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"Novelizing Philosophy": Reading Walker Percy's *Lancelot* Through Marcelian Creative Fidelity

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Abstract: This article offers a reading of American novelist Walker Percy's (1916-1990) novel, *Lancelot*, through the lens of French existentialist Gabriel Marcel and his notion of creative fidelity. I argue that reading Percy's *Lancelot* through this lens allows the reader to better understand why the protagonist Lancelot disastrously fails in terms of intersubjective relationships and why hope might still exist for him even after the horrors depicted in the novel. The aim of the article is not only to trace one strand of the Marcelian influence on Percy, but also to offer some insights into the protagonist that have escaped previous reviews and commentaries.

I

In a 1987 interview, American novelist Walker Percy was asked how his personal situation influenced his writing.[1] Percy responded by noting that after the second World War he was not practicing medicine (though possessing a medical degree) and was spending most of his time writing philosophical articles and going to the cinema. With neither of these occupations being lucrative, he decided to take a page from the French philosophical tradition and incarnate his ideas within novels. In a word, to "novelize philosophy." This decision would lead to a career as a noteworthy American novelist of the Southern tradition, with his six philosophical novels drawing specifically from the perspective of Christian existentialism.

Percy first discovered the Continental European philosophical tradition during one of the most trying times of his life. Though born and raised in the south, Percy matriculated to Columbia University Medical school in New York City, earning his M.D. in 1941.[2] During his time interning at Bellevue Hospital in 1942 he contracted tuberculosis, forcing him to abandon his medical career and take up residence at Sarnac Lake sanatorium in upstate New York. During his time of recuperation, Percy read voraciously. In addition to the literary giants of Dostoevsky[3], Lawrence, Joyce, and Hopkins, he also read the philosophical musings of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Sartre, and Marcel. While much attention has been paid to the primary influence of

[1] See Walker Percy, "An Interview with Zoltan Abadi-Nagy" in *Sign-Posts in a Strange Land*, ed. Patrick Samway (New York: Noonday Press, 1992), p.382.

[2] For an excellent biography, see Patrick Samway's magisterial *Walker Percy: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997).

[3] See Jessica Hooten Wilson, *Walker Percy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Search for Influence* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2017).

Kierkegaard on Percy, relatively little has been done on the Marcelian influence[4], though commentators (and Percy himself) continually list Marcel among those philosophers who influenced his work.[5] It is to this gap in scholarship that this article speaks.

Although Marcel's philosophical influence can be seen in myriad ways in Percy's work, we will focus here on his mid-career novel, *Lancelot.* Arguably Percy's darkest and most explicit novel, *Lancelot* tells the complex and confounding tale of Lancelot Andrewes Lamar and his descent into murder and destruction. I argue that reading this novel through the lens of Marcel's creative fidelity can lead one to a deeper understanding of the dark character of Lancelot and why nevertheless there may remain hope for him at the novel's conclusion.

II

Published in 1977, *Lancelot* came roughly at the midway point of Percy's career and strikes a unique tenor when compared to his other novels. The entirety of the novel takes place in a small room in a psychiatric hospital where Lancelot is being held. Within the confines of this cell, Lancelot engages in a series of conversations with a priest-psychiatrist whom he calls Percival and whom he has known from youth. It is to Percival, or Fr. John as his true name is, that Lancelot speaks about his life, his philosophy, and most importantly, about the events that led him to be committed to the institution. Through a series of recollections, the reader learns about Lancelot's early life, his marriages to Lucy and then Margot, and the events that led him to murder Margot and destroy their home. It is only after Lancelot has recounted these horrific deeds and indicated his troubling future plans, that we hear a response from Percival, who remains silent until the novel's last page.

Lancelot's monologues, of which the novel is mainly comprised, can best be seen as a series of recollections of the failed relationships in his life and how they contributed to the diminution of his personhood and to his eventual acts of violence and destruction. In brief, Percy's tale of Lancelot is one of failed intersubjectivity.[6] Approaching Lancelot's rambling monologues in terms of failed intersubjectivity will raise the question as to why these relationships failed, even to the extent of leading to disastrous consequences. Furthermore, such

[4] Two notable exceptions are: Mary Deems Howland, *The Gift of the Other: Gabriel Marcel's Concept of Intersubjectivity in Walker Percy's Novels* (Pittsburg, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1990); and Robert E. Lauder, *Walker Percy: Prophetic, Existentialist, Catholic Storyteller* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996).

[5] See Martin Luschei, *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1972), pp. 6, 8, 18; Lewis A. Lawson, "The Cross and the Delta: Walker Percy's Anthropology," in *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, eds. Jan Nordby Gretlund and Karl-Heinz Westarp (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), p.7; Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co., 1978), pp.15—6; *Conversations with Walker Percy*, edited by Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1985), pp. 5, 31, 60—1, 79—80.

