

THE STRANGEST THING IN THE COSMOS

the mystery of the self in the life and works of

WALKER PERCY

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Who is WALKER PERCY?

Walker Percy was a prominent American novelist and essayist from the publication of his first novel *The Moviegoer* in 1961 to his selection as Jefferson Lecturer for the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1989, shortly before his death. Although not young when he published his first novel (he was 45), his rise to prominence was rapid after this initial success. *The Moviegoer* won the National Book Award in 1962 and between 1966 and 1987 Percy wrote five more novels, all of which received critical acclaim. The success of his fiction also drew fresh attention to his essays, and he was soon to establish himself as an influential essayist as well.

Walker Percy's work is difficult to classify. His quirky, unique style of constructing a novel was a factor in the surprise success of *The Moviegoer*—it was original, it worked, and it was hard to say why. He was a southerner and although there were southern themes in his work, his particular philosophical concerns had no precedent in southern literature and his plots sometimes resembled those of Albert Camus more than those of William Faulkner. So was he an existentialist writer? Perhaps he was

in that he examined the predicament of the alienated person in the modern world, but he was also very funny and ultimately he was very hopeful—two terms that fail to describe the writing of Sartre and Camus. So was he a Catholic writer? Percy was a convert and remained a strong Catholic until his death, but any Catholic who picks up his novels expecting a simple affirmation of faith would most likely be baffled. His main focus was on exploring the open-ended mystery of the human person and he did not comfort believers or proselytize.

Although there are many aspects of Percy's writing that make his work attractive, his particular genius was that he could make you, his reader, feel a new fascination for the strangeness of your own being.

If you engage Walker Percy's work seriously, you are changed. You can no longer take for granted that you are a clearly defined being plugged into a world that more or less makes sense. You are aware that your humanity is indeed "the strangest object in the cosmos" and the world around you is in many ways constructed to suffocate and avoid the questions that your being provokes.



A SON OF THE SOUTH

Walker was born in 1916 into a prominent planter family with roots in the Mississippi delta from colonial times. The older generations produced famous Civil War officers, planters, and politicians. As time passed, the Percys, in addition to the traditional roles, tended to be doctors and lawyers. The family was also noted for cultural and literary achievement.

To be born a Percy was to be born into a social milieu that had high expectations of you. In the South of Percy's childhood, these went beyond the common expectations concerning what the son must achieve in order to enter the class of his parents with dignity. In his family, as was common in the patrician southern culture of the time, there was a marked emphasis on a stoic ideal of high personal honor. In many ways a noble ideal, it was often a burdensome call to an unobtainable standard that left one sad and alone. Melancholia ran strongly in the Percy blood and this need to live up to the family name was agonizing.

Percy's thought in later life was shaped in part by his response to what he was given in the family environment. Much of his life was a moving away from the attitudes of his predecessors in views of religion and morality. In a striking essay he described what he saw as the relationship of Christianity and stoicism in his heritage:

"The greatness of the South, like the greatness of the English squirearchy, had always a stronger Greek flavor than it ever had a Christian. Its nobility and graciousness was the nobility and graciousness of the Old Stoa. How immediately we recognize the best of the South in the words of the Emperor:

"Every moment think steadily, as a Roman and a man, to do what thou hast in hand with perfect and simple dignity, and a feeling of affection, freedom and justice." And how curiously foreign to the South sound the Decalogue, the Beatitudes, the doctrine of the Mystical Body. The South's virtues were the broadsword virtues of the clan, as were her vices, too – the hubris of noblesse gone arrogant. The Southern gentleman did live in a Christian edifice, but he lived there in the strange fashion that Chesterton spoke of, that of a man who will neither go inside nor put it entirely behind him, but stands forever grumbling on the porch."

Percy's fiction is driven by the internal dynamic of his protagonists. Although, these dynamics are universal in their scope, they can never be untangled from the complex historical burdens of the southern context. Each of the four protagonists of his novels wrestles with this cultural inheritance.

