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The 1994 Saint Augustine Lecture

**Cave, Cinema, and the Church:
Augustine of Hippo and Walker Percy**

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Whether or not Walker Percy is securely guaranteed of his stature as both essayist and novelist enviably possessed of a profound philosophical bent of mind is not mine to judge. Any judgment in this matter so shortly after his death is admittedly premature.

Nevertheless, in this essay I shall aim to enrich the wealth of distinguished scholarship which has already engulfed this American writer by noting how remarkably he shares this philosophical inclination with the renowned Saint Augustine.¹ No one, I dare say, would be more surprised to be linked in the manner I propose with Augustine of Hippo than Walker Percy himself. Because this topic lends itself to more extensive exploration I shall confine my observations mostly to the first of Percy's six novels, *The Moviegoer*.²

Walker Percy (1916-1990) is dead little more than three years. Augustine of Hippo (354-430) died more than fifteen and a half centuries ago. That a late fourth-century, early fifth-century author should anticipate and articulate in so artistic a fashion the many features of human behavior which were to become also the chief concern and preoccupation of a late twentieth-century novelist like Walker Percy testifies to the measure of Augustine's genius, a genius so amply attested to in this prominent lecture series which honors his memory and bears his name.

An exploratory lecture such as this one allows little time for nuance. If, however, I may presume on your part some familiarity with the story of Augustine's *Confessions*, my preliminary tasks are reduced to two: 1) to sketch the basic plot of *The Moviegoer*, and 2) to select some points of intersection between Augustine as portrayed in the *Confessions* and the young narrator-protagonist, Binx Bolling, as portrayed in Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*.

The vicissitudes of so many centuries render these "points of intersection" elusive to casual observation. Incredibly unprecedented changes in *Weltanschauung* caused by politics, economics, religion, myriad social upheavals and scientific factors, virtually sealed off the respective environments of Augustine and Percy. The hardened regionalism and the haunting peculiarities of place and custom where each of these two men lived out his life (in Augustine's case, ancient Hippo now modern Annaba in Algeria and in Walker Percy's case, Covington, Louisiana) accentuate the divergencies of their milieux. With all these factors taken into consideration, one is prompted at first to suppose that a dissonance of mental outlook and a disparity in personal life experience had set these men so far apart as to preclude any meaningful common ground between them.

Yet the very scope of their interests and the unique sharpness of their insights into the profounder matters of life provide a kind of meeting place for their minds. Both men were judicious readers of the best available secular literature of their day, and they found time to peruse a generous measure of philosophical writings as well. In addition to other influences, it was their respective reading habits which gradually nudged both men toward membership in the Catholic Church. By a curious coincidence, they took this step of entering the Church at almost exactly the same age, Augustine in his thirty-third year and Walker Percy at the age of thirty-one.

Story of *The Moviegoer*

A somewhat penetrating sketch of the characterization of Binx Bolling, the narrator and protagonist of *The Moviegoer* will serve to highlight some principal "points of intersection" in the philosophical and theological perspectives of Augustine and Walker Percy.

By refusing to go into medical research and opting rather to pursue a search for personal authenticity and happiness on his own terms, Binx had grievously offended and disappointed his father's side of the family. At least this is the way that Aunt Emily, who speaks for the Bolling side of the family, emphatically addresses her decidedly perplexed nephew. Instead,

after graduation from college, Binx Bolling entered his Uncle Jules' brokerage firm in New Orleans where he managed a small branch office. Stockbroker, suburbanite, and hence, a "commuter,"³ Binx most enjoyed making money. Furthermore, he was an inveterate moviegoer, either alone or in the company of one of his serial secretary-girlfriends, Marcia, Linda and now Sharon Kincaid. Occasionally, he invited his landlady, a fireman's widow, Mrs. Schernaydre to go to the movies with him (65).⁴

John Bickerson Bolling is the quintessential exemplar of restlessness, alienation and dislocation and in many ways the alter ego of Walker Percy himself. Fairly well-heeled financially with a modest inheritance which includes "a defunct duck club," (4), and possessor of a few shares of stock in Alcoa, Binx's sole personal possessions are a single book, *Arabia Deserta* (59, 61, 67, 187), a television set that looks as though it took coins, two Currier and Ives prints hanging on the wall of his apartment, which resembles a motel room (67), and, lastly, a car.

On the other hand, there is no shortage for him of styrene cards with his name on them "certifying, so to speak, one's right to exist" (4). There are identity cards, credit cards, library cards. While he seems on the surface to be settling into a predictable and pedestrian lifestyle, insouciantly ensconced in suburbia and desensitized by the mass culture which envelops him, there is yet an unfeigned and uncharted depth about this young man, who is just one week shy of his thirtieth birthday. His somber introspection and intense curiosity about virtually everything in life (in matters of death too), is shot through frequently with comic irony. His unrivaled perspicacity for seeing both wonder and mystery leaves, in contrast, both Holden Caulfield and Portnoy trailing in the dust. For one thing, Binx Bolling is possibly twice their age.

Throughout the novel the experience of ennui, boredom, *taedium vitae*, or as he often describes it, the "malaise" (106, 6 times; 107, 7 times), the "grip of everydayness" (127, twice; "everydayness" 6 times), goads Binx to observe and to recount for us subtle features of human behavior, both his own and that of others, with a directness and an immediacy which one readily associates with sudden changes in the weather.

Because his widowed mother remarried after her husband was killed in action off the island of Crete during the Second World War Binx has six half-brothers and sisters, who are all name Smith. Apart from the single reference to his mother's maiden name, Anna Castagne (47), the nondescript surname "Smith" suffices to identify her. This lack of distinction

stands in marked contrast to the Bolling side of the family who are so distinguishably identified, particularly its most eloquent representative, Aunt Emily, who never wearies of reminding her nephew that his forebears were Bollings for many generations.

Clearly, as Walker Percy describes it, the "Old South" was fast fading long before President Eisenhower ordered military troops to Little Rock, Arkansas in the 1950s. Social and economic changes were casting shadows over many regional contrasts, thereby liquidating the unique particularity of place and effecting within a wide geographical range a near total eclipse, to be superseded soon by the Sunbelt, which was extending the industrialized and commercialized culture of the "common man" (195, twice; "common" 5 times), from New Orleans to Los Angeles and southward to Houston, Texas.⁵

In a disarmingly candid tirade, the longest speech in the novel (192-9), Aunt Emily excoriates her nephew for his refusal to respect the honor code of a southern gentleman, for his cavalier posture towards women as sex objects, and for his heedless neglect of both personal and social responsibility, in short, for his insouciance towards Stoicism, southern United States style, and his eventual rejection of so venerable a long-standing staple of the Bolling family, specifically, the Stoic virtue of magnanimity. Aunt Emily assumes, mistakenly, that "words mean roughly the same thing," and that "there exists a set of meanings held in common" (195).

All the while, Binx finds himself living in a seesaw relationship with his step-cousin, Kate Cutrer, Aunt Emily's step-daughter, a Sarah Lawrence alumna whose engagement to Lyell Lovell was tragically terminated by an automobile accident which claimed his life on the eve of the wedding. Subject to sudden mood swings, Kate pops pills such as nembutal (171) and sodium penobarbital (22); she had become suicidal and far more unsure of herself and more unsteady than Binx Bolling.

Near the end of the novel we learn that Binx has become formally engaged to Kate not long after one of her attempts at suicide. In the long run, Kate's frailty and vulnerability strike a resonant chord in our narrator-protagonist. In the Epilogue of the novel we learn that Binx and Kate are married the following June; Binx abandons the lifestyle of a young urban professional in order to enter medical school in North Carolina the following September. Binx's half-brother, Lonnie, dies of an unidentified viral infection "a few days after his fifteenth birthday" (208). Thereafter, Binx re-

frains from talking about or saying much about either his search for happiness or the issues of religion.

The Allegory of the Cave

Our understanding of this characterization of Binx Bolling's "vertical search" (60) for happiness will be deepened by some reflections on Plato's famous allegory of the Cave (*Republic* 514a-519e).⁶ To begin, imagine yourself seated in a dark underground cave. From childhood you have known no other existence; you have been condemned as prisoners to watch flickering shadows on the wall in front of you. Both your neck and your feet are fettered with chains while you are seated and spread out at various levels on a rather moderate incline without any hope of turning yourselves around towards the entrance of the cave. Behind you there is an elevated platform on which people are moving sideways carrying statues of human beings and animals made of wood, stone, or other materials. Still further beyond this elevated platform there is a fire which accounts for the shadows on the wall in front of you. You are in this deep cavern, then, each one of you situated between its innermost wall with flickering shadows and the mobile people on the raised platform behind you, whose perpetual movements give rise to those shimmering images. Imagine, moreover, what it would be like to be set free of your chains, to be able to stand up, to walk, eventually to circumvent the platform behind you, to skirt the fire and to negotiate the arduous trek towards the entrance of the cave, then at last to face daylight and the sheer brightness of the sun itself.

On a fundamental level, the allegory of the Cave encapsulates the human condition, the human need for enlightenment and the function of human knowledge as the capacity to see and to understand. According to Plato, philosophy both liberates and enlightens; it does this by means of dialectical reasoning. Both a participation in the chain of being and imitation of the Good constitute additional pivotal elements in grasping Plato's view of reality. In sum, the allegory of the Cave illustrates the beneficent effects of education upon the human psyche.

In this allegory we are able to locate the germ of Augustine's view that knowledge requires both human and divine illumination. Here also in this allegory of Plato, we learn of three basic movements of the soul in the chain of being: first, the "withdrawal" of the soul (*vera rel.* 39, 72), from the inferior level of sense perception; secondly the "ascent" of the soul (*conf.* 7, 10, 16 and 7, 17, 23 and 9, 10, 23-25),⁷ to the superior level of vision, whereby the beholder is able to glimpse, however fleetingly, the ideal Forms of the Good, the True and the Beautiful. And, thirdly, we trace in the

allegory of the Cave yet another factor in the motion of the human soul, namely, its "return" to the "region of unlikeness,"⁸ *regio dissimilitudinis* (7, 10, 16), that is to say, from the exalted realms of intelligible reality to the sensate world of matter and embodiment, the world of dark shadows and images obliquely illuminated by shafts of light which have their source in the far distant sun.⁹

By the time of Saint Augustine, Christianity had made many radical modifications in its understanding and assimilation of Plato's evocative vocabulary. Among Christian writers, for example, Plato's prisoners were transformed into slaves under the yoke of the Old Testament law. It should be noted that we run the risk here of hasty oversimplification of profound and complex thought. In due course the Platonic binomial, intelligible/sensible, gradually yielded to Pauline anthropology as this was succinctly expressed in a variety of binomials: flesh/spirit, outer/inner, spiritual/carnal, spirit/letter, a new creature in contrast to the old creature.

With more enduring help from the pervasive light imagery in the story of creation, Genesis 1, from Sapiential Literature, from the Book of Psalms, from the Prologue to the Fourth Gospel, from John 8 (Christ as the Light of the World), from John 9 (the restoration of sight to the man born blind), the reality of Jesus Christ gradually superseded the sun of Plato's Cave in the Christian anthropology. "Turning around," (the Greek ἐπιστροφή) was radically replaced by penitence or change of heart (the biblical μετάνοια). Care, concern for another, compassion, love (ἀγάπη) and grace (χάρις) were aligned with knowledge (γνώσις), as the medium of salvation and redemption.

The Vertical Search

(Throughout this section the italics are mine in order to highlight resemblances with Plato's Cave.)

These Platonic perceptions of reality and their Christian re-interpretations continued, of course, to exert enormous influence on the thoughts and reflections of great thinkers throughout history until the present time. It is not surprising, then, that we can discern analogues of them in the book of Walker Percy which is under our consideration. Particularly, the allegory of the Cave provides a framework for our understanding of a motif used prominently in *The Moviegoer*, that is, the interplay between the world of reality and the world of appearances in human experience.

Selective identification of themes thus enables us to unreel the unsuspecting confluence of minds in the writings of Walker Percy and those of Augustine. Subsequent studies will be required to extend even further and to delve deeper into the philosophical and theological affinities between both writers.

Although a successful stockbroker, Binx Bolling failed until a week short of his thirtieth birthday to take stock of his personal life. Not at all dissimilar to Augustine with his reliance upon memory, Binx recalls some time ago during the Korean War when he had resolved for the first time upon "the possibility of a search" (7). Now he resolves once again upon this "possibility," as he wakes up in Mrs. Scherxnaydre's *basement apartment*, where he had lived *below street level* the past four years. It is not, by the way, an extravagant use of our imagination to see this *basement apartment* as an appropriate modern-day equivalent of Plato's Cave and "the possibility of a search" (7), as the perennial human longing to discover the truths of philosophy and religion. At this moment early in the novel, the reader is invited to accompany Binx on his "vertical search" (60), that is to say, on his ascent from the equivalent of Plato's Cave; from the tyranny of the senses to the higher regions of the intellect.

Meticulous attention to nature and all its wonder was part of Binx's search. In a close encounter with death as he lay bleeding in a ditch in Korea he had spotted a dung-beetle under a chindolea bush (7, 127), which he elsewhere recalls as an Oriental finch (181). The marvel and mystery of nature were a constant source of wonder for Binx in the manner of Augustine observing "a lizard catching flies or a spider trapping them as they blunder into its web" (10, 35, 57). Both men were keen observers of human beings and their world.

In yet another reminiscence of Plato's Cave, after the death of his older brother, Scott, Binx recalls a visit to the Field Museum in Chicago with his father where there was a "*long dismal peristyle* dwindling away into the howling distance, and inside (they) stood before a *tableau* of Stone Age Man, father, mother and child crouched around *an artificial ember* in postures of minatory quiet" (173).

Like entering a dark cavern after leaving behind them "*a long dismal peristyle*," father and son stood transfixed before the "*tableau*" of silent frozen familial figures. It is as though Binx and his father were standing before a resemblance of the artificial family which they had become over grief at the loss of one of its members. There is no real fire, no real family. Appro-

priately, then, there is no genuine commitment or involvement, simply detached observation. Perhaps after the death of his brother Scott, Stoic *apathia* appears to be a worthy response within so bereaved a family. "(M)inatory quiet," we shall momentarily point out fittingly anticipates the explanation or commentary so dramatically enunciated by Aunt Emily's "soundless word" (35).

In still another simulation of the Cave one of Binx's regular Wednesday visits to his Aunt Emily is described thus: "Through the living-room doors I can see my aunt *sitting by the fire The white light from the sky pours into her upturned face*. She opens her eyes and, seeing me, forms a *soundless word* with her lips" (35).

May one be permitted to stretch the evidence somewhat by suggesting that here too we have some affinity with Plato's Cave? Like Plato's prisoners, for example, Aunt Emily is seated, though with a notable difference. She is now alongside the fire, but her face is glistening with "white light from the sky," not with the warm winter fire from the living-room. Whether by fate (*μοίρα*) or by necessity (*ἀνάγκη*), she was able to leave the cave. (Plato never tells his readers how the prisoners are set free from their chains.) Aunt Emily saw the light of day and gazed at the sun. In deference to the Platonic/Plotinian doctrine of "withdrawal" from the world of meretricious images and "return" to the cave for the benefit of its inhabitants and in the manner of the philosopher-king, Aunt Emily at this time instructs Binx Bolling and others of his generation to initiate the "vertical search" (60) from their captivity by not forsaking the ethical principles of southern Stoicism.

One of these five variations on Plato's Cave, and perhaps the most compelling, appears in the research laboratory at Tulane University where Binx and his companion, Harry Stern, experience the same environment with different perceptions and reactions.

August *sunlight* came streaming in the great *dusty fanlights* and lay in *yellow bars* across the room . . . for minutes at a stretch (Binx) *sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight*. (Binx) called Harry's attention to *the presence* but he shrugged and went on with his work. He was *absolutely unaffected by the singularities* of *time* and *place*. His abode was *anywhere*. It was all the same to (Harry Stern) whether he catheterized a pig at four o'clock in the afternoon in *New Orleans* or at *midnight* in *Transylvania* (43).

