The Teller and the Tale: Walker Percy's *Lancelot* as Metafiction

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Walker Percy is not usually thought of as a writer of experimental fiction, although early in his career he hinted at a direction for his work that would take him away from traditional realism. He said in 1963, "[. . .] there is a disintegration of the fabric of the modern world which is so far advanced that the conventional novel no longer makes sense" ("Sustaining Stream" 82). Percy's social conservatism was ultimately matched by an aesthetic conservatism. In a 1975 symposium on fiction at Washington and Lee University, he took issue with fellow panelist William Gass's disavowal of the referential nature of literature. "It's hard for me to imagine any novelist not being motivated by some desire to approach some kind of truth or what he takes to be the truth," Percy said. "If I didn't think that I don't think I'd bother to set pen to paper ("Symposium" 6). And in a letter to me (5 Feb. 1987) Percy was even more critical of the postmodern novel: "The novel, usually screwed up, is even more screwed up than usual," he wrote, "by 'experimentation,' by the reader's confusion, etc.—and most especially by the fragmentation of the world, [the] loss of consensus [. . .]."

Yet if Percy's fiction never challenges the mimetic underpinnings of a conventional realism, all of his novels are marked to a greater or lesser degree by a narrative self-consciousness that is deeply ingrained in the minds of his protagonists and, consequently, in the structure of his fiction. From his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, to his last, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, his characters strive to fit the events of their lives into the narrative patterns that they have assimilated from history, from popular entertainment, and from family legend. Indeed, it is precisely Binx Bolling's failure to do that in the sexual encounter with Kate Cutrer near the end of *The Moviegoer* that precipitates the novel's conclusion. When Binx fails to demonstrate either the virility of a John O'Hara hero or the stubborn

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virtue of Clark Gable in *It Happened One Night*, the life of evasion and detached observation that he has carefully maintained until that point begins to fall apart. In a similar fashion, Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* reads a biography of Robert E. Lee and then bemoans his inability to act like Lee's gentlemanly son Rooney Lee (*LG* 255). When Dr. Thomas More in *The Thanatos Syndrome* finally confronts a ring of child molesters who are part of a larger conspiracy to engage in a secret effort at social engineering, he too is bothered by his inability to swagger in the heroic style he has seen in movies. "During the great crises of my life [. . .] I develop hay fever," he complains. "There is a lack of style here—like John Wayne coming down with the sneezes during the great shoot-out in *Stagecoach*" (302).

That narrative self-consciousness is never greater, though, than in Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot.* Written as a dramatic monologue spoken by Lancelot Lamar to his old friend, a priest-physician whom Lancelot calls "Percival," the novel alternates between what Simone Vauthier has termed two narrative "frames": a "primary frame" that consists of the interaction between Lancelot and Percival in Lancelot's cell in a madhouse and a "secondary frame" that consists of Lancelot's narration of the events that led to his imprisonment (Vauthier 39). Of course, that structure itself foregrounds the construction of narrative as a major subject of the text. We are witness not only to the murderous events at Belle Isle—Lancelot's ancestral home—in the secondary frame but also to his efforts in the primary frame to make that sequence of events coherent and acceptable to his own wounded sensibility. Indeed, Lancelot's whole world at the time of the events that he relates to Percival is also subsumed into another narrative. Belle Isle is being used as a location for a movie, and gradually almost all of Lancelot's family and friends become involved in the cinematic illusion.

Ultimately, Lancelot attempts to make sense of the events in the novel's secondary frame by imposing on them a series of narrative patterns, of potential scripts for his life, which are derived from many disparate sources. As with all of Percy's other protagonists, his consciousness is steeped in the narratives that he has consumed over his lifetime: the Arthurian legends he loved as a boy, the Raymond Chandler novels he reads for entertainment as an adult, and the apocryphal stories that have been passed down from one generation to another in his family. Over the course of the novel, we see how the conventions of the books and legends that Lancelot has assimilated shape both the actions that led to his imprisonment and the story of those actions that he later tells Percival.

That story begins with the accidental discovery that his daughter Siobahn's blood type does not match his own. While sitting in his study, "reading for perhaps the fourth or fifth time a Raymond Chandler novel," Lancelot happens to glance at his daughter's application for a riding camp and quickly realizes that her O blood type could not possibly be the offspring of his AB blood type (24). That discovery sets in motion what Lancelot will later call his "quest"—first to discover proof of his wife Margot's infidelity and then to avenge his honor (137).

