



The Litter of Summers Past: *The Moviegoer's* Philosophy of History

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Abstract

For *The Moviegoer's* Binx Bolling, history seems at times to be nothing more than the 'adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle'. At others, personal histories seem to shape people's constitutions. Bolling has abandoned his 'vertical search' of combing through history to find meaning in favour of a 'horizontal search' that treats such endeavours as ancillary. At the same time he only understands others by seeing them as the product of their historical dialectics. This complex use of history as both a vehicle of understanding and a veil that confuses more than it clarifies serves as one of the principal sources of Bolling's stasis throughout the novel.

Keywords

Moviegoer, Walker Percy, Kierkegaard, Hegel, history, alienation

'This morning I got a note from my aunt asking me to come for lunch,' begins Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. Binx Bolling knows what that means: that his aunt wants to have a serious discussion, a scolding of some kind that would drive most people to cringe. His aunt is the one who long ago, when he was a child, broke the news of his brother's death. That death, that memory, is still there. It is, if nothing else, a burden of history. He recalls Aunt Emily's directive about how to deal with the painful or unexpected: 'act like a soldier'. Life is much easier in the movies. He recalls one film where an amnesiac lost everything that constituted his past:

It was supposed to be a tragedy, his losing all this, and he seemed to suffer a great deal. On the other hand, things were not so bad after all. In no time he found a very

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picturesque place to live, a houseboat on the river, and a very handsome girl, the local librarian.

Bolling had attended the movie with his secretary and girlfriend, Linda, who was uncomfortable hanging around the theatre after the movie as he talked with the manager. 'But all this is history', he says. 'Linda and I have parted company. I have a new secretary, a girl named Sharon Kincaid.'¹

It is a troublingly contradictory message. Bolling is clearly burdened by the history of his brother's death and the responsibilities that have been foisted on him as a result. He longs for the warm embrace of amnesia, the renunciation of history that would free him to start over: a new place to live, a very handsome girl. It would be, as explained by Lewis Lawson, 'the most desirable state of consciousness, for it would guarantee a constant rotation'. At the same time, however, he is able to shrug off with little despair his failed relationship with Linda as nothing more than history, as something that is quite easy for him to overcome, allowing him to usher in Sharon Kincaid. History is, in other words, an individual choice. Its left and meaning only matter as a lived present, as something that someone can allow (or disallow) based on an individual perceived need. It is no coincidence, then, that Walker Percy uses Kierkegaard as an epigraph to the novel. As William Rodney Allen explains, *The Moviegoer* is a 'philosophically sophisticated exploration, from start to finish, of existential anguish', and Kierkegaard is generally classed as one of the first existential thinkers, though he almost certainly would have cringed had he been around to see his name associated with the capital-E existentialism of the twentieth century.²

The Moviegoer was Walker Percy's first novel, published in 1961, the story of a New Orleans stockbroker suffering his own version of a lowercase-e existential crisis, responding as he does to late 1950s alienation coming from a changing world, a changing South, and a changing city by abandoning a more traditional search for meaning in favour of the immediacy of entertainments such as movies. The novel won the National Book Award the following year, catapulting Percy to fame and making his book a signpost of post-war disaffection in the South and the nation. As such, *The Moviegoer*'s philosophy of history is one that acknowledges the existence of change over time, but sees that change as the cause of disaffection and therefore something to be avoided.³

In Isaiah Berlin's 1953 essay on Tolstoy's theory of history, he uses a line by Greek poet Archilochus as a trope for dividing the epistemological vision of authors throughout history. 'The fox knows many things,' wrote Archilochus, 'but the hedgehog knows one big thing'. What seems on its face a parable or equivalency statement becomes in Berlin's hands an organising principle around which we can understand the great academic debate over systems and systematising. Hedgehogs, in this formulation, subsume their worldview into a 'single central vision' – an infallible, a priori apparatus that can be applied universally to the great project of knowledge-making. Foxes, on the other hand, pursue many ends – often (and necessarily) contradictory – creating the essence of their moral centre not by

picking a central axis point, but instead by drawing on a veritable pluriverse of experiences and ideas to create a central morality out of velcro and twine. Berlin then spends the remainder of his essay parsing out the claims for Tolstoy's monism or pluralism – his variable percentages of foxness or hedgehogery.⁴

When that same trope, simplistic as it may be, is applied to Percy's Bolling, the parsing seems less necessary – his foxish credentials seem beyond reproach. Still, it is under the cope created by a web of ideological cherry-picking that we find a theory of history that is generally ignored by the literary criticism that has attempted its own categorisation of Bolling's basic ontology. For Bolling, history seems at times to be nothing more than the 'adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle', a definition that does in its simplicity seem to jibe with a discipline purporting to study temporal change in human space, or, in the words of Marc Bloch, founder of the early twentieth-century *Annales* school of historians who became the foundational base for modern social history, a discipline that was 'the science of men in time'.⁵ Bloch's analysis was published posthumously in 1953, just as Percy was developing the concepts that would ultimately become *The Moviegoer*. Much of the novel, then, is an examination of how individual alchemy can affect that broader progression, whether over the course of an individual life or over Bloch's *longue durée*. Thus, Binx Bolling can use such kinetic definitions of historical progression and find in their wake nothing but a desire for stasis, returning the reader to the novel's existential foundations.