[6] This point is made persuasively by Mary Deems Howland in her Chapter 5, "*Lancelot*: The Nadir of Intersubjectivity," *The Gift of the Other*, pp. 86—108. I would like to push this analysis further through introducing Marcel's notion of creative fidelity. I argue that while the thrust of the novel clearly evidences the failure of intersubjective relationships in Lancelot's life and the resulting disastrous consequences, this does not explain *why* these relationships failed. The notion of Marcelian creative fidelity advances the conversation and analysis by providing a diagnostic to shed greater light on Lancelot's descent to destruction and murder and why hope might still be held for him. Robert Coles mentions the role of Marcelian fidelity in his commentary on *Lancelot*, but does not describe why it fails in the novel, why it must be creative, or whether there might be hope through it regarding Lancelot's future; see Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search*, pp. 230—2.

a methodology will raise the additional question of whether there is any hope for Lancelot in the future and whether Percival might be the catalyst for this hope.

The two most significant relationships in Lancelot's life are with his first wife Lucy and his second wife Margot. In both of these relationships Lancelot equates love with the physical attractiveness of each woman and the desire for possession that each arouses in him, albeit in different ways. In recounting his first meeting with Lucy, he focuses entirely on her physical appeal as she plays tennis and of his desire to ask her to that night's dance. Speaking to his desire and the lack of rules or a manual concerning how to satiate it he questions: "What did I want? Just to dance with her, to hold that quick brown body in my arms not even close but lightly and away so I could see into her face and catch those brown eyes with mine."[7] Though certainly not unusual to be first drawn by another's physical attractiveness, the lack of any consideration of Lucy's personality or background is telling. While the actual events of that night's dance are not part of the recollection shared, Lucy apparently accepted his invitation, which eventually leads to marriage and the couple taking up residence in his ancestral home of *Belle Isle*. In the same breath as the reader quickly learns of this marriage and the resulting two children, Lancelot also causally mentions Lucy's death:

> We were married, moved into *Belle Isle*, had two children. Then she died. I suppose her death was tragic. But to me it seemed simply curious. How curious that she should grow pale, thin, weak, and die in a few months! Her blood turned to milk—the white cells replaced the red cells. How curious to wake up one morning alone again in *Belle Isle*, just as I had been alone in my youth (*Lancelot*, p.84).

In both his description of his first meeting with Lucy and their subsequent marriage and her early death, our protagonist reduces her to the purely physical, at first to that which attracts him and then to that which curiously ceases to live.[8] Without regard for Lucy as a whole person, he is not able to enter into a full relationship with her as an equal subject. This in turn prevents not only a fruitful intersubjective marriage but also does not allow Lancelot to grow and deepen as a person. Hence his cold and troubling response to Lucy's death.

The central relationship of the novel and the one that drives the narrative is that of Lancelot and his second wife, Margot. The fateful meeting of these two characters takes place at *Belle Isle* following Lucy's death. Lancelot is working as a progressive lawyer and supplements his income by allowing tours of *Belle Isle*. Margot, daughter of a wealthy Texas oil-man, meets our protagonist on one of these tours as he returns from work. Similar to the recounting of his first meeting with Lucy, Lancelot focuses exclusively on the physical features of Margot. This encounter leads to Lancelot inviting Margot to join him for a drink in the pigeonnier. As they sit and drink whiskey, Margot learns that Lancelot lives alone and comments on how the pigeonnier might be renovated. Whereas Lancelot's attraction to Margot focused squarely on her physical attractiveness, she is initially most taken with the idea of renovating the property! Lancelot comments on the almost mathematical nature of their first meeting and what he took to be Margot's calculating mindset: "What she was thinking was: I have ten million dollars and you don't; you have a great house and I don't; but you don't have me. You are a solitary sort and don't think much about women but now you do" (*Lancelot*, p.78).

[7] Walker Percy, *Lancelot* (New York: Picador, 1977), p.83 (hereafter, *Lancelot* in the text).
[8] See Howland, *Gift*, p.96.

As the conversation progressed and the whiskey flowed, the two find themselves lying on an old boat fender and beginning to make love. At this point Margot raises the possibility of locking the door and after doing so Lancelot returns with the door's antique key. Describing this scene to Percival, Lancelot notes: "I lay down and gave her the iron key. She held it one hand and me in the other and was equally fond of both. She liked antiques and making love" (*Lancelot,* p. 80). Reflecting upon this first encounter that led to their doomed marriage, Lancelot parsed the 'terms' of their love:

> We drank and laughed at the joy of the time and the discovery: that we each had what the other wanted, not exactly 'love' as the word is used, but her new ten million and my old house, her sweet West Texas self and my just as sweet Louisiana Anglo-Saxon aristocracy gone to pot, well-born English lord Sterling Hayden gone to seed in Macao (*Lancelot,* p.81).

Even in this first encounter one can discern the problematic elements that are present in this relationship. As noted above, Lancelot does not possess the skills or the desire to enter into a full relationship of mutual reciprocity with another person. Rather than engaging intersubjectively in a healthy manner, he sees the women in his life in terms of their attractiveness and sexual appeal. Margot struggles with intersubjective relationships of substance and depth. She, like her husband, sees the world and those within it in terms of objects that can be used for her pleasure or advancement. This is evidenced in her fascination with the historical home of *Belle Isle* and its possibilities for restoration.

