

SONGS OF LIFE AND DEATH IN WALKER PERCY'S *LANCELOT* (1977)

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Abstract. Cultures of life and death are central to the writing of American Southern novelist Walker Percy (1916–1990), and they are drawn with special force in his early novel *Lancelot* (1977), where songs and music deepen the reader experience of the cultural landscape of life and death. The present article combines methods of historically informed literary criticism and song analysis to examine Walker Percy's presentation of life and death in the novel. The conclusion is that certain musical genres, such as popular music, folk song, and classical music are associated with particular manifestations of the cultures of life and death in the novel.

Key words: Walker Percy, post-religious, culture of death, popular song, folk song, soundscape

INTRODUCTION

Culture of life or culture of death? These issues are central in all of Walker Percy's fictional and much of his non-fictional writing, but especially so in his early novel *Lancelot*, originally published in 1977 (references in this article are to a subsequent edition, Percy, 1978). Joseph Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley (1990) describe it as a 'novel about death', indicating a certain stance that critics tend to take towards this novel, unusual in style and atmosphere. However, it seems that the novel is not so much about death and dying as about learning to accept death as part of life and to build new life 'in the ruins'. Music is an integral part of this learning, signalling instances when the narrator struggles to rationalize his experience. Moreover, songs (including Creole folklore), instrumental music and other forms of soundscape deepen the reader's understanding of the cultures of death and life in the 'post-religious' world of the 1970s America, vividly portrayed in *Lancelot*.

The opening pages of the novel offer a typical example of Percy's soundscapes. A man is standing at the window and pointing to his guest the view: on All Souls' Day, the Lafayette cemetery in New Orleans presents a lively sight, with women industriously putting the tombs in order, the entire families coming together for the occasion, possibly talking and even singing. What the man hears is the rustling of leaves, hollow like popcorn (Percy, 1978: 9): death is a spectacle, like a movie in the cinema next door. Percy's main character, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, concludes about the shallowness of modern involvement with existential issues: 'Death and sex treated unseriously and money seriously' (ibid.: 23). He

makes the conclusion because of what he sees, hears and imagines looking out of the window: this example shows how, in Percy's novel, references to sound and music are not innocent, but invariably lead the narrator to make observations on death and love. Listening to music, remembering it, playing or singing are all means of reducing post-traumatic stress associated with death, as has been stressed by studies in music therapy (see Garrido et al., 2015). Another issue which is important to stress when reading Percy's fiction is 'the problem of language', to which he gives considerable attention in his non-fiction writings, especially in the section on language and literature in *Signposts in a Strange Land* and in *The Message in the Bottle* (Percy, 1975, 1991).

Throughout the novel, Percy cites children's rhymes (counting rhyme, Percy, 1978: 186–187, Cajun rhyme, *ibid.*: 233), popular songs (*ibid.*: 20, 124–125) and folk songs, including *Oh Shenandoah* (*ibid.*: 238), as well as referring to instrumental works (the 'Limelight' theme, *ibid.*: 10–11, Beethoven, *ibid.*: 124, 152, Chopin, *ibid.*: 162). Other examples of soundscape include the rustling of dry leaves on the cemetery, mentioned above, which, according to the narrator, resembles popcorn (*ibid.*: 9). At the climax of the narrative, Lancelot describes the screeching of wooden structures in his old manor house during the hurricane on the night of the explosion, using allusions to music. As he sits in the pigeonier, he listened to the 'organ sounds of the wind in the holes of its loft' (*ibid.*: 245). Inside the manor, he heard how the 'great timbers sang and popped overhead' (*ibid.*: 256), even referring to a 'bass roaring and soprano shrieking' (*ibid.*: 257), as if the house had its own chorus. Indeed, songs and music provide the background and, in many cases, the medium, for tackling the issues of dying and loving.

Although Percy's works, including *Lancelot*, have been the subject of numerous scholarly studies, no one has yet examined the role of music in the narrative. The present article argues that songs and music are an important component in the novel, providing the analogue of liturgy in the narrative told by an unreligious, at times even blaspheming narrator. A Catholic novelist writing in the 'post-religious' world, Percy uses what Bradley R. Dewey has aptly described as the 'indirect method of persuasion' (Dewey, 1985: 126). Percy employs metaphors and allusions to convey his evangelising message to the readers, and music is essential in this process. Percy's 'music of death', whether Creole, country or classical, thus are best considered bearing in mind the culture of Southern 'Arthurian' chivalry, which is largely profane yet characterized by occasional flights into medieval Christian spirituality. Accordingly, in describing 'the upper-class white Southerner', Percy remarks that 'he was raised on the Christian chivalry of Walter Scott, but it was a Christianity which was aestheticized by medieval trappings and a chivalry which was abstracted from its sacramental setting' (Percy, 1978: 84–85).

Percy's references to music in the novel are numerous and can be divided into three groups: classical instrumental music, popular songs, and folk songs. It is remarkable that references to song and music usually occur in discussions of death and love, often next to the very words. The death can be physical or

spiritual, just as love is either carnal or manifestly divorced from any association with physical sexuality, and certain kinds of music seem to be linked with certain kinds of death and love.

CONTEXT AND OUTLINE OF THE NOVEL

Lancelot, the fourth of Walker Percy's published novels, deals with the social and psychological problems of the United States of America after the sexual revolution. The title alludes to medieval Arthurian romances, where Sir Lancelot is one of the main heroes. Confusingly, although the main character, Lancelot, draws numerous parallels between his past and the Grail quest, his attempts are retrospective and unsystematic (Ropa, 2014a, 2014b). In the medieval Arthurian tradition, the Grail quest is the privilege of the most virtuous individuals, and its accomplishment is rewarded by a vision of divine mysteries. On the contrary, Percy's Lancelot aspires to a vision of pure evil taking place in this world.