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It is no accident, though, that the moment of discovery is underscored by a peal of artificial thunder, created by the film crew shooting outside his study window. Were the thunder real, it would be an egregious example of the pathetic fallacy, the worst sort of melodrama. But Percy—working here in a sly, ironic mode—uses instead the contrived thunder to suggest Lancelot's own precarious position in some borderland between life and fiction.

Of course, the initial model for Lancelot's actions is taken from the book he is reading at the time of his discovery. In his search for evidence that Siobahn's real father is Mark Merlin, one of the directors of the movie being filmed at Belle Isle, Lancelot emulates Chandler's hard-boiled private eye, Philip Marlowe: searching through old tax records to establish Margot's whereabouts eight years ago, when Siobahn was conceived; carefully scrutinizing the behavior of Margot and Merlin and the others in the film crew for tell-tale signs of secret intimacies and understandings; even enlisting his servant Elgin Buell to stake out the Holiday Inn where the film crew is staying and later to secretly videotape their actions when they are gathered at Belle Isle. But Chandler's novel ultimately offers more to Lancelot than just a model of dogged determination in search of a hidden truth. As Lewis A. Lawson notes in "'Spiritually in Los Angeles': California Noir in *Lancelot*," Chandler's vision of Marlowe as a tarnished knight errant in a morally corrupt universe suits the image of himself that Lancelot tries to sustain at the beginning of his quest. In Lawson's words, "Chandler's recurrent theme—the celebration of the Great Wrong Place—offered Lance a reflection of his own world; Chandler's recurrent protagonist, a drinking, lonely Philip Marlowe, tempted, but ultimately dissatisfied by the female, offered Lance a reflection of himself" (749).

In many ways, in fact, Lancelot successfully assimilates the script provided by Chandler's fiction. For until his final spasm of violence, Lancelot achieves something of Marlowe's rueful yet clear-eyed pursuit of truth. Only after Elgin's videotapes, in an ironic counterpoint to the movie being shot at Belle Isle, reveal that Margot is not having an affair with Merlin—he is her *ex*-lover—but with Janos Jacoby, Merlin's co-director, does the desire for vengeance take over. Then, Marlowe—who typically seeks justice, not revenge—must be abandoned as a model; and Lancelot adopts a different script to guide his actions, one taken from his family's fabled past.

In the course of telling his story to Percival, Lancelot introduces that pattern gradually. He first alludes to that model for his actions when he asks Percival if he remembers the bowie knife they found as boys in an abandoned pigeon roost—later to be converted to Lancelot's study—at Belle Isle. The knife belonged to an "ancestor" who "did know Bowie," Lancelot says, "even had a part in the notorious Vidalia sand-bar duel in which Bowie actually carved a fellow from limb to limb" (18). That ancestor, who strode into Lancelot's youthful consciousness out of the world of legend, was his great-great-grandfather, Manson Maury Lamar, a Civil War hero who, as Lancelot later tells Percival, fought

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a duel to defend his mother's honor, "a fight to the death with fists and knives just like Jim Bowie, in fact on the same sand bar" (154). It is notable, however, that his ancestor's legend changes the second time Lancelot mentions it. Now, instead of being a secondary figure in Jim Bowie's duel, Manson Maury Lamar is a principal in one of his own. That suggests both the apocryphal nature of the story and Lancelot's need, as a storyteller himself, to reassemble its basic components to provide the right example for his own actions. Thus, he now emphasizes how his great-great-grandfather responded to an insult—a suggestion that his mother had had a black lover—with deadly force.

It is ironic, though, that Lancelot gradually embraces that family legend rooted in the antebellum South. For as Susan V. Donaldson shows, Southern tradition in the novel is presented as calcified, transformed into a commodity whose value is determined less by sentiment or conviction than the market (67). Thus, Belle Isle can only be maintained by being turned into a tourist attraction or rented out as a film set. And yet while Lancelot mocks Margot's efforts to restore the once grand plantation and professes himself to care nothing for it—"As gone with the wind as Tara and as good riddance," he says (106)—both his actions at Belle Isle and the tale he later relates to Percival are, as Donaldson points out, "based on the very stories and fragments of the past that he rejects" (71). Consequently, as Lancelot comes closer to disclosing the details of his murderous rampage—how he gathered many of the film crew at Belle Isle and then rigged a gas line in the basement to explode, how he came upon Margot and Jacoby in bed together and then murdered Jacoby—he tries to present himself as acting in accord with the same stern code of honor as his rough-hewn ancestor.