Percy was raised in the South, a model of existential anguish in the post-World War I Jim Crow era, before moving to New York to attend medical school at Columbia. After contracting tuberculosis while working at Bellevue, he took an extended rest at an upstate sanatorium. It was there that he first engaged in a sustained study of Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard.⁶ For Kierkegaard, individual choice, particularly concerning values or beliefs, fundamentally alters the identity of the person doing the choosing. And values and beliefs are just fancy words used to simulate history. So, for example, Kierkegaard, a Christian, argues that objective knowledge of religious truths is impossible. But that is, he argues, all to the better, because any formal God proof would destroy the human ability to choose, to have faith. And faith, in its role as a human decision about the existence and viability of things past, can in that regard be interpreted as another one of those fancy words for history. 'The germ of Percy's aesthetic theory', Michael Pearson writes, 'begins with his disagreement with the behavioristic thesis that language can be explained as a stimulus-response mechanism', partly because it rejects semiotic representation and partly because it discounts history. History, in this view, can be plotted along a line that tracks 'the misuse and abuse of symbolization' that has ultimately 'been part of the cause of the spiritual atrophy in modern man'.⁷

This is a perfectly valid and defensible line of thought. Values are elements of the past playing on personal choices in the present, as are beliefs. History itself is by definition an event, an emotion, an experience that is no longer there. One's acknowledgement of history is itself a selective and culturally constructed faith

that our memories and documents – both experienced in the present – are valid proofs of things past. While such is at least nominally consistent with Bloch, more is owed here to Charles Beard, the father of American history, who said in 1933 as part of his presidential address to the American Historical Association that a science of history

would bring the totality of historical occurrences within a single field and reveal the unfolding future to its last end, including all the apparent choices made and to be made. It would be omniscience,

he said. ‘The creator of it would possess the attributes ascribed by the theologians to God. The future once revealed, humanity would have nothing to do except to await its doom.’⁸ And to do so, perhaps, by going to the movies. Beard, too, like Bolling, returns to existentialism and stasis.

The problem with this way of thinking, and certainly the problem for Bolling, is that it leaves history as both a vehicle of understanding and as a veil that confuses more than it clarifies. ‘The only way to find transcendence is to keep looking for it,’ explains Kerry Searle Grannis.

Though he never feels that he has arrived at a spiritual endpoint, Binx’s accomplishment is not that his search is completed by taking care of Kate and his young brothers and sisters, but rather that he comes to terms with the continuing nature of the search,

the meaning of which ‘will be revised again and again with the addition of new experiences that contribute to its shape as a whole’. Or, in the words of Richard Pindell,

It reduces things to possibilities in order to fan ablaze sinking potentials, and, in so doing, it creates the chaos we must endure if we are to establish as respect-worthy cosmos.

It is true that ‘the simple, seemingly inoffensive conventions which Binx contends can certify his existence’ and ‘give him enough structure to get from one day to the next’, but that doesn’t eliminate underlying conflict. And for those crushed by the existential weight of such dilemmas, it can lead to indecision and stasis, the two defining characteristics of *The Moviegoer*’s protagonist.⁹

Indecision and stasis, of course, are commonly analysed themes of Percy’s debut novel, and we need no ghosts from the historical grave to remind ourselves of their presence. Less analysed, however, is Bolling’s relationship with history, and the role that such a relationship plays in generating that stasis. The novel follows a traditional five-act structure, a deceptive strategy that leads the narrator through a circuitous evolution in his historical philosophy, only to end up right back where he started. Lawson argues that by beginning the novel with the phrase ‘This morning I’ Bolling ‘acknowledges his awareness that time existed before he became aware of it and that the chief and unending problem of his life is how to deal with it’. And so, as early as the novel’s first three words, Bolling immediately engages his own situation in time and space. ‘Binx’s wonder’, Richard Pindell writes, ‘is sustained

by a brooding and vigorous involvement with place and space'. Gary Ciuba points to Bolling's possessions, which consistently indicate 'what he would call being "stuck" in the world. They locate him at a place and an hour, serve as coordinates on the axes of his existence.' As John Edward Hardy explains, even Bolling's

use of the present tense instead of the more common fictive past, as the time-base of his narrative—a narrative that is addressed to no one in particular, no one clearly conceived as listener or reader—operates to the same effect of keeping us, and him and his story, all somehow peculiarly suspended in time and space.¹⁰

And so, before the novel's first sentence has run its course, its protagonist has begun his engagement and ultimate discomfort with history and its attendant burdens.

That discomfort with the role of history in his life and the lives of others is apparent early in Act One. 'The fact is I am quite happy in a movie, even a bad movie,' Bolling says.