The novel is set in the early 1970s in the American South. The narrative is presented in the form of monologue delivered by the main character, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, member of the Southern gentry, former lawyer, alcoholic and, as the reader comes to suspect, a murderer. Lancelot is confined to a psychiatric clinic in New Orleans, where he is visited by his college friend Percival (ordained Father John). Father John is a failed priest, who seems to have lost his faith and is working with psychiatric patients.

Over a series of visits, Lancelot tells his friend the story that led to his confinement in the clinic. The central element in his narrative is the unfaithfulness of his second wife Margot, whom he married because of her sexual appeal and, probably, money. Lancelot gradually discovers that Margot has repeatedly cheated on him with two film directors, and that even their daughter, Siobhan, has a different father. Percival (and the reader) also hears how the film crew, who came to Lancelot's manor Belle Isle to make a cheap film about the supposed life in the antebellum South, perverted Lancelot's elder daughter Lucy. Lancelot finally took revenge on Margot and the film crew by blowing the manor with his wife, her second lover and two members of the film crew with whom Lucy had sexual relations.

While telling of his past, Lancelot also explains his new philosophy of life and his plans for the future, mentioning his growing love for his co-patient, a victim of mass rape Anna. At the end of the novel, Lancelot is cleared of all charges and is about to be released from the clinic, though certain psychological issues remain unresolved. On the last pages of the novel, when Father John speaks a few words (the only words in the novel *not* by Lancelot), Lancelot appears to be on the threshold of a revelation, finally realising the meaning of the word 'freedom', which he heard in a song early in the novel.

Walker Percy drew on the chivalric heritage of the Old South and, in *Lancelot*, he explores elements of the Southern Gothic to a larger extent than in any of his

other novels. Being a Roman Catholic, Percy probably found the religious and Eucharistic elements of the Grail quest appealing, but, writing in a post-Christian culture, he makes his main character claim that he seeks not God or 'good', but its opposite, evil, the 'Unholy Grail' of sexual sin (Percy, 1978: 144). Percy's Lancelot is manifestly unheroic, unlike his namesake. Alan Lupack and Barbara Lupack explain that Percy was inspired by Lanier's *The Boy's King Arthur*, one of the first books he ever read', a juvenile illustrated edition based on Malory's *Morte Darthur*. Percy himself wrote in a letter to Alan Lupack that 'the provenance of my Lancelot [...] is *The Boys* [sic] *King Arthur* and most importantly the marvellous illustrations' (Lupack, A. and Lupack, B. T., 1999: 229). Percy's view of Arthurian literature is partially filtered through the prism of nineteenth-century Romantic medievalism, but he uses the Grail quest to comment on the moral challenges of the modern world, such as sexual promiscuity, political corruption and psychological alienation. These, for Percy, are all instances of 'death in life' and, what is remarkable, scholars, particularly David Benson, have argued that similar problems lead to the destruction of Arthur's kingdom in Thomas Malory's *Morte Darthur*, from which Percy drew inspiration (Benson, 1996: 234–235).

Remarkably, in the mind of Percy's Lancelot, moral and political corruption, alienation and the solitary quest for the meaning of life are closely associated with certain soundscapes or absences of sound. Thus, music and sound can not only facilitate one's understanding of the above phenomena but also divert the 'quester'. Accordingly, Lancelot realises that his obsession with watching certain television programmes at established times was an unconscious way of avoiding the crucial encounter with one's self, of not thinking about one's relations with life and death:

I stood up. Can a man stand alone, naked, and at his ease, wrist flexed at his side like Michelangelo's David, without assistance, without diversion, without drink, without friends, without a woman, *in silence*? Yes. It was possible to stand. Nothing happened. I listened. There was *no sound*: no boats on the river, no trucks on the road, not even cicadas. What if I didn't listen to news? I didn't. Nothing happened. I realised *I had been afraid of silence*. (Percy, 1978: 70, *emphasis mine*)

Percy uses the Grail quest to hint at the need for spiritual development inherent in every individual, believers as well as unbelievers. Indeed, critics have remarked on Percy's tendency to offer his readers a religious message through main characters who themselves have little or no use for God. Kieran Quinlan describes Percy as 'the last Catholic novelist' (Quinlan, 1996). However, Percy's strategy is more sophisticated than simply 'preaching' to his readers: instead, he presents flawed characters, who are struggling for the truth, for the evangelic revelation, while outwardly denying Christianity. The internal struggle of Percy's principal characters is often laid out before the reader, so that, like Lancelot, they seem to be making a confession about their inability to cope with life in the contemporary world. In fact, Lewis Lawson claims that Percy's 'fiction

tended toward (veiled) confession [...] while the non-fiction tempted him toward (veiled) evangelization' (Lawson, 1996: 7). At the same time, Percy never openly presents his readers with a confession or a sermon, unless Lancelot's subversive 'confession' to his friend Percival should be regarded as such.

SONG OBJECTS AND THEIR TYPOLOGY IN WALKER PERCY'S *LANCELOT*

On the most general level, it seems that any piece of music and song can be therapeutic and alleviate fear of death, mourning and grief. However, researches have highlighted the fact that 'individual differences in personality and coping style can moderate participant responses to [music and art] therapies' (Garrido et al., 2015: 1). In *Lancelot*, it is apparent that, for the main character and narrator at least, certain types of music are emblematic of spiritual decay and death, while others are associated with violence, liberation and, possibly, even resurrection. This sub-section is devoted to defining the types of music mentioned in *Lancelot* or 'played' in the characters' imagination, prior mapping them to certain images of death and dying in the subsequent sections.

