The only constant setting is the Trav-L-Aire,

mobile yet at home, compacted and not linked up with the crumby carnival linkage of a trailer, in the world yet not of the world, sampling the particularities

of place yet cabined off from the sadness of place, curtained away from the ghosts of Malvern Hill, peeping out at the doleful woods of Spotsylvania through the cheerful plexiglass of Sheboygan. (153)

The novel opens as Will Barrett hopes to observe a peregrine falcon he has spotted previously in Central Park. The falcon serves as a useful metaphor for its displaced and transient observer: “The falcon had abandoned its natural home in the northern wilderness and taken up residence on top of the hotel” (5). Like the falcon, Will Barrett's displacement arises from his having abandoned his natural (native) home and taken residence in a room at the downtown Y.M.C.A..<sup>18</sup> We encounter the young gentleman after he has lived in Manhattan five years, undergoing psychoanalysis and working the night shift in the basement of Macy's as a “humidification engineer” (18). Spending a great deal of time below street level is not Will's only similarity to Dostoevsky's underground man: he lives on the fringes of society and his displacement arises as much from his apparent psychosis as it does from his geographical confusion. “To be specific, he had now a nervous condition and suffered from spells of amnesia and even between times did not quite know what was what. Much of the time he was like a man who has just crawled out of a bombed building. Everything looked strange” (11).

The fugues caused by his “nervous condition” evidence the temporal element of Will's displacement, causing memory-related symptoms that, at the time of the novel's beginning, he had not suffered in some time. Will only relapses after he has been reminded of his past and his familial history by the Vaughts, for “on his fourth visit to Jamie he had a small amnesiac fit, the first in eighteen months.” Will “slips a cog” and becomes spatially and temporally lost:

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18 The image of the falcon may also allude to Yeats's “The Second Coming.” Here, the “widening gyre” of history has landed the falcon—and the falconer—in this unlikely post in Central Park, displaced and distant. Furthering this reading, the novel's original cover art pictures Will Barrett's blue eye at the center of a series of concentric circles (the telescope), evoking the image of Yeats's gyre.

As he climbed into the thin watery sunlight of Washington Heights, the look and smell of the place threw him off and he slipped a cog. Yonder was a little flatiron of concrete planted with maybe linden trees like a park in Prague. Sad-looking Jewish men walked around with their hands in their pockets and hair growing down their necks. It was as far away as Lapland. A sign read: *Washington Heights Bar and Grill*. Could George Washington have set foot here? Which way is Virginia?

He sat down under a billboard of Johnnie Walker whose legs were driven by a motor. He put his hands on his knees and was careful not to turn his head. It would happen, he knew, that if he kept still for a while he could get his bearings like a man lost in the woods. There was no danger yet of slipping: jumping the tracks altogether and spending the next three months in Richmond. (67)

Will “always remember[s] the remote past first” (57), and in this case, the past he remembers is centuries old. He finds himself unable to reconcile the history of the place with the place itself (“Could George Washington have set foot here?”), subconsciously seeking Old Virginia, where history is more visible on the landscape.

Episodes of forgetfulness are triggered by the “look and smell of [a] place,” elements that also trigger *déjà vu*, in which he is overwhelmed by memory. For example, as summertime comes to Manhattan, his experience of the present recalls the past:

The park swarmed with the old *déjà vus* of summertime. It put him in mind of something, the close privy darkness and the black tannin smell of the bark and cool suspiring vapors of millions of fleshy new leaves. From time to time there



seemed to come to him the smell of Alabama girls (no, Mississippi), who bathe and put on cotton dresses and walk uptown on a summer night. (99)

What follows is an extended flashback of an encounter between the young Will and his father, a memory with rather sinister undertones. Unlike Val's childhood memory, quoted above, Will's memory is strictly individual rather than collective. It is of a South that he alone experienced.

Thus spatial and temporal triggers result in either overwhelming presence or unexpected absence of memory. Unable as he is to recollect his own past consistently and conventionally, Will supplements his own memory with cultural history: he can be found throughout the novel reading war histories and biographies such as “Freeman's *R.E. Lee*.” In *The South That Wasn't There*, Michael Kreyling examines the ways in which southern identity relies problematically on a construction of the past. Kreyling conceives “the relationship between history and memory [as] one of organic necessity” (2), figuring “history-and-memory to be the Moebius strip of cultural studies, a single continuous surface that paradoxically has two 'sides’” (1). For Will Barrett, however, the Moebius strip is inchoate. Perhaps it is this imbalance that motivates him to return south: “suggestible as he was, he began to think it mightn't be a bad idea to return to the South and discover his identity, to use Dr. Gamow's expression” (79). The notion of southern identity is so elusive to Will that the very notion of “discover[ing] his identity” comes to him only by being implanted by his psychoanalyst. If, as Kreyling posits, “who we are depends on what we remember” (5), then Will lacks identity. He attempts to construct (or repair) this imbalance of southern identity, this history-without-memory, not only by reading historical artifacts, but also by conceiving of spaces (southern and northern) in terms of their history. To cite just one example, he observes, “[the highway] swept like a bird across the Delaware River not far from the spot where General Washington crossed nearly two hundred years ago” (132). Will uses these

historical landmarks and artifacts to weave a history that is distant and impersonal, but more tangible and more readily understood than the personal past that eludes him. He uses this cultural tapestry to (unsuccessfully) construct a (mediated) experience of place and the South.

## THE OLD NEW SOUTH

Percy offers in the opening chapters some insight into Will's pathological memory. Specifically, we learn that, in his young life, Will consistently failed to thrive in places too drenched in history. For example, he is unable to follow in the footsteps of his “male forebears” during his time at Princeton:

One beautiful fall afternoon of his junior year, as he sat in his dormitory room, he was assaulted by stupefying *déjà vu*. An immense melancholy overtook him. It was, he knew, the very time of life one is supposed to treasure most, a time of questing and roistering, the prime and pride of youth. But what a sad business it was for him, this business of being a youth at college, one of many generations inhabiting the same old buildings, joshing with the same janitors who had joshed with the class of '37. He envied the janitors. How much better it would be to be a janitor and go home at night to a cozy cottage by the railroad tracks, have a wee drop with one's old woman, rather than sit here solemn-and-joyous, *feierlich*, in these honorable digs. ... Yet, as he sat at his desk in Lower Pyne, by coincidence in the very room occupied by his grandfather in 1910,<sup>19</sup> he said to himself: what is the matter with me? Here I am surrounded by good fellows and the spirit of Old Nassau and wishing instead I was lying in a ditch in Wyoming or sitting in a

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<sup>19</sup> This is perhaps a knowing nod on Percy's part to Quentin Compson's being at Harvard in 1910, as depicted in *Absalom, Absalom!*

downtown park in Toledo. ... The fall afternoon glittered outside, a beautiful bitter *feierlich* Yankee afternoon. It was the day of the Harvard-Princeton game. He felt as if he had seen them all. The ghost of his grandfather howled around 203 Lower Pyne. ... After a moment the young Southerner, who still sat at his desk, tried to get up, but his limbs were weighed down by a strange inertia and he moved like a sloth. It was all he could do to keep from sinking to the floor. Walking around in old New Jersey was like walking on Saturn, where the force of gravity is eight times that of earth. At last, and despite himself, he uttered a loud groan, which startled him and momentarily silenced his classmates. "Hm," he muttered and peered at his eyeballs in the mirror. "This is no place for me for another half hour, let alone two years." (14-15)

Princeton, for Will, is haunted by familial history. The spectrality of the buildings ignites a sense of déjà vu that overwhelms and "stupef[ies]" the young Will Barrett with a "strange inertia" that causes him to envy the janitor's "cozy cottage," a place that lacks familial and historical associations. Percy, too, had familial connections with Princeton, as most of the male Percys attended school there. Jay Tolson argues that

[Percy's] decision...to make Will Barrett a Princetonian, albeit an out-of-place one, is a clear instance of Percy's practice of locational pathology. Will Barrett's uneasiness in this most 'southern' of northern colleges is a sign, among other things, of his troubled relationship with the old southern patrician society from which he comes. And the fact that Will fails to fit in may be one reason why, for all his confusion, he appears to avoid LeRoy Percy's ultimate fate. (153)

Will's dislocation at Princeton, then, represents a necessary break with his familial history. In fact, his retreat to the anonymity of New York is not unlike Binx's decision to break with *his* familial history, living instead in his "Little Way" in Gentilly.