Other people, so I have read, treasure memorable moments in their lives: the time one climbed the Parthenon at sunrise, the summer night one met a lonely girl in Central Park and achieved with her a sweet and natural relationship, as they say in books. I too once met a girl in Central Park, but it is not much to remember. What I remember is the time John Wayne killed three men with a carbine as he was falling to the dusty street in *Stagecoach*, and the time the kitten found Orson Welles in the doorway in *The Third Man*.¹¹

He has, in other words, subsumed his own personal history, those 'memorable moments' of his life, in favour of fictional referents that provide something that historical reality simply can't. It isn't meaning. After all, his movie memories consist of murder and kittens. It is, instead, a release from the weight those 'memorable moments', the standards of history that people like Bolling would rather not have to live up to. Moviegoing, then, as explained by Sara Lewis Dunne, 'forms a kind of defense against not only the outside world', but against Binx's 'troubled inner world, as well'. The disconnect such thinking creates with the common understanding of how people conceive their lives leaves him detached and isolated. For example, upon meeting Eddie Lovell – a blowhard Bolling can't avoid – the conversation proves to him that his 'exile in Gentilly has been the worst kind of self-deception'. Eddie talks about a client he particularly admired:

I've never known anyone, young or old, who possessed a greater fund of knowledge. That man spoke to me for two hours about the history of the crystallization of sugar and it was pure romance. I was fascinated.

Bolling, as of Act One, is simply incapable of fathoming how anything such as that could be relevant: 'It comes over me: this is how one lives!'¹²

Just a few pages over, however, Bolling stares deeply into a military photo of his father and his comrades. He states, 'For ten years I have looked at it on this mantelpiece and tried to understand it.' It is clear that he ascribes value to the

photo, to the deaths of the men in battle, but his father's eyes 'are alight with an expression I can't identify'.¹³ Even when the notion of historical value is clearly there, clearly bearing on his own identity, that value somehow escapes him. Bolling and other characters in later Percy novels (*The Second Coming's* Will Barrett, for example) 'reject the world of their fathers, but more often than not they find themselves inadvertently following in the footsteps of those that preceded them'. This situation creates 'a narrative that testifies to the lingering power of past southern stories'.¹⁴

It testified, too, to the lingering power of Percy's particular story. When the author was thirteen, his father committed suicide, forever ending his access to that particular world. As Percy worked on his novel in the late 1950s, the white South was undergoing a resurgence of Lost Cause ideology, that most persistent of southern stories, wherein disaffected racists in the region loudly lamented that political change and racial equality decisions emanating from the United States Supreme Court were eroding the world that their fathers had built. As the imprimatur of the New Southern Studies has demonstrated, those disaffected racists were feeling their own existential angst at the realisation that the closed society of the South was actually a functionally interdependent region whose very existence rested on national and international relationships that shaped and sustained it, and at the realisation that those lamenting a southern erosion were not the only viable members of the South.¹⁵

That perceived erosion came in many forms. From the *Brown II* decision in 1955, wherein the Supreme Court mandated that southern school districts move with 'all deliberate speed' to desegregate schools, to *Cooper v. Aaron* in 1958, a decision emanating from the Little Rock desegregation crisis the year prior that ruled that no southern stall tactics could be deemed legitimate or constitutional in the face of earlier Supreme Court decisions. With massive resistance to school integration still going strong at the onset of a new decade, all such southern trauma occurring as Percy was crafting *The Moviegoer*, it should come as no surprise that students were going to help lead the way in fixing it. In February 1960, for example, four black students at North Carolina A&T College in Greensboro sat down at a Woolworth's lunch counter and asked for service. It was the first action in what would become known as the 'sit-in' movement, where young activists would challenge local segregation laws by demanding equal access to public facilities, and it defined the national debate about civil rights in 1960.¹⁶ It was Bolling's crisis of disaffection writ large, an uglier version of existential angst that plagued the entire region.

Louisiana's pace had always been different, however. While the Montgomery Bus Boycott achieved an unprecedented momentum throughout much of 1956, for example, the act itself was based on the action of a similar if shorter boycott in Baton Rouge in 1953, led by Baptist minister TJ Jemison. In the late 1950s, Southern University students who attended Jemison's Baptist church began a series of lunch counter protests at Baton Rouge area restaurants that would become precedent documents for the Greensboro sit-ins. And in 1960, while the

sit-in movement captured the nation's civil rights attention, Louisiana's attention was captured by violent, reactionary attempts to thwart the desegregation of New Orleans's public schools, led by Plaquemines Parish lawyer and head of the Greater New Orleans chapter of the White Citizens Council Leander Perez.¹⁷

New Orleans public school desegregation was instigated by the NAACP's Legal Defense Fund and headed by Louisiana lawyer and civil rights activist Alexander Pierre Tureaud. Largely because of his effort, the US District Court had ordered the Orleans Parish School Board to initiate a desegregation plan, but, like so many of its southern counterparts, the school board stalled. A series of dramatic episodes throughout 1960 would not be enough to counter the pressure of the federal courts, however, and the first grades of two city schools were to be desegregated that Fall. Segregationist governor Jimmie Davis responded by calling the legislature into special session and passing twenty-nine laws in five days dealing with public schools in an attempt to halt the move. In response, and in typically absurd Louisiana fashion, the federal district court established a three-judge panel that met in New Orleans each night of the special legislative session and, after each law was passed, invalidated it as unconstitutional.

