

THE NEED FOR THE DISABLED BODY IN *THE MOVIEGOER*

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In *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling explains the correct way to see a movie, stating that he must speak with the ticket seller, otherwise he would “be lost, cut loose metaphorically speaking” (75). While such a claim may be indicative of Binx’s idiosyncratic system of ordering his world, it nevertheless assumes that, without a physical connection to another person, the solace of moviegoing is not only incomplete but dangerous. This need for something physical to anchor the moviegoing experience reflects the book’s larger concern with the human body. The instinct in *The Moviegoer* is to see Bolling’s conversion from aloof, escapist voyeur to one who accepts responsibility as a conversion caused by the intellect: a change based solely on contemplations, judgments, and mental responses. Yet in order for an ethical change that demands responsibility for another to occur, a right attitude toward the body is required, and this right attitude is created primarily through the disabling of the body. Characters that are healthy and seemingly protected by their wealth and safety are able to reassign the body a lesser role that intellectualizes existence, necessarily creating a distorted view of personhood. A disabled body in the text, however, forces an awareness of both self and the other that prompts ethical responsibilities, which are at the core of Binx’s “search.” The compromised body, witnessed briefly in Binx’s accident and more fully in his half-brother Lonnie, forces the “owner” to understand the full reality of his or her own existence, as well as the precarious nature of that existence. Only when the physical reality of existence and the looming reality of that existence’s demise are recognized can responsibility for the other actually occur.

Catholicism and the Body

An appropriate starting point for any discussion of the body in *The Moviegoer* is Percy's Catholic faith. While Percy had his own experiences with the disabled body during his time at a sanitarium for tuberculosis, Catholic theology has a more immediate impact on the novel. In Catholicism, most prominent in the life of Lonnie, the sacraments are not merely symbolic representations of a spiritual reality. They are physical actions that create a spiritual reality: one is physically immersed into death and resurrection, physically fed salvation in the wafer, and physically anointed with spiritual healing. The religious life of the Catholic is defined by these sacraments as well as secondary actions with the body (for example, blessing, fasting, venerating, kneeling). In "The Holiness of the Ordinary," Percy speaks to this very idea of the nature of the sacrament and the physical world: "Add to this anthropology the special marks of the Catholic Church: the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, which, whatever else they do, confer the highest significance upon the ordinary things of this world, bread, wine, water, touch, breath, words, talking, listening—and what do you have? You have a man in a predicament and on the move in a real world of real things, a world which is a sacrament and a mystery; a pilgrim whose life is a searching and a finding" (*Signposts* 369).

As the above words of Percy attest, the Catholic sacraments are not symbolic actions, standing in for something occurring at a psychological or spiritual level. The physical act helps create the spiritual reality. Aquinas, invoking Augustine in *Summa Theologica*, states that the sacraments are not merely symbols or signs, as "a sign is that which conveys something else to the mind . . . the visible sacrifice is the sacrament" (2339). In modern Catholicism, this relationship to the physical is retained, as the official *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that penance occurs not through mental assent, but physical action: "fasting, prayer, and almsgiving" (360). Right worship by the Catholic, therefore, necessarily involves both the physical and spiritual realms, and to divorce them is to lead to a misunderstanding of personhood. A believer cannot simply go through the sacraments without some acquiescence of the will, and likewise, a believer cannot disregard the sacraments by engaging with the church intellectually.