Here "*the presence*" of particles of light among the shadows commands the most intense attention of Binx, almost to an hypnotic state, and this transports him back and forth across the boundary between the world of abstraction and the world of concrete reality. All the while Harry Stern remains unaware and "*absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place.*"

The apparently impossible distance between Binx Bolling and Harry Stern psychologically and philosophically evokes comparison with the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the sciences and the humanities, which by the way C. P. Snow and others justifiably critiqued at mid-century. In sharp contrast to his colleague, Harry Stern, who is exclusively "research-minded," Binx Bolling is "search-minded" as well, and his search takes him through ascending stages of wonder, fantasy, imagination and mystery. Binx proceeds through a critical questioning and a disillusioning acceptance or rejection of current scientific opinions. He next attains more than satisfactory competence with both mathematics and the scientific method by means of which he becomes chary of their spurious scientific objectivity. Finally, he arrived at the core of humanity, the questioning and restless self as both *searcher / researcher* and thus capable of responding to the attraction of the Good, the True, and the Beautiful. Harry Stern, on the other hand, as Binx assures us, "is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in" (43). By the same token, after having read *The Chemistry of Life*, *The Expanding Universe*, and other books with a scientific slant, Binx remarks: "The only difficulty was that though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over" (60). While the solitary and stationary scientist, thus wholly absorbed, becomes attracted by his research, he is, according to Binx, no different from the incessant traveller and weary sojourner, whatever their search. Both run the risk of becoming "no one and Nowhere" (86).

Another possible allusion to Plato's Cave and the last in my enumeration of those adumbrated in *The Moviegoer* occurs in the Stevens Hotel, Chicago, which is depicted by Binx as a place where people live inside and underground. It features "the pool where Tarzan-Johnny-Weissmuller used to swim — *an echoing underground place where a cold gray light filtered down from a three-story skylight* and muscular men wearing metal discs swam and shouted, their voices ringing against the wet *tile walls*" (179).

Interlaced with the Cave-image we have an artistic account of David Riesman's book, *The Lonely Crowd*, which scored an immediate hit as a fairly accurate portrayal of American society in the 1950s. Hemmed in by a

pit with its narrow circumference and encircling (tile) walls, men stripped of customary clothing, like Tarzan, recreate the role of noble savages in a primitive world, which some critics might wish to interpret as an heir to the Roman public baths catering to *l'homme moyen sensuel* by scheduling their medley of entertainments, ranging from the sublime to the sybaritic. Much of our American sensate culture, in anonymity, alienated, displaced, and desensitized, is stripped of individuality and identity, except for a dog tag, a metal disc, or a styrene card, people such as Eddie and Nell Lovell (14-17), Sidney and Margot Gross (163-4), Harold and Veronica Graebner (182-5). As if in Plato's underground cavern where inaccessible and limited light revealed only shadows and where silence was broken only by echoes reverberating off the walls (*Republic* 515b), so also in the basement swimming pool the inarticulate sound of human voices boomerang off the "wet tile walls" opaquely illuminated by "a cold gray light filtered down from a three-story skylight" (179).

The upper floors of the Stevens Hotel fare no better. The counterpart of the basement swimming pool upstairs is the Cracker Barrel cocktail lounge, a *blue* ballroom in the center of which a ten-foot pot-bellied stove made of red cellophane captures the attention of many business people who are attending the meeting of stockbrokers. Binx describes Kate and himself as "trapped in this *blue* cave" (179). Like the Field Museum above, the Cracker Barrel features an artificial fire. The incongruity and unreality of the scene are accentuated by the fact that Binx is "sweating" (180) long before "the cellophane stove has begun to glow ominously" (181). The artificial fire is the symbol of the "Hot Stove League" where "(w)aiters pass by with trays of martinis and a salon orchestra plays: "Getting to Know You" (180). Within a very brief compass, the color "*blue*" twice characterizes Binx's mood, the "*blue* ballroom/cave" (179) of the Stevens Hotel in Chicago thus recalling the "Blue Room" (3, twice) of the Roosevelt Hotel in New York City at the opening of the novel. Both settings in turn reflect the homogenization of human beings who pliantly acquiesce to the infallibly inane guidelines of a hollow protocol and the deceptive allure of mass media while these arbiters of contemporary culture initiate and indoctrinate their devotees into a somewhat mindless pursuit of the trendy and the vulgar.

Cinema and Desert

Two extended metaphors as they appear in *The Moviegoer*, the first one more prominent than the other, (1) the cinema as an escape from chronological time and the particularity of space, and (2) the desert as the locus of

wandering, incorporate themes relating to the fundamental longings (*desideria*) of the human spirit so dramatically articulated in the writings of Augustine.¹⁰ Binx makes use of movies in the novel in order to describe himself, and he also uses them to describe others. Within a period of eight days in the time frame of the novel, there are references to twelve motion pictures by title. On four evenings during this time Binx goes to the movies as well. Throughout, the novel makes reference to thirty-seven actors and eight actresses and to several other films which are not identified.¹¹ Binx even has his own argot for moviegoing, but its peculiarities need not concern us here.¹²

Since he was so well aware of the shortcomings of his moviegoing habit, Binx runs the risk of becoming merely an observer, like the scientist who aims at dispassionate objectivity and detachment. He incurs the additional risk of becoming a solitary spectator who is isolated from society. Nonetheless, the cinema provides Binx with an escape from the vacuity of empty space and the tedium of time, what he calls "the grip of everydayness," (127, twice; the word "everydayness" occurs 6x). Binx elaborates further:

The malaise is the pain of loss. The world is lost to you, and the people in it, and there remains only you and the world, and you are no more able to be in the world than Banquo's ghost . . . (106).

Augustine, too, was "enraptured by the theater," *rapiebant me spectacula theatrica* (3, 2, 2), because the theater offered a welcome diversion from the miseries of his misdirected youth. As an adolescent, he loved to have his ears "tickled by false stories . . . with the same kind of curiosity for shows glittering more and more in his eyes" (1, 10, 16 and 1, 19, 30). For Augustine and his circle of friends, the theater competed in popularity with the circus and, if both were showing on the same day, the choice of going to one or to the other was problematic for them in some instances (8, 10, 24). Moreover, there were, evidently, those for whom this difficulty of choosing involved the options of going to the theater, or to a church, or to a Manichean meeting place (8, 10, 23).

For Augustine's friend Alypius, in marked contrast, the object of visual attraction and curiosity was one of an altogether different magnitude. He detested gladiatorial combats, and had no desire to attend them. Nevertheless, on one occasion he was dragged by "friendly force," *familiari violentia*, to the amphitheater by some companions who were studying law with him, *amici et condiscipuli* (6, 8, 13). Despite his reluctance to participate and his insistence that he would not open his eyes to see the spectacle, the

roar of the crowd was so overwhelming that at the climactic moment, Alypius succumbed to the excitement and riveted his gaze upon the gory scene in front of him (6, 8, 13).

In his own experience with cinematic spectacle, Binx is challenged by personal ruminations concerning the inexorable passage of time and the inevitable corruptibility of all living things, significantly, perhaps remembering a film, *The Oxbow Incident*, which depicted the tragic and unjust lynching of an innocent victim of mob hatred, not at all dissimilar from the death of the divine Victim or Lamb of God depicted in the cosmic spectacle of the gospel narrative.

In the same theater where fourteen years previously he had seen *The Oxbow Incident* (68), Binx and Kate see another western whose title remains curiously undisclosed. Now fourteen years later Binx suddenly came to the realization that seeing a movie is comparable to eating a ribbon of peanut brittle without the peanuts (69). For one thing, the film had been edited, spliced and in some segments where cutting had occurred, the film had been mended smoothly. In other words, events and experiences had been tampered with, laundered and in many instances rinsed out of the film. But "there are no film cuts in real life."¹³ A real-life story bears scant comparison with its celluloid version.

For another thing, a difficulty arose from the stance of the viewer, the moviegoer. For this reason, Binx questions whether "the lapsed time" (of fourteen years) "can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle" (69). Sitting, as he thought, in the same seat, its bottom slashed, its plywood split as if it had been waiting to ask him what he had done with his fourteen years, Binx can not avoid a thoughtful and sobering confrontation with the passage of time. Once again Percy invokes the vivid simile: "There remained only time itself, like a yard of smooth peanut brittle" (69).

Binx ruminates:

- "the old seats *enduring* nevertheless,"
- "a secret sense of wonder at the *enduring*,"
- "The *enduring* is something which must be accounted for. One can simply shrug it off" (69, italics mine).

His theater seat thus becomes a "mockery" (69), to employ his own word, as it reproached Binx for his escape through the years not only from the particularity of place by dodging into a cinema but, perhaps more seri-

ously, for his impervious stance towards the vicissitudes and ravages of time.

