Andre Dubus’s Annotated Copy of *The Last Gentleman*. Photo, courtesy of Jane Kelley Rodeheffer.
THE LEGACY OF *The Last Gentleman*: READING DUBUS READING WALKER PERCY¹

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“And like his love for God, his love for her had little to do with the emotion which at times pulsated and quivered in his breast . . . [I]t had more to do with the acts themselves, and love finally was a series of gestures with escalating and enduring commitments.”

(Andre Dubus, “Adultery”)

Walker Percy was profoundly influenced by Kierkegaard’s writings, and referred to his first three novels, including *The Last Gentleman*, as a “gloss on Kierkegaard” (Luschei 241). In the Preface to Kierkegaard’s *Either/Or*, the narrator, Victor Eremita, recounts the series of events leading to his discovery of the papers of one A, containing, “a multiplicity of approaches to the aesthetic life” (13). The papers were discovered in a desk purchased by Victor from a shop window. This essay was occasioned by a similar discovery, not in a desk admired in the window of a shop, but in what is perhaps its twenty-first century equivalent: a window in an online bookstore. Looking for a used copy of an early work of Andre Dubus, I stumbled upon the following listing: *The Last Gentleman* by Walker Percy. Andre Dubus’s teaching copy with annotations. Inscribed Happy Birthday, Papa Baby, August 11, 1966. Signed by Dubus. Minor tears to dust jacket, otherwise fine to near fine condition.” The thought of two such giants of contemporary Catholic fiction meeting in the same volume more than piqued my curiosity. How did Dubus, whose writing belies a preoccupation with the immanent, sacramental presence of God in the world, read Percy, whose brilliant chronicles of the modern malaise represent the fall into grace as ironic and almost inadvertent? What, if any, effect did his reading and teaching of Percy have on Dubus’s own writing? I will attempt to answer these questions through a close reading of Dubus’s annotations of *The Last Gentleman* and his outline for teaching the book in a course on Southern Literature, which he offered at Bradford College in the late 1970’s. I will suggest that the themes of *The Last Gentleman* which most engaged Dubus as a reader and teacher of Percy turn out to be those that most engaged him in the writing of the 1980 novella “Finding a Girl in America”: