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**THE AESTHETIC INDIVIDUAL AND THE NEW SOUTH IN THE AGE OF ALIENATION IN  
WALKER PERCY'S *THE MOVIEGOER***

This paper addresses Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, tracing the use of existentialist tropes in its narrative construction in order to delineate the problematic condition of the human individual in the postwar South. The protagonist's search for an authentic self and his escape from the snares of everydayness are put into perspective in the context of Percy's professed understanding of Kierkegaard and Sartre, against the background of a South increasingly alienated from her ancient traditions.

Keywords: existentialism, theorist-consumer, genre of alienation, Southern tradition

Walker Percy's writing, as acknowledged by readers and critics alike, is intimately rooted in the existentialist philosophy of Søren Kierkegaard, according to which human existence is governed by the interspersing planes of ethics, aesthetics and religion. Percy's fictional personae move freely, albeit chaotically, among these planes, swimming in the troubled waters of consumerist postmodernity. They despair and all too often are unaware of their despair while striving to construct an identity on the soul-wrecking premises of materialistic individualism; in Percy's novels, the postmodern western culture he presents transpires as an elitist space protagonists yearn to enter by performing rituals of an acquisitive nature. In order to blend in, to be accepted in social contexts, one has to purchase the right things and endorse certain lifestyles. The comforts of everyday existence sacrifice the individual on the altar of social conformity, which, according to the novelist, is nothing short of existential entrapment. Fashionable clothes, muscle cars and fancy restaurants dinners may be the ingredients of social acceptance, but they provide no escape from the trap of everydayness set by the commodities offered by consumerist postwar America.

Nowadays, Percy argues, society apparently has no use for anything that can't be bought and sold or theorized about. Ours is the age of the 'theorist-consumer', a spiritually disenfranchised individual who "neither knows who he is or what he wants outside of theorizing and consuming" (Percy, 1991: 311). For this theorist-consumer, enough is never good enough – as such, Percy's protagonists fittingly inhabit an aesthetic-philosophical universe devoid of any satisfaction provided by consumption of goods and/or knowledge of scientific theories. Inability to reach satisfaction spells despair and brings about repetitive abusive behaviors, such as drinking, drug-taking and promiscuity.

Against the backdrop of postmodernity, Percy contends that one of the signs that cannot be encompassed by theory is one's self (*Ibidem*: 312). The self as the part of a person that does not easily lend itself to theorizing fails to find its place in the world and has come to a stalemate with its very condition: although the age we inhabit was tailored for the self's understanding of everything and for its satisfaction through consumption of goods and services, the self of today's "theorist-consumer" bespeaks alienation and despair, it is "the face of fear and sadness, because it does not know who it is or where it belongs" (*Ibidem*). With Percy's protagonists, the self is often unbeknownst an actor enacting the drama of modernity, who epitomizes the conflict at work between the societal unifying moral framework that dictates people what kinds of life to lead, and the inescapable tendency of human nature that pushes the same people to expound their lived experiences as continual searches for signs. This tension between the alienated self and the world

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which is supposed to confer it signs of existential purposefulness organizes life in Percy's aesthetic universe by exploiting its dwellers' ability to produce stories. Percy employs narrative modes that revolve around and rely on the alienated self, whose personhood is constantly threatened by dissolution and whose existence depends on whatever traces of validation it can grasp from the reading of signs embedded in the cycle of theorizing and consuming that makes for its everydayness. Authorial interest in the characters' fates is almost clinical and mirrors the spirit of the age, an age "possessed by a sense of dislocation, a loss of personal identity, an alternating sentimentality and rage which, in an individual patient, could be characterized as dementia" (*Ibidem*: 309).

The first of his six award-winning novels, *The Moviegoer*<sup>1</sup> was published in 1961, incidentally the same year as Heller's *Catch-22*, and won the National Book Award for fiction the next year. Penning it was an unusual combination of the author's medical background and staunch attachment to existentialist philosophy and Roman Catholic values woven into a therapeutic pattern of diagnostic storytelling interspersed with shadows of despair and malaise. Percy's moralistic exhortations delivered in a somewhat self-absorbed prose style and his explorations into the nature of the self, marred by the perils of everydayness, made it clear from his novelistic debut that the fiction he proposed was philosophy first, then literature. Possessing the unique talent of "being able to dramatize metaphysics" (Godwin, 1987: 23), Percy, the medical practitioner turned philosopher, doesn't shy from asking the big questions and diagnoses the spiritual illness of Western man with quasi-scientific gusto and compassionate understanding.