If I did not talk to the theater owner or the ticket seller, I should be lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere at any time. There is danger of slipping clean out of space and time (64).

For example, during a constricted three hour layover in Cincinnati before seeing a film featuring Joseph Cotten, Binx found time to speak with Mrs. Clara James, the ticket seller with seven grandchildren and the only person he knows in the entire state of Ohio with whom he still exchanges Christmas cards (65). On another occasion, while he had no intention of seeing the Jane Powell film, Mr. Kinsella, manager of the Tivoli, pulled Binx into the theater by the coatsleeve and after a random look at the meager audience, Binx exits and stops at the ticket window to talk with Mrs. de Marco (63). In this same theater Binx "first discovered place and time," by marking the seat arm with his thumbnail and asking himself where "will this particular piece of wood be twenty years from now, 542 years from now?" (65).

Binx had seized and faced the restless concretion of time, recognizing that like Augustine:¹⁴

Time does not take time off,
nor does it turn without purpose
through our senses;
it works wondrous effects
in our minds (4, 8, 13).

By thus relating himself to the dimensions of time and place Binx confronts himself with the rudiments of identity and authenticity (Charles Taylor also uses the phrase "radical reflexivity"),¹⁵ while his casual and oblique contacts with moviehouse managers and ticket sellers nudge him along the path towards self-conscious efforts to relate with others. By the end of the novel, however, Binx seems to have had limited success in this matter. Except for Lonnie Smith and children, Kate Cutrer is the only individual with whom Binx painfully develops a meaningful relationship.

In sharp contrast to any Pythagorean, Platonic or Augustinian penchant for numerology, the number "fourteen" relating to the span or years which had elapsed before Binx returned to the same theater, and likewise the seemingly remote distance between a worn out theater seat and the tattered

seat of Lonnie's wheelchair, are hardly fortuitous strokes of Percy's pen. As we shall note momentarily, time links both pieces of furniture in a sacramental way. By the same token, if a tattered theater seat and the worn out seat of a wheelchair thus linked with a fourteen year interval in the lives of two half-brothers, Binx Bolling and Lonnie Smith, is accidental, then the perception of the reader is more keen than that of the author. Such an interpretation, of course, is further warranted by Augustine's understanding of multiple meanings in Scripture independent of the author's intention: *scriptura sui ipsius interpres*. Such is the subtlety of Walker Percy's artistry.

Outside the Touro Infirmary, the ten year old Donice, another half-brother of Binx, asks him whether Lonnie, confined to his wheelchair, will be able to waterski when the Lord raises him up on the last day (210). Binx assures his half-brothers and sisters (all five of them), that such will be the case with their deceased brother. In this connection, there immediately comes to mind some physical features of the risen body in no less sophisticated a *magnum opus et arduum* (*civ. Dei, praefatio*) than the *City of God* 22, c. 11-17. Augustine enumerated such ordinary things as baldness and lost fingernails. He speculated about fat people and about thin people and the ideal age of human maturity. He wondered what kind of physique the resurrected bodies of children and infants will possess? Presumably, people asked the same questions then as now.¹⁶

The Moviegoer terminates on Ash Wednesday, Binx's thirtieth birthday, and there is much in the novel which elaborates on the significance of Lent in the life of a Christian in contrast to Carnivale, New Orleans style. Specifically, as we shall soon point out, a desert experience is prominent through trial, temptations, suffering, dying to self and, in Lonnie's case, through conquering the "habitual disposition" (143 and 209) of envy, one of the capital sins, with the help of "the pierced heart of Jesus Christ" (120).

The reticence of Percy's talents as a writer, especially in matters of religion, is so pervasive and subtle as to baffle his readers. For our present purpose, it is sufficient to point out that cinematic time thus becomes wholly subordinate to chronological time which, in turn, is enveloped by liturgical time. What we might call "the sanctification of time" is actually a basic construct of Percy's novel, as it was for much of Augustine's mature writing, but we must defer examination of so elusive a theme until a subsequent essay.

A vacant seat in a largely empty theater, occupied only during cinema hours (69) offered Binx his early clues on what it meant "to endure" over that

lengthy period of time since he himself last sat in the same seat some fourteen years before. Fourteen, by the way, was also Lonnie's age during the time-span of the novel. In the Epilogue, we learn that Lonnie died of a massive and unidentified viral infection "a few days after his fifteenth birthday" (208). In like manner, the seat of Lonnie's wheelchair, never empty, except when someone helped him into bed either to sleep or because he was more sick than usual, instructed Binx on what it means to suffer and to endure patiently, to plod through the desert of this life, and to battle temptations always within the shadow of the Cross. Here too Percy shows kinship with Augustine who tells us: "The Sign of the Cross sets the measure for all Christian activity" (*doctr. chr.* 2, 41, 62).¹⁷ As an acknowledgment of Christ's passion and death there is, furthermore, a memorable scene where Roy Smith, Lonnie's father, lifts the resistant head of the paralyzed teenager in his wheelchair at Sunday Mass in order to facilitate his reception of the Eucharist (141).

Although Binx is inclined towards "reticence" when talking about religion (208) and although, as an artist Percy himself shrewdly inclines towards the same "reticence," nonetheless his encapsulation of John Bickerson Bolling as a post-modern Christian in the world with all its turmoil and confusion reverberates with select words of an Easter sermon in which Augustine of Hippo tells his people:

(D)uring *this time of our exile and our wandering*, we say "alleluia" to cheer us *on our way*. At present "alleluia" is for us *a traveller's song*; but by *a toilsome road* we are *wending our way* towards home and rest (*serm.* 225, 1, italics mine).

Augustine's thought and that of Walker Percy (especially in *The Moviegoer*) is rootedly eschatological. Without any vestige of Stoicism, both writers accentuate the Christian virtues of patient suffering and endurance always, however, within the framework of both the Cross and the Paschal Mystery. Percy's artistic achievement retrieves in the main the message of Christian hope which punctuates Augustine's mature writings with their preferred paratactic phrase, *in spe . . . in re*: hope and, in the long haul, its eventual realization.¹⁸

II

Early in the *Confessions*, Augustine had described himself in an irresistible Latin word play as "one who was cultivated in speech, even though left a desert, uncultivated for you, O God" (2, 3, 5), and he later on tells us that as a bishop he "had pondered flight into the desert" (10, 43, 70). In contrast

to so much else in the *Confessions*, Augustine entertained this thought of escape into the desert during middle age, at a time virtually contemporaneous with the time of publication. Here the word "desert" is used equivocally: in the first instance, as a symbol for a spiritual wasteland and, in the second instance, as the habitat of fruitful contemplation. While it would be worthwhile to explore the use of desert imagery by both writers, it must suffice for our present purpose to grasp the lesson emphasized by Percy, namely that "everydayness," or the quotidian elements which distract and prevent a person from taking a closer view of life, likewise has potential for providing a spur to an even closer and critical examination of life with a view towards imperceptible and individual growth.

But now I have undertaken a different kind of search, a horizontal search. As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion (60).

Notice the subtle stroke of the pen as Percy offers his reader an opaque glimpse of the desert:

Evening is the best time in Gentilly. There are not so many trees and the buildings are low and the world is all sky (63).

As a metaphor for Binx's search, wandering in the wilderness is linked with moviegoing. Percy dexterously weaves this biblical topos (Gen. 21:14, Ps. 106:4 and elsewhere) into the texture of his story with such finesse that a little more than midway through the novel the reader hardly notes Binx's cryptic remark: "But in the movie we are in the desert" (125). Mrs. de Marco's son, stationed at a military base in Arizona, detested the desert (63); Binx was enamored of it. Furthermore, he tells us that his personal library consisted of "a single book" (67), C. M. Doughty's *Arabia Deserta*. Here, too, Binx and Augustine share a common heritage. Except for a specific book from both the Old and the New Testaments, the only book referred to by Augustine from within the Judeo-Christian tradition prior to his conversion was Athanasius' *Life of Antony*, an Egyptian hermit whose home was the Nitrian desert.