Although Lancelot tries, both at the time of his actions and in telling them later, to see himself as re-enacting his ancestor's legendary deeds, the self-consciousness that permeates his actions undermines them. Lancelot killed Jacoby with the same weapon and in the same manner that Manson Maury Lamar killed his opponent—grappling hand to hand until he managed to turn Jacoby around and slit his throat with the bowie knife—but after what he calls "the cutting" is done, he is forced to "[cast] about for an appropriate feeling to match the deed." He knows, because of all of the stories he has heard, "that great deeds were performed with great feelings" (242). But the banal reality of what Lancelot calls "the deed"—a term that insists that the murder of Jacoby is the stuff of legend too—cannot match the heroic quality of his ancestor's famous duel. For as Lancelot surely knows, the details are wrong. Unlike his ancestor's opponent, who was armed with a bowie knife of his own, Janos Jacoby was naked, defenseless, and taken by surprise. Faced with that disjunction between his actions and the family lore that inspired them, Lancelot cannot sustain his tentative identification with Manson Maury Lamar. The narrative pattern that he has borrowed from his family's storied past fails him, and the story that he tells Percival threatens to go astray, revealing unforeseen possibilities.

But Lancelot's most elaborate attempt to impose an acceptable pattern on

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those events grows out of the Arthurian legends that he and Percival had read together as boys. Indeed, that is the reason why Lancelot insists on once again calling his old friend "Percival"—even though his real name is probably Harry and he has taken on the religious name of John.[1] As Lancelot acknowledges when he refers to their former habit of calling each other by different names, "depending on the oblique and obscure circumstances of our lives—*and our readings*," they both sought out paradigms for their characters and their futures in the books they read and the stories they heard (9, my emphasis). For the two boys, as Lewis Lawson has suggested in "Walker Percy's Silent Character," Camelot provided a model of noble behavior to emulate (182).

Now, however, Lancelot attempts to revive and transform the narrative pattern that he and Percival had earlier tried to assimilate. And so, on the third day of his conversations with Percival, just before he brings up Manson Maury Lamar's famous duel, he suggests that he finally understands the true nature of the events that he has been gradually recounting over the past two days. "I think I see now what I am doing," he tells Percival. "I am reliving with you my quest. That's the only way I can bear to think about it" (137). In this version, Lancelot is "the Knight of the Unholy Grail," and his search for evidence of Margot's infidelity is a quest for sin, because, as Lancelot has previously insisted to Percival, "If there is such a thing as sin, evil, a living malignant force, there must be a God!" (138, 52).

Unlike the other narrative patterns that Lancelot tries to assimilate, however, the quest for the Unholy Grail is entirely an afterthought, an interpretation imposed on his actions in retrospect. There is no evidence that he ever thought of himself in those terms at the time of the events that he narrates. Only a year later, as he struggles to come to grips with what he has done, does he seize on his and Percival's boyhood fascination with Arthurian legend and apply the framework of the quest narrative to his own actions, as if it were an alchemical solution that could transform a base metal into something finer, more heroic. Consequently, even Lancelot has trouble sustaining that vision. When he first offers it to Percival and then immediately admits that "That's the only way I can bear to think about it," he acknowledges the gap, the metaphorical space, that exists between that tenuous vision of a quest and the sordid reality of what took place at Belle Isle. Further, he admits how badly he needs to close that gap. He can only stand to remember those events when they are transformed in that manner.

Ultimately, that vision—like the attempt to see himself as re-enacting his ancestor's duel—collapses under the weight of its own pretensions. Just as the banal reality of Jacoby's murder did not give rise to "the great feelings" that Lancelot expected, the desperate thrashings of Margot and Jacoby in bed hardly constituted the evil he sought. As he tells Percival, "There is no unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail" (253). Yet perhaps even that assertion is self-protective. For surely the evil that Lancelot sought was manifest in his own murderous actions—as Percival's reaction to his story suggests. "You act as if I were Satan

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showing you the kingdoms of the world from the pinnacle of the temple," Lancelot observes, almost reflexively borrowing once again from another narrative source (254).

In the end, Lancelot is a failure as a storyteller. For though he eventually relates all—or at least most—of what happened at Belle Isle (there are hints that some details are omitted, such as the mutilation of Jacoby's body [Vauthier 41]), he cannot make those events cohere according to the narrative patterns that he has inherited, and his story subsequently slips out of his control. Where Lancelot had hoped to stand revealed in his listener's perception as a heroic figure, he is shown instead as the devil himself. And, on another level, Lancelot stands revealed as a storyteller who is thwarted by his own materials, as a symbol perhaps of all novelists who find themselves following in tow behind fictional characters who seem to have taken on lives of their own.