It is precisely these three elements of their first encounter in the *pigeonnier* that will comprise the early years of their marriage and its eventual dissolution: alcohol, sex, and the fascination with restoration. During the initial phase of their marriage, Margot and Lancelot are sustained by the excitement of sexual encounters and the dulling of the senses with alcohol. With his interest in law waning, Lancelot would come home for lunch each day with Margot, which included several cocktails and usually ended with sex and a nap. Eventually he stopped returning to the office in the afternoons. Though still enjoying the sexual escapades with Margot, Lancelot was beginning to feel the onset of malaise and restlessness. Such unease led him to dabbling in various activities from golfing to historical research to giving tours of *Belle Isle*. With none of these able to curb his growing malaise and *ennui*, Lancelot resorts to a nightly routine of television and drunkenness.

For her part, Margot is able to resist the threat of malaise a bit longer due to her project of restoring *Belle Isle* and populating it with antiques. Initially this passion for restoration co-existed with a sexual desire for Lancelot. As time passes however and Lancelot spends more time intoxicated in the pigeonnier, Margot's love for restoration and antiques became her dominant interest. As Lancelot lamented: "Later than that, when I took to the bottle—a different love story—and became a poor lover, once again inattentive and haunted, she came to prefer restoration to love" (*Lancelot,* p.119). When the restoration project was complete, however, and the couple's sex life came to an end due to Lancelot's impotence, there was nothing to bind this tragic couple to each other. As the drift in the relationship continued and widened, Margot seeks distraction by pursuing an interest in acting and the performing arts. It is during this time of withdrawal and isolation that Lancelot makes the crucial "discovery" that will lead him to murder and destruction.

This "discovery" occurs by happenstance. As Lancelot gazes down at his desk in the pigeonnier, he notices an application and medical waiver that Margot has left for him to sign so that their daughter Siobhan can attend a horse camp. As he prepares to sign the medical waiver, Lancelot notices that the blood type listed for Siobhan is I-O. In noticing this, he adopts an attitude of curiosity and interest which lead him to carry out a brief investigation. In short, with his own type being AB, it is impossible that a child fathered by him would be type O. Additionally, his meticulously kept financial records indicate that during the month that Siobhan was likely conceived, Margot was away from *Belle Isle* attending an acting workshop given by the famous director, Robert Merlin. Therefore, Siobhan cannot be Lancelot's biological daughter.

Upon making this discovery, Lancelot is not as enraged or devastated as one might expect. Adopting the cool demeanor of a scientist or investigator, he sets about creating a scheme to determine if Margot is still unfaithful to him. It is striking that at no point does he attempt to confront his wife directly and speak about what he has discovered and how it has affected him. Rather than regarding the knowledge of her adultery as a painful event between two persons, Lancelot sees it as a curious problem that must be investigated from a distance. As noted above, this marriage was rooted in a sense of possession, involving both the artifacts of *Belle Isle* and each other's bodies. As Lancelot muses: "Love her? I'm not sure what words mean any more, but I loved her if loving her is wanting her all the time, wanting even the sight of her" (*Lancelot*, p.117). When Lancelot learns that he no longer exclusively possesses Margot in a sexual manner, then even the shallow and disintegrating nature of their bond appears broken.

When Lancelot discovers his wife's betrayal, she is acting in one of Merlin's films which is being shot at *Belle Isle*. After working during the day at the estate, Margot and the cast gather at a local motel each evening to discuss the day's progress. To determine Margot's current level of marital fidelity, Lancelot asks one of *Belle Isle*'s employees, Elgin, to sit outside the motel and monitor the actors' movements. This surveillance reveals a great deal of movement between the actors' rooms during the night and the revelation that Margot did not leave till nearly dawn. With this new information, Lancelot conspires to have the motel closed for a few days, thus forcing the actors to move into *Belle Isle*. Taking his voyeuristic plan to a new level, he then charges Elgin with setting up videotaping equipment in each of the bedrooms. Not surprisingly, these videos reveal that Margot is in the midst of sexual love triangle with the director Merlin and the producer Jacoby. After viewing the tapes, Lancelot begins the process of preparing to murder his wife and her friends and to destroy *Belle Isle*.

On the evening of the murders, as a hurricane approaches, Lancelot has two conversations with Margot in an attempt to entice her to flee with him. One can view these meetings as the only time in the novel when something akin to a truly intersubjective encounter between the two takes place. In the first conversation, Lancelot proposes that they flee the hurricane and drive to Atlanta. After resolutely denying this request, Margot informs Lancelot that she will be starring in Jacoby's new film, for which she will travel to England, taking Siobhan with her. Shocked by this news, Lancelot almost directly addresses the brokenness of their relationship and the brutal fact of Margot's serial infidelity and his own withdrawal. When Margot attempts to assure him about the success of the new film, he questions whether she knows Jacoby as a lover. After equivocating on what love means and professing that she loves many people in different ways, Margot responds: "I don't mess around with anybody and you know it. Believe it or not, I've found something more important than the almighty penis" (*Lancelot*, p.174). In one sense, our protagonist is relieved by this denial. On the other hand, he

cannot quite believe it. Furthermore, he is unable to ask Margot directly about Siobhan's blood type and what he has discovered.