Here and elsewhere in the novel, certain places take on a spectral quality. Will is protected from the "ghosts of Malvern Hill" only by being not "of the world" in the Trav-L-Aire (153); the "Old new" golf links is "haunted by memory" (188); and in Louisiana he comes upon "a haunted Piggly Wiggly and a new-old Rexall" (306). In Levittown, on the other hand, he observes, "The freshly sprinkled lawns sparkled in the sunlight, lawns as beautiful as Atlanta lawns but less spectral and Druidic" (140). Martyn Bone argues that, in *The Moviegoer*, the "spectral" quality Binx observes in the new houses in Gentilly are in fact the "suburbanizing 'spirit' of capitalism [that] has 'take[n] possession' of 'the South'" (71). This reading may be useful here, as some of the spectrality Will finds—Atlanta's sprawl, Alabama's suburbanization, rural Louisiana's gas stations—can be attributed to capitalist ventures. But spectrality for Will also arises from the collision in these places of old and new, of past and present. Thus, temporally confounded, Will struggles to find an appropriate balance and in his spatial presence.

Percy's narrator repeatedly emphasizes the old—old values, to an extent, but more so old places, roads, buildings, and even furniture. Will struggles to cope in "old New Jersey." On the road, Will travels through "Old Virginny" and onto "old US 60." He meets up with the Vaughts to continue through the "old Tidewater" and "old Carolina." At one point the women go antiquing, which "the engineer had to admit...was the pleasantest of prospects: to buy a five-dollar chiffonier and come down through six layers of paint to old ribby pine from the days of General Oglethorpe" (169). Will thinks of reclaiming Hampton, his family's "old plantation" and of courting Kitty in the "old style." The old is undoubtedly important to Will—and to Percy

through Will—but, perhaps more important is the degree to which the new invades the old. As they travel through the Old South—Virginia and the Carolinas, specifically—the errant southerner compares the new and the old in the South: “It was like home here, but different too. At home we have J. C. Penney's and old ugly houses and vacant lots and new ugly houses. Here were pretty, wooden things, old and all painted white, a thick-skinned decorous white, thick as ship's paint, and presided over by the women” (164). This contrast recalls the distinction Percy makes in the novel's foreword between the deep South and the tidewater South. The tidewater is preserved while the rest of the South is bulldozed and repurposed.

A good example of the new displacing the old comes during the aforementioned stop on the journey (in which the women shop for antiques):

The engineer...watched a construction gang flattening a hill across a valley. They were making a new expressway, he reckoned. The air throbbed with the machinery, and the floodlights over the hill spoiled the night like a cast in a black eye. He had noticed this about the South since he returned. Along the Tidewater everything was pickled and preserved and decorous. Backcountry everything was being torn down and built anew. The earth itself was transformed overnight, gouged and filled, flattened and hilled, like a big sandpile. The whole South throbbed like a diesel. (169-170)

This passage perhaps more than any in the novel conjures the Agrarians' concern with modernization in the South. C. Vann Woodward's *The Burden of Southern History* (1960) identifies this modernization as the “Bulldozer Revolution,” in which the “great machine” becomes a symbol of metropolitanization in the South. Rolling through “its favorite area of operation, the area where city meets country,” the bulldozer “is the advance agent of the

metropolis. It encroaches upon rural life to expand urban life. It demolishes the old to make way for the new” (6). While Woodward succinctly identifies the preoccupation with the changing southern landscape the novel alludes to, to read Percy's thematic intentions as old equals good and new equals bad would be to oversimplify. Brian Carpenter notes in his article “A Splendor Never Known: Walker Percy and Historic Preservation,” that Percy's fiction demonstrates a skepticism toward the southern practice of preserving the old (like the Vaught women's interest in preserving antique furniture). He argues that, “Where Faulkner took for granted that there was a past worth preserving, Percy questioned just what it was that the South was trying to preserve. . . . One comes away from Percy's novels wondering just how much of historic preservation is historic after all, and how much marketing and myth” (103). In fact, Will Barrett seems to romanticize the new more than he does the old. He thinks to himself, “What was wrong with a good little house in a pretty green suburb in Atlanta or Birmingham or Memphis and a pretty little wife in a brand-new kitchen with a red dress on at nine o'clock in the morning and a sweet good-morning kiss and the little ones off to school and a good mammy to take care of them?” (88-89); he tells Kitty, “I dream of loving you in the morning. When we have our house and you are in the kitchen in the morning, in a bright brand-new kitchen with the morning sun streaming in the window, I will come and love you then” (180); he asks himself (again), “What was wrong with a Mr. and Mrs. Williston Bibb Barrett living in a brand-new house in a brand-new suburb with a proper address: 2041 Country Club Drive, Druid Hills, Atlanta, Georgia?” (187). That Will romanticizes a life in “Atlanta *or* Birmingham *or* Memphis” (emphasis added) implies that the metropolises of the South are to some degree interchangeable, and perhaps for this southerner who lacks southern identity, not unpleasantly so.

While at times Will romanticizes the prospect of the lifestyle promised by these new, constructed communities (Mr. Vaught even offers him a job at his auto dealership, which would have sealed his suburban status), he ultimately shies away from this lifestyle. Will spends only a short amount of time at the Vaughts' country club castle before he finds himself haunted by the old/newness of it. Indeed, Will's displacement is accentuated "living in this queer not-new not-old place haunted by the goddess Juno and the spirit of the great Bobby Jones" (241). Percy's awkward phrasing here reiterates the relativity of newness and oldness in this South. The "place" is "not-new," not only because it has been there a generation longer than other suburbs, but also because it emulates much older generations; it is "not-old," because its emulation of the (constructed) pastoral Old South is just that, emulation.

I shall reiterate here my earlier argument that the Vaughts' suburb on the golf links represents a hybridization of the Old and New South(s):

...It was an old suburb set down in a beautiful green valley across a ridge from the city. There were other ridges, the last wrinkles of the Appalachians, which formed other valleys between them, and newer suburbs and newer country clubs.

The houses of the valley were built in the 1920's, a time when rich men still sought to recall heroic ages. (189)

The very notion of an "old suburb" built by "men [who] still sought to recall heroic ages" further confounds the engineer's sense of old and new. In fact, living at the Vaughts' home, in its distant familiarity and aging newness, seems to have worsened his nervous condition and revived those old new ghosts of the past. The golf course itself is anecdotally related to his familial history:

This was the very golf links, he had reason to believe, where his grandfather had played an exhibition round with the great Bobby Jones in 1925 or thereabouts. It was an ancient sort of links, dating from the golden age of country clubs, with sturdy rain shelters of green-stained wood and old-fashioned ball washers on each tee and soft rolling bunkers as peaceful as an old battlefield. Deep paths were worn through the rough where caddies cut across from green to fairway. The engineer's amnesia was now of this order: he forgot things he had seen before, but things he had heard of and not seen looked familiar. Old new things like fifty-year-old golf links where Bobby Jones played once were haunted by memory.

(188)

That Percy's narrator describes a suburb and a golf links as “old” and “ancient”—and even compares the links to “an old battlefield”(!)—parodies the southern (Faulknerian) tradition of “sense of place” and “the past in the present.” Indeed, the passage almost reads like a decline narrative of the country club community, one in which newer clubs pale in comparison to those of this “golden age.” But the “golden age” belongs to a recent past, and the golf course's “sense of place” is haunted by the ghost of Bobby Jones rather than the ghosts of the Confederate South.