Resemblance between Binx and Augustine gradually strengthens still further. For example, three times we are presented with an area of Gentilly named "Chef Menteur" (8, 199, 202), a loathsome swamp sometimes smoldering with the heat of burning sulphur. Identification of the French words,

“Chef Menteur” with John’s Gospel 8:44, where Satan is depicted as “a liar and the father of lies” is unassailable. Moreover, Percy’s fictional account of Binx’s prolonged self-deception is quite consonant with Augustine’s interpretation of this Johannine verse in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 42, 15.

More than once we are reminded of Binx’s preference for streetcars and buses rather than cars. “Pilgrimage by foot,” he declares, “is the best way to travel” (107). Again alignment with Augustine is crystal-clear.¹⁹

An incisive interpreter recently reminded us that the theme of *peregrinatio animae* is “foundational for the entire structure of Augustine’s imaged thought” and that “*peregrinus* and *peregrinatio* were, for Augustine, far from happy words.”²⁰ Although for different reasons, this is no less true of Binx Bolling. “Now in the thirty-first year of my dark pilgrimage,” (199), mourns Binx near the end of the novel, while Augustine’s sorrowful address to God is summed up in four Latin words: *longe peregrinabar abs te*, “I was continually wandering far away from you” (3, 6, 11). Nor does the matchup in thought between these two young men stop here. Augustine and Binx Bolling share a varied vocabulary which included such words as: “exile,” “wanderer,” “stranger,” “wasteland,” “wayfarer,” “pilgrimage.”²¹

In his efforts to read and to interpret the “signs of the times,” the metaphors of cinema and desert, accordingly, enable Binx, a self who is insufficiently attuned to self and to other selves, gradually to confront himself with the mystery of human temporality and corruptibility. Like Augustine before him, Percy is attempting in his fiction to work out a hermeneutic of history: on the one hand, personal history, as exemplified in the autobiographical sections of Augustine’s *Confessions*, and, on the other hand, social history, as exemplified in Augustine’s *City of God*. It is to this theme that we must now turn.

The Catholic Church

Throughout the novel, Binx is caught in a tug of war between Creole Catholicism and Episcopalian Catholicism. Although he was a lapsed yet nominal Catholic, Binx seemingly gave a slight edge to the creed, cult and sacraments of Catholicism, given to him from his mother’s side of the family, over what he considered to be the threadbare truths of Protestantism, given to him from his father’s side of the family. On the Protestant side, religion was eclectic and indiscriminate. Aunt Emily, for example, “likes to say that she is an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature, and a Buddhist by choice” (18).

In spite of the edge which he gave to Catholicism, religious affiliation continued to perplex Binx. As he sees it, Uncle Jules, the Creole Catholic, "is an exemplary Catholic, but it is hard to know why he takes the trouble. For the world he lives in, the City of Man," Binx observes with a touch of comic irony, "is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him" (25). The only disturbing factor in Uncle Jules' life of "Catholic unseriousness," and "his dumbness about his God, the good Lord" (38), is "the subject of last year's Tulane-L.S.U. football game" (25). The depth, then, of Uncle Jules' Creole Catholicism translates to the level of enthusiasm for a Notre Dame-Southern Methodist football rivalry.

With these points in mind, therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that Percy, not unlike many Fathers of the Church in their day, is likewise opting not only for a hermeneutic of history with Jesus Christ as "the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20), but also for a more constructive yet critical stance toward contemporary American culture in all of its aspects, including religion.

In a similar approach, another writer from the southern United States, Flannery O'Connor anticipated such a diagnosis of Catholicism in words which Walker Percy might well have made his own:

It is our business to try to change the external faults of the Church — the vulgarity, the lack of scholarship, the lack of intellectual honesty — wherever we find them and however we can The Church in America is an immigrant Church. Culturally it is not on its feet. But it will get there.²²

Such sentiments are not far removed from the mind of Augustine and other Fathers of the Church whose ministry included putting the best possible face on the Church in society, while at the same time allowing for the vagaries of sin and human weakness.

Binx's total rejection of the popular pollster religion which he sees evidenced in Edward R. Murrow's radio program, *This I Believe* (10, 95, 128-9, 200), is powerfully reminiscent of Augustine's critique of political or civil religion in the first five books of his *City of God*. In contrast to Cicero, who traces religion etymologically from the Latin *re+ligere*, meaning "to choose again" (*de natura deorum* 2, 28, 72), both Augustine and Binx derive the word from the Latin *re + ligare*, meaning "to bind again" (*retr.* 1, 13, 9). In other words, both of them embrace a religious anthropology which holds that human beings are by nature ineluctably bound to God. It can never be an instance of a human being choosing God after having lost God through per-

sonal neglect. In those Johannine terms which impregnate Augustine's mind, the issue is not at all human love for God but rather the other way round: divine love for human beings.

By an odd and possibly significant coincidence, both Augustine and Binx veer in the direction of the religion and the faith of their mothers, Monica and Anna, respectively. Perhaps the sons were attracted in no small measure by the ability of their mothers to accept human vulnerability and, in the face of that vulnerability, to strive for a conscious cultivation of patience. It is patience, *patientia*, better translated into English as the virtue of Christian endurance, which squarely contradicts the heroic ideals of that Stoic and pagan endurance found to be inadequate by both men.

Augustine's forceful critique of ancient Greek philosophy in the *City of God* (books 6-10), likewise mirrors Binx's acerbic indictment of twentieth century scientific humanism (199). As a result, Plato's Academy with its unilateral bias in favor of scientific and mathematical research becomes subordinated to the significance of human self-disclosure and self-discovery and the importance of ethics alongside physics. Both the *sources of the self* (to echo the title of Charles Taylor's book),²³ and the *search for self* find no room in a world of Platonic Forms and essences.²⁴ In like manner, within the context of Binx's spiritual discovery, the "porch" (41, 3 times; 127; 135, 4 times), of the Smith family's fishing camp at Bayou Allemandes on the Gulf Coast, with its warm personal relationships, supersedes the unfeeling Porch (*Stoa*) of the Stoics. Finally, for Binx, the Garden of Epicurus gradually gives way to the Garden of Gethsemane, as we noted above, and "the pierced heart of Jesus Christ" (120). In sum, Ash Wednesday of the Paschal Mystery wins out over all those Wednesday afternoon meetings between Binx and his Aunt Emily.

Within the Patristic tradition of the early Church, Augustine anticipates this crucial stance toward contemporary American culture which Percy enunciates for his own time in much of the basic action of *The Moviegoer*. Augustine's trenchant criticism of the theater, rhetoric, Roman religion, and Greek philosophy, more devastating still in the first ten books of the *City of God* than in the *Confessions*, and his unrelenting apologetic on behalf of Jesus Christ among people whose earthly pilgrimage takes them towards the heavenly Jerusalem,²⁵ strikingly corresponds with the thematic material of the novel. Twice in the novel Binx declares: "Jews are my first real clue" (76-7). God incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ, both within the context and fulfillment of the Jewish Covenant, thus marks the intersection between

the human and the divine, time and eternity, Babylon and Jerusalem for both Augustine and Walker Percy.

The Christian doctrines of incarnation and resurrection furnish the principal signposts for an illustrative interpretation of Binx's religious odyssey, or as he describes it, "dark pilgrimage" (199). The autonomy of reason and selfhood is augmented and enriched in the narrative by a faith which transcends time and by presentation of the sacraments as vehicles of grace, functioning within a believing community which is identifiable as the Catholic Church. In an essay which unlocks the door to his deepest thought, Percy plots the trajectory of his own life and of his own artistry as well, both of which are subsequently reflected in his fictional creation, John Bickerson Bolling. With his inimitable-hyphenated-shorthand Percy reveals the infrastructure of his thought: "that unique Thing, the Jewish-People-Jesus-Christ-Catholic Church" (MB 140).

To put it briefly, a strong sacramentalism pervades the narrative of *The Moviegoer*.²⁶ Except for confirmation, all seven sacraments are accounted for: reconciliation, sacrament of the sick, the eucharist and Binx's sacramentalizing of sexuality in his marriage to Kate Cutrer, although we are never told that they are married in the Catholic Church.²⁷ While baptism and the sacrament of orders receive minimal attention here, they gain appreciable momentum in Percy's subsequent novels.²⁸

Augustine, for his part, has described the sacraments as if they were "visible words," *sacramentum, etiam ipsum tamquam visibile verbum* (*Tr Jn* 80, 3). The phrase immediately suggests the importance of both the eye and the ear in terms of audio-visual signification and perception.²⁹ Like Augustine, Percy always maintained a keen interest in this matter of human signification and perception whereby all knowledge hinges upon signs.³⁰ Words such as God, sin, grace, sacrament, salvation and many other words, Percy tells us, "are worn smooth as poker chips and a certain devaluation has occurred, like a poker chip after it has been cashed in" (MB 116). So immense a topic intersects so many disciplines. Here I wish simply to urge that a contemporary "sacramental vision," which ignores the legacy so profoundly envisioned for us by Augustine and Percy in this matter of signs does so with great peril.

