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Cosmopolitan Southerner: The Life and World of William Alexander Percy

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ABSTRACT

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The Mississippi planter and poet William Alexander Percy (1885-1942) is best remembered for his autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son* (1941), which was a bestseller and remains a seminal book in the study of the American South. Although scholars have traditionally portrayed Percy as an iconic provincial, he maintained an ambivalence towards his region—particularly towards local values regarding masculinity and sexuality. Percy left the South regularly and traveled across the world, and his encounters abroad informed his views about gender, sexuality, and race at home. *Cosmopolitan Southerner* maps connections between the American South and the broader world by tracing Will Percy’s travels across the globe: from Mississippi to the Mediterranean, to such places as Paris and Japan and Samoa, back to Mississippi.

Will Percy’s life story invites consideration of how one man became a sexual liberationist, cultural relativist, white supremacist in late Victorian Mississippi. I engage the paradox of Percy’s life and personality to make three main arguments. First, I examine the ways the experience, performance, and construction of gender and sexuality were connected to the concept of place. Will Percy’s heterodox views of sexuality and what it meant to be a man—namely, his belief that love between men was not only legitimate but a superior form of love—can only be understood by studying the ways he
experienced reality in different cultural contexts. Second, I examine the ways Percy participated in an international intellectual tradition centered on the idea of ancient Greece as a kind of spiritual “home” for men with gay desire. The nostalgia that many have interpreted as Percy’s longing for the Old South was, in fact, an important imaginative vehicle many men used to express homoerotic desire in a culturally sanctioned idiom. Finally, I examine Percy’s essentially racist critique of modernity—a critique also grounded in values of cultural relativism and sexual liberation. In situating Percy’s view of racial difference in the context of his cross-cultural encounters, I find that his interpretations of race and “primitivism” worked to simultaneously critique bourgeois sexual ethics and reinforce the structures of racial inequality in the American South.
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Introduction: Stories of Belonging

On December 5, 1910, William Alexander Percy toiled all day in his law office in Greenville, Mississippi. Twenty-five years old and a recent graduate of Harvard Law School, he had returned home to practice law with his father and write poetry. Greenville was a prosperous port city on the Mississippi River with its own opera house and a new four-story grand hotel with a telephone in every room, hot water in most. For a small southern town it was bustling and diverse. Russian and Greek and Chinese immigrants ran many of the storefronts downtown. Steamboats docked at the landing and offloaded whiskey and burlap and dry goods from New Orleans and Memphis. Blacks outnumbered whites eight to one in the surrounding countryside, where their labor on cotton plantations created wealth for families like the Percys. Will Percy’s ancestors were among the first whites to settle in the Mississippi Delta in the 1830s and 1840s, and the Percys remained among Mississippi’s foremost families. In 1910, Will lived with his parents in a mansion on a tree-lined avenue named “Percy Street.”

The fifth of December that year was a gray and rainy Monday. In the mail Will received word that Harold Bruff, his best friend and likely his lover from law school, was leaving the country. Harold had been ordered by his doctor and his New York law firm to take six months of vacation to rest his ailing body. Will wrote in his diary that Harold was “to have six months vacation—without me—among divine places.” During law school Will and Harold had twice traveled to the Mediterranean together. Will—of slight build with blond hair and blue eyes, his face bearing both his father’s strong jaw line and his mother’s dimpled chin—was the more mild-mannered of the two. His poetic temperament and quiet humor offset Harold’s brusque, lawyerly style. Will admired Harold’s frank New York sensibility, which enlivened their conversation and counterbalanced his own Mississippi reticence. He wrote that night that he was “filled with longing” and stuck in “that old mood between exasperation and restlessness.”

On nights like these Will often went to the opera, to dances, to poetry and history readings to relax. Sometimes he would walk to his friend Carrie Stern’s house, where they read and critiqued each others’ poetry: “Poetry fascinated me,” Percy later wrote, “like a fearful sin.” He and Carrie would occasionally get out the Ouija board and demand messages from Matthew Arnold and from God. Most often, though, Percy took walks alone on the levee overlooking the Mississippi River, filled with what he called “sheer lonesomeness and confusion of soul.” That particular December night the Washington County Historical Society was to present a reading of the reminiscences of

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2 William Alexander Percy Diary, 5 December 1910, Percy Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS. Hereinafter referred to as Percy Papers.
Sam Worthington, a prominent local planter. Worthington's memories of antebellum plantation life, the Civil War, and Reconstruction provided intimate details of the local past. His story would have been one Will had heard before—it was a story southerners loved to tell themselves, a story of belonging. Variations of this story were woven into the texture of Will Percy's life. One can imagine Will sitting in the audience, tired from the day's work, anxious to be elsewhere with Harold, but pleased to be among friends hearing a familiar story of his place and his people.⁴

"In days of yore and in times long since gone by," Worthington's reminiscence began, "a feudal aristocracy reigned supreme in Washington County." Worthington recounted the settling of Washington County by white men in the 1820s, the backbreaking slave labor required to clear out the brush and the hardwood bottoms and the cane—work done always with guns nearby since bears and panthers and wildcats then roamed the Delta. This work was hardship and toil but was worth it, for, in time, this founding generation of Deltans all "became millionaires." Worthington's story contained the distinctly southern themes of plantation life, aristocracy, slavery, and the expansion of capitalism. The balm of nostalgia soothed the inherent tensions within southern history for his Greenville audience in 1910.⁵

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⁴ We do not know for certain if Percy attended this meeting on December 5, 1910. But we do know he did occasionally attend meetings of the Washington County Historical Society, and that his actions from 6PM to 11PM of that day are not documented. Regardless of whether he was actually there or not, the story is an ideal type—it was a version of a story Percy heard many times in his life. To place him in the audience on this night, literally or figuratively, is to hear history as he heard it.

Worthington went on to describe magnificent plantation homes with libraries of 5,000 books and chandeliers that alone cost over three thousand dollars. Planters regularly gave handsome dinner parties, he said, and the young gentry gathered two to three times a week for balls at which they danced to brass bands composed of slaves. Worthington narrated planters' travels to New Orleans and Louisville to buy furniture and jewelry and English hunting guns; steamboats with names like *Fanny Bullet* and *General Quitman* stopped at Greenville with plows for the planters, whiskey for the slaves, and ten pound bags of candy for the children. Though it was a peaceful society, "nearly every planter in this county owned a pair of Tranter, Mills, or Derringer pistols, and would have accepted a challenge if sent." The Delta elite traded almost exclusively with gold and silver money, and when they went to New Orleans to do their banking, he explained, "'the pregnant hinges of the knee' were bent to them everywhere."\(^6\)

"My father always said the negroes were the happiest race and freer from care than any other people on earth," Worthington continued. "My recollection is they were always fiddling and dancing every idle minute they got; every plantation could boast a fiddler or two and all negroes could pat and dance even when no fiddler was around." As a rule, slaves were "docile" and idolized their owners; and though they hated their overseers, they "bragged of their master's wealth and the number of 'niggers' he owned."

Except for the mostly ignored plantation overseers, he claimed, "there were practically no poor white people in Washington County then."\(^7\)

A young Sam Worthington woke up one morning in March of 1863 and looked out of the window to see ten thousand Yankees lining the levee, backed by gunboats.

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\(^6\) *Ibid.*, 350-55

\(^7\) *Ibid.*, 351-56.
They were armed with rifles and cannons and had come to get 20,000 bales of cotton rumored to be stored near Wayside, the Worthington plantation. They stole wagons and mules and found the cotton, which they later sold in Memphis at fifty cents a bale. It took them a month to get it all. They camped in tents at Wayside and stole all the livestock and horses; they slaughtered a thousand cattle and a thousand hogs and destroyed ten thousand bushels of corn. A week after the Yankees took the cotton, the Union army’s General Steel arrived with transport boats “and carried the negroes all off.” He took them to Louisiana where the men were drafted to fight in the Federal army and where the women and children grew cotton for the United States government.  

Throughout 1863, Worthington explained, Colonel E. D. Osband of the Fourth Illinois Cavalry raided Washington County every week. One day Sam’s older brother Albert, who was on furlough from fighting with the First Mississippi Regiment of the Confederate Army, was napping when a Negro servant came into the house, yelling, “The Yankees are coming!” Albert ran out of the house and into a patch of weeds behind the mansion. Unfortunately Albert’s prized hunting hounds went baying after him. A Yankee followed the hounds, and from inside the house Sam heard a single shot from a Sharps rifle. Sam and his mother ran immediately to find Albert, and as they approached they heard someone in the group of Yankees that surrounded the mortally wounded Albert say, “Beat the Rebel’s brains out with your gun before the lieutenant comes up, it will never do to let him hear him say you shot him after he surrendered.” The Yankee stepped up to Albert and raised the butt of his rifle, but Sam and his mother threw themselves over his body. They would have given their lives, Worthington remembered,

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“to shield him, if possible, from the murderous blows of this human brute.” Just then, though, another Yankee called out, “Wait, you are too late, here comes the lieutenant.” They carried Albert’s bleeding body into the house, where he suffered for several tortuous hours before he passed away. “I only mention this in passing,” Worthington said, “to show that the planters and their families were made to drink from the cup of bitterness to its very dregs.”

Worthington explained that the war, tragic though it was, was dwarfed by the even greater calamity of Reconstruction. The floodgates of the Yankee North were opened and there “swarmed down upon this unhappy county, as well as all other parts of the South, the refuse of the social state, vagabonds who were more than a match for justice, bankrupt existences, consciences that had filled their schedules, scoundrels reduced to indigence, rogues who had missed the wages of roguery....Now indeed had evil days fallen upon us.” In addition to this “putrid mass” of immigrants, Washington County “had a negro sheriff, a ‘black and tan’ board of supervisors, negro clerks of the courts, negro magistrates and constables.” Law and order established and maintained through the leadership of honorable men was prostituted to the base and lawless desires of carpetbaggers and blacks.

As Worthington’s reminiscences neared their end, he called his audience back to their noble heritage: “the old chivalrous slaveholding aristocracy, to whom my heart ever warms.” Despite the tragedy of war with its death and destruction, despite the horrors inflicted on Mississippi by “Negro domination” during Reconstruction, Delta residents could forever look to those who preceded them, those who “embodied all those generous

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9 Ibid., 361-62.  
10 Ibid.
virtues which belong to chivalry, disinterestedness, contempt of danger, unblemished honor, knightly courtesy.” They could look to the past, the rich history of the South with its glories untarnished by time. “As I sit here now,” Worthington remembered, “I can see it in all its beauty, as it once was. In my mind’s eye, it is summer again, all gold and green. Avenues of magnolia trees in bloom rise up before me. In the leafy branches sit mockingbirds singing. In the borders are flowers dreamingly waving their fair heads.” Though the South is now so “changed,” so “desolate,” the history of the South and the nobility of Old Regime “echo through the centuries like spirit voices.” 11

The history of the South, Worthington believed, ought to deepen its hearers’ roots. And it did. His story—the story of so many white southerners—was one in which everyone had a belonging. It was primarily a story of powerful white men. The history of African Americans, the history of women, the history of the working class and immigrants—these were auxiliaries to the larger story of benevolent white supremacy and planter hegemony; the glory and bounty of the plantation; the tragedy of Civil War; the disaster of Reconstruction; the toppling of the planter regime and its replacement by a new breed of politician motivated by lust for power rather than duty. Percy absorbed this history and it shaped his perspective on class and race relations. It also told him something about what it meant to be a man—and as such marked the beginning of a lifelong and tormented relationship with the society of the Mississippi Delta. With its prescriptive roles for masculinity, and the ways these roles were intertwined with the telling of history, Greenville society shaped Will Percy even as he never found a comfortable place within it.

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11 Ibid., 364-65.
At home that Monday night in 1910, Will Percy was exhausted and wrote only briefly in his diary before falling asleep. He wrote of Harold, and of how he longed to be with him in faraway places. Will had recently traveled to see Harold in New York. Harold loved these visits and what the energy of the city did for their friendship. “You must stay here many days,” Bruff had written to Percy before his visit. “There are so many distractions that seem to frighten away the desired mood but maybe—who knows?” Beyond this, New York was a place they could “see lots of each other and possibly even talk ‘de profundis’—but that is very difficult.”\footnote{Harold Bruff to William Alexander Percy, September 8, 1910, Percy Papers. The phrase “de profundis” possibly refers to Oscar Wilde’s famous letter to his former lover Alfred Douglas. Titled “De Profundis,” the letter was written while Wilde was in jail after having been convicted of sodomy in 1895, and was later published and became widely read as a treatise on love between men. See Oscar Wilde, \textit{De Profundis and Other Writings} (New York: Penguin, 1974); Richard Ellmann, \textit{Oscar Wilde} (New York: Vintage, 1988), 510-34; Neil McKenna, \textit{The Secret Life of Oscar Wilde} (New York: Basic Books, 2005), 420-28.} The difficulties, though, seemed less pronounced in New York than in Mississippi.

In Mississippi, the air was heavy with pressure. That summer and fall of 1910 Will’s father, LeRoy Percy, was running for re-election to the U.S. Senate. Prominent men and women came regularly to the Percy house. One evening a journalist from Jackson was in the parlor drinking whisky highballs with Will’s father when Will came home from work. “He was a shy, timid, slender, soft-spoken youth, a bit effeminate,” the journalist remembered. Will offered a hasty greeting to the visitor before going upstairs to his room. LeRoy Percy turned to his guest and said, “Fred, that’s the queerest chicken ever hatched in a Percy brood.” His son was mystifying to him. The journalist wrote that people in Greenville thought Will was “somewhat of a sissy” and that they “could not understand him.” He was a person for whom there was no category in Mississippi in
1910, though the journalist tried a few: Will seemed to him “a poet, a dreamer, an idyllist, an aristocrat by heredity, high-strung, temperamental, a lover of peace.” But he was clearly not someone who fit neatly into Greenville society, or apparently into his own home.\textsuperscript{13}

Will wrote in his diary on October 17, 1910—perhaps even the same night as this encounter with his father and the journalist—about the difficulty of living in Greenville. He was a poet above all, he felt; he was a lover of beauty, and his duty was to capture it with words. Greenville seemed too much his father’s world. It was a place with real problems that could and should be addressed by strong men with practical minds. “Poets are always needed but it takes an effort to realize it,” he wrote in his diary, “while it takes no effort to see the good a practical man with a passion for righteousness could do here.” Before going to sleep that night in October he concluded, as he would often throughout his life: “I’m the right man in the wrong place.”\textsuperscript{14}

On December 6, Will went in to his office to prepare for trial—he was arguing a railroad trust case before a jury the next two days. After the trial ended with a hung jury on Thursday, he felt his arguments before the court were “worse than mediocre” and lamented that “I cannot speak other than vaguely and unconvincing.” Also on Thursday he received a letter from Harold with details of his upcoming trip. As Will read his letter “it seemed to palpitate: poignant to the degree that rereading is almost an act of courage. He is going to our country. How I long to go with him.” But work and his father’s Senate campaign made that trip, likely to Italy, impossible. Percy still felt, though, that

\textsuperscript{13} Will Percy’s Book, Jackson Daily News, no date, clipping in Alfred A. Knopf Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas, Austin, TX.
\textsuperscript{14} William Alexander Percy Diary, October 17, 1910, Percy Papers.
“there is compensation” in the knowledge that “Hal is almost all mine when he gets over there.”

A few days later on Sunday, December 11, Percy spent two hours playing the piano and took a walk on the levee after visiting his friend Will Hardin in the hospital. Hardin, Percy noted, was “splendid, sincere, clean, brave to an extraordinary degree, also good to look at.” He wrote in his diary that night that “Harold sailed yesterday to the lands overseas and the haven where I would be.” Will Percy would see him only one more time before Harold died sometime after the summer of 1911.

This week in December 1910 illustrates the simultaneous sense of longing and belonging that shaped Will Percy as a cosmopolitan southerner. People are shaped by stories about the past, and the stories around Will Percy—the local and intimate and partisan history of white Mississippi—created in him a distinct sense of belonging. But he also loved get out from beneath those stories peopled with men so unlike himself. Throughout his life Percy longed to leave the South and be with Harold Bruff and other men. Will wrote that all his life “the sirens call and the flutes” never ceased to “sound over the hill,” and that he had a “reckless determination to spend every cent I earned on going places.” Those places—faraway places, beautiful places, exotic places—did battle with Mississippi in his experience and imagination throughout his life.

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15 William Alexander Percy Diary, December 5, 6, and 8, 1910, Percy Papers. Italics mine.
16 William Alexander Percy Diary, December 11, 1910, Percy Papers. The date of Bruff’s death is not known. His last extant letter to Percy was dated August 1911, before which their correspondence was regular. Will Percy mentioned Harold’s death in 1919 in William Alexander Percy to Carrie Stern, 7 January 1919, Percy Papers.
17 Percy, _Lanterns_, 73-74 and 142.
Percy, who lived from 1885 to 1942, witnessed and participated in a significant transitional period in southern history. During his life as a lawyer, plantation owner, and civic leader in Greenville, the American South became increasingly enmeshed—through global markets, radio waves, and telephones, among other means—with a modernizing, global world. It was during the span of his lifetime that transportation technologies such as railroads, steamships, and automobiles transformed American life: local cultures like Greenville, Mississippi, became forever disrupted by the dramatic increase in the movement of people, goods, and ideas into and out of them. Though long interdependent with the global marketplace of capital and ideas, southerners became increasingly aware of their own connectedness to the rest of the world.\(^\text{18}\)

Despite the modernization of the South during Percy's lifetime, southerners worked to construct a solid and enduring regional identity. In important ways this southern identity resisted historical change. Entrenched racism and Jim Crow laws largely withheld educational and economic opportunities from African-Americans; disfranchisement measures such as the poll tax and literacy tests restricted access to the ballot for most black and some poor whites; sharecropping kept the region's agricultural laborers largely mired in debt and poverty. In many ways a white southern identity, referred to by Percy's contemporaries as "the southern way of life," rested on this racial hierarchy white southerners thought immutable. So during an era of unprecedented growth and prosperity in American history, an era of modernization and globalization of American markets, the South and southerners both participated in and resisted this

historical change. Families like the Percys welcomed the benefits brought by London’s cotton markets and freight cars from Chicago but also insisted on an almost ahistorical instability of local race and class relations.\textsuperscript{19}

Percy’s life reflected this tension between the local and the global: though he lived and worked and died in Mississippi, he also evinced a cosmopolitan sensibility. This cosmopolitanism—a style of living marked by regular travel and crossing of regional and national boundaries, and a way of thinking marked by openness to new ideas and discomfort with the received wisdom of a traditional society—shaped him in ways as significant as his regional experience in the American South.\textsuperscript{20} He was captivated, he said, by “travel and the thought of travel,” and this regular physical and imaginative movement away from Mississippi served a crucial function in his ability to cope with the restrictive elements of southern society.\textsuperscript{21} Travel served as an outlet for his sexual expression and indeed both in his material and imaginative life the foreign served as a site of sexual, emotional, and artistic freedom. This is not to imply that Will Percy was simply oppressed by southern society—he wasn’t. But I do mean to emphasize the vexed, even tormented sense of belonging Percy had in the South. The novelist and


\textsuperscript{21} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 142.
historian Shelby Foote, who knew Percy well, perceived this about Will's place in the world: "I sometimes speculate (impossibly)," Foote once wrote to his friend Walker Percy, "on whether he should have gotten the hell out of Greenville, which he was always saying he loved yet really hated—I mean deep down. Of course he wouldn't, couldn't, but I sometimes wish to hell he had."^{22} Foote's speculation was well received by Percy, who wrote back, "Re Uncle Will: You're right."^{23} Inasmuch as Will Percy was animated by the local, drawn to live in and serve his hometown, and moved to write elegiacally about the South, he was equally compelled to leave that place. His identity, as it were, was not merely "southern," but should be seen as a push and pull, a painful but often ecstatic set of cosmopolitan journeys between the South and the world.

The concept of cosmopolitanism implies a sense of shared space—an alternative to provincialism, a free movement of people and ideas across boundaries assumed to be fixed.^{24} It also suggests that the cosmopolitan, in gaining what Ulf Hannerz calls "competencies" in understanding systems of meaning in multiple cultural contexts, gains

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a broader perspective on human relations and often embraces a form of cultural relativism. The cosmopolitan, Hannerz argues, constructs the self in a space where cultures collide and interact, overlap and intermingle. And to truly be a cosmopolitan (as opposed to a tourist, an exile, or an expatriate), one must return home and apply cosmopolitan knowledge to the local level. As such, then, cosmopolitans never feel truly at home again, and locals view them as suspect. “The cosmopolitan is someone a little unusual, one of us and yet not one of us,” Hannerz writes. “Someone to be respected for his experiences, possibly, but equally possibly not someone to be trusted as a matter of course.”25 Will Percy developed this cosmopolitan sensibility in his life, and it came into distinct conflict with his relationship to his home.

More recently Kwame Anthony Appiah has theorized that true cosmopolitanism is “rooted” or “partial” cosmopolitanism—that which at one respects the oneness of humanity across space and time as well as the local allegiances that shape day to day life.26 Likewise James Peacock in writing about the American South advocates “grounded globalism.” In his formulation “rootless globalism” can not inspire moral commitment due to its abstraction; and on the other hand, provincialism has historically led to ethnocentrism, prejudice, and violent conflict. “The solution to these problems,” Peacock writes, “lies in recognizing the strength of both forces, global and local, and in clearing paths that productively and creatively unite them.”27

I intend to place Will Percy’s life story into this context of the relationship between cosmopolitanism and provincialism. A study of Percy’s life does not reveal a

26 Appiah, Cosmopolitanism, xvii.
full picture of a cosmopolitan, nor does it reveal a full picture of a provincial. On the one hand, Percy’s travels and considerations of foreign cultures led him to new and useful ways of thinking about gender and sexuality. On the other hand, he held many of the conceits and prejudices of his time and place; and in some cases his travels (especially to Japan and Samoa) reinforced these preexisting prejudices. Percy’s story is not the story of an activist, a modern thinker with cosmopolitan values, or a man ahead of his time. His is the story of a cosmopolitan southerner, a lifelong engagement with the world and his place in it.

Will Percy’s cosmopolitanism is connected with gender and sexuality, which seem to have been at the heart of Percy’s conflict with the South. Geographer Doreen Massey has usefully connected the concept of place with the construction of gender. She insists that we view “the global as part of what constitutes the local, the outside as part of the inside,” and within that framework, that we understand the construction of gender as a process that arises out of very specific spatial and temporal circumstances. In moving throughout the world, both within and outside of the American South, Will Percy developed a cosmopolitan male sensibility. The outside world worked to construct his experience as a man in the South, and the South worked to construct his experience a man in the global world. As a southerner abroad, he experienced a different and empowering sense of sexual freedom in places such as Paris and Capri; and conversely, his foreign encounters supplied him with a language and an imaginative space through which to write about sexuality while in the South. Indeed, this cosmopolitanism is
perhaps the single most important concept in understanding how Will Percy managed living in the American South.28

Historian Peter Kolchin has recently pointed out the ways in which the field of southern history evinces a similar tension between the global and the local, vacillating between global frameworks and narrow parochialism in its scope and aims. In some areas, such as slavery, race, and gender studies, the field has produced work that locates the American South fully within a global context. In other ways the field has had a tendency to look inward to the point of provincializing itself, focusing too heavily on the region’s exceptionalism from broader trends in national and global history. Kolchin and others have recently renewed and updated the charge that C. Vann Woodward made over fifty years ago for scholars to pay more attention to how the region relates to the nation and to the world. “Properly conceived,” Kolchin argues, “southern history can—and to some extent already does—lie at the forefront of efforts to make sense of human relations around the world.”29 The most common method of exploring the global dimensions of southern history is comparison, which has long been a very fruitful area of the field, especially in the study of slavery and segregation.30

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28 Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 5.
Will Percy’s cosmopolitanism offers another way of thinking about the South in a
global context. Examining individuals who regularly move across regional and national
boundaries creates an opportunity to destabilize common categories of analysis and
highlight the ways information, identities, and ideas circulate across and between
globalization and cosmopolitan. But I do agree with Linda Colley’s recent assertion that
global developments and the transnational exchange of ideas “have never been simply
and inhumanly there.” People make history, Colley reminds us, and biography offers a
unique opportunity to track the ways individuals “were informed and tormented by
changes that were viewed at the time as transnational, and transcontinental, and even pan-
global.”\footnote{Colley, \textit{The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh}, xxxi.} Biography allows us insight into the human experience of transnational
history.
Biographies of travelers also create connections between the local and the global. In the past twenty years scholars of U.S. nationalism and American Studies have questioned the use of the nation-state as the primary category with which we organize historical study. Among other things, the nation has been criticized for being an organizing concept that manages to ignore broad international trends in history as well as local distinction within the nation. Though scholars of the U.S. South have largely remained outside of this discussion, they have much to bring to it. The South is a region whose local distinctions largely give southern studies a raison d'être; inhabitants of the South have often been thought distinct precisely because of their provinciality, their disconnectedness from the rest of the nation and the world. However, to examine the ways local experiences, ideas, and identities have been shaped by broader global phenomena is in many ways to bridge the double-edged critique of national history: the local and the foreign do not have to be exclusive categories, and indeed the study of international travel is but one way to demonstrate the porosity between them. William Alexander Percy’s life can only be understood in this context of the reciprocal relationship between regional culture and international travel. Percy’s travels led him to encounter a new and useful way of understanding history, literature, and same-sex desire that he strategically employed in navigating cultural mores regarding sexuality and manhood in the late-Victorian trans-Atlantic world.

Despite his cosmopolitan experience and imagination, Will Percy has primarily been understood as a regional figure. In the years since his death in 1942, Percy has taken on an emblematic significance concerning what it means to be an American southerner. Evidence abounds—obituaries, book reviews, scholarly essays,
reminiscences—that portrays the ways in which Percy has been called on to speak for the South. When Percy’s publishers advertised his autobiography, *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941), in the New York *Times*, they asked readers, “Is the Old South *really* gone with the wind?” and urged them to buy the book “because it is the Old South, living and incarnate.”33 When the book was reviewed, reviewers inevitably portrayed Percy within the context of his region: “Percy is the exemplar of the idealized Christian Gentleman of the Old South”; “The author is a part of his own region, and his region is a part of him. He knows the South, and loves it”; “William Alexander Percy speaks for the Southern aristocracy”; “Traditions of the Old South came naturally through his daily living”; “This book gives a perfect portrait of a southern gentleman.”34

Even in scholarly discourse, the need to use Percy as a marker for “the South,” and, oddly, the “Old South,” has been irresistible. Two works that have recently sought to challenge the field of southern studies to take new directions (as indicated by their titles, *South to a New Place* and *South to the Future*) serve as a useful starting point. Southern studies, particularly literary studies, has long been interested in the concept of “place.” Spearheaded by New Critical theorists Cleanth Brooks, Robert Penn Warren, and others, these scholars paid close attention to the ways in which the geography and topography of the South moved through the texts of southern writers, particularly Southern Renaissance writers such as William Faulkner, Thomas Wolfe, and Eudora Welty. A common way to describe the outburst of literary creativity in the South in the interwar years was to point to southern writers’ distinct sense of place: these writers had

33 New York *Times*, May 18, 1941, Knopf Papers.
34 Charleston *News and Courier*, No Date; Cleveland *Plain Dealer*, March 23, 1941; Kansas City *Star*, April 12, 1941; Cincinnati *Enquirer*, May 10, 1941; *Book of the Month News*, April 1941; all in Knopf Papers.
an agonizing relationship with the historical peculiarities of their region, and the
distinctive social features of the South created a generation of writers whose artistic
sensibility was nourished by this inwardly-directed gaze. More recently, scholars have
tried to distance themselves from this fixation on place, or at the least look for new and
different "places." "South to a New Place," the editors write, "begins to chart
connections with 'other' Souths in ways that open up spaces and places from which we
might read the region as a site of exchange," with the hope that literary studies will begin
to "tie the mythic southern balloon down to earth."36

South to a New Place is a remarkable collection of essays that marks a significant
shift in southern literary studies towards an international, interdisciplinary model.

However, as if to punctuate the book's methodological distance from the old model of
inwardly focused South-gazing, the editors resort to a well-worn trope when they refer to
"William Alexander Percy, whose Lanterns on the Levee (1941) is one of the most
nostalgic (and reactionary) of place-defining memoirs."37 In contrast to much
contemporary southern writing, which is labeled as urban, cosmopolitan, and
expansive—Lanterns on the Levee continues to serve as a signpost for the provincialism
of the South and southern studies. The editors set it alongside "place-defining fictions"

35 For works dealing with the concept of place, see Louis D. Rubin and Robert Jacobs,
Eds., The Southern Renascence: The Literature of the Modern South (Baltimore: Johns
Hopkins University Press, 1953); Louis D. Rubin, The Faraway Country: Writers of the
Modern South (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1963); Richard Gray, Southern
Aberrations: Writers of the American South and the Problems of Regionalism (Baton
Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2000); Martyn Bone, The Postsouthern Sense of
Place in Contemporary Fiction (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005);
Michael O'Brien, Placing the South (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi,
2007).
36 Suzanne W. Jones and Sharon Monteith, Eds., South to a New Place: Region,
37 Jones and Monteith, Eds., South to a New Place, 1-2.
such as the work of Sir Walter Scott, Margaret Mitchell, and Erskine Caldwell. These works are interested in the local; they have given us a unique sense of (except in the case of Scott) the South, and have played a central role in creating a narrow sense of place in southern studies.

The same type of instance occurs in *South to the Future: An American Region in the Twenty-first Century*, a collection of essays by eminent southernists on the direction of the field. The collection emphasizes the ways in which both the South and scholarship on the South is changing. One point of agreement is that “the South is no longer even perceived as standing alone. It must be seen in the larger picture.”

The region should be examined in relation to the nation, to the world, and to the “many Souths” that have developed in the twentieth century. Again, to contrast the new template of the South with the old, Percy serves as a useful marker: critic Fred Hobson writes, “Walker Percy was in many ways an effective transitional figure, linking the Old South (what else was William Alexander Percy?…) and the most recent of many New Souths (suburbs, country clubs, a more flexible idea of place).” In important ways Will Percy has been assigned an inflexible *place* and called on to represent the stasis of the old way of seeing the South. Concerning Will Percy’s lived experience, this is misleading if not altogether wrong. Furthermore, concerning the field more broadly, it seems as though our understanding of the South is broadening and internationalizing only in certain areas; it is almost as if scholars are “internationalizing” certain aspects of the South, while other monoliths—such as Will Percy—need remain thoroughly southern, “place-defining,” and even “Old

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South” for the purpose of contrast. But perhaps it is more appropriate to see the South as always having belonged in an international context, all of it, all the time; the South and the southerner have always been shaped by social, economic and cultural forces coming both from within and outside of the nation. The need to contrast new scholarship on the South in the world with certain staid images of rootedness and southerness is counterproductive to the aim of conceiving the historical South in an international context. Artificial distinctions between the New Souths and the Old South, the New being urban, cosmopolitan, and multicultural and the Old being agricultural, provincial, and paternalistic creates a binary that is not wholly useful. The South has always been all of these things to varying degrees, and has done so in an increasingly modern and international world. Rather than what southernists have called a regional sense of place, then, it would be more appropriate to apply Massey’s concept of a “global sense of place” to the study of southerners.

Through the experience of William Alexander Percy, we can follow one man across the world and attempt to understand how he experienced and perceived different cultures, and how these experiences affected his views of the South. Percy traveled to five continents and lived for brief periods in Paris, Boston, New York, and the South Seas. By using his own writings, correspondence, and diaries, and by situating these sources alongside primary and secondary sources dealing with other cultures, we can work towards a “thick description” of several different cultural contexts and how one southerner experienced them. Primary among the places Percy spent time were Greenville, Sewanee, Boston, New York, London, Paris, The Mediterranean, and Samoa.
Though he also traveled to Brazil, Cuba, Japan, Mexico, Turkey, and Africa, extant sources do not allow significant commentary on those places.  

Though Percy’s cosmopolitan experience is significant, I also want to locate him fully in the context of late nineteenth and early twentieth century South, where he was born and raised and lived and died. He was a southerner before he was a cosmopolitan. In this way, this is a story about a man deeply rooted in the history and values of a traditional society, but whose life confronted and was disrupted by modern values, foreign ideas, and historical change.

Will Percy confronted this conflict between traditional and modern values head-on. In this way my study is a significant departure from previous work on Percy, which has portrayed him as evasive and blinded to the conflicts he faced. Bertram Wyatt Brown argues that “Will Percy closed his eyes to the cultural maze in which he lived”; John Barry writes that Percy clung to “a romanticized past” in order to insulate himself from “the grit of reality”; McKay Jenkins insists that Percy was determined “to remain aloof from the historical pressures of his own time, and to ignore the discomfort of his own sexuality.”  

The list could go on. But I would like to recreate Will Percy as his contemporaries knew him: engaged with the world around him, widely read, high strung, funny and charming with a temper to be careful around. Though he did not always find satisfactory answers to the conflicts he faced—either to himself or to us—he engaged them. He was, like all of us, engaged in a conflict with history.

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41 Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 284; Barry, Rising Tide, 294; Jenkins, The South in Black and White, 103.
In writing Will Percy’s biography, I consciously avoid several types of life writing. This is not a “day to day life” biography with piles of details of Will Percy’s daily experience. The evidence does not allow for this, and where it does I have included some details and left others out in the interest of narrative. Though this is a narrative history I also avoid “dramatic biography,” in which the secret conflicts of a human life provide narrative tension that moves the story forward. Regarding Will Percy’s sexuality in particular, I do not wish this to be a piece of intrigue—as though homosexuality in particular provides narrative drive otherwise missing in a life. The implicit construction of homosexuality as a spectacle is one I wish to avoid. That said, the life story of someone like Will Percy can reveal a great deal about homosexual desire in the context of late-Victorian Mississippi. I hope to have written about this aspect of Percy’s life with the respect of a human being and the explanatory aims of a cultural historian.

The novelist David Leavitt has recently written in the *New York Times* that we have entered into an era of “post-gay fiction.” That is, fiction writers, “rather than making a character's homosexuality the fulcrum on which the plot turns, either take it for granted, look at it as part of something larger or ignore it altogether.” Stories of sexual awakening were and remain significant, but Leavitt sees it as a positive trend that writers are treating gay people as full human beings and not just sexual beings: “in most of these works being gay is not central; these are just people living their lives.” As such, the texture of these fictional worlds is richer, subtler, more fully human. Works of post-gay fiction become “about the world of that time, its political and moral geography, and therefore about history and what it means to be human, and to live in that world.”

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The situation of a biographer has similarities with and differences from the “post gay” writer of fiction. On the one hand, I am mindful of Leavitt’s advocacy of portraying the fullness of the worlds of gay people and try to do so here. On the other hand, the work of a historian is to place texts and people and ideas in historical context, to explain change over time. The world of Will Percy was not our world. In fact, not only was it not a “post-gay” world, it was a world in which the category “gay” was just coming into existence. Cultural understandings of homosexuality transitioned from a set of practices to an identity and a culture during Percy’s life time. Will Percy’s life story necessarily focuses on the ways he struggled to make sense of his desires, to vindicate and explain them to himself, to understand his desire in the context of place and time. His story is not a coming out story, nor is it a story that can ignore the question of sexuality altogether. His is a story that can shed light on a world far removed from one in which David Leavitt can write of post-gay fiction.

Two final types of life writing that I wish to avoid are the closely related genres of hagiography and what Joyce Carol Oates has called “pathography.” In the former a biographical subject is used as a model for emulation; in the latter the subject is an object of scorn. Both seem to me to be forms of autobiography insofar as they reveal more about the values and commitments of the author than the subject. In this work I hope to neither pass judgment on Will Percy—even where I am tempted—nor to portray him as

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44 Quoted in Tolson, Pilgrim in the Ruins, 12.
faultless—despite my admiration of certain of his qualities. In finding this balance I seek to explain rather than judge, understand rather than praise.

The life and world of William Alexander Percy never cease to surprise me. The values, customs, and beliefs of Percy’s place and time are not my own. During an interview with Shelby Foote, I asked him if he thought a biography of Will Percy could make a good history book. His answer was no. “Mr. Will, he represented something that is long gone,” Foote said. “The best you can do is argue with him from your modern perspective.” Though my perspective has without question shaped the questions and framework for this narrative, it is precisely that which is long gone I am interested in understanding. It is not my argument with Percy I want to reveal, but his own argument with the world he lived in.  

45 Phone interview with Shelby Foote, August 15, 2004.
Chapter 1: The Stage of Southern History

Near the end of his life, Will Percy would write that the stage of southern history was “no ordinary stage, and the play was no ordinary play.” As a boy he sat at the feet of his elders and watched this play in his imagination as they talked of the past.

The hero of the stage in the Mississippi Delta was William Alexander Percy, Will’s grandfather and namesake who was nicknamed “The Gray Eagle” during the Civil War. A four year-old William Alexander Percy came to the Mississippi Delta with his mother and older brothers after his father’s death in 1841. His father, Thomas George Percy, had purchased plantation land in the Delta in 1829 with several business partners, among them Samuel Worthington, Sr. Thomas Percy’s father, Charles Percy, arrived in the new world in 1776 having left behind two wives in England and the Caribbean. He married a third wife and established a fortune in the Louisiana territory growing indigo; the Spanish government took to him, made him a magistrate, and called him Don Carlos. In 1794 Don Carlos wrote out his will and ten days later drowned himself in the creek near his house. He was said to have tied a sugar kettle around his neck.

Thomas George grew up, like Will Percy a century later, with money and time. He spent most of his time gardening and accumulating the library of brown leather volumes that Will Percy would inherit. He loved to travel and to shop, and he wrote

home from New York to a friend that on Broadway they had been “among crowds of well
dress’d people, & been pretty well dress’d ourselves.” Will noted that the family referred
to him disdainfully as “Thomas G” because of his lack of seriousness and ambition, his
lack of valor and manhood. Will, though, felt him “a familiar and a confidant of mine”
for one main reason: “he cut no very great figure in the world. He isn’t a demanding
ancestor.” Will Percy kept his portrait above the fireplace in his home and took comfort
in his sly smile.

Thomas’s son, though, who would become “The Gray Eagle,” was different.
William Alexander Percy’s life was, according to the family legend handed down to Will,
“crowded with usefulness and honor.” He was a leader, a Civil War hero, a mythical
figure in the Delta. He was also like a weight on Will Percy’s shoulders: “When I
consider all he did and all I haven’t done,” Percy recounted, “I feel the need of taking a
good look at Thomas G., debonair and wistful, expecting nothing.” The history of the
South as embodied by the Gray Eagle was a history of gendered expectation: “you had to
be a hero or a villain or a weakling,” Percy wrote, “you couldn’t just be middling
ordinary.” Percy’s family history was replete with its scripted roles: heroes—planters
like William Alexander Percy; villains—Yankees and carpetbaggers and corrupt black
politicians during Reconstruction; and weaklings—women, enslaved blacks who needed
white guidance, and men who couldn’t fill their father’s shoes.

In the 1840s and 1850s William Alexander Percy and his family lived on their
plantation at Deer Creek, about twelve miles from Greenville. It was a full house by the
1850s with his own wife, Nannie, his brother John Walker and his wife, Fannie, and

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4 Quoted in Ibid.
5 Percy, Lanterns, 271.
another brother LeRoy, a bachelor with a reputation for gallivanting and charm. One friend remembered the antebellum Percy plantation as a hub of refined excitement with its closely cut Bermuda grass, wide hallways, and sweeping porches: it was "a worthy retreat for a family who knew what life was and how to live it."6

In 1860 when Lincoln was elected and the fervor for secession was alive throughout the South, William Alexander Percy opposed withdrawal from the Union. As one Washington County planter curtly explained, "Wealth is always conservative."7 War would be disruptive, and the Delta elite were wary of losing control of the land and labor that had made them rich. And the Mississippi Delta was among the richest regions in the nation: with a total wealth per freeman of $26,800 in 1860, Washington's neighbor Issaquena County was the second wealthiest county in America. That wealth, though, was concentrated in slaves, and hence maintaining the status quo was imperative to Delta planters. The vision of northern armies marching through the cotton fields of the Delta haunted planters, one of whom warned that war would create a Delta "where the slave should be made free and the proud southerner stricken to dust in his presence." The vision of slaves becoming citizens haunted planters to the core of their being: in Washington county in 1860, there were over 14,000 black slaves and barely 1,000 white people.8 There was not one free black man or woman in the county.9

9 Bern Keating, A History of Washington County, Mississippi (Greenville, MS: Greenville Junior Auxiliary, 1976), 32.
William Alexander Percy arranged to send his friend Jacob Shall Yerger to the Mississippi secession convention. Yerger owned over a hundred slaves and a plantation in Washington County, and he argued at the convention that constitutional protections for slavery would be more effective than southern nationhood as a means of protecting their way of life.\(^\text{10}\) He suggested Mississippi meet with other southern states to try and find a way to avoid secession. When it came time to vote, though, the delegates voted eighty-four to fifteen to leave the Union.\(^\text{11}\)

Once his state voted to secede, Percy committed himself to the Confederacy. He organized a local militia unit he called the "Swamp Rangers," which became a part of the army of Mississippi. Percy fought in Mississippi until the fall of Vicksburg in July of 1863. He was then transferred to Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and saw action in the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor, where Confederate soldiers killed seven thousand Union troops in half an hour. Percy joined Jubal A. Early's cavalry advance up the Shenandoah Valley, reaching almost to Washington DC; it was during this operation that William Alexander Percy was nicknamed "The Gray Eagle of the Valley" for his heroism in battle.\(^\text{12}\)

While the Gray Eagle was at war, his wife Nannie managed the plantation and took care of four young children. Like other white women in the plantation South, her wartime experience consisted mainly of inventing ways to survive.\(^\text{13}\) The story that came

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\(^{11}\) Keating, A History of Washington County, Mississippi, 34.

\(^{12}\) Baker, The Percys of Mississippi, 5-7; Wyatt-Brown, The House of Percy, 175.

down to Will Percy was that “when the effect of the Emancipation Proclamation was realized by the slaves, they became restless, unruly, even dangerous.”\textsuperscript{14} Nannie, in a position “of great difficulty, if not peril,” called the remaining slaves on Percy Place together for a talk. She demanded they be in the fields at sun-up, and the next morning they were. She set up her rocking chair at the end of the turn-row, and sat and made sure the slaves did their work. In this way, she earned the Percys enough money to survive for a year after the war. “At that time,” Percy recalled, “my grandmother was twenty nine, very pretty, with a keen sense of the absurd, and how she could play Straus waltzes!”\textsuperscript{15}

The antebellum and Civil War periods were significant in Percy family lore, but the main stage was Reconstruction. After the Civil War white Mississippians by and large accepted defeat. The primary condition they wanted after the war was to have control over property and labor, and over their local governments—a condition that had almost everything to do with controlling the state’s 600,000 new black citizens. Percy wrote that the stories he heard of this period as a child gave him a point of view, a mindset he could not disinherit. The story of Reconstruction was the story of southern men defending their honor. The mentality Percy believed them to embody, he said, “while certainly not appreciated or understood by me in my childhood, [it] seeped into me, colored my outlook, prescribed for me loyalties and responsibilities that I may not disdain.”\textsuperscript{16}

Will Percy learned the history of Reconstruction as a boy sitting on the porch listening to his father and his friends. “A Small Boy’s Heroes,” he called them: LeRoy

\textsuperscript{14} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 9.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{Ibid.}, 9-10.
\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Ibid.}, 73-74.
Percy, Captain J. S. McNeilly, Captain W. W. Stone, General T. C. Catchings, and Mr. Everman. They would sit and talk, and Percy recounted that to him as a boy they were not just men sitting and talking about politics; they were heroes in an “epic”: “They were leaders of the people, not elected or self-elected, but destined, under the compulsion of leadership because of their superior intellect, training, character, and opportunity.” ¹⁷ Not only were they central actors in this history, but their experience saturated their very language, the stories that they told. One night after listening to them on the porch, Will Percy recorded in his diary, “About the speech of that older generation there is a tense muscularity, a vigor, a classic quality which constantly delights and surprises me. The effort is gained I think by the heroic lives they have led which influences their very speech and further their fine English, undefiled by slang, flavored of the bible and the English satirists.” ¹⁸ From these men Percy received stories that helped him piece together the meaning of history in the Delta. J. S. McNeilly also wrote his version of this history down, and Will Percy celebrated its survival. Though Percy felt many of the values and perspectives of these older men were being lost and forgotten in the modern world, the lucky few might delve “into the archives of the Mississippi Historical Society, [and] come with amazement across his articles on the reconstruction period, so trenchant, so accurate, so cold with fury.” ¹⁹

The fury Percy described was common among southerners of his era, and indeed a measure remains today. The common narrative of Reconstruction that circulated on Percy’s front porch and was codified by professional historians in the early twentieth

¹⁷ Ibid., 69.
¹⁸ William Alexander Percy Diary, 16 November 1910, Percy Papers.
¹⁹ Percy, Lanterns, 67.
century was that Reconstruction was a tragedy of Republican political corruption and Yankee economic opportunism. The interests of lawful, tax-paying, land-owning southern whites were subjugated to those of northern opportunists called “carpetbaggers” and newly freed slaves. Likewise Percy cast the historical context for Reconstruction:

The white people in the whole Delta comprised a mere handful, but there were hordes of Negroes. Poor wretches! For a thousand years and more they had been trained in tribal barbarism, for a hundred and more in slavery. So equipped, they were presented overnight with freedom and the ballot and told to run the river country. They did. They elected Negroes to every office. We had a Negro sheriff, Negro justices of the peace, Negro clerks of court. There were no white officials, not even carpetbaggers. It was one glorious orgy of graft, lawlessness, and terrorism.20

Mississippi’s official textbook for elementary school children concurred with this view: after the Civil War, “The entire political power of the state was thrown into the hands of a few adventurers from the Northern States and a host of ignorant Negroes,” and “the inhabitants of the state were compelled to submit to the presence of armed bodies of Negroes, commanded by officers of their own color of the most dangerous and turbulent type.”21 J. S. McNeilly directed his cold fury primarily at Mississippi’s northern-born Reconstruction governor, Adelbert Ames, whose “mission of race equality, with his

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20 Ibid., 274.
21 Mary V. Duval, History of Mississippi and Civil Government: Compiled and Arranged For the Use of the Public Schools of Mississippi (Louisville, KY: Courier-Journal Job Printing Company, 1892), 220.
ambition of leadership and the personal aims he sought out of it, were superior to all other considerations.” He wrote that Reconstruction created an unbearable tax burden on white planters that amounted to “robbery by a gang of negro officials flaunting in their faces.”

Indeed, all the sources available to Will as a boy told this familiar narrative of Reconstruction.

Demographically, Percy’s description of postbellum Mississippi was accurate: the state was flooded with new citizens. Six hundred thousand former slaves were now enfranchised citizens in Mississippi as a result of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth amendments to the constitution. In the Delta, blacks outnumbered whites on average eight to one. The prospect of “Negro domination,” combined with the harsh economic realities of the postwar South, created grave anxieties within the minds of planters such as the elder William Alexander Percy. Another Delta planter’s sentiments captured the climate among Mississippi whites during Reconstruction: “We are so oppressed with carpetbag and negro rule and with all the Yankees, that we the southern people feel we have quite gone out of existence except to work very hard for bare subsistence.”

William Alexander Percy, the Gray Eagle, made it his ambition to redeem his county from what he felt was a corrupt and tyrannical Reconstruction government—even if it required extra-legal methods. As Will told it, he was chosen for this: “The desperate whites though negligible in number banded together to overthrow this regime and chose Fafar as their leader. His life work became the re-establishment of white supremacy.” In 1873 the Gray Eagle organized a “taxpayer’s convention,” a coalition of white

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landowners, in order to create a strategy to unseat carpetbaggers and blacks in the elections of 1874. Percy’s main task was to figure out how to convince local blacks, a vast majority, to vote the Democratic ticket. To do so, Percy capitalized on a feud between Washington County’s two leading black politicians, William Grey and J. Allen Ross. Ross was moderate and friendly to planter interests, while Grey was seen as a radical by the local elite. Both men announced their intent to run for sheriff of Washington County in the summer of 1874. The local white newspaper, the *Greenville Times*, reported that Grey’s announcement of his candidacy amounted to a call to race war: “He was bound to be sheriff,” the paper reported, “Governor Ames was going to send him a thousand stand of arms, to secure his election, and, if necessary, he would kill all the white men, women and children and even children in their cradle in Washington County.” The article finished with an exhortation to its white readers: “You must all load your shotguns and have them ready.” A few days after his announcement of his candidacy, Grey and his followers mounted what the *Greenville Times* called a “murderous attack” on Greenville. In the melee, for which historical evidence is thin, J. Allen Ross was shot and killed and William Grey was run out of town by a local militia organized by whites.

With these two powerful men either dead or disappeared, Percy began to assemble a political machine more palatable to planters. In order to do so he had to resort to less than savory methods, which were not recorded in detail. Those details were not as important as the end itself in the stories white Deltans told themselves about Reconstruction. Will Percy reported, “That work required courage, tact, intelligence,

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24 Quoted in McNielly, “Climax and Collapse,” 378.
patience; it also required vote-buying, the stuffing of ballot-boxes, chicanery, intimidation. Heart-breaking business and degrading, but in the end successful. At terrific cost was white supremacy re-established.\textsuperscript{26}

In 1874 the Gray Eagle assembled a fusion ticket for the Democratic party in Washington County that included black and white politicians, and himself as state senator. His cohort won the 1874 election, and Democrats throughout the state followed suit. When Democrats regained a majority in the state legislatures in 1874, they immediately created a committee to investigate the Reconstruction Governor Adelbert Ame's administration. On March 14, 1875, William Alexander Percy read twenty-one articles of impeachment to the state senate, and Ames resigned.\textsuperscript{27} A Delta planter and friend of the Percys, John Marshall Stone, was placed in the governor's mansion.

The "Mississippi Plan," as this strategy for the redemption of the state has come to be known, centered around the use of violence and the threat of violence to keep blacks away from the polls. It began in the late 1860s with the Ku Klux Klan intimidating blacks and warning them to stay at home come voting day. During the election of 1874 a primary tactic of Mississippi's white groups such as the White League, the White Line, and the Regulators was to show up at multi-racial Republican events and provoke and heckle the crowd in order to draw them into violent confrontation. In 1874 and 1875, there were race riots in Vicksburg, Clinton, and Yazoo City, in which a handful of whites and hundreds of blacks were killed. The strategy worked. In Yazoo county, for example, which had a black population of 12,000, there were precisely seven

\textsuperscript{26} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 274.  
\textsuperscript{27} Baker, \textit{Percys of Mississippi}, 10.
votes cast for the Republican party. \(^{28}\) Governor Adelbert Ames, the most hated man in Mississippi, was prescient in his summary of what had happened: “Yes, a revolution has taken place—by force of arms—and a race are disfranchised—they are to be returned to a condition of serfdom—an era of second slavery….Time will show you how accurate my statements are.” \(^{29}\)

Disfranchisement and political violence aimed at blacks, though, was an unstated part of the story of Reconstruction Will Percy inherited and reproduced. LeRoy Percy, Will’s father, called the violence of Redemption a “desperate remedy for a helpless, scourged, and torn people.” \(^{30}\) Of the Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction, Will noted that it had played a “desperate but on the whole so helpful a part in keeping the peace and preventing mob violence.” \(^{31}\) The fact that the Ku Klux Klan was itself mob violence, or that it was precisely mob violence that was central to the overthrow of Reconstruction in Mississippi, was precluded in white Mississippian’s narratives of their history. These stories of belonging figured their heroes to be virtuous, and when not virtuous at least “desperate.” There was no place, as there is now, for a more detached perspective open to the possibility of alternate, contesting narratives. One that would include, for example, details of the tactics whites used to regain political control of Mississippi—such as this note placed on the door of a Freedmen’s Bureau agent by the KKK, signed by “Bloody Bones”:


\(^{29}\) Lemann, 152.


Dam your Soul! The horrible sepulcher and bloody moon has at last arrived.
Some live today, tomorrow “Die.” We the undersigned understand through our
Grand Cyclops that you have recommended a big Black Nigger for Male Agent
on our nu rode; wel sir, Jest you understand in time if he gets on the rode you can
make up your mind to pull roape....Beware! Beware! Beware! Beware!32

The story of Mississippi’s so-called redemption in 1874 and 1875 was handed
down to Percy as a story of gallantry. It was a story that gave Percy his heroes and his
villains. In his autobiography he filtered this story through the lens of himself as a young
boy, sitting on his porch listening to his father and his friends. His summation of
Reconstruction and redemption gives us a clear account of how his values were shaped
by history, and more specifically how he was imbued as a child with a male-centered
narrative of his own local history. He recounted sitting at the feet of his heroes:

These were the men who, before I was a listener, bore the brunt of the Delta’s
fight against scalawaggery and Negro domination during reconstruction, who
stole the ballot boxes which, honestly counted, would have made every county
official a Negro, who had helped shape the Constitution of 1890, which in effect
and legally disfranchised the Negro, who still earlier had sent my grandfather to
the legislature to help rid the state of “Old Ames,” the carpetbag Governor.33

32 James W. Garner, Reconstruction in Mississippi (New York: The MacMillan
Company, 1902).
33 Percy, Lanterns, 68-69.
History was centrally important to Will Percy’s sense of belonging, his views of race and politics in the South. This history, which he himself later re-told, was a story that informed his sense of belonging in the Mississippi Delta. “Some of us still remember,” he wrote, “what we were told of those times, and what we were told inclines us to guard the ballot as something precious, something to be withheld unless the fitness of the recipient be patent. We are the ones I suppose who doubt despairingly the fitness of Negroes and (under our breath be it said) of women.”

With the power of the state back in the hands of white men, planters like the Gray Eagle turned their focus to attracting northern investment, particularly in railroads that would connect the Mississippi Delta to the world, and in building levees that would prevent the overflows of the Mississippi river. Redemption provided access to the political power that Percy leveraged to bring prosperity to the Delta. Percy and other planters like him stacked the local Levee Board with those sympathetic to planter interests—central among which was the desire to infuse federal funds into the building of levees. He canvassed the Delta garnering support for railroads and played a pivotal role in bringing the Greenville, Columbus & Birmingham Railroad to the Delta. Connecting

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34 Ibid, 274.
35 Henry T. Ireys, “County Seats and Early Railroads,” in McCain and Capers, Eds., Memoirs of Henry Tillinghast Ireys, 324. One encounter W. A. Percy had while canvassing for support for the railroads usefully demonstrates the variety of perspectives in the Delta, and the ambivalence some felt towards technology and progress. One local farmer told him, “I am opposed to the railroad; there ain’t no accomodations about them. Now the boats are all right. When Captain White lands the Pargoud, you can go aboard and get a good drink of liquor with ice in it, and the captain will take one with you, and he ain’t in no hurry. He will talk with you and give you plenty of time for your liquor to cool and drink it, but them railroads come like a streak of lightning through your field, scaring your mules, killing your chickens and hogs—stopping about a minute for you to
the Mississippi Delta to the larger world was a central ambition of men like William Alexander Percy.

Creating a plantation empire out of the wilderness. Fighting valiantly in the Civil War. Overthrowing "negro rule" during Reconstruction and them re-establishing the wealth and power of the Delta. This is the story of his history that Will Percy heard and inserted himself into. The many stories he never heard, or heard as auxiliaries to this main story, included those of blacks struggling for land ownership; immigrants coming to the Delta to begin life anew; the stories of most women; the reaction of blacks to the violent overthrow of the experiment in democracy that was Reconstruction.36

One such reaction that must have been common among frustrated blacks, whose hope for civic participation was circumscribed by the "revolution" of 1874 and 1875, was that of a black Mississippian who wrote in 1878 to the Delta governor John Marshall Stone, who replaced Ames. His was the voice of not a few of the state's majority black population: "Infamous Scoundrel!" the note began. "You Democratic devil; you unjust cowardly dog.... The southern people are a Whisky-drinking, tobacco-chewing,

get off or on—nothing to drink aboard. I was going from Vicksburg to Jackson about a year ago, and I got off at Edwards and got a drink, and I told the cap'en of the train to wait a moment, I was going to get a drink of liquor, for I was mighty dry. Well, I hadn't more than touched the bar, hadn't even had time to order my liquor, when—off that train started. I hollered to stop and ran after it, but the blamed thing kept going faster and faster, and I had to stay in town until the next day. No, sir; there is no accomodation in a railroad, and we don't want them things in this county, killing chickens and hogs and scaring the game." Quoted in Ibid., 324-25.