And so it was that on 14 November 1960, two New Orleans public schools integrated. The young student Ruby Bridges became a national symbol of progress against racial intransigence. By the end of the week, however, white parents had pulled their children from the desegregated schools. On 15 November, the White Citizens Council held a rally that drew more than five-thousand people. Leander Perez and others whipped them into such a frenzy that the next day, a white mob began marching to the school board. The police turned water hoses on them, which kept them from the school board, but only made them angrier. The mob turned its attention to black bystanders, injuring almost twenty. New Orleans mayor DeLesseps Morrison appeared on television and tried to calm the white rebels by assuring them that the police department would not enforce the integration order, disillusioning the black population and ensuring that the riots would continue. There were more than one hundred casualties and more than 250 arrests. It was against this backdrop that Percy finished creating *Binx Bolling*, a backdrop of the white South more broadly and New Orleans in particular coming to terms with the myth of its control, the reality of its interdependence, and the erosion of its hegemony – a region reluctantly but violently escaping its past.¹⁸

When *Bolling* discusses his aunt, who 'has done a great deal for me', for example, he describes a life lived in the shadow of brothers and a specific Southern legacy. But after her brothers died, she was able to live as she was, for lack of a better word, destined:

It is as if, with her illustrious brothers dead and gone, she might now at last become what they had been and what as a woman had been denied her; soldierly both in look and outlook.

The burden of history is lifted. It is only then that she can find the full flower of her life. This is the kind of lived present that *Bolling* can admire, a life

free from the fetters of historical pressure. In a discussion with his cousin Kate, he spies the ‘basket-arm of a broken settee. It has a presence about it: the ghost of twenty summers in Feliciana.’ He sits on the arm. He is propped up by ghosts, by history, but he keeps his hands on his knees, assuring himself that the present will balance the possible traps brought by the past. Still, the only way he can understand Kate is through historical reference, comparing her to pre-war college girls,

how they would sit five and six in a convertible, seeming old to me and sullen-silent toward men and toward their own sex, how they would take refuge in their cigarettes.¹⁹

He could, when called upon, use history as a comparative model, as a metaphor that allowed him to understand others. There is less at stake in such cases. The history that bears upon others can’t affect him.

But it is bound to affect him. It is something he can’t escape, and as Act One continues, his relationship with such subjects becomes more complicated. Bolling, for example, describes Kate’s hatred, one of those traits that he sees as defining her, as ‘a consequence of a swing of her dialectic’. She moves from her father to her stepmother and back based on the historical flow of their relationships:

Where would her dialectic carry her now? After Uncle Jules what? Not back to her stepmother, I fear, but into some kind of dead-end where she must become aware of the dialectic.

Such is far afield of conventional existentialist thinking. It is plain old Hegelian historical progression.²⁰ A thesis is followed by an antithesis, and then the two are resolved through synthesis. It is a continuous process, the driver of history that keeps the human story moving ever forward. It was the formula of Hegel, the motion of Bloch, the predictability of Beard. Existentialism would never trump such certitude, but it is significant that Bolling uses the construct to describe Kate, not himself. It is a concept, like so many other concepts filtered through a life of stasis, more easily applicable to others, a convenience that could provide context for the lives of others, but never to that of the self, he who avoids historical ghosts whenever possible.

It makes sense, then, that Patricia Poteat has interpreted Bolling’s search as an element of a broader ‘narrative critique of Cartesianism’, his malaise as

a concise statement of what it is like to live as though the Cartesian picture of the self upheld by modern science were exhaustively true; as though the ‘I’ were synonymous with a discarnate mind reluctantly inhabiting an insensate body and loosed upon a world of equally insensate and hostile objects.

Or perhaps, as Coles demonstrates, Bolling is not just lolling through a Kierkegaardian existential crisis or a challenge to traditional Cartesian reason. He is located, rather, at a confluence of Kierkegaard’s existentialism, Gabriel Marcel’s conception of the ‘realities of presence’, and Heidegger’s ‘being-unto-death’.²¹

Heidegger's work was reaching its apotheosis in the 1950s, Marcel's in the 1960s. Thus, that confluence was reaching full flower at the time that Percy was writing *Bolling* into being. At the same time, the country was experiencing the nascent birth pangs of the counterculture. In 1960, the year prior to *The Moviegoer's* publication, Students for a Democratic Society held its first meetings. Timothy Leary created the Harvard Psilocybin Project. Meanwhile, other students were making other attempts to topple the received culture of the day. The Greensboro sit-ins and the New Orleans desegregation crisis instigated new waves of activism in the civil rights movement in Louisiana and the larger South that threatened to overturn all of the bedrock assumptions that the region's white population had held since long before Percy's birth. That confluence of the new philosophical and psychological understanding of the alienating role of culture and history with the new social movements that sought to overturn all of history's most ubiquitous burdens was the backdrop against which Percy wrote, the context into which he loaded *Bolling's* malaise, his willingness to apply Hegelian dialectics to the lives of others but never to himself. 'Percy's technique is illuminated by Charles Sanders Peirce's model of consciousness,' explains Lewis Lawson, 'the self-which-is silently converses with the self-which-is-just-coming-to-be.'²² In a world of synesthetic change in both mind and society, avoiding historical ghosts remained the safest bet.

The trademark of the 1950's is not the capitalistic victim of the 1930's or the frantic ghettoite of the 1960's but the healthy, creative, enthusiastic citizen of the Eisenhower era, using his money and leisure to express his individuality

explains Mary Thale.

This was the decade when most people thought of themselves as 'inner directed' 'non-conformists' in a society of 'conformists' who had suppressed their 'spontaneity.' (The appropriate hero of such fanatacists was J.F. Kennedy.) Percy, happily, does not use this jargon of the 1950's; however, he has created a world where everyone sees himself as a unique person but acts just like everyone else. Or rather, it is a world where most people are types, easily identified by the narrator, Binx.

According to Simmons, *The Moviegoer* demonstrates that 'the phenomena of mass culture' develops from an 'attachment to cyclical theories of history, in which the progress of civilization necessarily entails its decline and fall'. Consumerism was, in this sense, a fundamental antithesis bound to lead the thesis of a given culture to ultimate decay. Or, as Patrick Brantlinger explained, 'civilization leads to the death of civilization.' In Simmons's analysis, Percy's novel demonstrates how

the recent history of the rise of mass culture becomes part of the older mythoi of the fall from grace and the loss of the values of the aristocratic, agrarian old South.²³

Still, *Bolling's* willingness to use such constructs distorts what is to that point in the narrative a clear evasion of the burdens of history. And history is nothing if not

distortion. Bolling's Aunt Emily, for example, describes her relatives in heroic, historical terms, which her nephew interprets as incredibly short-sighted:

All the stray bits and pieces of the past, all that is feckless and gray about people, she pulls together into an unmistakable visage of the heroic or the craven, the noble or the ignoble. So strong is she that sometimes the person and the past are in fact transfigured by her. They become what she sees them to be.²⁴

It distorts reality. It provides metaphors that cannot be substantiated because the past is no longer around, and thus a fundamentally different being in the minds of each who interpret it. Aunt Emily is at least partially defined by 'a historical pessimism', wherein all that she values grows 'scarcer in the modern world'.²⁵ Here the novel moves to the semiotics of Jean-Francois Lyotard, who argued in 1979 against metanarratives, grand historical conceptions that seek to connect historical events through narrative techniques that create causal chains to serve a broader human idea of progress. Lyotard was just as frustrated with such conceptions as was Aunt Emily and sought to replace them with smaller, localised histories. Marc Bloch, for example, was doing grand narrative history, and Lyotard pushed back against Bloch just as Bolling pushed back against what he interpreted as the dictates and weight of his own historical narrative.²⁶ In the Bolling household, then, historical comparisons only aggrandise those who deserved no such praise. In trying to clarify the present by calling on the past, Emily only succeeds in adding another layer of obfuscation, another problem to clarify.

The opening of Act Two demonstrates that Bolling's efforts at evasion are failing him:

Again this morning the dream of war, not quite a dream but the simulacrum of a dream, and again there visits the office the queasy-quince smell of 1951 and the Orient ... It attaches itself to everything in the office. An earnings analysis reminds me of it; a lady came in to pick up her A.T.&T. debentures and she smelled of it.²⁷

History is in the air, in the smells of people. And that makes it, at least to some degree, inescapable.

Still, it is in the throes of Act Two that Bolling is able to explain the genesis point of his attempts at evasion. He explains that he used to read

only 'fundamental' books, that is, key books on key subjects, such as *War and Peace*, the novel of novels; *A Study of History*, the solution of the problem of time; Schroedinger's *What is Life?*, Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*, and such.

It was, he admits, a detached study, but it was also a sincere effort to understand the past and its meaning. Everything else was diversion. He called it his 'vertical search'. But one night in Birmingham, he finished one such book, then went out to a movie, disposing of the study of the universe in favour of what he used to see as diversions. 'The only difficulty', he notes, 'was that though the

universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over'. Thus begins Bolling's 'horizontal search':

As a consequence, what takes place in my room is less important. What is important is what I shall find when I leave my room and wander in the neighborhood. Before, I wandered as a diversion. Now I wander seriously and sit and read as a diversion.²⁸

History becomes ancillary. It becomes less important than the present and future, which can, through horizontal searching, be divorced from the past entirely. And so the vertical search fails, Martin Luschei notes, because of 'the failure of abstraction, the "world-historical oversight" noted by Kierkegaard'. For all the talk of those doomed to repeat history for lack of study, the reality is that people have been studying history since history began, and repetition continues unabated. 'What is a repetition?' Bolling asks.