Grace, Freedom and Vision

The young Augustine and the young Binx Bolling were able eventually to get out of the cave and to get free of the theater. That "dim and dazzling trick of grace" (206), as Percy expresses it, worked its way into both their

restless hearts. By cleansing "the eye of the heart,"³¹ this "trick of grace" loosened their chains of enslavement and freed them from the inherent human weakness of the will. At the same time it set their minds free from the faulty premises and inadequate conclusions of philosophy and science. As helpful as these disciplines were for them during their early years of personal formation, philosophy and science remained deplorably deficient for both young men throughout the third decade of their lives.

For whatever its value, however, education was the preserve of the few, those privileged individuals whose learning was in too many instances largely ahistorical and abstract. In contrast to the *intelligentia* then, the masses of people reflected a low culture and, if one will allow, sometimes an "idiot culture,"³² characterized by an ambiance of make-believe, superstition, fantasy, phantasm and falsehood. A combination of these five ingredients nourishes much New Age thinking today. It is the New Ageism of magic and make-believe and religious syncretism which Augustine called *curiositas* and recognized as a vice because it distracts from the pursuit of worthwhile values and knowledge of the truth. Although Augustine was far more censorious with regard to the distractions of *curiositas* than Binx Bolling was, for both young men, however, cultivation of an authentically human lifestyle was stifled from the start.

In like manner, rhetoric and what we today call the visual, performing, entertaining and communication arts generated an even greater sense of disillusionment for Augustine and Binx than either philosophy or science. The theater, which Binx described as "an Aztec mortuary of funeral urns and glyphs" (185), has found its way nowadays into the corner of the family room, like the corner bar. Recall the all too brief encounter where Veronica Graebner, holding her baby, is standing "between a sort of living room and a peninsula bar" (183). Television, video games that erase easily, soporific soap operas, sports mania, tawdry entertainments have overtaken the "bread and circus" (Juvenal, *Satire* 10, 81) games of Antiquity.³³ Sundry talk show hosts and guests have upstaged Augustine's "huckster(s) of hot air,"³⁴ *venditor verborum* (9, 5, 13), by catering to contemporary *curiositas*, which is for people of today far more insatiable than Augustine in his wildest dreams could ever have imagined.³⁵

In due time Augustine and Binx refused to keep their lives on hold any longer by accepting responsibility for themselves and for others. After much conflict and personal struggle, they were enabled by the grace of Jesus Christ to get on with the burdensome task of rebuilding their lives. Briefly put, both the *Confessions* and *The Moviegoer* tell the personal story of a *return*: 1) to

a mature understanding of self, 2) to a sensitive appreciation of other selves in a fragmented and pluralist society, and 3) return, finally, to the Catholic Church as a hospitable environment in which to make some intelligible sense of God and the world.

To describe in slightly different terms both Binx's and Augustine's search: cave-dwellers and theatergoers stay in the dark. Their audio-visual aids too frequently substitute appearances for reality, fantasy for fact. Only the elite can extricate themselves from the cave, yet, as we noted earlier, Plato never tells us how. Exit from the cave pertains chiefly to the upper echelons of society, thus revealing an aristocratic bias, as prominently entrenched and as conspicuous a feature of Stoicism in the southern United States until the 1960s as it was a permanent staple in the world of Antiquity. The cinema, moreover, caters to the plebs with their spectator mentality, many solitary individuals hopelessly groping in the dark while shadow-boxing with bogus images which claim to reveal the truth. Deceptions proliferate on all sides, because dialectical reasoning is beyond the reach of the masses, whose lack of culture triggers passive acquiescence and unreflective conformity rather than active involvement in human affairs. The Church, in contrast, neither elitist nor populist, calls out to people of every nation everywhere in the world. Here there is ample room for every human being. The Church, in words attributed to St. Ephraem, is "the big Church with the big lap/womb".

Both the *Confessions* and *The Moviegoer* should not be read as the reflections of two individuals whose hearts have already found rest and peace but rather as the witness of two young men who were watching, waiting, wandering and listening for the action of God's grace in their lives. In the Epilogue Binx crisply notes, "*religion*: (Percy's italics) it is something to be suspicious of" (208). At a similar juncture in the *Confessions* Augustine reveals a somewhat dissimilar cast of mind, but like Binx, he does not know the outcome, whether success or failure, of his personal struggles and conflicts, *ex qua parte stet victoria nescio* (10, 28, 29).

While Percy's thought is legitimately described as post-modern existentialism,³⁶ Augustine of Hippo seemingly resists classification as post-anything or post-anyone. It is, for this reason, singularly striking that Augustine's account of his spiritual *Aeneid* should adumbrate and nuance in so many ways the odyssey of Binx Bolling as a pre-Vatican II non-practicing Catholic (76), who is trying to make sense of a post-Christian world. Augustine gives us the clue to the divine source of his own vision and invites us

to conjecture that the vision of Walker Percy, so much like that of Augustine himself,³⁷ found its source in the same place.

When addressing people of both high and low culture on the matter of Christian doctrine, its orthodox interpretation and its effective communication, the Bishop of Hippo strongly urged that both learned and unlearned people "should . . . ask God for vision. Although I can lift up my finger to point something out," Augustine told them, "I cannot supply the vision by means of which either this gesture or what it indicates is seen" (*doctr. chr.*, Prologue 3).

Acknowledgments

English translations of Augustine are taken from John K. Ryan, *The Confessions of St. Augustine* (New York, 1960) and from John E. Rotelle, OSA, ed., *The Works of Saint Augustine*. Edmund Hill, OP, tr. and notes, *Sermons* (New York, 1990 ff.).

Dennis J. Gallagher, OSA, Archivist at Villanova University, was immensely helpful in responding to my requests for secondary materials on Walker Percy which one could hardly expect to find in Roman libraries. Unfailing help was always available and frequently extended by José Guirau, OSA, Librarian of the Patristic Institute.

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Abbreviations

a) Augustine

<i>b. coniug.</i>	<i>de bono coniugali</i> The Excellence of Marriage
<i>civ. Dei</i>	<i>de civitate Dei</i> City of God
<i>c. acad.</i>	<i>contra Academicos</i> Answer to Sceptics
<i>conf.</i>	<i>Confessiones</i> Confessions
<i>doctr. chr.</i>	<i>de doctrina christiana</i> Christian Doctrine
<i>ep.</i>	<i>epistula</i> Letter
<i>retr.</i>	<i>retractationes</i> Reconsiderations
<i>serm.</i>	<i>sermo</i> Sermon
<i>tr. Jn.</i>	<i>tractatus in evangelium Iohannis</i> Tractates on the Gospel of John
<i>trin.</i>	<i>de trinitate</i> The Trinity
<i>vera rel.</i>	<i>de vera religione</i> True Religion

b) Walker Percy

MB	<i>The Message in the Bottle</i>
LC	<i>Lost in the Cosmos</i>
SSL	<i>Signposts in a Strange Land</i>
LG	<i>The Last Gentleman</i>
LR	<i>Love in the Ruins</i>
L	<i>Lancelot</i>

* Citations derive from paperback editions of Percy's writings whose pagination differs appreciably from that of the original hardcover copies.