Constant-spitting, Negro-hating, Negro-killing, red-handed, ignorant uneducated, uncivilized set of devils.... I will soon come to Jackson to kick your ass. You thief.” Not having quite said his share, the man wrote Governor Stone again a year later: “You good for nothing nasty, stinking, Southern Son of a Solid South.... All the Southern people are Barbarians, a Whisky drinking, Tobacco-chewing, Constant-Spitting, nasty, dirty, Corn Bread eating, molasses-licking, Fat-back swallowing, Negro hating, Negro-killing, negro-women ravishing, lousy set.... Your wife is a nasty wench.”

But this was not a voice Will Percy would have ever heard. Insulated in his life from most blacks and from the working class generally, Will Percy’s view of history was equally insular. The view of his people and his past that he grew up with was more accurately captured in a history of Mississippi written in 1891, when Will was six years old. The history paid tribute to his grandfather,

The most prominent figure in the Yazoo and Mississippi Delta....Here was the very heart of what is known as the race question, involving at the time of a great crisis the peace of the State. Here was decided the stability of the levee system, upon which so largely depended the revenues and property of Mississippi. Of these questions Colonel Percy was the recognized leader and guide of his people. The political redemption, the material development and the ultimate prosperity of the Delta was the central idea of his life. He was a pioneer and chief promoter of the railroads which at last entered and threaded Mississippi’s fertile low country, and so wonderfully multiplied its comforts and wealth. Leading his people in that

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profound movement which resulted in the overthrow of base and alien rule in 1875, Colonel Percy....possessed that highest of nature’s gifts, personal magnetism, that drew him to people of all classes, creeds and conditions.\textsuperscript{38}

Perhaps more pertinent for understanding the pressures handed to Will Percy as a young man, the gendered expectations for the budding gentleman, was the Episcopal church’s obituary of his grandfather, who died in 1888:

In the death of the Honorable William A. Percy, the Diocese, in common with all the people of the commonwealth, has sustained a loss that cannot be expressed in words....The example of his noble life is a priceless legacy as a model for those who survive him, and which we commend to the young men of Mississippi as the best type of manhood, that of a Christian gentleman.\textsuperscript{39}

Onto this stage of heroes and villains, full of stories, Will Percy was born in May of 1885, six months after his parents’ marriage.

\textsuperscript{38} Quoted in Lowry and McCardle, \textit{A History of Mississippi}, 599-600.  
Chapter 2: The Planter’s Son

“Heaven help parents worrying over what to do with children a little out of the ordinary!”

William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*

In May of 1885, the month Will Percy was born, Greenville, Mississippi was a frontier town struggling to carve its place in the world. It was an ideal port city, between New Orleans and Memphis on the Mississippi River, and its boosters were busy promoting Greenville as a good place for business and investment. The pages of the Greenville *Times* displayed notices of land for sale and industry in need of capital, and merchants advertised their plows and razors and pistols and chandeliers in large black font. The newspaper urged its readers, “If you have goods to sell, advertise in the Greenville Times. If you have goods to buy, read the advertisements in the Greenville Times.” And as if to give a collective symbolic unwelcome to the future poet William Alexander Percy, the Greenville paper noted, on the day after his birthday: “Stories of fiction, and poetical contributions always declined.”

After the Civil War, the Percys had become a city family. Though Thomas G. Percy’s sons had settled on the Percy plantation in the 1830s, after the war the Gray Eagle swapped one hundred acres of Deer Creek land for a house on the corner of Locust and Washington Streets in Greenville. There he and his wife Nannie raised their five children, Fannie, LeRoy, John Walker, William Armstrong, and Lady.\(^1\)

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1 *Greenville Times*, May 16, 1885. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.  
Not far away a Frenchman named Captain Ernest Bourges, who had served under General Beauregard in the Confederate Army, bought a plantation called Woodstock in 1867. He renamed it "Camelia" after his wife and they moved in with their four beautiful daughters. One of these daughters was Camille, who would in time become Mrs. LeRoy Percy. Bourges eventually lost the plantation and moved his family to Greenville, where he tried and failed at several different business ventures. He was remembered as a success only at raising roses and daughters. His grandson, Will Percy, wrote of him, "He should have been provided with dominoes, a desiccated crony or two, a siphon, a bottle of Amer Picon, and a corner in a dingy café where some broad-bosomed madame queued it behind an elevated guichet.... Instead, his life petered out in a drab little country town."  

In 1884 a twenty-three-year-old LeRoy Percy began courting Camille despite her family's reservations. The Bourgeses were suspect of the Percys—how could one account for their ancestry, which began with the thrice married, mysterious Don Carlos who flung himself into a creek? While the young couple courted, the elder Camille sat in the parlor and chaperoned. The handsome young couple, though, managed to escape her watchful eye on at least one occasion. The soon-to-be parents were married in December of 1884.

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William Alexander Percy was born on May 15, 1885. Fifty six years later, just before his death, he recounted that his birth “overjoyed no one.” In the intervening years he came to terms with his unwantedness with varying degrees of success.⁶

Will Percy’s recounting of the early years of his life was devoid of mention of his father. In fact, he commented that even as he didn’t impress his parents with his birth, “they impressed me not at all....I have no single memory of them dating from the first four years of my life.” Percy’s erasure of their memory takes on more significance when he tells that replacing them were his grandmother and his black nursemaid, Nain. In what was another common theme in his view of blacks, Will Percy figured Nain as the possessor of a special spiritual and emotional wisdom. Percy’s perspective on black-white relations, which we will turn to in a later chapter, was that of a white supremacist; but he was also convinced that blacks as a race possessed the interior freedom and peace he lacked.⁷

Percy’s experience as an affluent white child being raised by a black woman in the late-nineteenth century South was at once normal and exceptional.⁸ It was common for such children of the affluent to be tended to by black domestics; it was common, also, for these children to grow up and sing retrospective praises of their “mammy.” What was

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⁷ Percy, *Lanterns*, 26; McKay Jenkins, *The South in Black and White*, p #.
not common in Will Percy’s case was the extent to which he *identified* with her. Percy delighted in overturning stereotypes and began his recounting of his life with a non-typical account of his nursemaid. The “black mammy,” Percy noted, was supposed to be “fat and elderly and bandannaed.” Nain, though, was sixteen years old and “divinely café-au-lait.” She was beautiful, and she sang to him. Percy wrote that he likely loved her for her youth and zeal and sympathy, though he mentioned the possibility that “in her I found the comfort of the womb, from which I had so recently and unexpectedly been ejected.” Having been ejected from his mother’s womb, he recounted over fifty years later, he found acceptance from Nain: “Chiefly I remember her bosom: it was soft and warm, an ideal place to cuddle one’s head against.” Percy recalled that his first memory of his life was of Nain singing to him—she would hold him in her arms and rock him, and though Percy said he didn’t remember the words or the tune he could not forget “what they did to me.”

The effect of Nain’s singing and her presence was indeed long lasting and centrally important to Percy’s conception of himself and his relationship to people of color. “It made me feel so lost and lonely that tears would seep between my lids and at last I would sob until I shook against her breast.” She would try to comfort him, but Percy explained that her singing filled him with a vast loneliness. Specifically, her singing awakened “kindred compassions in the core of my being.” Percy’s experience in Nain’s singing bosom imparted to him what he felt was a true empathy with the loneliness and alienation of blacks. He figures his literal contact with her body as a moment in which she transferred to him a special wisdom: “she innocently endowed me

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with a sense of the tears of things,” but she also filled “a baby’s vacant heart” with music that “guided me more sure-footedly and authoritatively through life than all ten of the commandments.” She taught him about music, about the body as containing not only flesh and blood but traces of the sublime. He contrasts Nain’s mysteriously powerful body with that of white southern society: the “Negro spirituals” in her bosom were more effective in guiding him through life than the Ten Commandments; her singing voice was more effective in transmitting love than was his own mother’s.\(^\text{10}\)

We will never know the veracity of Percy’s first memory, but its significance lies not in its literal truth about his childhood experience. Percy even admitted that Nain existed in his memory “more as an emanation or aura than as a person,” and this suggests important connections between the remembering Percy of Lanterns on the Levee and the child Will Percy. Percy’s representation of his infant experience was a narrative of parental rejection and subsequent acceptance into the bosom of a black woman. Significantly, Percy explicitly pointed out that this black woman was not “fat and elderly and bandannaed.” Nain was a sexual creature, her “café-au-lait” body even being a marker of interracial sex. The juxtaposition of his own mother’s womb and Nain’s breast suggests a theme that repeats itself throughout Percy’s autobiography, indeed his life: Percy often figured his family life in terms that suggest rejection; in contrast, he figured blacks as spiritually, emotionally, and sexually free. He felt more at rest in the arms of Nain than his mother. It was Nain who filled his vacant baby’s heart with music.

Just as Percy claimed that “every respectable white baby had a black mammy,” he also pointed out that “Any little boy who was not raised with little Negro children might

\(^{10}\) Ibid., 27.
just as well not have been raised at all” (of his adult life, he would say, “In the South every white man worth calling white or a man is owned by some Negro”). Though Will had a younger brother that was doubtless his companion and playmate, Will did not include him as a character in his childhood. Instead, Percy imagined his childhood as primarily learning the finer points of life from his black playmates. Of his friend Skillet, he wrote, “He is all my memory records of what must have been long months of my childhood; all others it seems were lay figures.” His white friends enter his narrative later; his parents are a fleeting presence; but his servant’s children played a central part in his portrayal of childhood. Percy wrote of playing with these friends in the early 1890s—a few years after blacks had been disfranchised by the Mississippi constitution of 1890, and a few years before the United States Supreme Court would decree the lawfulness of racial segregation in Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896). From his memoirist’s perspective in the early 1940s, the racial strictures created in the 1890s had hardened into the “southern way of life,” which included interracial friendships that ended with puberty.\(^{11}\)

Skillet was the son of Will’s grandmother’s cook, and a world-class crawfisher. After an overflow of the Mississippi river, Greenville’s roadside ditches filled with mud and crawfish. From Skillet, Will learned that crawfish could often be found inside a hollow bone lying in the bottom of a ditch. From Skillet also, Will learned of conversation and imagination. Skillet “outdistanced any white child in inventiveness, absurdity, and geniality” in conversation, and had a penchant for the fantastical. One day the two boys were sitting in a rowboat in Mere’s backyard, and, looking up at a pack of circling buzzards, Skillet told Will that if they landed on the ground the world would

\(^{11}\) Ibid., 46-49 and 287.
catch on fire. Percy doubted him like a “horrid little white realist,” but as the buzzards moved closer and closer to the earth, his anxiety and expectation heightened. When a buzzard landed and the world didn’t catch fire, Percy demanded an explanation: Skillet shrugged and told Percy that the buzzard had landed not on the earth but on a wood chip.

Percy wrote that the retelling of such a story was “one of the few pleasures that endure.” His enjoyment of this recollection as an adult, though, rested on a specific hope: “I like to imagine that Skillet is not in jail or dead,” Percy blithely commented, “but that he lords it in a Pullman car or a pulpit, or perhaps he has a farm of his own.” Percy’s childhood narrative relies at once on the glorification of perpetual black childishness and the inability of black adult economic and civic participation. Percy’s memory, charming though he wanted it to be, illuminates not only Percy’s identification with and love of blacks—it also demonstrates a psychological conceit necessary for the maintenance of segregation: blacks are fit for childhood companionship but not for adult political equality.

Percy’s tale of Skillet’s imaginative excellence reveals race and class prejudice as well as a distinct admiration for black access to the supernatural. Percy ascribed to blacks a primitive connection with the earth: Skillet was not a “horrid little white realist” but had the capacity for wonder. Percy would reaffirm this perception while traveling, as we will see in a later chapter.

Percy extended this theme in discussing his trips to his Aunt Nana’s farm in Virginia, where his parents “deposited” him during the summers of his childhood. Again

Percy figured his contact with blacks not just as a coincidence of southern society but as a result of his parents’ action. And also again his representation of blacks is marked by unrestrained awe interspersed with white supremacist conceits; the servant Amelia’s children on the Virginia farm, for example, were like “satyrs and fauns” even though Percy “often wondered who and where their father was.” A brief inquiry led him to believe the children’s “father or set of fathers” was some sort of traveling salesman. The rhythm of Percy’s race portrayal is marked by call-and-response in his own mind between luminous black other-worldliness and southern segregation. However, the primary motif in Percy’s portrayal of his interracial childhood experience is that of spiritual content, even redemption. While he playfully told of his Virginia summer games, the hunts for treasures in the river, the making of apple cider, in the end a more profound consequence of Percy’s black friendships emerged:

From Amelia’s children I learned not only gaiety and casualness and inventiveness, but the possibility that mere living may be delightful and that natural things which we ignore unless we call them scenery are pleasant to move among and gracious to recall. Without them it would probably never have occurred to me that to climb an aspen sapling in a gale is one of those ultimate experiences, like experiencing God or love, that you need never try to remember because you can never forget.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) *Ibid.*, 54-55.
Will Percy represented his childhood friendships with blacks as a portal to spiritual awakening. For Percy, childhood was a space in which interracial friendship on naively equal terms was permissible. Unlike adult blacks, who were illegitimate fathers or, at best, porters and preachers, black children (and mammies) were the repositories of spiritual and emotional knowledge. Later in his life Percy used the same language to portray Samoans, which suggests that Percy’s scripting of spiritual freedom had much to do with escaping the moral and economic strictures of white bourgeois society. Black children, like Samoans, were comfortably outside the reach of the deadening effects of modern capitalism and its attendant morality. The irony of Percy’s positioning of himself as superior in terms of class, yet spiritually inferior because of his class, was not lost on him. Indeed, it was at the heart of one of his great struggles.

When LeRoy Percy does appear in Percy’s narrative of his own childhood, he rejects the desires of his son and demands obedience. His first action in Lanterns on the Levee is significant. Will’s Aunt Nana was reading to the young boy from a sentimental novel, In Silken Chains, which Percy called “the most moving book ever written.” At “an unspeakably poignant climax,” LeRoy Percy appeared and demanded they stop reading. “‘Nana, what in the world do you mean by reading such trash to that child?’” he asked. “Aunt Nana was crushed, I was desolate, he was adamant. We asked weakly what please could we substitute, and unhesitatingly he answered: ‘Ivanhoe.’” Thus Will Percy was inured to the fictional world of martial valor and gallant heroism. However, “far from
being inspired to knightly heroism,” Percy “grew infatuated with the monastic life, if it could be pursued in a cave.”¹⁴

In what became a common trope when referring to his father in his memoir, Percy suppressed his anger towards his father and complimented him. In his compliment, though, we see some measure of the son’s torment:

It was hard having such a dazzling father; no wonder I longed to be a hermit. He could do everything well except drive a nail or a car; he was the best pistol shot and the best bird-shot, he made the best speeches, he was the fairest thinker and the wisest, he could laugh like the Elizabethans, he could brood and pity till sweat covered his brow and you could feel him bleed inside.

To Will, LeRoy Percy was “dazzling.” As with a dazzling light, one can admire it from a distance but not get close to it. Will felt lifelong and intense rejection from his father, but also a fascination and even yearning for his acceptance. He wrote that his appearances at the Virginia farm during the summers were “electric advents,” and that his returns from bird hunts had “a home-from-the-wars, home-from-the-seas, ballad brilliance.”¹⁵ Of Will, though, LeRoy was baffled. “It must have been hard for father,” Will wrote, to have a “sissy” for a son. Will remembered his father looking at him “quizzically” with “a far-away expression.”¹⁶

¹⁴ _Ibid._, 56-57.
¹⁵ _Ibid._, 57-58.
¹⁶ _Ibid._, 126 and 128.
LeRoy Percy was born in 1861 and rarely left the Mississippi Delta except for vacation travels and a brief stint in the United States Senate in 1910—11. He went to the University of the South and to the University of Virginia law school, and he made his living by his legal practice and plantation work. Not precisely a planter, he could more accurately be described as a corporation lawyer who owned and managed plantations; they were investments rather than places of residence and daily routine. Like his father the Gray Eagle, levees, railroads, and the law were the objects of his regular attentions. He was the lawyer for the Yazoo-Mississippi Levee District, the chairman for Washington County’s Democratic Executive Committee, legal counsel to the Illinois-Central Railroad, and a Captain in the Levee Guard. Percy’s law partner Judge Yerger (who had earlier gone to the state secession convention and advocated loyalty to the Union) went to the state constitutional convention of 1890 and urged legislators not to disfranchise blacks in the new state constitution. Far from a racial liberal, Yerger spoke for Deltans like the Percys whose interests dominated state politics. Because of the large number of black voters in the Delta, who were coerced by whites into voting the Democratic ticket, Delta interests such as levee building, school funding, and opposition to prohibition were regularly successful. The Mississippi Constitution of 1890, in the end, disfranchised African-American voters and worked to secure a more equitable representation from non-Delta counties. After 1890, the Delta’s dominance in state politics waned.¹⁷

LeRoy Percy, though, built his law practice and plantations into highly successful operations, and his connections with power brokers increased. In November 1902

¹⁷ Baker, Percys of Mississippi, 17-18.
Stuyvesant Fish, president of the Illinois-Central railroad, brought his friend Theodore Roosevelt to the Delta for a bear hunt. “I am only going because I want to hunt,” Roosevelt wrote to Fish before the trip, “and do see that I get the first bear without fail.” LeRoy Percy joined the group and Holt Collier, the legendary Delta bear hunter and former slave, promised to deliver the anxious president a bear. At the hunting camp when the Rough Rider told Collier that he must have a bear, Collier told him that he’d lasso one if he had to. Roosevelt laughed in disbelief, but LeRoy Percy told the president that he had known Holt Collier since he was a boy and that he never failed on his promises. The next morning, Collier positioned Roosevelt in a spot where he would see a bear and told him not to move, but the impatient president returned to camp when he could no longer hear Collier’s hounds. When Collier flushed out a bear and the president was gone, Collier lassoed the bear with a rope. The president and his friends returned astonished at Holt Collier but Roosevelt refused to shoot a restrained animal. When reporters got word of this, they told the story in endless detail and the phrase “Teddy Bear” entered into the national lexicon.\(^18\)

LeRoy Percy loved to hunt, gamble, drink, take risks, and politic. He never understood his effeminate son, who lacked the desire to partake in manly vices. “Drunkenness made me sick,” Will wrote, “gambling bored me, rutting per se, unadorned, I considered overrated and degrading. In a charitable mood one might call me an idealist, but, more normally, a sissy.” Will characterized himself as a “sissy” directly in relation to LeRoy. “It must have been difficult for father,” he wrote. “Enjoying good liquor, loving to gamble, his hardy vices merely under control, he

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sympathized quizzically and said nothing.” LeRoy’s silence was oppressive in Will Percy’s life but his presence was also stabilizing. As a boy, he looked upon his father with awe and fear. He sat at his feet as LeRoy and his cronies talked politics and hunting on the front porch; he sucked the mint sugary whisky from the bottoms of mint julep cups when the men were finished with them; he looked to these men as the embodiment of wisdom and virtue even as he increasingly sensed that he could not fully occupy their world. They talked of politics—“It is bitter as gar-broth, LeRoy,” General Catchings, the local congressman, would say—and of levees, the cotton crop, their travels to far-off lands where they hunted boar and elk and antelope. Will Percy recalled their hatred of William Jennings Bryan and his free silver platform in the 1896 presidential election; their love of Grover Cleveland; their never-ending resolve to build up levees in order to prevent floods. Class interests were central to their political views but also their conceits about other white people, which Will Percy adopted as his own.¹⁹

At the hands of a series of personal tutors, Will Percy had a very different education from the one LeRoy and his friends gave him. The distinction between his father’s perspective, which was utilitarian, political, and economically motivated, and that of his educators, which was idealistic, humanistic, and liberal, was a tension that remained with Will throughout his life. Though Greenville had the best public schools in Mississippi, his parents—like many elite Delta parents—insisted he be educated privately. It was at this point in remembering his childhood that Will remarked, “Heaven help parents worrying over what to do with children a little out of the ordinary! It’s a dark problem even with the recent assistance of Doctors Freud and Jung.” He continued,

I was a sickly youngster who never had illnesses, who hated sports partly because they didn’t seem important and mostly because I was poor at them, who knew better what I didn’t want than what I did, who was sensitive but hard-headed, docile but given to the bails, day-dreamy but uncommunicative, friendly but not intimate—a frail problem child, a pain in the neck.

His parents sent him to a local Catholic convent when he started school and dropped him off “with a basket of lunch and no advice.” At the church school young Will found “cruel, nasty, bullying” classmates, a teacher named Sister Evangelist who was a “midget of a nun with the valor and will-power of an Amazon,” and the personal truth that for someone with a “third-rate” body, pistols were more effective than fists in self-defense. In addition to these martial aspects of his education, Will found religion.²⁰

Sister Evangelist was in fact an ardent evangelist, and in Will she found fertile soil. He came home from school one day and announced to his mother that he had decided to become a priest. Percy’s memory of this instance was vivid—Camille Percy was tending to a Cape Jessamine flower, wearing a ribbon to keep her hair out of her eyes when he announced his intention to enter the priesthood. She looked up from her flowerbed, and the young boy saw in those eyes, perhaps for the first time, “scorn.” She was “too late” in hiding it, and it was branded into the boy’s memory. Of himself at this time in his life, Percy wrote that he “must have been an unbearable little prig.” Despite

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 76-78.
his mother's disdain, though, he pursued God with fervor; he went to confession and mass, prayed and even fasted "on the sly." He was determined, he wrote, to be perfect.\(^{21}\)

His parents pulled him out of the convent and placed him under the tutelage of Judge Griffin, a neighbor of the Percys who had never taught and who insisted there was no God. He was "the town atheist." In time, Will Percy came to see Judge Griffin as a saint. His house was an oasis of inventiveness and excitement to the curious young boy. It was littered with stacks of books, the Judge's half-finished inventions, old dogs, and roller skates. In Judge Griffin Percy found a model of learning, an older man who both loved him and challenged him, a guide to "knowledge of every world but this one, and much wisdom." He taught Will about "eternal verities" and truths "the spirit seizes on and transmutes into its own strength." Percy figured the passing of knowledge from an older man to a younger man as a spiritual encounter—a theme that ran throughout both his life and his writing. Resonant with the Greek conception of education, pedagogy was not just intellectual enterprise but included a chaste eroticism. Percy wrote of the Judge's "beautiful benign face" and the blissful but torturous "spasm of enjoyment" he felt when the Judge read to him from Othello. Of Iago's lines in the first act, Percy wrote, "I knew in my soul it was pornography and I enjoyed it exquisitely." But it was too much for the ten year-old Will, still devoutly Catholic and striving for perfection. When Judge Griffin reached for the play the next morning, Will said to him, "I don't want to read any more Othello. It's—it's immoral." The amused Judge respected his wishes.\(^{22}\)

When his parents sensed Will was "growing a trifle remote from ordinary doings" under the Judge's teaching, they placed him under two new tutors—Father P. J. Koestenbrock

\(^{21}\) Percy, Lanterns, 76-79.
\(^{22}\) Ibid., 81-83.
and E. E. Bass. Bass was the superintendent of Greenville’s schools and today remains a
town hero for the work he did in building the state’s best school system. In the mid-
1890s Will went to him for afternoon tutoring. Bass was redheaded, intemperate,
emotional, generous, and bald. When his thoughts crescendoed as he sat, he flapped his
knees together “very fast as if a grasshopper’s sound-box ought to be between them.” He
was above all a gardener, and the love and capacity for wonder that he displayed in his
garden translated into his affect as a teacher. His care for his pupils was akin to his care
for his diverse plants: “it only mattered that they were living things mysteriously standing
in the earth and reaching for the sun.” One summer he took Will on his first trip away
from Mississippi—to Arizona, where the two rode in a stagecoach pulled by ten horses
from Flagstaff to the Grand Canyon. “It is God’s most personal creation,” Will wrote of
the Grand Canyon, “you feel he’s just walked off and is expected back any minute.”23

Father Koestenbrock was the local Catholic priest, and before he began to tutor
Will he had already heard Will’s confessions, delivered him sacraments, and prepared
him for confirmation. Unlike the atheist Judge Griffin, Father Koestenbrock “was not a
saint and nothing shocked him.” He gave rambling discourses on Haydn’s superiority to
Mozart and Beethoven and asked uninterestedly if Will could conjugate his Latin verbs.
Will took to his easy, abstracted manner and came to love him. Every so often Will
would come for his lessons to find Father sitting alone in his bedroom in his undershirt,
and the priest would tell the boy to go away. He was a drinker, Will learned, and this was
his “first lesson in reconciling the irreconcilable.” Father would binge for several weeks
at a time, and in Mississippi men who did this were outcasts—yet, to Will the priest

23 Ibid., 83-86.
wasn’t a bad man. Will came to learn that he was not immoral, just lonely. Will’s realization was not merely about Father Koestenbrock, though, but also about himself: “I thought Father was single and unique in his loneliness: it was only the beginning of wisdom.”

Will’s childhood, at least as he remembered it, was peopled by diverse and often charming people—inventors, imaginers, travelers, and drinkers. His parents were background figures, his younger brother not a character at all, and his closest companions black servants and their children. Will identified himself as both on the inside and the outside of his home, both belonging to his family and his hometown and longing to escape them. And indeed it was upon leaving Greenville in 1900 that he came into a new and different kind of self-understanding.
Chapter 3: Arcady, Paris, and Cambridge

Will’s loneliness and sense of himself as an outsider would be lessened by the intimate relationships he would find when, at age fifteen, he headed to college. Similar to the way they sent him to convent school with “no advice,” LeRoy and Camille Percy put Will on a train for Sewanee—“a small college, in wooded mountains”—and themselves on a steamer for London in July of 1900. They told Will he was to enter the military prep school at Sewanee in order to gain entrance to the university; Will took one look at the boys in their “dusty ill-kept uniforms” and presented himself to the admissions office at Sewanee, took the entrance exam, and passed. On August 10 he partook of a Sewanee tradition when he signed his own name into the matriculation book of the University of the South: “William Alexander Percy, Age 15, Weight 90, Height 5’.’”¹

The significance of Will Percy’s time at Sewanee was twofold: first, his education there further ingrained in him the idea that learning was a spiritual and transcendent process, particularly in an all-male environment centered around study of the classics. Second, it was at Sewanee that Will came to accept and express his own sexuality.²

These two themes dominated Will’s experience and portrayal of his time at Sewanee—the erotic nature of learning Greek texts and the bucolic, Arcadian atmosphere of the college. Scholars of Victorian sexuality have written extensively about these themes and have shown them to be central to homoerotic experience and writing during the period. According to these historians, the homosocial nature of the all-male college provided an intimate setting in which same-sex encounters were common (for further

¹ Matriculation Book, September 18, 1868 through June 24, 1913. Sewanee Archives. ² Ibid., 92-93.
analysis of pedagogy and sexuality, see chapter 4). In addition, Byrne R. S. Fone has identified the theme of “Arcadia” as a central metaphor in gay male writing. Arcadia is a mountainous and remote region in Greece that historically was the province of shepherds and herdsmen, and one of the reported birthplaces of Zeus. Fone argues that the “Arcadian ideal” has been a consistent theme in the homosexual literary tradition employed for three primary reasons:

to suggest a place where it is safe to be gay: where gay men can be free from the outlaw status society confers upon us, where homosexuality can be revealed and spoken of without reprisal, and where homosexual love can be consummated without concern for the punishment or scorn of the world; 2) to imply the presence of gay love and sensibility in a text that otherwise makes no explicit statement about homosexuality; and 3) to establish a metaphor for certain spiritual values and myths prevalent in homosexual literature and life, namely, that homosexuality is superior to heterosexuality and is a divinely sanctioned means to an understanding of the good and the beautiful, and that the search for the Ideal Friend is one of the major undertakings of the homosexual life.3

Classic homoerotic texts, Fone argues, such as Virgil’s Second Eclogue, Thomas Mann’s Death in Venice, Edward Prime Stevenson’s Imre (which Percy mentions in his chapter on Sewanee), E. M. Forster’s Maurice, and others all figure Arcadia as both a metaphor

for homosexual love and a site for homosexual encounter. Rustic forest settings, often called “greenwoods” and peopled not only with humans but also with satyrs, nymphs, and pans have historically been the subtext of gay male writing in cultures in which men could not write of their intimate selves without social and legal reprisal. It was in just this manner that Percy wrote about Sewanee—combining the sexually charged atmosphere of the male college with a narrative of his own sexual awakening in Arcadia.

“I had the dimmest notion of how children were born,” Percy wrote of himself as a fifteen-year-old arriving at Sewanee, “though I knew it required a little cooperation; I had never heard of fraternities, I had never read a football score, I had never known a confidant or been in love.” At Sewanee, though, he learned of all these things. He studied hard and adored his professors, especially Dr. Henneman and William Porcher DuBose, “a tiny silver saint who lived elsewhere, being more conversant with the tongues of angels than of men.” They would hold forth in classes about Aristotle, Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Beowulf, and DuBose at times would even be so rapt at his own profundity that he would suspend his monologue, staring off into the distance, and the students would “tiptoe out of the class, feeling luminous.”

Before college, Will Percy had been “utterly without intimates.” At Sewanee, though, he found himself “among young creatures of charm and humor, more experienced than I, but friendly and fascinating.” Percy wrote delicately of the friends he made at Sewanee, and the profound connection they shared. “The springtime was on them and they taught and tended me in the greenwoods as the Centaurs did Achilles—I

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4 Percy, Lanterns, 93.
don’t know how I ever recovered to draw my own bow.” Percy’s description of them indicates something of their importance in his young life:

Percy Huger, noble and beautiful like a sleepy St. Bernard; Elliot Cage, full of dance-steps and song snatches, tender and protective, and sad beneath; Paul Ellerbe, who first read me Dover Beach, thereby disclosing the rosy mountain-ranges of the Victorians; Harold Abrams, dark and romantic with his violin, quoting the *Rubáiyát* and discoursing on Shaw; Parson Masterson, jostling with religion, unexpected and quaint; Sinkler Manning, a knight who met a knight’s death at Montfaucon; Arthur Gray, full of iridescence, discovering new paths and views in the woods and the world; Huger Jervey, brilliant and bumptious then, brilliant and wise now, and so human.

Jervey and Percy would remain close throughout their lives, and they bought a vacation home near Sewanee together in 1925. Jervey went on to become Dean of the Columbia Law School and was one of Will’s closest companions; the novelist Walker Percy later recalled that Jervey visited Will for months at a time in the 1930s. At Sewanee, Jervey was Will’s professor.\(^5\)

“There’s no way to tell of youth or of Sewanee,” Percy wrote. “It must be done obliquely and by parable.” “It is Arcadia,” he continued, “not the one that never used to be, but the one that many people always live in; only this one can be shared.” Sewanee enrolled about 300 students and was set atop a mountain north of Chattanooga,

Tennessee. "It's a long way away," Percy explained, "in the middle of the woods." And those woods to Percy were beautiful. The dusting of snow in winter was replaced in springtime by dogwoods, anemones, hepaticas, azaleas, and violets; the limbs of trees shrouded "puffs of ghost," and the perfume of wild honeysuckle was "actually dangerous, so pagan." These delights of the woods were the province of Sewanee youths, whom Percy called "Arcadians." The "faun-like" students read poetry to one another in the woods; searched out sellers of mountain whiskey on nearby farms; gathered in one another's rooms to play poker and piano. One time Percy watched another student, wearing only his slippers and a wet towel on his head, read aloud from Ode to a Nightingale. Another time a friend recited a poem to Percy on a hillside near campus, and the poem made the "two lads in a greenwood more shimmery and plumed."6

Percy's experience at Sewanee was, to him, a spiritual awakening. His "sojourn in the greenwoods," as he called it, was difficult for him to later write about in part because what he learned there were "the imponderables." Percy portrayed coming of age at Sewanee as a journey towards spiritual knowledge; this is particularly important because this journey included, at the age of sixteen, the loss of his faith in Christianity. While a freshman Will rode a horse ten miles to the nearest Catholic church to go to confession and mass. As in Greenville he ignored the perplexity of his peers and pursued his faith, albeit with anguish. "I'm certain Shelley never sank upon the thorns of life and bled nearly so often as I did between ten and sixteen," he wrote. "To be at once intellectually honest and religious is a rack on which many have perished and on which I writhed dumbly, for I knew even then there were certain things which, like overwhelming

6 Percy, Lanterns, 95-99.
physical pain, you must fight out alone, at the bottom of your own dark well, beyond ministration of assuagement or word of advice, incommunicado and leper-lonely.” At Sewanee Will went to receive communion and as he did, he examined his conscience. He questioned the church’s ability to give meaning to his life, the ability of Christ to forgive him his sins; silently and sadly, he left the church: “I knew there was no use going, no priest could absolve me, no church could direct my life or my judgment, what most believed I could not believe.” “From now on,” he wrote, “I would be living with my own self.”

This moment in Percy’s life marked a loss of religiosity but not of spirituality. The spiritual realm was one with which Percy wrestled throughout his life. The themes in his poetry in particular suggest that rather than lose faith he transferred his faith to a version of aestheticism—the love of beauty as a portal to the sublime. And, as we will see more fully in a later chapter, the way he wrote about men and male bodies was his most common method of writing about beauty and sublime experience.

Percy described his college intimates, the Arcadians, as otherworldly. Their ears were “slightly more pointed and tawny furred, a bit of leafiness somewhere in their eyes.” He called them “Pan and Dionysos,” the Greek gods of wild nature and pleasure, respectively. They were “sweet” to their cores, according to Percy, and their charm was of the lineage of “Socrates and Jesus and St. Francis and Sir Philip Sidney and Lovelace and Stevenson.” Their intimate contact with the beauty of the earth, the transcendent language of the King James Bible read to them each morning, and the environment of learning created “the tremulous awe and reverence you find in the recesses of the

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Arcadian soul—at least you can find them if you are wary and part very gently the sun-spotted greenery of Pan.” Percy retrospectively figured his experience in college as a spiritual and sexual awakening. By portraying his intimates as gods, his college setting as Arcadia, he tapped into a longstanding tradition in homoerotic writing that used classical and bucolic metaphor to suggest male intimacy.\footnote{Ibid., 100-103.}

In addition, at Sewanee Percy came to think of homosexuality as a superior form of love. As Fone suggests, gay men often figured their sexuality as a “divinely sanctioned means to an understanding of the good and the beautiful,” and Percy did just this in his own writing.\footnote{Fone, “This Other Eden,” 13.} At the end of his recollections on Sewanee, he figuratively positioned himself in a tower looking out of a window onto the world. He preferred this perspective, he said, because it was the perspective of Arcadians, who alone understood the good and the beautiful. They were eternally leaning out of the windows of their tower, viewing the world with an enchanted eye, and “busy with idle things”:

> watching the leaves shake in the sunlight, the clouds tumble their soundless bales of purple down the long slopes, the seasons eternally up to tricks of beauty, laughing at things that only distance and height reveal humor in, and talking, talking, talking—the enchanting unstained silver of their voices spilling over the bright branches down into the still happy coves. Sometimes you of the valley may not recognize them, though without introduction they are known of each other.\footnote{Percy, Lanterns, 103.}
Though Percy often evinced torment towards his sexual self, he also celebrated it. He figured his own sexual awakening as an entrance into a superior wisdom, a network of human beings who instantly recognized one another and who viewed the world from a different vantage. Peering out onto the machinations of everyday life with the ability to transcend it was, to Percy, the great task of life; to be able to see and appreciate the shimmering leaves of autumn and take joy at the passing of winter, to talk to another who understood—this was victory in a world full of dread monotony and emptiness. He captured this fellowship of men in his poem, “Recognition”:

Quietly, silently passing, at twilight, when streets are crowded,
Ah, the faces I see, the sad beautiful faces of men,
With the haze of their dream or their love or their sorrow tenderly on them,
With the charmed wistful shadows and hollows on cheek and temple,
Strangers to me, passing from dark into dark, unreturning!
Would I could lay on their twilight lids the kiss of peace,
But they pass, and I can only call after them “Brother, brother.”

Percy concluded his writing about college with a sketch of an Arcadian that is worth quoting at length to indicate something of Percy’s perspective of his friends who peopled his life. Significantly, Percy’s sketch presents an Arcadian not absent from the

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world, stuck in the greenwoods, but actively and charmingly participating in day-to-day life. Importantly, too, people who knew Will Percy described him in much this same way:

If some evening a personable youth happens in on your hospitality, greets you with the not irreverent informality reserved for uncles, puts the dowager Empress of Mozambique, your houseguest, at her ease, flirts with your daughter, says grace before the evening meal with unsmiling piety, consumes every variety of food and drink set before him (specializing on hot biscuits) with unabashed gusto, leaves a wake of laughter whenever he dips into the conversation, pays special attention to the grandmother on his left, enchants the serving maid with two bits and a smile, offers everyone a cigarette, affable under the general disapproval, sings without art a song without merit, sits at last on the doorstep in the moonlight, utterly content, with the dreamy air of the young Hermes (which only means the sense of impending adventure is about his hair like green leaves), and then if that night you dream of a branch of crab-apple blossoms dashed with rain—pursue that youth and entreat him kindly. He hails from Arcady.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 103-104.}

Percy’s outlook was often marked by a melancholy stoicism, but he wrote of Arcady and the relationships he found there with unfettered delight. To place his writings about Arcadians in the larger context of homoerotic writing during this period is
to understand a measure this delight at loving beauty, his possession of what he felt to be a superior wisdom in a world that did not recognize or appreciate it.

One event of Will Percy’s life in college that he did not write about in his memoir was the death of his younger brother, LeRoy Percy Jr. Will’s brother and his parents were vacationing in Hot Springs, Arkansas in August of 1902. When they arrived at the resort LeRoy Jr. met a new friend and the two went out target shooting with a .22 rifle. LeRoy shot at the target and knocked it down the first time; however, when he went to examine his success the other boy picked up the rifle to load it, and in doing so shot LeRoy in the stomach. Initially it seemed he would recover from the wound—he felt no pain at first and when he saw his father he said, “Hello pop, I am all right.” But within a week, the wound became infected and the young boy died.\(^\text{13}\) Will had lost a friend and his father had lost his namesake; Will would write that his father’s heart “must often have called piteously for the little brother I had lost, all boy, all sturdy, obstreperous charm,” and that in the Greenville graveyard LeRoy Jr.’s tomb forever marked “the small brother who should be representing and perpetuating the name.”\(^\text{14}\)

Will Percy graduated from Sewanee in 1904 and spent the next year in Europe. “From first childhood,” Percy wrote in his autobiography, “I had saved every penny of birthday and Christmas money for a trip abroad. It was my obsession, my one mundane objective.”\(^\text{15}\) After his graduation from the University of the South, Will Percy took his savings and left for a year in Europe. This was not the first time he had been to Europe—

\(^{13}\) LeRoy Percy to William Alexander Percy, August 14, 1902. Percy Papers.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 126 and 345.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 105.
he had traveled to Greece with his family in 1897—but in many ways it marked the beginning of his unique and lifelong relationship with international travel. Before this trip, his travels to Europe had been with his parents. Now he went alone. This year abroad, which lasted from June 1904 to September of 1905, opened up a world of possibility and freedom. He had to hide the freedoms enjoyed while traveling from those who looked to him to be a southern man in the vein of his illustrious father and grandfather. He shrouded his travels in secrecy, but there are clues in the historical record that indicate that Will Percy lived a distinctly different life in Europe than he did in Mississippi.

During his year abroad Percy lived in the Latin Quarter of Paris in a four-room boarding house with a Polish medical student, a prostitute, and Marie, “the homeliest femme de chambre in Paris.”\textsuperscript{16} He furnished his room with a piano. He read aloud to himself in French. To please his father, he took fencing lessons. He recounted that “Even at this age I had great affection for the world and did not want to miss any of its beauties,” and as such, he spent most of his time at the free Sorbonne lectures, the opera house, the Concerts Rouge, and the Luxembourg Gardens. He traveled regularly from his home base in Paris, even going so far as Egypt in January of 1905.\textsuperscript{17}

In his memoir he portrayed his time in Europe as one of loneliness, but his letters home to his mother at the time suggest contentedness: “You mentioned something about my staying over here until next September. That would be great, grand, and glorious”; “I have been exceptionally gay and giddy, going to the theatre every night”; “There is hardly a day that I am not in the Louvre at least an hour and every time I discover

\textsuperscript{16} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 106.
\textsuperscript{17} \textit{Ibid.}, 107.
something new.” Loneliness, however, is an important recurring element of *Lanterns on the Levee*: the things Will Percy cherished he lamented as gone and surrounded with sadness and silence. Loneliness did not always mean the absence of other people; rather, he used it as a trope to indicate his recurring sense of himself as an outsider. Percy was smart and charming, and was surrounded throughout his life with people who adored him. His loneliness was not physical as much as it was psychological, and it was abroad in 1904—1905 that he directly confronted this aspect of his life. He also acquired a way of managing it—to create a divide between his life in Mississippi and his life abroad.

One aspect of this divide was the secrecy Percy exhibited regarding his travels. When an admirer of his poetry wrote him and asked if the poem “Sappho in Levkas,” set in Greece, was modeled on personal experience, he answered, “I had not visited Greece when I wrote ‘Sappho,’ and I am afraid the scene of Sappho is Sewanee.” Actually, Percy had been to Greece at least three times before the poem was published in 1915. In 1909, for example, he wrote home to his mother from Athens of the wonderful time he was having in Greece. “This morning I spent on the Acropolis,” he wrote, “and thought again and again of how you, father and I enjoyed it all twelve years ago.” Indeed, the poem may even have been written in Greece. Percy often spoke of how he wrote poetry—and particularly his long, narrative poems such as “Sappho in Levkas”—while on summer vacation. He explained to his friend William Stanley Braithwaite that he nearly always wrote his longer pieces outside the South “in the loveliest spot I can find.”

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18 William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 15-17 November 1904; 22 December 1904; and 29 September 1904. All in Percy Papers.
including Jackson’s Hole, Wyoming, Taormina, and Capri.21 Travel, for Percy—and particularly his travels to Greece and Italy—was something he preferred remain distinct from his life in Mississippi.

It was easy enough for Percy to decide to spend a year in Europe. It was what he had always wanted; it was life changing, and travel thereafter would remain a regular part of his life. Yet his was the constitution of a cosmopolitan, not an expatriate. He felt drawn to home, compelled to live in Greenville, Mississippi, despite his ambivalence towards the place. During his year in Paris, he thought “uneagerly” about the ways he might make a living in America, and found himself uninterested in all that Mississippi had to offer. He had no interest in farming and was not motivated to go into business solely to make money; in his introspection he found no abilities “convertible into cash.” What he really wanted was to be a writer, but felt himself untalented and ignorant. “So I did not choose the law,” he explained, “it chose me.” His father and grandfather were lawyers, and the path was clear for him to take a job in his father’s law office. Unlike LeRoy and Fafar, though, who went to the University of Virginia for law school, Will wanted to go to Harvard. It was a compromise: he had no enthusiasm for the law, but rather he “wanted to be near Boston with its music and theatres, which I would miss the rest of my life in my future Southern home.”22

At Harvard, Will lived in Winthrop Hall dormitory and decorated his walls with Navajo tapestries and Italian paintings—the beginning of a lifelong practice of decorating

22 Ibid., 113-114.
his living space with what one historian has called “cosmopolitan domesticity.” In his room were a piano and a fireplace, and he and his friends stayed up late talking and playing music. One night in conversation his roommate belittled the accomplishments of Wagner and Beethoven and Will later bragged to his mother how he “shone forth like a splendid knight in protection of a damsel in distress,” coming to Wagner’s defense. When he and his friends were tired of the law (which seemed to be a regular state), they had different methods of diversion. He described these to his mother: Stanleigh played ragtime on the piano; George Reynolds fantasized about working for a railroad; George Roberts (who was a debater at Yale) found someone to argue with; Tommy got drunk; and Will Percy locked himself in his room to play piano and read Shelley. When they weren’t relaxing in their rooms, the group took trips to Maine, New Hampshire, New York, and even Chicago. Because he spent so much money on travel and entertainment, Percy had to conspire with his mother to get LeRoy to send him more money: “Kindly explain,” he wrote, “that law books are as expensive as they are uninteresting.”

The importance of law school to him lay less his education—he wrote regularly home to his mother about his lack of enthusiasm for his work—than his experience in New England. He was a B student and did enough studying to get by, but he put most of his energy into his relationships and his sightseeing. In the spring of 1908, for example, Will spent his time enjoying himself. One day he spent six hours playing the piano and

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25 William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, No Date, Sunday, Percy Papers.
26 William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, No Date, Percy Papers.
27 See, for example, William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 30 April 1906 and 27 June 1908, Percy Papers.
three hours walking along the Charles, and another he spent all day in a canoe; he wrote home, “Not being an adult at the art either of paddling or swimming I was propped Cleopatra-like on many cushions in the middle of the boat and borne luxuriously down the crowded stream with George and Bobbie doing the heavy work.” He played tennis every afternoon for two hours.\(^{28}\) He let his hair grow long and performed \textit{La Bohème} at the Harvard Union: “In a little less then a quarter of an hour,” he wrote to his mother, “I had cleared the room.”\(^{29}\)

During his law school years Will dated women and in particular pursued Elsie Singmaster, a woman six years his elder who would go on to become a widely published fiction writer. The two enjoyed going to the theater together and taking walks in the snow, but Will’s pursuit of her was without passion. “I can’t remember doing anything interesting this week,” he wrote home to his mother, but added that this particular week had “been one of much ‘fussing’ for me. I called on Miss Singmaster—the girl who writes stories, you know—and found her as always entertaining.”\(^{30}\) While in Europe the summer before he entered law school he regularly took women to the theater and opera, but without enthusiasm. He told his mother of the “crisis” of asking an American woman on a date to the theater. “This feat was accomplished last night—uh!”\(^{31}\) In another instance, he wrote to his mother about several days spent with Bessie Boswell, a woman he knew from Sewanee: “I am sorry to say no romances have developed since my last writing....To eat with a person and watch her eat three times a day is not conducive to

\(^{28}\) William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, No Date, Percy Papers.

\(^{29}\) William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 6 April 1908 and 25 May 1908, Percy Papers.

\(^{30}\) William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 10 March 1907, Percy Papers; Percy \textit{Lanterns}, 122.

arousing tender passions for her.” Mrs. Gray, who was chaperoning the group of Sewanee women in Europe, had earlier “insisted I lose my heart to [Bessie], but finally gave me up as hopeless.”

In addition to traveling and studying, Will began to write poetry in earnest during his time in Cambridge. In fact, he discovered that, to him, poetry was the most effective way to express himself and his struggles with the world. “When you feel something intensely,” he explained, “you want to write it down—if anguish, to stanch the bleeding; if delight, to prolong the moment.” He wrote of his anguishes and delights, and even published a poem in *McClure’s* magazine while in law school. His parents, though, found Will’s poetry troubling. Brodie Crump, a family friend of the Percy’s, remembered of LeRoy: “It was just the poetry, he was a little bit uneasy about that. But...he knew Will was a good man. He was a manly person, had his courage and everything like that.” LeRoy rightly perceived that in his poetry Will wrote about his unease with Delta manhood, but assured himself that his son’s courage made up for his strange poetry peopled with beautiful men.

Percy also spent time in Europe during his law school years with friends from law school. Will Percy enjoyed a particularly intimate relationship with Harold Bruff. Bruff and Percy met when they both entered law school at Harvard in the autumn of 1905 and immediately formed a deep bond. Percy reflected in his memoir that to sit at the symphony in Boston next to Harold Bruff was “ecstasy,” and the two traveled to Europe.

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33 William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 4-7 February 1907, Percy Papers.
34 Percy, *Lanterns*, 133.
35 Lewis Baker Interview with Brodie S. Crump, Hill Library, Louisiana State University.
together in 1907 and 1908 and visited frequently in New York after graduation.\textsuperscript{36} Will Percy felt free on these trips. In a moment of candor in 1907, he wrote home to his mother from Switzerland telling her a story of how he and Harold had met a group of delightful American girls. They were in a cheerful mood, and when they parted for the night Bruff and Percy and the girls played a game whistling back and forth to one another from their hotel balconies. However, Percy wrote, “It all ended by my suddenly appearing on Harold’s balcony clad in pink pajamas, with the moonlight a spot-light on me and imagining that I was completely hid by the shrubbery.” The game ended, and the travelers retreated to their rooms “in a disgraceful anti-climax.”\textsuperscript{37}

Percy and Bruff’s correspondence indicates something of their intimate relationship, all of which took place in Boston, New York, and Europe. Bruff wrote affectionately and longingly to Percy during these years. Before Bruff had joined Percy in Europe in 1907, for example, he wrote to him, “Write soon Billy your inmost thoughts and even if it’s a sonnet (an elegy or ode probably would be more polite) don’t be afraid to pour it out.”\textsuperscript{38} After their trip to Europe in 1908, Bruff wrote to Percy, who was still in Paris,

I have missed you tremendously and perhaps there is sour virtue in suffering in silence. Your letters have been whatever is appropriate to an aching soul—and I’m so glad for you that the trip has been a success and Italy is in sight.... You have done much for me in three years Bill, leading the way to something higher and the better things in life (and I don’t mean

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{37} William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 21 August 1907, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{38} Harold Bruff to William Alexander Percy, 1 July 1907, Percy Papers.
moral(s) and you know that you have a place that no one else can ever
quite fill.39

In the same letter, Bruff told Percy that while he had been enjoying his letters, he felt that
Percy was not sharing everything with him. Harold had recently lunched with a mutual
friend, who had just returned from Paris where he was with Will. Bruff commented that
though they did not talk openly in the restaurant, “He is going to take me out in his motor
tomorrow and discourse on what modesty (?) made you omit.”40 For Percy and Bruff,
Europe seemed to have been a site of sexual freedom during their law school years.

In his memoir, Percy wrote mainly about his male companionship during his law
school years. He claimed to have remembered nothing of the law, but much more of his
late night discussions and his trips to the countryside with his friends. Of Boston’s
symphonies, which played Schumann and Wagner and Bach and Brahms with such
grace, he wrote, “to have the great masterpieces of music, matchlessly performed, poured
into your fresh ears with Harold Bruff or George Roberts or Harley Stowell in the seat
next to you—well, one could ask nothing more of life.” Percy portrayed this time as a
last gasp in an era of innocence; there was much ahead for them, he wrote, “particularly
fiery furnaces and anvils of pain. But every concert was an adventure and usually we’d
be plumed and dripping fire as we made for the Brattle Street trolley through the winter
murk.”41 Even at the time, Will realized that Boston afforded companionship and
entertainment that he would deeply miss in Mississippi: “I look forward,” he wrote

40 Ibid. Parenthetical question mark in original.
41 Percy, Lanterns, 122-23.
sarcastically to his father as he neared the end of law school, “to several years in which ‘The Clansmen’ at the Grand will be the height of my theatre expectations.”

Will’s correspondence with his family while he was in law school was one-sided. He wrote long and detailed letters to his mother, and occasionally missives to his father. Very often these letters included pained remonstrances about their lack of concern for him. He begged them to come visit and to write more often. In November of 1907 he wrote to his father asking if they would spend Christmas with him in Boston—“I would like to find myself at your beck and call,” Will wrote. LeRoy and Camille agreed to come but reversed course on December 18, wiring to Will that LeRoy’s work prevented their trip. Instead, they sent a large check. “I suppose there’s not any use in talking about how disappointed I was and am,” Will wrote to Camille,

For the past few days I’ve been rather miserable, so disappointed that I hardly cared what happened or where I went for the holidays....All day [Christmas] I shall be thinking of you and wishing you and father were with me or I with you....The splendid check from father will make me feel like looking Mr. Vanderbilt in the eye when I meet him on the avenue.\(^{43}\)

The disappointment Will felt at the Christmas of 1907 was not an isolated event. Rather, his letters home were replete with similar admonitions to his parents: “Why am I being treated to a chilling silence?”, “I am being treated most unfilially and am mad. If no

\(^{42}\) William Alexander Percy to LeRoy Percy, 9 November 1907, Percy Papers.  
letter comes tomorrow never expect to hear from me again”; “Upon my untarnished
honor, Mother dear, you don’t deserve a letter....I don’t see any excuse for you and it
will be a long time before I forgive you.”

Despite this, though, Will still desired to return home. He had a genuine, if
idealized, love of his region and wanted to live there. After reading a biography of the
Georgia poet Sidney Lanier, Will wrote to his mother that in the book “so much is said
and thought of the South, its glories and faults and hardships that I feel an overwhelming
desire to bid farewell to all the Yanks and go dashing off to mine own people.” In
another instance, after a trip to Washington DC to visit some cousins who thought Will
“utterly unregenerate for going to Harvard,” he described their conversation to his
mother:

When I confessed that I actually had Northern friends and considered them
gentlemen, the whole trio were aghast and made a clearly legible mental note that
I was completely ruined. Trusting, Mama Mia, that you haven’t disinherited me
or ceased to adore me, I am your humble and contrite Chee-ild, William A.

Will’s comment about southerners and northerners was a common joke among his
people—in fact, he repeated a similar refrain in *Lanterns on the Levee*. What makes this
remark significant is that his tongue-in-cheek reflections on southern families was
followed by Percy’s sarcastic anxieties about being cast from his own family. Will very

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44 William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, 10 March 1907; 15 September 1907; 26
September 1907, Percy Papers.
often wrote to and about his family using sarcasm as a vehicle to express his sense of himself as an outsider. When he was “ejected” from his mother’s womb, his birth “overjoyed no one”; when his father demanded Will read more about knights and heroes and less about romantic love, he “grew infatuated with the monastic life, if it could be pursued in a cave”; when his announcement that he would become a priest was met with scorn from his mother, he reasoned that he “must have been an unbearable little prig”; when he described himself in relation to his father, he concluded the best term for himself was “sissy.” While in law school in New England and planning where to begin his career, his comments about regional difference were tethered to his own fears about his mother’s lack of adoration. Though he felt freedom in his daily life in the North and thrived in the cultured society of Boston, he also felt strongly if ambivalently the need to return home to his family and his place.

When he did return home to Greenville in the summer of 1908, the first thing he did was to pack his bags and go to Europe. After spending a week in Mississippi in July, he spent July, August, and September in Paris and Madrid. He returned to set up his office in his father’s law practice, but at the death of a professor in the English department at Sewanee, he accepted a temporary job teaching at the university during the spring of 1909. That summer, he spent four months in New York, Taormina, Greece, and Spain. After that trip, he settled more permanently into his Mississippi life, which he called a “long cold” in “the frightening concourse of men.” It was his father’s world. It was a world in which Will did not fit easily: “eight years of training for life, and here I was in the midst of it—and my very soul whimpered.” So too did his father’s: though doubtless “disappointed” in his son, he “never showed it except by a far-away expression
and a little smile.”

Here in Greenville, Mississippi, father and son lived in the same house together, walked to work together, fought battles—against floods, political opponents, the Ku Klux Klan—together. These battles, Will felt, were his duty. The conflict for the first battle had been developing for at least a decade before Will returned home from Cambridge.

\footnote{Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 130.}
Chapter 4: The Senator's Son

The year 1910 would be a tumultuous one in Will Percy's life, though it began with good tidings. On New Year's Day Harold Bruff sent Will a telegram from Brooklyn: "The dawn is here I think may you have at least half the happiness you deserve." Will's happiness, though, would be lessened by a political drama centered around his own family. The drama would mark the decline in his own family's political influence and the rise of a new breed of politician symbolized by a man named James K. Vardaman.

