



Walker Percy: The Prophet in the Wilderness

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The political commentator, William Buckley, wryly suggests that all the presidents of the U.S.A. should take a double oath of office. They should swear not only to uphold and defend the constitution but also to have read, marked, learned, and inwardly digested the works of Walker Percy. "It's all there in that one book," said Buckley, "what's happening to us and why." (Wood 72). Percy's fictional world is a replica of contemporary America and the western world at large in all its richness, variety, and complexity and throbs with the spirit of the West that is essentially secular and materialistic.

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Walker Percy was born in 1916 in Alabama, into the non-Catholic, Christ-haunted

Southern gentry. He was trained as a physician, specializing in what he termed "the science of disease," abstracted from the realities of treatment and care. His conversion began surrounded by despair and death. While working long hours at Bellevue Hospital, Percy contracted tuberculosis. The incurable disease was more than a sickness—it was a new state of existence. Without a cure, Percy was prescribed isolation and time. Percy's isolation sent him wandering in a desert of despair, searching for meaning in a world of suffering. While convalescing in a TB cottage, Percy began his search by reading voraciously. What captured his imagination was the philosophy of the Existentialist movement, with its darkened, sideways view of a world in despair—a world of limitation and loneliness, devoid of meaning. The Existentialists offered a compelling solution to our despair: acceptance. For Percy, despair was only the beginning; it was an awakening to deeper social ills. The Existentialists identified man's symptoms of despair and alienation but failed to diagnose his underlying condition. With his physician's intuition, Percy saw human angst as the disordering of a creature created healthy. Man has shifted his gaze from the creator to the self, leaving him restless—if there is such a thing as happiness, it is to be found here below. Percy's conversion to the faith corresponded to a literary conversion to the faith; Percy saw that humanity's sickness had a cure, but that it needed prophets before it was ready for the physician.

Walker Percy, a physician turned novelist and a Baptist turned Catholic, is a writer with a "Message in the Bottle." Percy's prophetic message that things are not well is somewhat anticlimactic, a diagnosis of which we are well aware. Yet hidden within Percy's six novels are the subtle hints at a cure. His diagnosis of the mire into which modern man has fallen and the remedy Percy suggests freeing oneself from the angst form the core of Percy's fictional world. The novelist writes about the coming end in order to warn against present ills and so avert the end. He isn't writing as a biblical prophet, but neither can he deny that his allegiances are fundamentally Christian. His own vision of



reality is confessedly “incarnational, historical, predicamental. Walker Percy and his many fictional transformations, from Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* to Dr. Thomas More in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, tend to view history as a nightmare from which they hope to escape through wayfaring. The ‘malaise’ that engulfs man is traumatic and often results in alienation, everydayness, anxiety, and angst. Like his fellow Catholic writer Flannery O’Connor, Percy believes that the novelist “should shock his readers by speaking of last things—if not the Last Days of the Gospels, then of a possible coming destruction, of a laying waste of cities, of vineyards reverting to the wilderness. Percy’s Catholic literature uses our despair and homelessness as signposts in the wilderness, guiding us home. He proposes a search, a journey through the ten thousand comforts that promise to save us from ourselves. His quasi-prophetic message prepares us for peace because Percy believes that a novelist should perform the function of a prophet in an increasingly pagan hostile age so as to detect the malaise that sickens man unto death.

Percy’s voracious reading while recuperating from TB led him to the sickening awareness that despite the tall claims of science, man still lives in fragmentation, under the perpetual threat of a devastating war, and that science cannot tell man anything about how to live in this muddled world with soul and body, which already had been rendered asunder by Descartes, together. Percy came to the sickening realization that science considers human beings only as mechanisms under observation and that the scientific and technological advancements have divested man of the essential flavour of life. Percy’s long years of arduous labour in science and medicine directed him to the firm hypothesis that the only thing that science could articulate about man was those generalizations that hold good for the entire species and could say nothing about the uniqueness and individuality of man. Science could pronounce everything about man’s organism and constitution; however, it is blank about “what it is to be a man living in the world” (Percy 1986; 28). Science, of course, makes life cosy and comfy and can manage symptoms but fails to treat the underlying malaise—alienation from God, man, and oneself as a consequence of the Original Sin. Left untreated, man has no true happiness, nor false happiness, but the dull acceptance of life. Our inherited illness has turned us inward, seeking self-made happiness on our own terms. Percy argues in his litmus work *Message in the Bottle* that “the peculiar predicament of the present-day self surely came to pass as a