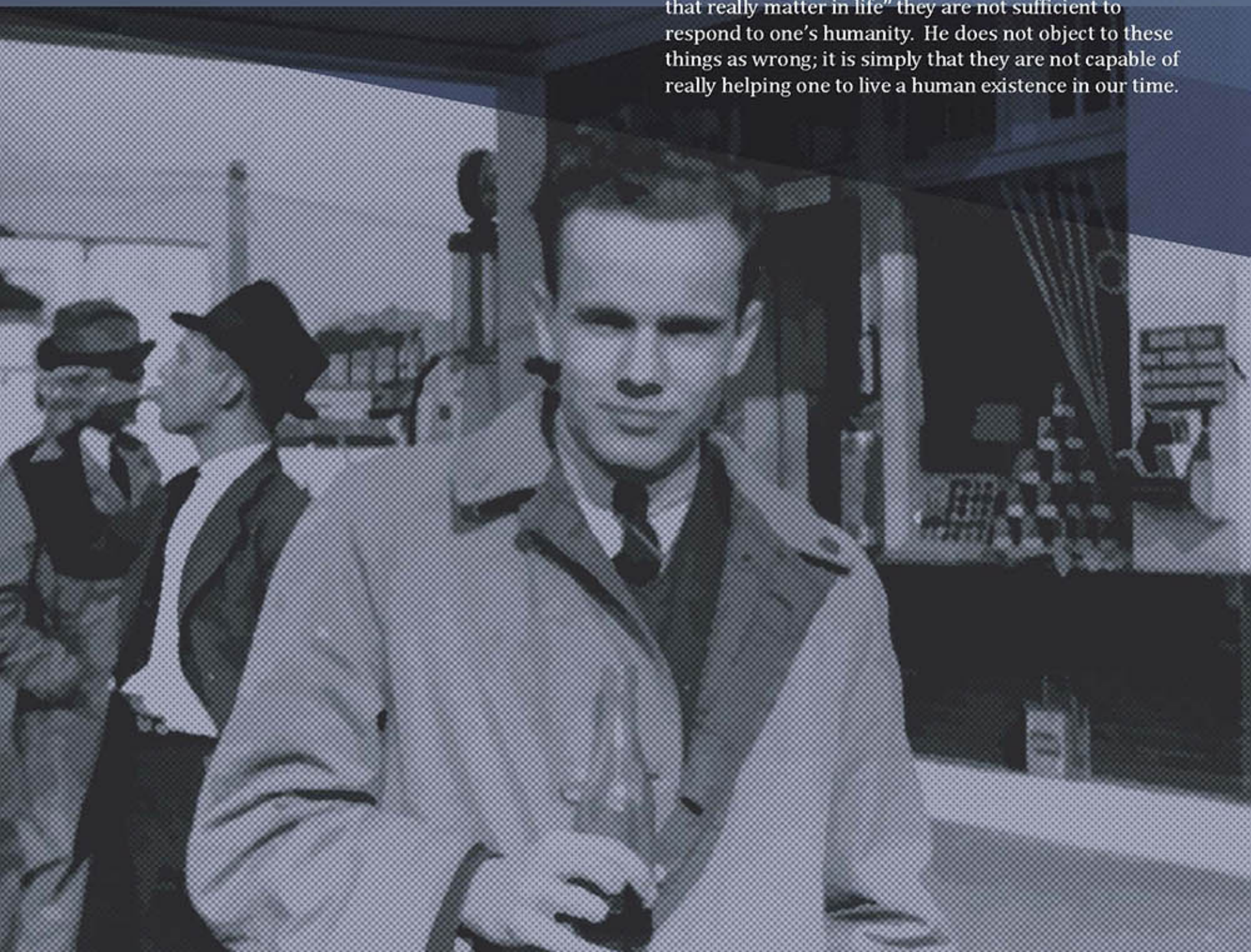
An example of this can be seen in *The Moviegoer* when the protagonist Binx Bolling must account for his choices to his Aunt Emily, who is the matriarch of his family. She embodies the values of the Bolling family, but in one very telling scene, her voice articulates what was the moral code of the Percy family as well. She wants to make sure her nephew becomes a proper southern man as were all of the men of the family. In a moment of frustration with her befuddled nephew, she pleads:

"I did my best for you, son. I gave you all I had, more than anything I wanted to pass on to you the one heritage of the men of our family, a certain quality of spirit, a gaiety, a sense of duty, and a nobility worn lightly, a sweetness, a gentleness with women – the only good things the South ever had. And the only things that really matter in this life. Ah well. Still you can tell me one thing. I know you are not a bad boy – I wish you were. But how did it happen that none of this ever meant anything to you? Clearly it did not. Would you please tell me? I am genuinely curious."

Binx responds sincerely to her:

"That would be difficult for me to say. You say none of what you said ever meant anything to me. That is not true. On the contrary, I have never forgotten anything you ever said. In fact I have pondered over it all my life. My objections, though they are not exactly objections, cannot be expressed in the usual way. To tell the truth, I cannot express them at all."

Binx cannot express them at all because Aunt Emily could not understand that if these are the "only things that really matter in life" they are not sufficient to respond to one's humanity. He does not object to these things as wrong; it is simply that they are not capable of really helping one to live a human existence in our time.



A LEGACY OF SADNESS



The male line of the Percy family was haunted by depression. In 1917, when Walker was still a baby his grandfather committed suicide, shooting himself with a shotgun in his bedroom. In 1929, when Walker was thirteen years old, his father also committed suicide in similar fashion. These traumas were to mark Walker all of his life, but this catastrophe was not over. The family moved in with a generous relative in the Percy ancestral home in Greenville, Mississippi. There, two years later, Walker's mother died when she drove off a bridge and drowned. There was no other car involved and there was no bad weather. The "dark view" in Greenville was that she too was trying to kill herself.

It is no surprise given this nightmarish history that reflections on suicide appear in his novels. The most chilling and powerful treatment of suicide occurs in *The Second Coming*. In this novel the protagonist Will Barrett is a successful retired lawyer who is in a state of desperation as he can still, after many years, make no sense of his father's suicide. In a poignant scene, Will Barrett questions his father in his imagination as he holds a three iron in his hands on the edge of a golf fairway:

"You were trying to tell me something weren't you?"

Yes.

That day in the swamp you were trying to tell me that this was what it was going to come to, not only for you but in the end for me, weren't you?

Yes.