In 1903 James K. Vardaman was elected governor of Mississippi and at his inauguration pronounced the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments stains on the virtuous history of America. To have granted citizenship and the vote to former slaves was a collective mistake that stood out "naked to all the world in all of its stupid ugliness." Vardaman hoped that the people of Mississippi, along with other white citizens throughout the South, would lead the way in righting this wrong by repealing the amendments. He explained that Negroes "never felt the guilt of sin, the restraining influence of moral scruples, or the goading of an outraged conscience" and were not fit for citizenship. In fact, for the American Negro "slavery is the only process by which he has ever been even partially civilized." The few intelligent blacks about were "mix breeds and freaks of the race." The real threat to American democracy and the American way of life, he explained, was the presence of colored people. Black men in particular, with their insatiable sexual appetite for white women, posed a constant threat and

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1 Harold Bruff to William Alexander Percy, January 1, 1910, Percy Papers.
mandated the segregation of the races in all public space.² Vardaman’s inaugural address echoed his campaign promise that if he became aware of a black rapist in town he “would head up the mob to string the brute up, and I haven’t much respect for a white man who wouldn’t.”³

When Will returned home from Harvard in 1908, James K. Vardaman was a leading figure in Mississippi politics. Within two years, he would become a bitter enemy of the Percys. Vardaman and his political career played a large role in shaping the way Will Percy came to view race and class in his southern world. Percy wrote that Vardaman was “a kindly, vain demagogue unable to think, and given to emotions he considered noble…. He stood for the poor white against the ‘nigger’—those were his qualifications as a statesmen.” In 1910 and 1911, James K. Vardaman was LeRoy Percy’s opponent as a candidate for the U. S. Senate. The story of this political contest illustrates a turning point in Will Percy’s life and in Mississippi history, as well as several of the most important themes in southern history: how race shaped politics; how class shaped politics; how the careers of white politicians came to depend largely on the rhetoric they employed concerning African-Americans.⁴

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After the Civil War and until the Civil Rights movement the Democratic Party dominated the American South politically—an environment historians have called the “Solid South.” The Republican Party was the party of Lincoln, of emancipation and Reconstruction, and white southerners wanted no part of it. By the late nineteenth century, white southerners had effectively disfranchised African Americans by initiating poll taxes, literacy tests, and all-white primary elections. Though the nuances of local politics in southern towns and counties were myriad, two dominant strains emerged within the Democratic Party: the conservative, pro-business, plantation elite, and the reform-oriented populist demagogue. The two strains fundamentally agreed that whites should have absolute economic, social, and political superiority over blacks, whom they thought inferior. The conservative strain, exemplified by LeRoy Percy, felt that blacks were an inefficient but necessary source of labor and as such should be treated fairly, educated to some extent, and not threatened with violence lest they strike out for work elsewhere. The populist strain, comprised of men like James K. Vardaman, did not advocate black education, felt that the status quo could effectively be maintained by the threat and use of violence, and sought to garner support among constituents by inciting racial hatred (such as in Vardaman’s inaugural address). “Race-baiting,” perfected by James K. Vardaman and practiced by generations of southern politicians from Louisiana’s Huey Long to South Carolina’s “Pitchfork” Ben Tillman, became a central


² V. O. Key, Southern Politics in State and Nation (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949); George Brown Tindall, The Emergence of the New South, 1913-1945 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1967). I use the term “populist” here to indicate the grassroots appeal of someone like Vardaman, not as a reference to the Populist movement of the 1890s.
part of the southern political landscape and led many colorful southern demagogues to local and even national leadership.

Another central theme of southern demagogues such as Vardaman was class. Not only did they fanning the flames of racial hatred in their rhetoric, they also assured their constituents that they were being oppressed by corporations, bankers, financiers, and the elites in their own neighborhoods. During his term as governor of Mississippi, for example, James Vardaman disassembled the powerful vestiges of the convict-lease system (whereby planters could use prisoners for farm labor), increased taxes to improve schools for orphans and handicapped people, and approved laws regulating big businesses such as railroads, timber and utilities—all reforms distasteful to wealthy elites such as the Percys. Though often quite wealthy themselves, many such southern politicians learned to cast themselves as plainspoken, hard-working men of the people. In contrast, leaders such as Percy felt themselves endowed with a special virtue that allowed them to lead the people; they were not motivated, they felt, by profit or power, but by a sense of responsibility to the people.6

Early in his career, James K. Vardaman was not as virulently racist as he would become. He moved to the Mississippi Delta in 1884 and bought a newspaper, the Greenwood Enterprise. In his editorials, and from his seat in the state legislature in the late 1880s and early 1890s, he advocated progressive change in his town—a new public high school, a fire station, electricity and telephone service. In one instance, he lashed out at the treatment of a black man who suffered unjustly at the hands of Mississippi’s convict-lease system. In another, he argued that his readers should support

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6 Bertram Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 178-79.
“improvement and elevation of the negro” through education. However, during the late 1890s and early 1900s his views on race solidified around a more spiteful platform. He developed a standard campaign speech that he later gave hundreds and likely thousands of times as a lecture he called “The Impending Crisis.” The crisis was the presence of blacks, whose moral and intellectual advancement halted, he argued, at puberty. Despite this, their ambition was to be equal to the white man, and Vardaman warned it would unfold in this way: Negroes had been granted citizenship and the vote by the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments; these rights would lead to progress in political equality; political equality would lead to social equality; and social equality would lead to intermarriage between whites and blacks and would thus pollute the white race forever. Thus, the best way to “smother in his native savage breast the fury of his passion” was to repeal the amendments that granted the black citizen his political equality. He packaged this platform to his audience within the rhetoric of fear, patriotism, and rape: “The white women of the South are in a state of siege,” he exclaimed, “The cloud of this black peril hovers about them as a deadly vapor. Their very hearts are perturbed and they live in constant fear and painful apprehension…. The pestilence is spreading.”

James K. Vardaman’s venomous idiom might not have gained the traction that it did had it not been for a development in Mississippi politics in 1902 called the Noel Primary Election Law. Before 1902, a committee in the Democratic state convention selected nominees for state offices. Since the populous Delta counties had the largest representation at the convention, Delta interests had dominated state politics since the Civil War. “Bourbons,” as they were called, made up of planters, bankers, and lawyers

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8 Ibid., 198.
such as LeRoy Percy and his friends, maintained disproportionate power since they maneuvered to have their candidates placed before the people in state elections. Political observers had long spoken of the antipathy between “the Delta” and “the Hills,” which though not precisely accurate geographically nonetheless pointed to a clear division within state politics. With the passage of the primary law, however, politicians would thereafter have to canvass the state and be selected by the people as a candidate for state office. This system gave more power to non-Delta voters and also emphasized oratorical skill, charisma, and the ability to connect with a wider range of people. In addition, the convention mandated that only whites could vote in the primary elections, thus placing another barrier (in addition to poll taxes and literacy tests in the general election) between African Americans and their right to vote.9

James K. Vardaman was perfectly suited to politicking directly with the people: he was dynamic, tall and well built, and habitually wore a white suit, white boots, and a black Stetson hat. He combed his jet-black hair straight back and let it hang down over his shoulders. He held audiences spellbound for hours at a time and often had the stamina to speak four times a day. Despite his disdain for Vardaman’s politics, Will Percy had to admit the man was entertaining: his oratory was merely “bastard emotionalism,” but Vardaman “was such a splendid ham actor, his inability to reason so contagious.... [and] besides he had charm.”10 This energy and charisma—and his fear-mongering, racist diatribes—carried him into the governor’s mansion in 1903. Because Vardaman was sympathetic to levee interests, and because his opponent was a part of an

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9 Ibid., 96-97; Cresswell, Rednecks, Redeemers and Race, 190-93; Kirwan, Revolt of the Rednecks, ch. 11.
10 Percy Lanterns, 143-44.
anti-Delta cabal, LeRoy Percy supported Vardaman in 1903. He served one term as governor and then lost in the 1907 race for U. S. Senate to John Sharp Williams, a close friend of Percy’s. He turned immediately to the nationwide lecture circuit (delivering “The Impending Crisis” day after day) and to editing a Jackson newspaper, The Issue. He then set his sights on the 1911 U. S. Senate race.

On December 22, 1909, though, one of Mississippi’s senators, Anselm J. McLaurin, suddenly died with three years left in his term. In Mississippi, LeRoy Percy was hunting ducks on an Arkansas plantation and James Vardaman was writing editorials for The Issue in Jackson. Vardaman immediately announced his plans to run for the newly vacant seat. Percy returned to Greenville and began to confer with his political friends as to who should run against Vardaman. Vardaman’s popularity with the people was unsurpassed, and it was unlikely that anyone could beat him. With this in mind, the elite power brokers hatched a shrewd plan. Since there was not time enough to hold a statewide election, Governor Edmund Noel charged the Mississippi legislature to choose the new senator. That body convened on January 6, 1910, and found that in addition to Vardaman, six other candidates had entered the race. Percy and his like-minded associates had decided that since no one person could defeat Vardaman they would put up several candidates, each of whom would gradually drop out of the race when he was sure his votes would go to another anti-Vardaman candidate. LeRoy Percy was one of the six.¹¹

When the first vote was taken on January 7, Vardaman garnered seventy-one votes and none of the other six candidates more than two dozen. The victor would need

¹¹ Percy, Lanterns, 144; Holmes, The White Chief, 201.
the eighty-six votes that would represent the majority. The vote, it had been decided by the legislature, was taken by secret ballot. This infuriated Vardaman, who increasingly felt that this “secret caucus,” as it came to be known, was a conspiracy against him since he was the most popular with the people. In a way, it was. Governor Noel, as well as many others in Mississippi politics, felt that Vardaman was too radical and unstable for the U. S. Senate, as well as too reform-oriented. His views on constitutional amendments, they felt, could possibly rekindle northern sympathies for blacks and lead to more outside meddling in southern affairs. To pro-business planters like LeRoy Percy, Vardaman’s race-baiting tactics were bad business: when faced with the threat of violence, many blacks would seize the chance to move elsewhere for work.\textsuperscript{12}

Every day for several weeks the legislators voted again with no real change. During this time, Jackson bustled with activity: barrels of whiskey were unloaded off trains and delivered to campaign headquarters; burlesque women were seen coming and going from hotel rooms at all hours; votes were being bought and sold, handsome dinners given, and fistfights fought in the streets. When Vardaman learned of a legislator on the fence, he invited him to his room for some sherry and conversation, which he called “missionary work.” The pro-Vardaman press published regular editorials calling for an open vote, proclaiming that an elite cabal was conspiring to undo the will of the Mississippi people. Vardaman himself wrote in \textit{The Issue} on January 29 that the sovereign will of the people was being jeopardized by railroad lawyers and big-money lobbyists. The next day LeRoy Percy boasted in another newspaper that though he was in fact a railroad attorney, at least he wasn’t, like Vardaman “a briefless barrister” and a

\textsuperscript{12} Holmes, \textit{The White Chief}, 206-208.
“reckless agitator” who had to rely on friends and creditors for money. Vardaman played his hand perfectly, writing a few days later: “I have no desire to indulge in personalities, nor shall I stoop to notice Mr. Percy’s thrust at my impecunious condition. If poverty is a crime, then I am guilty.” In a state full of impecunious farmers and laborers, Vardaman knew how to win at politics.13

But with a secret ballot, popular politics didn’t matter. The majority of state legislators did not want James Vardaman in the U. S. Senate, and they were the ones casting ballots. After almost two months of deadlocked balloting, anti-Vardaman supporters began to drop out of the contest and LeRoy Percy emerged as the strongest candidate. On February 22, before a packed gallery of Percy and Vardaman’s supporters, the final vote was cast and LeRoy Percy won, 87-82. The Percy people cheered and the Vardamanites sat in silence as Vardaman reportedly ran back and forth on the senate floor with his hands on his head yelling, “Black as the night that covers me!” Rather than the end, though, it was the beginning of a long and bitter fight. Vardaman’s paper The Issue promised, “People of Mississippi, the fight between the classes and the masses, between the corporate influences and the people is on, and it will be a fight to the finish.”14 On the other hand, many throughout the country exulted in this victory over radicalism; the New York Times proudly noted that the senator-elect from Mississippi was not a populist demagogue, but a descendent of the English “Northumberland family of which Harry Hotspur was a member.”15

13 Ibid., 212.
14 Holmes, The White Chief; 214-15, 227; Percy, Lanterns, 146.
15 Quoted in Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 182. Harry Hotspur (Sir Henry Percy) was the Earl of Northumberland in the 14th century and a major character in Shakespeare’s Henry IV.
A month after Percy’s victory Theodore Bilbo, a man who would become one of the most famous politicians in southern history but who was then a 32-year-old state senator from Pearl River, Mississippi, came forward and said that he had accepted a bribe to vote for Percy during the caucus. He did it, he said, solely to uncover corruption and in the end still voted for Vardaman. He still had the money—$645 in cash—that had been paid to him in installments during the caucus by a Delta plantation owner named Lorraine Dulaney. The state senate immediately launched an investigation into the charges of bribery, and the proceedings of that investigation uncovered much finger pointing and one truth: Mississippi politics, in the words of the journalist George Creel, was a carnival of corruption.\textsuperscript{16} During the caucus state legislators were wooed by promises of patronage, barrel after barrel of liquor, and in at least one case a Percy aide paid the property taxes of a state Representative. But the state senate, eager to defend its election of Percy, found no evidence of wrongdoing on Percy’s part and made a resolution to expel Bilbo from the senate. That failed to obtain a majority vote, but after the pro-Vardaman legislators walked out, the senate passed a resolution asking Bilbo to resign and calling him “unfit to sit with honest, upright men in a respectable legislative body.”\textsuperscript{17} For his part, LeRoy Percy pitched in that Bilbo was a “moral leper” and “a characterless man, a self-confessed liar, a self-accused bribe-taker.”\textsuperscript{18}

This resolution had the unintended consequence of galvanizing the support of the electorate on behalf of James Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo and Vardaman’s

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supporters successfully—and accurately—portrayed the “secret caucus” as a series of back room deals between the state government, big-money bankers, and corporate lawyers. Furthermore, the charge of bribery, as Will Percy put it, was “a lie with a thousand lives.”\textsuperscript{19} LeRoy Percy’s name became tainted with corruption, elite prejudices, and political chicanery. His battle to be re-elected in the regular primary election, set for August 1, 1911, would be all uphill.

LeRoy Percy did not help himself by being tiresomely intellectual in his campaign speeches, which began immediately in the summer of 1910. In speech after speech, he began by introducing himself (most Mississippians didn’t know who he was) and promising that he was neither as corrupt nor as wealthy as Vardamanites charged. Boll weevils ate most of his cotton, he said, and though he had served as counsel for the occasional railroad, most of his business consisted of serving his community. He then explained that the appropriate candidate for the U. S. Senate needed to have a working knowledge of business and law in order to best represent the people. To prove he was just such a candidate, he delved into the intricacies of cotton futures, the machinations of Mississippi’s Department of Agriculture, and the methods by which the federal government collected revenue and reapportioned it to the states. Rather than be moved to support Percy, many of his audiences heckled him and threw tomatoes.\textsuperscript{20}

Percy assured his audiences that he was not a racial liberal. Vardaman, he explained, was too extreme and actually posed a danger to white supremacy. “There was never a time since the war,” he told audiences, “when the relations between the whites and the blacks were more pleasant or better. Never was white supremacy surer or safer

\textsuperscript{19} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 147.
\textsuperscript{20} Holmes, \textit{The White Chief}, 234-36.
or more complete. No negro votes in Mississippi, nor sits on a jury. And this, without Federal aid, in fact in spite of Federal opposition.” With Vardaman in the senate, the Federal government would be forced to take notice of the race question, and with Vardaman’s extremism they might actually take punitive action.21

LeRoy Percy never connected with the people. Part of this was because he had a serious air and a personality that was all business. Unlike his son, he had little charm or patience for people, and he didn’t remember faces or names. “He just couldn’t remember folks,” the son of his campaign manager remembered.22 A larger part of this, though, must have sprung from the fact that he did not admire “the people” or want to connect with them. He and his contemporaries referred to the masses of poor whites in Mississippi as “the bottom rail.” Will Percy described the audience at a campaign stop in Black Hawk, Mississippi:

I looked over the ill-dressed, surly audience, unintelligent and slinking, and heard him appeal to them for fair treatment of the Negro and explain to them the tariff and the Panama tolls situation. I studied them as they milled about. They were the sort of people that lynch Negroes, that mistake hoodlumism for wit, and cunning for intelligence, that attend revivals and fight and fornicate in the bushes afterwards. They were undiluted Anglo-Saxons. They were the sovereign voter. It was so horrible it seemed unreal.23

22 Lewis Baker interview with Brodie S. Crump, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University.
In his campaign LeRoy Percy evinced this planter mentality, his social standing and his education. He was suspicious of democracy, of "the sovereign voter." As Will said idealistically of his father and his political friends, "Being convinced no system of government was good without good men to operate it, they considered it their bounden duty, their prime obligation as members of society, to find such men. Concerning democracy they had no illusions.... Anybody who was anybody must feel noblesse oblige." But most voters of Mississippi in 1910 were not looking for "good" men to lead them with disinterested virtue. To them, LeRoy's disposition did not look like noblesse oblige—it looked like condescension.

So they heckled him. At campaign stops crowds cheered "Hurrah for Vardaman! Hurrah for Bilbo!" At another Will found hampers full of rotten eggs that were to be thrown at LeRoy (Will had a pistol in his pocket, he said, "which I intended to use"). On July 4, 1910, the Percy entourage stopped at Godbold's Wells in the piney woods region of south Mississippi. The crowd was so noisome and cantankerous that Percy could not speak. He stood on the platform in silence waiting for the crowd to silence. As minutes went by, Percy grew angry. As his attempts to begin speaking were met with jeers and laughs, he grew furious. Finally in his anger he shouted at the crowd and what the crowd heard was, "Cattle!" To a polity already suspicious of Percy's airs of aristocracy, this was just the charge needed to create a groundswell of support for Vardaman and Bilbo. Pro-Vardaman newspapers and campaigners seized on this reference and never let crowds forget that Percy thought them nothing but hillbillies and rednecks, no different than herds of cattle. Vardaman's newspaper *The Issue* caricatured LeRoy as "the dead-

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game plumed knight of the Poker-table, the Crowned Victor of the Rotten Secret

Caucus.”25 Will Percy figured his father as a martyr: he was “a man of honor being
hounded by men without honor.”26

During the summer of 1910 James Vardaman was away delivering “The
Impending Crisis” on the California lecture circuit. In his absence, Theodore Bilbo, who
was himself running for Lieutenant Governor, campaigned for himself and for Vardaman.
Though he was barely five feet tall and often campaigned in borrowed suits, “On the
stump he’s 7 feet 10 inches tall,” wrote one journalist.27 Like Vardaman, he electrified
crowds with his invective. In one such speech, he painted a political enemy in these
colorful terms: he was “a cross between a hyena and a mongrel; he was begotten in a
nigger graveyard at midnight, suckled by a cow and educated by a fool.” (The man
subsequently cornered Bilbo on a train and beat him with his pistol, fracturing Bilbo’s
skull and sending him to the hospital for a week.)28 Relentlessly criticizing the corporate
elite, Bilbo introduced a bill in the state legislature designed to draw attention to himself
and make fun of legal jargon written by men like LeRoy Percy. Calling for a ban on
Coca-Cola, newly popular among African-Americans, the bill promised

To prohibit the manufacture, sale, barter or giving away of coca cola, afri cola, ala
cola, caffè cola, carre cola, celery cola, chan cola, chera cola, coca beta, Pilsbury
coke, cola coke, cream cola, dope, four cola, hayo cola, Heck’s cola, Kaye cola,
koca nola, koke, kola ade, kola kola, kola phos, koloko, kos kola, lime ola, lime

25 Quoted in Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 187.
26 Holmes, The White Chief, 238; Percy, Lanterns, 148-49.
27 Quoted in Green, The Man Bilbo, 39.
kola, mellow nip, nerve ola, revive ola, rococa, rye ola, standard cola, toko tona, tokola, vim-o, french wine of coco wise ola, and to prohibit the manufacture, sale, barter, or giving away of any beverage or drink which contains any part of caffeine, or the extract of coca leaf, and to fix a penalty for the violation or the manufacture, sale, barter, or giving away of any of them.\textsuperscript{29}

In addition to his own offbeat charisma, he had the added benefit of being at the center of the Dulaney bribe controversy—people wanted to see him, wanted to hear the inside story of Delta planters buying votes with money and liquor. He titled his campaign speech, "Jim Vardaman, the Radical; LeRoy Percy, the Conservative; Grandma Noel, the Sissy; Senator Bilbo, the Liar." In it, he gave salacious details about the ways Governor Noel orchestrated the secret caucus and Percy’s election; the dark rooms in which he received corrupt money from Dulaney; the sordid designs black men constantly made on white women. When he spoke his followers shouted, "Hit ‘em, Bilbo! Amen! Hallelujah! Good ol’ Bilbo! Goddam!"\textsuperscript{30}

In July 1910 Bilbo invited Percy to an open political rally. Percy rejected the invitation, and Bilbo published a letter to the rally’s organizer, saying, “I am very sorry, indeed, but presume the Hon. LeRoy Percy was afraid that he would not have his secret caucus legislature along to ‘applaud’ when he cussed Bilbo.”\textsuperscript{31} After this, Percy changed his mind and prepared to attend the rally. LeRoy’s brother Walker, a Birmingham lawyer, was fed up with the attacks on LeRoy’s honor and decided to challenge Bilbo to a

\textsuperscript{29} Green, \textit{The Man Bilbo}, 28.
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid.}, 39.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, 240-41.
duel. Walker came into Will’s hotel room the night before the speech and told him that “one of our group would have to kill the bribe-taker,” and instructed him to meet him on the morning of the rally in the hotel dining room where Bilbo would be eating his breakfast. After target-practicing in front of the mirror all night, Will met his uncle and his seventeen year-old cousin LeRoy at six o’clock the next morning. Bilbo was across the room eating oatmeal. Walker pointed at Bilbo and “boomed out the epithet which makes an American fight if he’s a man.” Bilbo didn’t look up.\(^{32}\)

At the rally that afternoon Bilbo riled the crowd of a thousand into such excitement they hoisted him onto their shoulders and danced after he spoke. They howled for Percy and when Percy stood up to speak they cried “Vardaman! Vardaman!” Though one of Percy’s aides had urged him to speak briefly about the tariff and cotton futures and be done with the bloodthirsty crowd, Percy did not. He began to fling insults at the crowd and at Bilbo, calling him a “vile degenerate” and a “consorter with lewd women and frequenter of assignation houses.” He claimed that the only person who would corroborate his bribery tale was “a poor, broken-down shameless woman of the streets.” Bilbo was quaintly sitting on a rocking chair on a porch listening to Percy’s caustic speech—he was a master of public relations and mass appeal.\(^{33}\) When Percy was finished, Will recalled, “the bear-baiting cowardly crowd, wild with excitement, cheered and cheered and cheered.”\(^{34}\) However, it is likely that they were cheering at the sheer spectacle of the campaign: the “man of honor” insulting the state senator’s sex life and

\(^{34}\) Percy, *Lanterns*, 151.
morality; the possibility of bribery and scandal; the electric advent of Bilbo onto the political scene.

The summer 1910 campaign ended with an electorate energized to work on behalf of Bilbo and Vardaman. LeRoy Percy returned to Washington D. C. weary from campaigning and wrote to his wife, “some day this cruel war will be over and then we will try to pick up the broken threads of our lives... and if we can come out of it in good health, with honor, and not a [sic] bankrupt I will be satisfied.”\textsuperscript{35} Vardaman, on the other hand, returned to Mississippi ready to jump into the fray. In California he had delivered “The Impending Crisis” almost daily for five months, and had it honed to near perfection. His first act upon his return was to stage a masterful rally at the Jackson fairgrounds. Five thousand Mississippians flocked to the capitol to see the White Chief. With Bilbo successfully massaging his identity as martyr for the people, and the pro-Vardaman press issuing daily reminders of the corrupted power of those like LeRoy Percy, much of Vardaman’s work had been done for him. As he finished speaking at the fairgrounds in October an excited listener grabbed Vardaman’s black hat, cut it into shreds and passed it among the crowd. The mob hoisted Vardaman in the air and carried him through the fairgrounds.\textsuperscript{36}

At this same time, Will Percy was in Greenville handling his father’s law cases while he was away. That summer Harold Bruff had written to chide Will for being too wrapped up in his father’s political battles. “Why haven’t you written me?” he asked. “Are you still in Jackson engrossed (that’s legal enough) in practical politics?” Bruff

\textsuperscript{35} Quoted in Baker, \textit{The Percys of Mississippi}, 51.
\textsuperscript{36} Holmes, \textit{The White Chief}, 244-45.
recalled their time in Paris together ("Don’t you wish you were there?") and demanded Percy come for a visit: “I know that New York is not the place for us and there are so many distractions that seem to frighten away the desired mood but maybe—who knows?” Bruff enticed Percy by including a program from a recent performance of Debussy, telling him that during the concert “you know where my thoughts were.” Bruff told Percy of a recent gathering of Harvard Law School alumni at which “everyone was dreadfully middle aged and legal and stupid and glum,” and contrasted his New York life with Will’s Mississippi routine: “O lucky one in the pleasant ways of Greenville doesn’t your conscience ever smite you?” Bruff’s insistence paid off and Will spent much of September in New York and New Hampshire visiting Bruff and Huger Jersey.

In Mississippi, Will took long walks alone on the levee, “watching the full golden moon float up into a hot, vividly purple sky.” A “bright spot” during one otherwise unhappy late-October day was the receipt of a letter from Jersey, who was practicing law in Manhattan. “My correspondence with him causes only satisfaction,” Will wrote in his diary, and seeing him in New York had imparted “that proud calm delight that being with such a friend should call up. Ours must be ‘a marriage of two minds.’ The maelstrom of New York sucks in more and more of the people I love.” Will was reminded daily of his loneliness in his Mississippi life. A few days later, he wrote in his diary, “This morning I was intensely and delightfully alive, delicious fancies coursing thro me like birds thro an open window. While dressing a day or two ago I noticed our new calf was

40 Harold Bruff to William Alexander Percy, 8 September 1910, Percy Papers.
41 William Alexander Percy Diary, October 18, 1910, Percy Papers.
feeling the same way, full of whimsical observations...lacking but one thing—someone to romp with.”

Will wrote often in his diary about his discontent with his law work in Mississippi and wondered if he might be better suited to live in New York. He didn’t particularly enjoy legal oratory, and his opponents on the bench reaffirmed his political and class conceits. On the same day James Vardaman had addressed the Jackson crowd at fever pitch, Will was in court arguing against a “hill-billy.” He noted of his legal adversary, “His style of speaking is a bastardized rococo of pure oratory, much in vogue in the hills and seldom heard in the Delta; characterized by flamboyant and frequent gestures and by loud vocal ornamentation. A quaint ridiculous old person he was obsessed very naturally with Vardamanism.” Will Percy chafed at the thought that his days were spent arguing railroad cases in a provincial town, against “ridiculous” old men, rather than writing poetry. He was busy, and constant work did not allow him time for his art. “This business of living everyday life,” he wrote, “completely makes art impossible because with its hurly-burly it makes a weighing of values and an appreciation of the absolute impossible.” Will managed this tension between work and art by burying himself in his cases, focusing on the law in Greenville and writing poetry when on vacation. “There is,” he wrote, “a sort of joy of efficiency in being a lawyer to the exclusion of all else and not only am I more intelligent but am actually more content when an accumulation of business forces me to work every hour, day & night. But during such periods a crash of

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42 Ibid., October 24, 1910.
43 Ibid., October 28, 1910.
44 Ibid., November 6, 1910.
music from an open window or a sunset is liable to tumble the house of my oblivion about my ears and leave me shivering with longing.”

With the campaigning on hold for the winter, Will filled his days with work and reading. His boredom permeated his reflections in his diary: “One of the days I hate, lacking any kind of passion or thrill, the tide of feeling within as drab as the tide of events without. No gusto. No pang of sympathy.” “Another day with no noble deed done.” “Tonight I read from cover to cover Bailly’s The Divine Minstrels (English translation) and found it ‘to my purpose nothing.’” One evening, he read and was taken with Percy Bysshe Shelley’s drama, Cenci. He felt the heroine, Beatrice, was comparable to Shakespeare’s’ best heroines, and Will evinced an implicit feminist perspective when he wrote, “She is the only heroine in all poetry who independent of love remains a heroine.”

In late November LeRoy and Camille were in D. C. for a meeting of the senate’s committee on immigration, on which LeRoy served, and Will used the opportunity of their absence for male companionship. He attended a local showing of Israel Zangwill’s popular play, “The Melting Pot.” “After the play,” he wrote the next night in his diary, “W.H.G who went with Tanque spent the night with me—a sweet, untrained child with a hint always of prankish Pan, and handsome.”

In December Will received a surprise visit from a law school friend, Bob Black. Though Bob had tended to be combative and temperamental at Harvard, something had softened in him. His eyes filled with tears at the mention of a former girlfriend, and Will was strangely touched. Bob was able to express feelings that Will was “unacquainted

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45 Ibid., “Sunday November 29 or so.” [actually Sunday, November 27]
46 Ibid., November 7, 8, 9, and 10.
of.” “I am envious,” he wrote in his diary. “Joy I have felt in all its stir under many different provocations; but never sorrow. Bob thinks he will never marry, but he has loved. There too he terrifies me: I fear that perhaps I shall never marry or more terrible I shall never love.”

The spring of 1911 witnessed the climax of James K. Vardaman’s political career. He opened his campaign for the August primary on February 24 in Canton, Mississippi. Though the band played “Dixie,” the crowd buried the music with its cheers and whistles. Vardaman’s popularity was such that he did not have to slander Percy—though he referred to him as the man “spawned in the cesspool of the secret caucus,” he rarely mentioned him by name. Also, since he had established his views on the race question so thoroughly in the previous decade, he often limited his racial diatribes to a call to amend the constitution to ensure America remain a white man’s nation. Primarily during the spring and summer of 1911 Vardaman made himself visible, created an atmosphere of excitement, and spoke again and again of his platform for the common man: Railroads and corporations should be regulated; a graduated income tax should be passed; the people should elect U. S. Senators directly; prohibition of intoxicating liquors should be federal law; America should not intervene in foreign affairs. He pointed to his success as governor and never let his constituents forget that he was the victim of bribery and a carefully orchestrated secret caucus.

Vardaman’s campaign capitalized on LeRoy Percy’s one recorded condescending epithet. At rallies men, women, and children carried signs that read, “Cattle,”

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48 Ibid., December 1.
“Hillbillies,” “Rednecks,” and “Low Brows.” In Meridian on Independence Day two thousand Vardaman supporters marched through the town with these signs, and with lighted pine knot torches and red neckties. Several bands played “Dixie” and Confederate battle marches. In the middle of the procession a high wagon pulled by eighty oxen carried the White Chief himself, and the crown thronged around it to touch the wagon or get a glimpse of Vardaman. LeRoy Percy and his friends watched in disbelief. Of Vardaman’s Meridian parade John Sharp Williams wrote to a friend, “There was a fanaticism about the fool performance that rather frightened me. When men get to fighting about who shall touch the stupid car, upon which a man almost as stupid is riding, there enters into it a factor of fanaticism that I don’t understand and am not capable of measuring.”50 The Percys had a sense of what this “fool performance” and others like it meant. Coming home one day after campaigning, LeRoy asked Will what he thought of the election. “Not a chance,” Will said.51

On election day Vardaman won a landslide victory, garnering almost 60,000 votes more than Percy and carrying 74 of Mississippi’s 79 counties. Bilbo, too, won his race for Lieutenant Governor by a large margin, and the state senate was filled with Vardamanites. Historian Bertram Wyatt-Brown poignantly noted that LeRoy Percy spent $20,000 on his campaign in order to garner about 20,000 votes; Vardaman spent $2,000 and garnered almost 80,000 votes.52 This election was significant in southern political history because it was one in which whites voted almost strictly along class lines: farmers and laborers voted for Vardaman, planters and businessmen did not. The Mississippi

50 Quoted in Ibid., 253.
51 Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 151.
52 Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 190.
Delta elite, which since the Civil War had maintained dominance in state politics, was losing its grip on power and being replaced by a new generation of populist politicians. This shift coincided with a dramatic increase in racial violence in the 1890s and 1900s and a solidification of Jim Crow laws throughout the South. A new brand of politician, symbolized perhaps most fully by James K. Vardaman, created solidarity among white voters by inciting racial fears and animosities, assuring his audiences of such things as, “We would be justified in slaughtering every Ethiop on the earth to preserve unsullied the honor of one Caucasian home.”

Deltans such as the Percys detested Vardaman’s racial views. LeRoy Percy wrote to a friend of Vardaman’s manner of creating “horrible pictures of the assaults of negroes upon white women... only to inflame the passions and hatred of his audience... Playing with dynamite, arousing the bitterest of race feelings, to accomplish nothing—only to get a few votes.” But Percy’s perspective was not shaped by his sympathy for African-Americans, or by a progressive political agenda. He felt blacks were inferior and politically incompetent but highly valuable for the production of wealth. The considerable riches of the Delta depended on the vast majority of black field hands, and racial agitation would do nothing but drive them out of the state. He felt that Vardaman’s agenda would only make “the Negro more difficult to reason with and control.” Blacks with their own volition, especially when this meant out-migration, spelled disaster for “not only the future prosperity and development of the South, but its very civilization.”

53 Quoted in Cobb, The Most Southern Place on Earth, 147.
54 Quoted in Ibid., 146-47.
For Will Percy, the political developments in Mississippi were central to his conception of race and class. Will’s conception of blacks as otherworldly, pitiful, and tragic (which we will turn to more fully in chapter 8) depended at least in part on his views of poor whites. He had nothing but scorn, contempt and vitriol for those whom he called “hill people” and blamed them for corrupting the Delta and the South more broadly. The South, he felt, was composed of three “dissimilar threads”: aristocrats, blacks, and poor whites. When he discussed the beginning of the end of the Delta’s hold on political power, he began with “the first trickle of poor whites from the hills into the Delta.” These people carried within them “the virus of poverty, malnutrition, and interbreeding” and led to “the most unprepossessing [breed] on the broad face of the ill-populated earth.” He continued,

Intellectually and spiritually they are inferior to the Negro, whom they hate. Suspecting secretly they are inferior to him, they must do something to him to prove to themselves their superiority. At their door must be laid the disgraceful riots and lynchings gloated over and exaggerated by Negrophiles the world over.... In certain counties they so throve and increased that they now outnumber the Negroes, control the local government, and fix the culture—God save the mark!—of those counties. That fate is probably in store for my own county. I am glad I shall not be present to witness its fulfillment.... When these shall have supplanted the Negro, ours will be a sadder country, and not a wiser one.55

The Senate campaign of 1910 and 1911 doubtless worked to shape Will Percy’s antipathy towards poor whites. To Will, LeRoy’s loss was symbolic of the rise in power and presence of a group of people that were wrestling control from aristocrats. Not just in Mississippi but throughout the world: Vardaman’s election in 1911 was “my first sight of the rise of the masses, but not my last,” he wrote in 1941. “Now we have Russia and Germany…. The herd is on the march, and when it stampedes, there’s blood galore and beauty is china under its hoofs.”

In addition to shaping his class prejudices, the election also worked to reaffirm Will’s stoic perspective. He came to believe that suffering and loss were the fate of human beings, and to accept and bear them was a form of victory. “Perhaps it is a strengthening experience,” he wrote, “to see evil triumphant, valor and goodness in the dust.” At age twenty-seven Will came to believe that life was full of failure, and “Since then I haven’t expected that what should be would be and I haven’t believed that virtue guaranteed any reward except itself.” This virtue mandated that those endowed with it care for those beneath them, such as black laborers, but to Percy it did not mandate concern for all of his white neighbors: “I can forgive them as the Lord God forgives, but admire them, trust them, love them—never.”

Thus in August of 1911, inured to defeat, filled with contempt not just for James Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo but for the “masses” in Mississippi, LeRoy, Camille and Will prepared to board a steamer for Greece. Just before leaving Will received a telegram from Harold: “Much disappointed on your account but cannot believe your father really cares to represent such stupid people. Hope this means you will all come

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56 Ibid., 153.
57 Ibid., 153-54 and 20.
north at once."\textsuperscript{58} Go north they did, stopping for a period in New York before heading to Europe. They left behind them the pain of the recent loss and sailed across the Atlantic and through the Mediterranean. Arriving in Greece, Will and his parents stepped on the sandy beaches of Patras with "considerable peace of soul."\textsuperscript{59}

As he so often did when he traveled to the Mediterranean, Will spent much of his time alone writing nostalgic poetry.

\textsuperscript{58} Harold Bruff to William Alexander Percy, 4 August 1911, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{59} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 154.
Chapter 5: The Nostalgic Poet

"South!... These stars I know!... And south is Greece!"

William Alexander Percy, "Night Off Gallipoli" (1920)

"We are homesick for 'the glory that was Greece.'"

Raymond Ganger to William Alexander Percy, 12 November 1921

As a literary figure Will Percy has been best known as the author of *Lanterns on the Levee*. In that book, though, he wrote that he most liked to think of himself as a poet. Percy published three volumes of original verse, *Sappho in Levkas* (1915), *In April Once* (1920), and *Enzio's Kingdom* (1924), much of which he wrote abroad in places such as Greece and Italy. Of his poetry he noted, "What I wrote seemed to me more essentially myself than anything I did or said." He sometimes worried, though, that publishing his poetry might be too revealing. As he was revising *Sappho in Levkas* for publication, he fretted to Janet Dana that perhaps he should not publish it because "taken together it is too intense, too personal, too unrestrained, too un-objective."\(^1\) Attempting to understand Percy’s poetry provides a window into some of his most personal struggles. What emerges from a close inspection of his verse are three interrelated themes: nostalgia, Hellenism, and sexuality. By placing these themes of Percys into the broader context of homoerotic writing in the late Victorian era, Percy’s poetry becomes a crucial body of evidence through which we can understand his identity as a cosmopolitan southerner.

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As we have seen, Will Percy has been characterized more often as a southerner than a cosmopolitan. One reviewer of *Lanterns on the Levee* wrote, “The author is a part of his own region, and his region is a part of him,” while another suggested that “William Alexander Percy speaks for the Southern aristocracy.” Evidence abounds in book reviews, obituaries, and reminiscences, as well as in scholarly books and articles, that Percy has become a place marker in southern studies for the genteel, paternalistic, and nostalgic elements of white southern life.

Will Percy, as we have seen, was not a typical American southerner in his life. He interacted with and was shaped by not merely the South but people, ideas, and experiences outside of the region and the nation. When he looked back in time with nostalgia, he was not always looking to the southern American past. In neither his prose nor his poetry was Percy nostalgic for the antebellum South so often embodied by mythical male ancestors, and he did not participate in the hero-worship surrounding the nation’s Civil War. He joked about his suicidal antebellum family patriarch who walked “down to the creek with a sugar kettle, tied it round his neck, and hopped in,” and he hinted at the contradictions of his war-veteran grandfather, who, though “an opponent of secession and a lukewarm slaveowner, was away fighting to destroy the Union and preserve the institution of slavery.” Moreover, Percy was neither a champion of the bygone innocence of southern womanhood, nor of the closely related cult of the Lost Cause. He conjectured that “the lily-of-the-field life of the Southern gentlewoman” was an imaginative creation of “Northern critics and Southern sentimentalists,” and commenting on the iconography of the Lost Cause, Percy dismissed statues celebrating Confederate valor as “dreadful” and “too pathetic” to be taken seriously. The gendered
nostalgia of many southern whites for Dixie, with its focus on Confederate soldiers and lily-white southern belles, was not Percy’s.²

Instead, Will Percy longed for a life his region did not allow him to live. His nostalgia was not for southern nationhood or plantations or the Lost Cause; it was very often for another South altogether. Percy traveled to the Mediterranean, the European South, as often as he could, and it was in that region he encountered and absorbed an intellectual tradition that became centrally important to his self-conception. In particular, while in Europe Percy immersed himself in the thinking of homosexual writers such as John Addington Symonds, Walter Pater, and Norman Douglas, all of whom wrote about and regularly visited Greece and the Mediterranean. In addition to traveling to and writing about the Mediterranean, they figured ancient Greece as a kind of spiritual home, an ideal society to which they longed to return. To these British men, this was “the South.” “Traveling south,” according to one historian of British literature, literally and figuratively meant a journey towards artistic, emotional, and sexual freedom. Historian Robert Aldrich has argued more broadly that the image of a homoerotic South, comprised of the Mediterranean basin, “is the major motif in the writings and art of homosexual European men from the time of the Enlightenment to the 1950s.” Percy’s interaction with the European South suggests that he was a figure of more than regional significance, and that “the South” as both a place and a concept was highly important to a large number of men in the Victorian international world. A broader longing for the southern past—specifically, classical Greece, in which these thinkers found evidence that among

² Percy, *Lanterns*, 40, 9, 10, and 11-12.
ancient Greeks same-sex desire was a legitimate and even valorized form of love—was a defining feature of the gay male world of Will Percy’s era.3

Scholars such as George Chauncey, Matt Cook, and John Howard, among others, have shown that even in repressive environments gay men strategically carved out spaces of sexual freedom—analysis that has significant bearing on Will Percy’s experience. Evidence suggests Will Percy experienced and enjoyed intimate relationships with men, both in the American South and while abroad. Sexuality, though, is not merely comprised of physical experience. Historians of sexuality pay attention not just to structures of relationships and varieties of sexual experience, but also to the ways longing is expressed in literary and material culture, the ways desire is articulated in historically specific language, the ways knowledge about sexuality is constituted and transmitted within particular social and political frameworks. Exploring the concept of nostalgia usefully engages these questions of sexual longing, desire, and knowledge. Nostalgia, evoked through a particular idiom in Percy’s era, was one of many vehicles through which men understood and legitimated their homoerotic desires.4


Nostalgia is generally described pejoratively as a tool of escape, a mode of imagination that allows an individual to sidestep discomfort with the present by imagining an ideal past. While this contention contains some truth, it also has the effect of simplifying the complexity of human experience by stereotyping nostalgia as a kind of weakness. The concept of nostalgia originated in the seventeenth century to describe a debilitating homesickness among Swiss mercenaries distant from their homeland. From the Greek roots, nostos, meaning “to return home,” and algia, meaning “longing” or even “bodily suffering,” the word evolved from a descriptor of physiological illness in the seventeenth century to a psychological concept in the twentieth—a fruitless yearning for an idealized and irrecoverable past. More recent theorists such as Christopher Lasch and Svetlana Boym have characterized nostalgia somewhat more positively as the “ideological twin” to the concept of “progress” and an essential component of the modern mentality. Boym’s contention that nostalgia is a “romance with one’s own fantasy” implies a larger interpretive possibility that has not been explored: the relationship between nostalgia and the erotic. More than longing for a lost time, more than resistance to historical change, nostalgia creates a space distant in place and time onto which one can script emotional and sexual desire. Will Percy did just this in his poetry, which

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suggests new ways of thinking about nostalgia, early-twentieth-century male homosexuality, and the broader “South.”

Students of southern literature have generally ignored Percy’s verse or described it as romanticized and anachronistic, echoing William Faulkner’s oft-cited review of Percy’s In April Once. Faulkner wryly pointed out a few positive qualities but mainly catalogued the weaknesses of Percy’s poems. He noted the “naïve” elements of Percy’s tone and suggested that his sentimentality was evidence that Percy unfortunately “suffered the misfortune of having been born out of his time.” “He is like a little boy,” Faulkner continued, “closing his eyes against the dark of modernity which threatens the bright simplicity and the colorful romantic pageantry of the middle ages with which his eyes are full.” Jay Tolson has called Faulkner’s critique “searingly apt” because it articulated “the greatest weakness of Will’s character—a willed blindness to certain realities.”

One passage in Faulkner’s review, however, has never drawn comment: “The influence of the frank pagan beauty worship of the past is heavily upon him.” This comment is a more useful starting point for understanding Will Percy’s intellectual influences—as well the erotic aspects of nostalgia among many early-twentieth-century men—than assertions that Percy was merely waxing sentimental when composing verse. Percy’s poetry indicates that he was deeply committed to a very specific ideal of “frank

pagan beauty worship” that drew from a long and important history of European thought; in engaging this tradition, he was addressing his own contemporary concerns about modernity, creativity, and sexuality. Though profoundly influenced by the history and thought of the European South, Percy has been cast as the “quintessence” of the American South. Perhaps, as southerner, he embodied both.7

In *Lanterns on the Levee*, Percy provided an oblique but tantalizing clue to understanding his poetry as well as his disposition towards the European South. He explained how, through his travels to Europe, he became aware of the way the ancient Greeks “practiced bisexuality honestly and simply without thought or condemnation.” He spoke of his admiration for their art and contrasted the Greeks with the later European world, a “more prurient age” during which ideas about creativity and sexuality manifested themselves in art Percy deemed “sentimental” and “false.” Importantly, he described his affinity for Greek art and sexual ethics as engendering nostalgia. While alone at the Louvre studying hermaphroditic Greek sculpture, Percy recalled, “I wasn’t suffering regular homesickness or ordinary loneliness.” Rather, he explained, “I was sick for a home I had never seen and lonely for a hand I had never touched.” Will Percy was homesick in this instance for an idealized version of the mores of ancient Greece, an ethical framework understood by many men in this era as a vindication and affirmation of male homosexuality. Percy’s recollections provide a point of entry into this world of the European South that proved central to his life and thought.8

Almost one hundred years before Percy was born, the German intellectual Friedrich von Schiller declared modernity a failure and ancient Greece the apex of human

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civilization in an essay called "Naïve and Sentimental Poetry." To Schiller, the prevailing conception of the human being as separated in soul and body was a failing of modern thought. The notion that the soul belonged to the heavens and the body to the earth led to a fundamental disconnect between humans and nature. Poets of his own day, then, wrote with an essentially sentimental disposition borne out of the poet's disconnectedness from the world. In contrast, ancient Greeks believed body and soul were one and, as such, evinced in their poetry a sensibility he called naïve, which, translated literally, means "natural": it was intimately connected with the simplicity and beauty of the natural world. Schiller wrote of "the beautiful nature that surrounded the ancient Greeks" and admired "how very much closer their mode of conception, their manner of perception, their morals, were to simple nature, and what a faithful copy of this their poetry is." Schiller's essay is an early example of a tradition of thought in Europe that posited ancient Greece as a society unique in its freedom and frankness. Greeks lived in accord with nature, and their creative expression indicated they were free of false duality between spirit and body. This brand of Hellenism—the celebration of classical Greece as the ideal society, distinct from modern life but with the power to transform it—became a dominant strain of nineteenth-century European thought that can be seen in the work of German thinkers such as J. W. Goethe and Johann Winckelmann and later British intellectuals such as Benjamin Jowett and Matthew Arnold. Throughout the western world—and, indeed, throughout the American South in this same period—Hellenism was an intellectual tradition that enjoyed significant cultural legitimacy. To be "civilized" to a large extent implied a mastery and appreciation of the classics.⁹

⁹ Friedrich Von Schiller, Naïve and Sentimental Poetry and On The Sublime: Two
The systematic study of Greek philosophy, history, and poetry came to occupy a central place in British culture in particular during the nineteenth century, a shift which had profound consequences for later expressions of love between men. To nineteenth-century British intellectuals like Jowett, Arnold, John Stuart Mill, and George Grote, the study of ancient Greek society suggested powerful correctives to the stagnation and uniformity created by modernity. Throughout the century educators revamped the university pedagogical system to make Hellenism the centerpiece of British higher education. An unintended consequence of placing the study of Greece at the center of the homosocial male culture of the university, historian Linda Dowling has argued, was that students like Walter Pater, John Addington Symonds, and others’ immersion in Greek texts led them to develop a “homosexual counterdiscourse” that justified and valorized male love. Late Victorian men from Pater and Symonds to Oscar Wilde, Charles Kains-Jackson, Edward Carpenter, and, indeed, Will Percy found abundant evidence of culturally sanctioned same-sex expression within what they regarded as the natural and honest culture of ancient Greece. The ideal of “Greek love,” as it came to be known, found its most public expression in Oscar Wilde’s famous sodomy trials of 1895, as a result of which he was convicted and imprisoned. During cross-examination, Wilde famously articulated a philosophy of same-sex relationships that had been developing in Europe throughout the nineteenth century. “The ‘love that dare not speak its name’ in this century is such a great affection of an elder man for a younger man as there was between David and Jonathan, such as Plato made the very basis of his philosophy, and such as you find in the sonnets of Michelangelo and Shakespeare,” Wilde testified. “It is

that deep, spiritual affection that is as pure as it is perfect.... That it should be so the world does not understand. The world mocks it and sometimes puts one in the pillory for it."

Though Wilde’s account was doubtless the most sensational testimony of Greek love, he was giving voice to several generations of intellectuals who had been studying ancient Greece and finding in it a history through which to understand and affirm their desire. Like their British counterparts, German and Swiss Hellenists such as Karl Otfried Müller, Heinrich Hossli, and Karl Heinrich Ulrichs had documented and celebrated the history of Greek “paederasty”—a form of “spiritual love” between an older and a younger man. This paederastic relationship was not always or merely sexual. Though most of these men doubtless desired and experienced sexual relationships with other men, the concept of Greek, or paederastic, love was an ideal type that emphasized intellectual and spiritual fervor in greater measure than sexual intercourse. Paederasty was not simply a structure for male relationships, but was also a concept men employed as a broader justification for the legitimacy and, indeed, the superiority of gay love. To the men of this generation labeled by Victorian culture as “inverts” and “sodomites”—and for whom criminal charges for homosexual activity were a real possibility—paederasty, as an erotic expression inseparable from “spiritual love,” possessed obvious appeal.

Paederasty should not be conflated with pedophilia. For Will Percy in particular the historical record says very little about the structures of his intimate male relationships, and what it does say suggests his intimates were roughly his own age. But the concept of

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paederasty, which often focused on the love of male youths, was a central feature of his writing. The significance of this lies primarily in the relationship between gay love and pedagogy: Percy’s focus was less on the physical act of sex than the transmission of spiritual and intellectual wisdom. The pairing of men with boys symbolized the teacher/student relationship and emphasized the ways in which gay love was uplifting and empowering. Many thinkers of this generation drew from this concept to articulate what they viewed as the purity of love between men—in contrast to the current and historical emphasis on gay love as corrupt and corrupting. This understanding of paederasty was most often grounded in a reading of Plato’s “erotic dialogues,” the Symposium and Phaedrus, texts which help shed light on this tradition of Hellenism that profoundly influenced Will Percy.

The Symposium, a set of speeches on the topic of erotic love, particularly influenced the Hellenists with its frank discussion of love between men. Socrates, Plato’s teacher, presides over this discussion and amends his pupils’ various views on the true nature of Eros. After the pupils have spoken and attempted to make sense of love in general, and the love of men for boys in particular, Socrates engages the issue by describing a conversation he once had with Diotima, an expert on love. Diotima had explained to him that the god Eros was conceived at a celebration of the birth of Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty. Eros was thenceforth a follower of Aphrodite—so all Eros is “love of what is beautiful.” What is truly beautiful, Diotima said, is reproduction, both physical and mental. Mortals have an innate desire for immortality, and they satisfy this desire by reproducing. “Those whose creative urge is physical,” Diotima explained, “tend to turn to women, and pursue Eros by this route.... In others the impulse is mental
or spiritual—people who are creative mentally, much more than physically.” This type of creative man, whose desire is to seek beauty and to reproduce ideas, will likely find a younger man he finds beautiful. When he does, “He’ll drop everything and embark on long conversations about goodness.... Now that he’s made contact with someone beautiful, and made friends with him, he can produce and bring to birth what he long ago conceived.... They form much firmer friendships, because they are jointly responsible for finer, and more lasting, offspring.” Diotima puts a higher value on such “intellectual friendship,” free from the biological exigencies of physical reproduction, as the source of art and creativity in Greek culture. Socrates gives his approval of this explanation of male love, and the group applauds its ingenuity.11

Socrates’s apparent endorsement of love between men was liberating for many and became a cornerstone of male homosexual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The philosophy of nourishing the artistic and creative soul through male relationships was already present in the British pedagogical system, and homosexual apologists such as Pater and Symonds viewed this as an affirmation of Greek love. Both men wrote extensively about the concept, and Symonds insisted that the idea of Greek love “has been the light and leading of my life.” Elsewhere he explained that Plato’s erotic dialogues empowered him to imagine himself a part of the southern European past, “as though in some antenatal experience I had lived the life of [a] philosophical Greek lover.” Will Percy, while living in Europe in 1904 and 1905, discovered and became enamored with Symonds; he recounted figuratively in his memoir that while abroad, “I lived with John Addington Symonds, Ruskin, Cellini, and Shelley.”

In particular, Percy was captivated by Symonds's lush descriptions of Greece and Italy, and his portrayal of the Mediterranean and its history as an ideal of freedom and beauty. In 1905 Percy wrote home to his father, "If you come across a book called 'Sketches in Italy' or 'Sketches in Italy and Greece' by Symonds don't fail to read it or them. They are the most thrilling descriptions of Italy...I ever read." He always took Symonds's work along when he traveled in the European South, and while on the train "read as much as I could of the history and romance of the thing—and there is a never-ending supply of both."\(^\text{12}\)

To men such as Symonds and Percy, the key words in Diotima's explanation of Greek spiritual procreancy were "beauty" and "friendship," concepts central to the "coded counterdiscourse" that Dowling describes, as well as the language that pervades Percy's poetry. Beauty came to symbolize pagan devotion to earthly ecstasy and aesthetic perfection, and in homosexual writing its ideal form was male love. Symonds, for example, declared, "I love beauty with a passion that burns the more I grow old. I love beauty above virtue, & think that nowhere is beauty more eminent than in young men." The figure of the male youth was not necessarily a sexual object, but was symbolic of the purity and beauty of the male body and love between men. Friendship, or comradeship, was the corollary to love of beauty and signified a relationship between two men. These relationships were sometimes but not exclusively between an older man and a younger man—writers often conflated terms such as "friendship," "paederasty," and "Greek love" in order to reflect the broader legitimacy of gay desire. Late Victorian

homosexual men celebrated, in the words of Oscar Wilde, “the intellectual loves or romantic friendships of the Hellenes.” The primary literary journal for paederastic poetry was entitled *The Quorum: A Magazine of Friendship*, while the first English anthology of homoerotic verse was entitled *Iolaus: An Anthology of Friendship*. A standard vocabulary was almost ubiquitous in homosexual writing in this era—one scholar has called it a “barely obscured code” that allowed communication about such illegal matters—and Will Percy’s poetry is replete with its language and related themes.\(^\text{13}\)

Percy’s use of Hellenist language and themes, however, was not merely a vessel through which he covertly expressed his sexual longings; it was also a medium in which he grappled with fundamental questions concerning art and society. The interrelationship of nostalgia, Hellenism, and sexuality in his poetry demonstrate Percy’s belief that a society’s sexual mores shape its art. Percy himself made the case for linking creativity and sexuality. “The situation is fundamental and eternal,” Percy wrote in describing one of his poems. “Much of our greatest art is directly traceable to the sex instinct and all of it is influenced by that instinct.... I do very deeply believe in facing the facts, and I know of no love in which the overtones of beauty and nobility are not discernible.” A society’s conception of sexuality, he maintained, affects the authenticity of its creative culture. His reflections on Greek bisexuality in *Lanterns on the Levee* indicate that Percy felt the beauty and nobility in Greek art was derived in large part from that society’s frankness regarding homosexual love. In his poetry, Will Percy was both giving voice to his own sexual desire and implicitly critiquing the sexual mores of Victorian society. He wrote as an individual, but he also wrote squarely within a significant literary context—central to

which was an idealization of a homoerotic southern past free of the moral strictures of the modern bourgeois world.  

The idea of Greek love animates much of Percy’s oeuvre, and whether his poems were set in ancient Greece or elsewhere in the distant past the concept provides the framework for male relationships in his poems. He articulated the uplifting nature of Greek love in “Mr. W. H. to the Poet,” a short poem in which Percy imagined a communication between friends Will Hughes and William Shakespeare—a relationship that many Victorian homosexuals viewed as pæderastic. Will Percy figured their relationship as such. The sonnet is an imagined letter of gratitude from the younger man after Shakespeare sent him a copy of *The Tempest*. “My thanks, dear friend, as always!” the poem begins, but the speaker confesses that none of Shakespeare’s writing “can speak to me / As those swift words you breathed first in my ear. / They were your heart; this but your wizardry.” The young man says in gratitude that in his life “There’s nothing shines but took its light from you,” but the poem ends with the lament that others could not understand their love:

> I wondered if the world, so prone to slight,  
> Would some day slur your stainless name with mine,  
> Not knowing there is ice in heavenly flame,  
> And Friendship is Love’s canonizèd name.

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14 William Alexander Percy to Ellery Sedgwick, 10 December 1921, Percy Papers.
Percy sent a copy of this poem to his friend William Stanley Braithwaite, then editor of the *Boston Transcript*, and explained that despite the poem’s casual tone, “I mean it very seriously as a defense against those charges of abnormality not infrequently made against the poet in these latter days.” “I realize its appeal,” Percy continued, “even its understanding, will be limited,” and suggested Braithwaite not publish it “if it seems to you either in subject or in treatment unsuitable.”