consequence of the disappointment of the high expectations of the self as it entered the age of science and technology. Dazzled by the overwhelming credentials of science, the beauty and elegance of the scientific method, the triumph of modern medicine over physical ailments, and the technological transformation of the very world itself, the self finds itself in the end disappointed by the failure of science and technique in those very sectors of life that had been its main source of ordinary satisfaction in past ages” (M.B. 119). Percy saw humanity as being theologically hard of hearing, lost, shipwrecked, distracted by commercial glitter, the lure of science and technology, inauthentic, suicidal, and living in despair. The postmodern protagonist, thought Percy, suffered from a broken relationship with God because of the sin of our first parents.

Percy argues that the scientific concept of man leads ultimately to totalitarianism, which is the opposite of the spiritual dimension of human existence. Percy combats the scientific view in *The Thanatos Syndrome* when he makes Fr. Smith remark, “Tenderness leads to the gas chamber” (360). Percy’s vision is post-Christian because people no longer understand themselves as ensouled creatures under God, born to trouble and whose salvation depends upon the entrance of God into history. The scientific view of man is only a “mish-mash view of man, a slap-up model put together of desperate bits and pieces” (Percy 1975: 19). The inimitable property of a human being is that he is stuck with the consciousness of himself as a unique individual. Percy warns his interviewer, Phil Combs: “Once you ignore the uniqueness and sacredness of the individual human being and set up abstract ideals for the improvement of society, then the terminus is the gas chamber” (810).

Percy’s overt intention in becoming a writer is to bridge the gap between the scientific and the Christian view of the world and the human beings. The whole impetus behind Percy’s attempts at fiction, as Jay Tolson comments, “is to express something quite mysterious: the journey that led to his accepting a transcendent order and purpose” (212). Though Percy never is a fire-breathing Catholic, he affirms that “The novelist is one of the few remaining witnesses to the doctrine of original sin” (“Notes from a Novel about the End of the World”). His task is not to edify but to purify by plunging us into the reality of man’s need for redemption. Percy continues that the novelist’s mission is not writing edifying stories but to diagnose the malaise gnawing at the roots of modern civilization. Flannery O’Connor comments that for



“people who can’t see ... clearly, you have to draw in caricatures ... The so-called Catholic or Christian novelist nowadays has to be very indirect. ... He has to practice his art in cunning and in secrecy and achieve his objective by indirect methods (Lawson 41). Percy’s intention is not to instruct but to engage his readers in a process of discovering themselves and their roles in a spooky world that may lead them to the rediscovery of God and the pulchritudinous world where they survive. Sans God, or in his absence, Percy believes man loses the quintessence of living and lives alienated from himself and from society. Percy desires to impart through his novels the Christian values of the beauty and dignity of human life and proposes a set of values, entirely different from the present, on which the Utopia he envisions may be established. Each of his novels, therefore, marks a transition from nihilism to hope and redemption.

