

THE INEFFABLE SOCIALITIES IN WRITING: HAWTHORNE AND PERCY

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... tout texte se construit comme mosaïque
de citations, tout texte est absorption et
transformation d'un autre texte.

Julia Kristeva, *Sēmiōtikē. Recherches pour
une semanalyse*

In his essay on Herman Melville, published six years after *Lancelot*, Percy marvels at what it felt like to have written *Moby-Dick*, "an experience which Melville called being broiled in hellfire, and which was surely a triumphant taking on of hell and coming through".¹ Was it the same for Percy, one wonders, after writing *Lancelot*, his "wicked book"? Did Percy feel, as he writes of Melville, "spotless as a lamb, happy, content"? In the essay, Percy alludes to Melville's letter to Hawthorne written in response to Hawthorne's appreciative reading of *Moby-Dick*, where Melville uses the puzzling phrase "ineffable socialities", the phrase that, to Percy, is the clear expression of intertextuality that can be stated, Percy believes, "in ordinary language – without the jargon".

In this loose sense, one could argue a number of "intertexts" for Percy's *Lancelot*. Malory's version of the quest of Sir Lancelot du Lac is at once the most obvious and the most frequently applied analogy. Corinne Dale reads *Lancelot* with both his Arthurian source and *The Divine Comedy*. Robert Coles points to several affinities between *Lancelot* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King*. Robert Brinkmeyer reads Percy's novel in the light of the twelfth-century French romance *Queste del Saint Graal*.²

¹ Walker Percy, "Herman Melville", *The New Criterion* 213 (November 1983), p. 39.

² Corinne Dale, "Lancelot and the Medieval Quests of Sir Lancelot and Dante", in *Walker Percy: Art and Ethics*, ed. Jac Tharpe (Jackson, Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 1980), pp. 99-108; Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1979), pp. 213-216; and Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr., *Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South: Allen Tate, Caroline Gordon, Walker Percy* (Jackson, Miss.: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), pp. 160-161.

Of a different area of associations, Lewis Lawson interestingly notes that the function of the house in *Lancelot* recalls the House of Usher, Burden's Landing, or Sutpen's Hundred.³ To this list one could add another instructive comparison: between *Lancelot* and *The House of the Seven Gables*. Both books concern themselves with the decay of a once great house that serves as a central unifying metaphor commenting upon the decline of those who inherited it. Both writers address issues of sex: Hawthorne, in his characteristically restrained manner, Percy, bluntly and directly, as he brutally attacks the amorality of his age. The hocus-pocus endings of both books intimate a symbolic rebirth of the hero following a storm (a hurricane in *Lancelot*). The comatose states of Clifford and Lance serve as another point of comparison, and an interesting parallel arises from the function of the arched window in *The House of the Seven Gables* and the pigeonier in *Lancelot*, both of which operate as panoptic images, whereby all experience becomes encapsulated into one wholesome vision. However, unlike the House of Usher and unlike the house of Lamar, the seven-gabled house does not explode but is spared in Hawthorne's one nostalgic impulse, though its foundations are affected by the storm and the house shakes and creaks.

Moreover, both books lend themselves to a biblical *exegesis*. Northrop Frye's *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* is of particular interest here, since it provides not only the structural framework for a typological reading of the two texts, but also the conceptual terminology for pinpointing their differences: the overall vision of *The House of the Seven Gables* is primarily apocalyptic, or ideal, whereas Percy, in *Lancelot*, prefers the demonic mode for the literary incarnation of his vision. If only for this reason Frye's schema deserves a closer look.

Frye's summary of the Bible begins with an analysis of the structure of its imagery which contains the images of sheep and pasture (pastoral), of harvest and vintage (agricultural), of cities and temples (urban), and, finally, of what Frye perceives as a "human element".⁴ These images contribute to the apocalyptic, or ideal, vision of the Bible, which Frye subsequently juxtaposes to the demonic vision. The contrast between the two visions is illuminated through the Bible's presentation of female figures. Maternal figures (the Virgin Mary and the woman crowned with stars who makes her appearance at the beginning of Revelation 12, but also Rachel and Eve) and marital or bridal figures (symbolically represented by Jerusalem, Christ's "spouse") belong to the apocalyptic vision, whereas the demonic counterpart of the Mother figure

³ Lewis A. Lawson, "The Fall of the House of Lamar", in *The Art of Walker Percy. Stratagems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), pp. 219-245.

⁴ Northrop Frye, *The Great Code. The Bible and Literature* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1982), pp. 139-142.

is Lilith, the mother of demons, and the demonic counterpart of the Bride is the Great Whore of Babylon (Revelation 17) known as the mistress of Antichrist.

If one analyzes the apocalyptic imagery in *The House of the Seven Gables*, one notices that the element missing from the structure outlined above is the paradisaical, for it usually overlaps with the pastoral and the agricultural element and, in fact, the three should be discussed synchronically. The very first depiction of the Pyncheon garden evokes the paradisaical ideal: as Phoebe, on the morning following the day of her arrival at the seven-gabled house, looks out of the window, she first sees a rosebush which, against the background of a neglected and decaying garden, looks "as if it had been brought from Eden that very summer, together with the mold in which it grew".⁵ The garden, as it first appears in Phoebe's perception, can be compared to Eden, as it impressed the first dwellers, Adam and Eve. To stress the parallel, Hawthorne comments on the "species of flowers growing there in a wilderness of neglect, and obstructing one another's development... by their *uneducated* entanglement and confusion" (78). The flowers, for all their uncultivated condition, "still sent a fresh and sweet incense up to their Creator" (77). Appropriately, Hawthorne brings out the biblical analogy when he speaks of "the early sunshine – as fresh as that which peeped into Eve's bower while she and Adam sat at breakfast there" (102). Much is made of this analogy throughout the narrative with Phoebe assuming Eve's role and Holgrave playing Adam's part, though Clifford, obviously attracted to Phoebe, also likes to imagine himself as Adam.

As indicated earlier, paradisaical imagery overlaps with idealized pastoral imagery where divine order has its counterpart in an order achieved by human labor. Hawthorne evokes the idea of order in several chapters, and above all in the chapter entitled "Maule's Well", which is devoted almost entirely to the depiction of the Pyncheon garden:

Phoebe saw... that their [the weeds'] growth must have been checked by a degree of careful labor, bestowed daily and systematically on the garden. The white double rose-bush had evidently been propped up anew against the house since the commencement of the season; and a pear tree and three damson trees... bore marks of the recent amputation of several superfluous and defective limbs. There were also a few species of antique and hereditary flowers... scrupulously weeded; as if some person... had been anxious to bring them to such perfection as they were capable of attaining. (90)

The passage is followed by the introduction of the agricultural, or more precisely, horticultural imagery, which includes the "plebeian vegetables": squashes, cucumbers, string beans, tomatoes – so ripe and "gigantic" that they

⁵ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The House of the Seven Gables* (New York: Collier Books, 1973), p. 77. All page references are to this edition. All emphases in the quoted material are mine.

“promised an early and abundant harvest”. “A pair of robins”, bees, hens, chickens, even a Chanticleer, complete the pastoral picture of tranquil plenitude.

Two elements occupy a focal place in the paradisaal imagery: trees and water. The description of the creation of trees in Genesis specifies fruit trees, the tree of life and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Hawthorne's romance boasts not only fruit trees in the Pyncheon garden, but also the significantly capitalized Pyncheon Elm that grows in front of the house. That this tree has an important function in the overall iconography of the book is stressed through regular references to it in the narrative and particularly through its appearance at both the beginning and the end of the book. When Adam and Eve are expelled from paradise, they lose the tree and water of life that are subsequently restored to redeem mankind at the end of the Bible. Thus, the two images determine the beginning and the end of the biblical narrative. This structure ideally corresponds to the overall structure of *The House of the Seven Gables*. The image of water here is fairly uncomplicated since Hawthorne tells us at the very outset that Matthew Maule built his hut by “a natural spring of soft and pleasant water”, and when the Pyncheons stole his land as a site for their great house, “the spring above mentioned entirely lost the deliciousness of its pristine quality”. Consequently, Maule's Well, the name it has borne since then, is like the image of the Dead Sea, from what Frye calls the manifest demonic counterpart of the apocalyptic, or ideal, vision, for the Sea is “so full of salt that nothing can live in it or around it”.⁶ In *The House of the Seven Gables*, the well is alleged to be “productive of intestinal mischief to those who quench their thirst there”, and Holgrave warns Phoebe not to drink from its “bewitched” water.