The nature of Binx's search complements this idea of the physical body as a sacramental, vital part of the person. While Binx is initially coy about what his search actually means, it is clearly a search that is rooted in physical experience rather than intellectual insight. We are first introduced to the idea of Binx's search through a reporting of his war injury. Describing how he "came to [him]self" (10) (a term very similar to the Greek term for repentance: "metanoia"), Binx details the physical injury to his shoulder and then the sheer physical-ness of the scene: "Six inches from my nose a dung beetle was scratching around under the leaves. As I watched, there awoke in me an immense curiosity. I was onto something. I vowed that if I ever got out of this fix, I would pursue the search" (11). The search, therefore, is brought about by physical injury, and the first sight that rhetorically connects to the search is a seemingly unimportant yet physical act. In the same way that the physical initiates and reflects the search, the lack of awareness deadens the search. Binx states that when he recovers—that is, returns to being unaware of his body—he forgets the search. Later he states that only disaster can break up the everydayness that murders the search. It is a thought he must have communicated to Kate at some point, as she asks him, referring to his own experience with a physically compromised body, "Listen. Isn't it true that the only happy men are wounded men? Admit it! Isn't that the truth?" (181). In Binx's own experience, then, the search is necessarily a part of the physical world. It is not any part of the physical world, however, as Binx realizes that to be a researcher leads him to a place where solutions are found but the scientist is left over after the equations. The search is united not just to the physical but to the physically wounded body. The specter of death creates the option of life, as Percy states in *Lost in the Cosmos*: "The ex-suicide opens his front door, sits down on the steps, and laughs. Since he has the option of being dead, he has nothing to lose by being alive. It is good to be alive. He goes to work because he doesn't have to" (78). Binx's search, then, is a response to the self when physically compromised, which is to say the body in danger of mortality.

The Disabled Body and the Search

In his book *Disability Theory*, Tobin Siebers writes of the idea that the person with the normalized body is no longer "aware" of the body. When pain

or lack of access is not present, then the body can become seemingly immortal because the normative expectations of physical experience are met. In the world of *The Moviegoer*, the healthy body is essential to becoming assimilated into the everydayness of existence. Max Webb, describing the tools available to Binx to order his life, states, "He just wants to live with awareness and wonder. His only tools for doing so are his memory and his ability to see himself as a stranger to the world even while he is very much in the world" (10). If Binx has only memory and a mental ability to create awareness, it is because he no longer has a physically compromised body, which forces awareness due to its embodiment of the threat of mortality. Binx has had his experience with the wounded physical body, of course, but his problem in maintaining his search is that he recovers. His body, only briefly experiencing the threat and illumination of mortality, falls back into the everydayness that the healthy body permits. When he is injured in the car accident with Sharon, he is openly thankful as physical pain necessarily creates a paradigm shift where the search, because of the threat of mortality, is possible again:

Yet how, you might wonder, can even a minor accident be considered good luck?

Because it provides a means of winning out over the malaise, if one has the sense to take advantage of it. (120)

Characters who are protected from the threat of danger to their body, therefore, also become agents in detracting from Binx's search. This allows the healthy to reassign the meaning of the physical body, which regularly signifies the body as a means of immortalizing convenience and pleasure.

Aunt Emily is perhaps the most common example of this kind of behavior to the body. Her first reported interaction with Binx occurs while he is still a boy and his brother, Scott, has died of pneumonia. Her advice to the boy is to "act like a soldier" (4). The translation, it seems, is to ignore the death of the body through all possible means. She states she knows it will be difficult for Binx, though the boy claims to have thought this to be one of the more simple actions, as though ignoring the death of his brother is a perfectly reasonable expectation. The diminishing of the body and its

mortality by Aunt Emily is perhaps more easily seen when her desired reaction from Binx is contrasted with his father's reaction shortly after Scott dies. Binx tells us, "I turned and saw what he required of me—very special father and son we were that summer, he staking his everything this time on a perfect comradeship—and I, seeing in his eyes the terrible request, requiring from me his very life . . . an intimacy too intimate" (204). Whereas Binx's father is wounded by death and is dependent upon another, Emily requires that Binx act invulnerable to death. Binx acquiesces to Emily; to his father, he "refused him what I knew I could not give" (204). This contrast between Binx's father and Emily is repeated when Binx stares into his father's picture, which separates him from the confidence and assuredness of other family members. When Emily appears, not only does Binx turn away from the photograph, but he states, "In a split second I have forgotten everything, the years in Gentilly, even my search" (26). Emily stands as a figure opposed to Binx's father, but more significantly for present purposes as a person who demands stoicism in the face of degradation of the body. Rather than accept not only the impact of Scott's death, but the existential reminder that death is a possibility, she expects a steadfast and purposeful denial of mortality.