Percy's interest in existentialist philosophy was ignited by the works of nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard he read while recovering from tuberculosis in the Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac Lake, New York (Allen, 1986: 15). The Christian existentialism espoused by the Danish groundbreaker, especially in the angst-ridden realization that man's freedom is a punishment to suffer not a reward to enjoy, helped to shape Percy's own existentialist take on life, primarily viewed as a series of usually poor alternatives triggered by the humans' defective understanding of self-determination. Furthermore, his fascination with molding philosophy in fictional form was bolstered by Kierkegaard's three-stage model of life. In a nutshell, the aesthetic, ethical and religious stages in the individual's spiritual growth correspond roughly to the pursuit of pleasure, the acknowledgment of duty toward society and submission to God's will, with the mention that no single individual is necessarily meant to experience every of these stages.

Not a single second oblivious to the fact that Kierkegaard was first and foremost a Christian philosopher, Percy delineates his existentialist profile as an American Christian novelist who is faced with the serious dilemma that "though he professes a belief which he holds saves himself and the world and nourishes his art besides, it is also true that Christendom seems in some sense to have failed" as "its vocabulary is worn out" (2000: 116). The reason why this may be is the prevalence of the aesthetic phase over the ethical and the religious in this age of theorists-consumers. The theorist-consumer turns a deaf ear to the signs revealed by the Christian existentialist as he/she is the aesthetic individual whose concerns imply mostly abstract thought and/or lived experiences; aesthetic individuals seek personal gratification above all endorsing lifestyles that teeter dangerously between materialism and hedonism, devoid of any transcendental concern for the hereafter and with no regard for long-term consequences. Unable to drive home the authentic message of existential(ist) despair in the present age, Percy feels like a "man who has found a treasure hidden in the attic of an old house, but he is writing for people who have moved out to the suburbs and who are bloody sick of the old house and everything in it" (*Ibidem*).

If Kierkegaard taught Percy the nature of self-determination and that man is essentially free in the universe, it was the French existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre who revealed to Percy that man is also free in choosing how to live his/her life and should pay utmost attention to the consequences of his/her actions. As Percy confesses in several interviews, Sartre's revolutionary novel *Nausea* (*La Nausée*, 1938) was the starting point in his novelistic venture that debuted with *The Moviegoer*; he saw the novel form as an apt vehicle for conveying ideas kindled by his own interest in existentialist philosophy: "I was influenced by Sartre in his first novel, *Nausea*, which is to me very good and very well done. It influenced me because the idea of having a certain belief and then trying to communicate it through, through a concrete situation – a man set down in a certain situation – was very exciting" (*qtd.* in Bunting, 1985: 44). Percy assimilated the lesson of the French master on the predicament of being human, that is essentially alone, thrown into this world with no guidelines, and encumbered with responsibilities, and followed through with the artistic-philosophical impulse to produce a Southern variant of Roquentin, John Bickerson (Binx) Bolling, the

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<sup>1</sup> Hereafter *MG* in quotations only.

protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, whose existential trajectory revolves around New Orleans and her movie theaters:

The spark might have come from Sartre's Roquentin in *Nausea* sitting in that library watching the Self-Taught Man or sitting in that café watching the waiter. Why not have a younger, less perverse Roquentin, a Southerner of a certain sort, and put him down in a movie house in Gentilly, a middle-class district of New Orleans, not unlike Sartre's Bouville... The thought crossed my mind: why not do what French philosophers often do and Americans almost never – novelize philosophy, incarnate ideas in a person and a place, which latter is after all a noble Southern tradition in fiction" (*qtd.* in Abádi-Nagy, 1986: 142-143).