Notes

1. "The following writers have meant most to me," Percy declares, "and in this order: Dostoevski (*sic*), Kierkegaard, St. Augustine . . ." Harriet Doar, "Walker Percy: He Likes to Put Protagonist in Situation," in Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson, 1985) 5. Commenting on his own "readings in existentialist philosophy," Percy favors "the modern French existentialists, going back to the Russian novelists, Dostoyevsky, all the way back to Thomas Aquinas and Augustine . . ." See John Griffin Jones, "Walker Percy," *Ibid.*, 272.
 2. Percy chose as possible titles for his novel, *Carnival in Gentilly* and *The Confessions of a Moviegoer*, but his editor at Alfred A. Knopf, Stanley Kauffmann, recommended the shorter version of the latter, and so the word *Confessions* was dropped. See Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins. A Life of Walker Percy* (New York, 1992) 264 and 287-8.
 3. Percy's essay, "The Man on the Train," in MB 83-100 is virtually required reading for an adequate understanding of Binx Bolling and Kate Cutrer. In the novel (161-76) there is a lengthy sequence on a train from New Orleans to Chicago.
 4. Page references to *The Moviegoer*, based on the paperback edition, seventh printing (Ballantine Books: New York, 1990), are clear from their context and indicated solely by page number(s).
 5. Philip E. Simmons, "Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination: Mass Culture in Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer* and Nicholson Baker's *The Mezzanine*," *Contemporary Literature*, 33 (1992) 601-24.
 6. Lewis A. Lawson, "Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*: The Cinema as Cave," *Southern Studies* 19 (1980) 331-54. See also the same author's "The Allegory of the Cave and *The Moviegoer*," in *The South Carolina Review*, 13 (1981) 13-18 at 18, where the author establishes a link between Augustine of Hippo and Walker Percy. Similarly, Lewis A. Lawson, "Time and Eternity in *The Moviegoer*," *Southern Humanities Review*, 16 (1982) 129-41 at 140, where Augustine, particularly Book Eleven of his *Confessions*, is again credited as a persuasive factor in shaping the contours of Walker Percy's mind.
- While researching the Saint Augustine Lecture I had from the beginning intuitively and independently of any secondary sources, recognized many affinities between Augustine and Percy, when providentially Professor Lawson, through the kindness of a mutual friend and colleague, John Auchard, accelerated my interest in exploring these matters still further. In a personal letter addressed to me on 19 January 1992, Mr. Lawson strongly encouraged me to persist in my critical investigation of Augustine's influence upon Walker Percy and their possible rapprochement.
7. Citations from the *Confessions* are indicated by three numbers, for example, 5, 9, 16, indicating the book, chapter and section, respectively, in standard editions of that text.
 8. Eugene TeSelle, "'*Regio Dissimilitudinis*' in the Christian Tradition and its Context in Late Greek Philosophy," *Augustinian Studies*, 6 (1975) 153-79.

9. Some interpreters detect a veiled reference to Plato's Cave in Augustine's *Two Books on Genesis Against the Manichees* 1, 14, 20, but Roland Teske, SJ correctly disputes this attribution in *Saint Augustine on Genesis* (Washington, 1991) 68-9, n. 69. On the other hand, James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine. Confessions II* (Oxford, 1992) 247, judiciously allows an allusion to Plato's Cave in *c. acad.* 2, 3, 7, *cavea popularis*. From the perspective of this essay it is worth noting that the Latin *cavea*, depending upon its context, translates both cave and the seats in a theater or an amphitheater. A cursory check of the *Augustinus-Lexikon* Concordance, the Latin words *cavea*, *caverna*, *spelunca* and *antrum* for direct affiliation with Plato's Cave analogies, yielded the single instance already noted previously by Professor O'Donnell. In a facsimile responding promptly to my query on this matter Robert O'Connell, SJ pointed out to me the Platonic resonances on the Cave, the Sun and the Divided Line in Augustine's *Soliloquies* 1, 8, 15 - 1, 13, 23.

This is not the place for reviving the difficult question of how extensive was Augustine's reading of Plotinus and Porphyry. It is sufficient for our purposes to know that Plotinus' *Enneads* 2, 9, 6, for example, specifies: ". . . the ascent from the cave and the gradual advance of souls to a truer and truer vision" (tr., MacKenna). Augustine's knowledge of Greek Philosophy and science derived largely from Latin translations from the Greek language by Cicero and Marius Victorinus, popular manuals and doxographies. See A. Solignac, "Doxographies and manuels dans la formation philosophique de saint Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 1 (1958) 113-48.

While the analogies of the Sun and the Divided Line are more emphatically attested to in Augustine's thought, these two components of Plato's allegory are scarcely intelligible, nor could they be invoked without implicit acknowledgment of their third component, the Cave.

10. Isabel Bochet, *Saint Augustin et le désir de Dieu* (Paris, 1982) offers a wide port of entry into this important aspect of "yearning/longing," *desiderium*, in Augustine's mature thought.

11. Lewis A. Lawson, "Moviegoing in *The Moviegoer*," Jac Tharpe, ed., *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics* (Jackson, 1980) 26.

12. In the novel Binx employs such words as "rotation," "repetition," "return," "zone-crossing," and "certification," or their cognate ideas in relation to his moviegoing. The sense of these words is explicated in the essay, "The Man on the Train," in MB 83-100 (See note 3 above), which is indispensable for an understanding of Percy's fictional thought. For a lucid presentation of this terminology with its Kierkegaardian resonances see Rober Coles, *Walker Percy. An American Search* (Boston, 1978) 85-101.

13. Lewis A. Lawson, "Cinematography in *The Moviegoer*," in Hans P. Braendlin, ed., *Ambiguities in Literature and Film* (Tallahassee, 1987) 45.

14. John M. Quinn, OSA, "Four Faces of Time in St. Augustine," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 26 (1992) 181-231 furnishes a nuanced and incisive account of Augustine's thought in relation to such contemporary philosophers as Bertrand Russell and Martin Heidegger under the rubrics of 1) psychological, 2) physical, 3) moral, and 4) historical time.

15. See the Index (599) to Charles Taylor, *Sources of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA, 1989) where this p Taylor situates his chapter on Augustine, aptly entitled, "Between his chapters on Plato and Descartes, respectively an exaggeration to say," Taylor writes, "that it was Augustine's awareness of radical reflexivity and bequeathed it to the thought" (131).

16. Paula Fredriksen, "Vile Bodies: Paul and Augustine on the k Flesh," in Mark Burrows and Paul Rorem, eds., *Biblical Hermeneutical Perspective. Studies in Honor of Karlfried Froelich on His 70th Birthday* (Grand Rapids, 1991) 75-87. See also Henri Marrou, *The Resurrection and Saint Augustine's Theology of Human Values*. The Saint Augustine Lecture 1965 (Villanova, 1966).

17. *doctr. chr.* 2, 41, 62: Quo signo crucis omnis actio christiana describitur.

18. Basil Studer, "Augustine and the Pauline Theme of Hope," in William S. Babcock, ed., *Paul and the Legacies of Paul* (Dallas, 1990) 201-21 with a comment by R. A. Markus, 221-5.

19. For a contemporary perspective which includes Augustine in its selective historical survey of this theme, see Margaret Miles, "Pilgrimage as Metaphor in a Nuclear Age," *Theology Today*, 45 (1988) 166-79.

20. Robert J. O'Connell, SJ, *Soundings in Augustine's Imagination* (New York, 1994) 11 and 72.

21. One should not overlook Augustine's identification of himself with the parable of the prodigal son in Luke's Gospel. Luc Verheijen, for example, brought to light "no fewer than nineteen clear allusions to the parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15:11-32)" in the text of the *Confessions*. See his "The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine: Two Grids of Composition and Reading," in *Collectanea Augustiniana. Augustine. "Second Founder of the Faith,"* eds., J.C. Schnaubelt and F. Van Fleteren (New York, 1990) 186. For greater detail, see James J. O'Donnell, *Augustine. Confessions II* (Oxford, 1992) 95-7.

In sharp contrast, Binx Bolling's conversion takes its cues from Søren Kierkegaard's four stages as these basic spheres of human activity are depicted in his *Stages on Life's Way* and his *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*: esthetic, ethical, religious and Christian. See Bradley R. Dewey, "Walker Percy Talks about Kierkegaard: An Annotated Interview," in Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson, 1985) 101-28.

22. Sally Fitzgerald, ed. and intro., *The Habit of Being. Letters of Flannery O'Connor* (New York, 1978) 308. See also Sue Mitchell Crowley, "The Thanatos Syndrome: Walker Percy's Tribute to Flannery O'Connor," in Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, eds., *Walker Percy Novelist and Philosopher* (Jackson, 1991) 225-37.

23. See n. 15 above.

24. Susan Menkel, "Augustine's 'I': The 'Knowing Subject' and the Self," *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, 2 (1994) 291-324.