The tree of life and the tree of knowledge constitute, as Frye points out, the same image in the Bible, and it can be argued that both meanings cling to the Pyncheon Elm. In the biblical apocalypse, personified locusts symbolize evil spirits, an association vital for Hawthorne's romance, for towards the end of the narrative, following the storm and the corresponding crisis in the house, “singing” locusts swarm around the elm, which, upon their departure, whispers “unintelligible prophecies”. The foreshadowing of “the coming fortunes” in Maule's Well and the whispering of the “unintelligible prophecies” belong to the same apocalyptic vision of the world that man lost but is eventually to regain and which, Hawthorne implies, the book's characters will recapture.

The urban imagery of the Bible consists primarily of phenomena associated with temples, highways, and roads. Hawthorne draws on a similar fund of city imagery as Clifford watches the busy street from the arched window, and

⁶ Frye, p. 146.

registers the changes that were introduced during his imprisonment: a cab, an omnibus and the railroad. In the biblical narrative, however, the central image of the city is the temple, which Hawthorne's romance recasts in the form of the seven-gabled house. Hawthorne's imagery is mixed here, partaking of elements from both the apocalyptic vision and its demonic counterpart. In the apocalyptic vision, Jerusalem was founded on a hill with its temple symbolically reaching heaven; Jerusalem's demonic variant is not only the Tower of Babel but also the seven hills of Rome, the seat of the Great Whore of Babylon. The distinguishing features of height and centrality, in Hawthorne's book, are attributed to the seven gables: “on every side, the seven gables pointed sharply to the sky...”, and, “There it rose, a little withdrawn from the line of the street, but in pride, not modesty” (24).

In urban imagery, cities tend to be tropically conceived as female, as conveyed by the very word “metropolis” (mother city). Hawthorne speaks of the seven-gabled house as “a whole sisterhood of edifices, breathing through the spiracles of one great chimney”. In the sexual imagery of the Bible, Frye reminds us, “the relation of male to female is expressed in two ways, depending on whether the two bodies or only the sexual organs are taken as the basis. In one, the male is above and the female below; in the other, the male is at the center and the female surrounds him”.⁷ Thus, in Hawthorne's text, the phallic chimney is surrounded by the “sisterhood of edifices”, the significance of which can be explained when we look for the meaning of the word “Hepzibah”. In Isaiah (62:4) we have the following passage:

No more shall men call you Forsaken,
no more shall your land be called desolate
but you shall be named Hephzi-bah (that is, My delight in her)
and your land Beulah (that is, Wedded);
for the Lord delights in you
and to him your land is wedded.
For, as a young man weds a maiden,
so you shall wed him who rebuilds you,
and your God shall rejoice over you
as a bridegroom rejoices over a bride.

The imagery is that of the land married to its rules, as Hephzibah and Beulah merge in the meaning of the land itself. The demonic counterpart of the Bride is represented by the Great Whore of Babylon who sits on the seven hills of Rome. In that connection, we should keep in mind that Hephzibah is given a life estate in the seven-gabled house, which is often personified, and whose decay is mirrored in the description of Hephzibah's physical appearance. One can argue, therefore, that Hephzibah is tropically conceived as the “sisterhood of edifices”. As the focus of Hephzibah's cosmos is her brother Clifford, the very word

⁷ Frye, p. 156.