“Mr. W. H. to the Poet” is instructive not only because in it Percy valorized a paederastic relationship as spiritually and artistically nourishing, but also because its language draws from one of the era’s most important homoerotic texts. Walter Pater’s *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, which Oscar Wilde later called “the golden book of spirit and sense, the holy writ of beauty,” gave voice to the late Victorian Hellenist’s philosophy of paganism. In the famous conclusion to the book, which Pater later had to revise rather than face scandal, he argued that the epitome of life was to experience moments of worldly ecstasy. “To burn always with this hard gem-like flame,” Pater wrote, “to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.” Pater’s exhortation to pagan ecstasy was inspirational to many late-Victorian intellectuals, regardless of their views about sexuality, though many read and welcomed Pater’s work as a homosexual manifesto. Pater celebrated passion and ecstasy but also the particular joys found in beauty and friendship. His description of worldly ecstasy as a “hard, gem-like flame” took root in paederastic discourse as poets wrote often of male friendship with reference

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to fire and flame, symbolizing what critic Paul Fussell calls “erotic heat.” Percy’s reference to the “heavenly flame” of “Friendship” unmistakably reflects the Socratic Eros of late Victorian male homosexuality.16

Percy likewise wrote of sexual passion in “Sappho in Levkas,” a poem he often cited as one of his favorites. The poem is narrated by the poet Sappho, born in the seventh century BCE on the Greek island of Lesbos. Sappho is often figured as either lesbian or bisexual in classical mythology and, according to myth, committed suicide because of her torment over her love for a shepherd boy, Phaon. Percy’s poem is an imagining of Sappho’s last moments, in which she confesses her carnal sin to the god Zeus as she stands at the edge of a precipice. Several of Percy’s poems employ female narrators who sing of male beauty, and in this case the poem becomes a meditation on the beauty of Phaon and the ecstasy of physical love—even as it is marked by Sappho’s self-hatred and disgust over her transgressions. At the end of the poem she escapes her agony by flinging herself into the sea. “Sappho in Levkas” should be read with an eye to its distinctly paederastic themes and language. It is a poem in which Percy himself was considering the spiritual and physical nature of erotic love.17

The poem begins with Sappho thanking Zeus for giving her the gift of song and the love of beauty. She had been a good steward of her gifts until she encountered

17 On Percy’s comments about “Sappho in Levkas,” see, for example, William Alexander Percy to DuBose Heyward, 3 July 1923, Percy Papers. “Sappho in Levkas” has been read as evidence of Will Percy’s homoeroticism also in Percy, “William Alexander Percy,” and Barry, Rising Tide. In the latter work, the poem is unfairly cited in the service of Barry’s thesis that Will Percy’s poor leadership during the Mississippi River flood of 1927 was due at least in part to his effeminacy, cowardice, and, implicitly, his homosexuality.
Phaon, "A slim, brown shepherd boy with windy eyes / And spring upon his mouth!"
Sappho proved incapable of resisting the lure of Phaon's simple, erotic beauty, and in
time they "met" carnally, prompting Sappho to confess to Zeus that in "meeting him, [I]
lost Thee!" Rather than confessing this and moving on, Sappho relives it, relishes it
before she relinquishes the memory. Sappho's language recalls Diotima's idea that all
humans desire immortality though reproduction; her metaphors for her relationship with
Phaon are often those of new life and regeneration. Sappho recalls that "Nor was the
earth's red longing for fruition / More hot than mine for Phaon," and that the boy was
lovelier than "The first strong tulip" of April. Following the paederastic model of love
that uplifts the younger man, Sappho claims that "Out of the evil of my passioning came
good! / For Phaon, Phaon loved me as a goddess sent, / And, curbing grossness, looked to
me for praise." In the retelling of their encounter, Sappho is both tormented and
invigorated: "Oh, let the anguished crimson of his mouth / Seek fire from mine, and all
his brown, light grace / Flame into strength to crush my paleness." Percy was imagining
not just Sappho's desire, but his own as well. The poem, as with many poems in his
oeuvre, is a celebration of the beauty of the male figure and love between males—despite
employing a female narrator.\(^\text{18}\)

Echoing Symonds's imaginative ability to embody a Greek lover, Percy embodied
Sappho as she experiences sex and considers its meaning. This move is significant not
merely in allowing Percy to write of gay desire using a male/female pairing, but also as a
meditation on the theme of ecstasy. "Ecstasy," literally translated from the Greek, means
to stand outside oneself, to experience a mystical reality outside of one's own body.

\(^{18}\) Quotes from Percy, *Sappho in Levkas and Other Poems* (New Haven: Yale University
Press, 1915), 4, 6, 6, 8, 9, 17-18.
Percy’s writing about a sexual encounter using Sappho’s body suggests that nostalgia and ecstasy can be usefully paired. To imagine ancient Greece in terms of “homesickness,” and to imagine oneself experiencing the sexual realm in a Greek body—these moves cannot be overlooked. In Percy’s writing there are moments of ecstatic experience that transcend place and time, but there always remains a melancholic difficulty in maintaining them. After each instance of carnal passion in “Sappho in Levkas,” for example, Sappho mourns its seeming wrongfulness. The tension created by loving perfect beauty while occupying a human body was the anguish of Sappho and, by extension, Will Percy. Rather than find fulfillment, Sappho commits suicide. Her death speaks of the tragic rather than the triumphant, the reality of pain and the fleeting nature of transcendence. “Always I shall be,” Sappho laments, “Hurt with the vehemence of too, too perfect beauty.”

Transcendence achieved through sexual experience, though, was neither Will Percy’s only source of meaning, nor something he chose to pursue unreservedly. For all his attraction to the sexual ethics of ancient Greece, Percy was nevertheless rooted in the mores of the American South. He grew up under the roof of his virile father who viewed poetry as suspect. Percy’s family self-identified with prescriptive ideals of masculine honor, which Will Percy felt duty-bound to uphold even as he strained beneath them. Percy’s pursuit of ecstasy and Pater’s “gem-like flame” of experience was always tempered by what he referred to as his sense of “duty,” his obligation to live out the values of his Mississippi home and family. Percy’s life in the American South was marked by service to others and a commitment to his place. His adopted son Phinizy

19 Ibid., 13-14.
remembered, “If he saw anything that approached a duty, he would reach out and grasp it.” This duty included not just acts of service but also a sense of restraint regarding sexuality.²⁰

Percy once explained to one of his readers that the main theme of his poem “In April Once” “grew from the conflict, frequently so poignant in youth, between the pagan joy of life and the increasing sense of duty—Guido vs. Serle.” “In April Once” is a long, dramatic poem in which Guido, a religious prisoner in a castle near Florence during the thirteenth-century Crusades, confronts his youthful pagan idealism through an encounter with David, a prison guard, and Serle de Lanlarazon, an imprisoned heretic. Serle, whom Percy mentioned as representing “duty,” challenges the pagan Guido to offer his heart “To something sterner than delights of youth.” At the end of the poem, Guido does this by sacrificing his own life so David and Serle can go and fight in the crusade, thus dying a heroic death in the service of good.²¹

The interaction of the characters in “In April Once,” all of them male, amounts to a conflicted paean to paederasty and paganism. David is described as “twenty-two, strongly built, blond, with blue, wide-set eyes and sullen, brooding expression,” while Guido is the same age and “slender, very dark, beautiful, full of high spirits and humorous gusto. His dark eyes are vivid and changing.” Serle is a “tall and fearful” old man. In the course of their discussion, Guido tells romantic stories of adventure and youthful experience, but it becomes clear that what he wants is not more adventure but forgiveness of sin and validation for his love of beauty. He suspects that in pagan love

²⁰ John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, MS.
²¹ William Alexander Percy to Medora Hambough, 13 April 1929, Percy Papers; Percy, In April Once, 49.
there is “vileness,” but that in selfless belief and action there is honor. In the end he remains at the castle to fend off attackers so David and Serle can escape with time to flee. He is stabbed and left to die, but his page Felice, a thirteen-year-old boy, enters and takes him up in his arms. As he lay dying in Felice’s arms, Guido recounts the “earthly ecstasy” of spending April evenings together. Sobbing, Felice implores Guido not to leave him, but Guido begins to fade. He tells his page,

O littlest comrade of my heart,

Doubt not the world is good and mankind mostly noble.

That I have lived unstained

Hath profited me surely by the gift

Of deep delight. The lips of harlotry

Can never kiss the sun

With the light rapture that was ours….

Guido’s last request is for Felice to lean closer and sing to him. Felice, holding Guido in his arms, sings to him a song, a prayer requesting Jesus to “make / Thy peach trees bloom for me, / And fringe my bridle paths both sides / With tulips red and free.”

“In April Once” is a more optimistic poem than “Sappho in Levkas”—unlike Sappho’s suicide, Guido dies a hero’s death in the arms of the “comrade” of his heart. The intimacy of the final scene adds depth to Guido’s dilemma of trying to reconcile pagan ecstasy with masculine duty. The peach trees and tulips that may await in heaven

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22 Quotes from Percy, *In April Once*, 19, 41, 33, 56, 57, 58.
suggest a redemptive outcome, and Guido is satisfied to remember that he “lived unstained” as he experienced the “light rapture” of friendship with Felice. The poem uses a chaste but erotically charged pairing of a man and a boy to emphasize the purity and pathos of male relationships. Far from hollow nostalgia, writing “In April Once” allowed Percy to imagine a moment of charged intimacy between a man and a youth, a fleeting moment of empathy and understanding in the context of a paederastic relationship.

This moment resonated, furthermore, with Percy’s readers. Felice’s song to Guido was later slightly revised and reprinted in the first anthology of homosexual verse in America. Compiled by Edward M. Slocum and privately printed, Men and Boys: An Anthology was a commentary on and compilation of homoerotic verse from Greek literature to the present. Billed as “An Anthology of Verses and Poems on the Charm of Boyhood and Young Manhood,” the book was “for sale only to mature and discreet persons” over the age of twenty-one. Published under the pseudonym “A. W. Percy,” Felice’s song appears as “A Page’s Song” with two lines revised. Felice’s prayer now requests Jesus to “fringe my boyhood’s path, both sides, / With lads-love fine and free.” It remains unclear whether Will Percy submitted this version of the poem to be included in Men and Boys, or whether Slocum read it, liked it, and revised it himself for the anthology. Donald H. Mader, a scholar of homoerotic poetry, has argued that Slocum was less than reliable as an anthologist and sometimes changed texts to suit his liking. In addition, there is no extant evidence of connection between Percy and Slocum in Percy’s own papers. Whether or not Percy intended this poem to be published in Men and Boys is likely to remain a mystery; in either case, though, the inclusion itself is important. If
Percy submitted the poem, it indicates his willingness to semi-publicly participate in a homosexual literary culture and his desire to make his homoerotic expression more explicit. If he did not, it remains illustrative that Slocum read the poem in print, recognized its paederastic themes, and included a form of it in his anthology.23

Critics also noticed Percy’s participation in this literary context. Responding to a New York Times editorial ridiculing the state of American poetry, the art and poetry critic Lindley Hubbell wrote the editor and suggested that Americans were producing excellent poetry led by Edwin Arlington Robinson, Edna St. Vincent Millay, and “the exquisitely spiritualized Hellenism of William Alexander Percy.” When a friend sent him a copy of Hubbell’s comments, Percy wrote back, “That Mr. Hubbell is just exactly the kind of critic of whom I enthusiastically approve. Seriously I like the company he put me in and was pleased at his praise.” Percy and Hubbell became friends in the 1920s and corresponded regularly and affectionately until Percy’s death.24

Many other readers recognized and appreciated Percy’s homoerotic verse, and some wrote him to empathize with his longing for the pattern of relationships that seemed to thrive in classical Greece. “Those of us who have known your poetry,” wrote one such admirer, “must find it very difficult to express our gratitude for that rich joy you bring us. We are homesick for ‘the glory that was Greece’ but we are happy for the reincarnation of that spirit in you. We love you.” Another reader thanked Percy for writing about “the ideal that made Greece great” and assured him that “you have done great service in

24 New York Times, 31 October 1922, 14; William Alexander Percy to Charles Puckett, 9 November 1922; see also reviews in Boston Evening Transcript, 22 January 1916; Hartford (Conn) Times, 8 January 1916; all clippings in Percy Papers.
bringing about this flowering of beauty," while one correspondent cried out, "To hell with homo-sexual exhibitionistic poetry—let us have delicacy of movement, enforced by a knowledge of classicism." Percy’s verse contained a refined and intellectual expression of sexual fervor that sat well with many of his educated readers.25

A more impassioned response came from a younger reader named Malcolm Vaughan. Responding to a letter from Will Percy, Vaughan articulated his love for Percy and his poetry in a manner resembling the intimations in “Mr. W. H. to the Poet.” Wrote Vaughan,

You are one of the children of dream. Whom the gods adore they glorify with passion for beauty: beauty whose intimations are agony. And the gods adore you, I know. Why, why is there so much sorrow in beauty, can you tell me? From time to time, I read from your poems to some friend, and all the poised pain of their loveliness throbs in us. Why is it thus? Is it that the human breast is capable of desire unrequitable? Yes; I suppose so; yes; love is that, I think; and beauty too, no doubt. I am smiling: who am I, to talk of beauty to you!

Vaughan concluded that if Percy were to come to New York to visit, “my head would be bowed, yes, positively sagging, beneath its aureole—the radiance of you…. Meanwhile, I shall continue to love you: poet that you are.” Being the only extant piece of evidence related to Vaughan and Percy’s relationship, the letter can only suggest so much. But it is

important to point out that the relationship contains the elements of the Socratic Eros: an older and a younger man joined together by a mutual love of beauty and art; the older man taking an interest in the younger, and the younger man being uplifted by that interest; and the intellectual friendship that both nourishes the artistic spirit and contains erotic overtones. Vaughan’s melancholic description of the sorrow of beauty and “desire unrequitable” also suggests the not insignificant social pressures of the day regarding homoerotic expression.26

Will Percy’s poetry was far more than a mere idealization of the “colorful romantic pageantry” of the distant past: it was for him and for others a medium that evoked the possibility of a shared homoerotic history. Percy wrote in his memoir that while his writing was “intensely personal,” he found solace in the thought that what he was feeling and thinking “had been felt and thought by thousands in every generation. Only that conviction would have permitted me to publish without feeling guilty of indecent exposure.” In this he was right: his feelings were common among men and women of every generation, and, indeed, in both the Mediterranean South and the American South. In his poetry Percy was able to express a measure of both his joy and his anguish, all the while reaching a small but sympathetic audience.27

According to Schiller’s interpretation of the Greeks, a naïve poet was fundamentally in accord with the natural rhythms of the world. Sentimental poets, conversely, were divided in body and soul, yearning for a lost connection with nature, honesty, and simplicity. By the time William Faulkner dismissed Will Percy’s poetry as “ naïve,” the term had come to be synonymous with “sentimental.” Faulkner’s

27 Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 131-32.
accusations of naïveté and sentimentalism suggested that Percy was in some fundamental way blind and weak, this weakness manifesting itself in futile nostalgia. Will Percy has too often been viewed as a man born out of his time—unable to deal with the complexities of modern life and resigned to long for the Old South through his anachronistic poetry. This is not so. Percy wrote poetry in a deliberate effort to achieve naïveté in Schiller’s use of the word: he desired wholeness and connection with what he viewed as beautiful, honest, and natural. “Above all things we desire to be united and absorbed,” Percy wrote in his memoir. “At the intensest peak of our emotions—lying on the bosom we love, or lost in a sunset, or bereft by music—being then most ourselves, we dissolve and become part of the strength and radiance and pathos of creation.”

This wholeness with the natural world, this pathos of creation, was a central feature of the “home” Percy longed for. At the end of Lanterns on the Levee Percy wondered aloud about the possibilities of being connected to a source of meaning outside the self. Science offered none, he felt, and Christian religion was “outworn rubbish.” In the final analysis, Percy concluded, “It is given man to behold beauty and to worship nobility.” Only when he experiences this “does the air taste native and the place seem home.” Human beings, Percy felt, suffered above all else from “apartness” and “isolation” from this spiritual home. “To become part of this creating essence and of all things created by it,” Percy wrote, “in this alone might be found fulfillment, peace, ecstasy.”

Percy was thus not merely escaping the present, he was trying to understand himself and his desire as part of a meaningful historical context, a context inclusive of

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28 Ibid., 321.
29 Ibid., 315 and 320-21.
traditionally suppressed human relationships. He figured these relationships as a natural part of creation, which, if understood, could lead to a fuller appreciation of human life. Percy drew from the work of generations of European Hellenists, and his poetry clearly demonstrates his participation in this literary context. His poetic characters’ obsessions with “earthly ecstasy” and the beauty of life are distinct expressions of Pater’s “hard gem-like flame” of experience. Will Hughes sings of his passion for Shakespeare, Sappho for Phaon, Guido for Felice. Some historians have noted that when Will Percy wrote of love, it was always unrequited—Richard King mentions Percy’s “apparently unfulfilled homoerotic encounters,” while Bertram Wyatt-Brown suggests that Percy’s love poetry remained “always with sexual passion unfulfilled.” However, it is less important that Percy wrote of unrequited male love—virtually no one in this era published writing about fulfilled homoerotic encounters—than that he wrote about it at all. Rather than writing about sexual fulfillment and contentment, Percy wrote what amounted to a meditation on paederasty, complete with the mourning of its non-acceptance in contemporary society. He drew from the paederastic focus on the figure of the male youth to articulate the beauty of the male body, and he wrote about asymmetric pairings to emphasize the pedagogical nature of gay love. Percy’s characters reflected Socrates’ explanation of paederastic love as a spiritual and intellectual form of uplift. The distant past was not merely a setting in which Percy fantasized idyllic scenes, but one in which he scripted desire, considered the joys and limitations of male love, and meditated on ecstatic experience.30

However, Percy never fully embraced the pagan ideal of the European South, even as he was clearly drawn to it. What Percy called “the conflict between beauty and duty” illustrates an animating tension in his life, and this tension can be understood in part as the conflict between the two Souths Percy experienced. He was drawn to the Hellenistic paganism of southern Europe, but he also lived within the moral framework of the American South. His pursuit of ecstasy was tempered by his sense of restraint. He wrote about, experienced, and enjoyed male intimacy, but he also worked to fulfill what he regarded as “duties” to his home and family, duties that, in part, mandated that he remain silent about his sexual desire. This he did not do. His expressions, though, were heard only by those inclined to hear; the rest insisted Percy was merely a versifier using classical themes—or they remained silent themselves.

Will Percy’s close friend David Cohn, who lived with him for two years in the 1930s, captured this tension in Percy’s life between Greek paganism and Christian morality. In a reminiscence of Percy, Cohn wrote that his friend possessed “an antique beauty suggestive of the Greece he loved and poet he was” and described Percy as perpetually longing for “pagan Greece: for the mortal beauty created there in such a moment of fruition as men have never since known.” However, Cohn explained, Percy was also drawn to the ethical precepts of the Catholic church; as such, in his bosom dwelt both “Saint Francis of Assisi and cloven-footed Pan.” Despite this conflict, Cohn saw Percy as having essentially succeeded in his attempts to live in spiritual accord with the world—like the Greeks. “Worldly, traveled, widely read, no denizen of an ivory tower,” Cohn wrote, “Percy nonetheless was marked by the naïveté and credulity that are nearly

always the mark of the spiritually superior and truly sophisticated man.” Cohn felt that this “naïvete” made Percy out of step with his times and urged his readers to think of Percy as a kind of pilgrim, who was, “in a sense, going home.”

This reminiscence, as well as letters from Percy’s readers and Percy’s own comments on longing for home, suggest that nostalgia is an important concept for understanding male homosexual desire in the early twentieth century. Percy described his poetry as a medium in which he created a space of freedom, always set in the past. “When after years of pondering you feel you have discovered a new truth or an old one that has the excitement of a new one,” Percy explained, “you write a longish poem.” And in order to “keep it free from irrelevant photographic details,” it is important to “set it in some long-ago time, one, of course, you love and perhaps once lived in.” Percy’s longing for home was inescapably connected to his longing to understand and vindicate his sexual desire. In using the Mediterranean past as both a setting and a source of inspiration, Percy and others were able to imagine themselves part of a “home” that transcended place and time.

When situated in its proper literary context, Will Percy’s poetry was squarely in the mainstream of late Victorian homoerotic verse. Though he often employed traditional forms and archaic language, the themes of his poetry were contemporary and reflected an intellectual tradition that was centrally important to educated male homosexuals of the era. Percy’s verse was not impotent fantasy but a deliberate attempt to find in the classical past tools for self-understanding. That Percy was not yearning for

the chivalric values of the Old South does not mean that students of life in the American South need not look to him to understand southern experience and ideas. Indeed, this makes him an ideal subject for study, a more complex southerner than generally has been recognized. For Percy, the South was not merely the American South. He insisted also that “south is Greece!” and it was from this South that he learned that he was not alone in the world, that others throughout place and time had felt and loved as he did. To him and to others like him, the possibilities of the South, of imagining oneself a southerner, imparted a chance of feeling at home in the world.
Chapter 6: The Theater of War

“One must be a soldier these days. There is no other part a man can play and be a man.”

William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, September 25, 1918

“While God may walk down the path of peace he is so much more visible on the field of battle.”

William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, 1915, before he went to war

On the day after the murder of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914, Will Percy was atop Mount Aetna with a group of drunken donkey-boys. Because Will’s Baedeker travel book double-starred the sunrise view from the volcano, he had hired a crew of guides to take him to the top. He tried to catch some sleep before the final ascent. Perturbed, he asked his tipsy guide “if Aetna donkey-boys always got drunk.” The guide said no, but that this was the first trip up since the last eruption; furthermore, the guide explained, his last client was the Archduke himself. “I was not interested in Austrian grand dukes and wished he would shut up,” Percy recalled. “One duke more or less—what time did we start up the crater for sunrise?”

After the Aetna sunrise Will traveled to Syracuse to find solace in the Sicilian countryside. He dashed off a postcard to his friend Carrie Stern: “Was piped asleep by a shepherd at Girgenti.” Within a month, Will’s placid Europe of sunrises and shepherds would be changed forever.

While Percy traversed the Sicilian countryside in search of bucolic idyll the alliance system that had held Europe in a balance of power since the 1890s began to

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come apart, leading quickly to a war that would change the world. The German army invaded Belgium on August 4, 1914, to begin a war that would last four years, involve over forty countries, and leave over 8 million dead. Immediately following the invasion of Belgium, Germany and Austria were at war with Great Britain, France, and Russia. Britain initiated a naval blockade of German seaports, hoping to starve the Germans into submission. The Germans, in turn, sent out U-boats to sink Allied naval and mercantile ships. On both sides, civilians and political leaders believed the war would be short and decisive. Rather than a decisive victory that would alter the political landscape, though, the war’s length and destruction altered not only the political landscape but the modern mentality. The slaughter of modern warfare mocked ideals like heroism and gallantry. Sacred values became profane. Soldiers died face down in the mud. Tens of thousands of pounds of church bells and organ pipes were donated to the war cause to be melted down into munitions.³

Historians have long argued about the role of the Great War in shaping a “modern” consciousness among Europeans and Americans—one that rejected the notion of history progressing peacefully towards perfection; one that valued questioning over dogma, experimentation over tradition, and irony over romanticism; one that saw art not as a tool for moral and spiritual uplift but one used for plumbing the mysterious depths of the human psyche and the seeming randomness of history.⁴

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thinkers came to reject the ancient notion that *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*—that “it is sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” By the end of the war, British war poet Wilfred Owen was firmly convinced that Horace’s dictum was “an old lie.”\(^5\) War and its outcomes could now only be written about with irony.

This debate is useful for framing Will Percy’s experience of World War One. In turn, Percy’s experience suggests one way in which the late-arriving American soldiers experienced World War One: with a high degree of self-consciousness. By the time Percy arrived in France in 1918, he had been reading about the war for three years. He had spent six months in Belgium in 1916-17 as a civilian relief worker. He knew of the death tolls. He knew of the alarming power of modern weaponry, of the years-long stalemate on the western front. In contrast, much of the enormous impact of the Great War on European soldiers came from the utter shock of it all—French soldiers wearing bright red and blue uniforms and carrying sabers marched into battles where 40,000 men would die in a matter of hours; British soldiers who had been told the war would be over by Christmas found themselves living in a trench at Christmas, cold and hungry and surrounded by death.

By 1918, Will Percy knew all of this. His vicarious experience of the first three years of the war taught him how to view it. He had his own convictions, to be sure, about the ethics and politics of the war—he resolutely believed in the Allied cause. But concerning the idea of war, Percy’s views were tempered by traditional notions about war as a crucible of manhood and an opportunity for valor. This knowledge created in him a deep-seated self-consciousness. Percy felt that being a soldier was a role one must play

in order to be a man. This war, in particular, seemed to be the great test of his generation, and “to miss this war is to miss the opportunity of living in this century.” World War One was in large part, for Percy, a theater in which he attempted to perform the role of man and soldier. In narrating Will’s experience of these years, it emerges that he not only felt the need to perform this role—which likely would lead to a heroic death—but that he felt he failed in his attempt. The war, rather than making a hero out of Will Percy, deepened his sense of inadequacy and purposelessness.

When the war broke out in August 1914, Percy returned home to Greenville from Europe. He was bored, restless, and had the distinct feeling he was living on the margins of world history. Percy’s angst played itself out in a correspondence with a woman who was in love with him. Janet Percy Dana was a distant cousin—a descendent of Don Carlos Percy’s first wife Margaret, whereas Will was a descendant of his second wife Susannah. They often joked of their shared great-great grandfather, calling him “the pirate” whose spirit haunted their family. Janet was beautiful, intelligent, and sensuous, and possessed a penchant for idealism. Her grandfather, Charles Dana, had been the Undersecretary of War in Abraham Lincoln’s cabinet. Her father, Paul Dana, was the editor of the New York Sun and had inherited a small fortune from his father and a large fortune from his father-in-law. The Danas lived on Fifth Avenue in New York City and summered at a property in Glen Cove, New York—one of two houses on Desores Island.

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6 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, 1914, in Janet Dana Longcope Papers, Hill Memorial Library, Louisiana State University. Hereinafter referred to as “Longcope Papers.”.
the other belonging to J. P. Morgan. The New York social arbiter Ward McAllister included the Dana family in his infamous list, "The Four Hundred," which named the select families in New York City who had "the poise, the aptitude for polite conversation...the infinite capacity of good humor and ability to entertain or be entertained that society demands."^8

Will and Janet likely met while Will was at Harvard but spent extensive time together in New York in the fall of 1913. Janet immediately felt an intimate connection with Will. She wrote him after his visit that "it is very forward to say so, but I vastly enjoy talking to you."^9 Will wrote back that "those rare hours with you were mighty sweet, tho so short."^10 After Will visited again in January of 1914, Janet wrote that "you made yourself much too agreeable during these four days you spent 'under my mother's roof'—I really miss you," and that "I don't even blush to make that frank statement—or to tell you that I shall wait impatiently for your next visit."^11 A few months later LeRoy Percy passed through New York and visited his relatives, and afterwards Janet wrote to Will, "we were awfully disappointed that Wm Percy could not come too, & I don't need to tell you that I shed tears for your sake....Oh! Why are miles between Greenville and New York."^12 Her letters to Will expressed longing and frustration, as well as a passion for their relationship: "Will dear," she once wrote, "I want to talk to you, I ache all over,"

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^10 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, Sunday, Longcope Papers.
^12 Janet Dana to William Alexander Percy, April 9, 1914, Percy Papers.
and in another missive she told him that “when your letter came and for some time after I was indigo colored in the depths.”\textsuperscript{13}

The opulent Dana family mansion stood at 1 Fifth Avenue in New York City, in the heart of Greenwich Village on Washington Square Park. Just a few doors down, at 23 Fifth Avenue, lived the iconic bohemian Mabel Dodge. To place Will Percy and Janet Dana in the context of “the new spirit” of the 1910s—Will Percy attended Harvard at the same time as the “romantic revolutionary” John Reed—sets their experience of this period in stark relief.\textsuperscript{14} When Mabel Dodge moved to Fifth Avenue in 1912, she demanded to live apart from her wealthy husband as an experiment in free thought and free love. She painted over the drab Victorian walls of her home until everything was bright white, from the porcelain chandeliers down to the polar bear rug that she placed in the living room. She held a regular “salon” at her home that was frequented by such visitors as feminist and birth-control advocate Margaret Sanger, labor organizer “Big Bill” Haywood, muckraking journalist Lincoln Steffens, and political radical Max Eastman. At these evenings the forward-thinking Bohemians spoke freely of topics such as sex, jazz music, socialism, and modern art, and sometimes experimented with hallucinogenic drugs. “It seems as though everywhere,” Mabel Dodge later remembered of the period, “barriers went down and people reached each other who had never been in touch before; there were all sorts of new ways to communicate as well as new

\textsuperscript{13} Janet Dana to William Alexander Percy, October 5, 1915 and August 7, 1917, Percy Papers.

communications." Just down the street, though, and in Mississippi, certain barriers remained.

Janet Dana and Will Percy occupied a unique relationship with the "new spirit" of the 1910s. They shared much in common with many Bohemians: they were both born in the mid 1880s; they were both reared in affluence and comfort in an age of enormous inequality; they both read widely and traveled extensively; they both felt acute discomfort with the confines of Victorian morality. Janet and Will were very open with one another and shared idealistic and open-minded temperaments. At the same time, though, the two still clung fast to some of the traditional values that Greenwich Village intellectuals rejected: reticence, duty, propriety, honor. They simply couldn't communicate about everything—and this was a constant source of frustration for Janet especially, who did not understand why her affections and advances were not reciprocated.

On his way to Taormina in June of 1914 Will visited Janet at Glen Cove. After the visit, she wrote to apologize for her behavior upon his leaving: "I fully realize how base it was of me to wail so indigo-ly after you had given up some of your precious New York hours to a country visit. I'm ashamed, but nonetheless appreciative, although when good-byes were said, I did not seem so!" "Anyway, Dear Will," she concluded, "I wish you Bon Voyage and many adventures & may the sea and Sicily at least answer some of your questions." Janet had less ambivalence about their relationship than Will, and spoke her feelings frankly. As months went by and Will did not fully return her affections, she demanded an explanation. "I am beginning to wonder," she wrote, "at

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least my New England conscience is beginning to wonder, just how long you will stand being appreciated in the spirit in this cavalier fashion. I leave it to you to say quite honestly whether you object."\textsuperscript{17} Will never did say honestly, but rather indicated his platonic feelings in his diction: whereas Janet regularly began her outpourings with "O dear Will" and "my dear Will," Will began his with "O Coz" and "dear Coz."\textsuperscript{18}

As the war began in Europe Janet and Will wrote regularly, and their correspondence indicates their traditional ideas about war. Whereas Janet's Bohemian neighbors regularly distrusted war as a tool used by the state to control and oppress, Will and Janet held a romantic view of war and emphasized suffering as a redemptive virtue. They both wanted to be in Europe serving the war cause, but early on there were not yet many opportunities. In the fall of 1914 Janet Dana enrolled at Barnard College (which, she said, was "simply swarming with Jewesses") in New York City. She commuted to class twice a week from Glen Cove. She enjoyed her classes but pointed out that being in college mainly helped to "keep me from running off to England, or to Mississippi, as I am sore tempted to do." Though she was busy, she said, she would certainly have time to see Will if he would come to New York. Though the Danas were "shutting up most of the house in town," Janet told Will, "we saved a room for you."\textsuperscript{19}

Will did not visit in the fall of 1914, likely due to his mother's poor condition. Just before Christmas Camille Percy had a nervous breakdown and moved into the sanatorium at Johns Hopkins hospital in Baltimore, where she stayed several months.

\textsuperscript{17} Janet Dana to William Alexander Percy, June 23, 1915, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{18} See, for example, Janet Dana to William Alexander Percy, February 2, 1915, Percy Papers, and William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, 1915, in Longcope Papers.
\textsuperscript{19} Janet Dana To William Alexander Percy, October 11, 1914, Percy Papers.
She was not allowed to see anyone, or send or receive mail, until she regained stability. Though Camille was a Percy by marriage rather than birth, she shared in the family's generational battle with depression and nervous disorder. Will's sense of futility at not being on the front lines in France was compounded by his inability to help his mother; indeed, without her, Will's place in his family was uncertain, as he explained to Janet: “When she goes the bottom quite drops out of our family establishment.” Will spent that Christmas day of 1914 alone in a hotel in Pass Christian, Mississippi.21

“What are you doing spending Christmas in Pass Christian, away from your family?” Janet Dana demanded to know. “I take it very unkindly that you should take holiday flights in any direction but towards New York.”22 In addition to this rebuke, Janet explained to Will that she could no longer resist serving in the war cause and announced that she was joining the Red Cross to serve as a nurse in France. Though this likely increased Will's sense of impotence, he was proud of his cousin and hoped in some way to experience her service in France vicariously: “I’m almost anxious for you to get to the front,” he wrote, “it’s the next best thing to going myself....So, please drink twice of all the terrible and the beautiful you will find there, once for you and once for me.”23 This terrible beauty was central to Percy's hopes for the war. The war promised honor and heroic manhood—and possibly more importantly, an escape from the strictures of elite Mississippi society. He wrote Janet disdainfully of his life in “comfortable aristocratic surroundings” while she and others served heroically at the front. “Isn’t it all

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23 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, Longcope Papers.
terrible and glorious?” he asked her, and wondered aloud, “Why shouldn’t I follow the
maid into battle?”

Janet’s letters from the front pleased and exasperated Will. He loved to hear of
the “glory” of battle, but the same descriptions reminded him of his own passivity in the
conflict. When Janet sent him some socks she had knitted as a gift, he turned them into a
symbol of his civilian status: “And how, pray, did you know the size of my feet and my
secret infatuation for green? I was almost consoled for not being a hero in the trenches
and receiving one of your mufflers.” He mockingly called himself a “stay-at-home.”
He wrote her that when he got “all droopy” and “sickly” he “only want[ed] to hear from
you and of you,” and demanded descriptions and details of the front. “Have you seen any
of the heroic armies?” he asked. Janet did reply with details of the front: the tedium of
her twenty-four hour nursing work, the chaotic and unclean hospital, the eyes of the men
she hoped would die so they did not have to suffer for the rest of their life as invalids.
She wrote of amputating infected arms and legs. In one case, a soldier had his shattered
arm amputated and was shortly thereafter informed of the death of his best friend.
Fogged with ether and grief, “He kept calling to his friend—‘Raymond, mon ami, au
revoir, au revoir...Ah, pourquoi tu ne me reponds pas?’” “No one who has not seen it,”
she wrote, “can realize the sheer material horror of it, let alone the spiritual side—which
is a sharper knife.”

24 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, 1914, Longcope Papers.
Underlining in original.
26 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, April 9, 1915, Longcope Papers.
Will, having not seen this material horror, continued to read gallantry into the war. "How I glory in your sketches of French heroism!" he wrote, "Please tell me more & more & more!" To him, the war was more than fighting—it was a source of meaning. He told Janet that her letters from the front "are the only things that seem to radiate vivid life & connect me with some vital force." He went even further to connect the French people of 1915 to a gallant medieval tradition. He explained to Janet that the French had changed since the beginning of the war: "All that we hated & wept for in them seems to have been burned up and the old exalted force that built the cathedrals & fought the crusades is shining forth." "Lord, Lord," Percy concluded, "if one stops to think there is nothing of moment to the individuals of this generation except the war."

As much as he loved her letters, Will did not reciprocate fully with Janet. As Janet experienced the terror of battle, she remained frustrated by Will's silences. "After I had bombarded you with letters almost as heavy as the shells that struck Dunkirk," she rebuked, he had not even bothered to write "to inquire whether I had been blown up to heaven by the Germans." Her letters were laced with chastisement for his inattention, but also with longing for his companionship. "I've needed your company badly, Will," she wrote. She described the beauty of the countryside and the destruction wrought upon it by war, and wrote that only he, the poet, could capture its pathos. She described walking through the countryside and finding a church behind the front lines, and how outside of it swarms of women and old men tended to wounded soldiers. She joined in to help. Eventually, priests and a robed choir emerged from the church with a crucifix and

29 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, 1915, Longcope Papers.
31 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, 1915, Longcope Papers.
32 Ibid.
led a procession of people, "to the music of a strange wailing chant," to a nearby chalk cliff to perform a mass: "pour la paix, pour le salut de notre pays, pour les soldats sur le champs et pour nos morts glorieux." "The Gods of Battle may not have heard," Janet wrote, "but surely the Son of Mary did. There were so many mothers there." She told Will how she longed for him to have experienced it with her. "But do you know, dear Will," she wrote, "I find myself wishing that in nearly all my experiences."33

Janet returned home in September, 1915, having served for almost six months. Coming home to comfort and convenience was a difficult adjustment after the terror of France. "I am puzzled to know," she wrote Will, "whether this present, or what has just been, is the dream—surely both cannot be real—& I am inclined to think that this concrete, common-place, three-meals-a-day-served-by-a-butler (i.e. a waitress) existence is the illusion."34 Much like before the war, she associated her affluence with malaise and purposelessness and faulted herself for freely enjoying its comforts. To her, the war was real, the war was authentic and full of meaning even as it was terrifying and grotesque. To be so close to death, she felt, brought her usually submerged humanity to the surface: experience and ideals were married, for the first time in her life, in the crucible of war. And once home, she wished to be back: "Every mail brings me letters from France and I am positively homesick for that atmosphere of high endeavor, that marvelous blend of courage and joie de vivre."35

In Mississippi, Will’s sense of uselessness heightened as the war raged on in Europe. To cope, he turned to what he called his two “opiates”: travel and writing poetry. In 1915 he traveled to Pass Christian and New Orleans and took a western tour to Salt Lake City and the Grand Tetons with an intimate friend, Tommy Shields (who, when he later died, Will had buried in the Percy family plot). He wrote to Janet from New Orleans that “I’m down here, instead of on my native hearth, without any good sufficient cause. My temper day by day became more unendurable so I just packed up and ran away, with an unfinished manuscript and a toothbrush under my arm.” Will was finishing what would become his first book of poetry, Sappho in Levkas and Other Poems. Writing poetry was intensely personal and cathartic, but it was also tainted for Will by his parents’ disapproval. In the same letter, he told Janet that “my poor family regards it as a poor way of spoiling a perfectly good career and tho this is learned merely from divination I suffer they are right.” Associating his mother’s illness with his poetry, he added that “it’s an awful pity I have such a wild queer streak in me—she would have enjoyed so a lot of normal children.” Percy’s poetry, as we have seen, was in large part a method of expressing and justifying his desire for male intimacy. Janet, in time, came to understand this. She later wrote him knowingly that “the things we feel most we don’t talk of or rather can’t,” and years later she urged Will to come to New York and talk about “the things we’ve known ‘darkly’ for so long.”

36 Percy, Lanterns, 158.
37 William Alexander Percy to Janet Dana, No Date, Saturday, 1915, Longcope Papers.
38 Quoted in Baker, Percey of Mississippi, 75.
39 Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, April 8 1919; Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, July 21, no year; all in Longcope Papers.
Coming to this knowledge, though, was difficult for Janet Dana, who loved Will and seemed to desire marriage. After several years of wondering about their relationship, she gave up. In October of 1915 she became reacquainted with a doctor named Warfield Longcope, whom she had known as a friend for four years. Longcope, almost ten years older than Janet, was the head of Presbyterian Hospital in New York City and professor of medicine at Columbia University. Within a month of their reacquaintance Longcope proposed to marry her. Janet was deeply ambivalent. In a long and tormented letter, she made one last attempt to speak clearly of her feelings. The letter is worth quoting at length:

All my life I've lived awfully much in my mind—even done my loving and enjoying and suffering with it—but with a queer feeling that some day I could feel overwhelmingly—I think my most intense longing has been for that day to come. I always thought it would come when someone loved me that I could love back—for the past two or three years I must say that I've been more alive—happier—than ever before & in my mind there has grown up an indefinite feeling—Will, has any woman ever shown themselves to you like this before?—that either one of two men who were my friends might be the flint & steel which might strike the living spark in me—one has spoken—I'm thrilled but not aflame. Now my puzzle is—shall I blow the bellows hard myself & possibly help to light my own fire—or shall I wait on—I'm not even sure the other man could light me, even if he cared to try—O Will, the heart is a strange thing & our selves still stranger. We're bound about by longings & ideals & fears & high restraints—we are so
awfully lonely—so proud—so humble—so chary—you’ve hit it right—to be
needed utterly—that is the touchstone to tell the truth from the illusion. Have you
never cared—what kept you from your hearts desire—fear—or duty—or a
mistaken idea of sacrifice. I seem to have bared myself to you. Won’t you speak
the truth on your side. We live so veiled perhaps you will be repelled by what I
am saying.40

Janet desired the comfort and security of marriage and did not want to be alone,
but she was unsure if Warfield Longcope could “light” her. Their courtship was a
whirlwind, and she explained to Will that “I never realized he cared until I came back
from France—& then it happened. There is nothing exciting about it.” However, she
said, “My doctor is a very wonderful person, Will, so kind and fine—so sensitive, so
human.”41 Nonetheless, doubts remained. Just before her wedding she wrote to Will that
“you don’t know how often my thoughts go to you—in spite of a wedding in ten days
time.”42 And even while on her honeymoon, Janet wrote to him that “on that day that
was in some mysterious way the happiest and most serene I have ever known—I missed
you.”43

Despite Janet’s marriage, or perhaps because of it, Will and his cousin grew
closer. In January 1916, Will decided to give up his law practice and move to New York
to write poetry full-time. The relative success of Sappho in Levkas had given him

40 Janet Dana to William Alexander Percy, October 5th, 1915, Percy Papers. Underlining
in original.
encouragement to devote more time and energy to his writing. So he rented an apartment at 110 E 22\textsuperscript{nd} Street, just outside of Greenwich Village in the Flatiron District, and less than a mile from 1 Fifth Avenue. He lived next door to his Sewanee friends Elliot Gray and Huger Jervey.\textsuperscript{44} The year of 1916 was one in which three warring desires raged within Will Percy: to write poetry, to live at home with his family, and to serve the war cause. As he lived and worked in New York, the latter desire became foremost in his mind.

Will applied to serve in Herbert Hoover’s Commission for Relief in Belgium. Hoover was then a wealthy businessman and cosmopolitan engineer who felt it his duty to orchestrate a relief effort for Belgian citizens, who since August of 1914 had been particularly hard hit by the war. Hoover was in London when the war broke out and immediately set to helping American travelers caught in the crossfire; his efforts eventually led to the creation of the Commission for Relief in Belgium, which he hoped would be “the greatest charity the world has ever seen” and perhaps even “the greatest job Americans have undertaken in the cause of humanity.” Indeed, the CRB was unprecedented and enormously successful, eventually providing five million tons of food for over nine million Belgian and French civilians trapped between the German army and the British blockade.\textsuperscript{45} One scholar has even suggested that because of his humanitarian efforts, Hoover was responsible “for saving more lives than any other person in history.”\textsuperscript{46} Percy, who headed Greenville’s recovery efforts during the Mississippi River

\textsuperscript{44} William Alexander Percy to Carrie Stern, February 16, 1916, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{45} David Burner, \textit{Herbert Hoover: A Public Life} (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1979), 74-75.
overflows of 1912 and 1913, had some experience in disaster relief. It was his chance to get involved, to meet a pressing need, and, he said, “Of course I hoped it would be a trifle heroic.”

As it turned out, it wasn’t. Will arrived in London a civilian in December of 1916, and it seemed that everywhere around him were young soldiers. Soldiers home from war, soldiers preparing to go to war, soldiers whose eyes were filled with purpose and whose faces were “gay and aureoled with daring.” Every able-bodied man seemed to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice, and Will was envious. Percy made the journey across the North Sea and eventually arrived in Brussels only to find that “the romantic pioneer period” of Hoover’s project had ended; now there was only administrative work and boredom. Percy lamented that “there was nothing dangerous or onerous about our tasks,” and that “the simple truth is we were the spoiled darlings of Belgian society.” The American ambassador to Belgium also resented the useless presence of so many young men of Percy’s class and status, writing that Belgium was “filled with a lot of impulsive, ignorant young doctors of philosophy.” The Americans were provided with upscale homes and servants, and were entertained with food, wine, and women. They spent the weekends walking in the pastures and golf courses of opulent country estates. In the far distance, they could hear the sounds of mortar shells and airplanes. “The ease and the laughter would seem inane,” Percy remembered of his leisure in the Belgian countryside, “and I would wonder how many were mangled by that burst.”

48 Quoted in Burner, *Herbert Hoover*, 80.
Will Percy could not come to peace with the idea that others were fighting for a cause he believed in. He wanted to be a soldier, not a “pampered trust[y].” Beyond that, the idea of death in warfare was one Percy relished. He didn’t just want to be a soldier, he wanted to die a soldier’s death: “Probably,” he wrote, “although I had no liking for hardships, a soldier’s hardships and his likely end seemed to me a better poem than I could ever hope to write.” A soldier’s death was particularly romantic in what he felt was the war that would define his generation, indeed the war that would punctuate world history. He viewed the two sides of the conflict in stark terms and had no doubts as to the moral superiority of the Allied cause. He noted, with no sense of irony regarding his own family’s history in the plantation South, that the Germans treated the Belgians as “slaves” and herded them off to work in munitions factories in a process of “wholesale enslavement of the able-bodied males of a helpless little country.” The German treatment of Belgian civilians was, Percy felt, “wicked stupidity that Germans alone could have been capable of.” Writing his memoirs years later during the Nazi occupation of Poland, he wrote that for the Germans in 1916, “this was only a miniature venture into slavery, a preliminary to the epic conquest and enslavement of whole peoples in 1940.”

That Percy likened the German occupation of Belgium to the institution of slavery is not insignificant. Percy knew the history of the slave South intimately—it was the history of his own family. Furthermore, Percy lived daily in a post-emancipation society in which former slaves and their descendants lived with little social, economic, or political opportunity. Freedom and self-determination—the ideals Will felt under-girded the Allied cause—were, in his home region, distinct privileges of those who had never

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50 Ibid., 162-63.
been enslaved. Freedom was more than an abstract principle—Percy lived daily with visible reminder of the effects of its opposite. In addition, he lived amid a population of people who had overcome adversity like he had never known and had created an enduring African-American culture despite oppressive conditions, a culture that once longed for and now embraced freedom. When Will Percy looked out and saw the “indignity,” the “actually and literally” starved Belgians, the trainloads of “slaves,” he had a potent and very personal frame of reference. He did not, however, associate his lofty ideals with southern blacks. “Americans at home,” he wrote, “cannot possibly appreciate the freedom so abundantly theirs.” 51

When America declared war on Germany in the spring of 1917, Will was elated. “There was only shouting in my heart,” he wrote. “We were spectators no longer, we were part of the tragedy.” He immediately returned home to join the army. 52

Once home, though, Will had difficulties. For one, he was thirty-two years old, which was a year over draft age. Second, to qualify for officer’s training camp one had to weigh at least 135 pounds. Will, at five feet eight and a half inches tall, weighed 112. He had a long way to go. He began to eat raw eggs, cream, and spoonfuls of tanlac. For a month he laid in bed. He did not exert himself in any way that might cause him to lose weight. Before he stepped on the scale he ate four bananas and drank a quart of water. It paid off—he had gained 23 pounds in just one month. “I was at last about to be a soldier.” 53

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51 Ibid., 163 and 166.
52 Ibid., 163.
Will viewed his opportunity to train as an officer a monumental test of his manhood. In his writing about it, he figured himself and his friends as “peewees” who faced long odds and enormous pressure. “If any of us failed,” he wrote, “he would have wasted the government’s time and money, he would have disgraced his family, and he would have failed in the supreme test of his whole life.” Most American men who served the war cause were enlisted; to become an officer meant authority and prestige. It meant a leadership role in the fight to save democracy. “I don’t suppose any of us ever felt,” Percy said, “so necessary to God and man.”

Will reported to training camp at Leon Springs, Texas, in September, 1917, and was assigned to the “peewee squad” of Company D. He described himself and his friends as “pale runts,” “insignificant” in comparison to the big “husky young Southerners” who comprised most of the camp. They struggled to keep up and tried to make up with brains what they lacked in physique. In one instance, the company was “broiling” in the Texas heat as they lay on the ground doing pushups. Percy was exhausted and could not do another. Lying in the dust, near the point of fainting, he gave up. “I giggled,” he remembered. “Mr. Percy,” the captain yelled, “this ain’t no kindergarten.”

Despite the physical hardships, the constant drilling and running and bayonet charges, Percy won his commission as a lieutenant. He and his friends felt that “we’d rather have had those single bars on our shoulders than celestial wings” and bade each other farewell as they set off on their assignments. The army instructed Will to report on December 15 to Camp Pike, Arkansas, where he would begin preparations to move to the

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front. While at Camp Pike he composed a poem, “Poppy Fields,” that gives some indication of his hopes for the war:

And would it not be proud romance
Falling in some obscure advance
To rise, a poppy field of France?\(^{55}\)

On the steamship that took Will to Europe, he read a novel his father had forbidden entitled *She*. As we have seen, when Will was a young child LeRoy demanded he not read any novels with titles like *In Silken Chains*—only chivalric tales such as those of Sir Walter Scott. All his life Will associated reading romantic novels with rebellion from his father. Will punctuated his memoir with images of himself as a different kind of hero than his father, a different kind of man. Will grew up in a world where novel reading, and indeed the idea of the artist-writer, was effeminate. It signified passivity rather than action, intellectualizing rather than practical work. But Will wanted to conjoin the two; he wanted to marry his artistic ideals to the work of war, the aesthetics of war to the action of war. That the first thing he did on his way to war was to crack open a romance novel suggests that, for him, the war was a moment in his life where feminine aesthetic met masculine action.

In France, the Army assigned Will to Tours, which was well behind the front. Will’s job was to inspect housing that locals offered to the American officers. He lessened his disappointment somewhat by securing himself a room “fit for a major

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general” in a doctor’s house. He loved the family’s French civility and fine meals with wine from their own vineyard, and he delighted when the famous sculptor François Sicard visited from Paris. Another regular was soon-to-be Nobel Prize winner Anatole France, who took a liking to Will and invited him to his home (Will’s superior, who had never heard of the writer, declined Will’s request for a leave). At the doctor’s house the group laughed and drank wine and passed the winter nights by reading aloud from “naughty” eighteenth century memoirs. At one large dinner party a kindly old French woman turned to Will and asked him to tell them about the American South. “Panic enfolded me,” Will remembered. “What can you say about the Delta? I became distraught in my search for a Southern theme.” The word that would not leave Percy’s mind was “Rattlesnakes,” though he did not know the French translation. “In my country there lives a serpent,” Will began. “He is three or four kilometers long….He always carries little chimes.” Will continued his fumbling description of rattlesnakes until he attempted to describe the tail of the snake and instead alighted on a French profanity. The dinner party was shocked and then erupted into uproarious laughter.\(^{56}\)

After his job as a billet inspector Will was assigned aide to a commandant who had no real job for Will, so he asked Will to fix his stove—which Will did not know how to do. Into this not very heroic war experience in early 1918 entered LeRoy Percy, who had joined the YMCA board and was on a fund-raising tour. Will wrote that soldiers loved his father’s speeches and that LeRoy, in his “Y” uniform, looked like General Pershing himself. Will explained that it must have been his father’s innocence that made

him regard his son as a hero, because, he wrote, “I had never seen a trench.”\textsuperscript{57} LeRoy’s insistence that Will was a hero was echoed by Janet Dana, who could not envision Will as anything but a noble warrior: she told him that in his Army uniform he looked like a “crusader” and said, “I know you have already been through fire and conquered in your soul and I thank God I know you. Will, you must have seen the Holy Grail with the eyes of your spirit...go out to battle dear knight and may God and our lady keep you.”\textsuperscript{58} She contrasted Will to her new husband: “when Barbara asks later, ‘Daddy, what did you do in the great war?’ his only trophy will be a very shiny pair of breeches worn smooth in a revolving chair!”\textsuperscript{59}

In late spring orders came for Will to be moved to Paris for more aide work. Will protested and insisted that he wanted to go to the front. His Colonel “observed that as far as he was concerned I could go to hell, but for the present I might try the next train to Paris.” So Will got on the next train to Paris, where he found himself in charge of organizing civilian labor for the American Army. Because most Frenchmen were fighting at the front, he was forced to put together teams of masons and carpenters and painters out of “the scum of Paris.” He came to admire these French workers and their love of life, but he wrote that the spring of 1918 was an unhappy one. Artillery and gunfire could be heard in the distance, bombs fell from airplanes, the war had long been bogged down in a senseless and seemingly endless quagmire of death. In the recent French offensive at Chemin de Dames, disillusioned French soldiers were said to have

\textsuperscript{57} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{58} Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, March 2, 1918, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{59} Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, May 11, 1918, Percy Papers.
walked into the field of battle ‘‘baa’ing’’ like sheep, mocking the slaughter that their generals ordered them into. ‘‘Fear clung to Paris like mold,’’ Percy wrote.\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 192.}

‘‘But these were not the true causes of my restlessness and unhappiness,’’ Percy remembered. On the streets of Paris were soldiers on furlough. Soldiers from Australia and New Zealand and Great Britain, soldiers with battle-worn uniforms and heavy eyes. ‘‘I began to believe these true soldiers knew that I worked in an office,’’ Percy wrote, ‘‘like a damn civilian.’’ Percy felt his work as an aide behind the front lines hung from his uniform like a ‘‘badge of disgrace,’’ and he ‘‘became convinced that without suffering there was no real soldiering.’’ He arranged to have his friend Huger Jervey, who held an administrative post, recommend his transfer to the front. When Will’s superior officer refused the request, Will went to him with wet eyes and said, ‘‘think how I must feel….this is my only chance.’’ He begged him for the chance to fight, that chance that ‘‘every real American wants.’’ When the Major consented, Will barely restrained himself from kissing his bald head. ‘‘I walked on air,’’ Percy wrote, ‘‘down the Champs-Elysees repeating: ‘My heart is like a singing bird whose nest is in a watered shoot’ and wondering what a watered shoot might be.’’\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 192-93.}

Since Will had been out of the infantry for six months, he trained briefly at the officer’s school at Gondrecourt. He worked hard in anticipation of going to the front. Upon completion of the course, the officers received their orders. Will was not going to the front but was ordered instead to be an instructor in the ninety-second division, America’s first all-black military unit.
"I decided that in a fit of homesickness I had lost my mind—the landscape was speckled with Negro soldiers!" The enlisted men were black. The lieutenants and sergeants and captains were black. Percy went to the head of the ninety-second, General Hay, and said, "Sir, I didn't ask to be sent here and I don't want to be here." The General was not amused. Will explained that he was a soldier, not an instructor. "I'm one of these new officers out of civilian life," Percy insisted, "I know nothing at all, sir." The general appointed Will to teach black officers, most of whom outranked him, how to read French maps. When Will wrote to Janet about his new position, she wrote back, "I can imagine your feelings when you found yourself in command of colored troops. No one but fate herself could have perpetrated that little jest, I'm sure."\(^{62}\)

The few months with the Ninety-second division in France in the summer of 1918 was the only time in Will's life that he was forced to face the impermanence of his sense of racial hierarchy. He had to salute black officers. He had to maintain military deference despite his deeply held belief that blacks were "a race which at its present stage of development is inferior in character and intellect to our own."\(^{63}\) Will described his life as a white man in the Mississippi Delta as living "habitually as a superior among inferiors."\(^{64}\) His time with the Ninety-second in France did not change his thinking. He felt that though there were some good officers, most of the black troops were "lazy, undevoted, and without pride." He kept his distance from them and did not eat with them at meals. He even wrote an old Delta friend who was an aide to General Pershing that he did not think the troops were fit for battle at the front. Years later he wrote disdainfully

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\(^{62}\) Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, September 7, 1918, Percy Papers.
\(^{63}\) *Ibid.*, 228.
\(^{64}\) Percy, *Lanterns*, 298.
that when the Ninety-second returned to America they were treated as heroes; they marched down Fifth Avenue (past the Dana mansion) before a flag-waving crowd, despite only having had one engagement and performing, Percy felt, badly. Will quoted General Pershing’s comment that during the Argonne offensive, “The 92\textsuperscript{nd} Division attacked but did not hold all its gains,” and called Pershing’s words “a masterly example of the glacial tact of understatement.”\textsuperscript{65} Will simply could not accept that a black man performed his notions of the heroic function of a soldier.