Percy’s novels are propelled by that philosophical paradigm: emblems of grace nudging characters to come to themselves. Percy once insisted that faith is not a leap into the absurd; it is an act, which is a form of knowledge. A knowledge that God exists and that man is created in His image. ... [Man] has this extraordinary capacity to know things, a certain freedom, and he can find himself in a predicament. ... Ordinary epistemology does not take account of news as a form of knowing. (Lawson 204-205). Percy’s novels explore the existential angst and despair experienced by men in a world where even the computers are baptized. Percy’s rationale is cognitive, i.e., to make his readers aware of the malaise into which man has plummeted and to show the way to free oneself from the mire through a comprehensive understanding of the self and one’s role in the society. His novels present a specific situation of man being “estranged from his being and from the being of other creatures in the world and from the transcendent being. He has lost something that he does not know: he knows only that he is sick unto death with the loss of it” (Percy 1987:352). The concept of alienation from the consumer culture connected his faith with readers’ beliefs because, claimed Percy in a 1968 interview, “alienation, after all, is nothing more or less than a very ancient, orthodox Christian doctrine. Man is alienated by the nature of his being here.” By creating characters that critique the shallow general culture, Percy could appeal to readers of any belief system and, using “cunning,” describe a world where God approaches humanity to draw seekers to himself. (Lawson 28-29). In the rat race for survival in the alienated world, man has lost his original self and has become mere commodities and things

without souls in the hands of modern scientists. Man, in these bleak and gloomy circumstances, occupies “the position of the man in the Bible who would gain the whole world and lose his soul” (Percy 1987:359). In Percy’s estimate, under this desolate situation, the moral force that bound the world and man together no longer holds; what we are left with is a world described in *Love in the Ruins*: “Broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self-ripped from self and man pasted back together as a mystical monster, half angel, half beast but no man.” (326)

The present quandary commands every writer, especially the Catholic writers, to assume the role of an apostle who would redeem men from the malaise. Percy writes:

The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions that are repugnant to him, and his problem will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience that is used to seeing them as natural, and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. ... You have to make your vision apparent by shock; to the hard of hearing, you shout, and for the almost blind, you draw large and startling figures. (O’Conner 35-36.)

Because the modern world lacks a Peter, the hermit, or Saint Francis, the right kind of person who could initiate a great religious revival in the world is the Christian writers. He should, as Percy remarks in *The Moviegoer*, “listen to people see how they stick themselves, hand them along always in their dark journey, and hand along...” (233). The novelists always unlock the world before their readers, for the novel is a transparent window on the world. With their knowledge of the world and men, the Christian novelists can affect a religious renaissance. However, it is not an easy task for the novelists to practice their art in the contemporary scenario, where the followers of Jesus, the Buddha, Muhammad, Krishna, and Socrates are driven away from the face of the earth. The niches that had been constructed to hold God are now occupied by the idols fashioned by science. A devaluation of religious vocabulary has occurred in the twentieth century on account of the scientific and technological advancements. The religious messages of hope, salvation, and redemption are no longer up to standard for the modern technological man, who is taught to be content with the all-sufficiency of science. The Christian novelists now experience a more profound disquiet than the theologians at the way man is leading his life with his body and soul



asunder. The task of the novelists, more especially the Christian novelists, therefore, is to portray how the alienated man comes to himself and how his relationship with his family, business, and his church is affected through the change in him. The novelists are not objective scientists who stand apart from the world, detached and excluded from whatever they see, but rather, novelist-therapists who fully participate in the inter-subjective encounters with their characters in their works. Percy proclaims: Christianity and the novel are both predicamental. A novel is always about somebody in trouble or incomplete or unfulfilled and their flawed journey through life. ... In theological terms, man is fallen. His life is a journey. (Lawson 122-123). Percy admits that though it is not his vocation to preach the Gospel, knowingly or unknowingly, his belief is shaped by a certain "belief about man's nature and destiny" (Percy 1975; 111). Man, Percy argues, is an exile and a wanderer by his very nature. He is a castaway washed upon an island and does not know where he comes from. But in time he adapts himself to his environment. "What with the present dislocation of man, it is probably an advantage to see man as by his very nature an exile and wanderer rather than ... as an organism in an environment," as scientists consider him (Walker Percy, "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World," 111). He is a pilgrim, a wayfarer journeying to his eternal home—heaven. . The theme of wandering fits Percy's protagonists philosophically; they do not depart from civilization for solitary treks over forbidding deserts. Instead they feel alienated from the secular/consumer culture around them and seek religious meaning amidst a society that is deaf to religious questions. What the wayfarer needs is strong mooring, and Percy, in his novels, provides the castaways, his protagonists, the anchorage they quest for to live in this murky, confused world. Percy hopes through this "to discover or rediscover how it is with himself, who he is, and how it is between him and other men" (Percy 1975: 45). Percy's essays explain that life's predicaments can yield faith as knowledge. Because the castaway recognizes that the message speaks to his quandary, he trusts it. The castaway learns that knowledge about how to live on the island must be differentiated from news from across the sea. Percy's protagonists grow to realize the difference between knowledge for consumption and news for their predicament in existence. What Percy intends to convey is information on a specific state of affairs that affects the hearer's existence, something that is crucially relevant to the understanding of his self and his place in the world. Percy's formidable

