

(11) Southern Existentialism and Genre Literature

Walker Percy, Richard Ford, Cormac McCarthy

Existentialism

- Existentialist Occupations • existentialism arises from our weariness with the stereotypical everyday life and awareness of human mortality
- the only philosophy to deal with **the absurd**, which springs from our striving despite our knowledge of death
- focuses on the conditions of existence of the individual and his responsibilities, actions, emotions and thoughts
- seeks to define how to achieve a fulfilling life, what obstacles must be overcome and what factors are involved
- concerned with the existential obstacles and distractions of despair, angst, **alienation**, boredom and absurdity
- American Existentialism • existentialism was rooted first in Jewish circles in the 1950s, was associated for instance with Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), Henry Roth's *Call It Sleep* (1934), also with Saul Bellow and Bernard Malamud
- introduced to the South by the essayist and novelist Walker Percy (1916–1990) at the beginning of the 1960s
- existentialism was originally associated with left-wing Marxist writers, Percy was however a Roman Catholic
- based his views on the French atheist existentialism of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, on the Catholic existentialism of Jacques **Maritain** and especially on the Danish Catholic pre-existentialist Søren **Kierkegaard**
- Percy & Kierkegaard • Percy adopts the basic terms from Kierkegaard's *Either/Or* (1843), contrasting the atheist and believer views
- avoids the existentialist terms 'estrangement' and 'alienation', prefers Sartre's term nausea, malady or **malaise**
- malaise refers to the state of mind which doubts the meaning of existence and is tired of one's life and oneself
- Kierkegaard describes three means of overcoming malaise, Percy reproduces them in translations or digests
- **rotation**: experiencing something new beyond the expectation of something new, even a shocking experience
- **repetition**: promoting an unconscious stereotype to a conscious ritual, including the experiences of déjà vu
- **zone crossing**: moving from the already known to the yet unknown, either geographically or metaphorically

Walker Percy (1916–1990)

- Background • raised in Mississippi in the family of his uncle, William Alexander Percy, author of *Lanterns on the Levee*¹ (1941), a memoir presenting him as genteel, public-minded, scholarly, culturally conservative white Southerner
- realized the limitations of the mixture of secular traditionalism and fatalism that his 'Uncle Will' represented
- interested in science, medicine, psychoanalysis and philosophy of language, embarked on a serious course of philosophical and religious study when he contracted tuberculosis and was quarantined for an extended period
- returned to the South to spend most of his life in Covington, Louisiana, and converted to **Roman Catholicism**
- Philosophy • regarded the view of the human being in contemporary psychology, philosophy of science and linguistics as limiting, considered it erroneous to treat the human being as an animal species responding to its environment
- the formalism of adaptive responses to an environment cannot correctly render the concerns of human beings about moral responsibilities to other people and the questions about the purpose of life or the right way to lead it
- seeks to provide a disciplined true **account of meaning and being** which can take into consideration the limitations of the existing scientific descriptions without devoting itself to Kantian quests after absolute being
- believes that the inability of contemporary culture to provide a satisfactory account of meaning leads people to seek the **sense of being alive** in substitute extreme experiences as is the pursuit of power, which does not help
- the consequence of a materialist view of human nature is estrangement from God, estrangement from self and estrangement from language, which results in a life in that severe moral deadness alternates with a moral panic
- Writing • his novels are the artistic play of a disciplined intellectual with a broad scientific and philosophical knowledge
- ridicules the South with 'the storytelling tradition, sense of identity, tragic dimension, community, history', describes rather a culture of well-fed vulgarians who do not read or think much but who at least leave one alone
- his characters are Southerners only in nostalgic ways, they do not feel the desperate combination of love and guilt for their region, they are racist, not in the dramatic Southern way but in the impersonal way of Northerners
- the characters live in a despairing world, but do not **despair** in the characteristically Southern way of grim stoical fatalists, they cannot despair because their everydayness denies them the capacity to name their feelings
- The Moviegoer* (1961)
- Characters • his first novel, winner of the National Book Award, reminiscent of Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger* (1942)
- features a comically **alienated idler** whose idleness criticizes the pointlessness of everyone else's industry, a character type similar to Melville's Ishmael, Thoreau's persona in *Walden* (1854) or Fitzgerald's Nick Carraway
- includes the morally earnest character of Aunt Emily, modelled on the author's uncle William Alexander Percy
- the protagonist, Binx, is a stockbroker because it is a job he does not have to take seriously as work, he holes up in a lower-middle-class neighbourhood rather to live than in the respectable district with the rest of his family

¹ A levee is an embankment raised to prevent a river from overflowing; Percy was a member of a commission to prevent floods.