The novel contains numerous references to song and music objects, which fall broadly in either of the two categories described Jean-Nicolas De Surmont as author's (signed) and traditional (popular) music. De Surmont, however, warns about the historical, cultural and subjective ambiguities inherent in the categories and in the terms used to refer to songs and music themselves. According to De Surmont, the 'song object' can be defined as the 'objet, sur le plan esthétique, d'une activité perceptive et d'une activité d'interprétation du concret sonore varié' (De Surmont, 2010: 11) [subject, on the aesthetic plane, of perceptive and interpretative activity of particular sound variation]. Ferdinand de Saussure speaks of 'acoustic imagery' ('image acoustique') to signify song objects. In the present article, I employ the term 'song' to mean vocal or vocalized (sung) works, whether accompanied by instrumental music or not, 'music' to mean instrumental pieces performed without vocalization and 'song-object' in reference to both vocal and instrumental works.

Before discussing the use of song objects in discourse on death in *Lancelot*, it would be useful to clarify terminology related to their (ethno) musicological status. De Surmont stresses the dichotomy and interaction between the 'learned' and the 'popular' domain in song object production and consumption, as well as in scholarly discussions of song objects (ibid., 2010: 80–94). Indeed, in *Lancelot*, the main character continuously alludes to this dichotomy as if it was self-evident, even though Lancelot himself does not use the terms 'learned' and 'popular'. When describing the enthusiasm of his second wife Margot for symphony concerts, he remarks that Margot enjoyed western country music much more, implicitly pigeonholing her pretended and true tastes within the categories of the learned and the popular (Percy, 1978: 124).

Meanwhile, the term 'popular' is far from being clear or unambiguous. In reference to music, it can mean one or several characteristics of song objects: folkloric (song objects belonging to oral tradition), commercially popular or simply beloved by many people. To distinguish between different meanings of the term 'popular song', De Surmont proposes the use of terms 'oral tradition song' ('chanson de tradition orale') as opposed to 'signed song' ('chanson signée'). The latter is defined as song 'dont l'auteur et le compositeur sont connus, écrite et souvent née dans un contexte éditorial, tantôt de nature nettement commerciale (populaire), tantôt plus savante, c'est-à-dire à texte, d'auteur' (De Surmont, 2010: 17) [for which the author and composer are known, written and often conceived in editorial context, sometimes purely commercial (popular), at other times more learned, an author's song]. Oral tradition songs are also classified as 'oral poetry', in distinction from 'learned poetry', to use the terms employed by Paul Bénichou ('poésie orale' as opposed to 'poésie lettrée') (Bénichou, 1970: 10). Paul Zumthor explains that, conventionally, song is an oral poetry genre: 'La chanson est un genre (sans doute éminent et d'usage universel) de ce que l'on nomme par convention la poésie orale' (Zumthor, 1983: 18) [Song is a genre (naturally prominent and universally used) of what is conventionally known as oral poetry]. In *Lancelot*, while the songs are presented to the audience in written format, in much the same way as they would be presented in collections of folkloric songs or in music record inserts, they are characterised by aural or oral ways of reception and performance for the main character.

MUSIC AND ITS FUNCTIONS IN *LANCELOT*

Three songs are quoted in the novel, and they represent different aspects of 'popular' song objects. The first song to appear in the novel, *Me and Bobby McGee* (1969), written by Kris Kristofferson, is author's song in the sense that it was created in editorial context and its author is known (Daniel, 2012: 193; Kristofferson, 1969). It was sung first by Janis Joplin, appearing in her posthumous album *Pearl* (released 1971) and instantly becoming the top hit: it is the only Joplin's song to enjoy massive commercial success, no doubt because of its associations with the singer's untimely death. The song was subsequently performed by Kristofferson, which was also a success (Miller, 2009). Thus, this 'author's' song is popular in the sense of being commercially successful. Interestingly, David Daniel argues that the song is 'an example of the traditional ballad form' and notes that 'it has been covered by dozens of recording artists' (Daniel, 2012: 193). Likewise, in *Lancelot*, the song enters the 'oral tradition' category: the main character first hears it sung by an unknown young woman in blue jeans, and, in the episode, no reference is made to the song's commercially available versions.

Later in the novel, Lancelot recollects listening to the same song while driving with Margot: this time, the song is firmly set in the context of its market

dissemination and consumption. Lancelot even names the singer, Kristofferson (Percy, 1978: 124), though associations with the original singer, Joplin, would probably be apparent to the novel's early audience. It is possible that reference to Kristofferson is used exactly to avoid association between Joplin and the novel's female character, Margot, both of whom are from Texas. After all, Margot and Lancelot appear in the situation in which it would be easy to imagine Janis Joplin and someone from the world of song production, possibly even Kristofferson himself, with whom Joplin had a brief affair. In the novel, Margot and Lancelot are in the car, Margot at the wheel, Lancelot caressing and kissing her. They stop in a secluded spot, drink whiskey and make love.