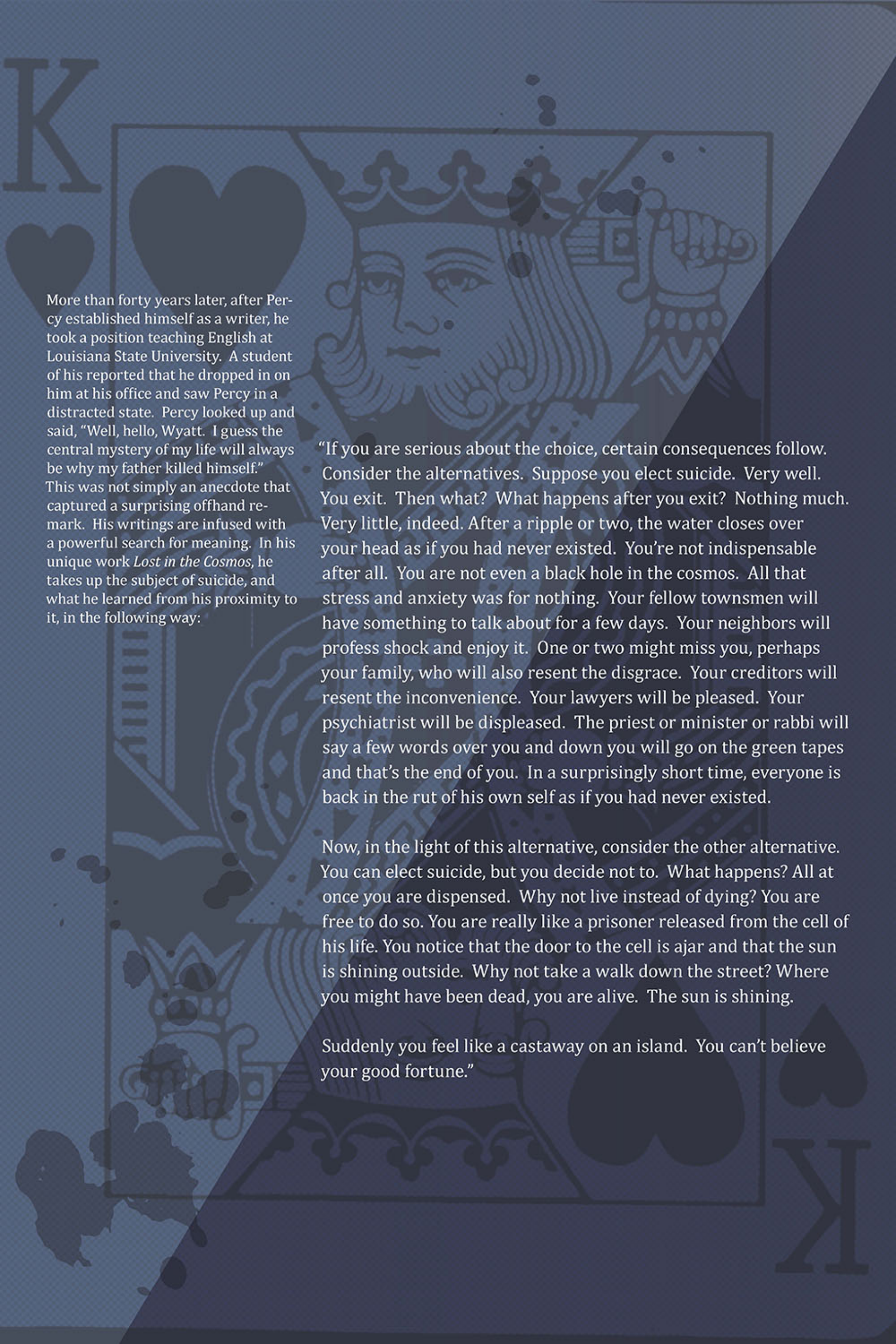
You did it because you hoped that by having me with you when you did it you would show me what I was up against and that if I knew about it that early, I might be able to win over it instead of it winning over me, didn't you?

Yes.

Then it's not your fault. It's not your fault that after all this time here I am back where we started and you ended, that there is after all no escaping it for us. At least I know that, thanks to you, you tried, and now for the first time since that day you cursed me by the fence and grabbed my gun, I don't hate you. We're together after all.

Silence.

Very well. At last I know why I feel better holding a shotgun than a three iron."



More than forty years later, after Percy established himself as a writer, he took a position teaching English at Louisiana State University. A student of his reported that he dropped in on him at his office and saw Percy in a distracted state. Percy looked up and said, "Well, hello, Wyatt. I guess the central mystery of my life will always be why my father killed himself."

This was not simply an anecdote that captured a surprising offhand remark. His writings are infused with a powerful search for meaning. In his unique work *Lost in the Cosmos*, he takes up the subject of suicide, and what he learned from his proximity to it, in the following way:

"If you are serious about the choice, certain consequences follow. Consider the alternatives. Suppose you elect suicide. Very well. You exit. Then what? What happens after you exit? Nothing much. Very little, indeed. After a ripple or two, the water closes over your head as if you had never existed. You're not indispensable after all. You are not even a black hole in the cosmos. All that stress and anxiety was for nothing. Your fellow townsmen will have something to talk about for a few days. Your neighbors will profess shock and enjoy it. One or two might miss you, perhaps your family, who will also resent the disgrace. Your creditors will resent the inconvenience. Your lawyers will be pleased. Your psychiatrist will be displeased. The priest or minister or rabbi will say a few words over you and down you will go on the green tapes and that's the end of you. In a surprisingly short time, everyone is back in the rut of his own self as if you had never existed.

Now, in the light of this alternative, consider the other alternative. You can elect suicide, but you decide not to. What happens? All at once you are dispensed. Why not live instead of dying? You are free to do so. You are really like a prisoner released from the cell of his life. You notice that the door to the cell is ajar and that the sun is shining outside. Why not take a walk down the street? Where you might have been dead, you are alive. The sun is shining.


Suddenly you feel like a castaway on an island. You can't believe your good fortune."

HOW DOES ONE GO ON?

After the death of his parents, Percy lived in Greenville, Mississippi with “Uncle Will” Percy, the cousin of Walker’s father. Percy called him, “the legendary uncle,” a World War I hero, a published poet and an honorable, cultured man. He was a southern planter who had been raised Catholic and as a boy he had aspired to be a priest. As a young man he renounced his faith and returned to what was the default moral disposition of Percy men: a stoic attitude of personal virtue in the face of a fate that will ultimately annihilate you. He was to Walker the embodiment of the old stoic southern ideal. Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* is a feminine reconstruction of Uncle Will in fiction. In the following excerpt we hear Uncle Will’s voice:

“I don’t quite know what we’re doing on this insignificant cinder spinning away in a dark corner of the universe. That is a secret which the high gods have not confided in me. Yet one thing I believe and I believe it with every fiber of my being. A man must live by his lights and do what little he can and do it as best he can. In this world goodness is destined to be defeated. But a man must go down fighting. That is the victory. To do anything less is to be less than a man.”