- observes the little turns of posture and voice that disclose the illusions of particular character types, delights in satirical thumbnail descriptions of passing acquaintances, proud of the biting perceptiveness of his observations
- Moviegoing
- feels oppressed by a sense of the everydayness of life and searches for something different from the everyday, feels the **malady of the quotidian** when he sits in a large car, hears public figures orate or overhears earnest talk
 - spends his time going to moviehouses, taking delight in the falseness of the movies because in their transparent falsehood they offer him a way of withholding himself from other things equally false but in less obvious ways
 - the other characters regard his moviegoing as a retreat from reality, but their lives are no more real than Binx's, except that they are not capable to recognize that the uneasiness they keep on feeling is despair of an unreal life
- Women
- Binx's other refuge from the everyday is the experience of random sexual passion, as with his secretary Sharon
 - his relationship with his cousin Kate is different in that Kate has a despair about life similar to Binx's, except that it is unrelieved by an **ironic sensibility**, dating to the experience when her fiancé was killed in a car crash
 - Kate learns from the accident similarly as Binx learns from his being wounded in Korea that the emotional heightening which comes from the presence of death substitutes the sense of reality that lacks in everyday life
 - Kate is put by her family under the care of a psychiatrist who keeps on trying to return her to the well-adjusted everydayness that she wishes to escape, she also attempts to commit suicide because she wants to stop not living
- Conclusion
- Kate flees with Binx to Chicago, but the romantic trip does not work out, and they return to New Orleans on Ash Wednesday, face Binx's wrathful aunt and decide to get married, while Binx also decides to study medicine
 - Binx contemplates the odd mix of the worldly and the unworldly in an African American businessman leaving the church having received the Ash Wednesday ashes and wonders if the same can be found in Kate and himself
 - the ending is suffused with the author's own special brand of ironic existentialism combined with urgent **faith**, Binx may not have found the meaning of experience but at least he does not know for sure that it is meaningless
- Baptism
- The Last Gentleman* (1966)**
- the protagonist of the novel, Will Barrett, is the descendant of a distinguished Southern family in moral decline
 - becomes drawn to a brilliant and sensitive young man dying of leukaemia and tries to prepare him for death
 - evades several choices prepared by the man's family, including his Babbitt father, his paranoid anti-Semitic mother, his sister-in-law's New Age religions and his brother's devotion to sex, alcohol and thoughts of suicide
 - accepts the choice of his sister, a self-sacrificing Catholic, and manages to have the dying man baptised before he dies, which may not be helpful to the sick but at least persuades his brother to postpone his scheduled suicide
- Dystopian Satire
- Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (1971)**
- his masterpiece, a comic dystopian fantasy and political satire, set in a Louisiana in which the cultural conflicts of the 1960s have continued unchecked for a few decades, turning the region into a site of decay and devastation
 - the Catholic church is split into three parts, one a right-wing American parody of Catholicism, another a parody of liberation theology and the last is a disconsolate remnant still loyal to Rome, including the protagonist
 - the political parties split too, the Republicans are the Knotheads, a self-righteously Christian party concerned chiefly with protecting its money interests, the Democrats are the Lefts, advocates of extremely liberal policies
 - the Lefts suffer from Angelism, leaving this world for a world of pure thought, the Knotheads suffer from rage
 - two more groups opt out of the quarrel between the Lefts and the Knotheads, the Bantus are essentially the Black Panther party who raid gold courses and shopping centres, the Choctaws are the hippies who cultivate pot
- Faustian Theme
- the protagonist is the 'bad Catholic' of the subtitle, a neurophysiologist named Dr. Thomas More, who favours neither of the parties and treats them both with an irony qualified by some personal affection for their adherents
 - More invents a device which makes it possible to diagnose people's moral and philosophical problems and to remove the split between mind and body by describing the human being rigorously as both a spirit and a body
 - More succumbs to the temptation of signing the device over to the Devil, a pharmaceutical salesman who alters the device so that it alters states of mind and exacerbates the differences between the Knotheads and Lefts
 - chaos breaks out until More vanquishes the salesman with a last-second prayer to his collateral ancestor, St. Thomas More, on which the tensions subside, the Bantus strike oil and take up golf, and More marries his nurse
- Essays
- The Message in the Bottle* (1975), *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983)**
- collections of professional and popular essays on the subjects of psychoanalysis and philosophy of language
- Arthurian Parallel
- Lancelot* (1977)**
- the novel follows a dejected lawyer, Lancelot Lamar, who murders his wife on discovering that he is not the father of her daughter and is sent to a mental home where he tells his story through his retrospective reflections
 - the protagonist experiences a vision of a modern American consumer culture whose moral emptiness he seeks to expose, he is compared to Sir Lancelot and his quest against depravity is linked to the quest of the Holy Grail
- Sequel Novel
- The Second Coming* (1980)**
- a sequel to *The Last Gentleman*, follows the protagonist in a somewhat sentimental retelling of *The Moviegoer*