The motif of 'freedom', introduced in the couplet quoted by Lancelot, reappears throughout the novel: when Lancelot reads the word 'free' on a sign he glimpses from his window, the reader is likely to remember that 'Freedom's just another word, Lord, for nothing left to lose' (ibid.: 124). In an interview, Kristofferson explained that he meant 'that double-edged nature of freedom, when the pain of the loss more than equals the pleasure of the gain' (Cartwright, 2010: n. p.). Freedom, which Margot tried to attain in company of the film crew, is also evoked in one of her last conversations with Lancelot, a conversation that takes place on the eve of a hurricane, when Lancelot and Margot have already taken drugs (Percy, 1978: 224). Margot dies the same night, not of drug overdose, but in the gas explosion arranged by her husband. While the association between Margot and Joplin is simultaneously suggestive and deceptive, the link between the song, death, love and freedom is crucial. The song, which was commercially successful and performed by a number of singers after Joplin's death, is sung by yet another unknown girl at the beginning of Percy's novel, marking the beginning of its entry within the 'popular' domain in more than one sense.

The notion of freedom in the novel often appears in the context of emptiness and even deprivation (the condition when there is 'nothing to lose'). Indeed, Lancelot spends a year in confinement after losing everything – his wife, his ancestral home and even his children, and all this year he is contemplating the sign containing the word 'Free'. The situation is highly ironic because Lancelot is anything but free, being physically confined to a clinic and spiritually entangled in his weird theories and resolved conflicts. However, for Walker Percy, the situation is pregnant with possibilities, like a desert waiting for the first spring rain to burst into flowers, as Percy explains in his self-interview 'Questions They Never Asked Me' (Percy, 1978: 423; 1991). The state of being in-between signals the passage from between stages in Kierkegaardian philosophy, in Lancelot's case this being the threshold of the aesthetic stage. The aesthetic stage is characterised by a person's awareness of emotions, his own and other people's, as well as physical sensations and feelings. Throughout the novel, Lancelot lacks this kind of awareness, as he is largely insensitive both to physical and emotional pain he causes and experiences. This numbness or, as Lancelot himself describes it, coldness, is characteristic of his psychological disorder, which music, and songs in particular, help to cure.

Apart from *Me and Bobby McGee*, a popular song in the sense of being commercially successful, there are song objects that are 'popular' in the other sense, that of belonging to the oral tradition. Historically, these songs have been defined as 'originating with the people' or 'destined to the people' (De Surmont, 2010: 80–94). Their original writer, composer or singer is not known, and they often exist in more than one variant. Naturally, a song object composed by an author can pass into the domain of oral tradition, and there are hints that, within the novel at least, *Me and Bobby MacGee* might be on the way of becoming an oral tradition song. Performed by an anonymous girl on the opening pages of the novel, it is not identified by the narrator as the country western hit that provided the backdrop for his lovemaking to Margot (Percy, 1978: 20).

The song's melancholic, bluesy tone, its association with Joplin's death, and its leitmotif of freedom all make it a perfect medium for the characters and the readers to reflect on the relations between freedom, death, and life. The songwriter, Kristofferson, confesses having cried when he heard the song recording by Joplin on the day of her death (Miller, 2009: n. p.). Such a natural, spontaneous expression of emotions, however, is far from Lancelot's mind, as he tries to rationalise the death of both his wives by reference to either science or theology. Thus, the death of his first wife Lucy from leukaemia is simple: 'Her blood turned to milk – the white cells replacing the red cells' (Percy, 1978: 88). Margot's death, in turn, is 'tragic', but hardly 'unthinkable', as Lancelot reserves the term 'unthinkable' for her sexual infidelity (Percy, 1978: 16): for him, she seems to be dead the moment he learns about her adultery, a revelation which surprisingly awakens him from his own mental lethargy. Thus, he becomes 'free' to act, 'revived', through the fact of his wife 'dying' for him as the woman he loves. This is at least one of the meanings of the line 'Freedom's just another word, Lord, for nothing left to lose' (ibid.: 124). The invocation of God reminds the reader that, apart from freedom act as one pleases, there is also spiritual freedom, that is, freedom from sin, freedom to choose life over death, the Holy Grail of love over the 'Unholy Grail' of sexual sin (ibid.: 144).

Till the very end, Lancelot misses the true significance of the song and of freedom. He needs the visual prompt of a sign 'Free & Ma B', which can be read not only as 'Free and Accepted Masons' Bar', etc., but also, and more meaningfully, as 'free and may be' (ibid.: 2, 270). Moreover, Lancelot needs the presence and, up to the very last page, silent support of his boyhood friend and priest/physician Perceval/Father John, to reveal the true reading of the sign and of the song in his life. Abandoning prejudices, conceit and pride, as well as 'easy' carnal pleasures ('Feeling good was easy, Lord, when Bobby sang the blues', ibid.: 124), one can attain true freedom, overcoming the loss of one's beloved people or part of one's self.

There are two oral tradition rhymes in the novel, both performed by children and overheard by the narrator. Lancelot associates one of them with the topic of his obsession, namely, sexual activity, and the other, on which he provides

no commentary, forebodes his own crimes and his spiritual ‘death’. The first is a skipping rhyme, which children perform under Lancelot’s window, and thus not a song object, though it can be discussed as part of the novels’ soundscape. Remarkably, Lancelot makes an unlikely association between children ‘doing “hots”’ while skipping and the other meaning of the word ‘hots’, which refers to sexual arousal (Percy, 1978.: 188). Subsequently, he proceeds to denouncing innocence as non-existent, which is justified in the sense that, in Catholic theology, children, just as their parents, are part of the fallen matter, bearing the weight of the original sin. For Lancelot, sin means sexual sin, which leads to its own kind of death, ‘orgasm’, just as in traditional theology the original sin leads to death.