Walker admired him greatly and he had a strong influence on him. He became a father figure to him and much of the intellectual and moral development of Walker’s early adulthood occurred in a dialogue with this archetypal Percy. Walker at first embraced this stoicism of Uncle Will, but converted it into a more modern skepticism. Although he was later to turn against the stoicism of his relative and embrace the faith that Uncle Will rejected, he never relinquished a gratitude and affection for the man who took him in during a dark period of his life. In the conclusion of his preface to *Will Percy’s Lanterns on the Levee*, Walker Percy wrote simply, “And about him I will say no more than that he was the most extraordinary man I have ever known and that I owe him a debt which cannot be paid.”



William Alexander Percy
(“Uncle Will”)

A MAN OF THE 20TH CENTURY, A LOVER OF SCIENCE

As a young man Walker Percy sought to come to terms with a painful past and an uncertain future armed with little certainty in anything. His one fixed belief then was a common one for the 1930's: the progress of science would find the best answers for all of life's questions. As an undergraduate at the University of North Carolina, Percy immersed himself in science and prepared for a career as a doctor. This faith in science was to founder in a decade, but at this time it gave him an anchor in life and it gave him absolution from the Percy call to high stoic honor that still haunted him. In his biography of Percy, Jay Tolson wrote:

"Total immersion in the sciences, besides keeping Percy busy, had at least one result: it brought his faith in the behaviorist model, then firmly entrenched in the Carolina science departments, to its highest pitch. Percy's education during these years strengthened his belief that science would eventually explain everything. The world might be headed to hell and war, economists might be predicting nothing but greater woes to come ... but young man Percy believed that science would somehow bring mankind through. A man of science could survive even in a world without honor."

Percy attended medical school at Columbia University and chose to work in a pathology lab when he became a doctor because he was attracted to the scientific purity of the work. It was the simple and elegant application of the scientific method that particularly appealed to him.

In an essay he wrote in the 1950's, Percy would describe his attraction to science in this way:

"Though I am descended from a long line of lawyers, my own bent from the beginning had been toward science – and still is. It was the elegance and order and, yes, beauty of science which attracted me. It is not merely the truth of science that makes it beautiful, but its simplicity. That is to say, its constant movement is in the direction of ordering the endless variety and the seeming haphazardness of ordinary life by discovering underlying principles which as science progresses become even fewer and more rigorous and exactly formulated."