A repetition is the re-enactment of past experience toward the end of isolating the time segment which has lapsed in order that it, the lapsed time, can be savored of itself and without the usual adulteration of events that clog time like peanuts in brittle.

Memory fails because it brings with it the discontent of past experience. By repeating such events, one could enjoy things for themselves, without the hassle of memory, without the historical 'adulteration of events'. And as Hardy explains, Bolling's 'acute sensitivity to his surroundings is first exercised in the context of memory'.²⁹

Bolling's repetition talk is nothing if not a rejection of grand narrative, and the move to a 'horizontal' search does make sense in that context. 'The subject of history is the life of peoples and of humanity,' wrote Tolstoy in *War and Peace*. 'To catch and pin down in words—that is, to describe directly the life, not only of humanity, but even of a single people, appears to be impossible.' And from Arnold Toynbee's *A Study of History*: 'Society is the total network of relations between human beings. The components of society are thus not human beings but relations between them.'³⁰ If the work of Tolstoy is a theoretical synonym for Hegel, and that of Toynbee for Beard, Bolling's attempt to abandon his 'vertical' search is entirely consistent with his developing worldview.

Despite his best efforts, however, the 'vertical' world is imposing itself upon his 'horizontal' search, and there is little else to do but fight back. 'Explore connection between romanticism and scientific objectivity', he writes in his notebook. 'Does a scientifically minded person become a romantic because he is a left-over from his own science?' It is a good question, but perhaps even more importantly, it is the first real example of Bolling confronting the past, of acknowledging history as a viable mover in his life. But it is a transition that is filled with unease. He listens intently to a business colleague discuss history:

[I]t pleased him to speak with me of the past and to connive with me against the future. He speaks from his loneliness and together we marvel at the news of the canal and enjoy the consolation of making money.³¹

For his colleague, history is the refuge; the future is the threat. Bolling disagrees and assumes such talk comes from garden-variety loneliness, a desire to use the past to alter the present in aid of a better future. It is, for Bolling, who has abandoned such Beardean reveries, a fool's errand, a lesson he claims to learn at the onset of his horizontal search.

The threat of such historical reveries becomes even more apparent as Act Two closes. 'Couldn't a person be miserable because he got one thing wrong and never learned otherwise', his cousin Kate asks,

because the thing he got wrong was of such a nature that he could not be told because the telling itself got it wrong—just as if you had landed on Mars and therefore had no way of knowing that a Martian is mortally offended by a question and so every time you asked what was wrong, it only grew worse for you?³²

It was a complicated way of asking whether or not a misunderstanding of history could change someone's life for the worse, could doom them without their knowledge to something undeserved. It was a significant question both for the existentialist and the Hegelian. Determinists could reasonably argue that yes, the circadian rhythms of history were such that the inability to track proper syntheses in historical progression could fundamentally alter that progression, could take it somehow off course. Fatalists could reasonably argue that no, the historical weight of past events is only relevant to the way we interpret current events, which are, in the scheme of things, out of our hands anyway. As Edward J. Dupuy explains, and again more broadly borrowed from Kierkegaard,

In aesthetic repetition the unformulable self avoids the issue of its unformulability by viewing experience in closed, timeless 'packages,' as segments of lapsed time that can be savored of themselves, determinately formulated so as to provide the illusion that the self is also formulable. Such a repetition seeks to calm the 'terrors of history' by neutralizing them.³³

What is left is only our ability to situate ourselves accordingly. Bolling's response is both existentialist and Hegelian in its way, demonstrating the uncertainty that emanated from such paradigmatic choices: 'I don't know'.³⁴

The encroachment of history, however, takes its toll. By Act Three, Bolling is no longer satisfied with his diversions. 'At night the years come back and perch around my bed like ghosts,' he says, evincing the ghost image of the wicker chair that haunts him with its frailty in Act One. Instead, he finds himself in the grip of 'everydayness'. He has cut himself off from such ghosts, limited their power, but then finds himself empty in their wake. But, in the true existentialist mode, it is an emptiness he is perfectly willing to deal with. The same could be said for the historical god. Bolling states, 'I have only to hear the word God and a curtain comes down in my head.' It isn't a workable hypothesis for someone who defines his life by avoidance, by his 'own invincible apathy'. It is bothersome, but at the same time it gives Bolling his existential base. 'Abraham saw signs of God and believed,' he scribbles in his notebook. 'Now the only sign is that all the signs in the

world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him.³⁵ Still, when history encroaches, there is little for Bolling to do but reluctantly embrace it. He shares intimate conversations with both his mother and his half-brother Lonnie just as Act Three comes to a close. His visit with his mother, as Richard Lehan writes, is a 'return to the past in search of self—a coming to terms with a haunted and guilt-laden world, a theme that abounds in southern fiction'.³⁶ Almost all conversations are lived history, discussions of the past that bear on the present.