This "soldiering on" expected by Emily in her experiences with Binx both in the past and in the present is repeated in more secondary characters, as well as in the culture at large. Uncle Jules, who to continue the imaginary imagery of military stoicism Emily calls a "Cato," is successful by ignoring all the troubling aspects of life. This of course goes beyond the physical body, but we nevertheless read an ignorance and aloofness toward physical tragedy in Uncle Jules that is consistent with Emily: "Uncle Jules is the only man I know whose victory in the world is total and unqualified. . . . For the world he lives in, the City of Man, is so pleasant that the City of God must hold little in store for him" (31). Other characters, such as Walter, who brings Binx along on a fishing journey with the false ideal that they have somehow mastered their unspoken searches through the physical pleasure of boating and fishing, and the Levines, who use bourgeois ideals of values and money to create the pretense of true success, all exist in a kind of bubble that denies the troublesome aspect of the inevitable death of the body and, of course, the person. Such denial is only possible, however, when the body is healthy. David Mitchell and Susan Snyder state in their seminal *Narrative Prosthesis*

that disability is consistently used in literature in which physical and cognitive differences have been narrated “as alien to the normal course of human affairs. To represent disability is to engage oneself in an encounter with that which is believed to be off the map of recognizable human experiences” (5). In *The Moviegoer*, the physically disabled body is an alien experience, but nevertheless a positive one. The normative body allows for an ignorance of reality, and eventually a malaise and despair that a healthy Binx cannot endure. His physically disabled body is unrecognizable to Aunt Emily’s and others’ “human experiences,” but to their own spiritual detriment.

While the denial of the non-normative, compromised body may create the opportunity for Emily and others to reassign the body’s role, it cannot change the fact that in *The Moviegoer* the physical-ness of personhood is an existential reality, just as in Catholicism, denial of the importance of the sacraments does not negate the importance of the sacraments. This leads characters to attempt to reach the search through physical means while maintaining their denial of the mortality that the compromised body assumes. The result of these attempts, of course, can only prove to be empty and frustrating experiences. Binx’s own romantic desires toward women are ultimately no different from those of the romantic he meets on the bus who will one day scare away real companionship with a woman due to his dreaming. When Binx tells the reader about the idea of the search, it causes him to “become absorbed and for a minute or so forget about the girl” (13). If the search causes him to purge thoughts of “the girl,” then the rhetorical girl causes him to forget about the search. When toward the end of the book Binx states that the search has been killed, he immediately moves on to Sharon’s roommate, Joyce, in an empty gesture of sexual gratification. The Sharons and Lindas in his life are a part of the malaise that no sexual conquest or MG sports car can alleviate. While undoubtedly his attempts with women are attempts to satisfy his physical body, they are another example of reassigning the role of the body into one that is fruitless and inevitably alienating.

Binx’s own moviegoing, therefore, can be understood within the same paradigm as the dreaming of the romantic and the consistent desire for sexual gratification: an attempt to reassign the body’s role in the life of the individual. Binx attempts to create an alternative reality where Rory

Calhoun and William Holden mask the inevitabilities of the body. Binx's rules of moviegoing are all attempts to ground moviegoing in the physical, because he is well aware that the physical cannot be denied. Movie theater visits must be accompanied by physical interaction with the people working in the theaters; each movie has its own smell and season; certification is an attempt to make the reality of the movies validate physical reality because physical reality *must* be validated. While Binx's moviegoing is a misguided attempt at living a kind of immortality, this is not to suggest that moviegoing is somehow represented in the book as a necessarily alienating act. Moviegoing is a favorite pastime of the book's only character who consistently recognizes the reality of mortality through the compromised body because he is rhetorically defined through that compromised body: Lonnie. Lonnie's understanding of moviegoing, however, is different from that of his older half-brother. When they see the movie together, Lonnie is happy because the experience is a shared one: "A good night: Lonnie happy (he looks around at me with the liveliest sense of the secret between us . . .)" (143). There is a communion between Lonnie and Binx because of moviegoing that does not occur when Binx sees movies with Linda, Sharon, or even by himself. Here the experience becomes, like other experiences in Percy, "not merely the state of awareness or sensibility . . . [but] 'an exercise in inter-subjectivity'" (Lawson 105). Lonnie and Binx link through moviegoing, and the response is infectious. Binx, too, is as happy as he has been at any point in the book. The moviegoing experience is shaped by Lonnie's understanding of it, one that is rooted in Lonnie's right understanding of the body and its eventual mortality.