A TIME OF TURMOIL

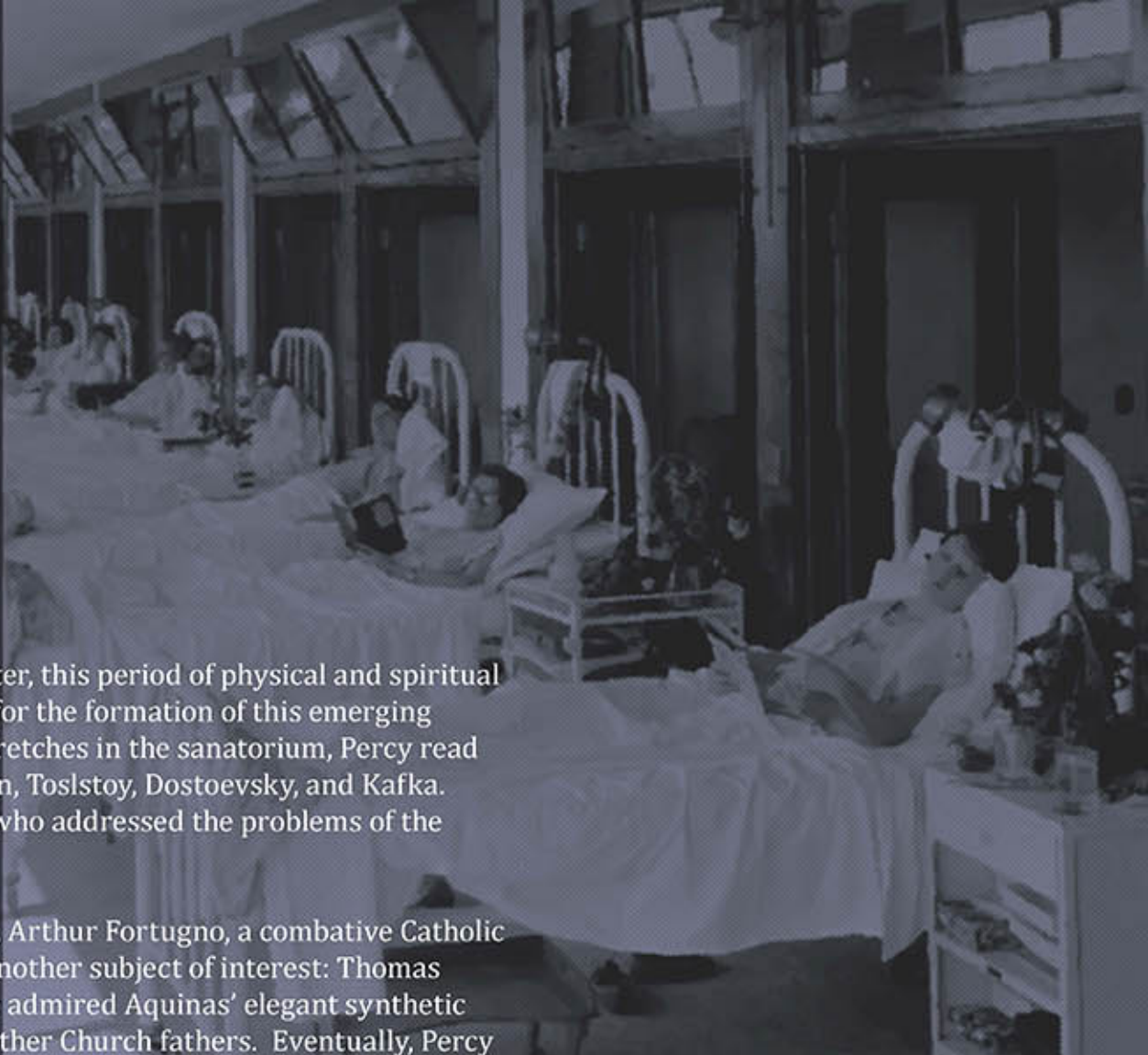
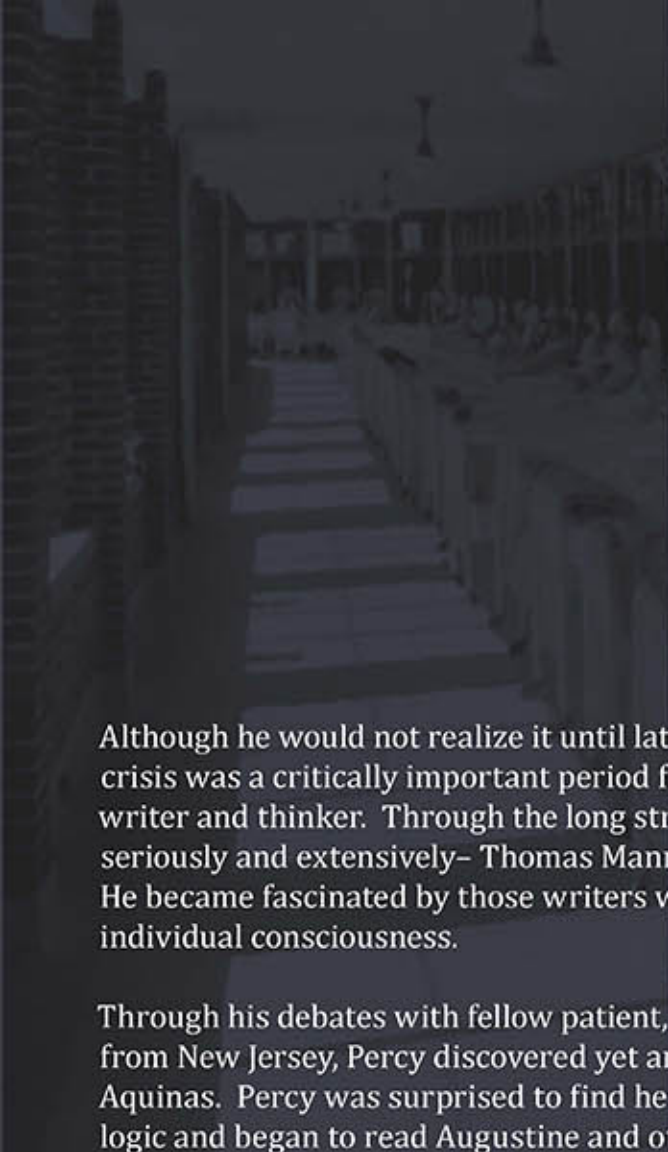
Walker Percy's life as a young doctor in New York City spun into crisis in the 1940's. His Uncle Will, the man who had become a father to him, passed away at the beginning of 1942. Percy had been receiving therapy for anxiety and was increasingly dissatisfied with it. Then his health collapsed. He contracted tuberculosis while working on cadavers in the morgue of Bellevue Hospital and this began a long period of convalescences and relapses that lasted through the war years. He missed the war entirely— a painful loss for a scion of the Percy clan, although his brothers served admirably.

By 1945, Percy had been twice released and twice relapsed. That year he returned to Greenville a thoroughly disoriented and disillusioned man. He abandoned his medical career without a clear plan of what he wanted to do and he lived in constant fear of the reemergence of tuberculosis. His one stable parent figure had died and the one sure belief of his younger days— scientism — had waned as well. He began to feel that the pain of his life and his desire for meaning required something more than scientific knowledge. As he wrote in a 1950s essay:

“If the first great discovery of my life was the beauty of the scientific method, surely the second was the discovery of the singular predicament of man in the very world which has been transformed by this science. An extraordinary paradox became clear: that the more science progressed, and even as it benefitted man, the less it said about what it is like to be a man living in the world. Every advance in science seemed to take us further from the concrete here-and-now in which we live. Did my eyes deceive me, or was there not a huge gap in the scientific view of the world (scientific in the root sense of the word “knowing”)? If so, it was an oversight which everyone pretended not to notice or maybe didn't want to notice.”

Almost twenty years later, he put this point in more colloquial terms in *Lost in the Cosmos*:

“Why is it that of all the billions and billions of strange objects in the Cosmos— novas, pulsars, black holes — you are beyond doubt the strangest?”



Although he would not realize it until later, this period of physical and spiritual crisis was a critically important period for the formation of this emerging writer and thinker. Through the long stretches in the sanatorium, Percy read seriously and extensively— Thomas Mann, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Kafka. He became fascinated by those writers who addressed the problems of the individual consciousness.

Through his debates with fellow patient, Arthur Fortugno, a combative Catholic from New Jersey, Percy discovered yet another subject of interest: Thomas Aquinas. Percy was surprised to find he admired Aquinas' elegant synthetic logic and began to read Augustine and other Church fathers. Eventually, Percy came to the strongest intellectual influence for most of his life: Soren Kierkegaard, the 19th century philosopher often labeled as the father of existentialism. For Percy, it felt as though he was discovering a great truth of the age in Kierkegaard's writing— that modern thinkers were building systems for understanding the world that failed to take into account the human person.