During the second conversation, Lancelot revisits the question of Margot leaving with him. Yet again she refuses his request and his additional plea for sexual activity. It is noteworthy that the plan offered by Lancelot and refused by Margot in both of these conversations involves the reality of escape. In fact, their entire marriage has been one of trying to escape the threat of malaise and the difficult work of deepening their relationship beyond sexual adventures and alcohol-fueled afternoons. After her double refusal, Margot makes an interesting statement concerning her understanding of love:

> Margot: "I do love you, Lance."
> Lancelot: "But—"
> Margot: "No buts. I love you as I've always loved you, with the old me.
> But there are other me's. One grows…The feeling is not there. One
> can't help one's feelings (*Lancelot,* p.207).

While it is clear from all that we have noted that Lancelot has not proven himself capable of a genuine intersubjective relationship in which another is treated as a unique and free person, it is equally clear that Margot is no more capable than her spouse. Indeed, her comments and actions make quite clear that she too can only conceive of intersubjective relationships in terms of the emotional thrill or physical satisfaction that they provide. Once the gratification or novelty wanes, one must transition to something else. Therefore, it appears that these two conversations on the night of the hurricane—the night of her death—are the last missed opportunities for Lancelot and Margot to speak honestly and in a manner that treats seriously their nature as persons.

With this last attempt at a genuinely intersubjective encounter having failed, Lancelot proceeds with his murderous plan. The first step is to rig the natural gas system in such a way that it flows through the air-conditioning ducts in the house. With this achieved, Lancelot goes to Margot's room and finds her having sex with Jacoby. Jumping upon them, he is able to wrestle Jacoby to the ground and slit his throat with a knife. Feeling the high of the methane that is now filling *Belle Isle,* Lancelot approaches Margot who is still lying on the bed. What follows is the last conversation between this tragic couple. Both high from the methane-filled room, Margot learns that Jacoby is dead and asks if there is anything she can do. In response, Lancelot states that she could have done something simply by loving him because he loved her. Even in these final moments together, Lancelot is not able to accept any responsibility for the failure of their relationship. Margot suggests that they escape and start a new life. In the midst of this suggestion and some reminiscences about her childhood, the kerosene lamp goes out. Lancelot strikes a match and the room explodes. He survives, having been thrown through the wall of the house, but Margot and the other actors perish in the inferno.

The last pages of the novel take place between Lancelot and Percival in the cell. With his friend now knowing the whole tragic story, Lancelot shares that he is in fact going to be released from the mental hospital. Throughout the novel, our protagonist has interrupted his recollections to voice his condemnation of society and his desire to start a new world order through revolution. Rejecting the apparent hedonism of the day, as well as the failed methods of institutional religion, Lancelot will proceed in a new and violent manner. After reiterating his philosophy and plan for the future, he asks Percival a series of questions, to which our otherwise silent character

answers with series of "Yes's." The final question is arguably the most poignant in which Lancelot asks Percival if there is anything else that he wishes to say to him before he departs. Percival responds with an ultimate "Yes" and the novel ends. The reader is left to wonder in how the conversation might proceed as Percival now takes the floor.

As one turns the last page of this haunting novel, questions remain. The first of these is the question of why things have gone so tragically wrong for Lancelot in each of his intersubjective relationships. The second is related and queries whether there is any hope for Lancelot in the future.[9] I will argue that an appeal to Marcelian creative fidelity can assist one in pursuit of these questions.

III

Though little studied in philosophical circles today, the French existentialist Gabriel Marcel holds a noteworthy place in twentieth century European philosophy and continues to hold relevance for own time.[10] Before advancing to our main focus of creative fidelity, it is necessary to briefly outline Marcel's overall philosophical project.

The basic posture of the human person for Marcel is to be a situated being via our embodiment.[11] This is to say, to be a person is to be embodied and situated in a given context, a world. Furthermore, due to this situated and embodied character of human existence, one is always—even if not self-reflectively—in relation to that which is other, to the world of persons and objects. While not denying the reality of the animate and even inanimate objects that make up one's world, it is the human other that receives much of Marcel's concern. With this said, one cannot choose whether or not to be in some measure of contact with the unique world of persons and objects that comprise one's situation; such contact is unavoidable. As an existentialist, however, Marcel affirms the person's free decision as to *how* they will engage with their situation, most especially other persons.[12]

Concerning this free choice that each person must make in terms of engagement, there is always the temptation to remain aloof from the world of other persons. Indeed, while it is the case that we are indubitably in relationship and contact with that which is other, often times this remains at the level of abstraction in which the other is treated as an abstract *it*, rather than as a

[9] Reviews and commentaries are mixed on this question of possible redemption for Lancelot. Lauder notes the possibility of hope in that Percival will now preach the gospel offstage; Lauder, *Percy*, p.96. Other scholars hold out some level of hope for Lancelot; see especially, Howland, *Gift*, p.108; Robert H. Brinkmeyer Jr., "Lancelot and the Dynamics of the Intersubjective Community," in *Walker Percy: Novelist and Philosopher*, p.163; and Farrell O'Gorman, "Confessing the Horrors of Radical Individualism in *Lancelot*: *Percy, Dostoevsky, Poe*," in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, edited by Peter A. Lawler and Brian A. Smith (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 2013), p.140. In contrast, many commentators do not even take up the question of Lancelot's future and Lewis A. Lawson even argues that Lancelot is nothing more than a raving madman at the novel's conclusion and that Percival's affirmations are only aimed at humoring a psychiatric patient; see Lewis A. Lawson, "The Fall of the House of Lamar," in *The Art of Walker Percy: Stratagems for Being*, edited by Panthea Reid Boughton (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), p.242.