In view of Lancelot’s fanciful interpretation of the skipping rhyme, it is surprising that he does not comment on the memory or vision he had on the night of the hurricane, prior to the explosion of Belle Isle. In the episode, he saw a girl in a white dress dancing *Fais-do-do* and singing a Cajun rhyme about a ram going to a slaughterhouse:

Mouton, mouton – et où vas-tu?

A l’abatoire.

Quand tu reviens ?

Jamais – Baa! (Percy, 1978: 233; *emphasis in the original*)

Lancelot notes that, even then, he remarked the oddness of the girl’s appearance, as there were no Cajun families in the area (*ibid.*: 233). What he does not mention is that the girl might be a hallucination (he later sees several ones, induced by the drug a member of the film crew gave him). In fact, her song is actually about Lancelot going to his own death – not a physical, but a moral and spiritual one – by entering his old manor. The song, being of oral tradition, supposedly reveals ‘folk wisdom’. Being sung in the Creole dialect, it instantly captures imagination – both Lancelot’s and the readers’ – by its sense of oddness, out-of-placeness, as this is the only passage in the entire novel that is not in English. Lancelot ignores the warning, and he fails to make sense of it one year later, as he recounts the episode to his friend.

Fais-do-do is a French lullaby, supposedly originating from the French ‘dormir’, but it is also a name for a pre-World War II Cajun dancing party (Scarborough, 1925). Thus, the text of the song Lancelot overhears is both evocative of death as sleep and highly suggestive in more than one sense. Sung at night, on the eve of the hurricane, by a mysterious girl in white, it harkens back to Lancelot’s previous ‘Big Sleep’ (Percy, 1978: 112), during which he preferred to be unaware of Margot’s infidelity, and to his subsequent ‘lethargy’, when ‘the past [didn’t] seem worth remembering’ (*ibid.*: 1). The song thus makes the reader connect the notions of death as sleep and of a person’s continuous journey towards death, as well as the association between sleep and the rituals of passage, which, according to Baumgartner, is prominent in medieval Arthurian and Grail literature that Percy used as his source.

A third song that appears in the novel is *Oh Shenandoah*, a famous oral tradition song of which many variants exist. Interestingly, an early recorded version was sung by an African American singer, Paul Robeson (1936). Later, Robeson was lynched, and it is tempting to think that Percy had that version in mind, given Lancelot's previous activism in the defence of the 'Negro' rights. The song *Oh Shenandoah* is an oral tradition song, of uncertain origin, and even its meaning is not entirely undisputed, though Shenandoah is supposed to be the daughter of an Indian chieftain addressed by a white trader. The song is classified as a river shanty, but it has enjoyed popularity unrivalled by any other river shanty. For Percy's *Lancelot*, the song is the emblem of the Southern chivalry and of his new society, a military anthem that harkens back both to the original purity of the States and to the purification in hand, as he envisages the 'Third Revolution' to begin in the Shenandoah Valley (Percy, 1978: 238).

Ironically, the song addressing a woman, an idealised indigenous lady, Shenandoah, is sung by Lancelot prior to a speech in which he discards the virtue and morality of all women, whose 'happiness and the meaning of life itself is to be assaulted by a man' (ibid.: 239). Again, the oral tradition song can be interpreted in two completely opposite ways: while Lancelot sees only its association with the Southern homosocial chivalry and its imminent destruction of all that is 'rotten' in the contemporary states, the song also celebrates womanhood and meekness, a longing for peace and unity, a longing for life.

Song objects belonging to the 'popular' category (both oral tradition songs and commercially successful songs with known authors) can be interpreted in more than one way when used by the main character of the novel to make sense of life and death. In the novel, these songs invite the reader to independent reflection, to interpreting them within the context, as the song texts quoted in the novel are insufficient for interpreting them as independent units. Taken within the context, the songs, which often do not refer to death explicitly, turn out to reflect on both life and death, on the relation between freedom and individual choice, on loving and dying, and on coming to terms with death, both other people's and one's own.

The novel also contains numerous references to instrumental music, most often, classical pieces, with the exception of the 'Limelight' theme, which Lancelot enjoyed with his first wife, Lucy. These musical pieces are often associated with spiritual inertia, lack of authenticity and abstraction. Thus, Margot 'plays' a Southern lady and listens to symphony concerts, although her true passion is for country western (Percy, 1978: 124). In turn, Lancelot drinks, reads Chandler and listens to Beethoven in his 'abstracted' state (ibid.: 152). In fact, in other Percy's novels, the abstracted, lost male main character also likes listening to classical music (*Love in the Ruins* (1971), *The Second Coming* (1980)). It seems that classical music, with its healing potential, may be selected unconsciously by Percy's main characters who feel depressed or 'lost' in life; indeed, classical music is usually selected by music therapists for patients from most age groups (Grocke

and Wigram, 2007: 47). The association between classical music and a Southern gentleman belonging to the past, often 'lost' in his dreams or abstracted from reality may have been suggested to Percy by his experience as adolescent in the house of his relative, 'Uncle Will'. Percy recollects how he used to set up concerts for Uncle Will in the living room, where there was 'the Capehart, a huge automatic phonograph, one of the first of its kind and surely the only one in town, and an even larger record cabinet packed with albums of 78s, from Bach to Brahms' (Percy, 1978: 64).