25. A. M. Clausen, "*Peregrinatio* and *Peregrini* in Augustine's *City of God*," *Traditio*, 46 (1991) 33-75.

26. The word, *sacramentum* in Augustine is invariably associated with *mysterium*, both of which Latin words possess a wide range of applications, for example, the Lord's Prayer, the Creed, blessed salt, exorcisms, the scriptures, events and personalities in the Old Testament who prefigure Christ. The standard introduction to Augustine's use of these Latin words is Charles Couturier, "*Sacramentum et Mysterium* dans l'oeuvre de S. Augustin," in *Etudes Augustiniennes*, H. Rondet et al. (Paris, 1953) 162-332. See also Basil Studer, "*Sacramentum et exemplum* chez saint Augustin," *Recherches Augustiniennes*, 10 (1975) 87-141.

27. Apart from any blessing by the Catholic Church, Augustine as a bishop, was of the opinion that the exclusive relationship between a man and a woman who lived together, in mutual fidelity until death because continence otherwise eluded them, constituted marriage, *nutpiae, conubium (b. coniug. 5, 5)*.

28. The final scene in LG (389-409) involves Father Boomer baptizing a dying youth, Jamie Vaught, with the assistance of Will Barrett while Jamie's brother, Dr. Sutter Vaught, a suicidal physician looks on. In LR human sexuality is more emphatically sacramentalized in marriage than in *The Moviegoer*. Both Father Smith and Monsignor Schleifkopf figure in LR, while in L Father John Percival leaves his post as priest-psychiatrist or psychiatrist-priest to labor in a small Alabama church where he will: "preach the gospel, turn bread into flesh, forgive the sins of Buick dealers, administer communion to suburban housewives" (L 239).

29. The full Latin text reads: "*Detrahe verbum, et quid est aqua nisi aqua? Accedit verbum ad elementum, et fit sacramentum, etiam ipsum tamquam visibile verbum (tr. Jn. 80, 3)*. Similar thoughts are expressed in *tr. Jn. 15, 4* and elsewhere. Here one ought to bear in mind the public and social character of speech in the ancient world. In one of the newly discovered Divjak letters, for example, Augustine tells us that on three successive afternoons he listened to a reading of Book Eighteen of his *City of God* with Firmus, a sort of dilettante intellectual to whom the letter was addressed (*ep. 2*, 3*). Many years before Augustine came upon Ambrose reading silently, a fact which he later recalled as a somewhat unconventional practice, occasioned no doubt by Ambrose's heavy schedule of pastoral duties as a bishop (6, 3, 3). See Bernard M. Knox, "Silent reading in Antiquity," *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies*, 9 (1968) 421-35.

Consequently, Augustine's description of sacrament "as a kind of visible word," has no bearing at all upon the visual perception of words in print during the post-Gutenberg age; it indicates rather a verbal medium which, by way of contrast, is essentially auricular or auditory: "the word that sounds outwardly is the sign of the word that gives light inwardly" (*trin. 15, 11, 20*).

See David Chidester, "The Symmetry of Word and Light: Perceptual Categories in Augustine's *Confessions*," *Augustinian Studies*, 17 (1986) 119-33 and the same author's excellent book, *Word and Light. Seeing, Hearing, and Religious Dis-*

course (Urbana and Chicago, 1992), particularly Part Two, "Augustine and the Augustinian Tradition," 51-145.

30. For both authors this is a vital and a vast subject.

Augustine

Primary Sources:

- *de magistro* (The Teacher) 389-90
- *de dialectica* (Dialectics) 387
- *de catechizandis rudibus* (First Catechetical Instruction) 399
- *de doctrina christiana* (Christian Doctrine) 396-427
- *de trinitate* (The Trinity) 399-422/6 (from Book Eight on)

Secondary Sources: Clifford Ando, "Augustine on Language," *Revue des études augustiniennes*, 40 (1994) 45-78 with a helpful bibliography which need not be duplicated here. See also R. A. Markus, "Interiorità e intenzionalità. Atti del IV seminario del Centro di Studi agostiniani di Perugia. *Studia Ephemeridis Augustinianum*, 41 (Roma, 1993) 13-24, and Gerard O'Daly, *Augustine's Philosophy of Mind* (Berkeley, 1987) 171-8.

Walker Percy

Primary Sources: Most of the essays in *The Message in the Bottle* (New York, 1975; tenth printing 1984) relate in one way or another to matters of speech and signification, symbol and human communication. It is not necessary to list these essays here. Described as an "intermezzo" and found between chapters 12 and 13 of LC, pages 85-126 of this book offer a résumé of Percy's semiotics, which can be bypassed altogether or read independently from the rest of the book. See also the pertinent essays in Part Two, "Science, Language, Literature" (111-291) of SSL.

Secondary Sources: Marcus Smith, "Talking about Talking: An Interview with Walker Percy," in Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* (Jackson 1985) 129-45 and perceptive insights on Walker Percy's Catholicism and his theory of language by Lewis A. Lawson, "The Cross and the Delta: Walker Percy's Anthropology," in Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp, eds., *Walker Percy, Novelist and Philosopher* (Jackson, 1991) 3-12.

31. See *tr. Jn.* 13, 3: "there is another eye; it is the interior eye," *est alius oculus, est interior oculus*. The *Confessions* speaks of "inner sight," *interior aspectus* (7, 8, 12); "that same eye of my soul," *isdem oculus animae meae* (7, 10, 16); "my feeble sight," *infirmetas aspectus mei* (7, 10, 16; and "inner hearing," *auris interior* (12, 11, 11 and 12, 15, 18 2x). James J. O'Donnell in his three volumes *Augustine. Confessions* (Oxford, 1992) *ad verbum* offers excellent commentary on the primacy of sight in Augustine's "sequence of the senses" (4, 7, 12; II, 228-9 and 10, 35, 54; III, 224).

Elsewhere Augustine's sermon on the healing of the two blind men outside Jericho (Mt. 20: 29-34) traces the process of inner healing: . . . "what calls for all our efforts in this life is the healing of the eyes of our heart, with which God is to be seen"

- (*serm.* 88, 5) In like manner, *tr. Jn.* 2 delineates the same curative procedure. In section 7 of this tractate the preacher describes "hearts that are wounded, minds that are weakened and the vision of a soul that is bleary-eyed," *corda saucia, mentes infirmae, acies animae lippientis*. Later on in section 16 we read that the incarnate God has manufactured an eye-salve, *ipsa nativitate collyrium fecit*; "for the eye of the heart that had been blinded, the flesh that had blinded you is the same flesh that heals you," *ergo caro te caecaverat, caro te sanat*.
32. I owe this descriptive tag to Carl Bernstein, "Journalism and the growth of the idiot culture," *Guardian Weekly* (London) 14 June 1992, 21, as cited in an astute interpretation of Augustine in the light of contemporary mass media and the Persian Gulf War. See Robert Dodaro, OSA, "Eloquent Lies, Just Wars and the Politics of Persuasion: Reading Augustine's *City of God* in a 'Postmodern' World," *Augustinian Studies*, 25 (1994) 77-138 at 133, note 115. My alignment of Augustine with Walker Percy is not dissimilar from my colleague's successful achievement in relating Augustine's political anthropology to several undercurrents in society today.
33. Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death. Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York, 1985).
34. I owe this sensitive English translation which preserves the alliteration of the original Latin to W. R. Johnson, "Isocrates Flowering: The Rhetoric of Augustine," *Rhetoric and Philosophy*, 9 (1976) 217-31 at 29.
35. Hans Blumberg, *Die Legitimitat der Neuzeit* (1st ed., Frankfurt, 1966; Eng. tr. from rev. ed., *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* (Cambridge, MA, 1983). See chapter 5 on Augustine, "Curiosity Is Enrolled in the Catalog of Vices," 309-23. Also, Maria Tasinato, *Sulla Curiosità Apuleio e Agostino* (Parma, 1994).
36. Raymond Boisvert, "Walker Percy's Postmodern Existentialism," *Soundings*, 71 (1988) 639-55. For another point of view, see Kieran Quinlan, "The Moviegoer: The Dilemma of Walker Percy's Scholastic Existentialism," in Thomas Daniel Young, ed., *Modern American Fiction* (Baton Rouge, 1989) 213-24.
37. Margaret Miles, "Vision: The Eye of the Body and the Eye of the Mind in Saint Augustine's *Confessions* and *De Trinitate*," *Journal of Religion*, 63 (1983) 125-42.