There was no more haunted and guilt-laden world than New Orleans, Louisiana, home to both Percy and his protagonist. 'New Orleans is right in your backyard,' wrote Percy's friend Shelby Foote in a 1951 letter, 'and it has everything: intellectuals, whores, priests, merchant seamen: you could make it boil and bubble'. Percy, Foote said, should make the novel fit 'a rigid timescheme: Mardi Gras, for instance, with its climax the following holy day'. It was advice Percy would take. New Orleans was and is a city obsessed with its own history and culture, where that history and culture are so palpable that they have become the city's principal economic vehicle. Founded in 1718 by the French, transferred to the Spanish in the Treaty of Paris in 1763, and sold to the United States in 1803, the city's culture, law, architecture, food, music, and language evinced a rude conglomeration of the influence of all three countries. The history of New Orleans, then, bore down on residents in every building, meal, song, and turn of phrase. It was, befitting that French heritage, *un métissage culturel*, a culture of blended ancestries and memories that coalesced into one collective history. Most revelled in such history, arguing that the cultural mélange that still proudly uplifted French and Spanish heritage gave the city an identity that its residents could claim as their own. They did so even as the city's desegregation crisis and the erosion of Jim Crow challenged both the assumption that New Orleans was functionally different than the rest of the South and the assumption that there was anything collective about the city's history. 'I think New Orleans in the fifties was just on the threshold of becoming Americanized a little more in the sense of growing suburbs,' explained New Orleans writer Ronnie Virgets, 'but there was still the "small town" part of New Orleans and there was still the part where we felt, "Hey, we're different," and we liked it.' It was a region clinging desperately to its sense of exceptionalism, even as events on the ground were demonstrating that such shibboleths were anachronisms at best. Such was the power of the city's mythmaking, thus for anyone like Bolling trying to escape from the fetters of history, New Orleans was perhaps the worst place to be. 'To Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer*', writes Philip E. Simmons, 'history is visible in the landscape.' It was on every corner.³⁷

Such realities leave Bolling searching for comparative models as Act Four opens. He remarks that his friend and author Sam Yerger 'had been overtaken by nostalgia, the characteristic mood of repetition', which ultimately produced a successful book. Repetition is, as he describes in Act One, a 're-enactment of past experience', but one specifically undertaken to isolate segments of time without the burden of history and its contextual finality connecting it to the wider world.³⁸ Nostalgia is history without consequence, and, therefore, one of Bolling's best

methods to accommodate its dictates without the strain of responsibility. This is his great act of Hegelian synthesis. There is the burden of history, there is his own desire to escape it (a desire that left him static by response), and then there is his compromise, his isolated segments of time. Thesis. Antithesis. Synthesis. It is the great move that protagonists are supposed to make in Act Four. At the same time, however, it is a gambit, Bolling involving himself in ‘space-time stuff’ without carrying the full weight of space and time. As he and Kate exit a train in Chicago, he is disoriented by the strange place, hoping someone can provide him with such space–time information,

who built the damn station, the circumstances of the building, details of the wrangling between city officials and the railroad, so that I would not fall victim to it, the station, the very first crack off the bat.

History is stifling at home, where it is actively keeping everyone tethered to his or her assumed places in life. But in a strange land, Bolling’s *détente* with history allows him to get his bearings. Such is what constitutes the ‘genie-soul’ of such places, but that isn’t a problem. There are no consequences far from the tethers of home.³⁹

‘Binx distrusts these self-sufficient places where people have everything figured out,’ explains Christine Reimers,

where everything and everyone has its place, and where world-order exists to justify the people who live there. He prefers to lose himself in the solid detail of the most ordinary life imaginable, one where the stories of the past do not hang so heavily on the horizon.

Binx finds himself in a world, as Richard Pindell has explained,

not of action but of transaction. To the esthete, who characteristically remains aloof from concrete commitments, the better to broaden the space of his intellectual playground, the peculiar gift of the modern loss is simply this: one need not act as a doer, only as an actor.⁴⁰

In Chicago he is even able to find Harold Graebner, a fellow soldier who saved his life in the war, and to see Harold’s historical accomplishments as heroic and meaningful, a task that would have been virtually impossible before his Hegelian synthetic turn. Harold, however, is home in Chicago. So when Bolling begins to recount his act of heroism,

[i]t is too much for Harold . . . the sudden confrontation of a time past, a time so terrible and splendid in its arch-reality; and so lost—cut adrift like a great ship in the flood of years. Harold tries to parse it out, that time and the time after, the strange ten years intervening, and it is too much for him.⁴¹

And Bolling notices, understands. History is far too much for him, too, in the depths of Feliciana Parish, where the consequences of memory are harder to shake. And Chicago is Harold’s Feliciana Parish. It is, for all of its problematic

compromises, that realisation that completes his deterministic synthesis and drives the otherwise existential being into Act Five.