Sequel
Novel***The Thanatos² Syndrome*** (1987)

- a sequel to *Love in the Ruins*, the novel reflects the author's disapproval of mechanical attempts to manipulate people in the service of presumed social good, because moral aims can only be served through moral reflection
- depicts an attempt to reform people's behaviour and raise their intelligence by dissolving heavy sodium in the water supply which runs disastrously astray, lowering sexual inhibitions resulting in an epidemic of child abuse
- suggests that a moral motive detached from the divine means also a detachment from circumspection about fallen human nature, so that in our certainty about being in right we may turn the best things to the worst uses

Essays

Signposts in a Strange Land (1991)

- a posthumously published collection of essays, edited and given its name by the Jesuit priest Patrick Samway

Richard Ford (b. 1944)Influences
on Writing

- compared variously to Hemingway for his occupation with male affairs and to **Updike** for his suburbia themes
- learned his realistic description of characters and setting from **Hemingway** and his view of success and failure from Fitzgerald, also admired Faulkner who inspired his Southern grotesque novel *A Piece of My Heart* (1976)
- influenced most by Walker **Percy**, through whom he knew Camus, Sartre or Kierkegaard, but is atheist himself
- condemns Catholicism but most of all condemns those who give up their lives and resort to committing suicide
- avoids presenting any moral judgements in his writing, treats his characters with a detached, dispassionate tone

Writing
Subjects

- captures the **dark aspects** of ordinary people which may be suddenly revealed in a violent or extreme action
- describes characters who lead commonplace suburbia lives but happen to commit a criminal or immoral action
- portrays mostly men in their forties, divorced, leading their everyday lives and looking out for another chance
- focuses on dangling men who lead outwardly comfortable lives, as in the movies, journalism or insurance, but who are wryly ill at ease, they are at odds with themselves and the world, sunk in an inevitably quiet desperation
- his characters dread inconsequence, fear that they are undistinguishable from others, that they are swallowed by the anonymous 'weave of culture', an accumulation of insignificances, a culture not just ordinary but blank

Good Man
Novel***The Ultimate Good Luck*** (1981)

- a novel influenced by Graham Greene, set in Mexico, shows a man helping his ex-girlfriend save her brother
- suggests that one must not avoid dangerous situations so as to gain some experience and not to waste one's life

Bascombe
Novel***The Sportswriter*** (1986)

- the first of the series of three novels concentrated on Frank Bascombe, a failed novelist turned sportswriter, who undergoes a spiritual crisis following the death of his son; inspired by his brief occupation as a sportswriter