This concern that the distinctively human element, the most essential factor in the drama of life, was somehow being made foreign to us is a dominant theme of his Percy's writing. In the novel *Love in the Ruins*, the madcap anti-hero protagonist Tom More has created a device that can actually measure through physical means the degree to which an individual human being is distant from his ontological core (i.e. just how screwed up he is). In the following excerpt, the protagonist speaks directly to the reader, commenting on the skepticism of another scientist towards his device:

“After twelve years of a scientific education, I felt somewhat like the Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard, when he finished reading Hegel. Hegel, said Kierkegaard, explained everything under the sun, except one small detail: what it means to be a man living in the world who must die.”

(“From Facts to Fiction” *Signposts in a Strange Land*, 186)

“Colley, I will admit, has not gone along with my idea of measuring and treating the deep perturbations of the soul. Unfortunately, there still persists in the medical profession the quaint superstition that only that which is visible is real. Thus the soul is not real. Uncaused terror cannot exist. Then, friend, how come you are shaking?”

(Tom More speaking in *Love in the Ruins*, 29)

CHOICE AND RESOLUTION

At the end of 1945, a euphoric America was celebrating the triumphant conclusion of the war and was about to embark on an economic and population boom. At that time Walker Percy was returning to Greenville as a very well-read tubercular ex-doctor, with no plans and few commitments. By the end of 1946 Percy would have made three decisions that would determine the rest of his life: 1) he proposed marriage to the woman that would be his wife for the next 44 years, Bunt Townsend, 2) he was going to be a writer, and 3) he was going to convert to Catholicism, the faith that he strongly embraced until his death. What provoked this dramatic shift from aimlessness to powerful and steady commitments? As life itself, it remains a little mysterious.

Percy traveled west with his best friend Shelby Foote in that year. Percy was thinking of moving to Santa Fe as the climate would be better for his lungs than the low, damp Mississippi delta region. On the trip Foote recalls that Percy mentioned he was seriously considering becoming a Roman Catholic. Foote, a modernist and religious skeptic all his life, was horrified. "Yours is a mind in full

intellectual retreat," the famed Civil War historian told him. (This would be a strain but not an obstacle to a deep friendship that began when the two men were teenagers in Greenville and would continue until Percy's death.)

Although these major decisions did not happen all at once, it seems like this trip was the occasion where they came to a head. The West in Percy's fiction represents the land of possibility, the place free from the familial and historical entanglements of the South and free from the abstracted, rushed consumerism of the North. It is the place where moments of existential freedom can occur. This is a recurring note in his writing and it seems to reflect this critical juncture of his life. In his second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, the protagonist Will Barrett is an aimless southerner in New York City who falls in love with a southern girl and becomes entangled with all the characters of a very complicated family. In this picaresque tale he is led along by these new family connections to track down two of the brothers as they head west.

Percy describes Will Barrett's sense of what the West offered a person:

"Even in the southern wilderness there is ever the sense of someone close by, watching from the woods. Here one was not watched. There was no one. The silence hushed everything up, the small trees were separated by a geometry of silence. The sky was empty, map space. Yonder at Albuquerque forty miles away a mountain reared like your hand in front of your face. This is the locus of pure possibility, he thought, his neck prickling. What a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was the minute before."

Clearly something happened on this journey to the West in July of 1946. He mentions in different essays factors of his conversion: people that he knew, intellectual influences, an attraction to the sacramental, but he wisely acknowledged that no comprehensive "explanation" was possible. In a foreword to the 1987 book *Strangers in a Strange Land* on recent converts to the Catholic Church, Percy wrote:

"How to write about conversion if it is true that faith is an unmerited gift from God? How to describe, let alone explain it if this is the case? When it comes to grace, I get writer's block. How to write about other people's conversions when one hardly understands one's own? What one does, of course, is write about the cause other than God's grace, the "proximate," the "material," the "psychological" causes.

One can write about conversion two ways. One way is to put the best possible face on it, recount a respectable intellectual odyssey. Such as: Well, my tradition was scientific. I thought science explained the cosmos – until one day I read what Kierkegaard said about Hegelianism, the science of his day ... And for me, this "explanation" would be true enough I suppose. But then there is this. When I was in college, I lived in the attic of a fraternity house with four other guys. God, religion, was the furthest thing from our minds and talk – from mine, at least. Except for one of us, a fellow who got up every morning at the crack of dawn and went to Mass. He said nothing about it and seemed otherwise normal.

Does anyone suppose that one had nothing to do with the other? That is, thinking about Kierkegaard's dilemma and remembering my roommate's strange behavior – this among a thousand other things one notices or remembers, which, if they don't "cause" it, at least enter into it, at least make room for this most mysterious turning in one's life."

What was clear to him at the time was that when he came back to the delta, he knew who he was and what he wanted to do. He proposed to Bunt Townsend in October of 1946. They were married in November. A year later, in December of 1947, Walker Percy and his new bride were received into the Catholic Church.

He then began his career as a writer.

A FASCINATION WITH HUMANITY


Percy's genius as a writer was his ability to communicate how bizarre the human person is. He had an urgent concern that modern culture was building a world that did not suit its builder. It was therefore becoming harder to live as free self-aware human beings. In his essay "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?" he argued that it was the particular vocation of the modern novelist to sound an alarm and to make a diagnosis of our illness.

His approach to this task was artful and multi-faceted. His novels included hilarity and intense pain; he wrote outrageous satirical portraits of American life as well as powerful passages that only a man who struggled with depression could write. His non-fiction ranged from technical treatises on the nature of the symbol to the wild satirical humor of *Lost in the Cosmos*, *The Last Self-Help Book*, a funny and profound examination of the lost self in the modern world. We see his particular fascination with the human person in this passage:

"One of the peculiar ironies of being a human self in the Cosmos: a stranger approaching you in the street will in a second's glance see you whole, size you up, place you in a way in which you cannot and never will, even though you have spent a lifetime with yourself, live in Century of the Self, and therefore you ought to know yourself best of all.