Lonnie, Kate, and the Search

Lonnie's own compromised body rhetorically defines him, as all experiences and interactions come as a result of his impairment. When he speaks to Binx about love, his inability to control tone makes Binx hear the words anew again; because of his compromised body, one must speak honestly when Binx would otherwise hide behind "smart-alecky" stances and aloofness. Whereas Binx understood the need for the search and then lost the desire due to his recovery, Lonnie is never to recover and, therefore, is in

a perpetual state of recognizing the search. John Desmond writes, "Unlike the sickness of malaisians in the culture, Lonnie's sickness is not unto death. His faith and hope in the risen Christ, confirmed in the Eucharist, enables him to live each day in the spirit, in anticipation of final glory" (199). While true, the reference to Lazarus must be qualified; Lonnie's sickness will indeed cause his death, but his intimate knowledge of this impending truth, unlike in Binx's injury, is what ensures Lonnie's rejection of an already-present "malaisian" glory. It is precisely his disabled condition that allows Lonnie to become aware of his own selfishness, as well as to see the answer to that selfishness in a responsibility to the other.

Lonnie confesses to Binx that he felt joy at both the failures and the death of his older brother, Duval. If such a statement is to be believed, it is perhaps the most selfish we have seen any character in the book. Lonnie immediately undoes this selfishness by confessing to Binx that he had these feelings and stating that he wants to make up for them. Both the manner of his reconciliation as well as the perceived need for it come through Lonnie's physical state. He desires to fast and to receive extreme unction, both actions which diminish the seeming invincibility of a healthy body. Fasting will end his "habitual disposition" (163), and extreme unction will be a physical reflection of forgiveness for his sins. Lonnie understands that the body must be used to create the betterment of the self; while his mother can only see that a sickly boy should not exercise physically demanding religious duties, Lonnie understands that *because* of his sickliness the physically demanding is exactly what is needed. Siebers states that the disabled are often depicted as psychologically locked within "a myth of hyper-individuality, a sense that each individual is locked in solitary confinement where suffering is an object of narcissistic contemplation" (60). Here, however, Lonnie's compromised body is constantly driving him to reach out to the other and undo his narcissism. His disability answers that narcissism by demanding a confrontation with the existential reality that we are responsible for other people. Binx says of Lonnie, "he has the gift of believing that he can offer his sufferings in reparation for men's indifference to the pierced heart of Jesus Christ" (137). These sufferings are physical, as is the remedy: when Lonnie takes the Eucharist, he "mediates God for Binx . . . he, in a sense, *becomes* Eucharist for him" (Newkirk 198). Lonnie understands that the right response

to intellectual malaise—even if it is not his own intellectual malaise—is the physical offering of suffering. Such recognition speaks to the physical aspect of the search, but it also speaks to how the search is ultimately answered: sacrifice of the self for another.

Lonnie's body reminds him of imminent death just as, for only a few moments in Korea, Binx's body reminded him of the same. Instead of death turning Lonnie inward in self-absorption, it pushes him outward toward responsibility for the other person. Binx states that one of the reasons he is Lonnie's favorite is because Binx doesn't pity him. There is no cause for self-pity for Lonnie because his disabled body causes him to care for the other. He offers his own physical sufferings for others' malaise, and he offers communion not for his own healing but for Binx's. There is no coincidence in how Percy organizes Lonnie and Binx's relationship. After the disabled boy tells Binx that he offers up his communion for him and then asks if he is loved, we are immediately shown Binx back in the MG with Sharon; the spiritual state should not be surprising: "On its way home the MG becomes infested with malaise" (166). The chapter ends with Sharon stating she must meet her fiancé, making Binx's relationship with her all the more absurd and Lonnie's sacrifice all the more exceptional.