[10] See Gary Gutting, *French Philosophy in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp.98—102; Brendan Sweetman, "The Uniqueness and Continuing Relevance of Gabriel Marcel," *Studia Humana* 5:2 (2016), pp.47—51.

[11] See Gabriel Marcel, *The Mystery of Being I: Reflection and Mystery* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 1950), pp.133—9.

[12] On Marcelian intersubjectivity, see Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, pp.176—81.

potential *thou*.[13] A common theme in the Marcelian corpus is the extent to which the tyranny of technology keeps us from discovering our true humanity and the call of the other to be recognized as a unique thou in our world, a presence calling for acknowledgement and relationship. To fail to recognize others in this manner and to remain at the level of abstraction, which encourages a functionary view of other persons, is to reduce our existence exclusively to a realm of problems and having rather than one which allows for being and mystery.[14]

Even with these temptations and challenges, Marcel affirms that within each person there exists an *exigence* for being or demand for transcendence.[15] This demand to be in contact with being often emerges when one becomes conscious of one's dissatisfaction with a world solely governed by function and in which all matters are seen as problems to be solved. There is a dryness or anxious lack that seems to beckon toward something more or new. For Marcel, one of the chief and concrete ways in which we can answer this exigence for being is to enter into relationships of trust and commitment in which we see the other—whether friend, lover, or religious community—as a *thou* to whom we are responding. When we engage with others in this manner, we are able to regard them not as objects to be controlled or problems to be solved—but as presences to whom we might be open and available. In relationships of this sort, we not only go deeper into the mystery of the other to whom we are committed but also gain deeper insight into ourselves. These relationships reveal to us both the unlimited value present in the one (or the community) we regard as thou and the unlimited value in ourselves. In fact, we can only know ourselves, our value, and where we need to grow through intersubjective relationships of this kind.[16] As a Christian existentialist, Marcel believes that in such relationships and in the communion they may produce, one—at least implicitly—encounters something of Being itself, that is to say of God.[17]

As noted above, it can be easy to remain enmeshed in the world of problems and abstraction and miss the need for truly intersubjective relationships and the transcendence they offer. Even as most persons do engage in some level of intersubjective relationships, the possibility of them being diminished or dissolved is a constant danger. It is to this challenge of maintaining the intersubjective relationships in one's life that Marcel offers his notion of creative fidelity. While Lancelot had the potential to enter into truly intersubjective relationships, he failed to do so because of the absence of creative fidelity in these relationships.

Marcel begins his phenomenological exploration of creative fidelity by first outlining what it is not.[18] While most tend to think of creative fidelity in terms of constancy, Marcel argues that this is a mistaken understanding, for constancy is merely the "rational skeleton of fidelity."

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[13] See, *ibid*., p. 179.

[14] The distinctions between being and having and between problems and mystery are at the heart of Marcel's epistemology. His point is not that one must always be engaged with the realm of being and mystery as such a position would be absurd and not allow one to function in the world. Marcel's critique is that often we *only* approach the world in terms of having and problems; see Gabriel Marcel, *Being and Having: An Existentialist Diary* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965) pp. 117, 155.

[15] See Joseph Gamache, "Of a false dilemma and the knowledge of Values," *Continental Philosophy Review* 54 (2020), pp.440—44.

[16] See Marcel, *The Mystery of Being*, pp.135, 185.

[17] See Marcel, *Creative Fidelity*, trans. by Robert Rosenthal (New York: Farrar, Strauss, 1964), p.167.

[18] For this treatment of Marcel's creative fidelity, I draw mostly from his essay "Creative Fidelity" in *Creative Fidelity* pp. 147—74. Other notable treatments of the topic by Marcel are his "The Creative Vow as the Essence of Fatherhood" in *Homo Viator* (South Bend, IN.: St. Augustine's Press, 2010), pp.91—117; "Obedience and Fidelity," *Homo Viator,* pp. 118—27; and *The Existential Background of Human Dignity* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1963), pp. 55—74.

If all one pursues is constancy, one is more likely engaged in a matter that is mostly for one's own benefit in terms of fulfilling a goal or acting correctly in reference to a code. Constancy is something that I as the agent control and appraise, whereas fidelity is not simply a matter of my plans and commitments but also of the other and how my actions are received. Importantly, my decision to be constant does not necessitate an internal change on my part. In fact, one can be perfectly constant in one's fulfillment of a certain duty or protocol and all the while be aloof or resentful of the person, community, or cause to whom one is constant. Arguably, fidelity requires something more than this even if the two notions do cover some similar territory.