The golf course is indeed an important place in the novel. Barrett conceives of the links foremost in rather sketchy temporal terms (“old new”), and he perceives it (in his amnesiac way) not through his own eyes but through his grandfather's. This rather distorted conception/perception of the golf course suggests that this last “southern” gentleman has inevitably confounded the boundaries of space and time. In this postmodern, postsouthern space,



a vortex of behavior of the new southern aristocracy,<sup>20</sup> the golfers (Will among them) perform a past from which they are many degrees removed:

The sixth hole fairway of the second nine ran in front of the castle. It had got to be custom after teeing off to mark the balls and veer over to the patio, where David, the butler, had toddies ready. . . . The tone of the sixth-hole break was both pessimistic and pleasurable. The world outlook was bad, yes, but not so bad that it was not a pleasant thing to say so of a gold-green afternoon, with a fair sweat up and sugared bourbon that tasted as good as it smelled. Over yonder, a respectful twenty yards away, stood the caddies, four black ragamuffins who had walked over the ridge from the city and now swung the drivers they took from the great compartmented, zippered, pocketed, studded, bonneted golf bags.

The golfers gazed philosophically into their whiskey and now and then came out with solemn *Schadenfreude* things, just like four prosperous gents might have done in old Virginy in 1774. (193)

The golf course simulates a questionable arcadia. The old hierarchy is there—complete with the black caddies at a respectful distance—but the agrarian ideal is absent. The golfers, businessmen though they may be, emulate centuries-old planters in a decades-old environment. It seems the only remnants of the antebellum ideal the golfers perform are wealth and racial hierarchy—formative (and *performative*) elements of these early suburbs and country clubs.

Percy seems again to belittle this “southern” desire to reclaim the past when, later in the novel, the Vaughts' servants come to see off Lamar Thigpen—one of the golfers—for “the game”

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20 The golf links may be aptly described in terms of what Joseph Roach calls vortices of behavior, “[places] where the gravitational pull of social necessity brings audiences together and produces performers...from their midst” *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996), 28.

(the Alabama-Tennessee football game). Lamar here conflates history and memory as he seems to mourn the “old-timey ways” of history-and-memory:

as the little caravan got underway and the three servants stood waving farewell on the back steps, Lurgurtha fluttering her apron, Lamar shook his head fondly.

“There's nothing like the old-timey ways!” he said. The Vaught retainers seemed to remind Lamar of an earlier, more gracious time, even though the purple castle didn't look much like an antebellum mansion and the golf links even less like a cotton plantation. (272)

## **FINAL THOUGHTS: GOLF, THE SOUTH, AND THE “THEORY OF ENVIRONMENTS”**

The reader learns through various references over the course of the narrative that Will Barrett has a “theory of environments.” Early in the novel, Dr. Gamow asks Will to expound on this theory: “Yesterday, ... we were talking about your theory of environments. I believe you said that even under ideal conditions you felt somewhat—hollow was the word I think you used” (35). While we never learn precisely what that theory is (and perhaps Percy did not intend for us to learn it), we can apply this theory to a number of elements in the novel that concern simulated environments. Will's room at the Y.M.C.A., for example, is described as being “furnished with a single bed and a steel desk varnished to resemble wood grain” (8). For a character who has a “theory of environments,” this transient space might be problematic, as it seeks to “resemble” the natural and is thus deemed relatively inauthentic.

Forney Aiken, the pseudo-Negro, has his own theory, and he and the engineer engage in a conversation which leads us closer to understanding Will's own theory:

the driver...launched at once into his own pet theory. It was his conviction that there was a balance in nature which was upset by man's attempt to improve upon it.

The engineer agreed and, casting his eye about the ruinous New Jersey flats, cited an article he had read about rivers in this very neighborhood which fairly foamed with detergents and chemical wastes.

“No no,” said the driver excitedly. He explained that he was not speaking of ordinary pollution but of a far more fundamental principle. Rather was it his conviction that man's very best efforts to improve his environment, by air-conditioning and even by landscaping, upset a fundamental law which it took millions of years to evolve. “You take your modern office building, as tastefully done as you please. What does it do to a man to uproot him from the earth? There is the cause of your violence!”

...

Obligingly, ... the engineer ... set forth his own ideas on the subject of good environments and bad environments—without mentioning the noxious particles.

“Yes!” cried the driver in his damped reedy voice. ... “That's your reaction to artificial environments in general! Wonderful! Don't you see how it dovetails?”

The engineer nodded reluctantly. He did not see. Back-to-nature was the last thing he had in mind. “Except—ahem—” said he, feeling his own voice go a bit reedy. “Except I would suspect that even if one picked out the most natural surroundings he might carry his own deprivation with him.” (126-127)

While the third person narrator only dances around Will's own theory, this conversation reveals a great deal about the novel's treatment of these problematic, not-new not-old spaces. While Will does seem concerned with the artificial (the false wood grain, the simulated pastoral space of the golf course, etc.), as it compares to the apparently authentic ("Hampton," the family plantation, his home in Mississippi, etc.), his main concern is rather with the depravity *within* the individual, regardless of environment.

*The Last Gentleman* covers a number of environments or "places"—old and new, southern and not—but a reading that considers simply the "sense of place" or the relative authenticity of these places is perfunctory at best. That "the last thing he ha[s] in mind" is "[b]ack-to-nature" implies that Will, affected though he is by space and place, ultimately rejects the Agrarian ideal of "place," concerning himself instead with internal experience, no matter the place. Ultimately for Percy notions of the (in)authenticity of places and nonplaces should be considered more deeply. In *The Second Coming*, sequel to *The Last Gentleman*, Percy turns his attention more earnestly to the interiority of *place*.

### III: *THE SECOND COMING*:

#### THE LANDSCAPE OF REMEMBRANCE AND THE PROBLEM OF PLACE

*The golf links was like his own soul's terrain. Every inch of it was a place he had been before.*

—Walker Percy, *The Second Coming*

Although Walker Percy's 1980 novel *The Second Coming* does not take place in a suburb, it may still warrant a reading through the lens of suburbia. Elements of suburbia pervade the novel: golf courses, real estate ventures, “garden homes” and condominiums, as well as a general feeling of aimlessness, are of central concern in this sequel to *The Last Gentleman*. Linwood, North Carolina, where the novel takes place, is not a suburb *of* any city, but it can and should be analyzed as a suburb in most every other sense. Percy's take on the Suburban Sadness, it seems, is not confined to the geography of the suburbs. Moreover, *The Second Coming* confirms not only that suburbia has extended beyond its geographical borders, but also that the angst that accompanies suburbia should perhaps be attributed to internal rather than external manifestations of displacement.

Timothy Dow Adams believes otherwise. Adams asserts that *The Second Coming* demonstrates Percy's “movement away from suburban settings,” arguing that the novel, “with its rural and mythical settings, reflects the feeling that Barrett's troubles came in large part from his need for an authentic place in which to live” (68). This statement is problematic for several reasons. First, Adams speaks of Will Barrett's “troubles” in the past tense, suggesting erroneously that the older Will's troubles are behind him, when in fact he faces in this novel a new set of

troubles—psychological, physical, familial, and spatial. Second, Adams holds that the novel's settings—among them the utopian greenhouse, the colorful mountains, and the Confederate cave—are “rural and mythical,” and thus more “authentic” than what Will found in his travels as a young man. But to describe the novel's setting as such is speculative and debatable, even in terms of Adams's own analysis of Percy's use of “inauthentic” landscapes. Indeed, if, as Adams posits, “Suburbs are inauthentic because rather than developing organically, they are developed artificially and instantly, with only economics and convenience as hallmarks” (61), then the Linwood of *The Second Coming* is no different from Percy's more explicit suburbs. Lastly, to suggest that Will Barrett has a “need” for authenticity of place is to discount what the reader knows of his “theory of environments” from *The Last Gentleman*—namely, that “Back-to-nature was the last thing he had in mind” (127)—and to overlook, for example, Will's suggestion toward the end of *The Second Coming* that he and Allie “rent or buy a garden home” (343) rather than remain in the greenhouse. While the novel does not, as Adams suggests, present some “authentic place” that Will has a “need for,” it does call upon the careful reader to distrust the possibility of authenticity, even beyond suburban borders. To adapt John Egerton's phrase, what Percy depicts in the “places” of *The Second Coming* is not the Americanization of Dixie or the Southernization of America, but the *suburbanization* of both.