“sisterhood” acquires a further dimension, with Clifford’s figure symbolically interpreted as the phallic chimney. As advocates of the incestuous strain in Hawthorne’s writing would have it, Hepzibah’s attitude to Clifford is, indeed, conveyed in sexually ambivalent terms. For one, she plays both mother and sister to him, which is understandable because, after all, Clifford does resemble a child in his utter lack of reflectiveness. But Hepzibah’s feelings for her brother contain a strong sexual element that surfaces during a mock-wedding scene, in which Hepzibah gives free reign to her fantasies: “She yearned to take him [Clifford] by the hand, and go and kneel down, they two together” (159).

Given Hawthorne’s inborn reticence and the taboos of the time, *The House of the Seven Gables* reverberates with sexual overtones. Clifford’s sensual perception of Phoebe’s physical appearance serves as one of several instances. Another is the implication of sexual abuse in Judge Pyncheon’s abortive marriage, in the comment that this wife “got her death blow in the honeymoon, and never smiled again, though Hawthorne hastily adds that it was because “her husband compelled her to serve him with coffee every morning at his bedside”, in token of loyalty to “her liege lord and master” (121). The Judge’s Puritan ancestor, Colonel Pyncheon, whose appearance and character are remarkably similar to the Judge’s, “had worn out three wives”, with sexual violence strongly implied in the explanation that his remorseless “weight and hardness... in the conjugal relations” drove all three of them to their early graves. Finally, Holgrave’s interpolated narrative symbolically depicts abuse in Alice Pyncheon’s masochistic submission to Matthew Maule.

The above examples illustrate the demonic of the human element inherent in the apocalyptic vision. Another example of demonic parody is Jaffrey Pyncheon’s role in the narrative. Hawthorne’s presentation of Judge (Jaffrey) Pyncheon fulfills a function of cultivating, in René Girard’s words,

the future victim’s supposed potential for evil to transform him into a monster of iniquity – not for esthetic reasons, but to enable him to polarize, to literally draw to himself, all the infectious strains in the community and transform them into sources of peace and fecundity.⁸

The judge makes only two appearances in the novel: the first time, when he makes his acquaintance with Phoebe, who instinctively recoils from his embrace, and, the second, just prior to his death, which is presumably caused by an attack of apoplexy, when he talks to Hepzibah. In both episodes, Hawthorne surrounds him with a host of negative attributes, emphasizing “massive accumulation of animal substance about the lower region of his face”, that has an “unctuous, rather than spiritual” look. Subsequently details his “animal” aspect: “animal substance” becomes “animal form”, then

⁸ René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. from French by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977), p. 107.

“animal development”. Hawthorne observes that the Judge’s Creator made him a great animal, but the dinner hour made him a great *beast* (149). This repeated stress on the epithet “animal” figuratively transforms the Judge into the beast (Leviathan) of the demonic parody of the apocalyptic, or ideal, vision. He incarnates the evil of the Past, whose weight upon the Present must be purged, so that the pristine condition can be restored in the Future, and everything, in Hawthorne’s words, will “begin anew”. Holgrave’s conversation with Phoebe, in the chapter “The Daguerrotypist”, addresses precisely this issue of a new beginning which can eventuate only with the cathartic jettisoning of the past:

Shall we never, never get rid of this Past?” cried he, keeping up the earnest one of his preceding conversation. “It lies upon the Present like a giant’s dead body! In fact, the case is just as if a young giant were compelled to waste all his strength in carrying about the corpse of the old giant, his grandfather, who died a long while ago, and only needs to be decently buried. (171)

If we try to imagine what the iconography of the latter part of this passage communicates, we get the image of the bodies horizontally resting: one (the Past) on the other (the Present). This image is re-enacted in Hawthorne’s reference to the Judge’s corpse:

so heavy and lumpish that we can like him to nothing better than a defunct nightmare, which had perished in the midst of its wickedness, and left its flabby corpse on the breast of the tormented one, to be gotten rid of as it might! (229)

To anticipate the forthcoming discussion, Percy’s *Lancelot* boasts a parallel image in Lance Lamar’s encounter with the convulsed bodies of his wife and her lover on “the great Calhoun bed”, as the apocalyptic beast whose “skin was darker than the white sheets. Now I could see it, the strangest of all beasts, two-backed and pied, light-skinned dark-skinned”.⁹ In both texts, the encounter with apocalypse involves the killing of the beast, which is accompanied by a storm, the prototype of which is to be found in the description of chaos in Revelation.