True to his often meandering philosophical method, Marcel does not offer a clear definition for fidelity. Following his *via negativa* analysis in relation to constancy, Marcel characterizes fidelity as a matter of presence to a person—beyond external manifestations—who is regarded as a *thou* for me and importantly recognizes that I regard her as such. The other to whom I am faithful has the assurance that I am available to her. Colloquially rendered, the object of my fidelity does not reasonably doubt that she can "count on me." Interestingly, Marcel argues that fidelity should possess an element of spontaneity. In contract to constancy which is purely a formal matter of carrying out certain duties or expectations, fidelity seems to allow for a freer enactment. To attempt an example: I am faithful to my lover by not cheating on her. Additionally, I surprise her at work before a particularly challenging meeting with her favorite latte and am present at the end of the day to listen and process.

This description of fidelity contrasted with constancy invites the obvious question of how such fidelity is maintained. While it appears clear that as humans we desire and attempt intersubjective relationships, the lifetime fidelity of which Marcel speaks seems to be elusive for many. Manifestly, many enter into these intersubjective relationships and vow fidelity based on their current disposition toward the person and the commitment undertaken. After time has passed and this disposition weakens and evaporates, so too does our faithfulness. This not uncommon phenomenon and explanation invite the interpretation that each commitment of fidelity is rooted only in one's present disposition and at least implicitly or unconsciously includes conditions. One promises fidelity until one's disposition toward the commitment and the person changes.[19] While this phenomenon is verified in human experience, it is also the case that those entering into such commitments do not do so lightly or conditionally. Indeed, to take the clearest example of marriage, few reasonable or sincere couples approach this commitment of fidelity with conditions or timetables attached to their vows of love. Hence the question becomes how to maintain the fidelity that was chosen with at least a desire that it be "forever." It is to this challenge that Marcel's descriptor of the fidelity as *creative* is directed.

Marcel locates the source of this creativity at the point in which one makes the commitment of fidelity to another. Once this vow or pledge is made, the existential situation is altered and another person now depends on me and I on him. As Marcel notes:

> The fact is that when I commit myself, I grant in principle that the commitment will not again be put in question. And it is clear that this active volition not to question something again, intervenes as an essential element in the determination of what in fact will be the case. It at once bars a certain number of possibilities, it bids me invent a certain *modus vivendi* which I would otherwise be precluded from

[19] This of course excludes cases of abuse or violence in which one would be more than justified in ending a relationship.

envisaging.[20]

This altered situation is not something that takes place by chance or something into which one romantically falls. Rather, it is of the utmost importance that when one enters into such a relationship and vows to be faithful, she does so with the clear and explicit intention of keeping her commitment, an active willing. With this in place, one must then go about—both internally and with one's partner—of creating a way of life that supports this pledge of fidelity, particularly when we encounter difficult circumstances and when the fervor of the initial disposition wanes. In religious terms, one might say that creative fidelity calls for a commitment to ongoing conversion.

Toward the end of his discussion of fidelity, Marcel notes the transcendent dimension present in creative fidelity. He believes that ultimately those engaged in relationships of creative fidelity and experiencing communion come to sense that their relationship is ultimately grounded in something which transcends them as individuals and even their relationship of communion as a couple. This ultimate grounding is spoken of as Being or more explicitly as God. Hence for Marcel, creative fidelity to another is also—at least implicitly—fidelity to the mystery of Being or God, who grounds fidelity and can act as its guarantor, even beyond the grave.[21] Thus the "forever" of the pledge is mysteriously something more than mere poetry.

With this sketch of Marcelian creative fidelity, we can now use it as a diagnostic tool to see why it is that each of Lancelot's intersubjective relationships failed. When considering his first marriage to Lucy, it appears clear that there was no room given for creative fidelity to be practiced. As noted above, Lancelot's recollection of the first time he met Lucy focuses exclusively on her physical attractiveness and his desire for her. While it is not problematic or unusual to be first drawn by another's physical attractiveness, it is problematic if one stops at this level of appearance and sexual desire. From his self-reporting, there is no indication that Lancelot ever moved in the direction of regarding Lucy as a unique thou or presence or that he saw their relationship as a mysterious reality through which they might experience transcendence and deeper levels of meaning. The fact that this bond never existed can be seen in the cold and abstract way in which he acknowledges her death. To use Marcel's terms, Lancelot's relationship with Lucy remained in the domain of problems and having. His desire to possess or have her remained a problem that needed to be solved, evidenced by his desire for a manual to help him win her over. When she died, he regarded it simply as curious that he should no longer have this possession. If a life of creative fidelity had existed in which they had built a way of existing together that fostered, indeed strengthened, the promises they made, Lucy's death would have been as though a piece of his soul had been wrenched from him. The lack of this expected response and the fact that this first marriage did not lead to any transformation in Lancelot paves the way for his more complex and disastrous relationship with Margot.

The first encounter with Margot at *Belle Isle* shares similar elements to the initial meeting with Lucy on the tennis courts. Both Margot and Lancelot approach each other and are drawn to each other in terms of the Marcelian notions of having and problems.[22] Lancelot, a lonely

[20] Marcel, "Creative Fidelity," p.162.