Certainly, Uncle Will's manor could not be far from Percy's mind when he describes, in *Lancelot*, the film shot at Belle Isle. In the film, a Southern gentleman, a cuckolded husband of a librarian played by Margot, and, in many ways, a replica or caricature of the novel's main character, plays Chopin on the piano and becomes 'lost' in his illusions (ibid.: 162, 210). Somewhat more positively, Lancelot recollects dancing with his first wife Lucy to the 'Limelight' theme, which he describes as his first 'falling in love' (ibid.: 10). Again, the motif of falling in love while dancing appears in Percy's other novels, where it is not unequivocally positive or authentic: in *The Last Gentleman* (1966), Will Barrett cannot realise who or what he is despite his apparent success with a girl to whom he is attracted.

In all, it seems that, within Percy's *Lancelot*, only popular music, in either of its two meanings, as oral tradition or commercially successful music, can lead to revelation and authenticity. Instrumental music is more often than not associated with escapism, abstraction and an attempt to avoid the sensitive issues in one's life, particularly the existential questions of one's origin, identity and death.

MUSIC AND DEATH IN *LANCELOT*

Much of Percy's writing, both fictional and non-fictional, is informed by what scholars have described as 'the culture of life' and 'the culture of death' (Zapatka, 2000: 321; Montgomery, 1993), which is particularly true in case of *Lancelot*. Early in the novel, Lancelot describes to his friend Percival the view from his room, which overlooks 'a corner of Lafayette Cemetery' (Percy, 1978: 2). On Percival's second visit, Lancelot describes the activities in progress at the cemetery on All Souls' Day, as 'a pretty scene' (Percy, 1978: 8). For a year, Lancelot has been observing the cemetery daily, and, when he is to leave the hospital, he turns to the cemetery again, remarking that 'the cemeteries here [in New Orleans] are more cheerful than the hotels and the French Quarter' (ibid.: 270). As it has already been mentioned in the introduction, sounds which Lancelot hears, or imagines hearing, at the cemetery, are instrumental in building the atmosphere of cheerful, unconcerned preoccupation with death, which, as argued further in this section, is in sharp contrast with Lancelot's own morbid interest in death and the process of dying.

Percy sets *Lancelot* in a culture which has distinctive rituals about death, a complex of Catholic and Creole rituals, and the effect of these rituals resembles the effect of medieval rituals connected with death. Funerals and All Souls' Days provide an occasion for families to get together and engage with the memories of the past or with their family history. Cleaning the tombstones and adorning the place with flowers while singing songs is such a mundane activity that it tempers the atmosphere of the sublime. Death is domesticated and, to an extent, divested of its mystery; the effect is different from the one produced when the awareness of death is repressed, as often happens in modern society (Utter, 1982). Lancelot notes that in New Orleans young people are so unconcerned with death that 'Some of them even sleep in the oven crypts, shove the bones aside and unroll their sleeping bags, a perfect fit' (Percy, 1978: 270). This irreverent behaviour signals that the process of familiarization may have gone too far and that the young generation may discard the values and morals of their parents as easily as their ancestors' bones.

Moreover, physical death, represented by the cemetery and the activities therein, is for Lancelot emblematic of the spiritual and imaginative 'deadliness' which he sees in the society around him. He asks, for instance, looking at the activities in the cemetery: 'Tell me why that should be, why two thousand dead Creoles should be more alive than two thousand Buick dealers?' (ibid.: 270). At this moment, Lancelot forgets that a year ago he himself was 'dead' and only the discovery of Margot's infidelity put an end to his lethargy. Interestingly, Lancelot also compares his own sensitivity (if sensitivity it is) about the issues of love, sex and death with the relative indifference of his son, who 'lusts after, loves' a 'certain kind of guitar' and does not care about the girl with whom he has sex (ibid., 1978: 16–17). The question, which Lancelot himself never addresses, is what music his son will play on the guitar or will he even play it much, or does he just want to possess it as a valued object.

Meanwhile, despite being 'alive', neither Lancelot nor Percival have a way of coping with death at the beginning of the novel. Whereas the women whom Lancelot sees from his window have a set of rituals rendering death bearable, such as scrubbing the tombs, singing and praying on All Souls' Day, both Percival and Lancelot are incapable of this easy, habitual way of dealing with the phenomenon. Lancelot tells his friend how he has noticed earlier the same day a woman ask Percival what could have been 'Only one thing under the circumstances. To say a prayer for the dead' (ibid.: 9). Percival's refusal prompts Lancelot to conclude: 'So something went wrong with you too' (ibid.). Lancelot thinks that Percival is having a vocational crisis, being in love with a woman. Another possibility, which does not occur to Lancelot, is that Percival may be having the same problems coping with reality as Lancelot is experiencing. It is an indicator of Percival's overcoming his crisis that, at the novel's end, he kneels at a tomb to pray.

Lancelot meets references to death not with refusal, but with morbid curiosity. He conceptualizes death in much the same way as love, as a physical occurrence which can be explained by scientific methods. Indeed, to Lancelot, death is

merely a natural phenomenon, which can be grasped by scientific observation. Gary Ciuba points out that Lancelot ‘continuously applies the methods and reasoning of science to areas like sex and the sacred, which by his own admission are ineffable’ (Ciuba, 1985: 107). Death is another ineffable phenomenon which Lancelot fails to grasp with his materialistic methodology. Imitating scientific practice, he observes death drily, keeping his distance even when the dying person is his wife (Lucy, Margot) or when he is killing another man (Jacoby). In this respect, playing music and singing songs, both those which engage with death and others, provides a welcome contrast to Lancelot’s pseudo-scientific preoccupation with death and dying.