The seven-gabled house is spared in Hawthorne’s one nostalgic impulse. With the exception of one “ruinous” portal, the house remains intact, though Hawthorne mentions that the storm affects its foundations and it shakes and creaks. As the storm subsides, Hawthorne’s fictive universe is restored to its pristine condition. Although the locusts, the only remnants of the demonic imagery, linger for a while in the Pyncheon Elm, the book closes, as does the biblical text, with the imagery of the exorcised tree and water of life, and with the agricultural and pastoral (hence paradisaical) elements of the apocalyptic (ideal) vision. In Clifford’s words, “And so the flower of Eden has bloomed... in this old, darksome house today” (278).

⁹ Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Avon Books, 1980), p. 258. All page references are to this edition.

In *Lancelot*, as in *The House of the Seven Gables*, we must deal with this lingering dream for prelapsarian, primal innocence presented anew, which has been such a temptation for generations of American writers. Lance Lamar resembles Clifford in that he entertains a dream of innocence in which Anna, the woman he meets in the Center for Aberrant Behavior, to which he was confined after the crime he had committed, plays the role of Eve. For both Clifford and Lance the new life begins after prison and is induced by shock. Both need a crisis to restore them to some kind of sanity.

The house of Lamar, Belle Isle, and the legends of the past that cling to it constitute one of the structural affinities between *The House of the Seven Gables* and *Lancelot*. In both cases, the house ages over a century and is in a delapidated condition. Lance reports that, prior to Margot's restoration, the house reflected the impoverished condition of its inhabitants. The income of both families lags so far behind their needs that business must be conducted in the house to increase their budgets. Hepzibah inaugurates a little grocery store in the Pyncheons' house, whereas Belle Isle is displayed to tourists at a dollar a head in Lance's father's time, and at four dollars in Lance's time, thus showing the inflation that has occurred over the span of a generation. In particularly lean years, Lance tells Percival, he bought antiques elsewhere and sold them, with interest, at Belle Isle. The pigeonier, where Lance retreats for meditation, discovers Margot's infidelity, and details his Machiavellian scheme, has its counterpart in Clifford's arched window.

The ancestral legends yield another structural parallel between the two books. Lance's father's infamous involvement in bribery, which occasions his decline and the come-down of his marriage with Lily, corresponds to Colonel Pyncheon's notorious deed, which causes his untimely death and casts a shadow over his descendants' fortunes. Both writers allude to what Percy calls a sexual "offence" in conjugal relations: Colonel Pyncheon's "remorseless weight and hardness" dispatched three consecutive wives to their early graves, whereas Lance refers to his mother's illicit relations with the jovial uncle Harry. Interestingly, we also find parallels in the books' interpolated narratives – Holgrave's story of Alice Pyncheon and the scenario of the movie shot at Belle Isle – both of which have some bearing on the heroes' fortunes. Although Holgrave's story mostly alludes to events in the past, the Pyncheons' greed for money and subsequent decline, it also provides a negative comment on his relationship with Phoebe. The scenario of the movie bears some resemblance to Lance's particular situation.