[21] See Gabriel Marcel, *Presence and Immortality*, trans. Michael A. Michado (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1967), p.201. For further on this point, see Brendan Sweetman, "Marcel on God and Religious Experience, and the critique of Alston and Hick," *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. 80, No.3 (Summer 2005), pp.407–420.

[22] See Howland, *Gift*, pp.94—9.

widower in need of funds, sees in Margot an attractive sexual partner whose money can make him rich. Thus, a union with her would solve his money issues and satisfy his libido. For her part, Margot desires a respected name in the region and an estate to go with it. Lancelot solves her problem of being an ignored although wealthy outsider in the region and gives her *Belle Isle* as a possession and an avocation in terms of the restoration project. In addition to this union solving problems for each of them and satisfying some of their desires, both Lancelot and Margot enjoy excessive drinking and sexual pleasure, which ultimately fail to satisfy their implicit need for transcendence.[23]

While any reasonable analysis of this first meeting and the seemingly quick decision to wed would raise concerns about the health of this relationship, it is certainly not a foregone conclusion that this union would end in isolation and serial infidelity, much less murder. There is always the possibility that what began with selfish motives might evolve and deepen in time given the right interventions by others and a healthy dose of self-reflection on the part of at least one partner.[24] Creative Fidelity's essential components of active volition and creating a way of life in support of one's promises clearly presuppose dialogue between the spouses, critical self-reflection, and the involvement of trusted friends and communities. Had this been undertaken, Margot and Lancelot may have moved in the direction of seeing one another more as a presence to which they were called to be faithful and available.

Rather than moving in the direction of presence and availability in which they experience communion and affirm that they can count on each other, our doomed couple spend the early years of their marriage in sexual escapades and drunkenness. While Margot is happily engaged with the restoration of *Belle Isle*, the malaise hits Lancelot first as he decreases his law practice in addition to dabbling in several detrimental activities (noted above), as his drinking increases. Clearly these early years were a missed opportunity for Lancelot and Margot to evaluate the shallow nature of their relationship and perhaps face the hard truth that they were merely using each other. While there may have been a basic level of presence and availability to each other in so much as they are still spending time together and communicating at some level, it is clear that this is not sustainable. In Marcel's terms, they are not creating a mode of life that will enable them to be faithful or to engage in the hard work of continuing to grow and develop so as to be more and more present to the other. While their bouts of drunkenness and sexual escapades in random places seem to them to be exciting and spontaneous, they are in fact following the same routine rooted in current dispositions. Lancelot's dabbling in several different activities and only becoming more restless was an invitation to have an honest conversation with Margot and redirect their relationship, but tragically this was a call unheeded.

As Margot finished the restoration and Lancelot fell further into alcoholism, she too faced the threat of malaise and to wondering what they were going to do next. Noteworthy is the fact that this couple never asked the question—not what are we going to do (drink, have sex, restore, etc.)—but what are we going to **be**.[25] The house was done and with his heavy drinking, Lancelot was no longer able to perform sexually, and thus the disposition of each started to change. Once again, the question emerges of what course of action to take in the midst of this obvious deterioration? Rather than the honest dialogue that seeks to address the issues of presence and availability and create a mode of life enabling fidelity, they pursue a routine involving escapist distraction. When all of the exotic traveling and partying does not improve their relationship,

[23] See *ibid*., p.97.
[24] See Marcel, "Obedience and Fidelity," in *Homo Viator*, p.127.
[25] See Howland, *Gift*, p.99.

Margot dives into the world of acting, and later has a child with Merlin. For his part, Lancelot retreats permanently into the pigeonnier and to his constant routine of news and alcohol. Rather than forming a life together in terms of creative fidelity, they establish separate lives while remaining married in name only.

The deterioration of their relationship is already complete when Lancelot discovers that Siobhan is not his daughter and that Margot is still unfaithful to him. His scientific and abstract manner in pursuing these investigations evidences his utter disregard for Margot as a presence to whom he is called to be available and faithful. The unveiling of the betrayal does not wound Lancelot because this couple has never embarked upon the work of creating a manner of life in which they might preserve their fidelity. Rather, the betrayal is treated as a problem to be solved, as if it affects one of Lancelot's possessions.[26] Thus, while couples engaged in creative fidelity can experience a level of presence that in some mysterious manner gives them hope that their bond of communion and their beloved might survive the seeming finality of the grave, Lancelot's utter lack of creative fidelity renders him unable to tolerate the continuing presence of Margot even in this life. It is significant that even in their last conversations as a couple, Lancelot's main focus is to try to convince Margot to flee with him. Even on the night of her murder, she remains for Lancelot an object that he wishes to possess again, an object to take away with him. The quest is not for honest dialogue with another person—he does not even confess to Margot that he is aware of her serial infidelity—but is rather one of trying to escape and restore some lost excitement or routine of distraction. After Margot refuses both the plan of escape and the suggestion of sex, she affirms in a clearly Marcelian key that her disposition toward Lancelot has changed and she loves him in a different way now. Rather than embracing the dynamism of creative fidelity and growing together as a couple, their mutual dispositions rooted in selfishness having changed as they drift further apart.