One example of Lancelot’s peculiar, unnaturally detached attitude to death is his description of the death of his former wife Lucy from leukaemia: ‘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’ (Percy, 1978: 88). Utter maintains that Lancelot’s response to Lucy’s death is that of a scientist confronted with an unfamiliar phenomenon (Utter, 1982: 120). In a sense, Lancelot’s reaction is characteristic of contemporary technological and materialist society. According to John Desmond, Lancelot realizes the flaws of scientific reasoning, discerning that ‘modern culture [...] has tried to reduce evil to an empirical datum’, yet he makes the mistake of trying to investigate metaphysical realities, such as death, evil and love with scientific techniques (Desmond, 1986: 104). Furthermore, Robert Brinkmeyer states that ‘Lance wants to see evil much as a scientist wants to see a chemical reaction in a test tube, and his experience reduces persons to objects’ (Brinkmeyer, 1987: 37).

Remarkably, Lancelot seems to have genuinely loved his first wife, as he remembers nostalgically their first dates, making particular reference to the music associated with these occasions:

At first I thought that ‘being in love’ was the only thing. Holding a sweet Georgia girl in your arms and dancing to the ‘Limelight’ theme in the Carolina mountains in the summer of ’52, out of doors, with the lightning bugs and the Japanese lanterns. (Percy, 1978: 10)

However, it is possible that Lancelot was more in love with the idea of femininity, a certain atmosphere that accompanied their dates, at least initially, because he does not name his wife. He is more particular about the second time when they listened to the music: ‘Driving with Lucy Cobb through the Carolina summer night with the top down and the radio playing the “Limelight” theme’ (ibid.: 11). Lancelot refers to his dead wife in a very formal way, using her name and her maiden surname, which is hardly a way to describe one’s beloved person. The ‘Limelight’ theme is associated with both his love and his loss of Lucy, just as *Me and Bobby McGee* reminds Lancelot of his relations with his second wife, Margot. Indeed, any music can become associated with sorrow, bereavement, death, and mourning. It can also bring out repressed or unacknowledged feelings and emotions, becoming the catalyst of both pain and healing.

Singing and music in general appears at turning points in Lancelot's life, and it is also associated with revolutionary actions and outcomes. One of his recurring visions is of a mountain ranger, who hears the singing of *Oh Shenandoah*, which signals the upcoming revolution and the beginning of a new, purified age. Appropriately for a war anthem, the song is performed to the rhythm of marching: 'There is a cadence and a dying away to the sound' (ibid.: 238). The two couplets cited or chanted by Lancelot, use the vocabulary of love and affection:

Oh Shenandoah, we long to see you
How we love your sparkling waters
And we love daughters
[...] Oh, Columbia, our blessed mother (ibid.: 238).

Prompted by Percival's question about women, Lancelot subsides into mad ravings about women's desire to be raped and men's destiny to violate them. This conclusion induced by Lancelot's traumatic experience of his wife's infidelity, but it may also be an attempt to rationalise his own violent actions at Belle Isle, which included rape and murder. Indeed, as I have mentioned before, any song object can become associated with death and violence or mourning, depending on the individual experience

While the action of singing, which implies emotional involvement, introduces a humane note in Lancelot's dreams of a 'new life' in a new world, the detached, scientific tone in which Lancelot invokes death is particularly alarming because of the 'third revolution' that he envisages. Speaking of his third revolution, just before claiming that there will be no need for killing anyone, Lancelot 'prophesies' that the 'country is going to turn into a desert and it won't be a bad thing' (Percy, 1978: 168). He explains that 'Deserts are clean places. Corpses turn quickly into simple pure chemicals' (ibid.). His words indicate that, for him, death is an abstraction in spite, or because, of the fact that he has had a very immediate experience of it. Lancelot probably feels that he can function as a sane being only if he refuses to recognize death as a tragedy, so that the murders he committed remain abstract, cushioned in the language of science and metaphor.

Nevertheless, Lancelot's 'new life' does not resemble, contrary to his claims, the life of 'survivors', but the existence of 'the living dead' (ibid.: 38–39). Indeed, Erich Fromm explains that sensitivity is essential for a sane, unalienated person, because 'The effort to avoid [pain and sorrow] is only possible if we reduce our sensitivity, responsiveness and love, if we harden our hearts and withdraw our attention and our feeling from others, as well as from ourselves' (Fromm, 1991: 201). Likewise, Garrido et al. contend that 'Among the disturbing effects at both clinical and sub-clinical levels of trauma may be emotional numbing, re-experiencing the event, survivor guilt and feelings of responsibility, anger, and heightened arousal levels' (Garrido et al., 2015: 1). Remarkably, music, singing and other creative activities are considered to be among the means of overcoming emotional trauma and in some cases have been successfully applied as treatments for psychological trauma (see Garrido et al.).

When Lancelot distances himself from the pain of Margot's infidelity, he ceases to function as a healthy individual. As he forgets or, to use his own words, 'does not want to remember' the night when Belle Isle exploded, he stays in a mental hospital for a year without getting better. Only when he is able to speak to Percival and relate his experience, is Lancelot healed, at least apparently, as he announces: 'I'm leaving today. They're discharging me. Psychiatrically fit and legally innocent' (Percy, 1978: 270). Lancelot's words sound ironic: although the reader may for a moment believe that Lancelot is 'fit' to function in society and is even saner than his psychiatrist (*ibid.*), the second part of the statement, 'legally innocent', is manifestly untrue. Lancelot's discharge follows on his telling Percival about Jacoby's murder; as a result, the reader's impression is that, in the world of *Lancelot*, the concepts of innocence and sanity are distorted.