Lancelot operates on three narrative levels. First, we have Lance's monologue and, mad as it appears to be, it has its own form of organization. Each part of the monologue, which deals with events at Belle Isle, whose chronology the reader is to reconstruct, has its counterpart in Lance's reminiscences of childhood and adolescence, his first and second marriage, and

Lance's anticipation of his future with Anna. This reconstructed chronology of events constitutes the second narrative level, what we might call its narrative proper. Finally, we have the story of the movie, the details of which fall into place as the monologue unfolds. The three narrative levels have the same dramatic structure, which, in turn, corresponds to the dramatic structure of *The House of the Seven Gables*. Lance very accurately sums up this sense of correspondence between the three narrative levels when he tells Percival of "a hurricane coming now while I tell you about Hurricane Marie a year ago which came while an artificial movie hurricane was blowing down Belle Isle" (174).

We can trace direct parallels between the second and the third narrative levels in *Lancelot* (i.e., between the chronology of events at Belle Isle and the story of the movie). The film scenario is about the great house whose master, Lipscomb, shelters a group of people during a hurricane. Likewise, Lance hosts a flock of Hollywood moviemakers. Margot, Lance's wife, performs the double role of adulteress in both the movie, as Lipscomb's wife (with the actor Dana Troy playing the Christ-like hippie), and "real" life (with Jacoby, the movie director). The story of the movie gets complicated (possibly distorted by Lance), since in the crucial part, which takes place during a hurricane, it turns out that Lipscomb is Sarah's (Margot's) father, and not her husband. He stays behind in the house as his daughter (like Lance's daughter Lucy) goes off with her lover. At this point, the two narrative levels diverge since the cinematic daughter-wife (Sarah-Margot) leaves the house, whereas "real" Margot remains in Belle Isle to meet her destiny at Lance's hands.

Interestingly, the merging of the father with the husband figure (which gains further pungency when we recall that it is Merlin who plays Lipscomb, and Merlin, as Lance has ingeniously proved, was once Margot's lover, hence possibly the natural father of Lance's "daughter" Siobhan), corresponds to Lance's hallucination on the second narrative level concerning the Lady of the Camellias. Lance is drugged, and he finds it difficult to establish the identity of the woman he sees. He first seems to recognize her as one of the women he and Percival used to know in their adolescence. He then perceives a camellia pinned at her shoulder and, subsequently, the apparition begins to talk. She mentions Lance's mother, Lily, who was "a lovely delicate creature. Like a little dove" (a traditional attribute of ideal womanhood). Of herself she says that she is "more a sparrow. Plain but tough" (more like Margot, in fact). She then speaks about Lily's relationship with Harry and the father Lamar's resigned acceptance of their liaison. She alludes to Lily and Harry as "Camille and Robert Taylor", which of course provides the final clue. The very heading of this part of the narrative, *Our Lady of the Camellias*, reveals the demonic parody of the apocalyptic, or ideal, vision. *Our Lady* of course refers to the Virgin Mary, whereas the Lady of the Camellias is the courtesan Marguerite

Gautier (Margo) from Dumas' *La Dame aux camelias*. The figure of the mysterious woman signifies thus a further merging, this time of the mother and the wife figures.

To further develop this line of thought, we should recall that Frye identifies the demonic counterpart of the Mother figure as Lilith, the mother of demons. Her name evokes the powers of the night, and not the purity which the name Lily suggests. Early semitic folklore believed Lilith to be a female demon, or vampire, who inhabits ruins. She was reputed to haunt such desolate places during the storm, and men, especially young men, were vulnerable to her playful charm. Goethe refers to Lilith's demonic charm when he has Mephisto tell Faust:

The first wife of Adam.
Watch out and shun her captivating tresses:
She likes to use her never-equalled hair
To lure a youth into her luscious lair,
And he won't lightly leave her lewd caresses.¹⁰

Percy draws on similar fund of imagery when he has Lance allude to his mother's mischievous manner, recalling "a kind of nervous joking aggressiveness about her". She used to "get" Lance in this playfully aggressive way:

On cold mornings when everyone was solemn and depressed about getting up and going off to work or school, she would say, "I'm going to get you", and come at me with her sharp little fist boring away into my ribs. There was something past joking, an insistence, about the boring. She wouldn't stop. (230)

It is, tellingly, the Lady of the Camellias, as his mother, who hands Lance the Bowie knife (with which he ultimately annihilates the mother-wife specter), during the hurricane, in the same playful-aggressive fashion:

Then she looked like my mother again, and when she gave me the Bowie knife, she picked it from the desk and thrust it at me point first in the same insistent joking way my mother would bore her sharp fist into my ribs. (243)

On Frye's table of demonic imagery, one of the demonic incarnations of the Bride figure is Jezebel, Ahab's queen. To briefly survey the biblical story: Ahab sins against God at the promptings of his wife Jezebel. He is condemned by God through the mediation of Elijah, God's emissary; he repents and God waives His punishment, or rather, postpones it until the next generation. Jezebel, the corrupt, licentious, wicked hussy, Elijah assures Ahab, will end having her body devoured by dogs. In *Lancelot*, it is through the agency of Margot-Jezebel that the issue of eroticism, with all it entails, stands starkly before Lance. Now, eroticism, as Lance conceives of it, involves marital

¹⁰ Goethe's *Faust*, trans. with intro. by Walter Kaufmann (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday and Co., 1961/63), p. 381.

infidelity and corruption of the innocent – in short, everything that Lance calls the "sexual offence". More importantly, eroticism thus conceived is the mark and religion of the new age which, to Lance's obsessive mind, has replaced Christianity. The only direct allusion to the biblical story is when Lance asks Percival why anyone should take the matter of fidelity seriously if "even the ancients didn't seem to dwell on it too much; even the Bible is rather casual. Your [Percival's] God seemed much more jealous of false idols, golden calves, than his people messing around with each other" (16). But, then, of course he takes pains to demonstrate that the "new" eroticism *is* a false idol.

Interestingly, however, Percy alludes in the above passage to the fact that the term "whoredom" in the biblical narrative denotes not so much sexual irregularities, as theological ones. This connotation derives from the practice of maintaining cult prostitutes in Canaanite temples, both female and male, the latter known as "sodomites" (I Kings 14:24). We might recall that Lance uses this qualifier several times in reference to the Hollywood group (Margo included). Jezebel, Ahab's wife, incarnates both sexual and theological evil, for not only did she cuckold Ahab, which appears to be of slight importance to the narrator of Kings, but also, and primarily, because she introduced the Worship of Baal, the "false god", into Northern Israel. The reality of a "false god" is a devil, Frye maintains, the word "Baal" appearing in several concatenations suggestive of this meaning as, for example, in "Beelzebub". Baal functioned among ancient semitic people as a god of fertility, or a sun-god, the meaning associated also with Lucifer (light-bringing). It remains to be said that Lance's ascent from the inferno of Belle Isle, after the explosion, is conveyed as the upward movement of Lucifer ("I was wheeling slowly up into to into the night like Lucifer blown out of hell, great wings spread against the starlight" [266]).

One of the rites that the worshippers of the god Baal introduced was the fertility rite whereby they "gashed themselves with swords and spears until the blood ran" (I Kings: 8:28). The significance of the rite is not only to express the desire for fertility but also to identify the worshipper's body with that of the fertility god. Frye acknowledges a similar rite, known as the "garden of Adonis", where plants in pots, which were symbolically associated with female sexual organs, were dipped in water by a group of females as a rain charm. A female counterpart of Baal was a fertility goddess, Asherah, whose emblems were carved wooden poles and a star (*stella maris*). And the Bible makes reference to the prophets of Baal and Asherah as Jezebel's "pensioners".

It is now impossible to ignore the structural and symbolic parallels between *Lancelot* and the biblical text. The god of fertility becomes the god of sexual sin who is worshipped by Margot and the Hollywood moviemakers (Margot's pensioners). Margot does not "carry" a star but is one, and her special dedication in restoring wooden surfaces of antiques at Belle Isle are both suggestive of Percy's source. Sex, or what Lance obsessively calls the sexual sin

(the unholy grail he seeks), is time and again conveyed in religious terms. Having first commissioned and then viewed the video recordings of the sexual antics of his wife and daughter (a separate "feature" for each), Lance, puzzled and hurt into cynicism questions: "A prayer?" And in the scene during the hurricane, just prior to the explosion of the house, Lance conceives of the two bodies, Margot's and Jacoby's, on a Calhoun bed, as his encounter with the "beast" which "held discourse with itself in prayers and curses" (238).