To borrow and adapt Egerton's phrase might suggest that I wish to preach the dangers of the supposedly inauthentic encroaching on the supposedly authentic, of the suburban mindset endangering the rural landscape.<sup>21</sup> Instead, I wish merely to challenge the assertion that what

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21 John Egerton, in *The Americanization of Dixie: The Southernization of America* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), writes, “The South and the nation are not exchanging strengths as much as they are exchanging sins; more often than not, they are sharing and spreading the worst in each other, while the best languishes and withers. . . . [T]he dominant trends are unmistakable: deep divisions along race and class lines, an obsession with growth and acquisition and consumption, a headlong rush to the cities and the suburbs, diminution and waste of natural resources, institutional malfunctioning, abuse of political and economic power, increasing depersonalization, and a steady erosion of the sense of place, of community, of belonging” (xx, emphasis added). While I find the majority of these observations useful, and certainly applicable to Percy's fiction, I wish in my study to reexamine

Will Barrett has found in the North Carolina mountains is “authentic place.” While the novel's setting is rural in that it is not located in or near a city, it is important to recognize that rural may not equal authentic. In fact, we ought to be skeptical not only of “authenticity” itself, but also of whether Percy's intention in depicting the suburbanization of Dixie is in fact to mourn the loss of the apparently authentic. Scott Romine writes in *The Real South*,

the South was telling stories about the assault on its culture well before such stories—of the assault *of something by something*—operated as a kind of grand narrative in an age supposedly without them: the assault of the local by the global; of place by tourism; of history by the museum; of the real by the simulacrum; of authenticity by mechanical reproduction; of coherent space by time-space compression; of depth by surface; of value by consumerism. (4)

Percy's novel seems to fit this model—to tell of the assault of the rural by suburban ideology, or, to use Romine's words, “of the local by the global; of place by tourism” (the novel does, in fact, depict a mountain town overrun by tourists, hikers, “leafers,” and other transients seeking to discover “authentic” charm, to find seasonal work, or to retire in Linwood). It may even tell of the assault “of authenticity by mechanical reproduction,” as the “garden homes” of Linwood are essentially mechanical reproductions of the more “authentic” greenhouse the novel depicts. But while this narrative of assault does exist in the novel on many levels, the novel as a whole doesn't necessarily act as part of a “grand narrative” of assault. Instead, it presents a town (and a South) that is always, already inauthentic. In fact, Adams's referring to the novel's setting as “authentic” may have negated his own argument: as Romine puts it, “once something is called 'authentic,' it already isn't” (4).

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and to interrogate, as I believe Percy does, the nature of the “sense of place,” that Egerton believes to be eroding.

Percy addresses the problem of self-negation of “authentic” experience in his essay “The Loss of the Creature.” Here, Percy uses the Grand Canyon as an example of a place, or a “thing,” the very experience of which renders the thing itself unattainable:

Why is it almost impossible to gaze directly at the Grand Canyon...and see it for what it is—as one picks up a strange object from one's back yard and gazes directly at it? It is almost impossible because the Grand Canyon, the thing as it is, has been appropriated by the symbolic complex which has already been formed in the sightseer's mind. Seeing the canyon under approved circumstances is seeing the symbolic complex head on. The thing is no longer the thing as it confronted the Spaniard [who discovered it]; it is rather that which has already been formulated—by picture postcard, geography book, tourist folders, and the words *Grand Canyon*. (47)

The essay goes on to examine the ways in which other things—places, pieces of literature, scientific subjects—are marred by “symbolic package[s]” or media that stand between the perceiver and the thing, between the sightseer and the sight. But it is Percy's notion of our gross inability to experience a place authentically—a place-in-itself, extracted from its cultural package—that sheds light on the function of “place” in *The Second Coming*.

I mentioned above that the Linwood of the novel has very few locals. Instead, it is inhabited by those seeking to experience this place as a sightseer might wish to experience the Grand Canyon: they are there, we can assume, for the “culture” and the “authentic” charm of Linwood—its mountains, its fall foliage, its antique shops. But, as Romine and Percy have shown, their very presence renders this kind of authenticity impossible. The novel, then, addresses the (im)possibility of authentic experience with place qua place, as place has become



instead *context, expectation, and idea*. Percy dramatizes this struggle through two inwardly dislocated individuals—one with an excess of memory and one with no memory at all—who wish to discover how to live in the world. In *The Second Coming*, the center of this world is a golf course.

### **“ANY MEMORY CAN BE RECAPTURED”: THE LANDSCAPES OF REMEMBRANCE**

“The first sign that something had gone wrong manifested itself while he was playing golf” (3). So begins *The Second Coming*, the story of the middle-aged Will Barrett, for whom the golf course in the mountains of old Carolina functions in much the same way as the “old new” golf links of suburban Alabama. We learn that Will did not marry Kitty and live out his days in a bright new kitchen in a new suburb on a new golf links. Instead, he returned to New York, married a millionaire, and worked successfully as a Wall Street lawyer. He retired young and moved with his wife and daughter to old Carolina where, in this apparently idyllic mountain landscape, he has spent his time golfing while his wife, “one of the good triumphant Yankees who helped out the poor old South” (157), donated her time and money charitably. But as the novel begins Will's wife has recently died, stirring up depressive tendencies. He experiences self-doubt, largely relating to his inability to reconcile his psychological displacement with his physical placement in the world. In *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes* (2000), Allen Pridgen offers a useful discussion of Percy's notion of this dislocation:

Percy, in a 1984 interview, defined “Will Barrett's problem” as an inability to discover “where” he is “*here* in the present.” This is a common twentieth-century psychic deficiency, Percy argued, that inclines people like Will to languish in the “guilt of their past” and miserably “worry about the future.” Dislocated from their

present phenomenal existence, they are, obviously, estranged from a consciousness of the authentic selves existing in flesh-and-blood actuality; they usually suffer from that self-enclosure in thought and feeling that marks interiorized selves like Will. (101)<sup>22</sup>

“Interiorized” as he is, Will struggles to reconcile between his inward self and his outward physicality. He wonders what place he had in New York (where his distance from the natural world was such that he “walked [his] poodle in the park, went up an elevator to get home” (72)) and what place he has in these mountains: “Now Marion is dead and I can't believe I spent all those years in New York in Trusts and Estates and taking dogs down elevators and out to the park to take a crap. ... —what in God's name was I doing there, and what am I doing here?” (73).

Will's displacement is accompanied by some of the pathological memory symptoms he experienced in his younger days. In *The Last Gentleman*, the young Will suffers from bouts of amnesia, constructing a cultural narrative from history books and second hand accounts to supplant the personal history he could or would not confront. In his middle age he faces this personal history head on: he literally falls into the past he had heretofore suppressed. In his depression he finds himself overwhelmed by his own vivid, personal history: “Lately he remembered everything. His symptom, if it was a symptom, was the opposite of amnesia... Everything reminded him of something else” (9). As the sightseers Percy discusses in “The Loss of the Creature” are unable to see the Grand Canyon because it “has already been formulated by picture postcard,” Will finds he cannot see the “brilliant autumn-postcard Carolina mountains” (7) for what they are, and instead sees a scenes from his past. Perhaps what Will experiences is, on some level, like what the sightseer feels, who “will only be conscious of the disparity between

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<sup>22</sup> Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983) also addresses the problem of the “authentic self[f],” as Pridgen calls it, when it finds itself in the here-and-now. One section of the book is titled, “THE NOWHERE SELF: *How the Self, Which Usually Experiences Itself as Living Nowhere, is Surprised to Find that it Lives Somewhere*” (27).

what it is and what it is supposed to be” (47). This middle-aged, depressed golfer-widower in old Carolina finds in the setting a disparity between Self and world, between past and present, between what is and what was, and what never was or will be.