mission, like Flannery O'Connor, is to make God real in his absence and to invoke God with being named.

Percy's novels are attempts at elucidating a Catholic theory of man as a wayfarer in search of his lost home on account of the 'first sin.' Percy holds that the very essence of man's existence on earth is to be redeemed rather than becoming fulfilled with respect to his needs or applauded as a model citizen, a true patriot, or one possessed of exalted mental health. Percy's protagonists are well-bred Southern gentlemen who, although endowed with all the trappings of contemporary comforts, are all haunted by the fear that they are leading meaningless and inauthentic lives amid the glitter and the lure of the modern world. Percy's heroes are people who search for an 'idea' for which they can live or die, and each of them, in the course of their search, comes to occupy a house with a beloved as redeemed individuals shedding the burden of everydayness, despair, and alienation. Percy's main characters realize that "life is a charade, and he is 'a stranger who is in the world but who is not at home in the world (*M.B.* 119). So the castaway becomes the prototypical Percy protagonist, searching for news from across the sea of mortal life. Percy embraced O'Connor's approach—a writer who creates a literary world where grace works to awaken characters to their spiritual predicament. Percy's main characters at the end of their wayfaring doubt secular concepts of humans as only physical, temporal, consuming beings; they realize that human life must have immortal consequence. At the end of the wayfaring, Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* admits, "Abraham saw signs of God and believed. Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge? But I am onto him (*MG* 118-19). Similarly, Will Barrett in *The Second Coming* says to himself, "Speak, God, or be silent. And if you're silent, I'll understand that" (212). Essentially, Will prays here, calling on God to respond to him. The unique characteristics of the cave—the quiet, darkness, and aloneness—stir Will to reach out toward God mentally. The world as it exists today, Percy remarks, is fast deteriorating; the whole world moves now to an open expression of the thanatos syndrome. His fiction is of the Jeremiad genre, denouncing the moral flaws of contemporary men and decrying the sins of the people and issuing warnings about God's wrath that will ensue if people are not awakened to faith. He uses fiction as "a vehicle for incarnating ideas as did Jean Paul Sartre and Gabriel Marcel" (Hobson 170).



Percy's Christian, more particularly his Catholic perspective, offered him insight into what was wrong with the world and what could be done to fix it: craft novels aimed at arousing agnostic readers' interest in life's principal questions and in Christianity's answers. With humour, satire, and emblematic settings and clergy, Percy's novels picture castaways combing the environment for clues as to where he came from and what his destiny is. Percy uses Christ's phrase about the prodigal, who 'came to himself,' to describe the contemporary persons who realize that life has become superficial and must search for answers to life's questions through a relationship with God, much like a shipwrecked survivor would search the beach for messages in bottles from across the sea. Though Percy's outlook is like the prophet Jeremiah warning the people of the doom they are to face if they do not attend to the messages sent by the Supreme, his novels offer a ray of hope to the contemporary men too much engrossed in the 'ways of the world.' Percy always conveys the idea of "a new beginning to try again" (Lawson 65) instead of a total kismet. All his novels portray men who rejuvenate themselves into a fresh life out of their insulated, solitary lives through an unsullied understanding of their position and role in the society, as Binx Bolling remarks, "to make a contribution, however small, and leave the world just a little better (MG 301). Percy's novels are novels that our civilization needs to keep reading.

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