Furthermore, in bringing Binx Bolling to life, Percy observes Sartre's main imperative of existential freedom – the concept of nothingness, envisioned as the emptiness at the core of the human self, the possession of which allows the conscious being to perceive the surrounding world and to take action accordingly. The conscious perception of one's nothingness is intrinsically a *quale* that engenders a series of existential possibilities, or, more plainly put, nothingness entails freedom. To Percy, being "a naught is the very condition of making anything" (1989: 82-83), while his discernibly correct decoding of nothingness as source of freedom empowers him to diagnose modern man's feeling of inner emptiness in the post-Christian age, that rebuffs his quest for an identity, for a definitive name to live by, and forces him to assume guises and impersonations that would fill in the void (Wang, 2012: 144). His novelization of philosophy, much like Sartre's, has a lot to do with the uniqueness of man's endeavor to live authentically. When the human individual refuses to be in "bad faith", that is when he/she is making a choice by appropriating his/her indwelling freedom, his/her steps are in the right direction on the path toward an authentic self. Condemned to be free, man creates existential value in his process of decision-making only by conceptualizing the consequences of his acts as being sanctioned by his freedom; alternatively, in sketching the existential hero's personality, Percy portends that "the human being has no defined nature as being-for-itself is not what it is and is what it is not, and the human being is always in the process of projecting a new identity as he is making new choices and creating new values" (*Ibidem*: 145). As such, *The Moviegoer* is not so much a novel that tells a story as it is an essayistic concatenation of philosophical explorations into the nature of existential anguish and its result – despair – a recondite condition of the self, engendered by the human individual's awareness of freedom. Its existentialist thesis, while constructed in accordance with Sartre's tripartite model of being into the world (being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others), displays the self in its Kierkegaardian, aesthetic phase, and explores it as a negativity, as a 'hole' (in Sartre's words) that needs to be filled in order to mitigate the anxiety caused by the multitude of choices freedom affords (Sartre, 1992: 259-260).

But while the material world is only being-in-itself, the human individual can be whatever he/she chooses, and in its aesthetic phase the self is induced to define itself in terms of material objects, desperately trying to fill the 'hole' of inward nothingness. Eventually a life lived solely in its aesthetic dimension becomes a source of boredom. For Percy's protagonist, there are only so many experiences, and each new one is supposed to be more thrilling than the last. Once the aesthetic self of the consumer-intellectual abstracts everything into nothingness, there is no reason to continue living. Since everything simply is, without relation or purpose, then despair takes hold. Such is the case of Percy's protagonist, whose predicament is aptly summarized by William Rodney Allen: "He becomes, in short, a "consumer." But while Binx *has* a convertible, and plenty of money to buy whatever he wants, what he *is* remains an enigma – even to himself" (1986: 23).

Critics generally agree on placing Percy's first novel in the tradition of American literature of alienation, firmly established by 1961, the year of the novel's publication. It is also illustrative of that search for identity that Ralph Ellison deemed as "*the American theme*" (1995: 15). Salinger's denunciation of phoniness in Holden Caulfield, Hemingway's stoical heroes and the misfits created by the Beat Generation, all entrenched the conventional portrait of the alienated young American male, unable and/or unwilling to blend in the fabric of postwar American society, the nature of which, the same Ellison contends, "is such that we are prevented from knowing who we are" (*Ibidem*).

In fact, such was the mainstream literary success the alienated man enjoyed after World War Two that, by the early 1960s, he was struggling to stay alienated. More recent readings of *The Moviegoer* analyze it from the complex perspective of Cold War culture (Wang, 2012: 145); boredom, malaise, despair, or whatever imbalance of the self the protagonist may experience, can be ultimately fathomed as symptoms of a

Cold War anxiety. Indeed, Percy appears to exploit the American literary precedent of the alienated young male who is a veteran of an overseas war, but the fact that Binx Bolling is a veteran of the Korean War, the first armed conflict of the Cold War, makes more palatable the idea that Percy's employment of existentialist tropes in his first novel is deliberate. In calibrating Binx Bolling's story to fit in the alienation genre, Percy manages to advance its tradition and at the same time to historicize the Southern disquiet in the face of a conflict-ridden postwar atomic era.<sup>2</sup> Binx does not merely embark on an existential journey in search of his authentic self, but his uncertainty about the future, on the face of it, can be read as an attempt to negotiate the Southern individual's precarious position in Cold War America, to reconcile the doleful past of the South with the present uncertainties of mainstream American culture (Osborne, 2009).