These fits of *déjà vu*, in which Will perceives that the past sensorily supplants the present, heighten and transform his perception of the landscape that surrounds him. In the novel's opening scene, for example, Will finds that,

with his cheek pressed against the earth...things looked different from this unaccustomed position. A strange bird flew past. A cumulous cloud went towering thousands of feet into the air. Ordinarily he would not have given the cloud a second glance. But as he gazed at it from the bunker, it seemed to turn purple and gold at the bottom while the top went boiling up higher and higher like the cloud over Hiroshima. (3)

The episode—in which the lovely October scenery is transformed for the perceiver into an ominous, even apocalyptic, landscape—is described in greater detail a few pages later. Will's perception of the landscape is such that it is even anthropomorphized: “the round one-eyed mountain...seemed to gaze back with an ironical expression” (6). That the natural world here takes on human form reinforces the degree to which its symbolic meaning—or, in Percy's words, its “symbolic complex”—has been formulated through generations of human interaction. The landscape then undergoes a complete transformation:

Certain “quasi-sensory” symptoms, as one doctor explained later, began to manifest themselves. There was a slight not unpleasant twisting sensation in his head. A pied weed at the edge of the rough gave off a faint but acrid smell which rose in his nostrils. The bright October sunlight went dark as an eclipse. The scene

before his eyes seemed to change. It was not really a hallucination, he learned from another doctor, but an “association response” such as might be provoked by a lesion in the frontal lobe of the brain, the seat of memory.

Instead of the immaculate emerald fairway curving between the scarlet and gold hillsides of the Appalachians, he seemed to see something else. It was a scene from his youth, so insignificant a recollection that he had no reason to remember it then, let alone now thirty years later. Yet he seemed to see every detail as clearly as if the scene lay before him. (6)

The here-and-now, simulated pastoral space of the golf course conjures a recollection of a heretofore forgotten place. He imagines as he reflects on the place and his memory of it that “perhaps it belonged to no one, not even the Negroes, a parcel of leftover land which surveyors had not noticed on their maps” (7).

That Will presumes this “nondescript sector of earth” to have had no human owner might suggest that he desires the possibility of authentic (that is, lacking “symbolic complex”) experience of place qua place. This kind of authenticity, it seems, can only occur in an undiscovered place, one that lies outside the realm of capitalist ownership. Will's memory recalls one such “authentic” experience with place, and the place itself seems both close and distant on this Carolina golf links. The scene he recollects is of a time in his adolescence when he had just seen a classmate of his, Ethel Rosenblum, practicing cheerleading:

Once in his life had he set his foot on this unnamed unclaimed untenanted patch of weeds and that was when he saw Ethel Rosenblum and wanted her so bad he fell down. So keen was his sorrow at not having his arms around her...that he flung himself down in a litter of algebra books, ring binders, *Literature and*

*Life*, down into the Johnson grass and goldenrod, onto the earth smelling of creosote and rabbit tobacco.

Ah, *that* was the smell of the pied weed on the golf course, the acrid smell of rabbit tobacco!

...Ethel, let's me and you homestead this leftover land here and now, this non-place, this surveyor's *interstice*. Here's the place for us, the only place not Jew or Gentile, not black or white, not public or private. (8; final emphasis added)

The smell of the golf course initiates his recollection, a sensory trigger that brings with it a recalled experience of a (non-)place that is altogether unlike his actual here-and-now placement. As I've discussed, Percy uses the term "nonplace" in his essay, "Why I Live Where I Live," to describe his chosen town of Covington, Louisiana. Significantly, Percy seems to prefer "nonplace" (a term with inbuilt negative implications) to place, claiming the reason he has chosen to live there, "is not that it is a pleasant place but rather that it is a pleasant *nonplace*. Covington is in the Deep South, which is supposed to have a strong sense of place. It does, but Covington occupies a kind of *interstice* in the South. It falls between places" (3; emphasis added). The repeated use of the descriptor "interstice" suggests that Percy is drawn to these (non)places because they fall *between* places: they are not weighed down by their own placeness. For Will Barrett, the golf course is unlike the patch of grass in Mississippi in nearly every way: it is immaculately over-landscaped ("he seemed to see and smell the multicolored granules of chemical fertilizer scattered in the bent Bermuda" (8)); it has many owners (but only the privileged); (he believes) it lacks Jews. Thus, while these places diverge in terms of their cultural, "symbolic complex," of place, they nevertheless share the same native element, rabbit tobacco, which triggers Will's memory. In short, it is the symbolic meaning alone that makes the

golf course as far from authentic—and as far from the Mississippi patch of weeds from his youth—as it can be.

Does Will mourn the loss of authentic place? Perhaps. The argument could be made that it is the relative inauthenticity of his current location that causes a desire for the authentic. It could also be argued that he mourns the loss of something he never had—not the loss of any “real” place, but merely loss for loss's sake, a lamentation of he knows not what, a melancholia.<sup>23</sup> He seems to mourn the loss of possibility—of love, of “untenanted” place, of domesticity. It is significant that his longing for Ethel is not sexual in nature, as one doctor suggests, but rather domestic. His regret is that he could not and can not dwell or make a “homestead” with Ethel Rosenblum in the “leftover land” he remembers. The Will of *The Last Gentleman* repeatedly fantasized about a life of domesticity with Kitty in a red dress in a new kitchen in a new suburb, an image of domesticity that is unlike both the life he imagines here and the life he lived with his wife. What he feels in the present narrative, though, is not entirely regret: he asks himself, “Would he have been better off?”, the answer to which is uncertain, but “At least he probably would not be falling down on golf courses and recalling odd bits and pieces of the past” (9). His life with Marion lacked this domesticity. He and his wife “lived in the same house all those years and passed each other like ghosts” (124). Indeed, Will's presence in the novel—if a character with such temporal displacement can be said to have *presence*—is spectral at best.

He seems at the novel's beginning finally to have determined that he may be like his father, who lived a melancholic death-in-life. Indeed, the memory that he spends nearly the entire novel attempting to understand is of a “hunting accident” that was actually no accident at all—a

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23 Percy was greatly influenced by the study of psychoanalysis, and he draws much of his notion of melancholy, especially of the degree to which the self unproductively turns on itself and the past, from Sigmund Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916): On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement, Papers on Metapsychology and Other Works*, 1917, 237-258.

previously repressed memory in which his father attempts to kill Will and himself in the Georgia wilderness. He decides early in the novel that he doesn't belong in the mountains of old Carolina on an immaculate golf links, and perhaps that he does not belong in any place: "There at any rate stands Will Barrett on the edge of a gorge in old Carolina, a talented agreeable wealthy man living in as pleasant an environment as one can imagine and yet who is thinking of putting a bullet in his brain" (14).

### ***"I AM HERE": THE LANDSCAPES OF FORGETFULNESS***

Will's displacement arises largely from a Cartesian dualism ("He was of two minds, playing golf and at the same time wondering with no more than a moderate curiosity what was happening to him" (48)) in which his subconscious often drifts from present to past, from a North Carolina golf course to a patch of weeds in Mississippi to a Georgia hunting camp. The novel's other protagonist, Allie, has a very different problem. Allie remembers nothing. Will struggles to live in the here-and-now because his subconscious resides in the past and future, but never in the present: "Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream" (124). He seeks the temporally and spatially unattainable. Allie, on the other hand, lives only in the present: "She remembered nothing. It does not matter that I do not remember the past, she thought. What matters is finding shelter, a safe warm place in these great cool dripping rhododendrons" (80). She travels through the novel in a deliberate, and often difficult, attempt to reacclimate, to learn to live in the world as it is. For her the world is just that: it lacks the "symbolic complex," the preconceptions and expectations that render places

problematic. She is so confident in her physical placement that she even declares in her journal, “I am here” (85). Her temporal placement is not as certain. She is both like and unlike Will, who often experiences vivid encounters with his own memory. Allie pieces together her own identity through an instructional journal she wrote to herself before her last treatment, when she made up her mind to escape: “As you read this, it will not be entirely new to you—it will be like remembering a dream” (28). Like Will, her present experience is more dreamlike than real, and as a result she too does not belong entirely to the *cultural* here-and-now. “Indeed, she seemed to belong to a past almost remembered” (32).