The person who can recognise and diagnose Lancelot's sickness is Percival. As a priest and psychiatrist, Percival would know that his friend is psychologically and spiritually sick. According to Lawson, Percy learned from experience that 'there are several different aspects to illness, not merely a physical, not merely a physical *and* a mental, but a physical *and* a mental *and* a spiritual' (Lawson, 1972: 31). In his ability to perceive Lancelot's sickness holistically, as a combination of physical, mental and spiritual aspects, Percival becomes very similar to Percy the author, who believed that a novelist should be the diagnostician of social malaise (Lawson, 1972). One symptom of Lancelot's sickness, characteristic of modern society as a whole, is that he still perceives death as an abstract category. He has observed Percival recognizing and accepting death in its relation to the individual, when the priest prayed for the dead at the cemetery. However, death remains associated with mythology for Lancelot, as he alludes to Sodom, the Assyrians and the Spartans in describing contemporary American society: 'How many Spartans would be needed to take these 200 million Athenians? Ten thousand? A thousand? A hundred? Twelve? One?' (Percy, 1978: 277). Despite his earlier assertions that there will be no need to kill, Lancelot does not appear to balk at the thought of manslaughter. Nevertheless, he needs the vocabulary of myth and ancient history (Assyrians and Jews, Sparta and Athens), abstract terminology ('destroy' instead of 'kill') and pejorative words 'Russkies' and 'Chinks' to justify his intentions (Percy, 1978: 277). Human life for him is quantifiable, because he does not perceive the 200 million people he proposes to 'destroy' or 'take' (*ibid.*) as human beings. Lancelot also refers to the song *Oh Shenandoah*, which is symbolic in the context of the Southern culture, in order to rationalise or justify his past and envisaged violence and death-dealing.

Happily, an alternative vision can be glimpsed in the actions of Percival, who, at the novel's end, prays for another member of his community. By means of prayer, the dead and the living are joined as one community, which is an important notion in medieval Christianity generally and in the Arthurian romances in particular. This union is achieved, in many ways, through different types of music. While *Oh Shenandoah* constitutes a link between Lancelot's historical past and his noble Southern ancestry, the Cajun rhyme he hears or

dreams of provides a link to his other ancestors, the practical-minded, cheerful Creoles.

Classical music largely has negative associations in the novel, often being linked, in Lancelot's speech, to decay and decadence, but it also can evoke powerful emotions and memories. In many cases, classical music provides an inauthentic venue of escapism: Lancelot listens to Beethoven while drinking and reading Raymond Chandler, while the character in the film made at Belle Isle, Lipscombe, is given to playing Chopin on the piano. Likewise, Margot's interest in classical music is probably pretended, an affectation of the Southern 'aristocratic' lifestyle as she sees it, and Lancelot believes that her enjoyment of country music was far sincerer. In this case, it is both sad and ironic that the soundtrack Lancelot remembers in connection with their love-making is Janis Joplin's *Me and Bobby McGee*, Joplin's single hit with which she made it to the radio tops posthumously. The song is about betrayal and loss that, unexpectedly, leads to a sort of tragic liberation, just as Margot's betrayal death has left Lancelot free to begin a new life and to live authentically, rather than drowning his consciousness in routine drinking and mindless activities. For Lancelot, the song is emblematic of love and sexuality, and he imagines that his friend, Perceval/Father John, is in love with an unknown girl whom Lancelot watches singing the song. The readers never find who the girl is or whether she even sings the song except in Lancelot's imagination, but her singing creates a chain of continuity between her the two dead and – apparently – promiscuous women, Janis Joplin and Lancelot's Margot.

CONCLUSION

As Lancelot plans to begin a 'new life' with a 'new woman', the victim of rape and his fellow patient, in the evocatively named State of Virginia, he needs to create a new language or a new medium of expression. Throughout the novel, he attempts at communicating with his neighbour by tapping on the wall, but he soon realises the limitations of this method. However, when he enters the room next door and tries to speak with the girl he realises still more acutely the inadequacy of the old language. It seems that the solution to the main character's inability to communicate his feelings, ideas and visions in the existing language could have been solved through bypassing the medium of words altogether, and using, for instance, the language of music and song. A tendency in this direction is signalled using the oral tradition song *Oh Shenandoah*, but, like *Me and Bobby McGee*, it may be misunderstood or inadequately interpreted, rendering void its healing effect. Moreover, past experiences can change the meaning and healing potential of song objects: *Me and Bobby McGee* is, for Lancelot, about betrayal and loneliness, but so is, in a sense, the 'Limelight' theme, associated with Lancelot's dead wife Lucy.

In fact, no final musical solution to Lancelot's dilemma of a new language is offered, just as his new life is only hinted or promised but never drawn explicitly in the novel. In his later commentary on the grail quest motif, however, Walker

Percy outlines his own vision of what may follow upon Lancelot's entry on the Holy Grail quest: a desert is flowering and blossoms springing out of barbed wire (Percy, 1978: 422–423). This vision, based in the medieval romance aesthetics and theology, is also in line with Kierkegaardian existentialism as embraced by Percy himself. Thus, for Percy, and in his novel *Lancelot* in particular, songs of death can be transformed into songs of life as the individual passes from the aesthetic to the ethical stage, from culture to nature, from the search for consumerist heaven to the search of God. In this passage, author's song objects, especially classical instrumental music, are synonymous with the aesthetic stage, while popular and oral tradition song objects are close to the ethical stage. In turn, the music of nature or soundscapes represents the dawning of the aesthetic stage and the victory of life over death.

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