As Binx and Kate speak about the imminent passing of Lonnie, Kate reacts to how physically decrepit the boy has become: "he's so hideously thin and yellow, like one of those wrecks lying on a flatcar at Dachau" (238). Immediately following this discussion, however, Binx reports to Kate that Lonnie has overcome his "habitual disposition," something we as the reader understand to be Lonnie's selfishness toward his dead brother. Rhetorically, then, the ideas are linked: the disabled body at its worst and the final victory for Lonnie over selfishness. It is a moment that provides the model for Binx's own converted relationship with the disabled body. As Franklin Arthur Wilson has observed, while Kate connects Lonnie with Dachau, "from Binx's reverse orientation . . . we suspect that the twin obscenities of a child's death and the Holocaust may be viewed within the reverse light of Christ's death and resurrection" (203). Binx's moment of injury has long faded, but once he is able to recognize the disabled body of Kate, then he is able to repeat Lonnie's (and Christ's) ethical mandate of responsibility for the other.

Part of Binx's search is completed before the chronology of the book

begins, when he reads *The Expanding Universe*; what he calls “the main goals of my search” (70) were met and, like the scientist-romantic, Binx feels left over. He shifts the understanding of his search from a “vertical” one to a “horizontal” one. The idea of a horizontal rather than vertical search speaks to the responsibility one has for another, and just as Lonnie offers his communion for Binx, so Binx begins to accept responsibility for his step-cousin. Kate offers herself to Binx metaphysically; she wants him to make decisions for her so that he operates as her quasi-God. Binx at this point in the novel, however, is unable to accept this responsibility with any degree of awareness. As Mary Grabar states, Kate “acts as a spiritual guide to Binx” (124). This is not because Kate is wiser (or more naive) than Binx, but because Kate, with her anxiety forcing her into self-torture, has an awareness that only the compromised body can bring. When Binx and Kate finally have sex on the train, Binx admits to his own shallow understanding of his relationship with her. Rather than recognizing an ethical dependence, Binx can neither make sex with Kate redemptive nor turn her into one of his Sharons and Lindas: “Flesh poor flesh failed us. The burden was too great and flesh poor flesh, neither hallowed by sacrament nor despised by spirit ... rendered null by the cold and fishy eye of the malaise” (200).

When the two reach Chicago, however, Binx is able to see Kate as though for the first time. Unlike the dreams and narratives that dominate other characters such as the romantic and Harold Graebner, Binx sees Kate as she is, a kind of vision of ontology that equates to his epiphany of the search while wounded: “There I see her plain, see plain for the first time since I lay wounded in a ditch and watched an Oriental finch scratching around in the leaves” (206). Conceptually, Binx sees her as a disabled person; the injury which initially prompts the search is the injury which demands Binx’s responsibility to Kate, a person who purposely flirts with destroying her body and consistently injures herself. The black man who emerges from the church for Ash Wednesday is sanctified by his physical actions; at the same moment, Binx swears allegiance to Kate and asks her to stop injuring herself. These two moments are metaphorically the same: a recognition that, because of our injured bodies, it is through our bodies we find salvation. It is only by Kate injuring herself that Binx first sees his responsibility for Kate, yet the man emerging from the church is perhaps the wisest in the

book: he needs no disabled body. He understands, as a practicing Catholic, the power of the physical world through a sacramental life.

Only through physical injury does Binx recognize the initial need for a search. Once recovery occurs, he must battle the malaise and everydayness that present a false promise of immortality and comfort. A young man such as Lonnie, permanently disabled, is constantly engaged with the search, and the threat of mortality provides both himself and Binx the ability to see the search as a horizontal one that requires responsibility for the other. What Binx's injury begins and Lonnie's body models is ultimately acted upon due to Kate's disabling of her own body, which forces Binx to finally take responsibility for the other. The promise of "soldiering" in stoicism or finding contentment in ultimately selfish uses of the body is shown to be a misunderstanding permitted only by the obliviousness of a healthy body and intellectualized life. The promise of a resurrected body for Lonnie and a Kate who can fully trust herself is for another story; *The Moviegoer* takes us only as far as the disabled body can: the recognition of the search and the ethical responsibility toward the other.

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