While teaching black officers about the French army’s military tactics, the ways of sending messages to and from the front, and how to use a compass, Will missed action at the front that proved the beginning of the end of the war. The German army had, in the spring of 1918, made a frantic gamble. In the “Ludendorf Offensive,” the German army mustered all of its strength for a series of attacks intended to break through Allied lines and capture Paris. Since the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had eased the pressure on the Eastern front, thousands of German troops were transferred to the Western front for this operation. The Germans made significant advances and even began to shell Paris in June; by July of 1918 the German Empire extended from near Paris in the west to the Ukraine in the east—its largest extent ever. But these gains were Germany’s last gasp. Between March and July of 1918 the German army suffered 800,000 casualties. Desertion was a problem, and revolution among war-starved civilians seemed imminent on the home front.\textsuperscript{66}

Allied commanders decided to capitalize on what they rightly perceived as weakness and launched a counteroffensive that would be the death knell for the German

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 200.
\textsuperscript{66} Hew Strachan, The First World War (New York: Viking, 2003), 298.
Army. On July 18 the Allied forces launched what would become the Second Battle of the Marne, and Will Percy did not take part. His resentment towards the black troops went beyond racial prejudice—they were robbing him of his chance to lead a platoon into battle. They were demanding his time and energies during the first major fighting the American army was involved in. While nine American divisions took part in the Second Battle of the Marne, the Ninety-second was well beyond the front lines. What was worse, many of the American infantry gained the heroic status that Percy so ardently desired. One war observer in France wrote that the American soldiers looked like “Tommies in Heaven...so god-like, so magnificent, so splendidly unimpaired.” In July and early August the Allies gained such significant ground, with so many German casualties, that Ludendorff called August 8 “the black day of the German army.” He rightly sensed that his soldiers would not be able to fight much longer.67

In mid-August, though, Will Percy got his “break.” Colonel William P. Jackson, with whom Percy served in the Ninety-second division, was promoted to Brigadier General of the Thirty-seventh division—which was at the front—and asked Will to serve as his aide. “Thanking him, I said I understood that an aide was the lowest form of military life and all I aspired to was to be a platoon leader at the front,” Percy wrote. But Jackson told Percy it was either be his aide at the front or remain as an instructor with the Ninety-second until peace was signed. Percy agreed to go. He wrote to his Greenville friend Billy Wynn that despite his decision, “still I’ll never cease regretting not being a platoon leader.”68

67 Quote in Ibid., 311 and 316.
68 William Alexander Percy to Billy Wynn, August 16th, 1918, Percy Papers.
The Thirty-seventh division participated in the Muese-Argonne offensive of late September and October 1918. Will's duties were to attend to the needs of General Jackson—he went with him on trench inspections, he sent messages, he organized the general's administrative affairs. On one patrol, the general got his pants caught on barbed wire and Percy was set about the task of disentangling him when a shell landed nearby, driving mud and shrapnel into the air. The freed general took cover in the nearest ditch but Percy was so thrilled to be in battle that he stood up to watch the artillery barrage. William P. Jackson, Percy wrote later, "was highly irritated at this performance."

As it turned out, Will maintained the same sense of self-consciousness and inadequacy at the front as he did behind the front. He wrote home to his mother that he had a gas mask but he merely carried it around to make himself look serious. He wasn't in any real danger. In fact, he wrote, "I've resigned myself to losing all chances of glory, and what's more, of the deep human satisfaction of suffering and fighting with the men." The front as Percy experienced it was neither dangerous nor glorious. During a German artillery attack, he was surprised at the absurdity of his perceptions: "My only sensation as the sun came up was listening to the wild canaries which suddenly and strangely moved to music could be heard above the thunder of the guns." He lamented to his mother that the front "isn't serious enough to dampen one's spirits or to seem more real than a good movie."

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69 Quoted in Baker, The Percys of Mississippi, 84.
70 Quoted in Ibid.
72 Quoted in Baker, The Percys of Mississippi, 84.
Percy’s sense of the war as a movie suggests the performative aspects of World War One for him. He felt as though he was being watched, as though he were on stage. He figured his role as such: to his mother, he described his war experience as “playing in the last act of the world’s greatest tragedy” and referred to the battlefield as a “show” and an “amphitheatre.” He even scripted his role in the case of his death. Just before the Allies launched the “gorgeous big battle” in the Argonne forest on September 26, he explained to his mother that “One must be a soldier these days—there is no other part a man may play and be a man. Should anything ever happen to me over here, you and father must, and I know you will, feel that it was a great privilege for us to be allowed to go forth with the heroes.” Even as he scripted his own role as a man, though, he did not portray himself as a hero—only as one who went forth with them.

Much as Percy wanted the war to be a performance, and much as he figured it as such, he felt he was merely an observer of the fighting soldier. He never actively fought. He never fired at the enemy. His time in the trenches was at the rear of the action with the general rather than in the front with the infantrymen. He was acutely aware of this, and it pained him deeply. The point here is not to portray Percy as a coward but to emphasize how viscerally he wanted to fight—not just to serve. He served dutifully and well—and was rewarded for it with several medals of honor and a promotion—but he did not fight. His wartime correspondence, and his memories of the war, are marked by an overwhelming sense that his primary role in the war was to bear witness to its terribleness. He saw everything: the rows and rows of young dead Americans, the

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74 Percy, *Lanterns*, 201.
destroyed French villages, the dismembered and disfigured soldiers. He felt everything: the whistle of artillery shells bound for killing; the dirt spewed forth from bombs; the cold and damp and wet trenches the French infantry lived in for four years. But seeing and feeling was the role of the poet, not the soldier. It was the job of artists to perceive and record, the job of the soldier to fight and die. Laying in bed one night before an attack, Percy thought to himself, “Art? What was art, painting, music, poetry, all that stuff? Child’s play, the pastime of weaklings, pointless, useless, unmanly, weak, weak, weak.”

Percy’s chance for action came just weeks before the war’s end. The Thirty-seventh division was given the task of capturing the German redoubt at Mountfaucon, and they did so successfully. At one point in the attack, Percy found himself separated from General Jackson. Walking among dead bodies and falling bombs, “I wandered along wondering vaguely where he was.” Amidst his wondering, a barrage ensued and he jumped into a trench. In the chaos a nearby colonel lost control of his men and Will and another aide took over the company and rallied them to retain their position. “It was a vivid wild experience,” he wrote his father, “and I think I went thro it calmly by refusing to recognize it was real.” He described the exhilaration of rallying the men amid the barrage as “a sort of sleep, as you might read Dante’s Inferno.” For his efforts in rallying the troops near Mountfaucon, Will was awarded the Croix de Guerre, which the French army bestowed on those who showed heroism in battle.

The war ended with Will having served about five weeks at the front. Though it was not long compared to his French and British comrades, it was enough for him to have

75 Percy, Lanterns, 216.
76 William Alexander Percy to LeRoy Percy, October 4, 1918, Percy Papers.
seen the horror of war. On the morning of the armistice, November 11, Will and his fellow soldiers walked through town without fear of being shelled or shot at. They felt lighter, less afraid. But it took no time for Will to begin feeling regretful of the war’s end: “for each of us,” he wrote, “our bliss and serenity were only the superstructure over a hidden tide of desolation and despair.” Each of the soldiers, Will guessed, repeated to themselves some version of what Will told himself:

It’s over, the only great thing you were ever a part of. It’s over, the only heroic thing we all did together. What can you do now? Nothing, nothing. You can’t go back to the old petty things without purpose, direction, or unity—defending the railroad for killing a cow, drawing deeds of trust, suing someone for money, coping again, all over, with that bright rascal who rehearses his witnesses. You can’t go on with that kind of thing till you die.\(^77\)

Though his wartime experience was less than heroic, though he did not play the role he wanted to play, though he did not die a soldier’s death—at least during the war there was still a chance for escape from the boredom and despair of everyday living. When the war ended and it had not met his expectations, Percy was filled with dread melancholy about the thought of returning to Mississippi. He wrote to Carrie Stern of the immensity of the “mental and spiritual let-down” he felt and waited in Belgium until the army could ship him home.\(^78\) He watched as the postwar peace was negotiated in Paris and noted with prescience that “the boundaries of nations and the fates of peoples are assigned to

\(^77\) Percy, _Lanterns_, 223.
committees, and the politicians in Congress with neither wisdom, sincerity, nor information attack, investigate and criticize, hoping to assure their own reelection.\textsuperscript{79}

For Will Percy, World War One was an aesthetic and performative experience marked by self-consciousness, restlessness, and unfulfilled yearnings for martial valor and even death. Though he portrayed this as a turning point in his life, a marked sense of continuity emerges between the unsettled, peripatetic Will Percy of 1914 and the Will Percy of 1918 unable to recreate the thrilling horror of battle. If not a turning point, Percy's experience in the Great War reified his sense that human life was a drab and unromantic affair in which authentic experience was impossible. Even for a soldier.

In \textit{Lanterns on the Levee}, Percy wrote that the world before the Great War was coherent, stable, and even beautiful. "An entrancing world it was," he wrote, "where scenes fit for postcards were round every corner and treasures of art at every turn." He sprinkled his descriptions of his time in Europe in the summer of 1914 with enduring, solid features of the landscape: Mount Aetna, Notre-Dame cathedral, the Mona Lisa hanging in the Salon Carré. Percy figured pre-war Europe as a deeply rooted, historical society that was torn apart by the war. He figured himself in a similar way. When he arrived in Paris in July 1914, he met up with a friend and the two men bought a bottle of wine and some raspberries to enjoy at a sidewalk café on the Grand Boulevards, but these particular icons of the European landscape were gone: "There were no chairs or tables on any Paris sidewalk! We knew the world had come to an end." He included himself along with the disintegration of Europe and the old order. Likening himself to the famous

\textsuperscript{79} William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, February 2, 1919, Percy Papers.
biblical outcast and wanderer, he recalled that “I was to be a bit of an Ishmael the rest of my days, but I didn’t know it then.”\(^{80}\)

Percy’s nostalgia for the pre-war world belies the fact that he had felt himself an outcast and a wanderer from a young age. His correspondence and writing from his Sewanee days to the advent of World War One are shot through with a sense of inadequacy, a longing for stability, and a restlessness that led to constant movement. The point here is not to prove Percy was a hypocrite but to emphasize the ways in which Percy demanded the Great War provide him with a sense of purpose and mission—and the ways the war failed to bring this about. He demanded from the war suffering and possibly death, but when his chance came, he couldn’t experience battle with authenticity. Rather than experiencing war unself-consciously, he played it out as if on a stage. The longer the war went on, the more conscious he became that his role in the war was not the part he had hoped for.

Despite his own feelings, his family and his society insisted he was a war hero. Janet Longcope wrote to him that she was “green with envy” of his battle experience, and pointed out that “you have the glorious talisman ‘I made the choice, I went and I endured.’\(^{81}\)” When he arrived home his parents met him at the harbor in New York. “They were so happy,” Percy remembered, “so filled with pride and thanksgiving, it was embarrassing. I tried, too, to be glad and proud and thankful, but I have never before or since felt so incapable of emotion, so dead inside.”\(^{82}\)

\(^{81}\) Janet Dana Longcope to William Alexander Percy, December 8, 1918 and January 7, 1919, Percy Papers.
\(^{82}\) Percy, *Lanterns*, 223.
Feeling dead inside but wearing the uniform of a soldier, Will boarded a train headed for Mississippi, his *Croix de Guerre* hanging from his chest in silver and gold.
Chapter 7: The Percy Family and The Ku Klux Klan

Will arrived home in Greenville a war hero who felt himself a failure. He told a young admirer that the French Army sent a bucket of Croix de Guerre ribbons to the American army, and any "doughboy who played brass-horn in the brigade's brass-band got one of the extras."¹ In the summer of 1919 he finished his manuscript of poems that would be published the following year as In April Once. He delivered speeches asking citizens to buy more government "Liberty Loan" bonds, and in the fall he took a one-semester post teaching in the English department at Sewanee. That summer he also reflected on the violent relations between blacks and white as riots broke out in places like Chicago and Detroit, as well as in his own South. Like the rest of the nation, the immediate postwar years tested Will and his family's ideas about race and class.

In September 1919 Will sent an unsolicited letter to The New Republic explaining and defending southern race relations. In it, he argued that the "Negro Problem" was not so much a matter of race as of class. The Negro race, he explained, was "a race which at its present stage of development is inferior in character and intellect to our own." They were a tragic, pitiful, and lovable race but essentially uncivilized. They needed the care and protection of white men, particularly those who lived among them and possessed the "wisdom, justice, and kindness" to lead them. This higher class of whites possessed the ability to orchestrate race relations in a way that was peaceful and effective, "not quickly nor easily, but through the years. And they are the only people who can: it is their problem, their burden, their heavy heritage." The greatest challenge to peaceful race

relations in the South was not blacks but “the lawlessness and hoodlumism of our uneducated whites.” The “inflammable, uneducated whites whom the best part of our lives is spent in controlling” were responsible for the violence, the lynching, the lawlessness, the feelings of fear and mistrust between the races in the South. Further complicating the situation, Percy contended, was the long legacy of northern interference in and civilizing ambitions for the South. “To you our tragic situation, calling for courage and wisdom and unselfishness and patience, is a theory, a subject for criticism, suggested panaceas, scorn. We know the solution, the only one.... My plea to you is that you trust us who are fighting the fight in the South.”

The fight over control of the “Negro problem” would literally come to the Percy’s front porch in the early 1920s. On a rainy night in May of 1923, Will Percy was in the parlor of the Percy home playing the piano when a rain-soaked, unshaven man appeared at the door and asked for LeRoy Percy. Percy came to the foyer and the man explained that he and his sister were stranded, that his car had broken down outside of town, and that he needed a ride to the nearest mechanic. LeRoy went to put on a coat and call for his car, and in the meantime a group of his friends arrived to play bridge, one of whom was the county sheriff. The stranger disappeared into the darkness, and a neighbor told the Percys he left with another man who was parked across the street. It turned out that the stranger was a member of the local Ku Klux Klan who wanted LeRoy Percy dead. The next morning, Will Percy walked into the office of the leader of the local KKK and said, “I want to let you know one thing: if anything happens to my father or to any of our

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friends you will be killed. We won’t hunt for the guilty party. So far as we are concerned the guilty party will be you." 

The early 1920s witnessed the rapid growth of the Ku Klux Klan. But when they arrived in the Mississippi Delta the Percy family insisted they leave. The encounter reveals a great deal about the conflict between white southerners over how to control the black population. Both the Percys and Klan members were driven by ideas of “Americanism,” anti-modernism, and white supremacy but held vastly different views of how southern society should be organized. The Percys believed blacks were essentially different from and un-assimilable to themselves, but that they could all live peacefully alongside one another if blacks were led by “honorable” men. The Klan was composed of a broad cross section of white men who held that Catholics, immigrants, and blacks were an imminent threat to the purity and cohesion of white society. Klan members felt their vigilance was necessary in order to maintain control of communities. The reaction of the Percys to the Klan illuminates a central tenet of elite white Deltans’ view of race: the ability to retain and control labor. And as with LeRoy Percy’s battle with James K. Vardaman, the encounter laid bare the conflicts of race and class in the Mississippi Delta.

After the Civil War, a group of Confederate veterans formed the Ku Klux Klan in Pulaski, Tennessee, in the interest of controlling the newly emancipated blacks. With the structures of justice and social control torn apart by war, this Klan’s members felt that a system of vigilante justice that preyed on the superstitions of former slaves would be the best way to reinstate order and prevent disruption and violence. The idea of night “rides” of Klansmen mounted on horseback and wearing white robes spread throughout the

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South, and by 1867 it had become an organization with regional structure and a hierarchy of leadership. Former Confederate general Nathan Bedford Forrest was elected "Grand Wizard," and the "Invisible Empire" was divided up into realms, dominions, provinces, and dens, representing regions, states, counties, and towns. Each local Klan acted as a sort of vigilante police force, acting to counterbalance what they felt were intrusive Reconstruction governments who were ignorant of local circumstances. They aimed to drive out northern missionaries, schoolteachers, and politicians and particularly to make sure freed slaves did not overstep their bounds. KKK members also lynched black preachers who preached equal rights, "took care of" former slaves who acquired land and a semblance of wealth, and established an understanding in communities that southern whites intended to retain control. The Reconstruction Klan was most active in rural areas throughout the South and was seen by most southern whites as a group of heroes trying to preserve law and order and to prevent "Black Rule" in the South. But being a secretive, highly localized organization, the Klan suffered from disorganization and internal conflict, and in 1869 Grand Wizard Forrest officially disbanded the organization because he felt it had fallen into hands of lower-class whites who were overly violent and self-interested. The Klan ceased to be a major force by 1872 but was generally considered by white southerners to have been a necessary, successful organization that had served its purpose well.5

That the first Klan was etched into the imaginations of white southerners as a heroic, patriotic, manly pursuit surely had much to do with its reincarnation in the twentieth century. In 1915 the KKK was resurrected near Stone Mountain, Georgia. The second Klan, however, would be very different from the first. To begin with, it found fertile soil in a culture that was obsessed with secret societies and ritual. The period of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century was dubbed the “Golden Age of Fraternity,” with five and a half million men members of secret societies such as the Odd Fellows, Freemasons, Knights of Pythias, Red Men, Grand Army of the Republic, the Grange, and the Knights of Labor, as well as many other smaller orders.\(^6\) By 1920 there were over eight hundred secret societies with an estimated membership of over thirty million men.\(^7\) Many of these secret societies were increasingly ordered around vague principles of “Americanism,” although most of them were not organized for political activism. But there was a growing sense of insecurity about the meaning of “Americanism” in the first two decades of the twentieth century, for the three most common challenges to traditional white notions of “Americanism,”—immigrants, Catholics, and African Americans—were growing in numbers and in power. From 1861 to 1900, there were over fourteen million European immigrants to America, 50 percent of whom were eastern European (primarily Catholic and Jewish), and from 1900 to 1915, there were over fifteen million immigrants, 70 percent of whom were eastern European.\(^8\)

In addition, from 1890 to 1915, the Catholic church in America grew by 114 percent, and


\(^{8}\) *Ibid.*, 226.
by 1920, 36 percent of all American churchgoers were Catholic. And perhaps the
greatest source of fear rose out of the returning black veterans from the First World War,
all of whom had a taste of freedom, sacrifice for America, and, many whites thought,
European women.

So it was not altogether out of the ordinary when William J. Simmons, a failed
minister and salesman from Alabama, decided to start a secret society of his own in 1915.
Drawing from his friends and “brothers” from other fraternal orders, he envisioned an
elaborate reincarnation of the Ku Klux Klan. Its beginnings, though, were inauspicious
and distinguished from other secret organizations only by name: the Klan was another
secret society dedicated to Americanism, and Simmons sold its members regalia, life
insurance, and membership plaques. By 1919 the second Klan could only boast of a few
thousand members dedicated to the supremacy of the white race and “100 percent
Americanism.” It was primarily a southern phenomenon in its first years, drawing most
of its members with the lure of the name, “Ku Klux Klan,” and articulating a defense not
only of Americanism but of southern regional life as well.

But in 1919 Simmons met Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, who
together formed the Southern Publicity Association. They struck a deal in which Tyler
and Clarke would receive eight dollars out of every new member’s ten dollar initiation
fee, and Simmons would receive two. Clarke and Young set to work and found that they
had a very receptive market for the name, rituals, and raiment of the Ku Klux Klan. They
hired regional sales managers, called Grand Goblins, who oversaw salesmen, called
Kleagles, to recruit new members. They initially targeted the South for new members,

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but quickly learned that there was broad national interest in the Klan: Bessie Tyler later noted their initial southern marketing strategy, "but the minute we said 'Ku Klux,' editors from all over the United States began literally pressing us for publicity."\textsuperscript{10} Within a year, 100,000 new members had joined, and within five years the Ku Klux Klan claimed almost five million members.\textsuperscript{11} What had begun with a southern man intending to gain the fraternity of his fellow southerners in the name of Americanism and white supremacy, with the aid of the name of the then-mythical Ku Klux Klan, had become a national phenomenon. The Klan purported itself to be, on a large scale, an organization dedicated to protecting America from foreign radicalism, Catholicism, immorality, and challenges to white supremacy. At the local level, it did this by having its members "be vigilant," watching their neighbors and townsfolk, and reporting any immorality, disrespect by blacks, and general lawlessness to local meetings, or Klaverns, where the members would decide how to dispense justice. They saw themselves not as lawless men, but as a group of vigilantes who aided the law in watching local affairs. In addition, they worked to have their members elected to local offices, and if possible, national positions as well. So while the second Ku Klux Klan was a national organization with a highly structured

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 32.
hierarchy, the effects of this Klan were experienced locally, and local Klans differed greatly as to their priorities and concerns.

In Mississippi, the Ku Klux Klan never grew to be a powerful force in the 1920s. It did exist, however, and like most Klan chapters, left little record of its activity and membership. But the extant records show that the Klan entered Mississippi with the same basic aims of vigilante justice and white supremacy that it boasted in other locales. In a letter addressed to “All Flag and Liberty Loving, Law Abiding Citizens” printed in the Leland Enterprise, the Klan warned “bootleggers, gamblers, and all other law-breakers” that “we have our eyes on you, and we are many; we are everywhere, and you will not escape.” They warned all who might commit adultery to think twice, and,

To the boys who take girls out automobile riding, and park their cars by the roadside: Had you ever thought that what you do, some other boy is entitled to do with your sister? Surely the manhood that is spoken about by the One Person is not gone from you. We are going to appeal to you to quit this, and are going to suggest that you do quit. And let us say to the parents: Join with us and assist us in the keeping of your daughters at home, for the life of our nation depends on the purity of womanhood. Let us make Washington County a clean place to bring up our children.
To “the Negro,” they only said, “We are your best friend, but we wish you to do right.”\textsuperscript{12} This was the general attitude of the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi: southern civilization, and by extension American civilization, was in danger of general decline due to immorality and challenges to white supremacy. Furthermore, certain Mississippians, such as the Percys, were peculiarly tolerant of Catholics and immigrants, and strangely susceptible to vices such as gambling and drunkenness, and order needed to be restored. But the situation according to the Percy family looked quite different.

Will Percy would write in his memoir that before the First World War, Greenville, Mississippi was a “lovable town.” With more than a trace of nostalgia, he described it as a place where “You could take a Coke any time of day with someone full of important news. There’d be amiable people running in and out of the house, without knocking, for tennis or golf or bridge or poker or to join you at a meal or just to talk.”\textsuperscript{13} It was particularly a lovable town for the Percys, who had for decades been one of the dominant families in the region.

LeRoy Percy, like most other Delta planters, took a relatively businesslike approach to race relations: they were in need of year-round agricultural labor, and blacks were the most readily available form of labor. He viewed African Americans as uncivilized, childish, and unable to care for themselves. In an article he published in \textit{Outlook} in 1907, entitled “A Southern View of Negro Education,” Percy argued that southern blacks should be educated in public schools so they would not leave the region. Eventually, he believed, blacks would die out in the Delta because they lacked masters to

\textsuperscript{12} All printed in the \textit{Leland Enterprise}, March 18, 1921, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{13} Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 230-31.
care for them, and "white men, possessing the potentialities of citizenship," would eventually replace them. But until then, whites should not speed up the process of their removal but should care for blacks, as they were their best form of labor.\textsuperscript{14} But he was also seeking alternative forms of labor for the Delta. From 1896 to 1907, LeRoy was actively involved in recruiting northern Italian immigrants to work on Delta plantations. He recruited hundreds of families during this period, but his doing so violated federal labor contract laws and he narrowly missed a court battle.\textsuperscript{15} LeRoy Percy embodied, in many ways, much of what the Klan was against: tolerant of Catholics and immigrants, a non-churchgoer, a corporate conservative, a gambler, and a drinker.

But LeRoy and Will Percy felt they had nothing to fear from the Klan in the 1910s and early 20s. The real problem facing them, Will Percy believed, was how to live in a society of essentially different races and classes of people:

The Delta problem is how all these folks—aristocrats gone to seed, poor whites on the make, Negroes convinced mere living is good, aliens of all sorts that blend or curdle—can dwell together in peace... and live where, first and last, the soil is the only means of livelihood. Most of our American towns, all of our cities, have


their unsolved problem of assimilation. But the South’s is infinitely more
difficult of solution.\textsuperscript{16}

It was “infinitely more difficult” particularly because Will and his father saw blacks as
un-assimilable. They were an alien race, but they were also the whites’ subordinates and
therefore in need of their protection and provision. And, for the most part, the Percys felt
they had done a good job of providing for them. In a 1922 letter, LeRoy Percy boasted to
Ellery Sedgwick, editor of the \textit{Atlantic Monthly},

\begin{quote}
Nothing could be more interesting, so far as a racial study goes, than to see five or
six thousand free Negroes working on a weak point [on a levee] under ten or
twelve white men, without the slightest friction and of course without any legal
right to call upon them for work, and yet the work is done not out of any feeling
of patriotism but out of a traditional obedience to the white man.\textsuperscript{17}
\end{quote}

The Percys were not anxious about white supremacy in the same manner as were
members of the Klan in the early 1920s. In many ways, as Will’s letter to \textit{The New
Republic} in 1919 demonstrates, they were more apprehensive about lower-class whites
than blacks. Will Percy would recollect, “Strangers had drifted in since the war—from
the hills, from the North, from all sorts of odd places where they hadn’t succeeded or
hadn’t been wanted.... The newcomers weren’t foreigners or Jews, they were an alien

\textsuperscript{17} LeRoy Percy to Ellery Sedgwick, April 27, 1922, Percy Papers.
breed of Anglo-Saxon.” To the Percys, it wasn’t “foreigners or Jews” who posed a threat but the sort of people who would join the Ku Klux Klan. The sort of people who lacked in character and education; the sort of people who, along with the Negro, needed to be “controlled.” These were the type of people Will described as having “revived the old Ku Klux Klan which during reconstruction days had played so desperate but on the whole so helpful a part in keeping the peace and preventing mob violence” but which now was “not even a bastard of the old organization which General Forrest had headed and disbanded. This thing obviously was a money-making scheme without ideals or ideas.” Reading about its activities elsewhere, Will found himself “amused and uninterested. Even in Forrest’s day the Klan had never been permitted to enter our county. It couldn’t happen here.” So when, in the spring of 1922, the Percys learned that a traveling Klan speaker, Colonel Joseph Camp, was coming to recruit in Greenville and deliver a lecture at the county courthouse, they were bemused and defensive. “Evidently some of our own people were already Klansmen—fifth-column tactic before there was a Hitler. Our best citizens, those who thought for the common good, met in Father’s office and agreed almost unanimously that the Colonel should be answered and by Father.”

On the night of March 1, 1922, the Washington county courthouse was packed with citizens who had come to hear Colonel Camp’s speech and LeRoy Percy’s response. Camp began, and in his speech he described the impending dangers to American born Anglo-Saxons, and argued that the only “100 per cent American organization today is the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan.” One newspaper described his argument as “declaring that aliens are seeking to shift the foundations of government from the hands of the Anglo-

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Saxon. He opposed immigration. He declared that the Catholics are organized, and the noir is organized, leaving only the American unorganized." While there were a few nods and grunts of approval, the audience soon called for LeRoy Percy and the Colonel returned to his seat to hear what the newspaper reported as "the most eloquent, powerful and forceful address that was ever heard in the Washington County court house."20

LeRoy Percy began his long rebuttal with a defense of the first Klan as a desperate measure in a time when the South needed vigilante justice. It was a war-torn region in need of protection, lest radical Republicans and Negroes take control over every office in the former Confederacy. But now, after every conceivable justification for the Klan has passed, "after the need for it has gone, with the white man in control of every department of government, of the courts, judges and juries, the machinery of the Ku Klux Klan is dragged from its grave and revamped for profit." Percy then turned to his main concern: the lack of labor in the region, largely due to "the steady trend of the black man away from the South." While this trend could not be stopped, he argued, the Ku Klux Klan was surely expediting the process to the detriment of all who lived and worked in the South. The principles of the Klan were not all bad, he explained, but the tactics and the effects of it were devastating. Percy essentially agreed with their "stand for Christianity, for the protection of womanhood, and white supremacy," but asked, "In the name of God, do they need to be masked to do that?" Their practice of intimidation, their reliance on secrecy and violence, and their essential lawlessness had the effect of driving away black labor and tearing communities apart, and furthermore, was unmanly:

Any Southern man standing out and proclaiming himself as a champion of Southern womanhood and white supremacy should do it in the broad light of day, in the noonday sun, thanking his God that he can stand on his feet and battle for the right. You don’t need a masked face for that kind of declaration. Since when has Southern womanhood needed to be defended by men in masks?.... Shame that such a slur should be thrown on the manhood of Washington County.... Since when have the officers of Washington County become so helpless and impotent that they have to be backed up by sheeted Klansmen at night?

Percy appealed to his audience’s sense of virility and manliness, and his argument centered on the Klan’s effect on the Delta labor supply and its deleterious effect on community life. He downplayed the religious dimension of the Klan and its effect on Catholics and Jews. He pointed out that he was not a member of any sect himself, and posited, “I do not care anything about this war on Catholics and war on Jews. It would not have brought me out here tonight. They can take care of themselves, but I know the terror this organization embodies for our negro population, and I am here to plead against it.”

Another rhetorical strategy Percy used in this Greenville speech was to comment on the uncivilized nature of the Klan and its anachronistic presence in twentieth century America. Percy quipped that “it reads like some page of medieval horror to have this man stand on the floor of this court house, built by taxation of Gentile and Jew, Catholic and Protestant, white and black, and stir up strife and hatred among our people.” He

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21 Ibid.
compared the Klan to the “horrors of the inquisition,” took offense at its “barbarism,” and called them a “gang of sleuths, spies and inquisitors.” He suggested that “it was sacrilegious to hear him stand here and talk about the Pilgrim fathers, the deeds of Anglo-Saxons and the glorious men who have led the van of civilization—all their efforts about to pass away unless safeguarded by an oath-bound secret gang of masked Klansmen.” To Percy, civilization was Anglo-Saxon and had made a fine expression and reached a high point in the culture of the South. Southerners did not need the help of the North or the Ku Klux Klan to help maintain or enrich this civilization. They needed to be left alone, and left to continue the work begun by their ancestors, as “all down the corridors of time, history dwells on brave Anglo-Saxon men who have fought for right and for liberty.”

Percy concluded his speech with a patriotic defense of the American form of government, which needed no help from the Klan to sustain itself. He aligned the Klan with Soviet Russia, a point sure to elicit reaction from any American audience in 1922. Percy maintained,

I would as soon be condemned by a decree of the soviet government handed down by Lenine [sic] as I would by decree of the Ku Klux Klan handed out by Simmons of Atlanta. One is as much a menace to orderly government as the other. One is as undemocratic as the other. Either is a menace to law, order and freedom.

Percy made a gesture towards his class prejudices, but restrained himself—perhaps a lesson he learned as a result of his 1910-11 campaign for the senate—since a large part of

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22 Ibid.
his audience were white farmers, laborers, and merchants. But he did note how the masses of whites tended to be incredulous, and that “our people are willing to join any organization in the world. They are such easy marks, so easily jarred loose from initiation fees that they are a constant temptation to dishonesty.” He charged the audience not to let the Klan fool them into membership, for “you will substitute a suspicious, sneaking, spying community for one which is today the finest type of community life in this country.” After his speech, a resolution was adopted by a unanimous vote to condemn the Klan in Washington County and prevent its spreading.

The local deputy, an Irish Catholic, escorted Colonel Camp to his hotel.\(^\text{23}\)

In the days and months after the speech, LeRoy Percy involved himself in a tremendous amount of correspondence with local and national leaders, journalists, and friends. He received hundreds of letters from supporters, black and white, across Mississippi and the nation who had read reprints of his speech in the Greenville Democrat, Houston Chronicle, Vicksburg Herald, New Orleans Times-Picayune, and New York World.\(^\text{24}\) The bulk of his incoming mail praised him for his manliness, patriotism, and leadership.\(^\text{25}\) Although the majority of the letters were from whites, Percy received several letters from African-American lawyers, professors, and school principals. F.S. Armstrong, a black attorney in Washington, D.C., wrote Percy, “My love

\(^{23}\) Ibid.

\(^{24}\) See Greenville Democrat, March 4, 1922; Houston Chronicle, March 19 and 23, 1922; Vicksburg Herald, March 4, 1922; New Orleans Times-Picayune, March 6, 1922; and New York World, March 26, 1922.

\(^{25}\) See, for example, (Un-legible) to LeRoy Percy, March 13, 1922, who congratulated Percy on his “manly, patriotic defense of your fellow citizens”; Louis U. Babin to LeRoy Percy, March 15, 1922, who praised Percy’s speech as “the most manly that I have ever read”; and W.L. Evans to LeRoy Percy, March 3, 1922, who thanked Percy for his “eloquent and able defense of true American ideals and principles.” All in Percy Papers.
for Mississippi is unbounded and when I hear the voice of men of your type, representing
the best of white manhood of our state, I am genuinely proud.” His letter echoed a
sentiment found in a large number of letters from African Americans, that “the old
bugbear of social equality, which you know we do not seek, ought to be tossed to the
things forgotten.” These black leaders had a great deal at stake in Booker T.
Washington’s vision for the industrial and agricultural education of blacks with the
support and leadership from whites like Percy.26

Another common theme in Percy’s correspondence was the idea of
“Americanism,” particularly as it differed from Bolshevism. Percy was reaffirmed in his
comparing the Klan to Communist Russia in several letters he received. Lea Beatty
praised him for his “answer to that Bolshevist talk” and for “so ably defending American
ideals, lands, and our Constitution.” He agreed with Percy that the Klan was “too absurd
for a Christian, as a real patriotic American citizen to endorse;” and extended Percy’s

26 Perry W. Howard to LeRoy Percy, March 27, 1922; see also Wallace A. Battle of the
Okolona Industrial School to LeRoy Percy, March 4, 1922, in which he expressed “the
praise and congratulations of 13,000,000 Negroes in the United States.... If white people
knew how much colored people respected them, how much they feared them, how much
they honored them and how much they loved them, there would be no problem between
the Negro and the white people in the United States.”; J.M. Williamson of the Industrial
Agricultural College for Negroes to LeRoy Percy, March 7, 1922, the letterhead of which
stated, “Civilization begins on the farm. Farming is a divine occupation. The Negroes
should remain on the farm as less competition, better health, and more happiness on the
farm [sic]. This school teaches the ideas and principles that will cement the feeling
between the two races and show the Negroes why the South is his home and why the
white people are their friends.”; James V. Mitchell to LeRoy Percy, March 28, 1922, who
praised Percy’s speech as “the bravest deed recorded in favor of a southern white man.”;
and Rev. Norman Bell to LeRoy Percy, March 6, 1922, who noted that “this is an
evidence that we have some great white friends in the South that will stand by the colored
people. All we want Senator Percy here in the South is good schools, justice in the
courts, and treated as human beings [sic].” All in Percy Papers.
argument, to say, "if it not checked we will have anarchy, bloodshed, and hell."\textsuperscript{27} J. G. McGuire endorsed Percy's condemnation of the Klan, and said, "if we want this country to follow into the ranks of Bolshevix Russia all we have to do is to let such fellows as Simmons and Camp go over the country spreading their gospel of hatred and dissension."\textsuperscript{28} Clearly, the Ku Klux Klan struck fear into the hearts not just of southern blacks but of whites as well. The Klan was different from other relatively powerless secret societies. It carried with it both in its rhetoric and in its actions the power to move ordinary men to violence and lawlessness. In a time when Communist Russia (which the Klan also condemned and saw as a primary threat to civilization) seemed the most impending danger to the civilized world, it went unquestioned by Percy's correspondents that the Klan was not far removed from it. The best way to dramatize how the Ku Klux Klan was "trying to drag us back into the dark ages" and trying to undo "rapid strides in the way of civilization" was to align it with communism, and Percy capitalized on this opportunity.\textsuperscript{29}

During the spring and summer of 1922, LeRoy and Will Percy reworked the courthouse speech into an article that was published by LeRoy Percy in the \textit{Atlantic Monthly} in July 1922. The article contained much of the original speech, but with some notable changes, specifically that there were more references to Bolshevism, less emphasis on race, and more emphasis on "good citizenship."\textsuperscript{30} Entitled "The Modern Ku

\textsuperscript{27} Lea Beatty to LeRoy Percy, March 20, 1922, Percy Papers.
\textsuperscript{29} F.W. Jones to LeRoy Percy, March 9, 1922, and J.D. Benson to LeRoy Percy, March 27, 1922, both in Percy Papers.
Klux Klan," Percy began by arguing that the first Klan was "in a measure justified" but that the modern Klan had been revamped for profit. He noted that,

The Klan excludes from membership negroes, Jews, Catholics, and foreign-born, whether citizens or not. In its own phrase, it is the only Gentile White Protestant American-born Organization in the world. It is secret. Its membership is secret, in that respect differing probably from every other secret society in America, though like enough to many in Russia.

Percy claimed that the two things he disagreed with most about the Klan was its insistence on total obedience and secrecy, for those principles were undemocratic and un-American. He shortened the section on the Klan's effect on blacks, and added a joke (intended to illicit sympathetic chuckles from whites across the nation) that the Klan was robbing blacks of their natural love of gibberish and "extravagant nomenclature" by using so much of it themselves: "They have wronged the negro by getting 'a corner' on the gibberish of the English language."31 This comment reflected a common type of joke told and retold in Delta society that reinforced paternalism and complicitous feelings of white superiority.

On the whole, the Atlantic Monthly article made what the Percys thought would be a nationally palatable argument against the Ku Klux Klan. The article argued against the violence and lawlessness of the Klan, its secretive structure, and its backwards, "uncivilized" nature. He chided "these new evangelists" for their religious intolerance

31 Ibid.
and bigotry. He extended the importance of ridding America of the Klan to all people, not just southerners; the Klan posed a threat of ruining multi-cultural communities, which made up most of those in America:

The most malign effect of the organization is the destruction of the spirit of helpfulness, cooperation, and love in the community where it intrudes itself. In a community composed of Jews and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants, white and black, where the life and progress of the community has been marked by helpfulness and cooperation, friendship and harmony, this organization comes to plant discord, racial hatred, religious dissention, and intolerance.

The answer, Percy contended, lay in “good citizenship”: “Good citizenship should actively and openly oppose [the Klan’s] entry into any community…. The common sense and patriotism of the people should be appealed to. The shams, sophistry, un-Americanism, and evil of this organization should be exposed.”

But in August 1923 a Klan posse abducted and murdered two white men opposed to the Klan in Louisiana. Their bodies were found a few days later floating in a lake near Mer Rouge, Louisiana. This aroused LeRoy Percy’s support in favor of his friend John M. Parker, then governor of Louisiana. The two campaigned against the Klan forces in Louisiana in hopes of exposing them as responsible for the Mer Rouge murders, but a local jury unanimously acquitted the murderers. The team of Parker and Percy, though, continued their campaign, urging leaders and journalists in Texas, Louisiana, and Mississippi to openly oppose the Klan. They were invited to give a speech at a labor rally in Chicago, and though Percy initially declined, he went and delivered a speech.

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32 Ibid.
Percy continued his correspondence and politicking through the spring of 1923 and prepared for the county and state elections of that fall, in which nearly every office was being contended for by a Klansman and an anti-Klan supporter. He established, along with fifty of Greenville’s “best citizens,” an organized group to oppose the Klan, called the “Protestant Committee of Fifty Opposed to the Ku Klux Klan.” On April 23, 1923, LeRoy Percy delivered a two-hour diatribe at the People’s Theatre in Greenville in which he paid particular attention to local context and specific Klan activity in Washington County. Percy named all the local Klansmen he knew of, and responded to personal attacks on him made by the local Klan, namely that he was “the Big Cheese,” and that he was a member of the “PPP,” or “Parker, Pope, and Percy.”

He argued against religious bigotry and for “the religion of our community,” which “finds its expression in love, helpful service, man to man…. The kind of religion that made you know as you walked down the streets of Greenville, that behind every house—you might not know whose house it was, whether it was Jew, Protestant, or Catholic—but behind every house was a friend.” He pointed out the grave danger of the Delta’s labor situation, and noted that blacks were like sheep and Klansmen were like wolves: “This feeling of restlessness, of uneasiness, which the white people of this community feel is intensified 100 fold when it is passed on to the brother in black.” In the end, the sacrifices made by soldiers in the First World War, the American ideals of democracy and freedom, and the “blessings of civilization and free government” were too good to let them be trampled on

by the Ku Klux Klan. The speech had a particularly political bent, as it was aimed at mobilizing support in the upcoming elections.

In the months after the People’s Theatre speech, letters of praise and support flowed into the Percy & Percy law office, commending LeRoy for his manly, Christian, patriotic defense of the South and of American principles. C. N. Burch wrote to him from Memphis, “I sincerely hope you have been able to convert Washington County.”34 F. S. Armstrong inquired, “I wonder if it were possible for me to get a copy of your speech as I am quietly doing a little missionary work among the good Protestant businessmen in this section.”35 Percy and his supporters saw themselves as on a crusade that had several ambitions: to retain black labor in the Delta; to sustain the dominant social, political and economic conditions of the planter class; and to restore the sense of community threatened by the secretive nature of the Klan.

LeRoy Percy himself was clear that his ideas of civilization included many of those shared by the Ku Klux Klan. In his vision of an ordered society, white supremacy, manliness and the protection of white womanhood, patriotism, and Protestant morality were all perfectly good principles, and one could hardly blame the Klan for being devoted to these things. He conceded to B. B. Harper that “there may be some justification for the Klan in some sections of the country,” but that there was no need for it in the Delta, presumably because he felt his class could order society just fine.36 Indeed, he wrote to another friend, “the good things which it may do could be much

better and more effectively done without the organization.”37 Those good things—white supremacy, morality within the community, veneration of women, and control of immigration—he felt, already existed in the Delta. Why couldn’t Mississippian see that the good life was all around them? A Kentucky journalist wrote an article in May 1923 explaining that the growth of the Klan in Mississippi was largely due to racial tension. Percy was quick to correct him that this was not the case. “As a matter of fact,” Percy wrote to him, “the race relationship was never better.... Nowhere is the existence and growth of the Klan more difficult to explain than in the Yazoo-Delta.”38 Nor was the growth of the Klan due to the large population of Jews or Catholics; rather, it was due to “a revival of medieval bigotry meddling Puritanism.”39 Percy had a lot at stake in portraying Delta race relations as harmonious, as had southerners since Reconstruction.

In the elections of that summer, the Percy candidates won all the major offices except the office of sheriff, in which there was a runoff. In many ways this was the most important office, because, as Will Percy later recalled, if the Klan “could have the law-enforcement machinery under their control, they could then flout the law and perpetuate such outrages as appealed to them.” The Percys threw all their support behind George B. Alexander, “a powerful, square bearded, Kentucky aristocrat.... He was Father’s favorite hunting companion and friend.” In his memoir, Will dramatized the night of the election runoff to be one of the most important in the town’s history: “The whole population was in the street, milling, apprehensive, silent.” When the vote counting began, LeRoy Percy

37 LeRoy Percy to Dick Cox, March 11, 1922, Percy Papers.
39 Ibid.
retired to his house to play bridge while Will waited for the results, and after several hours,

A sweating individual with his collar unbuttoned and his wide red face smeared with tears rushed out on the steps and bellowed: 'We've won, we've won! Alexander's elected! God damn the Klan!' Pandemonium broke loose. Men yelled and screamed and hugged one another. Our town was saved, we had whipped the Klan and were safe. I ran home with the news and Father's bridge game broke up in a stillness of thanksgiving that was almost religious.

A mob of people gathered at the Percy mansion, LeRoy Percy delivered a speech, and everyone seemed in the mood to celebrate, so LeRoy ordered four kegs of whiskey be brought out. "There were few inhibitions and no social distinctions.... A banker's wife hobnobbed with the hot-tamale man, a lawyer's careened with a bootlegger.... The little town had come through, righteousness had prevailed, we had fought the good fight and for once had won. Everybody was affectionate with everybody else, all men were equal, and all were brothers-in-arms."40 For the Percy family, this was more than a local victory—it was a vindication of their class interests and view of racial hierarchy.

LeRoy Percy's correspondence after the victory over the Klan substantiates Will Percy's nostalgic portrayal of the victory of "civilization" over "barbarism." More letters poured into Percy's office congratulating him personally on saving the Mississippi Delta. Former President William Howard Taft wrote him, saying, "I cannot speak too strongly of the comfort and pleasure that it gives me to know that our civilization is not to be

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sacrificed and our institutions are not to be destroyed without every sacrifice being made
by those who appreciate their value." LeRoy Percy wrote back agreeing that the
"skulking, cowardly, un-American, un-Christian organization" was nothing but "a
recrudescence of medieval, ignorant, bigotry puritanical religion," and could only be
defeated by true American principles. In response to Dartmouth sociology professor
John Moffat Mecklin, who would publish a book on the Ku Klux Klan in 1924, Percy
explained that the Klan in Mississippi was due mainly to the ignorance of poor white
southerners. But it would not last much longer, Percy surmised: "I believe the Klan will
last possibly through 1924. I do not give it a longer life. Politicians and religious
fanatics will keep it alive that long." Percy's work in this area had been done; after the
elections of 1924, he made no more major speeches, wrote no more articles, spent little
more effort on battling the Klan.

The Percy family's "crusade" against the Ku Klux Klan represents yet another
reaction to the tumultuous changes in late nineteenth and early twentieth century
America. If the Klan was presenting a distinctly "southern" solution to the problems of
assimilation in American life by reincarnating the mythical Ku Klux Klan, the Percy
family presented a distinctly elite, Mississippi Delta view of southern civilization to
counteract it. The South in the Percy's imagination had nothing to do with secret
societies, intimidation, and violent racism and everything to do with planter leadership of
race and class relations. They saw no need for northern interference during
Reconstruction or after, and no need for Klan supervision in the 1920s. To the Percys the

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41 William Howard Taft to LeRoy Percy, August 30, 1923, Percy Papers.
42 LeRoy Percy to William Howard Taft, September 25, 1923, Percy Papers.
43 LeRoy Percy to John Moffat Mecklin, September 26, 1923, Percy Papers.
very existence of the Klan and the North’s continual meddling in their affairs was a threat to the power of the planter elite, who were losing their power. LeRoy Percy explained to a friend,

This Ku Klux folly… is a demonstration of the fading away of the old aristocracy of the South, which with its many faults and weaknesses is yet far in a way the best thing the South has yet produced. In the olden days as gentlemen we were something of a success…. When you destroy the traditions which furnish a background for a people you leave them like a rudderless ship on an uncharted sea.\footnote{LeRoy Percy to Miss Alice D. Jenkins, July 21, 1922, in Percy Papers.}

The old aristocracy was directly challenged by the Ku Klux Klan, for the Klan was essentially offering a new way to control society. Rather than paternalism, the Klan suggested violence; rather than noblesse oblige, the Klan suggested intimidation; and rather than disinterested service by “honorable” men, the Klan suggested a network of secret agents. The Percys fight against the Klan revealed their deep-seated anxiety about loss of power and control in the region.

Though Will Percy played only a supporting role during the Klan struggle, the episode reaffirmed his sense of class superiority and antipathy for poor white people. But even as he felt a part of this battle, invested in its outcome, he also felt himself an observer of it. The summer after the Klan battle he packed his bags and left for the Mediterranean.
Chapter 8: The Mediterranean and The Mississippi

In 1924 Will Percy spent four months in Italy, Turkey, and Greece with his friends Gerstle Mack and Huger Jervey. Will worked on some poems as he sailed through the Greek Islands, and the familiar yet exotic sights and sounds of the Mediterranean pleased him. He wrote to his mother that as a result of his travels he had “improved very greatly in the way I’m feeling.” He described Greek villages quiet save for goats and shepherds moving through the streets and wrote of watching sunsets over long valleys with Gerstle.¹ To his father he wrote of their boat trip to Crete during which “our small boat [was] bucking like a Ford across cotton rows.”² Will’s only lack of peace during his trip derived from his parents’ silence. Another friend had informed Will that LeRoy was in poor health, and Will wrote his mother that he was “completely upset” not to have heard from them. Though his other friends were keeping him up to date, their letters did not “make up [for] the other silences.”³

This letter demonstrates a persistent conflict in Will Percy’s life: the freedom and joy he found in travel, but his concomitant vexation regarding his parents and his Mississippi home. Will’s life in the 1920s can be understood in part through his larger symbolic conflict between two bodies of water, the Mediterranean and the Mississippi. He traveled throughout the decade, particularly to the Mediterranean, and observed and participated in male cultures that offered a wider range of possibilities for male friendship.

¹ William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, June 12, 1924, Percy Papers.
³ William Alexander Percy to Camille Percy, June 12, 1924, Percy Papers.
and intimacy. In contrast, his experience in Mississippi was marked by a pivotal event in his life—the Mississippi River Flood of 1927, which laid bare conflicts between Will and his father, and between Will and Greenville’s black population. These two bodies of water represented competing values in Will Percy’s life.

The Mississippi River with its regular overflows and unpredictable nature was a constant and threatening feature of life in the Mississippi Delta. Fighting floods was the perennial duty of men in the Delta. This duty rested largely on the levee guard, a group of men who assigned themselves ranks such as “Captain” and “Lieutenant.” “If you won’t volunteer for that duty,” Will Percy wrote, “you should return to the hills from which obviously you came.”

4 The levee guard was historically made up of volunteers who walked the levee at night with a lantern and a pistol. They had two primary jobs: to find and mark weak spots, or “boils,” in the levee; and to guard the levee from Arkansas interlopers who might sneak across and dynamite the Mississippi side of the levee in order to release pressure from the Arkansas side. The levee guardsmen were instructed to shoot such people on the spot.

Will Percy admitted he had an idealistic fondness for his father’s generation of levee guards. He dug up an article from the 1893 Greenville Democrat that called for extra guards to help during a period of high water. It listed the guards who had been serving honorably, and the list included “Capt. LeRoy Percy” and other heroes of Will Percy’s youth such as J. H. Wynn, Alfred Stone, and Henry T. Ireys. “To refuse or neglect to do your individual duty,” the article read, “proclaims you wanting in those characteristics which would prove your patriotism.” Percy grew up amid stories of

heroism and high-water fights. “The old guards,” he wrote, “well, perhaps I exaggerate their excellences, but to me their names are innocent and idolized and more familiar than those of my fellow rotarians I lunch with every Thursday.” These men were war heroes, sheriffs, lawyers, Senators, and judges. Their sense of duty created in them honor, strength, and virtue that seemed to be disappearing. “Guard duty,” Will Percy wrote, “must have made men strong in those days.”

However, Will Percy felt himself distinctly different from that generation of men. “Evidently the Delta gentry of fifty years ago were not effete or decadent,” Percy mused. “I like to hear about them—theirs was such a magnificent male combination of gentleman and pioneer—but I doubt if I should have been at ease living among them.” His father and his friends, heroes though they were, “were a bit too lusty and robustious,” and that rough streak “was unfortunately omitted from my makeup.”

One’s duty to walk the levee, to protect Greenville’s citizens (and Greenville’s wealth) from floodwaters was directly connected to one’s ability to be a man and a patriot. Will portrayed the men of his father’s generation as capable of this kind of valor, but himself less so. That Will Percy titled his memoir using this metaphor—Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter’s Son—points to an enduring tension in his life with regards to the Mississippi River. On the one hand, the title is a metaphor for the flood of modernity and the inability of old regime to stem that flood. More poignantly, though, the title speaks of Will Percy’s deep sense of his own different values of manhood than those evinced by the Mississippi River and its levee guard. Will portrayed himself as of a different cloth than those who carried lanterns on the levee—although he himself

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5 Ibid., 242-43.
6 Ibid., 244.
volunteered for the levee guard throughout his life, he noted, he carried a flashlight. Will Percy used the moniker, “Planter’s Son” as a marker of difference—not a planter like LeRoy Percy, but the son of such a planter. This suggests a different generation, a different set of values. The conflict of the book—indeed, a central conflict in Percy’s life—was this conflict between his and his father’s values. On the one hand, LeRoy’s values were based fundamentally in business, wealth creation, and a version of manhood that demanded service and sacrifice. And on the other hand Will’s values were based in aesthetic ideals of beauty, cosmopolitan moral standards, and a version of manhood that allowed for varying forms of friendship, affection, and sexual connection between men.

In the end, Will Percy lived out both and neither of these sets of values—his was the conflict of a cosmopolitan southerner.

The Mediterranean, though, was a body of water that symbolized an alternate set of gender values—as we have seen in Percy’s poetry. In addition, it was a place where these values could be lived out. In this chapter I would like to compare Will Percy’s experiences with the Mediterranean and the Mississippi in the 1920s. He traveled to the Mediterranean regularly during this period. He also had a defining moment in his Mississippi life during the flood of 1927. To place these bodies of water next to each other, to compare what they represented to Percy as well as how he experienced them, reveals the competing sets of values that animated his life.

Will Percy’s experiences with the Mediterranean and the Mississippi should be placed in the context of his relationship with his father, LeRoy. The hunting buddy of Teddy Roosevelt, U. S. Senator, and corporate lawyer overshadowed his son all of his life and created profound ambivalence at the center of Will’s self-conception. Like his own
father, LeRoy’s perennial focus was on the Mississippi Delta—lobbying for better flood control, trying to get more cotton out of an acre, setting himself to solving the “labor problem” and the “Negro problem.” He didn’t understand his son, or his son’s avocations. Will preferred playing piano, translating French poetry, and tending his azaleas and roses and iris’s to LeRoy’s diversions of hunting, poker, and drinking.

Will Percy found creative ways of achieving satisfaction and overcoming the strain of life under his father’s roof, despite a sense of self-loathing that often surfaced in his writing. For one thing, he worked at his relationship with his father. Will lived in his parents’ home all his life. He walked to and from work with LeRoy, and he supported his father in his political and legal battles. When LeRoy died in 1929, Will commissioned a thirty-thousand dollar statue to be placed on his grave. He loved his father and wanted to please him even though he rarely did. Rather than seeing Will merely as a victim of his father’s disdain, it is important to understand the ways he worked against it, the ways he was wounded but not completely oppressed by it.

Another way Will Percy managed this constraint was to maintain regular distance from his father by traveling. Sigmund Freud’s interpretation of travel sheds particular light on this aspect of LeRoy and Will’s relationship. In 1937 Freud published an essay titled “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis” in which he reflected on a trip he and his younger brother took to Italy and Greece in 1904. Although Freud addressed several psychological phenomena in the essay, in his conclusions he ventured a few suggestions as to why adults are compelled to travel, and whereby they gain pleasure or guilt from it. He suggested that the compulsion to travel is often rooted in painful childhood experience and fantasies of escape, and that “a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in
the fulfillment of these early wishes, that it is rooted, that is, in dissatisfaction with home and family."\(^7\) However, just as this escape brought pleasure, it also created guilt because, in Freud’s reading, “a sense of guilt was attached to the satisfaction of having got so far: there was something about it that was wrong, that was from earliest of times forbidden. It was something to do with a child’s criticism of his father."\(^8\) For Freud, whose father had never been to the Acropolis and furthermore did not have the education to appreciate it, guilt accompanied his pleasure at the top of the Acropolis because he had accomplished something his father could not have. “It seems as though the essence of success were to have gotten further than one’s father, and as though to excel one’s father were still something forbidden.”\(^9\)

One of Will Percy’s own experiences atop the Acropolis, which he recounted in his autobiography, has instructive parallels with Freud’s conception of travel, guilt, pleasure, and the figure of the father. Will and his family sailed for Greece after LeRoy Percy’s political loss to James K. Vardaman in the 1911 U.S. Senate race. Though devastated by the recent loss, Will had determined to recover his peace of mind during their trip abroad. Lying in bed on the first night in Athens, he decided he “couldn’t possibly wait until after breakfast to see the Acropolis, and besides it would be great fun to put one over on father and tell him all about Athena’s Hill over coffee and rolls.”\(^10\) He left the hotel at six in the morning and ran to the Acropolis. Near reaching the top, he stopped to catch his breath and heard a sound above him. Looking up, he saw that his

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\(^7\) Sigmund Freud, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis,” in *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier, 1963), 319.
\(^8\) *Ibid.*, 320.
father had beaten him to the enclosure atop the Acropolis. “The curative morning was flooding over him, and he laughed when he saw me.”

Although Freud’s essay was published in 1937, it was not translated into English until 1941; so it is not likely that Percy had it in mind when he wrote this section of *Lanterns on the Levee*. Nonetheless, this episode can be read in light of the phenomenon Freud described. Like Freud, for Percy the Acropolis was a site of escape even as it represented the dominating presence of his father in his life, both actually and symbolically. Unlike Freud, though, Will Percy never did “excel” his father, as symbolized by LeRoy’s presence at the top of the Acropolis. The father always overshadowed the son, always dominated him, and never fully accepted him. In turn, Will never criticized his father, excepting veiled admirations such as, “It was hard having such a dazzling father.”

Yet, the first part of Freud’s concept, that the compulsion to travel is in large part derived from the desire to escape home, is quite useful. Will Percy was fascinated with “travel and the thought of travel,” and throughout his life, he wrote, travel was his “usual opiate” that he indulged at every opportunity. As he confessed, “Probably I had never been at peace. Probably I had always wanted to escape a life that had seemed to me filled with nothing and less noble than a human life need be.” He spent much of his energy as an adult planning ways to leave Greenville, Mississippi, and the South. Richard King has pointed out that though Percy “presided over his own small realm in the Delta, he felt no

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid., 57.
13 Ibid., 142 and 158.
14 Ibid., 161.
more sense of freedom in the world at large." This, however, is exactly backwards: while Percy is usually figured as someone rooted to his home, perhaps it would be more useful to see him as someone with a compulsion to escape his home.