As we have seen, however, that synthesis is ultimately a dodge, a hustle. And in the last act of Bolling's drama, his aunt finally calls him on it:

First, is it not true that in all of past history people who found themselves in difficult situations behaved in certain familiar ways, well or badly, courageously or cowardly, with distinction or mediocrity, with honor or dishonor. They are recognizable. They display courage, pity, fear, embarrassment, joy, sorrow, and so on. Such anyhow has been the funded experience of the race for two or three thousand years, has it not? Your discovery, as best as I can determine, is that there is an alternative which no one has hit upon. It is that one finding oneself in one of life's critical situations need not after all respond in one of the traditional ways. No. One may simply default. Pass. Do as one pleases, shrug, turn on one's heel and leave. Exit.⁴²

She goes on to explain that his is a condition of the modern age, 'the only civilization in history which has enshrined mediocrity as its national ideal'.⁴³ Corruption is present in every civilisation, as is adultery, thievery, and the like. But today those traits are celebrated acts of sincerity, a kind of broad generational synthesis, a reaction to the old morality infringing upon the new. It is a conclusion that would receive more considered attention two years after *The Moviegoer's* publication, when Richard Hofstadter's *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life* sought to trace the historical progression of utilitarianism and anti-intellectualism in American cultural norms, finding that they were partly a function of the democratisation of knowledge and partly features embedded in society. It is also a conclusion that brings the reader back to the context that surrounded Percy's writing, the modes of alienation brought by the linguistic turn in western thought, the arrival of the countercultural critique of received social mores, and, in the South and in New Orleans itself, the civil rights movement that disillusioned its white residents and threatened to overturn history as they had known it. It left them wanting an 'out'.⁴⁴

Bolling knows that his Aunt Emily is right, but it is precisely that kind of 'out' that he requires. She is, without knowing it, letting him off the existential hook. And so the novel closes with the narrator's marriage to Kate. 'As for my search, I have not the inclination to say much on the subject,' he says, coming full circle, evincing the same reticence to engage the past that he displayed at the novel's onset. '[I]t is not open to me even to be edifying,' he says,

much too late to edify or do much of anything except plant a foot in the right place as the opportunity presents itself—if indeed asskicking is properly distinguished from edification.⁴⁵

Asskicking and edification are most certainly properly distinguished. Edification is just another method of engaging the past, the core reason why Bolling has no desire to do it. Asskicking is easier. Asskicking is a lived moment, the present. There is the present malaise and the hope of the future battling what Bolling describes as

‘the litter of summers past’.⁴⁶ Or, to borrow from Berlin, there are foxes battling hedgehogs. For *The Moviegoer* and its protagonist, that battle is one that interprets history as a combination of Hegel’s formulaic progression over Marc Bloch’s *longue durée*, an interpretation of social evolution that leads to a society beyond Bolling’s tolerance, if not his comprehension. If history is the study of change over time, his goal is to avoid existential crises by avoiding change, to hide from the kinetic by remaining static, somewhere in the dark of a Gentilly movietheater. The best one can do, so goes the novel’s argument, is to keep the litter of summers past at arm’s length, careful that it doesn’t circumscribe the possibility that exists somewhere on the other side of stasis.

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Notes

1. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (1961; New York, 1998), pp. 3–5.
2. Lewis A. Lawson, *Still Following Percy* (Jackson, 1996), p. 94; William Rodney Allen, *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer* (Jackson, 1986), p. 22; and Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 22. The use of Linda as a historical trope brings the author down another path with its own historical resonance, that of history being a male-dominated phenomena. For examinations of Percy’s relationship with female characters in *The Moviegoer* and other novels, see Lewis A. Lawson and Elzbieta H. Oleksy (eds), *Walker Percy’s Feminine Characters* (Troy, NY, 1995); Sheila Bosworth, ‘Women in the Fiction of Walker Percy’, *Louisiana Literature* 10:2 (1993): 76–85; and Kathleen Scullin, ‘A Feminist Lens for Binx Bolling’s Journey in *The Moviegoer*: Traveling toward Wholeness’, in Kristie Siegel (ed.), *Gender, Genre, and Identity in Women’s Travel Writing* (New York, 2004), pp. 293–307.
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4. See Isaiah Berlin, *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy’s View of History*, Second Edition, ed. Henry Hardy (1953; Princeton, 2013).
5. Marc Bloch, *The Historian’s Craft*, trans. Peter Putnam (New York, 1953), p. 27.
6. Robert Lacy, ‘*The Moviegoer*, Fifty Years After’, *Southern Review* 47:Winter (2011): 52. For more sustained work on Percy’s biography, see Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York, 1992); Patrick H. Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* (New York, 1997); and Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (New York, 1979).
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 11. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, p. 7.
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36. Richard Lehan, ‘The Way Back: Redemption in the Novels of Walker Percy’, *Southern Review*, 4:Spring (1968): 312.
37. Lacy, ‘*The Moviegoer*, Fifty Years After’, 51; and Philip E. Simmons, ‘Toward the Postmodern Historical Imagination’, 606. Virgets quote from ‘New Orleans In the ‘50s,’ WYES, New Orleans Public Broadcasting, <http://www.wyes.org/local/new-orleans-in-the-50s/> (accessed 25 March 2017).
38. Percy, *The Moviegoer*, pp. 169–70, 79.
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 43. *Ibid.*, p.223.
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