Allie is Kitty's daughter, and she more closely resembles the younger Kitty than the middle-aged Kitty, who has married a dentist, grown bolder, and become a southern country club stereotype.<sup>24</sup> David Riesman's notion of other-direction is evident in Allie to the point of pathology. She concerns herself so heavily with the approval of others that she cannot interact socially without feeling embarrassment for both herself and the other. She even asks of herself, “was that her real sickness, that she was embarrassed for everybody?” (102). For her “sickness” she has been undergoing electroshock treatment at a mental hospital for a few years, she is uncertain how many. The novel encounters Allie shortly after she escapes to claim a piece of property in Linwood that she has inherited. The inheritance, a piece of mountainside near Linwood and an island off the Georgia coast, has great thematic significance. It was bequeathed to her by her Aunt Sally (actually her real aunt's friend), who believed the property to be worthless. Kitty and her husband, however, discover that the land, in fact, has much greater value

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24 Kitty in her middle age is quite unlike the Kitty of *The Last Gentleman*: “Kitty had changed. When he thought of her, he thought of sitting next to her in the Alabama twilight in her father's Lincoln, her knees together, eyes cast down, silent; crossing lonesome red-clay railroad cuts filled with ironweed and violet light. But now she came shouldering up to him. She was bolder, lustier, better-looking but almost brawny, a lady golfer, brown and freckle-shouldered. Her voice was deeper, a musical whiskey-mellowed country-club voice with a laugh he didn't remember. When she leaned toward him, her heavy gold jewelry clunked (131)”



than Sally Kemp had let on. As Kitty puts it, “her poor little old dirt farm is eight hundred acres next to the Linwood golf course and her sandspit island is over two thousand acres, more of a wilderness than Cumberland which you've heard of, and that the Arabs have already offered two mill one for it” (120). The Arabs, as it turns out, plan “to turn the island into a 144-hole golf course” (283). But the commercial value of these places has not (yet) rendered them inauthentic. Indeed, so long as Allie is their proprietor (Allie, unlike her parents, seeks only a place to live rather than to commercialize) these places can remain as (non-)places, “interstices” of wilderness among the rapidly developing South.

Percy, in “The Loss of the Creature,” lays out a few scenarios under which a person may recover the Grand Canyon. One of these is to be a survivor: “It may be recovered in a time of national disaster. The Bright Angel Lodge is converted into a rest home, a function that has nothing to do with the canyon a few yards away. A wounded man is brought in. He regains consciousness, there outside his window is the canyon” (49). This survivor, knowing nothing of the Grand Canyon just yards from his window, may experience the thing anew, free from any “symbolic complex,” free from expectation. This is Allie's situation. She experiences the town and the world around her as if for the first time, in the very way that is impossible for Will. She interacts with people and places without preconceptions. She is a survivor. Indeed, Percy invites the comparison to other Percyan survivors when he has Allie, in the journal to herself, compare herself to a survivor of a plane crash:

There will also be something good about having gone through the bad experience, the buzzing, for the last time and having survived—the bad maybe even being the condition of the good, I don't know. Like that man who crawled out of the plane crash in West Virginia last summer, remember? Everybody else dead or dying and

he with a cut lip and, realizing he didn't even have to crawl, not knowing what he was doing, not even remembering it later, simply walked away like a man getting off a streetcar, walked into the woods. (29)

Allie arrives in Linwood as if she has walked from a plane crash, or as if she were “Rip Van Winkle coming down into town after a twenty-year nap” (25). She cannot be characterized as local or leafer (who drives mountain roads with out-of-state plates in search of fall foliage)—“Her unfashionable clothes made her look like a local. On the other hand, perhaps she talked like a tourist” (26)—and is thus more able than any in the novel to take in this place for what it is. But while perhaps her peculiar situation allows her to *experience* the place more *authentically*, this is not necessarily such a good thing. Her mental condition and her anxiety are certainly unenviable. Like other Percyan survivors, she does begin to acclimate, but this may not be such a good thing, either. Soon, she begins to learn categorizations and sects of people. When she has a task before her, for example, she begins to feel less separated from the cultural aspects of the place, and thus more separated from the transients: “A real townie she felt like now, bustling past slack-jawed hippies, moony eyed tourists, blue-haired lady leafers, antiquers, and quilt collectors” (247).

Allie seems to belong to the forest. She succeeds in domesticating the most natural of places, the very thing Will is regretfully unable to do in his memory with Ethel Rosenblum. In this light, Allie should perhaps be read as a sublimated version of both Ethel and Kitty, with whom Will has had unfulfilled domestic fantasies. Indeed, the *place* Allie inhabits is perhaps the most identifiably pastoral place in any of Percy's writings. Having sat untouched for a generation, it is literally entwined in nature:

It was a greenhouse, such as [Will] had never seen before, free-standing but sheltered at one end by the ridge, with a wall of lichened concrete and a tall gambrel roof. It looked as big as an ark. The sun, sunk behind the pines, had come straight off the lower, more vertical of the glass slopes. A steep copper hood, verdigrised green-brown, shaded the front door like a cathedral porch. Iron spikes and fleurs-de-lis sprouted from the roof peak Virginia creeper and saplings thrust through broken windows. (74)

This place in all its natural glory (likened even to a cathedral) lies adjacent to the golf course. Timothy Dow Adams likely had this “rural and mythical” enclave in mind when he declared Will Barrett's “need for an authentic place” to have been realized in *The Second Coming*. The greenhouse had lain unused for a generation, slowly becoming reclaimed by the natural world. But in domesticating this place—which Allie refers to throughout the novel as “my place”—she effectively disentangles the greenhouse from the relatively natural, overgrown state in which she first finds it. She reclaims and repurposes the pastoral, proving that no “place” can remain entirely “authentic.” What's more, her life there is not the idealized, harmonious existence one might generically expect. She has little human interaction, she has no means of earning a living, and she still faces the dilemma of time, of what to do with it, how to live in it, how to survive four o'clock in the afternoon. Thus, while Allie's spatial presence is actualized in a way that Will's is not, she remains temporally uncertain.

Indeed, in creating this idyllic-not-ideal “place,” Percy seems to be both fulfilling and rejecting generic expectations.<sup>25</sup> In a body of fiction full of suburbs and golf courses, *here* is a

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25 Percy's nonfiction makes it clear that he is continually aware of the common signifiers of Southern literature, and he often seems (perhaps intentionally) to work against them. He writes in “The Loss of the Creature,” for example, that these kinds of signifiers of the genre (like “place”) are best left to the “experts”: “decaying Southern mansions are surrendered to Faulkner and Tennessee Williams” (55).

place; *here* is the apparently pastoral. But what are we to make of it? The domesticity that occurs here is between an escaped mental patient and a suicidal golfer—between a girl and her mother's old boyfriend. Moreover, this “place,” for all its placeness, is just a stone's throw—or a golf ball's slice—from the country club. In placing the pastoral and the simulacrum in such close proximity, Percy invites the comparison, calling on the reader to question the authenticity of both places. Indeed, perhaps the most significant aspect of Allie's dwelling in the greenhouse is this proximity to the golf course. When Will first encounters Allie he is in search of the ball he had sliced out-of-bounds. In this first encounter, Will begins to reevaluate his presence in the indeterminate place,

...all at once he became aware of himself as she saw him, of his golf clothes, beltless slacks, blue nylon shirt with the club crest, gold cap with club crest, two-tone golf shoes with the fringed forward-falling tongues, and suddenly it was he and not she who was odd in this silent forest, he with his little iron club and nifty fingerless glove.

In the presence of Allie, Will considers perhaps for the first time that golf, a sport in which “grown middle-aged men socked little balls around a mountain meadow and hummed along in electric carts” (77), may be out of place in old Carolina. When Will leaves the greenhouse and is on the golf links side of the fence, “he seemed to feel freer, as if the fence allowed a neighborliness” (114), suggesting that Will's home had been the golf course. His meeting Allie, however, seems to open new possibilities of where he might find a here-and-now domestic fulfillment.

## FROM MANSION TO GARDEN HOME: WILL'S JOURNEY TO DOMESTICITY

As I've discussed, Percy's characters often experience feelings of aimlessness. In my analysis, I have related this aimlessness to the postwar sentiment, to the relative purposelessness of peacetime, and to the Suburban Sadness, which Riesman describes as “an aimlessness, a pervasive low-keyed unpleasure which cannot be described in terms of traditional sorrows” (377). Amid this aimlessness, as Riesman discusses in *The Lonely Crowd*, people often prefer war to peace, calamity to good fortune (297). Percy meditates on this notion, akin to the Suburban Sadness, fairly often in his writing, often pointing to the exhilaration and happiness felt during hurricanes. In *The Last Gentleman*, for example, part of Will's “theory of environments” is that bad environments are often preferable to good: “Take hurricanes, for example, certainly a bad environment if ever there was one. It was his impression that not just he but other people too felt better in hurricanes” (23). Similarly, Percy begins his essay “The Delta Factor,” by asking a series of questions:

Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century?