What role, in the above scheme, can we then assign to the silent addressee of Lance's confession? Percival's "religious" name, the name he adopted after ordination, is John and, at one point, Lance wonders: "Is it John the Evangelist who loved so much or John the Baptist, a loner in the wilderness?" (8). He himself suggests the answer when he says that Percival was a "loner". In the Gospel, the prophesy of Elijah's return fulfills itself in the figure of John the Baptist (Matthew: 11:14). According to the biblical account, when Elijah flees from the priests of Baal, he hears the noise of earthquakes, thunder and fire, after which a "still small voice" speaks. It tells Elijah that he need not worry because the followers of the god Baal will be slaughtered in due time. The weaving of this context together with its wonderful phrase into the ending of Percy's text constitutes undoubtedly a masterstroke. Percival, like Elijah in the biblical account, has envisaged the thunder and fire of Lance's apocalyptic story, and his tacit "Yes", with which the book ends, parallels the biblical "still small voice". What this inner voice, the voice of God, tells him he is ready to pass onto his raging patient. Whether Lance is ready to hear this message remains a pending question. Having just given Percival his mad rant, Lance paradoxically says that there is no confession "forthcoming". What he surely means, and what the priest awaits, is an act of penance. The reader, and perhaps also Percival, may hope in vain that the message will disclose the "secret" Lance has taken so much pain to search for elsewhere. Though, arguably, at the end of *Lancelot*, there resonates a note of reintegration of human and divine love, the reader must wait until Percy's next novel for its realization.

It is thus apparent that *Lancelot*, like *The House of the Seven Gables*, works on a cathartic principle. It can be also argued that the meaning of *catharsis* is experienced by the books' authors, rather than their characters. Hawthorne referred to *The House of the Seven Gables* as his "sunny romance", an assessment contradicted by several critics, who find fault with the book's happy ending.¹¹ Likewise, the final chapter of *Lancelot* begins with a Wordsworthian "tranquil restoration", but the reader doubts whether purgation transforms Lance. He complains to Percival of the numbness and chill he feels

¹¹ See, for instance, Agnes McNeill Donohue, *Hawthorne. Calvin's Ironic Stepchild* (Kent, Ohio: The Kent State University Press, 1985), pp. 68-95.

and he once again with cold logic outlines his plan ("We know what we want. And we'll have it. If it takes the sword, we'll use the sword" [277]).

To Melville, however, *The House of the Seven Gables* reveals "the grand truth about Nathaniel Hawthorne. He says NO! in thunder; but the devil himself cannot make him say yes".¹² Melville's *Moby-Dick* appeared the same year (1851), and his joy at getting his vision across to reticent Hawthorne, whom he ranked with Shakespeare, was ecstatic. In Percy's words:

Surely this is the key to the paradox – the ineffable sociability [sic] in writing. Intertextuality if you please. As lonely as is the craft of writing, it is the most social of vocations. No matter what the writer may say, the work is always written to someone, for someone, against someone. The happiness comes from the ineffable sociabilities, when they succeed, when the writing works and somebody knows it.¹³

And thus, rather than seek for a principle of cohesion in *Lancelot* and *The House of the Seven Gables*, we may concede with Harold Bloom that confusion is beautiful because it cannot be resolved, or, as Gabriel Marcel says, remains a mystery. Percy's vision in *Lancelot*, like Hawthorne's in *The House of the Seven Gables*, moving heaven and earth and descending into hell, may terrify us but it returns us, purged by its extremes, to our mid-earth existences.

¹² Herman Melville, *The Letters of Herman Melville*, ed. by Merrell R. Davis and William H. Gilman (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960), p. 174.

¹³ Percy, "Herman Melville", p. 41.