When Percy traveled, he journeyed alone or with friends not from Greenville. His most common American traveling companions were Harold Bruff (before 1911), Gerstle Mack, and Huger Jervey, all of whom lived in New York. Will did not often speak of the details of his travels, but he did write about travel—and especially travel to the Mediterranean—as a means of experiencing purer relationships with men. As we have seen, Will’s relationship with Harold Bruff, which took place in Boston, New York, and Europe, was marked by a distinct sense of freedom and frankness. Another of Will’s closest companions, Sinkler Manning, died in battle in World War One and from France Will wrote home to his mentor, Carrie Stern, "You, probably more than anyone else, know how much he meant to me: after Harold he was my best friend, one I understood and who understood me, one who I knew could never fail me." Will Percy rarely spoke of people who understood him. He often spoke of loneliness. He often portrayed himself as a wanderer and a pilgrim. How hard it must have been for him to feel free in the company of others, how difficult to live on display as a man from a prominent family while trying to come to terms with his homosexual desire and poetic temperament in the patriarchal and philistine South of the early twentieth century. One way he managed this was to keep his life in Mississippi separate from his life of international travel—the provincial life a public one and the cosmopolitan life a private one. This was not easy, particularly for an intensely introspective person likely to fault himself for

\[15\] King, 87.
disingenuousness. Willful duplicity both allowed Percy to experience rare moments of fulfillment even while it led to self-loathing. It helped him to manage life in the South by giving him access to a freer life in the larger world. But in the end, the balance rested on his ability to remain silent. He did so, but at great cost. He gave some clue to this inner torment in his poem, “Safe Secrets,” published in 1924:

_I will carry terrible things to the grave with me:_

_So much must never be told._

_My eyes will be ready for sleep and my heart for dust_

_With all the secrets they hold._

_The piteous things alive in my memory_

_Will be safe in that soundless dwelling:_

_In the clean loam, in the dark where the dumb roots rust_

_I can sleep without fear of telling._

It was abroad that Will Percy most often felt release from these torments. In the 1920s Percy involved himself with a group of British writers who left England to either travel extensively to or set up residence in the Mediterranean. Literary historian Paul Fussell has identified the international travel of such writers as Norman Douglas, Christopher Isherwood, Robert Graves, Somerset Maugham, Bertrand Russell, and others in this period as the “British literary diaspora,” and argues that this movement was an essential component of modernism and the struggle for sexual freedom. For this group of

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writers, sexual freedom often meant homosexual freedom. Travel has always been considered romantic, but in this case the Mediterranean and Capri in particular was especially a site of erotic possibility as compared to the Victorian prudishness of England. (One contemporary observer noted in 1927 that “The Isle of Capri is a sodomical capital in miniature, the Mecca of inversion, a Geneva or a Moscow of the future internationalism of homosexuality.”)\textsuperscript{18} Writers such as Christopher Isherwood and Norman Douglas in particular drew on the homoerotic literary tradition of Walter Pater and John Addington Symonds in order to portray the Mediterranean as a sexually uninhibited locale. According to Fussell, Isherwood and Douglas’s “sojourns abroad were inseparable from [their] erotic requirements and predicaments,” and both traveling and imagining travel was central to their sexuality.\textsuperscript{19} Will Percy became friends with Norman Douglas in Italy in the 1920s, and the two corresponded until Percy’s death in 1942.\textsuperscript{20} Douglas was fond enough of Percy to ask him to write a foreword to his book, *Birds and Beasts of the Greek Anthology* in 1929.

Percy’s involvement with this group provided him both with sexual freedom and with an idiom with which to talk about that freedom. This literary idiom is especially evident in Percy’s foreword to *Birds and Beasts*, which he worried was “too personal” to publish—the other men mentioned (“Carey” and “Berto”) insisted Will change their names before he published his foreword.\textsuperscript{21} Rather than introduce the book itself, which was a commentary on the natural history of the Greek Anthology, Percy wrote a series of


\textsuperscript{20} Wyatt-Brown, *House of Percy*, 220.

\textsuperscript{21} William Alexander Percy to Harrison Smith, April 12, 1929, Percy Papers.
vignettes of Douglas and their group of friends in the 1920s. Percy set the first scene in a café in Florence. Percy described Douglas’s entrance as an almost regal event, and he did so in language that was undeniably sexual: “Norman Douglas appeared.... A person, a personage had entered, one whom Frans Hals would have walked miles to paint: the untidy room was galvanized, something robustious and electric accelerated the tempo of the waiters, stiffened the patrons into expectancy.” When he entered the room, his booming voice ushered forth a greeting that “seemed an adequate climax.” Two days later, Percy wrote, he met Douglas on a side street as he was headed to see the Giotto’s at Santa Maria Novella. When Percy asked him if he would care to join, Douglas declined, commenting with tenderness, “Two years ago.... It’s the most famous and convenient place in Florence for lover’s meetings.” Percy went alone but almost tripped over a step, he remembered, as he was “thinking of other things.”

In fact, the juxtaposition of aesthetic beauty and homoerotic feeling is a common element of Percy’s work and much Victorian homoerotic writing. His discussion of colors in the landscape, museums, artwork, cathedrals, and other aspects of Mediterranean life often served to augment the sense of wonder and freedom he found in the European South. In this respect, Percy utilized the idiom of Victorian writers who figured “friendship,” “comradeship,” and “companionship” in the context of this natural beauty to connote same-sex desire—a literary device well documented by historians of European literature and sexuality. Percy’s foreword illustrates this well. In the next

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23 See, for example, Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 270-306; Timothy D’Arch Smith, *Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of English*
vignette, Percy and a companion, Berto, were walking along the Arno River in Florence at dusk, discussing Douglas. "Norman is amazing," Berto observed. "With him the end of a love affair is never the end of a friendship. The charming friends of his earlier years come back to him from all over Italy, in fact from all over Europe, for advice or merely to be shone on by his vitality. Of course you've recognized his terrific sunshine." Natural beauty, friendship, and vitality: these were things Will Percy found in the culture of the European South. He traveled there to experience them, and when absent he wrote about them.

Percy's final vignette further illustrates this unique blend of artistry, beauty, and friendship Percy found in Europe. Percy, Douglas, and another man named Carey were having lunch with one another when Will mentioned he spent his morning marveling at the Botticellis in the Uffizi gallery. "Isn't that sweet, Carey?" quipped Douglas. "Think, there are still persons who look at the Botticellis. I haven't seen one for twenty years." Douglas admonished Percy for being such a dilettante and suggested that if he wanted to see some truly beautiful works he should take the bus to Volterra to see the Etruscan art, which was "worth all your Michaelangelos and da Vincis and Botticellis put together."

To Douglas, Volterra had an additional benefit: "the charming boys there are all lightly powdered with alabaster dust, even their eyelashes. Exquisite! Like Pierrots!" For many in this community of intellectuals, artistic beauty was inseparable from sexual desire, and sexual desire was inseparable from travel to Italy and Greece. Just as Douglas

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24 Douglas, Birds and Beasts, xi.  
25 Ibid., xi-xii.
associated Etruscan art with its alabaster-dusted attendants, for Will Percy the Mediterranean, artistic expression, and male companionship were intertwined. Percy’s cosmopolitanism was not merely comprised of travel and leisure; it was a method of managing constraint and experiencing sexual freedom. It was likely just this freedom that he was thinking of when, late in his life, he was asked to describe his favorite place: “The part of the world I love best is the Mediterranean. This to me is indeed the most beautiful spot in the universe.”

However, a different body of water captured Percy’s attentions and energies in 1927. In the spring of each year as the snow thaws in the west and Midwest, the Mississippi River swells. For thousands of years the river has regularly overflowed in the Delta, which is the reason the soil is so rich—the topsoil has continually been replenished and is rich with minerals. After the Civil War when Delta pioneers like Colonel William Alexander Percy were making the Delta more inhabitable, a primary concern was to strengthen the levees. The federal government was largely uninterested in this, and a major feature of Delta interests was lobbying for federal dollars to build levees. People like LeRoy Percy made it their life work to build, protect, and sustain the levee system. The wealth of the Delta depended on preventing massive floods that would wipe out a season’s cotton crop.

Will Percy remembered his first overflow. These were times when men came out and helped their people—they got in boats and checked on their plantations; they worked on the levees overseeing black laborers tend to the weak spots; they arranged for their

families to stay fed. During this particular flood LeRoy Percy allowed his young son to ride in the boat with him to check on the plantation. “Overflow water is depressingly brown,” Will Percy remembered, “the glare was terrible, and from trees and bushes hung snakes, which I loathed and which I loved to fall into boats.” The young man didn’t see the appeal of being out in the flood, so he curled up in the front of the boat with a novel. His father, he remembered, “was disgusted with me.” Here was a central feature of Delta manhood: fighting floods, being at the center of the action, serving one’s community and one’s own interests—yet, Will Percy didn’t much care. “Here I was mid-stage in drama and romance and I preferred reading about them! I sensed distinctly he wanted to box my ears, but I kept on reading.”

In April of 1927 Will Percy was finishing a series of poems he entitled “Three April Nocturnes.” Rain had been falling steadily for weeks, and teams of levee guards had been mending a weak spot in the levee just north of Greenville. Five thousand black men and scores of plantation owners and engineers were working to prevent a flood. Alone in his room on Percy street, Will wrote of other people and other places:

I remember the kisses they gave me in tenderness or passion,

Never in love, the ones they could spare me, forgetful

And I am thankful for each, regretting nothing,

Only wishing they lay on my mouth again

To-night when the moist buds are uncrinkling in starlight... 

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27 Percy, Lanterns, 245.
28 Percy, Collected Poems, 349.
He was in "a writer’s tantrum," he recalled, and he couldn’t break away. "All good men and true except me were at Scott, fifteen miles above town."\(^{29}\)

While Percy was at work in March and April on his nocturnes, another Greenville writer, the diarist Henry Waring Ball, was recording his impressions of weather and life. A sample of his entries during those two months provides a glimpse into the sheer amount of rain that fell, and also the day-to-day conceits of a white southern man: "pouring almost incessantly for 24 hours"; "Rain almost all night"; "I believe the filth of theatres and pictures, dress, ‘music,’ is due largely to Jew dominance"; "Violent storm almost all night"; "Rain last night, of course"; "We have heavy showers and torrential downpours almost every day and night"; "Nell and I to church, Red hot sermon on the evils of the theatre and moving pictures and women’s immodest dress"; "The worst Good Friday I ever saw. A night of incessant storm—wind, lightning, thunder and torrents of rain"; "I have never seen it look so appalling. I am very anxious." On the night of April 21, the fire alarm in Greenville sounded to alarm the town that the levee had broken.\(^{30}\)

When it did, a torrent of water washed over into the Mississippi Delta that eventually covered ten counties in water five to twenty feet deep. Over a hundred thousand people fled their homes. Greenville’s population doubled as black and white refugees poured into town. Corpses of cows and mules and horses floated past houses and schools. The deep brown and foamy water cut Greenville off from the rest of the world: train tracks were underwater, roads were underwater, to dock a boat at the landing in Greenville risked further damage to the levee. The mayor called the Percy house and

\(^{30}\) Henry Waring Ball Diary, 6 March to 21 April 1927, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
suggested that Will’s experience with the Red Cross in Belgium made him the ideal candidate in town to head the disaster relief. LeRoy, Will remembered, said, “Guess you’d better go while you can. I’ll be along.” LeRoy Percy got on the phone to New Orleans and Washington and New York City to arrange for loans and contributions to the relief effort. Camille Percy ordered servants to carry sofas and record players and books upstairs. Will walked through the rising water to the opera house, which would become headquarters for his relief effort.31

Historically to lead a fight against floods was LeRoy Percy’s job. The 1927 flood was Will’s chance to lead in a manner that pleased his father and served his community. He set to work immediately on the most pressing problems: seeing to housing and food for the eight thousand refugees that crowded the levee; commandeering boats; making contact with the state and federal government and the Red Cross; finding a way to bury dead bodies; stopping the looting of stores on main street; creating a way for steamers and barges to dock at Greenville. He persuaded the governor to call in the National Guard to maintain order on the streets—Will thought they looked like “an army of Kewpies”—and within a few days the Red Cross had arrived and the group of leaders seemed to be solving problems.32

The most pressing problem, though, was the mass of hungry, cold, uprooted refugees. To feed them, a massive centralized kitchen would have to be established; to house them, thousands of tents and blankets would have to be delivered. The weather was unseasonably cold and rainy, and those living on the levee were exposed. The refugees scattered about town living on rooftops and in attics and second stories of

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31 Percy, Lanterns, 251; Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 239-40.
32 Percy, Lanterns, 252.
houses couldn’t stay there. Will’s first thought was of the white people. He “issued an appeal very much in the nature of a command” for all white women and children and elderly men to board the steamer Control on Monday morning, April 25. Nearly five hundred of them did so in a scene of “desperate confusion” in which people pushed and shoved themselves aboard the steamer out of town. Some women, such as Will’s mother, refused to leave.\textsuperscript{33}

Of the black refugee population Will came to the same conclusion: they must be evacuated. They were cold and hungry, and conditions on the levee made disease and malnutrition likely. As leader he thought of their lives after he thought of white lives, and he also thought of them as distinctly animal-like: “Of course,” he wrote, “none of us was influenced by what the Negroes themselves wanted: they had no capacity to plan for their own welfare; planning for them was another of our burdens.”\textsuperscript{34} But he did think of them, and of what he thought was their best interest: to be warm and to eat. Will ordered the Red Cross to build a refugee camp in Vicksburg where they could more suitably be fed and housed. A group of furious planters approached Percy and explained to him that if he sent the blacks out of the Delta they would never return. They fumed that he would be doing his region a grave and long-term injustice. Will replied that they were only thinking of their pocketbooks and that he “would not be bullied by a few blockhead planters into doing something I knew to be wrong.” The steamers Wabash and Kappa were at the dock waiting to take the black population to Vicksburg.\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} Percy, Lanterns, 256; John Barry, Rising Tide: The Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and How it Changed America (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 308.
\textsuperscript{34} Percy, Lanterns, 258.
\textsuperscript{35} Percy, Lanterns, 257; Barry, 308.
LeRoy Percy found his son on the levee, and asked what his plans were for the black refugees. Will told him. LeRoy said it was a “grave decision.” Will assented. LeRoy said it would be wise for Will not to make this decision alone. Will agreed, and said he had discussed it with his committee members and they had all come to the same conclusion. LeRoy suggested he canvass them again. “Although nothing new had happened to cause them to change their minds,” Will wrote, “I promised father I would call them for a last consultation.” After a few hours Will gathered his committee to confirm their plans. They had all changed their minds. Will’s resentment showed itself in his writing of the event in *Lanterns on the Levee*: “I was astounded and horrified when each and every one of them gave it as his considered judgment that the Negroes should remain and that we could provide for their needs where they were. I argued for two hours but could not budge them.” Eventually Will walked down to the levee and told the waiting captains that they should go to Vicksburg without passengers.36

Will learned later that his father had met with each of the committee members and persuaded them to change their minds.

Though Will wrote in his autobiography that he learned of this after his father’s death, it seems likely that he suspected what had happened at the time. His father was someone people listened to—especially in Greenville. LeRoy had stated his desires, and Will had intimated he was not prepared to change his mind. What seems to have happened is that Will did not confront his father but instead lashed at out at those blacks who, because of his father, remained in Greenville.

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The black population on the levee became agitated. Life in tents (which eventually arrived) was not pleasant. They were expected to unload the steamers that docked at the levee, perform manual labor to fix the levee, and stay out of trouble. To Will Percy, this seemed agreeable: “The camp life on the levee,” he wrote, “suited their temperaments.”37 By early May, though, three weeks after the flood began, national black newspapers began to report on the conditions on the levee. The reports were not positive. A black minister to Greenville wrote to President Calvin Coolidge that blacks on the levee were “being made to work under the gun, [whites] just bossing the colored men with big guns buckled to them....All of this mean and brutish treatment of the colored people is nothing but downright slavery.”38 The Chicago Defender reported that Will Percy and the Red Cross were withholding supplies and food from any black families that did not have a male head of household, and that Percy spent most of his time on the golf course at the Greenville Country Club.39

For his part Will acknowledged that unjust coercion existed, but he felt himself different from most southern planters. He wrote to a friend that it was true: many of those in charge in Greenville “were guilty of acts which profoundly and justly made the negroes fear them.”40 However, he felt that the situation forced him to be authoritarian, and that “If I had to be a despot I was very anxious to be a beneficent one.”41 The biggest problem, according to Percy, was that blacks could read, and when they read they read the Chicago Defender.

37 Ibid., 264.
38 Quoted in Barry, 319-20.
39 Wyatt-Brown, 244.
40 Ibid., 243.
41 Percy, Lanterns, 253.
In June the water rose another six feet. Greenvillians black and white lost whatever idealism they had. Black refugees began to refuse to unload the boats and to work on the levees for no wages for men carrying guns. “The guns are the problem,” one black leader said. “All the white folks carry guns.” Many of those living on the levee waded back to their homes. Will Percy met with his committee to figure out how to persuade the black community that they must work. One member suggested they get the local police to round up work crews. Percy refused. Members of the committee began to resign. Finally, feeling he had no other option, Percy agreed to allow police to go into black neighborhoods. When they did, blacks resisted. Within two hours a white policeman shot and killed a black man.43

The black population during the flood was more than double the white population. Rumors began to circulate that there would be an uprising. Will’s black informant told him that the black population blamed him for the killing. Will, seething that the blacks who should have been in Vicksburg were in Greenville in a frenzy, decided this was his problem to fix.

Will called a citywide meeting at a prominent black church and demanded there be no whites present but himself. That night he arrived at the church and black Greenvillians trickled in until the church was full. “It was the surliest, most hostile group I’ve ever faced,” Will wrote. A black preacher rose and said, “I will read from the scripture.” Then they sang, their voices sounding to Percy like “a pounding barbaric chant of menace.” After the hymn the preacher turned to Percy, who mounted the pulpit and looked out into the crowd. “A good Negro has been killed,” he began,

42 Quoted in Barry, 325.
43 Percy, Lanterns, 265-66.
By a white policeman. Every white man in town regrets this from his heart and is ashamed. The policeman is in jail and will be tried. I look into your faces and see anger and hatred. You think I am the murderer. The murderer should be punished. I will tell you who he is... We white people could have left you to shift for yourselves. Instead we stayed with you and worked for you, day and night. During all this time you Negroes did nothing, nothing for yourselves or for us. You were asked to do only one thing, a little thing. The Red Cross asked you to unload the food it was giving you, the food without which you would have starved. And you refused. Because of your sinful, shameful laziness, because you refused to work in your own behalf unless you were paid, one of your race has been killed.... The murderer is you! Your hands are dripping with blood. Look into each other's faces and see the shame and the fear God has set on them. Down on your knees, murderers, and beg your God not to punish you as you deserve.

Percy recalled with some ambivalence that they all got down and prayed, but that when he then called for volunteers to unload the boat only four men stood up, "a friend of mine, a one-armed man, and two preachers who had been slaves on the Percy Place and were too old to lift a bucket."^44

Percy's outrage, and yet his admittance that his outrage was ineffective, is suggestive of the torment the summer of 1927 was for him. His leadership was thwarted

^44 Ibid., 267-68.
by his father, and the result of his father’s connivance was that the black population in
town wanted to rise up against him, William Alexander Percy, Chairman of the Red
Cross. Rather than respect for the “beneficent” despot, they had rage; rather than
controlling the race relations in the Delta, Will Percy had allowed disaster. The racial
tensions of Greenville were brought to the surface and he was the target of the fury of the
black population. That Will Percy lashed out at them with such unfairness was in some
measure due to the frustration he felt at having been usurped by his father. And that he
wrote that his best efforts resulted in the conversion of a one-armed man and a few
preachers seems an implicit admittance that his was not the constitution of his father’s.
He was not as powerful, nor as effective, as LeRoy Percy.

However, even after recounting his father’s manipulation of his decision to
evacuate the black refugees, he wrote that “Father, though he was not a member of the
committee, was the brains and the faith back of everything, the strong rock on which we
leaned and in whose shade we renewed our strength.” Instead of expressing his
resentment, or allowing that his father had deceived him, he excused him: “He was a
natural gambler,” Will wrote of his father. “He bet on warm weather and tents.” But at
the church full of blacks, Percy felt “Retreat was out of the question. Attack was
imperative.” And attack he did, with all the fury of a displaced son.\(^45\)

Indeed, the Mississippi River for Percy represented defeat and emasculation. It
was his father’s river, his father’s domain. In August of 1927 Will resigned as chairman
and sailed for Japan. He secretly hoped, he wrote, that the relief effort would suffer in his
absence of several months, that his people would miss his leadership and his guidance.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 258-59 and 267.
However, he returned several months later to discover that “the relief work had proceeded distressingly well without me.” In fact, things seemed to get better after he left. He admitted that he learned from the flood, in part, “humility as to my own indispensability.”

The Mediterranean and the Mississippi were vastly different places in Percy’s experience and imagination. In the Mediterranean he experienced and wrote about beauty and friendship; it was a place peopled by men with a love of art and a love of the freedoms engendered by the Mediterranean. The Mississippi River in large part created the Percy family’s livelihood with its soil-enriching floods and with its steamboats carrying cotton to the world’s markets. It also flowed alongside a Delta society stratified along race and class lines, and which held together in a delicate system that rested on planter coercion. In Will’s chance to lead this hierarchical society, he failed to secure his own place on top of the hierarchy; his father outmaneuvered him and in doing so created a problem that Will only dealt with by turning his anger towards black laborers who were understandably tired of unloading boats for men with guns. Will’s racism in this case was motivated in part by a conflict of gender: unable to prove his manhood and authority to his father and to Greenville, he expressed it to a church full of blacks in mourning. The Mississippi’s flood waters washed away some of the edifices that kept Greenville society, and the Percy household, living in a semblance of peace and harmony.

Two years after the flood LeRoy and Camille Percy died within two months of each other. For his father, Will commissioned New York sculptor Malvina Hoffman to construct a bronze statue of a knight in armor. He paid her thirty thousand dollars.

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46 Ibid., 268-69.
“Father was the only great person I ever knew,” he wrote in his autobiography. On his mother’s grave he simply placed a stone. After their affairs were tied up and put in order, Will boarded a steamer for the South Seas.

\[47\text{ Ibid., 270.}\]
Chapter 9: Uncle Will

In July of 1929 Will Percy’s cousin, LeRoy Pratt Percy, committed suicide in the attic of his Birmingham mansion. He was a successful lawyer, in love with his wife Mattie Sue and his three young sons, Walker, Roy, and Phinizy. He was a hunter and a sportsman and traveled often with his Uncle LeRoy, Will’s father, to hunt in places like Alaska and Wyoming and French Lick, Indiana. They brought trophy elk and deer and antelope busts home and hung them on the walls. Despite his successful professional and family life, though, LeRoy Pratt Percy dealt constantly with what he called “The Crouching Beast.” His depression rarely lifted. He drank more than his friends. A neighbor recalled at least one instance in the 1920s when he drove by and saw LeRoy tending his rose garden with white bandages wrapped around his wrists. LeRoy’s son Walker, thirteen when his father died, would grow up to write novels about the loneliness and despair created by life in the modern world. As a grown man one day in 1979, fifty years after his father’s suicide, Walker Percy was sitting alone in his office during a year of teaching at Louisiana State University. A student wandered in to talk to him. Percy, caught off guard, looked up at the student and said, “I guess the central mystery of my life will always be why my father killed himself. Come here, have a seat.”

That Walker Percy did not meet the same end as his father is remarkable in itself—crippling depression was a genetic predisposition in the Percy family line, and family history was punctuated by suicides. But that Walker Percy invited this student in to talk with him, that he worked to understand himself and his world through creativity,

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was in large part due to the fact that Will Percy, after the death of his cousin, adopted the three boys and became a father to them. “It was the most important thing that ever happened to me,” Walker Percy said. “I never would have been a writer without his influence. I’ve never met anybody like him.”

The Percys of Birmingham were a New South family. After the Civil War, the Gray Eagle’s sons responded to new opportunities. All lawyers, they moved in different directions to practice their trade. LeRoy, the eldest, inherited the family plantation and stayed in Greenville; William moved to Memphis; and Walker, the youngest, moved to Birmingham. Birmingham was much like Greenville in the late nineteenth century in that it was a small southern town in a strategic location. Greenville was situated alongside the great corridor of the Mississippi River, and Birmingham was situated atop an abundance of coal and iron ore. Named after the English industrial town, Birmingham attracted northern and foreign investors to reap profits from the rich minerals in the ground.

Walker Percy moved to Birmingham in 1886 and began to practice law. Within two years he married Mary Pratt Debaradelaben, the daughter of the town’s richest industrialist. Within another year, he represented his father-in-law’s corporate conglomerate Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad—which would eventually merge with J. P. Morgan’s vast enterprise, United States Steel. The Percys became a prominent family in Birmingham: Walker became a state senator and president of the Birmingham Country Club, and he and his wife often had other couples over to play ping-pong and cards in

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their sprawling home, which has been described as “a turreted Gothic monster of a place.”

The young couple had their first son, LeRoy Pratt, a year after their marriage. LeRoy grew up and followed in his father’s footsteps to become a lawyer. He went to Princeton and then on to Harvard law school, and did a year of post-graduate study at the University of Heidelberg in Germany. He returned home in the fall of 1914 and joined his father’s law firm and a year later married Mattie Sue Phinizy, whom he had met at a resort in Arkansas while on vacation. They wasted no time: just short of nine months after their elegant wedding in Athens, Georgia, Mattie Sue gave birth to their first son, whom they named after his grandfather Walker. Everything seemed fair and bright for the Percy family: financial security, political and social power, new life in their midst.

The elder Walker Percy, though, six months after the birth of his grandson, shot himself through the heart with a twelve-gauge shotgun. The coroner ruled the death a suicide. The public figure—successful, well-traveled, loyal to his community—was haunted by private demons. His death hovered over his son LeRoy, who would perform an almost identical act thirteen years later.

Walker Percy was too young to remember his grandfather, and what he learned about his death had to be learned from intuition. He grew up amidst a heavy silence. But like most children, his focus was not on uncovering family tragedy. His memories were of a happy childhood, riding the Birmingham streetcars with his brothers and sneaking into movies. He remembered his father sipping bourbon whiskey out of a barrel in the basement during the prohibition. He remembered the gothic mansion—his grandfather’s

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3 Tolson, 26.
house into which his father moved them after his death—with it’s angled walls and dark rooms; it was “spooky,” he said, “like the Munsters’ house on TV.” Walker remembered moving to a home on the country club golf course, which would forever color his view of the South.⁴

Mattie Sue Percy was a doting mother to her sons and a popular Birmingham socialite. She was a sure hand at tennis, a good athlete, and widely thought to be one of the most attractive women in town. She was also delicate. She worried about her husband’s instability. She worried when her sons arrived home late on their bicycles. For all her devotedness and kindness, though, she was distant. Her sons remembered her with fondness but they spoke of her with a sense of detachment. They loved their parents, but their father’s unpredictability and their mother’s distance did not go unnoticed. Years later, Walker’s brother Roy put it succinctly: “It just wasn’t a happy family.”⁵

After the death of her husband in the summer of 1929, Mattie Sue moved the boys to Athens where they lived in their grandmother’s spacious house on Milledge Avenue, one of the town’s two main streets. They enrolled in school, enjoyed their time exploring a new town, but felt somewhat restricted. Though their grandmother clearly loved them, she was strict and, like her daughter, detached. Walker’s younger brother Phinizy’s primary memory of Athens was that they were not allowed to use scissors on Sunday. But in the summer of 1930, everything changed for the Percy boys.⁶

⁴ Ibid., 32-36.
⁵ Quoted in Ibid., 42.
⁶ John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
Will Percy went to Athens early in the summer of 1930 and invited Mattie Sue and her sons to come and live with him in Greenville. “I liked him the first time I saw him.,” Phinizy Percy recalled about Will Percy. “He was a very handsome fellow, and very gentle. I immediately took to him. There was no way not to like him.” Walker Percy remembered being thirteen years old and already having a well-developed and fabled notion of his Mississippi cousin: the son of a U. S. senator, a war hero, a poet, a man who had just blown in from Bora-Bora. At that moment and forever after, Walker remembered him as “a personage, a presence” who exuded “exoticness” and “radiated that mysterious quality we call charm.”

The home that they moved to in the summer of 1930 was a new and foreign world. Will Percy still lived in the family mansion on the corner of Percy Avenue and Broadway. The home had been renovated in the late 1920s when LeRoy and Camille took an extended European vacation and now had a stuccoed off-white exterior, a massive front edifice, and a tennis court in the back. The house had rooms with odd angles, secret spaces, and stained glass windows. In the attic World War One era Springfield rifles, cartridge holders, helmets, and memorabilia overflowed from trunks and boxes—Phinizy once found an aluminum leg up there. The upstairs of the house was set up as a series of suites, almost like apartments, in which people came to stay for a night or a week or several years. Will’s house had an elevator and a book-lined library and an army of servants. Indica azaleas and lilacs and roses with names like Talisman, Dainty Bess, Malmaisons, and Maman Cochets grew in the yard. It was a cosmopolitan

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place, seemingly filled with people and things from all over the world—a bronze statue of Lorenzo de Medici, a marble statue of Venus, Moroccan rugs, Japanese paintings, and Persian vases. "It was a window through which you could see the world," Shelby Foote remembered. "No, it was even more than that—it was as if some of that other world had been brought into this little town."\(^8\)

More exciting than the house itself were the people there. Odd people, foreign people, black people—the kinds of people Walker and his brothers had never seen before except as servants or characters in books. The boys were shocked to find that Will Percy had black friends. "I remember one black guy who was more or less off the street," Walker Percy recalled. "He'd walk up and down the street at night and talk to people." Another time, a traveling black musician came to the house and came inside and played the blues on his harmonica all afternoon.\(^9\)

The radical black poet Langston Hughes stayed at Will Percy's home several times in the 1930s.\(^{10}\) During one visit, Will Percy went to the all-black African Methodist Episcopal Church to introduce Hughes before he gave a poetry reading. Langston Hughes remembered that he "introduced me most graciously" to the multi-racial audience, and was surprised to hear Percy describe him as something of an equal, as "my fellow poet." This was particularly uplifting to Hughes, who had recently been in

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\(^{10}\) *Ibid.*, 11.
Nashville where the poet Allen Tate cancelled a party when he found out Hughes would be there. Meeting Hughes at a party, Tate explained, would be like consorting socially with his cook.\textsuperscript{11} That Percy not only interacted with Hughes in public, but allowed him to sleep under his roof, was thought by most Greenvillians to be disgraceful. They called Percy a “nigger-lover” and a “mixer” and were outraged at his gestures of equality.\textsuperscript{12}

Will Percy’s Greenville home was a gathering place for artists and intellectuals. The Percy boys remembered it as always a swirl of activity. “It was almost like living in a hotel,” Phinizy Percy remembered. There were men who had fallen on hard times and were living upstairs, and “when we lived there, there were two or three other people who were also friends of his who were also living there. Then there were always guests popping in and out.”\textsuperscript{13} Though the young boys didn’t realize it at the time, these guests were often world famous writers, artists, and intellectuals. The novelist William Faulkner came for tennis in the summer wearing white flannel pants and no shoes and left stumbling drunk; the poet and Lincoln biographer Carl Sandburg got drunk on whisky and played country songs on his guitar (“Everybody got tired of listening,” Roy Percy remembered, “He kept playin’. It seemed like he wouldn’t stop.”); the psychiatrist Harry Stack Sullivan stationed himself in the pantry with a pitcher of vodka martinis, and

\textsuperscript{11} Arnold Rampersad, \textit{The Life of Langston Hughes, Volume I: 1902—1941, I, Too, Sing America} (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986). 231-32. Walker Percy had a different memory of this episode: “My Uncle, being the idealist and liberal that he was, introduced [Hughes] at a meeting by saying, ‘Now here’s a man who’s black and an activist who has risen above the issues of race and ideologies involved in being a black activist and who’s now become a poet.’ Whereupon Langston Hughes got up and read the most ideologically aggressive poetry you can imagine.” Quoted in Lawson and Kramer, Eds., \textit{Conversations with Walker Percy}, 261.


\textsuperscript{13} John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy.
watched life in the Percy house in both directions—the life of the white guests in the front, and the life of the black servants in the back kitchen; the poet Vachel Lindsay got drunk and recited one of his poems, loudly, off the Percy porch in the middle of the night, just months before he committed suicide by drinking Lysol.\footnote{On Faulkner, see Ben Wasson, \textit{Count No ‘Count: Flashbacks to Faulkner} [add p #]; On Sandburg, see Mary Stewart Interview with LeRoy Percy, 26 July 1994, Greenville, MS, in author’s possession; On Sullivan, see Walker Percy, “Uncle Will’s House,” 65; on Lindsay, see Baker, \textit{The Percys of Mississippi}.}

Amidst this atmosphere of serendipity, Will Percy was mysterious. Despite the constant flow of guests, despite the regular affection shown him by his friends, melancholy pervaded his disposition. Walker Percy later remembered his eyes as “piercing gray-blue and strangely light....They were beautiful and terrible eyes, eyes to be careful around. Yet now, when I try to remember them, I cannot see them otherwise than as shadowed by sadness.” Will Percy would pace the sidewalk at night with his hands in his pockets, back and forth in front of the house. He would take walks alone on the levee. He had his chauffeur, Ford, take him for long drives in the countryside. He played his grand piano for hours in the evenings, with passion that sometimes silenced his audience—one hearer recalled that he was good enough to have been a concert pianist. He stood in his garden frowning down at his iris’s and azaleas. He closed himself in his library and wrote translations of the French poet Verlaine. Phinizy, who shared a suite with Will upstairs, would often hear him awake in the middle of the night, vomiting into the toilet.\footnote{John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy.}

Will also had a fiery temper. One of his favorite diversions was to sit in his living room and listen to classical music. He had a collection of 78 speed records—Brahms,
Beethoven, Wagner, Bach—that he played on a Capehart record player. The size of a piece of furniture, the automatic Capehart would play ten records in a row. Will would lay on the couch all afternoon listening to music. "He had this great love which I'd never seen before," Walker Percy remembered, "which was unusual and is even now to see somebody who actually gets a high delight, great joy out of listening to music." The record player, though, jammed regularly and Will Percy would get up and curse it, kick it, fly into a rage. "He would break records," Walker said, "throw records around."17

In one instance Roy, Phinizy, and their new friend Shelby Foote were playing with tennis balls in Will’s dining room when one of the balls became lodged in the chandelier. Phinizy got up on the table and tried to get the ball out, and in doing so pulled the chandelier out of the ceiling and fell crashing to the floor. The three boys walked downtown to Will’s law office and told him what happened.

"Uh, Uncle Will," Roy said, "that chandelier in the library, I’m afraid it got broken."

"What do you mean ‘it got broken’," Will asked. The boys were silent.

"Goddammit!" Will fumed, "people who don’t know how to take care of good property shouldn’t be allowed around it!"

Foote explained that they were all "scared to death of him." "He had a capacity for great anger," Foote said. "You mustn’t think Mr. Will was all sweetness and light. He could get as mad as anyone I’ve ever known in my life....I don’t know exactly what we thought he was going to do, but his anger was a fearsome thing to be around."18

18 Quotes in Carter, Ed., Conversations with Shelby Foote, 159.
As the Percy boys and their mother became settled in Will Percy's lively household in 1931 and 1932, some of the townsfolk began to speculate that Mattie Sue and Will might marry. As late as the 1960s, some Greenvillians insisted that Will Percy had fallen in love with Mattie Sue, and she with him.\textsuperscript{19} They played tennis and bridge together, and she seemed to have a sense of belonging in Will’s house. When the writer David Cohn was considering a move to Greenville, she told him, “Oh Dave, Greenville is the most peaceful place on the earth.” Just then, they heard two gunshots outside the window. “Oh Dave,” Mattie Sue said, “I take it back.”\textsuperscript{20} But Roy and Walker, doubtless still dealing with grief, fought a lot during the family’s first year in Greenville and this took a toll on Mattie Sue’s nerves. One time she yelled at her two older sons, “If you don’t stop your fighting you will kill me!”\textsuperscript{21} Walker Percy would later say that during her years in Greenville, his mother “was not well.”\textsuperscript{22}

On the morning of Easter Saturday in April 1932, Mattie Sue asked her youngest son Phinizy to go for a car ride with her. The two got in her Buick coupe and left the house. Mattie Sue said nothing and seemed distracted, irritable. She wouldn’t tell Phinizy where they were going. They headed north out of town toward the country. Mattie Sue turned down a dirt road and sped towards Metcalf, Mississippi. As they drove onto a wooden bridge, the Buick spun out of control and plunged off the bridge and twenty feet down into Deer Creek. As the car sank into the water, Phinizy looked for a means of escape. His mother grabbed his wrist and would not let go. Phinizy, seeing that a rear window was open, tried to pull his mother toward it. She would not move, and her

\textsuperscript{19} Bertram Wyatt-Brown, \textit{House of Percy}, 273.
\textsuperscript{20} Quoted in Patrick Samway, \textit{Walker Percy}, 43.
\textsuperscript{21} Quoted in Tolson, \textit{Pilgrim in the Ruins}, 90.
\textsuperscript{22} Lawson and Kramer, \textit{Conversations with Walker Percy}, 255.
grip tightened around his wrist. She remained seated in the drivers seat. Desperately Phinizy wrenched himself free and swam out of the rear window and to the bank. Hoping to turn around and see that his mother followed him, all he saw were ripples in the brown muddy water.

Passers by comforted the wet child and went for help. Others arrived and pulled Mattie Sue from the water. An ambulance arrived and medics tried to revive her, but she was dead. By sheer coincidence, Walker and LeRoy drove by with a friend and saw the crowd of people. Curious, they went towards the scene. Will Percy had arrived by this time and intercepted the boys on the road. “You shouldn’t be here,” he said. But Walker and LeRoy had seen their mother. His eyes filling with tears, Walker stumbled away saying, “It’s my mother, my mother…”

At home, Will Percy comforted the three boys. He told them that he loved them, and that he would adopt them and provide for them. He arranged to hold the funeral services at the house, and for Mattie Sue to be buried at the Greenville cemetery in the Percy family plot. The next day, Easter Sunday, the pastor from the Presbyterian church presided over the funeral and they buried her in the earth. Will filed a petition for adoption.

Phinizy was traumatized. He woke at night screaming with terror. He had vivid nightmares about time and the beginning and end of life. Will Percy moved him into his suite and woke at night with Phinizy and talked to him. He would ask him how he

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felt, encourage him to talk if he wanted to. When the boy didn’t want to talk, or couldn’t
go back to sleep, Will would read to him from the Greek myths. Phinizy became deeply
and emotionally attached to Will. “I trusted him completely,” he said. “His only thought
was comforting me and getting me back to sleep.”26 For the rest of his life Phinizy
carried this trauma with him, and even as a grown man he would be moved to tears at the
mention of his mother. At the mention of Will Percy, he would speak in superlatives and
become acrid at the slightest challenge to his character. “It’s trite to say he was like
Christ,” Phinizy said, “but he certainly was more like Christ than anybody I’ve ever
known or heard of.”27

That summer of 1932 Will arranged for Walker and LeRoy to take a trip out west
while he took Phinizy to Washington DC and Baltimore. The older boys went with
Will’s secretary, Mitchell Finch, to the Grand Canyon, San Francisco, and New Mexico,
and Will took Phinizy to the Phipps Clinic at the Johns Hopkins Hospital to speak with a
psychiatrist. While there, Will took Phinizy around the capital and spent time talking
with him about his mother.28 In July, Will and Phinizy took a train out west and met Roy
and Walker at Jackson Hole, Wyoming. They stayed there for two weeks taking trips
into Yellowstone National Park, riding horses, and even playing softball (one has a hard
time imagining Will participating in this—perhaps he was the coach). After Wyoming,
the group of four took a train to Sewanee, Tennessee and spent the rest of the summer at

26 John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy.
27 John Jones Interview with Phinizy Percy.
28 Wyatt-Brown, House of Percy, 275.
Will's house, Brinkwood, hiking in the nearby coves and reading aloud to each other at night.\(^{29}\)

Will Percy's commitment to his three adopted sons was remarkable. They entered his life at a time when he was prepared to spend his time traveling around the world, living off of his inheritance and income from the family plantation, writing poetry and tending his garden. After the death of his parents he was free to structure his household as he chose, free to live outside of the expectations of his father—after a lifetime of both deep love and deep resentment towards his parents, he was free of them. Walker Percy explained that late in life he realized what his second cousin had done for him: for a man who "felt more at home in Taormina than in Jackson" to have forsaken his cosmopolitan freedoms in order to raise three young boys "amounted to giving up the freedom of bachelorhood and taking on the burden of parenthood without the consolations of marriage." The three boys idolized their new father-figure. "He was to me a fixed point in a confusing world....He was the most extraordinary man I have ever known," Walker wrote. "I owe him a debt which cannot be paid."\(^{30}\)

Though he hated practicing law, Will took on more work in order to pay for the boys' education. During these years his health problems increased, and practicing law did not help his congenitally high blood pressure. He worked out a deal with his partner, Hazelwood Farish, by which he did not have to work in the summertime; each summer he would spend with the boys at Brinkwood, or park them at Brinkwood under the care of one of their aunts and travel.

\(^{29}\) Samway, Walker Percy, 58-59.

He wrote no more poetry after he adopted the boys, though he continued to read and maintain strong opinions. Shelby Foote and Walker Percy in particular loved to engage Uncle Will on literary matters, because the man had such firm convictions on what was "good" and what was "bad" art. Foote and Percy began to track with current artistic trends and would try and persuade Uncle Will of the virtues of modern forms. One afternoon they were sitting on the porch together in Greenville and Foote played a record of Bing Crosby and Kay Star singing "If I Could Be With You (One Hour Tonight)."

"Now Mr. Will, you have to listen to this," Foote said.

They sat and listened to the song. The chorus, in part, went:

If I could be with you one hour tonight,
If I was free to do the things I might,
I'm telling you true, I'd be anything but blue,
If I could be with you.

Walker and Shelby waited in anticipation to see if Uncle Will would approve.

"Did you like it?" Shelby asked.

"She sounds like a whore," Will replied.  

On another occasion, Will and the boys were at Brinkwood and Foote brought to Will John Crowe Ransom's famous modernist poem, "Bells for John Whiteside's

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31 Quoted in Samway, Walker Percy, 43.
Daughter.” In it, Ransom described ironic melancholy outside a funeral for a young girl by showing an image of several geese on the lawn:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{The lazy geese, like a snow cloud} \\
\text{Dripping their snow on the green grass,} \\
\text{Tricking and stopping, sleepy and proud,} \\
\text{Who cried in goose, Alas.}
\end{align*}
\]

Foote waited for Uncle Will’s judgment. At last, all he said was, “That’s not the way geese act.”[32]

When Walker was a junior in high school, he entered a poetry contest for which Will was appointed judge. Though the poems were submitted anonymously, Will picked Walker’s as the winner. The poem was a sentimental and romanticized depiction of a group of black slaves working in a cotton field. It read, in part:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{By plough-shares rude your fields were tilled} \\
\text{‘Neath azure summer skies} \\
\text{When happy slaves the warm air filled} \\
\text{With drowsy lullabies.}
\end{align*}
\]

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Walker, proud of himself, went to his uncle and told him that the winning poem was his. Will said, “You needn’t be happy about it because it was the worst bunch of poems I’ve ever had occasion to judge.”

Will Percy was enamored of the classics, but he was also not closed-minded with regards to modern literature. Shelby Foote, for example, mentioned on several occasions that it was Will Percy that recommended the three modernist books that changed his life: James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Thomas Mann’s *The Magic Mountain*, and Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past*. Percy told him that these were the three most important novels of the century. To the young southerner Foote, Will Percy seemed almost foreign, so unpredictable were his views and opinions in the context of a homogenous South. “Will Percy had a culture that was alien to me and to that country,” he recalled. “He had been almost everywhere and seen almost everything.” And what was more, Will Percy wanted to share what he had seen, what he knew, with younger people. Foote said,

He was a very good teacher, not a teacher in the sense of lecturing you, though when he got to talking it was very much like lecturing, sometimes. But it was by example. Here was a man who was a world traveler, who was widely read, who knew about the cultured forms of life on other continents, who had experienced the company of the some of the fine writers of our time, and he would talk about it in a way that made you not only know the reality of it, but also appreciate the beauty of present day literature and past. I’ve heard Mr. Will talk about Keats, for

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example, in a way that made you wish the conversation would hurry up and get over so you could go home and read some Keats.\textsuperscript{34}

Walker Percy, too, highlighted this quality in Will. To have lived in his house for twelve years was to be “informed in the deepest sense of the word. What was to be listened to, dwelled on, pondered over for the next thirty years was of course the man himself, the unique human being, and when I say unique I mean it in its most literal sense: he was one of a kind: I never met anyone remotely like him.” Will would sit with Walker in his living room and point out moments in a symphony or read aloud from Shakespeare. “I had a great teacher,” Walker wrote. “The teacher points and says \textit{Look}; the response is \textit{Yes, I see.”}\textsuperscript{35}

Indeed, throughout the 1930s, Will Percy transitioned from artist to patron and teacher of the arts. He opened his home to writers and artists who needed an environment to create their art—David Cohn, for example, wrote his classic memoir, \textit{God Shakes Creation}, while he lived at Percy’s house for two years in the mid-1930s. Will invited Hodding Carter to move to Greenville to start a more liberal newspaper, which he did and for which he eventually won the Pulitzer Prize. Shelby Foote once was suspended from Greenville High School and Will told him to stay in his library for a week and read. Percy oversaw the formation of the Delta Art Association (funded by the New Deal’s Federal Arts Project), which he hoped would be a beacon of creativity in a society that evinced no “joy in living.” Percy encouraged the artists to create with joy, and he encouraged non-artists to think of living as art; in one speech, he suggested that “all of

\textsuperscript{34} Carter, ed., \textit{Conversations with Shelby Foote}, 72, 41, and 156-59.
\textsuperscript{35} Walker Percy, “Introduction,” x-xi.
our jobs are petty jobs but how we do them, whether we put loyalty and courage above all, makes the difference between being God-like and beast-like.\textsuperscript{36}

Will Percy’s commitment to younger artists was, to him, deeper than civic activism. He was committed to the idea of a pedagogical relationship as spiritually and artistically nourishing. His relationship with Leon Koury, who would become a well-known sculptor, demonstrates this. Koury was the son of Assyrian immigrants who moved to Greenville in the 1920s to open a grocery store. They lived in the black section of Greenville and served a working-class clientele from their store across town from where Percy lived. In the early 1930s a teenaged Koury, who spent most of his time skipping school and reading Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, wrote Will Percy to tell him he admired a poem he had published. Koury’s letter was forwarded to Will, who was in Europe at the time. Will wrote from France to thank Koury and to ask him to stop by his house when he returned home. Koury worked up the courage to go to Percy’s house and when he did Percy read some of Koury’s poems and told him they weren’t very good, but the sketches on the back of the poems were. “I’ll tell you what to do,” Percy told Koury, “forget the writing right now, and bring me some drawings.”\textsuperscript{37}

Koury brought Percy some drawings, and the older man encouraged him to keep practicing, and also invited him to come around and listen to music with him. “The first symphony I ever heard was in Will’s parlor,” Koury remembered, “in his study—and I remember it was Pathetique—Tchaikovsky. I was in a daze for weeks after that, just in a daze. This was something that I felt I had heard thousands of years before and it had

\textsuperscript{36} Quoted in Baker, 164.
\textsuperscript{37} Josephine Haxton Interview with Leon Zachary Koury, September 4, 1978, in William Alexander Percy Library, Greenville, MS.
come back to my ears. *I knew it!* It was saying something to me.” Will Percy opened up a world of art and culture to Koury. As with Walker Percy, Leon Koury felt that Will did not teach him so much as lead him to see something that was already inside of him. Will took Koury to New York and introduced him to his friend, the famous sculptor Malvina Hoffman. Koury described Percy’s influence on him as leading him “into realizing that there was so much more to acquire….This wasn’t a conscious—it wasn’t deliberate—he didn’t go about this in any kind of way. It was just during our visits….It was just there, but he didn’t realize that to me it was like a miner being in a mine and finding a gold nugget after struggling so long—and not knowing what I was looking for, you know.” During one such visit, Koury was playing around with modeling clay and Will Percy noticed his work. Shortly thereafter fifty pounds of clay appeared on Koury’s doorstep across town and his sculpting career began.38

Despite his civic idealism, and his considerable efforts in these years to help his community, Percy evinced a mounting despair that coincided with poor health. He felt overworked and his blood pressure was consistently high. At times he would take to bed for days at a time. Both Shelby and Walker remembered how regularly Will took sick and remained in bed. He would emerge “padding around in fuzzy slippers” and his favorite purple kimono he brought back from Japan, irritable and tired.39 A student once went to his law office to interview Will Percy, expecting to find him elbow-deep in work, but when she arrived at 9:30 AM Percy’s partner laughed and said she’d be lucky to catch

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him there. "He usually comes in between 10:30 and 12," he said. When she said she'd come back at 10:30, he replied, "But sometimes he doesn't come in at all."\(^{40}\)

Despite his regular devotion to his three sons, he also tired of them. He wrote to his friend Charlotte Gailor of his irritation at the timing of Phinizy's Easter break from school: "Of all others [this weekend] is Phín's Easter vacation and in desperation I am having him spend it in New Orleans with Bob and myself. That means I cannot see the pageant."\(^{41}\) To his friend Gerstle Mack, he wrote, "The Percy boys are interesting little animals," and another time, "God, Christmas was awful as usual."\(^{42}\) Because they offered excellent educations, but likely also in an attempt to preserve some peace of mind, he enrolled Roy and Phinizy in boarding schools for high school—Roy at Episcopal in Virginia, and Phinizy at McCallie in Tennessee. Walker later wrote to Shelby Foote that re-reading Will's letters from the 1930s "makes you see how much fell in on him in such a short time, death of parents in 1929, the Depression, mother's death, having to lawyer, bad health....It's amazing he carried on despite all. It's also surprising how much he traveled even after we arrived. Apparently he would call in an aunt to take charge, Aunt Ellen—'a pleasant totally inefficient woman'—or park us in Sewanee—and take off—to Tahiti, Samoa, Rio."\(^{43}\)

Will Percy did continue to travel regularly in the 1930s. He still had more of the world to see.

\(^{40}\) Madel Jacobs, "Interview With William Alexander Percy," *Ephemera: A Student Literary Publication of the Mississippi State College For Women*, February 1939. Clipping in Alumni Files, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.
\(^{41}\) William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, 23 March 1936, in Charlotte Gailor Papers, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.
\(^{42}\) Quoted in Walker Percy to Shelby Foote, 3 September 1980, in Tolson, ed., *Correspondence*, 265.
\(^{43}\) *Ibid.*
Chapter 10: The White Plague

On June 24, 1936, Will Percy boarded the SS Monterrey in Los Angeles to sail just under four thousand miles to Samoa. He had traveled to Polynesia before, in 1931, and his fascination with the South Seas followed a number of American and European intellectuals and artists. The French painter Paul Gauguin abandoned his wife and five children to live in Tahiti and paint. The novelists Herman Melville, W. Somerset Maugham, and D. H. Lawrence, among others, traveled there to find inspiration for their fictions. The American anthropologists Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead engaged in fieldwork in the South Seas that led to seminal publications in the field of social anthropology.¹

Mead’s controversial and bestselling book, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), posited in part that Samoan sexual mores were less repressive than those of the West, and that young Samoan women passed through adolescence with little turmoil, enjoying casual sex with both sexes, free from the pressures of romantic love. Benedict based much of her book, *Patterns of Culture* (1934), in which she famously argued that moral values were relative and contingent on cultural patterns, on her fieldwork in the South Seas.² These two arguments—foundational ideas regarding cultural relativism and sexual

liberation—predictably upset many Americans when they appeared. Though we cannot know for sure if or when Will Percy read these books (though he likely did, bestsellers as they were and wide reader as he was), his trip to Samoa in 1936 led him to share many of their modern ideas about culture and sexuality, as well as the longstanding romantic conception of the Pacific Islands as pristinely primitive in their disconnect from civilization. Ironically, these relativist views on sex and culture stood alongside Percy’s conviction of the fundamental difference between races and the spiritual superiority yet intellectual inferiority of black people across the world. The vexed question with regards to Will Percy and race is this: How did one become in the 1930s a cultural relativist, sexual liberationist, white supremacist?

Will Percy’s trip from Los Angeles to the South Pacific would have taken almost a month, with a stop in Honolulu along the way. Arriving in the main port in the Samoan Islands, called Pago Pago on the island of Tutuila, one would find sheer cliffs that ringed the one-time crater of a volcano. Though travelers like Will Percy went looking for contact with primitive peoples and pre-modern civilizations, Samoa had by 1936 been in contact with the West for almost two hundred years. French explorers “found” Samoa in the mid-eighteenth century and were met with violent resistance from the natives. British missionaries went to Samoa in the 1830s, and the German navy invaded Samoa in 1889—leading to a conflict with the United States, which had laid claim to parts of the islands. The 1899 Treaty of Berlin divided Samoa in half—the eastern half for the Germans, and the western half for the Americans. The American navy built a coaling station in the bay of Pago Pago and established a regular presence. Samoans fought and died for the United States during World War One. By 1925 when Margaret Mead arrived
in Pago Pago to do her field work, she was disturbed to find a smokestack and radio
towers rising from the beautiful volcanic crater. She found the native ceremonies
“depressing,” because during tribal dances the natives carried black American umbrellas
and wore tunics made of “various hideous striped American stuffs.” The scene was
“ludicrous,” she said, “the brightest costumes melt into a background of endless
umbrellas.” By 1939 American marines outnumbered the indigenous population of the
island.3

Arriving in 1936, Percy would have been met with much the same scene:
American sailors in the shops and bars, local women and men stripped to the waist
carrying fruit to the market and wearing a combination of grass skirts and American
clothes, islanders and Americans alike crowding the narrow streets of the small harbor
town. In July it would have been hot but breezy with occasional brief rain showers. A
central bus route ran through the center of the island—the buses old and rattling, the
roads unpaved and rocky. The villages along the bus route, Mead had noted, did “not
present a typical picture of the original culture,” for they were “very much influenced by
American goods and American visitors.”4 But if one was willing to travel by walking
path or by boat, a more remote village could be found that was more untouched by
commerce and missionary.

26-27. On the history of Samoa, see Mansel G. Blackford, Pathways to the Present: U.
S. Development and its Consequences in the Pacific (Honolulu: University of Hawai’I
Press, 2007) and Malama Meleisea, The Making of Modern Samoa: Traditional Authority
and Colonial Administration in the History of Western Samoa (Suva: Institute of Pacific
Studies of the University of the South Pacific, 1987).
4 Mead, Letters from the Field, 31.
The extant sources do not give much detail about Percy’s several months in Samoa in the late summer of 1936, though they give an excellent picture of his reactions to and perceptions of the local culture. On the long trip home from Samoa he composed an essay entitled, “The White Plague,” in which he discoursed on the topic of race. The essay gives unique insight into Percy’s views about race and the ways he saw race as interconnected with modernity, globalization, and sexuality.

Scholars and writers have written a great deal about Will Percy and race—he was, after all, in charge late in his life of a large plantation worked by over five hundred African American renters and sharecroppers. His family was centrally involved in creating and sustaining the rigid segregation of the Mississippi Delta and the plantation sharecropping system that kept so many blacks in perpetual debt. Moreover, he styled himself as something of an expert on race relations in his autobiography, particularly in the chapter entitled, “A Note on Racial Relations.” Observers have generally categorized Percy in three ways regarding his views on race: as a racial liberal; as a paternalist; and as a vicious racist.

This latter view is most clearly seen in reviews of Lanterns on the Levee written in the leftist press and by historians in the 1970s. Florence Murray, writing in The People’s Voice, called Percy’s writings on race “fascist literature” and “racial poison,” and noted that “Negroes, Italians, Chinese, ‘poor whites’ and other racial and social groups are vilified, condemned, laughed at and held up to ridicule.”

In the Boston Transcript, the reviewer wrote that “if you can put aside your social conscience and forget that Mr. Percy apparently likes slavery, you’ll be delighted with his personal

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history.”

Charles Curtis Munz wrote in *The Nation* that “the theories and opinions of this fine flower of Southern life are at bottom very similar to those held by the rednecks and the peckerwoods and the vulgarians.” The historian James W. Silver, speaking to the Southern Historical Association in 1975, said that “Will Percy added nothing to the century-old assumption that blacks were innately inferior, utterly content, and could best be taken care of by white southerners,” and, in the final reckoning, “I can see no real difference in the basic assumptions regarding the Negro as between Will Percy and [demagogic Mississippi governor] Ross Barnett.”