Why does man feel so bad in the very age when, more than in any other age, he has succeeded in satisfying his needs and *making over the world* for his own use? ...

Why do people often feel bad in good environments and good in bad environments? ...

Why is a man apt to feel bad in a good environment, say suburban Short Hills, New Jersey, on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon? Why is the same man apt to feel good in a very bad environment, say an old hotel on Key Largo during a hurricane? ...

Why is war man's greatest pleasure? (3; emphasis added)

Will, discontented in “one of the pleasantest of all places” (181), displays these symptoms throughout *The Second Coming*. Early in the novel, for example, when a gunshot ricochets through his garage, Will finds that he prefers the possibility of catastrophe to the aimlessness of the life he lives. He asks himself, “Are we afraid quiet afternoons will be interrupted by gunfire? Or do we hope they will?” (16). Following the shot, he feels “miraculously restored to himself” (17), asking, “why do I feel most myself here and not hitting a three-wood for an eagle on the back nine? What does my ease with gunfire portend?” (18).

Indeed, much of the angst Will Barrett feels arises from his increasing sense of purposelessness on the golf course. It is only after slicing out-of-bounds—the moment, in fact, of crossing the border from cultivated to wild—that he is able to view the aimlessness of the game and the life in-bounds. During this journey out-of-bounds the golf club undergoes an important transformation:

As he stopped and *in the instant of crossing the wire*, head lowered, eyes slightly bulging and focuses on the wet speckled leaves marinating and funky-smelling in the sunlight, he became aware that he was doing an odd thing with his three-iron. He was holding it in his left hand, fending against the undergrowth with his right and turning his body into the vines and briars which grew in the fence so that they snapped against his body. Then, even as he was climbing through, he had shifted his grip on the iron so that the club head was tucked high under his right arm, shaft resting on forearm, right hand holding the shaft steady—as one might carry a shotgun. (44; emphasis added)

As he continues through the woods, the golf club continues to transform:

He was holding the three-iron, not like a golf club or a shotgun now, but like a walking stick. ... Now, carefully, as if he were reenacting an event not quite remembered, as if he had forgotten something which his muscles and arms and hands might remember, he swung the shaft of the iron slowly to and fro like the barrel of a shotgun. He stopped and again stood as still as a hunter. Now turning his head and stooping, he looked back at the fence. (50-51)

His consciousness drifts then to the flashback of the “hunting accident,” the memory he spends most of the narrative attempting to recreate and comprehend. Following this extended flashback, the golf club transforms once more: “He was watching the three-iron as, held in front of him like a divining rod, it sank toward the earth. *Ah, I've found it after all. The buried treasure*, he thought smiling” (61). This “buried treasure” is perhaps the knowledge of his father's attempted murder-suicide, the knowledge that he, like his father, may be doomed to a “death-in-life” (133). But perhaps, too, the “buried treasure” is his exposure to this world out-of-bounds, a world in which a golf club has no purpose. Pridgen believes that, stepping into this more natural setting, he is able to begin his journey to *interior* placement, referencing Percy's own comments about the novel from *Conversations with Walker Percy* (1985) and *More Conversations with Walker Percy* (1993): “Percy says that in the novel Will symbolically steps 'out of bounds' into a place beyond his 'ordinary life' and eventually finds a 'grace' with Allie that promises the possibility of a new life. Later, when Will falls out of Lost Cove cave into Allie's greenhouse, he falls, Percy says, 'into sacramental reality'” (104).

The distinction between “sacramental reality” and sensible reality is significant. Percy implies that the “authenticity” Will seems to seek is a *spiritual* reality, rather than merely a spatial one. Nevertheless, the “sacramental reality” he finds occurs only after he has experienced

a subconscious journey through the physical transformations of “place.” Manifest in his semi-conscious dream in Lost Cove cave, he must more fully comprehend the ways in which the landscape has transformed from generation to generation before he can reconcile his dualistic placement:

He found himself in a certain place. It was a desert place. Weeds grew in the sand. Vines sprouted in the rock. The place was a real place. Its exact location could be determined within inches by map coordinates, ninety-one degrees so many minutes so many seconds longitude west, thirty-three degrees so many minutes so many seconds latitude north. He had been there forty years earlier. Then the place had not been deserted. It was a spot near a stream which ran through a meadow. ...

Then the spot became part of a country club, the exact patch of grass in the concavity of a kidney-shaped bunker on number-six fairway. For twenty years winter and summer thousands of golf balls, cart tires, spiked shoes crossed the spot.

After twenty years the country club became a subdivision. The spot was at the corner of a lot where a ranch-style house was built for a dentist named Sam Gold. Weeds grew in the fence corner where not even the Yazoo Master mower could reach and covered an iron horseshoe for ten years. Though Sam Gold was a Jew, places meant nothing to him. One place, even Jerusalem, was like any other place. Why did he, Will Barrett, who was not a Jew, miss the Jerusalem he had never had and which meant nothing to Sam Gold, who was a Jew?



After twenty-five years the subdivision became a shopping center, with a paved parking lot of forty acres. The spot was now located in the mall between the Orange Julius stand and the entrances to H&R Block. The mall was crowded with shoppers for twenty years.

Now it was deserted. When he came to years from now, he was lying on the spot. The skylight of the mall was broken. The terrazzo was cracked. Grass sprouted. Somewhere close, water ran. Old tax forms blew out of H&R Block. A raccoon lived in the Orange Julius stand. (277)

This dream, that takes Will through the transformations of a “real place”—from “desert place” to country club to subdivision to shopping center, before being deserted once more—apparently allows him to recover his placement in the here-and-now.

The conclusion of *The Second Coming* finds Will Barrett, after emerging from Lost Cove cave, taking a short detour before ultimately finding “grace.” After his daughter moves him out of his mansion, Will finds himself literally homeless and drives to the bus station. He meets a man who is going back to Georgia:

The man was returning to Georgia to sell his house. He and his wife had bought a garden home in Emerald Isle Estates. He explained the difference between a villa, a condominium, and a garden home. A garden home had the privacy of a villa and the maintenance services of a condominium and more land than a mountain home. Though he had lived and worked in Atlanta twenty years as an Associate, he was returning to Valdosta to sell his family home. It had once been a farm. (294)

Will decides impulsively that Georgia “was the place!” (295), and boards with the man, having made up his mind to buy the hunting camp where, in his youth, his father had tried and failed to

kill him, “to find something he had left there, to find a place where something had happened to him” (296).

But shortly after the bus departs, he changes his mind. He sets out to begin a life with Allie. He finds in her the possibility for domesticity he previously lacked: “Kissing her was like entering a new and happy land” (328). He defeats the “old mole,” the inner voice of his father that beckons Will, “a placeless person in a placeless place,” to death, to “the second, last and ultimate come to end all comes” (337). He does not come. He stays with Allie, first in a motel, suggesting to her that they “rent or buy a garden home,” places that are “like motels but not unpleasantly so,” until they can “build a house.” He ultimately hopes to “develop [Allie's] property here or on the island—perhaps log cabins on ten- or twelve- acre plots” (343). Thus, Will and Allie set out to form a selective utopian community.

Will's plan for his life with Allie, however, is problematic even in its inception. The domesticity he envisions has troubling inbuilt gender roles. Will subjugates Allie not only by planning this community on *her* land, but also through implying that she should appear more feminine, telling her, “I think I'll buy you a dress. Imagine you in a dress!” (331). Furthermore, the elderly men he enlists to build log cabins bring with them problematic racial and social prejudices. Mr. Ryan, for example, tells Will he will hire “hippies” to work for him, but only “If you know which ones to pick. Some of them are tired of sitting around. I got me a real good gang. They work better than niggers” (320). This utopia, it seems, is no more utopian than any suburb. While Will and Allie are figured as a kind of Adam and Eve, the garden remains problematic.