Indeed, *Lancelot* is ultimately a meditation on the seductions and ambiguities of storytelling. On one level, it powerfully depicts the way the stories we read and hear and see shape our consciousnesses. For in the end it is not just Lancelot who is seduced by the narratives he has consumed, but everyone in the novel. Mark Merlin wants to live out Hemingwayesque fantasies. Margot and Lancelot's older daughter Lucy and even Elgin try to reenact scenarios from the movies they have seen when the film crew invades Belle Isle. On another level, though, *Lancelot* depicts the circuitous nature of storytelling. For the way that Lancelot's own story slips away from him, inadvertently revealing an unexpected truth about his own capacity for evil, is a metaphor for the way that the novel itself exposes Percy's own long-standing conflict between his dedication to his art and the strong moral and religious convictions that he brought to his work. As his biographer Jay Tolson notes, "While committed to the integrity of the work of art, Percy still did not believe that art existed as its own justification. The end of art was knowledge, which to Percy was knowledge of the Christian message" (300).

In *Lancelot*, that aspect of Percy's character, the part of him that once admitted that "what I really want to do is tell people *what they must do and what they must believe if they want to live*," is embodied in the novel's protagonist (qtd. in Tolson, 300). Over the course of telling his story to Percival, Lancelot repeatedly lapses into long digressions in which he condemns the corruption of contemporary America and envisions a vaguely fascist movement that will "set it out for you, what is good and what is bad, and no Jew-Christian waffling bullshit about it" (177). Yet in allowing Lancelot's storytelling to become so entangled with his moralizing, Percy—inadvertently perhaps—satirizes his description of himself in interviews and essays as "a polemicist and a moralist" (Lawson and Kramer 89).

Indeed, as Lancelot Lamar haltingly relates his narrative to Percival, we see in him a dark reflection of Percy himself as storyteller-cum-moralist, and consequently the artistic problems that bedevil much of Percy's other fiction take on a

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strange new light in his fourth novel. In *Lancelot*, as in much of Percy's other work, most of the women are either idealized innocents or sexual predators. Yet here, it is clear that that vision belongs to Lancelot. Margot confirms that in the final delirious moments before her death when she says, "With you I had to be either—or—but never a—uh—woman" (245). In a similar fashion, almost all of the secondary figures in *Lancelot* are satiric caricatures, what Joyce Carol Oates once described as "hardly more than assemblages of shrewdly noted details" (64). Troy Dana, the star of the movie being made, is a vacant blonde surfer from the California beaches; Merlin is a would-be *auteur* who dreams of making a film "about a man and a woman who are good comrades, go on a hunt, and then have good sex together"; Jacoby is a European intellectual of dubious background (203). Yet in *Lancelot* those unremittingly savage characterizations have been filtered through the distorted optic of Lancelot's narrative. Where in Percy's other fiction—particularly such works as *Love in the Ruins*, *The Second Coming*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*—such scathing portrayals of the secondary characters are clearly the result of Percy's satiric intentions, in *Lancelot* we do not know whether to ascribe such characterizations to the angry storyteller in the madhouse or the self-described moralist who created him. Because Lancelot is at once a moralist himself—William Rodney Allen calls him "the voice through which [Percy] lets loose his self-professed desire 'to attack things in our culture'" (111)—and at the same time a storyteller whose convictions help shape his narrative, it is possible to see his misogynistic vision and his unsympathetic depictions of those around him as an effort by Percy to satirize his own intentions as a writer, to expose the limitations of the moralist when he seeks to embody his principles in narrative art.

Ultimately, then, *Lancelot* is a novel *about* storytelling. For in the figure of Lancelot Lamar we are offered a representation of a storyteller whose own efforts at narrative are infused with a desperate and agonizing self-consciousness of other narratives. Moreover, the self-conscious quality of Lancelot's own narrative spills over into the novel that contains it, transforming that novel into a self-referential work that implicitly critiques its author's own divided intentions. *Lancelot*, in many ways Percy's most deviously complicated novel, is a house of mirrors endlessly reflecting its own fictive processes.

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NOTE

1. Ultimately, however, Lancelot's intentions as a storyteller become confused with Percy's. For while it is Lancelot who insists on the Arthurian framework of the story that he tells to the man he calls Percival, Mark Merlin's name seems to be Percy's invention, not Lancelot's. Though it is possible that Lancelot has renamed the man known as Merlin in a desperate attempt to maintain metaphorical consistency, none of the other character's names fit into this pattern. Why would Lancelot rename one character—and a relatively minor character at that—and not others? Merlin's

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name is, I think, evidence of Percy's own inconsistency. It hints at the confusion of motives that leads, as I argue at the end of this essay, to *Lancelot* becoming a self-referential fiction that itself comments on Percy's own divided intentions as a writer.

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