Others have characterized Percy as a paternalist in the vein of his father, pointing out that his views on race were mainly determined by the economic structure of the Mississippi Delta. John O. Hodges has recently written in the *Southern Quarterly* that Percy’s view of blacks arose “out of a need to protect his own aristocratic interests” and that Percy had adopted “the story of southern paternalism as his own story.” Some reviews of *Lanterns on the Levee* focused on Percy’s defense of sharecropping and derived that blacks, to him, were merely laborers, a source of profit. The reviewer in *Mademoiselle* magazine quipped, “Mr. Percy is an unabashed southerner who runs a plantation with sharecropper tenants, and admits it.” Walker Percy memorably characterized this view in his introduction to *Lanterns on the Levee*. He wrote of the many readers who, after finishing the book, come “bearing down at full charge, waving

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6 *Boston Transcript*, March 29, 1941, clipping in Knopf Papers.
10 *Mademoiselle*, May 1941, clipping in Knopf Papers.
Lanterns on the Levee like a battle flag. ‘He is right! The Old South was right!’ What she means all too often, it turns out, is...that she is enraged at having to pay her cook more than ten dollars a week; that she prefers, not merely segregation to integration, but slavery to either.”^1

The most common portrayal of Percy’s view of race, though, both in academic and popular literature, has been by writers trying to make sense of Will’s considerable compassion and sympathy towards blacks. Hodding Carter wrote that the blacks of the Delta saw Will as a “fabulous provider to whom they came for money and advice and sometimes for protection.”^2 Of Will Percy’s kindness towards local blacks, historian Lewis Baker explained that “Will believed that a little sunshine was good for everyone.”^3

The most perceptive observer of Percy’s view of race, which combines something of all these views, is McKay Jenkins. Jenkins argues in his book, The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s, that Percy was a man uncomfortable in his own skin and that his use of metaphors in Lanterns on the Levee suggests an underlying sense of identity with African Americans. That is, Percy was an outsider, misunderstood, misrepresented, and alienated, and in many ways his writings about blackness were attempts to come to terms with his whiteness. Blacks too were alienated and marginalized, and Jenkins uncovers the ways Percy wrote about them with a kind of longing. He argues that Percy was uncomfortable with changes in his own time and so wrote about the past with nostalgia, which allowed him to embroider the past in any way

^1 Walker Percy, “Introduction,” xii.
that suited him. In the same way he tried to portray himself as outside of history, he wrote of blacks as living outside of history: they were forever living in the present, unable to remember or plan. Jenkins points out, “marking blacks as living ‘outside history’ reveals more than a sentimental impulse, then; it shows Percy’s determination to remain outside history himself, to remain aloof from the historical pressures of his own time, and to ignore the discomfort of his own sexuality.”¹⁴ Jenkins’s analysis of Percy’s metaphors of race is accurate in several important ways: he correctly identifies the ways Percy wrote about blacks with longing; he points out the unusual way Percy wrote about time and race; and he connects Percy’s own feelings of alienation with the way he wrote about black authenticity.

However, traveling with Percy to Samoa reveals several ways in which Jenkins’s analysis needs to be extended and clarified. First, Percy’s views on race were indeed related to his own sexuality; but where Jenkins suggests his writings on race relay an effort to “ignore the discomfort of his own sexuality,” in actuality they suggest ways his views of race were grounded in his views of sexuality. And rather than a determination to “remain aloof from the historical pressures of his own time,” Percy’s writings in Samoa demonstrate that he was engaged in—and sympathetic with—key changes taking place in American culture in the 1920s and 1930s. Namely, he articulated a view that echoed Margaret Mead’s anthropological work suggesting gender roles and sexual practices were not immutably determined by biology; and he was sympathetic with Ruth Benedict’s assertion that moral values were very often merely cultural values.

¹⁴ McKay Jenkins, The South in Black and White: Race, Sex, and Literature in the 1940s (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 103.
Unraveling Percy’s view of race depends, in part, on understanding Will Percy’s wide reading and wide traveling—the influence of cosmopolitanism. It also doubtless lies in his local experience of the Mississippi Delta: there was no one, not one person, in his position—a white, affluent, Greenville plantation owner—who could not have been described as a white supremacist. But Will Percy’s white supremacy was a different strain than his neighbors; it was shaped not just by the economic realities of the Delta, not just by the social strictures of Jim Crow segregation, not just by the day-to-day interracial relations of his household—but by a convergence of these things with his cosmopolitanism and sexuality. However, one must also guard against a new attempt to categorize Percy’s racism: his views on race were ambivalent, often contradictory, mired in his lifelong struggle to come to terms with his self and his world.

When Will Percy was in Samoa for two months in 1936 he noticed that, to Samoans, sex was merely corporeal. Samoans saw bodies as bodies and intercourse as a physical act and did not attach moral values to it. “Copulation is esteemed a bodily function,” Percy wrote of Samoans. “You indulge as the need asserts itself.” He admired the casual way Samoans treated sex. Unlike American culture, which was overbearing in its regulation of sexual values—with emphasis on chastity, heterosexuality, and reticence—Samoan culture had a more balanced view of sex: “It is pleasant but not important, certainly not a matter of special consideration.” Samoans, Percy found, had no attachment to the idea of romantic love with its pressures to possess and control; rather, their relationships seemed less possessive, less bound up with jealousy and envy. There was little value placed on privacy, and Percy was surprised to find that Samoans made love even when sleeping in a large room “with eight or ten of the family snoring
obliviously.” Unlike many Westerners, who described this kind of sexual behavior as “savage” and “heathen,” Percy admired it. Samoans were “a people gracious, superbly healthy, handsome & happy.”

Studying indigenous sexual practices while on vacation was not customary for American tourists. Percy was something of a steamboat anthropologist—his travels were not merely leisure and relaxation. He was regularly gathering information and using it in his writing and in forming his opinions and perspectives. Moreover, it seems likely that his views on Samoan sexuality were somewhat predetermined, for these writings echoed Margaret Mead’s findings in *Coming of Age in Samoa*. She, too, wrote of the “general casualness of the whole society,” and their “free and easy experimentation” with sex. In her appendix she tracked the sexual practices of Samoan adolescent girls, and her data suggested that the large majority of girls had experienced both heterosexual and homosexual relations during adolescence. She noted the absence of romantic love and pressures of chastity, and concluded that as a result “sex was a natural, pleasurable thing.” It was American culture that was odd. Unlike Samoans, Americans were almost entirely disconnected from the processes of birth, sex, and death—the most fundamental acts of animal life. As a result, American culture very often produced frigid and repressed individuals where Samoan culture produced a broader spectrum of “normal” people: “homosexuality,” she wrote, “statistically unusual forms of heterosexual activity, are neither banned nor institutionalized. The wider range which these practices give prevents the development of obsessions of guilt which are so

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16 Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa*, 137 and 69.
frequent a cause of maladjustment among us....This acceptance of a wider range as
‘normal’ provides a cultural atmosphere in which frigidity and psychic impotence do not
occur.”

In addition to sexual freedom, Percy wrote about and admired the emotional and
spiritual freedom of the natives. Unlike Americans, Samoans had no discontent that led
them to envy and to steal. “Individual ownership is almost nonexistent,” Percy noted,
admiring how it was entirely appropriate to walk into one’s neighbors house and take
what you needed. That the Samoans did not covet was related to the ways their culture
was cohesive and ritualized. They had a shared identity, a shared system of meaning that
they did not challenge and which was not threatened by multiple frames of meaning:
“Their native way of life, their ceremonials, their culture,” Percy wrote, was “stylized and
beautiful and completely adequate to their needs.” In many ways, Percy read into the
Samoan culture an absence of the features of Western life he felt oppressed by: Christian
sexual ethics, capitalist possessiveness, lack of spiritual content.

These features, though, were encroaching on Samoan life (and had been for
decades by the time Percy arrived). The main topic of debate in Samoa while Will Percy
was there was whether English or Samoan was to be taught in schools. Percy dreaded the
spread of English with especial disgust. Samoan “is a singularly sensitive and poetic
language which lends itself perfectly to the elaborate ritualistic speeches of their talking
chiefs, so exquisite in compliment, so gracious and flowery, so silly if translated.” The
beauty of ritual, the meanings embedded in ceremonies, even the pathos of small
observations in day to day life, Percy felt, were connected to the native language.

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19 Ibid., 153-54.
“Substitute English as the language of the people & their whole culture falls: you make of them merely imitation white men.” He continued:

They are now proud, self-respecting, with no sense of inferiority, but when they shall have become imitation white men, the whole world will have no need of them; they will lose their pride, their self-respect, their charm, their integrity. Yet that is what your government with the best of intentions is now engaged in doing. Let it continue a few years and the disintegration will be complete. It will be too late to change.

That Will Percy conflated modernity with whiteness and saw the process of globalization as “making white men” is significant and lends support to McKay Jenkins’ claim that Percy figured blacks as living outside of history. Their charm, their honesty, their simplicity and freedom—these were characteristics that flourished outside of modern bourgeois culture, which was stultifying and repressive. The expansion of Western culture across the globe had deleterious effects on these last remaining authentic cultures. “We will destroy them,” Percy wrote, “as we are destroying every race lacking our pigmentation. The white plague.”

Percy’s idealization of Samoan culture was grounded in his own lack of content, which he intimated was a product of being born and growing up a Percy in Mississippi. That world was structured in a way that did not allow for free expression, for alternatives to the status quo; it was regulated by that curious American combination of Puritan

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morality and insatiable consumerism. The problem, it seemed to Percy, was that dark-skinned people across the globe possessed neither the will nor the prescience to resist flashy American goods—they did not know that with the goods comes the morality, and with the morality comes repression. “They want to be destroyed,” Percy wrote. “Our good gifts are so patent, our evil ones so hidden, even to ourselves.” The Samoans lauded the arrival of a crate of ice boxes, of radios and record players and mattresses, and especially bicycles and automobiles—it made their lives easier and more comfortable. But the islanders took these “gifts” “never suspecting that taking these they must take too our weariness, our restlessness, our unhappy hearts.” In contrast to the rooted, ritualized traditional culture of the Samoans, American consumer culture would lead to dislocation and discontent: “We are the nomads of the world,” Percy explained, “without home fires, wandering by stars not fixed, whose passion is to force the older & younger tribes of the race to join our tumultuous and futile pilgrimage.” In forcing “primitive” cultures like the Samoans to join them, whites would give them things but take their souls: unwitting islanders receive “things, amusing things, miraculous things,” but as a consequence they lose “the one thing for the lack of which we sob ourselves to sleep—sweet, sweet content.”

Percy conflated whiteness with modernity, and modernity with discontent. He associated non-white people with content and premodern cultural forms. The contrast is striking and could be read as a typical anthropological fallacy: primitive cultures possess authenticity that modern cultures lack. This view would lead one to believe that for Percy the South Seas were a fantasy space onto which he scripted his own desires—a

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22 Ibid.
useful space, one that was sufficiently far away for him to write about with disconnect from his Mississippi world. To a degree, this is true. However, in an interesting move, Percy spent the second half of the essay applying the knowledge he gained from “studying” the Samoans to the race relations in the American South. The result is a vexed, half-rant, half idealistic discourse on race in which several patterns emerge. First, Percy perceived a fundamental difference between black and white that he grounded in scientific racism; this difference was evolutionary, not immutable—blacks could “catch up” with whites because both groups were human, “brothers,” as Percy wrote. But the difference was so vast equality was not likely in the near future. Second, Percy described the sharecroppers on his plantation in much the same manner as the islanders of Samoa—content, eroticized, charming—with one important distinction: the damage had been done to the blacks in the South, their souls corrupted by American values and American history. Finally, Percy’s application of his Samoan anthropology to Mississippi emphasized the evils of capitalism and its attendant values and morality as the fundamental cause of “The White Plague.” More than merely a place about which to fantasize, Samoa also provided data that Percy used to grapple with the “Negro problem” in America.

The American race problem, Percy wrote, was fundamentally a problem of two alien cultures living side by side at different stages of development. Where an earlier phase of development—the premodern and primitive stage in which the Samoans still operated—was preferable in many ways, modernity had done its damage to American black culture. “Our evil to [the Negro] is not immanent as to the Samoans, but accomplished,” Percy explained. “Forced into an alien culture, among a different, more
intellectual people, told to become like a white man the negro has lost his pride, his self-respect, his dignity as a human being; he is losing his remnants of native content, of native happiness.” The tragedy, according to Percy, was not that blacks had contaminated white culture, or that blacks were disruptive to the good life in the South, but precisely the opposite: in being told to act white, they had lost their blackness. “He makes at best a second-rate white man,” Percy wrote of the Negro. “He could have made something for more precious in the eyes of any god, a first-rate Negro.”

Percy blamed much of this development on northern philanthropists. He felt that northern liberals regarded African Americans “sentimentally, as a white man with black skin.” This, of course, was not true at the present “stage of development.” Percy felt that the findings regarding “genes & Mendelian laws & inherited characteristics” proved that whites and blacks were fundamentally different at present, and to regard them as otherwise was a sentimental illusion. This illusion dominated post-emancipation race relations in the United States, and though the South “knew the northern throng was ridiculous & cruel, in practice it accepted” this illusion. The result was that blacks were given only a limited freedom: to act and think like a white man. Given this harsh and prescribed reality, “slavery would have been a far more comfortable and self-respecting status for the negro than his present so-called freedom, north or south.” Rather than living uncomfortably in a white man’s world, rather than having to live in freedom yet having no real freedom, blacks would have been better to remain in slavery, where “his position, his caste as it were, would have been fixed, unequivocal, he could have

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23 Ibid.

24 Percy uses this phrase in Lanterns, 228.
developed his own way of life, his own culture, uninterfered with so far as his inner life was concerned by the white culture around him.”

Much of Percy’s description of race relations followed a traditional narrative among white southerners: blacks were not fit for citizenship at emancipation; their simple, childlike nature was suited for slavery and benevolent white guidance; they were incapable of full civic and economic participation in American society. But two parts of this diatribe nuance Percy’s version of this familiar story. First, he explained that the reason slavery needed to be abolished was that slave owners were not strong enough to avoid “inward disintegration” and never made good on their responsibility to treat slaves with “wisdom, kindliness, honesty.” Percy implied that slave owners were not strong enough because the burden of benevolence was simply too great. The tragedy was that a strong, virtuous aristocracy was over-burdened by this responsibility and collapsed. This was probably their due, Percy allowed, because the system had a fundamental flaw: southerners had “no right to own another human being.”

A second feature of Percy’s story of southern history was his interest in the “inner life” of black people. The main thrust of his “white plague” theory was that white culture destroyed the inner life of black people, which was beautiful, even sublime. This inner life could only be sustained when separate from white culture. Slavery allowed, in Percy’s mind, for this necessary separation of the races. This separation would “have afforded a better chance for him to develop as a human being, to achieve his own happiness, than we are now permitting him.” Since slavery, though, American culture has demanded the “impossible” of the former slave: “he is to act, think & feel like a white

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26 Ibid.
man, but not to be a white man.” The problem in America is infinitely more complicated than the Samoan problem, because “the Samoan still has his own well-established good way of life.... The Samoan has an isolated country of his own.” The vital inner life could only be sustained in a faraway place; the black soul and spirit, fragile and beautiful and corruptible, could not withstand the pressures of assimilation.27

White Americans, for their part, only made this situation worse. Northern idealists “drummed into [the negro’s] receptive ear” constant talk about rights and privileges with no corresponding talk about duties and responsibilities. Meanwhile, the only thing the southerner said was, “keep your place, nigger.” Percy saw no practicable solution to the race problem in America. The only glimmer of hope was if both black and white had a “change of heart.” The black man needed to develop “a pride in himself as a negro,” and whites needed to allow him that pride, “moreover, encourage him in it.” The greatest crime since Reconstruction, Percy explained, had been committed by white southerners, but no one ever spoke of it: “since slavery, we have been unwilling to grant to the negro the one thing without which no human soul can grow, self-respect.” “How tragic,” Percy lamented, “how profoundly moving the plight of the charming & child-like people!”28

The conclusion of Percy’s essay demonstrated yet more clearly how much his views on race were shaped by his own feelings of alienation—how place and time seem to be the two things he most wanted to escape; how escape from these things seemed to him to be embodied by black people; how tragic it was that black people were becoming like white people as a result of forced migration. “The negro is not the equal of the white

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27 Ibid.
28 Ibid.
man in the white man’s own terms,” Percy wrote, “in his morality, his intellectual
development, his mores, but he has virtues of his own for which the white man’s world
provides no outlet, exquisite sensibilities which the white man’s world deadens and
transforms or vices.”

Racial inequality to Percy essentially meant difference, sometimes an inferior
difference and sometimes a superior difference. Black people were not as intellectual,
not as fit for political and economic participation, not as well-suited for middle class
respectability. But that was because they had largely remained outside of the historical
process that had created that “white” world. In turn, white people were not as spiritual,
not as charming or funny or able to live in the present as black people—this being a result
of their participation in history. “Three apples plus two grapes do not equal five
That, however, does not prove that what the Vendor of Fruits gave the Negro is less
sweet or less nourishing—to me, at any rate, it has always seemed more luscious, with
sunshine for sap.”

Percy concluded his sketch on race with a story of himself and two Brazilian
laborers on a boat bound for Rio. The two workers had been working in coal mines in
Pennsylvania, and in the course of their conversation Percy asked them how they liked
America. “We hate your America,” they said. Percy asked them to continue, and they
explained that in America “the boss man calls you a son of a bitch and a bastard.” In
Brazil, they explained, there was not so great a stigma on being poor. Rich and poor
alike ate at the same table; the poor were not ashamed of being poor and the rich were not

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vain. "In Brazil," they said, "we know God has assigned us different places in his world, some are poor, some rich...but we know we are all his children, equal in his eyes, and so we are really brothers. You don’t know that in your America.” Percy agreed. “We don’t know it,” he wrote. New blood needed to be “transfused into our arrogant veins before the ice of our hearts can melt and we without shame and without condescension can say, ‘My brother.’ St. Francis said it, even to Death.”

Percy’s closing story illustrates the repeating themes in his writings about race—a fundamental difference between white and black; the deleterious effects of capitalism on human relationships; and the remove in place and time necessary for healthier relationships. It is significant that it was St. Francis who was able to say, in the thirteenth century, “My brother.” It was Brazilians who had the wisdom to point out the vast inequality in America—yet were comfortable with the God-ordained hierarchy in Brazil. In the past, and in another place—that was where Percy’s ideal society was to be found. The difference between black and white, rich and poor, seemed to him not to be as poignant or painful in those contexts.

This may seem to support McKay Jenkins’ contention that Percy was determined to “remain aloof” from the pressures of historical change; that he couldn’t manage living in the present, so he embroidered a past that was more pleasant. One must grant that to some extent this is true—Percy was not an activist; his issuances about the present were idealistic rather than practicable. However, if Percy were determined to remain aloof he would not have written on the subject. At the least he wouldn’t have written about it with such torment. Furthermore, it is important to consider the ways Percy’s writings about

31 Ibid.
race can be read as an implicit critique of modern, bourgeois society. To the extent that
his views were grounded in his belief that Western sexual mores were oppressive, and to
the extent that he believed the Christian ethics that governed “white society” were also
repressive, Percy’s figuration of blacks as better for being outside of history was an
expression of his dissatisfaction with modern culture. In addition, in titling his essay
“The White Plague” and in conflating modernity with whiteness and discontent, Percy
expressed a singular view: he was not aloof from historical changes but acutely aware of
them and of his own participation in them. He was making a historical critique—granted,
a critique filled with wishful thinking about the pleasantness of the past and of premodern
societies—of capitalist America. It is unfair to him to read his writings as merely
personal fantasies—as “ways of evasion,” to use a term coined by Timothy D’Arch
Smith.32 His nostalgia, his contradictory claims about equality, his simultaneous longing
and disdain for black people—these suggest not aloofness but tormented engagement.

Percy returned to California in the fall of 1936. It was not long after that that he
wrote the portions of Lanterns on the Levee that dealt with race. His writings about race
both in and about America mirror his writings about race while on a steamship coming
home from Samoa. As in “The White Plague,” race in Lanterns on the Levee emerges as
a central tension within Percy’s worldview: he writes with boastful confidence at
moments, utter humility at others; his views look like “racial poison” at moments, at
others tender, even intimate, regards for particular individuals. Attempts to categorize
Percy’s racial views run up against his own contradictory claims, his ambivalent feelings,
his movement between fatalism and idealism.

32 Timothy D’Arch Smith, Love in Earnest: Some Notes on the Lives and Writings of
One thing Mississippi had that Samoa did not was poor white people. Percy loathed them. Recall his father’s bitter and unsuccessful fight against James K. Vardaman and his “redneck” followers—the Percys had a longstanding and unwavering view of themselves as a superior class of white people. Will Percy, though, took this a step further and portrayed blacks, too, as superior to poor white people. If poor whites had ever been decent or admirable in any way, Percy explained, “the virus of poverty, malnutrition, and interbreeding has done its degenerative work.” The poor whites of the present were bigoted, closed-minded, violent, angry, stupid people. “I can forgive them as the Lord God forgives,” Percy said, “but admire them, trust them, love them—never.” His white supremacy included the supremacy of the white aristocracy over blacks, but also the supremacy of both the white aristocracy and blacks over poor whites.33

“I often conclude that the only Southerners worth talking about are the darkies,” Percy wrote. The Negro, to Percy, was well-mannered, inefficient, charming, lovable, and spiritual. They had no sense of their own past, nor did they care or worry about the future. They had an “obliterating genius for living in the present.” In contrast to the Negro, who neither remembered nor planned, “The white man does little else: to him the present is the one great unreality.” Percy positioned blacks as impervious to historical change, but he also positioned them outside of the marketplace. Indeed, in every instance a black character is working or in a place of work in Lanterns on the Levee, he or she either fails, makes a mistake, or breaks something. “None of them feels that work per se is good,” Percy explained, only a means to “idleness,” which white people called “leisure.” Whites, on the other hand, felt that work was good and idleness must be evil

33 Percy, Lanterns on the Levee, 20.
since it was pleasant. "I leave it to the wise," Percy wrote, "to say which is the more fruitful philosophy."\(^{34}\)

When writing about American blacks in the abstract, Percy wrote with admiration and even humility. He admitted, for example, that though he wrote about race as though he had "an innate and miraculous understanding" of blacks, "the sober fact is we understand one another not at all." "The barrier is of glass," he wrote of the divide between white and black, "you can't see it, you only strike it." He wrote that even the views of race about which white southerners were "certain" usually turned out to be "untrue." Race was an enigma, and just as one began to feel understanding, one ran into a wall of glass.\(^{35}\)

Despite these gestures at his own finitude, Percy still wrote with essentialism of the "peculiarly Negroid" characteristics he perceived in black people. Two of the central weaknesses of blacks in the South were violence and thievery. But Percy portrays them not so much as flaws as idiosyncrasies. "Negroes are as charming before as after a crime," he explained. "The gentle, devoted creature who is your baby's nurse can carve her boy-friend from ear to ear at midnight and by seven a.m. will be changing the baby's diaper while she sings 'Hear the Lambs a-calling'." As such, white society did not treat black-on-black crimes seriously. For a knifing, for example, a white man would be charged with intent to kill while a black man would be charged with assault. Lawyers like himself were at their wits end "trying to deal justly with crimes committed by simple and affectionate people whose criminal acts do not seem to convert them into criminal

\(^{34}\) *Ibid.*, 23.

characters.”36 Percy’s writings about black vices tend strongly to suggest he did not view them as full moral agents. They were simply incapable of containing certain primal urges—another example of why they were not fit, and would not soon be fit, for white society. In another sense, Percy’s anecdotes about black vice imply their frustration at white values being imposed upon them—the “white plague” had corrupted their primitive morals, which were well-suited for island life but not for urban-industrial society.

Their primal urges, though, were more than offset by their charm and childlike honesty. When writing about individual blacks, Percy wrote with affection and knowing condescension. He wrote that “In the South every man worth calling white or a man is owned by some Negro.” Ford, Percy’s caddy, chauffeur, servant, and retainer, owned him. Percy described Ford as his “weakness and solace and incubus,” and explained that “There is no excuse for talking about him except that I like to.”37 In fact, he wrote an entire chapter about him. Ford was “my only tie with Pan and the Satyrs and all earth creatures who smile sunshine and ask no questions and understand.” Indeed, Percy wrote that his relationships with his black servants brought to mind “those fragments of another world on which I have stumbled, hints of a traditional lore alien to us and unfathomable by us.” Though Percy gives no more specifics it seems likely that he is alluding to ancient Greece, as he did so often in his writing. His figuring of blacks as akin to “Pan” and “Satyrs,” and Ford as his “incubus,” suggests a certain erotic aspect of his view of blacks. Percy most likely did not have sexual relations with blacks, but he did see them as a particularly sexual people, symbolic of the freer ethics of pre-modern societies.38

36 Ibid., 299-300.
37 Ibid., 287.
38 Ibid., 296 and 304.
Percy recounted Ford’s folk stories he told to cheer Percy when he was down, and Ford’s frankness about Percy’s lack of understanding of black people. Ford told him once while driving that when he, Percy, traveled to Africa, local blacks speculated that he was trying to arrange to have blacks sent back to Africa and into slavery. Percy, who felt himself a benevolent and caring figure towards blacks, fumed: “And you were idiot enough to believe that?”

“I’ve heard it lots of times,” Ford said.

Percy demanded the name of who said those things, since he was “stunned” and “hurt” by the information. Ford said nothing, and for the rest of the trip, Percy noted, “spiritually we were not on rapport.”

The next morning Ford woke Percy to tell him that he remembered another person who had mentioned Africa: Louisa, “our cook, the mainstay and intimate of the household for fifteen years.”

“God damn!” Percy screamed. He went down to the kitchen to find Louisa, who weighed three hundred pounds and “distinctly suggests in her general contour a hippopotamus.” When he arrived she was pacing back and forth beneath a nail hung from a doorframe. He asked her what she was doing, and she explained that the hanging nail was drawing the soreness out of her foot, which she had hurt. “I left her pacing. I didn’t mention slavery then or later.”

This story highlights superstition, storytelling, and naïveté in the black community, though in it Percy also portrays the lack of trust between blacks and whites—even the cook and the retainer, purportedly the most intimate and trusting

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39 This story is recounted in *Ibid.*, 289-90.
blacks, did not trust Percy. This lack of trust, "understandable enough," according to Percy, was the one “tragic characteristic” among blacks that made uplift impossible. They didn’t trust whites, who had the power and money to help them; but they also didn’t trust blacks. “The Negro has cut himself off from all leadership,” Percy wrote, and as such was unlikely to grow up, to move beyond his childlike state. “Trusting no one, without moral stamina, without discipline, without standards,” Percy explained, “the Negro gropes blindly through an alien white man’s world.”

Another story Percy recounted also illustrated this lack of trust but did not end with an image of Percy’s superiority (i.e., him leaving the superstitious Louisa pacing beneath the door). On this occasion, Ford drove Percy out to Trail Lake, his plantation that he mostly avoided. But this was settlement day, and Percy liked to oversee the sharecroppers getting paid—in the past, corrupt managers had not paid Percy’s tenants their full due. As they drove up to the crowd of farmers, Percy heard one of them ask, “Whose car is dat?” and another answered, “Dat’s us car.” Percy wasn’t quite sure what to make of that, but concluded “how sweet it was to have the relation between landlord and tenant so close and affectionate that to them my car was their car. Warm inside, I passed through the crowd, glowing and bowing, the lord of manor among his faithful retainers.”

Percy mentioned on the way home how funny it was for the man to have mentioned that.

“Funnier than you think,” Ford said. Percy asked him to explain.

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40 Ibid., 306.
“He meant that’s the car you has bought with us money. They all knew what he meant, but you didn’t and they knew you didn’t. They wuz laughing to themselves.”

Percy asked his managers a few days later if this was true and they, laughing, said yes. “I laughed too,” Percy recounted, “but not inside.”

In this vignette Percy was unusually vulnerable—he felt free enough to portray himself as blinded and his sharecroppers as prescient. That he included this story at all suggests a certain degree of open-mindedness on Percy’s part, a willingness to have his authority and benevolence undermined. But it also points to a recurring theme that Percy used to portray the “tragedy” of race relations in the South—blacks did not trust whites. Percy, “glowing and bowing, the lord of the manor,” portrayed himself as the most trustable white man in a society of untrustworthy whites—and they even did not trust him. This was the tragedy: blacks were both losing “their negro quality, care-free and foolish and innocent,” in trying to participate in the white man’s world; but they were also not acquiring the necessary characteristics to participate in that world because they didn’t trust those who could help them. “I want with all my heart to help him,” Percy wrote. But that which Percy offered would “help him little unless he helps himself.”

It was when writing about the “Negro problem” in America that Percy departed from his gentle tone and wrote with sneering confidence—he reserved his bombast and derision for northern philanthropists and poor whites. In his chapter entitled “A Note on Racial Relations,” Percy explained that the race problem was the most misunderstood feature of southern life. Liberals from New York to Moscow were constantly fretting and fuming about white and black relations in the South, but Percy offered a different view.

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41 This story is recounted in Ibid., 290-91.
42 Ibid., 292, 306, and 309.
“I, on the other hand, am usually in a condition of amazed exultation over the excellent state of race relations in the South.” He continued:

It is incredible that two races, centuries apart in emotional and mental discipline, alien in physical characteristics, doomed by war and the constitution to a single, not a dual, way of life, and to an impractical and unpracticed theory of equality which deludes and embitters, heckled and misguided by pious fools from the North and impious fools from the South—it is incredible, I insist, that two such dissimilar races should live side by side with so little friction, in such comparative peace and amity.\textsuperscript{43}

Percy explained that all those who wished to help from the outside were merely sentimentalists. “The noblest of them, such as Mrs. Roosevelt, accomplish their insidious evil quite unsuspectingly and with the highest motives.” But the problem was uplift itself—this was a fundamentally childlike people for whom uplift was corrupting. The ideal would have been for them to have remained outside white society altogether. Barring that, though, strict segregation and mutual respect was the next best thing. But mutual respect—which depended on black deference—was in decline because the Negro had been told that he was an equal; so “when a Negro now speaks of a ‘man’ he means a Negro; when he speaks of a ‘fellow’ he means a white man; when he speaks of a ‘lady’ he means a Negress; when he speaks of a ‘woman’ he means a white woman. Such manners are not only bad, they are not safe.” The nationwide efforts at improvement in

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}, 286.
racial relations merely put ideas into the heads of black people, ideas that they were not yet capable of enacting.\textsuperscript{44}

A further effect of southern blacks' being "influenced by bitter half-castes" was the increasing lack of respect for "the one sacred taboo": the untouchability of white women. "It is academic to argue the wisdom or justice of this taboo," Percy wrote, because it was firmly in place and had been for centuries. "Wise or unwise, just or unjust it is the cornerstone of friendly relations, of interracial peace. In the past it has not been the eleventh but the first commandment." However, a new generation of black and even white youths were beginning to question it. This was not due, Percy explained, to the regularly assumed insatiable sexual appetite of black men; it was made possible by white morality. Modern mobility made it possible for "every black buck" to go to Chicago and sleep with a white prostitute; and modern morality made it possible for young white people to conduct themselves in a manner that invited "breach of taboo." Essentially the problem was due to white people—"Whenever there's a moral failure on the part of the Southern white, there's a corresponding failure on the part of the Southern Negro." This reiterated Percy's firm conviction that blacks were not fully functioning moral beings; they were merely reactors to white actions. "The White Plague," at base, rested on the assumption that it was white actions that made history, white morals, white values. Black people and black culture could do nothing but be destroyed.\textsuperscript{45}

\footnote{\textit{Ibid.}, 307. Recently scholars have studied the role of "manners" in sustaining white supremacy and segregation in the South. See especially Joseph Crespino, "Civilities and Civil Rights in Mississippi," in Ted Ownby, ed., \textit{Manners and Southern History} (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2007).}

\footnote{Percy, \textit{Lanterns}, 307-08.}
The southern aristocracy—one white culture that Percy admired—was being destroyed as well in this process. In being stuck between the dominant white culture of America and the newly freed black population in the South, the aristocracy—being essentially decent and responsible—felt an obligation to help black people. "Anybody who was anybody must feel noblesse oblige," Percy remembered his father and his father's friends teaching him. If one had power one had to take care of those who didn't. The problem, though, was that in supporting a weaker race the stronger race was weakening. In addition to black virtues being turned into vices, Percy lamented "the pathos of a stronger race carrying on its shoulders a weaker race and from the burden losing its own strength!" Both aristocrats and blacks alike had no place in a world threatened by the white plague.

Percy's views on race were vexed, ambivalent, and often contradictory. But one thing that can be said is that they are grounded in a firm sense that black and white were fundamentally different and ought to remain separate. They had played different roles in history, and white history, which Percy conflated with modernity, America, and consumerism, was not headed in a savory direction. Bourgeois morality, religious close-mindedness, rampant consumerism and consequently unrest, discontent, and oppression were the result of that history. Black history, on the other hand, was fundamentally removed from this and as a result Percy wrote of "blackness" as essentially other-worldly: charming, at peace, sexually and emotionally free, unconcerned with productivity and advancement.

However, since American slaves were emancipated and "forced" to live in the "white man's world," forced to join history, their charm and beauty had been corrupted.
They were now murdering, thieving, and lying, and even felt freer to lust for white women. Charm remained, inefficiency and carelessness and naïveté remained, but these qualities would do them little good in the white man’s world. Eventually, these qualities would be turned into vices because there would be no one to appreciate them. “It is not pleasant to make these bald and bitter statements,” Percy wrote. “I make them because they are true and because I am afraid for the Negro. Only the truth can help him, and that can help him little unless he helps himself.”

And here was the truth: “I would say to the Negro: before demanding to be a white man socially and politically, learn to be a white man morally and intellectually—and to the white man: the black man is our brother, a younger brother, not adult, not disciplined, but tragic, pitiful, and lovable; act as his brother and be patient.”

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46 Ibid., 309.
47 Ibid.
Chapter 11: The Planter

"I have seen much of the misery of city slums and something of the poverty of mountain farmers and the dreary little towns which coal barons or textile manufacturers own. In none of them is life on the average so completely without comfort for the present or hope for the future as among the share-croppers of the South."

Norman Thomas on sharecropping, 1934

"Our plantation system seems to me to offer as humane, just, self-respecting, and cheerful a method of earning a living as human beings are likely to devise. I watch the limber-jointed, oily-black, well-fed, decently clothed peasants on Trail Lake and feel sorry for the telephone girls, the clerks in chain stores, the office help, the unskilled laborers everywhere—not only for their poor and fixed wage but for their slave routine, their joyless habits of work, and their insecurity."

Will Percy on sharecropping, 1941

Upon the death of his father Will Percy inherited a 3,000 acre cotton plantation called Trail Lake. Will was not an enterprising planter like his father—he left most of the decisions and day to day work to his managers, and in at least one instance sold off some of the family land to finance a long trip to Europe. As soon as his adopted son LeRoy turned 21—literally the day he returned from his post-college European vacation—Will called him and the plantation managers into his office and said, "As of noon today, I no

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longer have any business connection with Tralake Planting Company....My son LeRoy is boss and you are going to have to deal with him, and that’s the end of that.”

Though Will did not have any inclination towards farming or business, he did have an ideological attachment to the idea of a plantation. He felt a duty to retain the plantation upon his father’s death, and when the institution of sharecropping as practiced in the South came under attack in the 1930s, Percy came vigorously to its defense. Setting the Percy plantation and Percy’s defense of his plantation into the context of the 1930s sheds light on the far-reaching shift in southern agriculture that took place in that decade. In addition, examining Percy’s thoughts on sharecropping reveals less about sharecropping than his ideas about racial and class hierarchies as well as his anxiety about his role as paternalist.

The institution of sharecropping evolved throughout the Great Depression years of the 1930s, eventually to be done away with altogether. Throughout the decade, writers, journalists, sociologists, intellectuals, and agricultural reformers together decried sharecropping as unjust, inhumane, inefficient, backwards, and barbaric. Those who

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3 John Jones Interview with LeRoy P. Percy, December 14, 1979, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

looked into sharecropping in the thirties reported that these southern cotton farmers were mired in cycles of poverty that led to malnutrition, disease, illiteracy, sub-standard housing, lack of opportunity, and inescapable patterns of debt. Indeed, sharecropping became something of a spectacle to outsiders. *Tobacco Road*, Erskine Caldwell’s comic and often ridiculous novel about the turnip-stealing, womanizing, desperate, racist, prideful, poverty-stricken sharecropper Jeeter Lester, was a bestseller that was also staged as a Broadway play. Most Americans accepted Caldwell’s stereotype of the “awful truth of the Tobacco Road country,” which he described as follows: “Stretching from South Carolina to Arkansas its stench is a complacent nation’s shame. White and colored, its thousands upon thousands of men, women and children exist in an inhuman state of landlord and politician imposed slavery. For fifty years, while churches were sending missionaries to save the heathen in China, Africa, and Mexico, its own people were being subjected to the economic blood-sucking of the landlord-elders and the politician-deacons.”\(^5\) Furthermore, government-based agriculture programs and trends within cotton production itself led to the redundancy of sharecroppers as cotton production became mechanized and moved westward. The 1930s were a watershed in the history of southern agriculture and the social makeup of the South: it was during this decade that the foundations for cotton monoculture, worked primarily by black laborers,  

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eroded and were replaced. A central consequence of this agricultural shift was a
demographic and economic reorganization of the South. The diversification of the
southern economy, the movement of blacks and whites into and out of the region, the
growth of urban centers, and the flowering of industry all worked to fundamentally
reshape southern society.

Most social thought on sharecropping in the 1930s differed markedly from Will
Percy’s perspective and indicates that many Americans viewed the cotton states as
unusually backward. Of these states Mississippi became the chief example. In 1931
H.L. Mencken and Charles Angoff wrote a three-part article for the American Mercury
entitled, “The Worst American State,” in which they compiled 106 tables representing
various indicators of “progress and civilization” in each state, including per capita
income, literacy rates, school enrollment, magazine circulation, death rates, medical
facilities, crime rates, government outlay for public services, etc. In every category
Mississippi was at or near the bottom of the list. Mississippians had the lowest spendable
money income, attended school the fewest days of the year, received the fewest
newspapers, experienced the most maternal deaths in childbirth, committed the most
lynching, and were second only to South Carolina in the number of deaths from pellagra.
The rate of illiteracy in the U.S. was 4.3 percent, and in Mississippi it was 13.1 percent;
the average teacher salary in the U.S. was $1,364, and in Mississippi it was $545; 29.5

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6 For sociological and anthropological work on Mississippi in the 1930s, see especially
John Dollard, Caste and Class in a Southern Town (New Haven: Yale University Press,
1937) and Hortense Powdemark, After Freedom: A Cultural Study in the Deep South
XXIV (September-November, 1931).
percent of American farmers were tenants in 1931, 68.3 percent of Mississippi’s farmers were tenants. These facts and others led Mencken and Angoff to conclude, “The Cotton Belt... is the least advanced part of the United States, and of all the Cotton States Mississippi is the most unfortunate.... it seems to be without a serious rival to the lamentable preeminence of the Worst American State.”

And if Mississippi was the worst American state, the Mississippi Delta was seen as the nadir of Mississippi. Stretching south from Memphis to Vicksburg, the Delta was, in Rupert Vance’s words, “cotton obsessed, Negro obsessed, and flood ridden, it is the deepest South, the heart of Dixie.” The region was historically dominated by a white planter elite who owned the majority of the land, which was devoted to cotton and worked almost exclusively by black laborers. In 1930, three out of four Delta residents were black, and nine out of ten blacks were tenant farmers. Plantations were large and prosperous and Delta land was the richest in the state, producing a crop value per acre of

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9 Ibid., 9, 11, and 6. Literacy rates and teacher salaries can be a misleading statistic for Mississippi, as there was a vast disparity in education for whites and blacks. In Mississippi in 1930, white illiteracy was about 3 percent while black illiteracy was close to 25 percent. See Roger D. Tate, Jr., “Easing the Burden: The Era of Depression and New Deal in Mississippi” (PhD. Dissertation, University of Tennessee, 1978), 9-11. Salaries for teachers was accordingly unequal for white and black schools. One study of the Mississippi Delta found that the average teacher salary for the 1935-1936 school year was $103.90 a month for whites and $39.18 a month for blacks; the average cost per white child for the session was $84.59, while the average cost per black pupil was $6.74. See The Mississippi Education Journal XIII, No. 6 (March 1937): 111.


12 In 1930, there were 80,072 farms in the Mississippi Delta, and 77,845 (or 97 percent) were devoted to cotton monoculture. Charles Felder Reynolds, The Economic and Social Structure of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta (PhD. Dissertation, University of Virginia, 1947): 58. The practice of the U.S. census is to define a “farm” as units worked by an individual or a family, so tenant farms are counted as units rather than plantations.

13 Ibid., 30.
$42.96 compared to $15.60 for the rest of Mississippi.⁴ Although the average Delta plantation in 1934 earned over $8,000, the average tenant farmer’s net cash income was just over one hundred dollars. By 1937, when the price of cotton had doubled since 1934, the tenant farmer’s average income had risen to $208, but this still represented only a fraction of the $11,740 earned by the plantation.⁵ The Mississippi Delta, with its rich soil and wealthy planters such as the Percys, delivered a meager standard of living to its labor force. Black sharecroppers and tenants generally subsisted on a poor diet and little if any cash income, and lived and worked in a plantation region that offered little hope of change. Rupert Vance was right to conclude in 1932, “nowhere are antebellum conditions so nearly preserved as in the Yazoo Delta.”⁶

Washington County, the hub of the Mississippi Delta, was the nation’s sixth largest cotton producing county in 1929, producing 103,651 bales.⁷ There were 8,965 total farms in Washington County in 1930, and 95 percent of them were operated by tenants.⁸ These tenants were highly mobile and willing to set out for better opportunity when the chance arose: in 1935, nearly one half of them had lived on their present farm for one year or less.⁹ Among several reasons for these patterns of mobility, which were largely intra-regional, is the fact that living conditions were almost unbearable on many plantations. Washington County tenant farmers were on the whole malnourished,

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⁴ Ibid., 63.
⁶ Vance, Human Geography of the South, 270.
unsatisfied, desperately poor producers of a fickle crop that brought wealth to some and poverty to most involved with it. One study of 153 Delta tenant families over a three month period in 1939 found that 143 of them never ate beef, 119 never ate pork, 130 never ate butter, 118 never drank milk, and 121 never ate eggs. Cotton prices rose and fell, government programs decreased cotton acreage with promises of higher prices, landowners bickered over subsidies and new technologies, but to the tenant farmer, little was changing. Many would have agreed with Buck Sims, an evicted tenant farmer, who concluded, “Not for you to have nothin’, that’s what they really want.” There was little food, little cash, and little hope of things changing in the Mississippi Delta in the 1930s.

A curious companion to the anti-sharecropping social thought of the 1930s was a resurgence of agrarianism. Led by the Southern Agrarians, a group of intellectuals and writers loosely associated with Vanderbilt University in the late 1920s and early 30s, this antimodern mode of thought rejected the urban/industrial transformation as crass and dehumanizing and called for a revitalization of agrarian life. In *I'll Take My Stand* (1930), which contained essays on topics as diverse as religion, education, race relations, the philosophy of progress, and individualism, the Agrarians argued that “the culture of the soil is the best and most sensitive of vocations” and that community life that was bound to the land was an essential precondition for the flourishing of art, manners, religion, family life, and romantic love. Urban and industrial society was hostile to all.

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22 In addition to the Agrarians, see also Maurice Kains, *Five Acres and Independence* (New York: Greenberg, 1935); Ralph Borsodi, *This Ugly Civilization* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1929) and *Flight From the City* (New York, Harper & Brothers, 1933).
of these elements, the very things that gave life meaning and individuals satisfaction. They posited that the central premise of rationalized labor was to introduce into the market labor-saving devices and machines in order to increase efficiency. This assumed that labor was an evil not only from an economic standpoint but from a human standpoint. The result was that one worked in order not to work, one produced in order to consume; labor and leisure became separate entities in one’s life. So the result for the individual was that his life is broken up into discreet and disjointed elements, and the result for society was overproduction, unemployment, inequality in the distribution of wealth, and an inability to either produce or understand art because the individual was fundamentally disconnected from the natural world. The history of the South, they argued, supplied a healthy alternative to the inhumanity of modern industrial society. Indeed, the South in 1930 was still predominantly “agrarian” and thus must be protected from the deleterious effects of industrial progress.

Will Percy was also one who in the 1930s embraced a version of agrarianism. He was a friend and correspondent of both Allen Tate and Donald Davidson, two leaders of the Agrarian circle, and shared their disdain for modernity and their love of poetry. But Percy departed from the Nashville Agrarians in several important respects. Will Percy owned a three-thousand-acre cotton plantation in Washington County, Mississippi; he believed himself to be an heir of the Mississippi Delta’s rich and vital aristocratic tradition, and he had pity for blacks and contempt for poor whites. While the Agrarians exalted the small, local community and the white yeoman farmer as the essential elements of the good society, Percy was not optimistic about the potential of common southern white folk: To Will Percy, the central feature of the agrarian South was not the
common white farmer, the class of southerners who “attend revivals and fight and
fornicate in the bushes afterwards.” The central feature of Percy’s South was the
particular relationship between elite, landowning whites and their black dependents.24

White supremacy, to Will Percy, meant more than just political dominance. It
meant an active and thorough paternalism that extended into nearly every area of black
life. Blacks were simple and childlike creatures, Percy felt, and the most stable social
order was one in which elite whites cared and provided for the less fortunate blacks. So,
after the Civil War when freed slaves found that they had “freedom, but nothing else,”
and that “though slaves couldn’t go hungry, freedmen could and did,” they began to drift
back to the Percy place in search of work and food. William Alexander Percy, who felt
he had an obligation to care for his dependents, considered his options: “Fafar had little to
offer them except good land and leadership. He puzzled over what was just to do and
what he could do. He concluded by offering his ex-slaves a partnership with him.” As
Will Percy describes it, his grandfather then created a system which was just, practical,
and appropriate for the two parties:

In simple words, about like these, he explained it to them:

I have land which you need, and you have muscle which I need; let’s put
what we’ve got in the same pot and call it ours. I’ll give you land you can
work, a house to live in, a garden plot and a room to raise chickens, hogs,
and cows if you can come by them, and all the wood you want to cut for
fuel. I’ll direct and oversee you. I’ll get you a doctor when you are sick.
Until the crop comes in I’ll try to keep you from going hungry or naked in

24 Percy, Lanterns, 149.
so far as I am able. I'll pay the taxes and I'll furnish the mules and plows and gear and whatever else is necessary to make a crop. This is what I promise to do. You will plant and cultivate and gather the crop as I direct. This is what you will promise to do. When the crop is picked, half of it will be mine and half of it yours. If I have supplied you with money or food or clothing or anything else during this year, I will charge it against your half of the crop. I shall handle the selling of the cotton and the cottonseed because I know more than you do about their value. But the corn you may sell or eat or use for feed as you like. If the price of cotton is good, we shall both make something. If it is bad, neither of us will make anything, but I shall probably lose the place and you will lose nothing because you have nothing to lose. It's a hard contract these hard times for both of us, but it's just and self-respecting and if we both do our part and have a little luck we can both prosper under it.  

Will Percy's description of the origins of sharecropping reflected his own desires for the system: it was borne out of an obligation to an inferior race; it was "just and self-respecting;" it reinstated a social order with clear lines yet can be described as a "partnership;" and it was necessary not just because of hard times but also because the freed slaves needed white benevolence. It was ordered and stable and a safe alternative to the "lawlessness and terrorism" of blacks acting outside of the supervision and

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25 Ibid., 275-276.
leadership of whites. Sharecropping was not just a system of agricultural production, it was a way of ordering a bi-racial society.

LeRoy Percy ran Trail Lake under the same contract as that used on the Percy Place, and when he died Will Percy assumed the role of planter and paternalist with ambivalence. Will Percy was not a farmer and admitted that “I have no love of the land and few, if any, pioneer virtues.”26 His close friend Hodding Carter later wrote, “He didn’t know a thing about farming. In the springtime, instead of commenting on the weather or the condition of the land, he’d stand in a field and say that he liked the aroma of the freshly ploughed earth. When a manager or tenant pointed out a rich stand of cotton, Will would stray off to the cabin yard to look at the flowers he encouraged the tenant wives to plant.”27 Yet Percy also was deeply attached to the idea of his plantation and vigorously defended sharecropping in his autobiography. He was proud of Trail Lake, and although he did not live on it, he traveled there occasionally and took an interest in the lives of his tenants. In the 1930s he was shocked to learn that sharecropping had come under attack: “One day I read that the President of the United States had excoriated bitterly and sorrowfully ‘the infamous sharecropper system.’ I asked a Washington friend of mine in what locality that system of farming prevailed. He knocked the breath out of me by answering: ‘On Trail Lake’….That very partnership of Fafar’s which had seemed to me so just and practical now was being denounced as avaricious and slick—it was Mr. Roosevelt’s ‘infamous system.’”28 So Will Percy,

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26 Ibid., 278.
bluntly exclaiming, "I know the truth about share-cropping," set out to defend it.\textsuperscript{29} He used his plantation as an example of the virtues of sharecropping; it was a "model place," he wrote:

Well drained, crossed by concrete roads, with good screened houses, a modern gin, artesian well-water, a high state of cultivation, a Negro school, a foolish number of churches, abundant crops, gardens and peach trees, quantities of hogs, chickens, and cows, and all the mules and tractors and equipment any place that size needed.\textsuperscript{30}

Trail Lake was the embodiment of Percy's vision of order: it was a peaceful, productive, agrarian world where simple blacks lived and worked separate from yet dependent on the white landowner. Sharecropping was not "avaricious and slick;" it was, Percy plainly stated, "one of the best systems ever devised to give security and a chance for profit to the simple and unskilled."\textsuperscript{31}

In 1936 a graduate student in sociology at the University of North Carolina came to live on Percy's plantation as part of his thesis research for sociologist Rupert Vance. As Percy remembered it, "In 1936 a young man with a passion for facts roved in from the University of North Carolina and asked to be allowed to inspect Trail Lake for the summer. He was Mr. Raymond McClinton, one of Dr. Odum's boys....Some of his findings were of interest even to me, largely I suspect because they illustrated how

\textsuperscript{29} Ibid., 281.
\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 278.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 282.
Fafar's partnership-contract works in the modern world.\textsuperscript{32} McClintop actually lived on Trail Lake for the entire year of 1936 and produced an M. A. thesis entitled \textit{A Social-Economic Analysis of a Mississippi Delta Plantation} in 1938.\textsuperscript{33} In \textit{Lanterns on the Levee}, Percy uses McClintop's data to demonstrate the beneficence of sharecropping and the opportunities for "simple and unskilled" labor to sustain a decent life growing cotton. This was a moment when elements of anti-sharecropping, progressive thought, and reactionary agrarian thought came together, and it begs some important questions. What did McClintop find? Was tenant life on Percy's plantation particularly different from elsewhere in the South? Was Percy justified in defending sharecropping on his own plantation, and does his defense work for sharecropping as a whole? How did Percy's own views on race and class work to shape his defense of sharecropping? What does McClintop's research and Percy's use of it tell us about southern agriculture in the 1930s? To address these questions, I will attempt to reconstruct, using McClintop's data, life on Trail Lake in 1936. I will examine the organization and operation of the plantation, the procedure and experience of growing cotton, and the living conditions of the tenants.

Trail Lake was a sprawling cotton plantation fifteen miles south of Leland, Mississippi, and five miles east of the Mississippi river. The majority of its acreage was

\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 278-279. "Doctor Odum" referred to Howard Odum, sociologist and founder of the "Chapel Hill School" or the "Regionalists" of the 1930s. This group was, among other things, dedicated to studying and improving the living conditions of southern sharecroppers. The Regionalists, with their progressive attitudes towards race and industry, came into sharp disagreement with the Nashville Agrarians. See Daniel J. Singal, \textit{The War Within: From Victorian to Modernist Thought in the South, 1919-1945} (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982), esp. Part Two.

\textsuperscript{33} Raymond McClintop, \textit{A Social-Economic Analysis of a Mississippi Delta Plantation} (Master's Thesis, University of North Carolina, 1938).
cultivated in cotton, corn, alfalfa, and vegetable gardens, the rest uncleared hardwood stands of oak, cypress, gum, and pecan trees. The plantation was crossed by paved roads and drainage ditches, and punctuated by freshly painted green tenant houses. There was no “big house,” as LeRoy Percy acquired the land in patches over time and never lived on it; there was no avenue of oaks, nor a vista of the distant river’s banks: it was a plantation geared for production rather than leisure. There was a muddy slough that wandered onto the plantation, grew shallow and calm towards the middle of the property, and sat still and brown and lifeless save for hovering mosquitoes and gnats. This was Trail Lake, the namesake of the plantation and the habitation of mud-colored catfish occasionally pulled out by giddy plantation children and old men. But the dominant visual feature of Trail Lake, particularly if approached in late summer, would be acres and acres of waist-high cotton, growing thick and green out of the dark alluvial Delta soil. Scattered throughout the stands of cotton would be men and women, all of them black, wielding hoes and working to prevent the Johnson grass and crabgrass from choking out their livelihood. It would be hot and quiet save for the occasional rumbling past of the manager’s truck.

Trail Lake Plantation was 3,255.5 acres in 1936 and was operated as a corporation called the Trail Lake Planting Company. After Percy inherited the plantation, he valued it at $100,000 and sold shares valued at $1,000, which were “distributed among a few relatives and close friends.” The plantation was run by two managers, one of whom, McClinton noted, “tries to reason with his tenants and to develop in them a sense of responsibility and pride” and the other of whom “is more stern and forceful,” and if his tenants disobey or antagonize him, “he will resort to force and violence.” Both managers rarely consulted with Percy for day-to-day decisions. But Percy did set the policies of the
plantation, hold conferences with the managers, sign all the checks, and visit Trail Lake regularly. McClinton felt that Percy “has a high sense of honesty, and being economically secure, he attempts to see that the tenants are given good treatment and honest settlements.” The plantation also had a company store with $10,000 worth of stock, a gin, a blacksmith shop, a tool shop, a school, and three churches. A branch of a railroad called the Black Dog maintained a dilapidated but often-used depot there.\textsuperscript{34}

At the beginning of 1937, Trail Lake had planted 1773.1 acres in cotton, 731.76 in corn, 602.36 in alfalfa, 63.96 in gardens, 18.08 in beans and peas, and 16.24 in pasture. These acreages reflect changes wrought by the AAA, as the 1932 cotton acreage was 2600 and the 1934 acreage was 1477.\textsuperscript{35} In addition, diversification was a new trend: since 1932, corn acreage had increased by 600 and alfalfa by 300. Trail Lake produced 1,542 bales of cotton in 1936 and made a gross income of $102, 797.19. This number represented the plantation’s share of the cotton the tenants produced ($60, 057.74), the amount of cotton that was grown on the plantation in 1935 but sold in 1936 by the cotton cooperative ($21,092.80), the income from the gin ($17, 594.62), the income from the store ($3,252.04), and miscellaneous items accounting for about $800. The gross expenditures for the plantation totaled $67, 482.23, with the highest expenditures being for taxes ($20, 459.99), repairs ($11, 208.48), and the salaries for office clerks and managers ($8,467.65). This left a net plantation income of $35, 314.96, which was

\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 8 (acreage), 9 (shares), 23-24 (managers), 16-17 (Percy), 9 (store and railroad).
\textsuperscript{35} It remains unclear whether Percy received money from the AAA and if he did, where it went. McClinton notes on page 80 of his study that “during the depression years not a cent of relief money was spent on the Trail Lake Plantation,” but on page 14 he notes that “the company has been reducing its acres in cotton each year since 1932 in cooperation with the government farm program.” It seems unlikely that the drastic acreage reduction on Trail Lake was unaccompanied by government compensation.
distributed among the shareholders. Nineteen thirty-six was the first year since the
depression began that Trail Lake broke even.\textsuperscript{36}

The cotton on Trail Lake was grown solely by tenants. There were 150 tenant
families in 1936, 124 of whom were sharecropping families. McClinton found that the
company preferred sharecroppers to renters, and that whenever a renter family left they
were replaced by a cropper family. The renters provided their labor, work stock, feed for
their stock, seed, tools, and three-fourths of their fertilizer, and in return they received
housing, land, fuel, one-fourth of their fertilizer, and three-fourths of their cotton. The
croppers, on the other hand, furnished only their labor and one-half of their fertilizer and
received housing, land, fuel, tools, work stock, feed for the stock, seed, one-half of their
fertilizer, and one-half of their cotton. There was a total of 596 tenants on the plantation,
and family size varied from two to thirteen but averaged 3.9 persons per family. The
majority of the tenant families lived in homes in which only their immediate family
resided, but twenty-five of the families resided with people other than immediate family:
adopted children, grandchildren, in-laws, cousins, and non-relatives who moved in and
became a part of the economic household. Eighteen families had female heads who
shouldered the responsibility of providing for the family and who secured the “furnish”
from the company and made the settlements at the end of the year. But the majority of
the families were composed of husband and wife, and almost always children. Of the
596 individuals on the plantation, 193 were under the age of fourteen.\textsuperscript{37}

\textsuperscript{36} Ibid., 9 (itemized acreage), 51 (acreage reduction), 10 (corn and alfalfa acreage), 14
(bales), 34 (gross income), 37 (gross expenditures and net income), 16 (breaking even).
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid., 11 (tenant families), 21 (preference for croppers), 86 (total tenant population), 89
(non-family member population), 86-87 (female heads), 91 (child population).
All of the individuals under one roof were part of the economic household and were responsible for helping cultivate the cotton crop. The size of each tenant farm was generally determined by the size of the family and varied from 5 to 40 acres but averaged 18.6. The plantation company owned two tractors that were used to break the land in the fall and spring, but each tenant family was responsible for the rest of the process. They used a one-mule row plow to create rows in early March and then planted the cotton seeds using a one-mule cotton planter. Throughout the year, tenants continually waged battle against vines and weeds with hoes but also with one and two-mule middle busters and cultivators. Mechanical cotton pickers were not widely available, and the means of cotton cultivation were very similar to cotton cultivation in the Delta in 1850, save for the tractors that broke the land and made rounds regularly to spray boll weevil poison late at night. The plantation did invest heavily in fertilizer and bought sixty tons of synthetic calcium cyanide, sulphate of ammonia, and nitrate of soda in 1936. The tenants bought their share of fertilizer from the plantation store and spread it themselves on their cotton and corn. Tenants were allotted acreage for each crop and averaged 12.22 acres of cotton and 5.65 acres of corn. The company-imposed crop diversification allowed tenants to spend more time performing wage labor and almost every family earned some income during the year this way.  