Throughout his monologues, Lancelot never takes his share of responsibility for the marriage's dissolution.[27] He does not—as Marcel advises—consider his commitment to Margot in terms of how he is perceived or experienced by her. His self-absorption prevents the self-knowledge required to engage in the conversion and life-building that are necessary for fidelity to be creative and thus sustainable. Lancelot and Margot are completely enmeshed in viewing their relationship in terms of selfish dispositions and a constant routine that seeks the novelty of excitement. Hence, their relationship failed.

While thus far this essay has suggested that the reason intersubjective relationships failed in Lancelot's life is due to a lack of creative fidelity, one is now left wondering if this same notion may be not only diagnostic but predictive in terms of the unseen future of the protagonist. While reviews are mixed on this question, many see at least a glimmer of hope for Lancelot and his future through his relationship with Percival. Although nodding to this possible hope, no commentator provides a sustained rationale for it in terms of creative fidelity.

At first blush, one might think that any thoughts of redemption or hope for Lancelot are absurd. Seeing that Lancelot was tragically unable to practice creative fidelity with either of his wives, why would his relationship with Percival be any different? One way to approach this question is in terms of capacity. While we do not know much about Lucy, it is clear from what is known about Margot that she had a very limited capacity to engage in Marcelian creative fidelity. Her focus from the start and throughout the relationship was directed primarily at the superficial, indeed escapist, pursuits of sensual gratification and architectural restoration. The

[26] See *ibid*., p.100.
[27] See *ibid*., p.97.

same could not be said for Percival. Although described as a heavy-drinking and pensive loner as a college student, Percival eventually experiences something powerful that causes his conversion to Catholicism and his joining the priesthood. Furthermore, in the context of this vocation he opts for the more difficult assignment of missionary work in West Africa. In addition to this historical progression, one also notes hints of personal crisis and then resolution for Percival in the course of his visits to the cell.[28] At several points, Lancelot asks him if he has lost his faith or his vocation. Lancelot surmises that his friend must be in some sort of vocational crisis that likely involves being in love with a woman. Toward the end of the novel, we learn that Percival has now arrived at the cell dressed in clerical attire, which suggests that prior to this he had not been dressing as a priest. Additionally, we learn that he is leaving his position at the hospital to return to being a full-time parish priest. It is not unreasonable to infer from these happenings that Percival himself has undergone some sort of transformation or conversion in the course of his visits with Lancelot. While clearly being better disposed for fidelity than Margot, Percival's added growth in the course of the novel speaks to his ability to create a change in Lancelot, if any such change is possible.

Even though likely dealing with his own struggles of life and faith, Percival displays creative fidelity to Lancelot in the course of the novel in a way that none of the people in his previous life have been able to do. Percival's continual visits to the cell are more than mere routine or constancy. Even after hearing disturbing details, rants, and inchoate attempts at philosophies, this priest-psychiatrist displays an active volition in continuing to visit Lancelot. Indeed, we can say that he remains faithful and views his old friend as a presence to whom he feels called to be available. It would seem that Lancelot must to some extent experience Percival as a presence that he can "count on" in so much as he shares so freely and openly with him. The fact that he does not reduce Lancelot to the objectifying realm of "problems" and "having" can be seen in his general response involving silence and considerate gestures. Percival is not reducing his friend to a disturbing problem that must be quickly fixed or placing any external or functional conditions on his time with him. Rather, he treats him as a person and listens to him with faithfulness until Lancelot has expressed everything he wants to express. It is only then that Percival speaks.

While not that of a vow or a pledge, the crux of the relationship between these two men can be found in the fact that Percival modeled creative fidelity to Lancelot. Significantly enough, this modeling took place during a period of apparent crisis or transition for Percival himself. This illustrates that one need not be perfect to practice creative fidelity. On the contrary, one's effort at this practice is not only of benefit for the one to whom one is faithful but also offers the opportunity for self-growth and transformation. In the course of being present and faithful to his friend as he narrates the descent of his life into murder and madness, Percival rediscovers his Christian vocation to be a person of and for love in the midst of a complicated and troubled world.[29]

The ending of the novel is of course ambiguous and one is left to wonder what it is that Percival will say to Lancelot and more importantly how will our protagonist respond. This ultimate stage of Percy's work represents yet another Marcelian call to Lancelot to engage in an authentic intersubjective relationship. If he responds to the call to creative fidelity made and modeled by Percival, Lancelot will then need to actively engage in the work of being faithful to

[28] See *ibid*., pp.90—2, in which Howland argues that the change in Percival is the main point of the novel; see also Robert H. Brinkmeyer, "The Intersubjective Community," p.163.

[29] See Howland, *Gift*, pp.107—8.

the presence of his friend and creating a manner of life that will allow him to maintain this fidelity. As to whether this glimmer of hope will amount to anything is left to the reader's speculation. If such a blossoming of hope is well founded, then it seems clear that it will be due to something akin to Marcelian creative fidelity.[30]

[30] I dedicate this article to Rev. Robert E. Lauder, Professor of Philosophy at St. John's University, Queens, NY, who first inspired in me a love of both Walker Percy and Gabriel Marcel.