Short
Stories***Rock Springs*** (1987)

- a short story collection, dealing mostly with dysfunctional families and their effects on young male narrators

Growing-
-Up Novel***Wildlife*** (1990)

- a novel narrated from the perspective of a teenage boy whose parents are experiencing a difficult marriage
- the subject of a maturing boy coming to terms with the problems of his parents recurs in more of his writings

Bascombe
Sequel***Independence Day*** (1995)

- a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, a continuation of the life of Frank Bascombe, now a middle-aged real estate agent, who spends the title holiday visiting his ex-wife, his troubled son, his current lover and several clients

Existentialist
Novellas***Women with Men*** (1997)

- a volume containing two existentialist novellas set in Paris and the short story 'Jealous', printed in *New Yorker*

Bascombe
Sequel***The Lay of the Land*** (2006)

- the last Frank Bascombe novel, set against the background of presidential elections, following the now older protagonist struggling with prostate cancer and just arranging a Thanksgiving dinner for his family and friends

Cormac McCarthy (b. 1933)Writing
Subjects

- meditates on the unhomelike nature of our environment, the scary disconnection of the human and non-human
- one of the essential preoccupations of his fiction is the elemental and equivocal activity of human settlement
- qualifies as a **literary hybrid** writing in a confluence of styles, reflecting the plural environment we all inhabit
- portrays the collapse of our cultural illusions about belonging to one stable community and a set of traditions
- depicts a constantly changing landscape in which different cultures see their otherness and try to understand it
- makes his characters cross and recross the landscape, dissolving the oppositions of the clearing and wilderness

² In Greek mythology, Thanatos is the daemon personification of Death. In psychoanalysis, human beings have a life instinct, called Eros, and a death drive, called Thanatos. In literature, these opposites are comparable to the Dionysian and Apollonian dichotomy.

- melts down the structures of perception and reveals what is today a fluid 'world without measure and bound'
- all his novels are preoccupied with a sense of blankness, evil and above all **homelessness**, showing the 'dark parody of progress' of our lives, which is in fact a restless wandering, cultural and topographical displacement
- his early novels rewrite Southern subjects and themes, discussing the clash of pastoralism and the anti-pastoral
- the geography of his first four novels is confined to a single Southern place in and about Maryville, Tennessee
- his later novels deconstruct **Western** myth and tell stories of a newer and truer West, using the Western setting
- the later novels invert traditional Western stories about crisis and redemption, lacking any sign of regeneration
- the Western novels are marked by a sense of the bleakness of Western space, the unobstructed extension of the landscape triggers not the conventional feelings of freedom but of empty immensity, the denial of human value

South
& West***The Orchard Keeper*** (1965)

Initiation

- his first novel, influenced by Faulkner, about a boy mentored by an outlawed bootlegger and a reclusive hermit

Outer Dark (1968)

Incest

- follows the search of a woman for her infant, conceived with her brother, who left the baby in the forest to die

Child of God (1973)

Perversity

- the novel portrays a lonely young man, deprived by the isolation of landscape, and his decline into perversity

Suttree (1979)

Outcasts

- shows the experiences of the eponymous character, a fisherman on the Tennessee River, among the homeless

Blood Meridian (1985)

Frontier

- a violent frontier tale about a boy who joins a gang of outlaws hunting Indians along the U.S.-Mexico border

The Border Trilogy: ***All the Pretty Horses*** (1992), ***The Crossing*** (1994), ***Cities of the Plain*** (1998)Border
Trilogy

- the first volume is the coming of age of a teenage Texan cowboy travelling to Mexico, made into a film (2000)
- the second book portrays the picaresque adventures of two brothers moving between New Mexico and Mexico
- the last volume brings together the characters of the previous books, employing them on a New Mexico ranch

No Country for Old Men (2005)

Western

- a modern bloody western, named for Yeats's poem 'Sailing to Byzantium', made into a successful film (2007)

The Road (2006)

Dystopia

- a dystopian growing-up novel, a Pulitzer Prize winner, about a father and son trying to survive after a disaster