Contemplating his fate as a thirty-year-old man in the twentieth-century South, Binx Bolling is decidedly an aesthetic individual interested in abstract data, a rationalistic relativist, shying from difficult choices. To him, everything is relative to the individual, with no greater meaning attached to it. Grasping continuously for a theoretical framework that would eventually enable him to construe some way of being in the world, Binx intuits that his life is, in the main, narratively unintelligible. While discarding the modes of action available to him under the well-established tradition of Christian humanism, he proclaims the dissolution of the modern self, an increasingly paranoid entity, incapable of answering elementary practical questions about any course of action even when provided with the recognizable instruments of postwar American culture, and abandons himself to

... living in fact in the very century of merde, the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied, everyone becomes an anyone, a warm and creative person, and prospers like a dung beetle, and one hundred percent of people are humanists and ninety-eight believe in God, and men are dead, dead, dead; and the malaise has settled like a fall-out and what people really fear is not that the bomb will fall but that the bomb will not fall – on this my thirtieth birthday, I know nothing and there is nothing to do but fall prey to desire. (*MG*: 228)

Percy's engagement with the conventions of the alienation genre is, as previously stated, premeditated. Twenty years into the publication of *The Moviegoer*, he fancies his Binx Bolling as a Faulknerian hero, a Quentin Compson who didn't kill himself (*qtd.* in Gullledge, 1984: 107). If Faulkner's youthful neurotic genius carries his Southern despair with him up north and drowns it along with himself into the Charles River, Percy's protagonist is, almost in spite of himself, saved by a curious sense of selective perceptiveness he displays in dissecting his own despair against the background of the increasingly individualized society that the postwar South has become. In Binx's here-and-now predicament, Percy "claims a chief concern with loss of memory rather than with explorations of the past or its impositions upon the present" (Wyatt-Brown, 1988: 118); "deprecating an overconcern with southern legend and history" (*Ibidem*), Percy parses the essence of the New South in the "Little Way" of his protagonist, as a region which has outgrown its regional, if traumatic, concerns and joined the rest of America in the age of alienation.

Binx's existential quest depicts a solipsistic society after a breakdown of the tradition required to account for public and personal moral issues. Unable to maintain a coherent understanding of itself, this tradition dissolves in the protagonist's dismissive conviction that the old ways have been exposed and rendered irrelevant by new theories. Binx's soliloquizing signals the birth of a new human individual, the modern secular humanist, who settles for a life of everydayness, but fails to notice that this settling is counterintuitive to the underlying idea of his search. He senses the core difference between his "Little Way" of trivial pursuits and a "Big Search" in the direction of the new theories advocated by the age, with little comprehension of the fact that the very notion of settling renders any search impossible, then postulates the intractable nature of this search: "To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be onto something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair ... The search always ends in despair" (*MG*: 13).

John Bickerson Bolling, Binx to some and Jack to others, endures as Percy's very first untoward hero who is not onto a search that would eventually resurrect the Old Southern ethos. He participates into the rituals of a world in decline and, at the same time, observes, with an always renewed sense of wonder, the effects of everydayness upon himself and his fellow-humans. In line with other protagonists of the genre of

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<sup>2</sup> In retrospect, it may be of interest to note that the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred in 1962, only a year after *The Moviegoer* was published. A simple look on the map of the Gulf of Mexico may shed some light on why New Orleanians felt a particular anxiety as to their vicinity to Communist Cuba: New Orleans is (only) 670 miles, or 582 nautical miles away from Havana, a trifle of a distance in the event of a nuclear attack.

alienation, Binx's life is, for most of its part, marked by narrative unintelligibility: his intentions and actions are peculiarized by a complete lack of purpose, whereas the framework of understanding he strives to make out belongs to a tradition that lost its foregoing ordering power over culture. However, while Percy's dramatization of metaphysics in his character's search betokens the flawed condition of postwar *homo americanus*, the New South that harbors his existential pursuits, unevenly divided between malaise and wonder, bears witness to how the human individual is fractured from the said framework of understanding in negotiating his/her position in this age of theorists-consumers.

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