#### IV. EPILOGUE: THE SUBURBAN “SAD LITTLE HAPPINESS”

*It is not a bad thing to settle for the Little Way, not the big search for the big happiness but the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little car and a warm deep thigh.*

—Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer*

Each of Walker Percy's novels deals in some way with ailments that are often attributed to suburbia. Pervasive in his writings are a sense of purposelessness, malaise, depression, and despair; a feeling of placelessness that seems to arise from the newness of the built environment and the perceived divorce from the natural world; and an awareness of privilege, exclusivity, and white flight. But the symptoms of Riesman's Suburban Sadness cannot be said to *define* Percy's work. While many “suburban” novels and films portray a hopelessness, Percy's novels tend to portray characters who find redemption among the malaise. More specifically, his characters hope to discover the possibility of a search, and this distinguishes Percy's suburbia from more common portrayals in which characters often find themselves in a suburban dead end. For Percy, not only do the suburbs play a more complex narrative role, but also “sadness” is a more complex emotion.

The Suburban Sadness, as well as what Adams calls the “Suburban Myth,” may be just that, myth. While there remains a widespread opinion that the suburbs still house many of the old ailments—placelessness, conformity, homogeneity—recent studies have questioned these charges. A recent study, *Suburban Century* (2004), reassesses some of these charges against suburbia. The following blurb about the book offers a useful summary: “Bad architecture. Soulless. Destructive of Communities. The suburbs are much maligned places. . . . But are they

really as homogeneous and conservative as we think they are?” Written by Mark Clapson, the book reconsiders suburbia from a sociological and comparative perspective. One review declares this sociological approach to be “a welcome shift in a field that has historically based critiques on externally generated standards. [Clapson's] approach helps clarify why suburbia continues to grow and supports a more discerning analysis of suburbs that gives weight to residents' views.” Indeed, if more evaluations of suburbia were internally generated they might reveal that the long-held intellectual grudge against suburban communities discounts the fact that most residents tend to live there because they *like it there*. Long before sociologists began to reconsider this suburban myth, Percy depicted in his fictional—and often autobiographical—accounts a more nuanced and sympathetic view of suburbia than that of his contemporaries. Furthermore, his characters are fraught with emotions much more complicated than “sadness.”

In Percy's brand of the Suburban Sadness, the relationship between the suburb and the sadness is correlative but not necessarily causal. *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* address the discrepancy between outer pleasantries and inner strife, but the former cannot be said to cause the latter. While much of the angst from which Percy's characters suffer correlates to the settings in which they live (namely, settings in which the built environment fails on some level to coexist with the natural environment), one central problem—and there are many—with interpreting this angst as the Suburban Sadness is that the “sadness” itself is multifaceted. For Percy's characters, sadness often occurs simultaneously with happiness. Consider Binx's “sad little happiness” (136), and Will Barrett's assertion that “there is a kind of happiness in golf” (65), even after he has admitted to himself that he wishes to put a bullet in his brain (14).

The convoluted emotion of sad happiness/happy sadness can be found throughout Percy's 1971 novel *Love in the Ruins*. This novel moves the southern suburb into an imagined, strange,

apocalyptic future in which the “old Auto Age”—the age that saw the rise of the suburbs, the interstate system, motels, and strip malls—is a thing of the past. Vines sprout in the cracks of sidewalks and old buildings (9). Motels have been abandoned. Society suffers from a spiritual sickness, and Dr. Tom More believes he can cure it. The novel presents through a series of case studies the maladies that affect the inhabitants of the golf course community of Paradise Estates. The Suburban Sadness here is discussed in strictly medical terms through the first-person narrative of Dr. More, “a not very successful psychiatrist; an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors...” (11). Despite his own ailments, Dr. More believes he can cure mankind's spiritual malaise with his invention, the “stethoscope of the spirit” (62), More's Qualitative Quantitative Ontological Lapsometer. The device measures the “lapse” of the self from the self; it diagnoses the Suburban Sadness even as it questions whether the source of the sadness is the suburbs themselves, or simply the despair of modern man.

For the inhabitants of Paradise, their interior Cartesian lapse mirrors an apparent divorce from the natural world. For some patients, More prescribes a “recovery of the self through ordeal” (37), a rejection of the built environment and a return to the swamp. Thus, as More sees it, the built environment plays *some* role, if not easily causal, in the alienation his neighbors experience. But sadness and happiness coexist here. This hybrid emotion pervades the residents of nominally happy places like “Paradise Estates,” “Happy Hollow” (a place in which its very name implies simultaneously occurring, contradictory emotions), and “Happy Isles Separation Center,” an old-folks home where patients are given the “Euphoric Switch” that offers manufactured happiness.

As in the Will Barrett novels, the golf course creates a sense of purposelessness, displacement, and general uncertainty. The Linwood and Birmingham golf courses conjure both

personal and collective memory with a sense of gravity. In *Love in the Ruins*, on the other hand, the landscape becomes rather a parody of the (post)southern “sense of place,” as well as of the region's collective memory. “[T]he showplace of Paradise” (75) is a mansion named “Tara,” a “plantation house” that was “purchased from ... a gangster from New Orleans who runs Louisiana” (174). More describes Tara in contradictory terms, seemingly finding it at once ridiculous and desirable: “I look at Tara, a preposterous fake house on a fake hill: even the hill is fake, dredged up from the swamp. ... The very preposterousness of life in Tara with Lola inflames me with love” (181). Percy's choice of the name “Tara” for such an obscene structure evokes not the antebellum South but rather a reproduction of it.<sup>26</sup> Percy even has Tom's mother ask, after speaking of the Tara in Paradise, “Do you remember what Scarlett said about the land? ... Or was it from *The Good Earth*?” (180). The uncertainty of Tom's mother's allusion underscores the tendency of southerners to confuse personal history and conviction with cultural artifacts. In alluding to the cultural reproduction that is the great source of southern nostalgia, Percy parodies the “southern” literary sense of place.

That Tara is conceived of by Tom as “fake” begs the question of what Tom might find to be “real.” We seem to find the real at the end of the novel, as Tom eventually settles in “the quarters,” old slave quarters that he and his new wife repurpose as a kind of “real” place to find happiness and raise a family. However, this gesture, in which relics of the antebellum South are repurposed for white domestication, further perpetuates the racial subjugation that had been codified in the Paradise Country Club. Furthermore, this space becomes commercialized in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), sequel to *Love in the Ruins*, when Tom's mother, a real estate agent, updates and rebuilds them, even finding their supposed “authenticity” marketable. After being

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26 See also Scott Romine, who discusses how southerners' nostalgia for “Tara” is problematic, as the place-name never existed except as cultural reproduction, in “Tara! Tara! Tara! *Gone with the Wind* and the Work of Cultural Reproduction,” in *The Real South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2008), 27-59.

spruced up with “New Orleans balconies,...a tiny dock in front...and a Jacuzzi behind,” his mother names them “The Quarters,” telling potential buyers, “This is the *real thing*” (36-37; emphasis added). This kind of repurposing for marketability parallels an actual practice in today's South. Former plantation sites throughout the region have been subdivided, built upon, and marketed by inserting the name, “Plantation.” (In fact, there is even a “Tara Subdivision” in the city of Colleyville, Texas.)

In the Will Barrett novels, as well as the Tom More novels, golf courses come to hold great significance: they self-consciously evoke a sense of cultural nostalgia for a southern “sense of place,” only to interrogate the very notions of nostalgia and place in the region. It is incontestable that Percy attaches connotative implications to the idea/l of “place,” and he is often (perhaps deliberately) ambiguous about the relative assets of places and nonplaces, and whether one might have any authentic “sense of” them. Ultimately for Percy, “sense of place” comes from the “sense” rather than from the “place.”

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## VITA

In May of 2007, Joyce Garrett Butterworth received her undergraduate degree in English from The University of the South in Sewanee, Tennessee, where she learned to love writing, and where she was awarded the Tennessee Williams award for excellence in creative writing. She attended the Columbia Publishing Course, a division of Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, in 2008. She plans to pursue her interest in writing back home in Alabama.