Tenants on Trail Lake almost always broke even, and they generally spent all the cash they made. They were guaranteed credit each month from March until September in the form of coupon books issued bi-monthly and redeemable at the plantation commissary. The amount of credit depended on the size of the family and was

determined by the managers, and ranged from six to thirty-two dollars every two weeks. Tenants purchased everything they could not grow or produce at home at the plantation store, from clothing to food to fertilizer to feed and seed. The only things that could not be purchased on credit at the store were luxury items such as soft drinks, candy, and gasoline; these items, which the store carried, were available only with cash. The tenants were charged a 20 percent “supervision charge” on all food and clothing purchases, and this fee went to pay the salaries of the managers. The credit extended to the tenants, which averaged $179.55 for the year and was charged against their cotton crop. The average gross family income for all tenants on Trail Lake in 1936 was $558.14, $790.27 for the renter families and $491.90 for the cropper families. After the credit used during the year was subtracted from the sale of their cotton, the actual cash income of tenants on Trail Lake averaged $378.66, $508.36 for renters and $334.89 for croppers. Nineteen thirty-six was a better than average year for the Great Depression, with cotton fetching an average of 12.33 cents a pound, and every tenant family on Trail Lake had cash in their pockets after the settlement.39

But that cash didn’t last long. Tenant farmers on Trail Lake didn’t save their money when they made it but spent it quickly and extravagantly. After settlement in 1936, celebrations began and “the tenants attend[ed] the social gatherings in their nicest clothes of the latest styles.” Tenants drove to town and bought new kid and patent leather shoes, new suits, and silk dresses; they went to the movies, to circuses and fairs, and some even traveled to Chicago, St. Louis, and Memphis. But the greatest desire among

tenants was to purchase a car: after harvesting season, new and used car salesmen
brought their cars to Trail Lake, and those who could afford cars bought them. There
were thirty-six tenant-owned automobiles in 1936, and many of them were unlicensed
and only used on the plantation; several of the families that didn’t have cows, hogs, or
chickens did own cars, and they kept them in meticulous order. Some cash-laden tenants
went to town and came home with radios, phonographs, ice boxes, and sewing
machines.\footnote{McClinton, \textit{Social-Economic Analysis}, 69 (quote about latest styles), 85 (automobiles).}

For the rest of the year, when cash was not at hand and credit at the store came in
limited installments, tenant life was demanding and often monotonous. Cultivation of
cotton was arduous work, and time during the day not spent on cotton and corn was spent
tending gardens, doing wage labor, and tending to livestock. Tenants lived in well-
constructed and well-maintained homes that all had wood stoves, fireplaces, water
pumps, front porches, and screened windows and doors, although “some of [the tenants]
cut holes in the doors and windows to throw out water and to let the cats enter the house.”
The homes averaged three rooms and five windows, and tenants tended to spend most of
their time outside the houses, either working or resting on the porch. The screens and the
clean water, combined with clean outhouses and readily available medical care, led to a
low rate of disease on Trail Lake. Malaria was almost nonexistent, and there was only
one case of pellagra in 1936. However, syphilis and other venereal diseases were
rampant: the Washington County Health Doctor estimated that 90 percent of all black
tenants in the county had a venereal disease, and the Trail Lake managers estimated rates
among their own tenants were above 95 percent. Promiscuity was widespread, and managers estimated that 20 percent of all children born on Trail Lake were illegitimate.\(^{41}\)

Will Percy believed in education for his tenants, and school was something that was available for any child who desired to attend. The principal of the school was a graduate of a Negro college in Mississippi; and he concluded in his own survey of the plantation that 95 percent of the adults on Trail Lake were literate, and those who were not tended to be elderly and unschooled. The school had its own building, which was paid for by the county school fund called the “Rosenwald fund,” Will Percy, and fees charged to tenants. There were 350 school-aged children in 1936, and the average daily attendance was 230; there were four teachers for these pupils, and school met six and a half months out of the year. Each year about one-fourth of the students failed to pass, but a handful also completed the eighth grade and moved off the plantation to complete their education at an accredited high school. In addition to teaching reading, writing, and arithmetic, the school organized basketball and baseball games, plays, silent educational films, and closing school ceremonies that proved to be popular forms of recreation for all the tenants.\(^{42}\)

The church was a vital institution on Trail Lake. There were three of them, Sunrise Baptist, Mount Airy Baptist, and Porter’s Chapel Methodist. The total membership of all three churches was 248, nearly the entire adult population of the plantation. All of the churches were wooden structures with benches, stoves, and electric lights on the inside, and Sunrise Baptist had a piano and a beloved pastor (and the highest

\(^{41}\) *Ibid.*, 62 (quote about cut screens), 71 (malaria and pellagra), 72 (venereal disease), 92 (illegitimacy).

\(^{42}\) *Ibid.*, 94 (literacy rates), 96-98 (school funding, number of students and teachers, failure rates, completion rates), 104 (extracurricular activities).
Tenants went to church Sunday morning for Sunday school and Wednesday night for a prayer meeting, and they met once a month for a service conducted by the pastor, a women's missionary society, and a youth group service. Families averaged $11.07 in tithes and offerings to the church each year, which is about half of what they spent on tobacco and twice what they spent on education. The church was the primary social institution on the plantation, and Trail Lake tenants congregated at the houses of worship regularly. Funerals, for example, brought all the tenants from the fields to the church for a four-hour service, during which the deceased's favorite pastor preached, and prayers were offered and hymns sung.\footnote{Ibid., 98 (church membership), 60 (tithes and offerings).}

The church was not the only social institution, however. A County Demonstrator founded a 4-H club on Trail Lake in which women learned how to can vegetables and raise products for home use. There were several fraternal orders and a burial union. The group called Knights, Daughters and Tents of Tabor had sixty-two members and sold life insurance to tenants; a $200 adult policy cost $8.40 a year, and a $50 child's policy cost $4.20 a year. They met monthly and voted on new members and managed the policies, which also had a sickness benefit by which a tenant could draw $1.50 a week if unable to work. An order called Afro-Americans had sixty members and offered policies from $150 to $500, and also offered sick benefits. But the Afro-Americans also maintained a hospital in Yazoo City where members were treated for free. The most flourishing social organization on Trail Lake was the Burial Society, which had 165 members and, for a yearly fee of $3.20, offered a death benefit of $40 to cover embalming, hearse expenses, a coffin, and a burial ceremony. In addition, the plantation company imposed a
mandatory twenty-five cent fee to every tenant family when there was a death on the plantation, so funerals were a well-funded and often extravagant affair.44

Apart from school, church, and social institutions, tenants spent their leisure in many different ways. Of the 150 families, 136 had gardens, many of which were flower gardens as well as vegetable gardens. Will Percy held a contest among the tenants for the best garden each year, and many of the tenants put a lot of effort into their gardens. On days off, tenants went into nearby towns, went to watch local professional baseball games, and often traveled to see relatives. The most popular gathering spot for men on Saturday nights was the plantation store, where tenants would get together and drink bootleg whisky, dance, and throw crap games until the sheriff came. And the sheriff often did come and disperse the tenants, some of whom, McClinton noted, "roam the turnpikes shouting and talking until day break."

At home, many tenants read and some debated current events. About 35 percent of the tenants regularly received local and state papers, farm journals, religious or fraternal magazines. Several of the tenants took northern Negro papers such as the Chicago Defender and the Pittsburgh Courier, which were doubtless shared with others. They sat on their porches, many of which had porch swings, told stories and read aloud, and chewed tobacco. "In most of the families," McClinton reported, "all members of the families [sic] both young and old used tobacco of some form. Most of the women used snuff extensively, and many of them could be found literally eating it." A highlight of

44 Ibid., 82 (4-H club), 100-101 (Knights, Daughters, and Tents of Tabor and Afro-Americans), 102-103 (Burial Society).
the year was Christmas time, when Will Percy would buy a Christmas tree and throw a Christmas party at which he gave out presents and drinks.  

The tenants, though, knew Will Percy was rich and they were not. Recall Percy’s story about his tenants’ comment about having paid for his car. They did not accept his paternalism as simple and unwitting members of an inferior race; they accepted it with cunning and self-interest. It was nice to have free drinks at Christmas and screens on the doors and windows, and Trail Lake was a pleasant place to live as far as Delta plantations went. But they were active participants in their relationship with Percy; they demanded better conditions and often complained about various aspects of plantation life. They made their voices heard, although “the landlord usually justifies their position by pointing out that there is no other enterprise in the capitalist system that will take a pauper and extend him several hundred dollars credit with no security except the promise of a crop if it is made.” What negotiating leverage they lacked in their relationship with the landlord, they attempted to make up for by creating lives for themselves within the limits of plantation life. They traveled, they bought cars, they chewed tobacco and listened to the radio, they read about the outside world, and on certain Saturday nights they got drunk and danced until morning.  

Percy came to the ardent defense of sharecropping, even as late as 1941, not because he was a true paternalist but because he perceived the failure of paternalism. The warm feeling of glowing and bowing to his retainers was not only not available to him, it

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45 Ibid., 80 (gardens), 105 (Saturday night parties and quote), 76 (reading material), 78 (tobacco use), 104 (Christmas party).
46 Ibid., 17 (distrust of Percy quote); Percy, Lanterns, 290-291 (story about Percy’s trip to Trail Lake on settlement day); McClinton, Social-Economic Analysis, 20 (“landowner” quote).
was a source of deep humiliation for him. His retainers did not respect and emulate him, they joked about him; they did not gratefully receive his beneficence—they pointed out the contradictions in his beneficence. If Percy was a true paternalist, he would not have recounted this story in his autobiography. Will Percy was perceptive and sensitive, and his antimodernism was rooted in his ambivalence towards his own ideals. To him, paternalism was an ideal that gave him great comfort and moved him to acts of kindness towards some blacks, but it was also a source of pain for him. His defense of sharecropping was rooted in this pain, and his writings about blacks were borne out of his ambivalence rather than his conviction. Paternalism no longer worked in the modern world, and Percy’s portrayal of sharecropping in *Lanterns on the Levee* was a portrait of an ideal rather than a workable plan.

Will Percy’s attitude towards race relations reflected his ambivalence towards the Delta elite’s paternalistic creed. Unlike his father, or his grandfather before him, Will Percy was not confident in his role as a father figure to local blacks. As we have seen, *Lanterns on the Levee* is replete with ambiguity and contradiction concerning race relations. In several long, didactic sections Percy articulated the paternalistic ethos of the Delta elite, but throughout the book he also articulated his own identification with blacks.

Will Percy’s inability to shoulder the mantle of Percy leadership and live up to the masculine ideal of his fathers, however, did not repel him from their paternalistic ideology. Rather, his persistent failures in life drew him ever closer to the ideology of his fathers and the idealization of the past. Percy’s paternalism and his nostalgia did not arise out of his confidence nor his sure place in Delta society; they arose out of his intense yearning for acceptance and his feelings of alienation. The same impulse that
drove Percy away from the Delta so often to travel to Greece, Italy, New York, Japan, Samoa, and Africa also bound him to the traditions of the Delta elite. He did not fit into the Mississippi world of his father, and he dealt with that displacement at once by celebrating the Delta and fleeing from it. These patterns of encounter and withdrawal can be seen consistently in his life and were a powerful force in shaping Percy’s conflicted attitude towards his own region and its history.

Seen in this light, Percy’s defense of sharecropping was not simply an example of his paternalism, and it was not simply a nostalgic plea for a return to the soil; it was a manifestation of his deeply rooted anxiety about himself as a southerner. Trail Lake gave Percy the opportunity to order a self-contained world in the midst of the disorder of his own life and the chaos of the modern world. However, his defense of sharecropping in *Lanterns on the Levee* was not borne out of love of the land, a belief in the efficacy of paternalism, or a desire to change the system of cotton production. It was borne out of Percy’s own ambivalence, out of his simultaneous affection and repulsion towards the tradition of his fathers.
Chapter 12: The Autobiographer

Sometime in the mid-1930s David Cohn, who was living at Will Percy’s house, found some old papers beneath the cushions of a sofa in Percy’s living room. They were a few pages of reminiscence Percy had begun. Cohn read them and insisted his friend keep going. Will Percy objected that his life had nothing particularly interesting about it; why would anyone want to read about a small-town lawyer? Because, Cohn replied, quoting Montaigne, “Every man carried within himself the whole condition of humanity.”

That period was not a leisurely one for Will Percy. He was working hard at the law in order to pay for Roy and Phinizy’s boarding school tuition and Walker’s college tuition at the University of North Carolina. His plantation was losing money throughout the decade. His blood pressure was perpetually high, and often he took to bed sick for weeks at a time. He occasionally emerged wearing his purple kimono and looking dazed. His doctors advised rest and various diets; in 1940 he wrote to a friend that “I am on a brand new silly diet which involves wheat, milk, and honey.” He traveled in the summers—to Sewanee, New York, the South Seas, Brazil—but spent most of the year working at the law and beginning to compose his autobiography.

Percy’s book became and remains a classic portrait of southern life. To trace its genesis and reception is important in understanding a significant book in the field of southern history. Understanding the book itself provides a window into Percy’s life and

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2 William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, August 10, 1940, Gailor Papers.
can also begin to uncover the ways the book has helped shape the idea of “the South” for many of its readers. Knowing as we do the “facts” of Percy’s life, as presented throughout this dissertation, we can explore how Percy used autobiography as a form of expression, as a story about himself and his world. Percy relates something of the spirit of his Mississippi home, at times a loving and moving portrayal of his region—but we would be amiss not to read this book also as an attempt to write a version of his life that was at once satisfying to himself and satisfying to his southern readers. Much of the book evinces an acute discomfort with Mississippi. We know *Lanterns* was satisfying to his readers because the dominant reading of the book, which persists to his day, is that he was the quintessential southern gentleman writing the quintessentially southern book. Without rejecting the argument that this book is supremely important in the study of the region, it is possible to read the “South” as serving several purposes for Percy’s story. The rhythm of the book in some sense includes Percy establishing his credibility by writing evocatively about the South, intermixed with metaphors and subtexts that express his disdain for the place. His attraction and repulsion with regards to the South animates the book, as it did his life.

Percy had been working on and off throughout the 1930s on sketches of his home and his life. With Cohn’s encouragement he began writing in earnest, but when he sent some chapters to his “highbrow” friends they advised he stick to poetry. He vacillated with the project—between the ambivalent feedback, poor health, and law work he didn’t make much progress. In 1938, though, Alfred A. Knopf approached him about writing a “lawyer’s autobiography.” Percy sent him the four chapters he had written and Knopf sent them out for reader’s reports. One of the readers was Harold Straus, who would
become the primary editor for the project. He wrote to Knopf that it was not really a lawyer’s biography, in fact Percy seemed to care nothing for the law, but he marveled at the “magnificent prose” and the way Percy came across as “a salty, unique individual, with strong notions but a great deal of warmth and kindliness.” He noted that Percy was depressive and didn’t seem to want to “reveal a good deal about himself and his personal life.” Their main task was “simply a matter of putting our wits together on how to handle Mr. Percy.”

Harold Strauss met with Paul Hoffman and a group of other readers to discuss the manuscript. Afterwards, he wrote to Knopf that they had agreed that the autobiography was excellent and should be published. “The big question,” though, he wrote, was “who is Percy, and why should he write an autobiography?” But Strauss felt he had a good sense of who Percy was and how he could pitch the project to the sales department in order to get “a really big advance sale.” Strauss’s explanation of “who” Percy was gives a good indication of the shaping of the reception of Lanterns on the Levee:

I could of course give the answer myself: I could say Percy is a well known Southerner, a lawyer who cares nothing for the law, but whose passions are life, poetry and war. I could say that his father was a senator from Mississippi and that Percy is the friend of almost every person of prominence in the South, and of many in the North. He is an aristocrat, and I could say that the reason that made him write and we publish his autobiography is that it presents, through one man’s struggles, a noble vision of a simple, satisfying, but fast-vanishing way of life—

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3 Harold Strauss to Alfred A. Knopf, March 16, 1939, Knopf Papers.
the way of the Southern aristocrat. This book transmutes to non-fiction the appeal of southern historical novels.

Even before the book was written, then, Percy’s publisher had a marketing strategy for Percy’s life story. The past, the South, the aristocracy—these were the features of Percy’s life that made his story saleable. The particular South that Strauss had in mind—“simple, satisfying, but fast vanishing”—was an ideal type that was a proven seller, the 1930s having seen images of the South commodified and sold in record numbers. From *Gone With the Wind* to *So Red the Rose*, the opulent South of the distant past sold.4

Percy, during this time, had to get out of Mississippi. The latter half of the 1930s, when he was writing his autobiography, saw him in Samoa, Sewanee, New York, Arizona, New Mexico, Florida, Baltimore, and Brazil. He traveled, as he did throughout his life, precisely because the South was neither “simple” nor “satisfying.” As he traveled, he wrote about his life. At the El Tovar Hotel in the Grand Canyon he cut out cigarettes, walked four miles a day, and wrote a chapter on sharecropping.5 He wrote seven chapters at Fort Walton beach in January 1940 while “icicles hang from my ears.”6 In writing his own story, though, he continually felt that it would have no appeal. “I can understand how anyone could write this stuff,” Percy wrote to a friend, “but I can’t understand why anyone should read it—and they won’t.”7 He had intimated the same feeling to Harold Strauss. Strauss replied, “You misapprehend entirely the degree of

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4 Harold Strauss To Alfred A. Knopf, no date, Knopf Papers.
6 William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, 29 January 1940, Gailor Papers.
7 William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, 29 January 1940, Gailor Papers.
interest that your autobiography will arouse. As publishers we feel that it is so strong and honest and genuine as well as so beautifully written, that it cannot fail to attract wide attention.”

In addition to Percy’s strengths as a writer, Strauss knew he could shape the marketing of the book in order for it at attract such attention. In the memo to Knopf, Strauss explained that while he knew “who” Percy was, he (Strauss) didn’t have the fame to explain who he felt Percy was on a dust jacket blurb. “I want it to have the stamp of authority,” he explained. “I can make people...say it for me.” He listed several literary figures such as Carl Sandburg, Jonathan Daniels, Gerstle Mack, and Dorothy Thompson. “I want to make this book much talked about before it is ever published....I want to see if I can make this promotion behave like an avalanche, gathering mass as it goes.” The celebrities need not read the manuscript itself, he wrote, so long as they could write a 200-word blurb entitled “William Percy and what he stands for in the South.”

As Percy sent in new chapters of the book, Strauss encouraged him to give a “fuller portraiture” of life in the South, and concentrate less on his abstract and philosophical musings. Strauss wrote to Knopf that the advent of World War Two in 1939 had sent Percy “into an acute (although not morbid but philosophical) depression.” The charm and narrative drive of his earlier chapters had given way to fatalistic ruminations and abstractions, chapters “concerned with death, religion, philosophy, etc., and they are the products of Percy’s mental depression, and everything that an autobiography should not be.” “This is the old trouble I have had with Percy,” Strauss

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8 Harold Strauss to William Alexander Percy, August 16, 1939, in Charlotte Gailor Papers, University of the South, Sewanee, TN.
9 Harold Strauss to Alfred A. Knopf, no date, Knopf Papers.
concluded. "I am sure that he will see the light, as he has before. What he needs now is to emerge from his mental depression."\textsuperscript{10}

When Percy sent in a final draft in the summer of 1940, Strauss was elated. "It is a magnificent book, both distinguished and saleable," Strauss wrote to Knopf. "The static, essay-like material that once slowed up the book is now mostly gone." The only remaining problem was the chapter Percy had written on Samoa, which was "out of place" entirely in a book about the South. Strauss felt that it should certainly be "eliminated," and after that the book would have "tremendous possibilities."\textsuperscript{11}

After Percy submitted his draft he continued work on his revisions and worried about world affairs, feeling useless as war raged on in Europe. He tried to join the American Army in some capacity. In New York in November he had lunch with Assistant Secretary of State Adolf Berle, but because of Percy's age and poor health they had no place for him. He contacted the Canadian army and received the same response.\textsuperscript{12}

While in New York he discovered his friend Lindley Hubbell was on the verge of a nervous breakdown, so Percy "shipped him off to Puerto Rico." He wrote to Charlotte Gailor, "I'm getting right fed up with neurotics."\textsuperscript{13} It seemed like the world was making people go mad, including his friends. He could only help on a small scale by helping his friends. But on a large scale he was not needed: "being on the outside," he explained to Sinclair Lewis's son Wells, "inactive, inefficient and unneeded in this sort of world is enough to drive one completely nuts.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{10} Harold Strauss to Alfred A. Knopf, March 1, 1940, Knopf Papers.
\textsuperscript{11} Harold Strauss to Alfred A. Knopf, July 24, 1940, Knopf Papers.
\textsuperscript{12} William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, "Election Day" 1940, Gailor Papers.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{14} William Alexander Percy to Wells Lewis, April 11, 1941, Knopf Papers.
Strauss and Knopf went to work preparing the book for publication in March of 1941. They had a designer come up with a dust jacket they felt was perfectly suited for a book about the South. The cover had a picture of a stately and columned white mansion with a smaller quarters just off to the side. Lit by a sunset over the Mississippi river, live oaks and Spanish moss graced the mansion’s grounds. Lanterns burned faintly in the distance along a levee and the river. When they sent the book to Percy, he wrote to a friend and begged her to come up with a different sketch—perhaps a silhouette of a levee guard figure walking along a levee with a lantern. Anything but this, he said: “I think the book itself is pretty good looking, but the cover struck me as horrible and in the most ghastly magnolia tradition as conceived by a Yankee.”

The magnolia tradition, though, was a big seller. Knopf took out a large ad in the New York Times that asked readers in bold letters: “Is the Old South Really Gone With the Wind?” No, the ad promised, it lives on in Lanterns on the Levee, written by a man who “is the Old South, living and incarnate.” People flocked to the stores to buy the book. Within a month of its issuance Percy received almost 300 pieces of fan mail—all of which he responded to. Alfred Knopf wrote to tell him that a first book of prose almost never sold this well. Percy was excited and surprised by the success of the book. “I am amazed that people down here seem to like the book so much,” he wrote to Knopf, “and frankly I am puzzled when I try to analyze what makes them like it.”

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17 William Alexander Percy to Alfred A. Knopf, April 14, 1941, Knopf Papers.
18 Alfred A. Knopf to William Alexander Percy, April 21, 1941, Knopf Papers.
Percy didn’t think of himself as a very typical southerner. In many ways he felt himself an outsider to the South. That the book had become a bestseller, largely on its appeal as a quintessentially “southern” book, vexed him. He was surprised by the reviews, most of which seemed to misunderstand him and “mostly want to make me appear as a professional southerner or professional aristocrat.”

It seemed to Percy that readers, both in the South and elsewhere, wanted a book that embodied “the South.” He received letters from Oregon and California, China and Honolulu, and even from a descendent of Harriet Beecher Stowe, thanking him for writing so evocatively about the South. This all seemed “very queer” to Percy, who felt the book had no real appeal and didn’t feel that the book spoke for the South. “Apparently Southerners,” Percy wrote to Knopf, “thinks it speaks the truth for them. I’m still quite confused and don’t see just what it’s value is.”

*Lanterns on the Levee* drew a range of responses from readers. The most common portrayal of the book was glowing praise for its portrayal of what one reviewer called “the distinctive quality of southern civilization.” Will Percy accurately articulated “the viewpoint of a Mississippian,” and “his life has exemplified perfectly the southern aristocratic tradition at its best.” The South was “personified by Mr. Percy,” according to another reviewer, and in his book “the traditions of the Old South lend grace to the new aristocracy.”

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21 William Alexander Percy to Alfred A. Knopf, April 24, 1941, May 19, 1941, and September 17, 1941, Knopf Papers.
22 *Boston Traveler*, April 25, 1941, Knopf Papers.
book so uniquely southern: "From such memories as when cotton was king; darkies singing in the moonlight on the levee; and the arrival of a steamboat on the Mississippi, the author has presented a moving account of his life in the Delta region." In the book itself, there are no "darkies" singing on any levees; and Percy had little to say about the time when cotton was king. In many ways it seems as though readers read the book through the lens of the dust jacket—it was about mansions and slaves, live oaks and dusky southern evenings. And these were just the northern reviews.

In the South, reviews were yet more effusive. In Knoxville the reviewer wrote that *Lanterns on the Levee* should "make every southerner proud," while the *Nashville Banner* wrote that the book will "click with Southerners as readily as fried chicken and apple dumpling." The review in the *Dallas Morning Herald* was entitled, "Charming Tale of Old South is Well Told" and promised readers the book was "definitely, graciously Southern, deep Southern." The review in the *Richmond Times-Dispatch* began, "Here at long but happy last is a real book about the South by a real Southerner."

Local Mississippi newspapers, which carried reviews by writers who knew Will Percy, were somewhat more nuanced. In the *Jackson Daily News* the reporter who covered LeRoy Percy’s 1910—1911 senate campaign and who had met Will Percy in the fall of 1910 in the Percy home, reviewed *Lanterns on the Levee*. He used the occasion to retell the story of meeting Will Percy, "shy, tender, timid...effeminate," so many years ago. He recounted how Mississippians tended to think of him as a "sissy," and how even

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25 *Stamford (Conn.) Advocate*, April 2, 1941, Knopf Papers.
27 *Dallas Morning Herald*, no date, Knopf Papers.
28 *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, March 16, 1941, Knopf Papers.
his father thought him “a queer chicken.” In a regular trope among Mississippians who knew Will Percy and felt compelled to protect his memory, the reviewer spent much of the review defending Percy’s manhood. He recounted Will Percy’s many battles—World War One, the Ku Klux Klan, the Flood—as evidence of his valor. Each of his paragraphs began with a litany of gendered praise: “You can hardly call a man a sissy who….There was not much that is sissy in the heart of the lad who….No sissy was a chap, who….Not much of a sissy….Far from being a sissy….” In Mississippi, on the local level, Will Percy was a more complex figure; rather than merely a symbol of the Old South, he was a man who needed some explaining. In the end, he did achieve symbolic status—the Jackson reviewer called him a “rare genius” while the reviewer in Greenville gushed that “it is the only absolutely true picture of the Delta I have ever seen”—but there seemed also to be some counterpoints that needed to be addressed.29

*Lanterns on the Levee* was not universally praised. The *Journal of Negro Education* pointed out the conceits and condescension in Percy’s view of race:

“Negroes,” wrote the reviewer, “now that they are trying to live like free men, have lost their fine qualities and alas are doomed.”30 Writing in *The Nation*, Charles Curtis Munz read the book as evidence that the South was “the nation’s intellectual problem No. 1,” and characterized Percy’s view of race as, “Struggle on, Black Brother, be obedient, tip your hat to your betters, and in a thousand years or so maybe you will be as good and as

29 *Jackson Daily News*, no date, and *Delta Democrat-Times*, March 11, 1941, Knopf Papers.
smart as I am now, and then possibly you can have the vote and a berth in the Pullman car.” This was obviously, Munz concluded, “hollow nonsense.”

Percy found all the controversy amusing. He wrote to Knopf about the “pretty magnificent” “blast of The Nation,” and suggested that the next advertisement for the book “should show on one side the excoriations and on the other the hyperboles of some of the Southern papers. It’s very amusing and I don’t know who to believe.” In another letter he joked that “I was astonished to see a picture of myself today in Time with a rather long review. I suspect the picture will stop the sale.” That people were reading his book at all, and beyond that expressing emotions of adoration and hatred, surprised him.

What kind of book was *Lanterns on the Levee*? Judging from its reception it was anything from an ode to the “happy darkies” and cotton fields of the Old South to a book of racist vitriol and smug arrogance. The truth, as it often does, lies somewhere in the middle of these extremes. The book was a story of a southerner and as such provides real insight into southern life—as has been shown throughout the present study, Percy’s local life was supremely important to his experience. He was deeply committed to Greenville and sacrificed a great deal for its well-being. A large part of this sacrifice, though, was simply staying there. His story is also that of a cosmopolitan, a man who dreaded Mississippi and delighted in Paris. He was possessed of a great sense of responsibility to, but also a great sense of alienation from, his home. *Lanterns on the Levee* should be read

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32 William Alexander Percy to Alfred A. Knopf, June 5, 1941 and June 16, 1941, Knopf Papers.
as just this: not merely a symbol of the South (though in some ways this is important), not merely as a piece of racist rhetoric (though in some ways it was), but as a life story, one man’s struggle to represent and make sense of his own life in the world.

A crucially important aspect of *Lanterns on the Levee* that has been overlooked in scholarship is the ways Percy’s cosmopolitanism shaped his life story. Indeed, of the 346 pages in the book, on only 19 does Percy not make some reference to a foreign place, idea, person, or text. Percy’s imagination was animated by global reference points. In many ways, he constructs “the South” in *Lanterns on the Levee* using foreign references. Southern icons became cosmopolitan in Percy’s hands: old men sitting on the front porch drinking mint juleps became “the patriarchs of Chartres,” while the woman serving them (his mother) was “the Queen of Sheba;” Percy called the fading of the Old South “a sideshow Götterdämmerung” and described the foliage along the Mississippi river as “done by Puvis de Chavannes in pastel green.”

The way the foreign, the global, the cosmopolitan operates in Percy’s autobiography suggests an ongoing tension in his life between the South and the world. His life in the South was one of responsibility and civic leadership; his life abroad was one of greater freedom and possibility. His project in his autobiography, in many ways, was to create a socially acceptable space into which he could write with honesty his desire and torment. He did this by juxtaposing the South with the foreign and particularly used blacks, male friendship, and travel as metaphors for cosmopolitan freedom. As we have already seen, Percy portrayed blacks as the repository of spiritual, sexual, and emotional freedom. He characterized men in his life story as the greatest of friends and

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34 Percy, *Lanterns*, 75, 56, and 130.
the repository of beauty. Travel in *Lanterns* served as a vehicle for experiencing male companionship. These themes culminate in the penultimate chapter, “Jackdaw in the Garden,” in which Percy uses male bodies and foreign spaces as entrees into a different, and better, world from the South.

Percy’s cosmopolitanism created an imaginative space in *Lanterns* that offers important clues to understanding both the man and the book. In his autobiography, his travels play a dynamic role in his most intimate portrayals of himself. Critics have been correct to read *Lanterns on the Levee* as a book concerned with place, for geography and topography are central features of the text. Some of the most resonant moments in the book derived from local images: the Mississippi River and its levees and floods, the dark soil of the Delta, cotton, crawfish. But these descriptions, these local anecdotes, do not portray the *place* with which the book is concerned. *Lanterns on the Levee*’s presiding leitmotif is a series of travels away from Mississippi. Like Percy’s life his memoir is marked by the melancholic sense that the South was an inadequate home, and in turn Percy used the foreign as a template onto which he wrote his personal and emotional desire. He juxtaposed home and abroad to conjure a space of sexual freedom and personal wholeness.

Will Percy called his memoir “A pilgrims script—one man’s field notes of a land not far but quite unknown.”\(^{35}\) It is a common trope in autobiography to describe one’s life in terms of a journey or a pilgrimage, but in Percy’s case this is instructive for two reasons. First, throughout the book he portrayed his life as a series of journeys, both physical and metaphorical. It is not a book of stasis, but of movement—into and out of

\(^{35}\) Percy, *Lanterns*, Foreword (No page number).
the South, towards Europe, to Japan, back to Mississippi. The pilgrimage was a concept that for Percy had more than vernacular significance: it was an essential component of his experience and imagination. Second, at the end of the book he confessed the destination of his pilgrimage. After recounting his various failures in life, he described his vision of the afterlife and the vindication he hoped to receive for his “one tiny life.” He saw himself on a road traveling towards heaven, and when the High God appears he demands, “Who are you?” “The pilgrim I know,” Percy wrote, “should be able to straighten his shoulders, to stand his tallest, and to answer defiantly, ‘I am your son.’” Will Percy’s pilgrimage would end, he hoped, with acceptance from a father. He never received it in his life, but in his most ardent hopes for the afterlife what he hoped to gain was sonship. It is ironic, then, that in the broadest terms Percy’s pilgrimage was towards his father, while in his life his journeys were away from him. In his life, his most fulfilling moments were when he was abroad; the moments of greatest freedom and self-realization he described in the book took place on foreign soil.

One of the most expressive and least guarded chapters of Lanterns is entitled, “Jackdaw in the Garden.” In this chapter, Percy assumed the role of the Jackdaw, a type of crow that is noted for its quiet watchfulness. He perched in his garden, which he offered as a metaphor for his own struggle to flourish in a difficult environment. “The major moral afforded by a garden,” Percy wrote, “comes from watching the fight for sunlight waged by those unhappy things rooted against their will in the shade.” The Indica azaleas and the lilacs, for example, would prefer another climate, farther north. “They will exist if I take enough pains with them, but they are not happy and the

36 Ibid., 348.
37 Ibid., 334.
meagerness of their bloom betrays their incurable nostalgia. The heart too has its climate, without which it is a mere pumping-station.”38 Percy portrayed the aridity of Mississippi, the dryness of life, and his own efforts to reach for sunlight in spite of his rootedness in local soil. His shade plants “thrust emaciated feelers, gangling and scant of leaf, toward a spot of light. To escape the deeper shadow they twist themselves into ungainliness. Branches die so that the remnant whole may survive. They are bleached as by a sickroom.” In the same way, such was life in Mississippi: “Standing at the post-office corner I recognize my poor sunless plants in the passers-by, sickly, out of shape, ugly with strain, who still search for a sunlight vital to their needs and never found, or found and lost.”39 The climate in Mississippi was not the climate for Will Percy’s heart.

Having set up this guiding metaphor for the chapter, Percy described another reward of a garden: “It’s a closed and quiet place, the best sort of Ivory Tower.... It’s a starting point for thoughts and backward looks and questionings.... You sit there and think of the trip you have made, fifty-five years of trip, and you wonder what it totals up to.”40 As such, he set out to reminisce about his own life, its meaning, its occasional flourishes, and its constant struggle. But in an important change of tone, Percy wrote that rather than the struggle and the failures, he would write about the treasures in his heart. In a book dominated by self-deprecation and recounting of his various insufficiencies, he attempted in this section to record instances that represented his fullest experiences, “what was mine to possess utterly and sovereignly, without counterclaim...the jackdaw pickings of my curious and secret heart.” “Now is the time,” he wrote, “to spread my

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38 Ibid., 333.
39 Ibid., 334.
40 Ibid.
treasure out.” For the remainder of the chapter Percy told of what, when he looked like a Jackdaw into his own heart, he found of value.

Percy’s reminiscences have several repeating themes. The most striking is that each of Percy’s treasured memories took place in a foreign setting. Moments of love between two people, moments of understanding, and moments of self-fulfillment took place in Spain, Greece, Turkey, Capri, Taormina, France, and on sea vessels approaching Bora-Bora and Rio de Janeiro. In addition to being geographically foreign, these moments were removed from time and set in a far-off, detached period. In each instance Percy cast himself with another man or a group of men. Percy’s expression of his homoerotic desire, his portrayal of those he was able to “love and understand,” was carefully yet lovingly crafted. This was Percy’s struggle, and likely the struggle of many with homosexual desire in the late Victorian South: how to both express this love honestly and articulate it in a way that would not end in public humiliation. Percy’s solution was to cast the foreign as a site of sexual freedom and to adorn his homoerotic fantasies with exoticism and timelessness. The struggle, Percy wrote, “has all been good and worth the tears. I see it as a dream I long to hold, but not to relive. I hear voices unbelievably soft (whose are they, was it in Rio or Barcelona or the islands? No matter) that murmur: ‘Don’t go, don’t leave me, I love you,’ and I smile, knowing I will hear them no more and grateful for their music.” In a series of vignettes, he laid his treasure out “for the mere delight of recalling” and in doing so provided clues as to how

41 Ibid., 336.
42 Ibid., 337.
cosmopolitanism in life and imagination served a crucial function in navigating the constraints of the late-Victorian world.\textsuperscript{43}

Percy’s first treasure centered on his encounter with a “satyr on the slopes of Parnassus.” In Greek mythology, a satyr is often figured as an oversexualized man, but in this instance it was an antique and primitive “brown boy.... hardly half as tall as the goat-herd’s crook he carried.” His hair was uncombed, he was wearing a goat-herd’s skirt and tunic, and he had a conspicuous knife in his belt. Percy cast the shepherd boy as entirely pre-modern, and himself as a god, a “disengaged spirit” drinking in the splendor of the “high lost world” of a Greek dusk. The laughter and banter of village women below “were merely tinklings in the deepening silence.” The boy stared at Percy “as though I were a mortal” and asked to see his watch. To emphasize the primal nature of the boy and the timelessness of the moment, Percy recounted that “he shook it and put it to his ear, but of course did not look at the time.” The boy turned to one of his goats and from his throat “issued animal sounds, half cluck, half guttural bleat,” and the boy and the goat “danced together. The full moon and I saw them dance together.” After this act of primal connectedness, the boy ran to Percy and took him by the hand. For a moment the two “walked in silence, hand in hand,” but suddenly the boy looked at Percy and “smiled once—but it was like a gale of laughter—and was gone. And the night seemed suddenly bleak.” The language of this encounter indicates the mystical possibilities the foreign held for Percy. Greece in Percy’s imagination was “austere and primitive, antique and changeless,” and as such offered unlimited possibility. Percy was free to script his desire in a playful and even joyful manner in a setting removed from his place and from his

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Ibid.}
time. Nowhere else in *Lanterns* is a smile ascribed the power of laughter, nowhere else do mortals assume the properties of gods. Percy surrounded the moment with silence and sunset and celebrated the possibility of connection between two humans even as he mourned its impermanence. 44

Innocent and primitive love was a repeated theme in the memoir and in another vignette set in the Anatolian headland of Turkey. In this instance, Percy was accompanied by another man on a picnic overlooking the sea, though we are not told the partner’s name. The imagery of the passage is among the most colorful and positive in the entire autobiography. The sea and the sun were laughing, the sapphire water glistened below the clouds, the picnickers “seemed suspended magically” as they were bathed with “palest pink and lavender in the ecstatic light.” “Except that it was live with rushing air,” Percy wrote, “it would have seemed a fortunate bright dream. We lay on the ground in the penciled shadow, each in his own burnished reverie.” As they lay looking out towards the distant horizon, they began to hear what sounded like singing in the water below them. They crawled to the edge of the cliff and peered over the edge, and in the water, “A young man, white and naked, with a mop of gold hair, was swimming beneath us, and as he swam he sang.” In the silence, the young man was unaware of the onlookers and swam along playfully, “brimming with some hale antique happiness not ours to know.” But, like the encounter with the satyr, the moment was brief. The swimmer disappeared from sight as “the dazzle hid him from us, but we still heard his voice.” In this instance, Percy again emphasized the pre-modern disposition of the swimmer, him being possessed of an untouchable and momentary happiness unavailable

to the Western watchers. Unlike the encounter with the shepherd, though, this memory was a voyeuristic fantasy. Though the vision of the young man was fleeting, in this moment Percy had a companion, quite possibly one whose loving whispering voice he recalled earlier in the chapter. Percy used the image of the naked boy to indicate that in their watching he and his companion experienced this ecstasy together. Though lonely and alone throughout his memoir, in this instance Percy revealed a fundamental connection with another that he experienced rarely in his life. When he did, he experienced it in Turkey, suspended in time as if dreaming.45

Yet Percy always had to reenter the world—these encounters were all marked by their brevity and volatility. The final vignette took place on the deck of a ship approaching Rio de Janeiro on a moonlit night. It was dark and silent, otherworldly: “Our ship receded from reality, became a tiny world abandoned to itself.” Though ostensibly headed for Brazil, in this fantasy the ship became both placeless and without destination, for “despite the appeasing pathos of the moon, it seemed a lonely world, forgotten and adrift, pursuing some mysterious course that might not count a port.” Percy was again a voyeur, this time watching the crew, an exoticised, all-male, working-class group of men from Portugal, Samoa, Finland, America, and Greece. In this detached but sexually charged setting, the men took on an ethereal beauty:

I watched them moving like somnambulists, the wind whipping their hair, the moonlight turning their bodies slender and unsubstantial, daubing their cheek-bones and shoulders, the arch of their chests or their buttocks with

45 All quotes in Ibid., 340-41.
pallor, and a stillness was on them. They came on deck from the hatches in a sudden glory of light.... They came in all manner of garbs, in work clothes or stripped to the waist; mostly they came alone and kept to themselves.

The men sat on the deck in silence as the wind muffled the occasional song or comment. Though the men were beautiful, Percy ascribed to them prescience of human limitation and the reality of pain. As they stood shrouded in moonlight they gazed into the unending ocean. Percy suggested that they may have been thinking of many things, but likely they "were thinking each of the same thing.... The patience of loneliness and the tranquility of unescapable pain were on their faces like grave beauty. I thought of a lost chart and an unknown port, and I too looked to the sea." The sea, the distant horizon, the endless night—these things suggest unlimited possibility. Unlimited possibility, like the destination of a ship bound for nowhere, was not a reality in Will Percy's world. But in another rare instance of optimism in a book marked by melancholicfatalism, Percy offered hope. As he and the sailors gazed out into the expanse, the night watchman clanged his bell to sound the hour and yelled to the captain, "in a voice piercingly young and full of hope, 'The lights are bright, sir!"\textsuperscript{46}

Throughout these vignettes, Percy demonstrated aspects of his cosmopolitan imagination. It was a moment in his memoir in which he became vulnerable, allowed himself to write more freely about the places and moments and people he valued. The instances he recorded are remarkable for their exoticism, magic, and detachment in place

\textsuperscript{46} All quotes in Ibid., 342.
and time. In his most forthright expression of himself in his memoir, he sketched three homoerotic fantasies set in distant lands and removed from time. And in those instances in which he did mention his home and his region, he portrayed it as lifeless and dry. At the end of the chapter, after outlining his foreign fantasies, he returned to the local and, importantly, to the negative tone of the rest of the book. “These memories of mine,” he writes, “lose nothing of their luster in this time of doom.” Returned from the world of his imagination, he remembered again that “A tarnish has fallen over the bright world; dishonor and corruption triumph; my own strong people are turned lotus-eaters; defeat is here again.” But sitting in his garden, reflecting and watching the vignettes of his remembered life, “the only treasure that’s exempt from tarnish is what the jackdaw gathers.”

Will Percy’s cosmopolitanism in life and imagination was crucial to his lived experience as a southern man. Rather than a regional assignation, then, such as “southern gentleman,” perhaps it is most useful to characterize Will Percy as a traveler—as he himself did. Traveling outside the American South provided an opportunity for Percy to enjoy male companionship in a non-threatening and often beautiful environment. He traveled often, and it was during these times that he most often experienced connection and understanding with another human. His experiences in foreign places comprised all of “the jackdaw pickings of [his] curious and secret heart,” and Percy expressed those memories in language that indicates a freedom he never experienced in Mississippi. Despite Percy’s deep connection and commitment to the American South, his

47 All quotes in Ibid., 341-43.
relationships with other men—from his father to his traveling companions—depended largely on his ability to leave it.

One of his traveling companions, Tommy Shields, lay dying in the spring of 1941 after *Lanterns on the Levee* came out. Percy spent hours of every day in the spring of 1941 at his bedside. Percy wrote that Shields’s illness “depressed me” greatly, and that often he didn’t feel up to charting *Lanterns’* progress. He apologized to a friend that “I haven’t had the heart to write. Tommy Shields is in the hospital fatally and hopelessly ill with a brain tumor. He is terribly pitiful to see, though suffering less pain than might have been expected. As I can think of little except his condition and the war, I’m not able to work up much pep….I can’t be away from the hospital even for a day.” When Tommy had a lucid moment, he would cry out for Will. One friend remembered that Percy did not leave his bedside for days at a time during Shields’s last six weeks. When asked why he spent so much time at the hospital despite Tommy’s comatose condition, he replied, “Tommy needs me.” When he finally died, Percy had him buried in the family plot at the Greenville cemetery.

Percy spent the rest of his days in the spring of 1941 tending his garden, in which the pear trees and redbuds were in full bloom, and reading fan mail. For two weeks in February he went to Charleston to tend to his friend Huger Jervey, who was sick. He wrote to Charlotte Gailor that “my garden is a wreck” and was constantly demanding her to visit and help him make decisions in the garden (“Now to the point,” he wrote her. “If

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48 William Alexander Percy to Wells Lewis, April 11, 1941, Knopf Papers.
49 William Alexander Percy to Charlotte Gailor, April 22, 1941, Knopf Papers.
you don’t come by here, you are a perfect what-not. I am in desperate need of expert advice”). She came for a visit and consulted with him about his wrecked camellias, jonquils, and tulips. He tried to urge her to come earlier to help with another problem: “Mr. Knopf is coming by for the weekend and I don’t know what in the world to do with him.”

Despite brief trips to New York and to Lee, Massachusetts, for the Berkshire Music festival, Percy spent most of the summer and fall at Brinkwood. One evening Will and Walker went to dinner at Charlotte Gailor’s house, where a group of young people all wanted to meet Will Percy. The dinner party included talk about books and politics, the war, and the amazing success of *Lanterns on the Levee*. Will loved to talk to young people and at some point a “sculptor-poet” asked him a question; as Will was responding, he couldn’t get words out of his mouth. He tried to speak but couldn’t remember words. He tried again and a stream of mumbled phrases came out. He was terrified and grabbed Walker’s arm and told him to take him home. Walker, who had just finished medical school, recognized this condition as aphasia, in which a series of strokes in the brain damage speech patterns and memory. The next morning a doctor came to Brinkwood and Percy’s blood pressure was in the neighborhood of 280 over 150.

Walker and Will boarded a train and traveled to Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore to see a specialist. The doctors told him he had the oldest body of anyone they’d ever seen at his age. He was suffering from malignant hypertension and acute

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exhaustion—conditions that had been developing intensely for the past five years, but gradually over his entire adulthood. He wrote to Charlotte Gailor and apologized for leaving abruptly with no explanation, but “Imagine not being able to talk!” He had been horrified. The doctors could do nothing for him and advised rest and quiet.  

Back in Greenville, Will Percy stayed in his kimonos. He kept to bed, emerging occasionally to visit with people. He occasionally looked at Phinizy befuddled, not able to remember his name. He wrote to Charlotte Gailor that he felt “like hell” and that “the world is falling to pieces in the middle of a headache.” His sons remembered him emerging from his room on December 7, 1941, to express his delight at the United States’ entry into the war. Roy Percy recalled that “he was gung-ho and raring to go, ready to go again.” Walker Percy was disturbed by Will’s happiness at war—it seemed that the only times Will felt at peace in his life was when on the brink of death. He asked years later, “Why was he sad from 1918 to 1941, even though he lived in as good an environment as man can devise...?”

In January, 1942 Will entered the hospital with intestinal hemorrhaging. He lay in bed for two weeks at King’s Daughters Hospital before dying peacefully on January 21, 1942. The next day the funeral was held at his home. The Reverend John J. Igoe

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58 John Jones Interview with LeRoy Percy, Dec 13-14, 1979, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.  
from the Catholic Church delivered a funeral oration that lasted forty-five seconds, and he never took his overcoat off.\textsuperscript{60}

\textsuperscript{60} John Jones Interview with LeRoy Percy.
Epilogue

Father Igoe’s overcoat and his hasty last words about Will Percy echoed the day before Percy’s birth, when the Greenville Times warned its readers, “Stories of fiction, and poetical contributions always declined.” Will Percy never fit neatly into his southern world; locals viewed him as something of an outsider, or, as his father suggested, a “queer chicken.”

However, after he died, Will Percy became memorialized in both local and regional lore as an iconic southerner. His obituaries were the first in a long succession of writings about this symbolic status: aristocratic, nostalgic, a bit eccentric but all the more charming for it. “Mr. Percy,” read his obituary in the New York Herald Tribune, “was the quintessence of the unreconstructed southerner. He was born in the South, nurtured in its legends, and, to him, the Mississippi Delta country was the only place in the world in which to live.” The obituary in the Richmond Dispatch called him “a living exemplar of the best traditions that have come down to us from the Old South.”

Many in Mississippi have made a particular effort to cast doubt on Will Percy’s characterization of himself as a “sissy.” As we have seen, one of the reviewers of Lanterns on the Levee began five paragraphs of his review with counterarguments against attacks on Will manhood. In the 1970s historian Lewis Baker interviewed the son of LeRoy Percy’s campaign manager, and asked him what LeRoy thought of his son being a

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1 Greenville Times, May 16, 1885. Mississippi Department of Archives and History.
2 New York Herald-Tribune, 22 January 1942, clipping in Alfred A. Knopf Papers, Harry Ransom Humanities Center, University of Texas-Austin.
3 Richmond Times-Dispatch, 23 January 1942, Knopf Papers.
4 Jackson Daily News, no date, Knopf Papers.
writer. Crump’s response was, “He didn’t mind that. It was just the poetry, he was a little bit uneasy about that. But he knows...He knew Will was a good man. He was a manly person, had his courage and everything like that.” And in 1997 when John Barry portrayed Will as an aesthete and homosexual in his book, *Rising Tide*, a local lawyer countered that Will “had a distinguished military record. He was not a sissy by any means. Everything I knew of him was respect.”

Will Percy’s memory has been used in other ways as well. When New York’s Broadway Chapel Players staged a production of Percy’s poem, “In April Once,” the playbill described the author as “a Southern liberal, poet, teacher, and plantation owner.” An obituarist for Walker Percy wrote in 1990 that Walker was raised by “his bachelor uncle, William Alexander Percy, lawyer, poet, planter, and civil rights activist in Greenville, Mississippi.” Will Percy’s legacy has been shaped by the needs of the present—in some instances by those wanting to prove the “decency” of the South and conservative southerners, in other instances by those wanting to create racial liberals where there were none.

A few years after Will Percy’s death, a young black man named Wash Jones took a Greyhound bus to Greenville, Mississippi to find Percy’s house. He had lived and worked there as a youth, and “Unk,” as he called Will Percy, had taught him to read poetry and raise roses. He was now a gardener himself and a lover of Walt Whitman’s

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5 Lewis Baker Interview with Brodie S. Crump, Hill Library, Louisiana State University.  
work. As he walked into Percy’s old neighborhood, he noticed decay: screens torn out from porches, trash in front yards, car parts littering the once pristine lawns. Even the stucco on Percy’s house was now cracked and faded to gray.\(^9\)

As he stood outside the back kitchen door, Jones remembered the sights and smells of his youth: of buttered rolls and fried chicken; of the lively dinner parties that took place in the dining room; of the broad wooden table upon which the servants ate in the kitchen. He looked at the brick wall that surrounded Will’s once beautiful garden, and behind it to the servant’s house where he had lived as a boy. He rang the bell at the kitchen door. A white man named Adrian Oates opened the door and threw his arms around Wash. Oates had been Will Percy’s lover for years before his death, and now lived in the house alone.

“The garden’s not as good as when you and Unk kept it, is it, Wash?” Adrian asked. Wash replied with a shrug and the two exchanged pleasantries. “Wish I could hire you to fix our garden,” Oates said. “Unk must be rolling in his grave about it.”

Oates continued: “Sorry, there wasn’t enough money to send you to college like Unk wanted to happen after his death. He thought the estate would be mine, and it’s not going to be that way. The litigation is going against me.”

“I’m okay,” Wash said. “I have the plants. I’m even taking an interest in cotton. Never cared much for it, but it’s all around the nursery.”

“You didn’t like cotton ’cause you were afraid you’d haf’ to pick it like every other black bastard,” Oates joked. The two laughed. Wash said he’d come to look

through Will’s old library. Oates invited him in and told him to make himself at home while he finished dressing.

Wash walked into the grand library, its oak paneled walls still lined with old books, its furniture still decorated with antiques and statues of armored knights. Wash remembered how Will would rise early in the morning to write poetry and listen to Beethoven in his library. Wash, whose face was deformed from an accident in his youth, remembered Will saying to him, “Wash, you’re going to have a bad time because of your burn and lameness. But you have a good mind, and I’m going to show you how life can be rich despite being different. I know from my own experience.” Will tutored Wash in the classics, just as he had been tutored long ago by Father Koestenbroeck and E. E. Bass. Now, Wash took up a book of Lewis Carroll’s letters and a volume of poetry by T. S. Eliot. Adrian Oates had by this time returned, impeccably dressed.

“You know, Wash,” he said, “I’m going to have to sell the house. The contents are up for grabs—and Unk would have used the word grab—but the house is, thank God, the only part of the estate that the cousins couldn’t get back.”

Wash said he was sorry, and asked what was to become of the place.

“An Oriental who is gonna make apartments out of it” had made an offer, Oates said. He sighed. “We’d both be better off if Unk had been a little more careful with legalities. I’m an old, poor fag. There’s nothing worse.” The white man laughed. “I wonder Unk didn’t make you a fag, Wash, but he didn’t. Nothing worse than an old, poor fag than an old, poor nigger fag, pardon the word, ol’ dear.”

Wash asked what Oates would do, and he said he was going to move to New York and hook up with an old friend of Will’s who would give him a job. He was going
to work as a night clerk for at the Barbizon Hotel for Young Women at Lexington and Sixty-third. "They won't let men in any place but the lobby, and they know I won't harm the poor dear girls. 'Course they'd never let on to know I'm queer. Too genteel for that."

The two men exchanged parting words and Wash walked away, his new books heavy in his hands.

This exchange, of course, took place only in a fictional world. The author, Sally Bolding, grew up in Greenville in the 1930s and 1940s and had a lifelong curiosity about Will Percy. Towards the end of her life she wrote and self-published a novel, *The Cyclops Window*, about the town. Her imagined encounter between Wash Jones and Adrian Oates, though fictitious, represents an important aspect of writing about Will Percy—the necessity of the imagination in representing much of his life. This is especially true because of the ways Will's adopted sons, out of their love for him and desire to protect his memory, have delimited the evidence we can access about his life.

Will Percy's heirs donated Will's papers to the Mississippi Department of Archives and History in the early 1980s. Before they did, though, they vetted them. "I kept about as much as I gave," LeRoy Percy told an interviewer later.\textsuperscript{10} One can only imagine why they did this, or the nature of the evidence that remains in a box, or a safe, in Greenville.

Will Percy himself was prescient on this issue. Towards the end of his life a younger writer named John Seymour Erwin sent him a manuscript of a gay-themed novel he was writing. Will Percy read it and wrote to the young author, "Due to the subject

\textsuperscript{10} LeRoy Percy Interview with Mary Stewart, in author's possession.
treated, and to the subsequent repercussions upon your family (in a small community) it is just not for today. Perhaps some years hence all the inhibited will become less so and the world will develop a policy of live and let live (although I doubt this, and don’t count on it).” Of his own autobiography Percy explained to Erwin that he left much of his life story out. “I have, perhaps, left as much unsaid as I have said,” Percy wrote. “But so much must necessarily die with us that cries out to be heard.”

11 William Alexander Percy to John Seymour Erwin, no date, 1940, quoted in Bertram Wyatt-Brown, “In and Out of the Closet: Twentieth Century Southern White Male Authors and Cultural Alienation,” unpublished manuscript, in author’s possession. The author would like to thank Bertram Wyatt-Brown for pointing out this source.
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