The question is: Why is it that in your entire lifetime you will never be able to size yourself up as you can size up somebody else – or size up Saturn – in a ten-second look?

Why is it that the look of another person looking at you is different from everything else in the Cosmos? That is to say, looking at lions or tigers or Saturn or the Ring Nebula or at an owl or at another person from the side is one thing, but finding yourself looking into the eyes of another person looking at you is something else. And why is it that one can look at a lion or a planet or an owl or at someone's finger as long as one pleases, but looking into the eyes of another person is, if prolonged past a second, a perilous affair?"



The wonder at the mysterious quality of the individual human existence is also what permeates and enriches all of Percy's fiction. The suffering of each protagonist provokes a quest to find something that can speak to his whole humanity. Is individuality the sign of something great or the final curse (Aquinas or Sartre)? It is in the context of this drama that Percy explores the mystery of the human person in his novels.

In *The Second Coming*, the protagonist Will Barrett expresses this drama in his poignant questions. He has emerged from a deep personal crisis in which he has abandoned his desire for suicide. Percy offers his thoughts in this passage:

"How did it happen that now for the first time in his life he could see everything so clearly? Something had given him leave to live in the present. Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream.

Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane? And how is it that death, nearness of death, can restore a missed life?

This fervent desire to awaken the modern reader to the enigmatic nature of the human person is seen in his philosophical essays. In an early essay, he wrote:

It is not difficult to demonstrate that there does not presently exist a coherent theory of man in the scientific sense – the sense in which we have a coherent theory about the behavior of rats and more recently, a theory about what causes the red spot on Jupiter. I suspect that most of us hold to both traditions, man as body-mind and man as organism, without exactly knowing how he can be both – for if man is yet another organism in an environment, he is a very strange organism indeed, an organism which has the unusual capacity for making himself unhappy for no good reason, for existing as a lonely and fretful consciousness which never quite knows who he is or where he belongs."

THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN:

THE ALIENATED PERSON IN THE MODERN WORLD



Walker Percy's literature not only provokes a wonder for the strangeness of our humanity, it also captures the painful drama of living our humanity in a world that can no longer recognize it. Alienation is a theme that runs through all of his fiction.

In the beginning of *The Second Coming*, Percy describes the thoughts of his suicidal protagonist Will Barrett in these words: "In fact, he didn't even realize he was depressed. Rather was it the world and life around him which seemed to grow more senseless and farcical with each passing day." What follows in the novel is a reflection on which of these two is more true: the illness of depression or the fact that life is indeed steadily growing more senseless and farcical. The jury remains out for the rest of the novel.

In all the novels, the soul is not well and the world is not helping very much. There is a disconnect that often seems irremediable. The proposals of the world often seemed pitched to some other kind of being than the human person (and thus farcical and senseless) and the individual, unable to understand himself, is impotent in generating anything other than the violent or the insipid.

In the following passage we hear the world-weary voice of Binx Bolling from *The Moviegoer* after he learns from his boss he must go on a business trip to Chicago, leaving his native New Orleans in the days leading up to Mardi Gras:

"For some time now the impression has been growing upon me that everyone is dead.

It happens when I speak to people. In the middle of a sentence it will come over me: yes, beyond a doubt this is death. There is little to do but groan and make an excuse and slip away as quickly as one can. At such times it seems that the conversation is spoken by automatons who have no choice in what they say. I hear myself or someone else saying things like: 'In my opinion the Russian people are a great people, but-' or 'Yes, what you say about the hypocrisy of the North is unquestionably true. However-' and I think to myself: this is death. Lately it is all I can do to carry on such everyday conversations, because my cheek has developed a tendency to twitch of its own accord."

THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN:

THE DANGER OF ABSTRACTION

For Percy, an important source of this experience of alienation is the spirit of abstraction that marks our time. Intoxicated by the promise of science, we have constructed a culture in which knowledge that can be universalized is esteemed and knowledge that is needed to grasp that which is unique (i.e., my existence) is relegated to the shadows. Humanity then becomes known only through the fragmentary ways it can be objectified, which in the end is not to know it at all.

In Percy's darkest novel, *Lancelot*, the deranged narrator of the story reflects on this soul-numbing influence of abstraction in our time. From his prison cell he muses:

"Yes, interest! The worm of interest. Are you surprised? No? Yes? One conclusion I have reached here after a year in my cell is that the only emotion people feel nowadays is interest or the lack of it. Curiosity and interest and boredom have replaced the so-called emotions we used to read about in novels or see registered on actors' faces. Even the horrors of the age translate into interest. Did you ever watch anybody pick up a newspaper and read the headline: 'PLANE CRASH KILLS THREE HUNDRED?' 'How horrible!' says the reader. But look at him when he hands you the paper. Is he horrified? No, he is interested. When is the last time you saw anybody horrified?"

In his most humorous and satirical novel, *Love in the Ruins*, the theme is touched upon in a more comical manner. The brilliant crackpot Tom More has invented a device that can read the ills of the soul as they manifest themselves in the brain. He examines a highly abstracted graduate student suffering from sexual impotence and describes his results in this way:

"He registered a dizzy 7.6 mmv over Brodmann 32, the area of abstractive activity. Since that time I have learned that a reading over 6 generally means that a person has so abstracted himself from himself and from the world around him, seeing things as theories and himself as a shadow, that he cannot, so to speak, reenter the lovely ordinary world. Such a person, and there are millions, is destined to haunt the human condition like the Flying Dutchman."



THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN:

THE HORROR OF EVERYDAYNESS

A dominant theme in Percy's writing is that in a world where every dimension of our being can be explained by experts, we have lost any sense of the drama of our own existence. The very theories that offer us a security by claiming to name all of reality cut us off from ourselves and from a real engagement with the world. In an early essay, Percy writes about what happens when people become abstracted consumers of experience:

First, sovereignty is lost: it is theirs, not his. Second, it is radically devalued by theory. This is a loss which has been brought about by science but through no fault of the scientist and through no fault of scientific theory. The loss has come about as a consequence of the seduction of the layman by science. The layman will be seduced as long as he regards beings as consumer items to be experienced rather than prizes to be won, and as long as he waives his sovereign rights as a person and accepts the role of consumer as the highest estate to which the layman can aspire.

As Mournier said, the person is not something one can study and provide for; he is something one struggles for. But unless he also struggles for himself, unless he knows that here is a struggle, he is going to be just what the planners think he is.

This "loss of sovereignty" results in a secret longing for disaster and an intolerance of the banal moments of life. A man can consume the most exhilarating experiences, but he must ultimately accept life on the ordinary day or it becomes a desperate series of escapes. For Percy's characters, it is the banal moment when terror creeps in. Below is a passage in which the narrator describes the thoughts of Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman*:

Yet it was on just such a day as this, an ordinary Wednesday or Thursday, that he felt the deepest foreboding. And when his doctor, seeking to reassure him, suggested that in these perilous times a man might well be entitled to such a feeling, that only the insensitive did not, etc. It made him feel worse than ever. The analyst got it all wrong. It was not the prospect of the Last Day which depressed him but rather the prospect of living through an ordinary Wednesday morning.

THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN: MODERN CULTURE'S PENDULUM SWINGS FROM THE ABSTRACT TO THE BESTIAL

In Percy's thought and in his literature he describes a modern phenomenon that is the result of an age guided by abstract theory. We are subject to uneven swings between a theoretical posture and concrete experience without ever operating as stable, whole beings. There is something lopsided and incoherent in our approach to life that stems from the self-understanding that our age proposes. We in actuality are persons occupying a world (a set of meanings that includes a meaning for the person) and we try to pretend that we are organisms operating in an environment. The person can never function successfully as an organism because there are needs for meaning that are different.

The theorist who sees himself only as an organism must briefly exempt himself from his hypothesis because organisms do not theorize about their environment; they simply function within them. Thus, the first one to experience this odd swing between the theoretical and the concrete is the theorist himself, who must return to being an organism after performing the very non-organism act of ascribing meaning to things. Percy provides an example of this point in *Lost in the Cosmos* when he discusses the problem of scientists "re-entering the world" after moments of exhilarating discovery. Here he discusses an amusing irony associated with Charles Darwin:

Difficulties arise when triadic creatures [beings with consciousness] try to explain evolution through exclusively dyadic [cause and effect] events. Neo-Darwinian theory has trouble accounting for the strange, sudden appearance of man, the conscious self which speaks, lies, deceives itself, and also tells the truth. It gives an admirable account of the variations in the beaks of Galapagos finches, but what does it have to say about Darwin himself, sitting by his fireside in Kent and hitting on a theory which assigns all of life into a sphere of interaction and immanence while covertly elevating himself into the sphere of transcendence, and worrying about whether he or Wallace was going to publish first?

Percy admired Darwin's achievement and was not a skeptic about his theory of evolution. He was simply pointing out that the act of naming the whole process is an indication of a factor in humanity that is not contained within the cause-and-effect dynamic of evolution itself. The transcendent act of naming reality is the act of a person in a world, not of an organism within an environment.

THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN:

THE ABSTRACT AND THE BESTIAL IN *LOVE IN THE RUINS*

Percy's fiction is a celebration of the contradictions that emerge when we do look at the human person as if it were only an organism. He presents these contradictions both tragically and comically, but always with the intent of drawing our eyes to the mysterious, unruly phenomenon that is the human person.

In Percy's satirical and apocalyptic novel *Love in the Ruins*, Tom More is a failed physician-psychiatrist who drinks too much, pursues young women and suffers from both abstract terrors as well as lust and alcoholism. He is a bad Catholic who tells the reader: "I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whiskey next, God fourth and my fellowman hardly at all."

He is a genius, though, and he has invented the lapsometer, a device that can actually diagnose illnesses of the soul as they manifest themselves in brain activity. He attempts to obtain readings of his own self, but they are too difficult to interpret as it is like "a regular museum of pathology, something like passing a metal detector over the sand at Iwo Jima"

In spite of his fallen state, More has a great desire to heal the world around him with his device as he sees it spinning into chaos. Indeed, poor America is in a state of ruins. Vines are appearing everywhere over crumbling buildings, racial tensions have exploded, and ideological polarizations have become extreme. Late in the novel, he expresses his desire to heal the weary soul of the nation:

"For the world is broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as mythical monster, half angel, half beast, but no man. Even now I can diagnose and shall one day cure: cure the new plague, the modern Black Death, the current hermaphroditism of the spirit, namely: More's syndrome or: chronic angelism-bestialism that rives sold from body and sets it orbiting the great world as the spirit of abstraction whence it takes the form of beasts, swans and bulls, werewolves, blood-suckers, Mr. Hydes, or just poor lonesome ghost locked in its own machinery ... Some day a man will walk into my office as ghost or beast or ghost-beast and walk out as a man, which is to say a sovereign wanderer, lordly exile, worker and waiter and watcher."

THE NOVELIST AS DIAGNOSTICIAN:

ORGANISMS JUST DON'T ACT LIKE THAT!

LANCELOT AND HOW HUMAN DEPRAVITY IS A SIGN

Walker Percy wrote *Lancelot* in the mid 1970s and it is a journey into darkness. The rapid cultural changes of America in the late sixties disillusioned Percy. His Catholic faith was challenged by the crisis in the American Church and he always struggled with the pain of his own past. After he wrote this book he had a renewed sense of faith and purpose. The experience of reading the novel is like a Dantean journey through the depths in order to ascend.

The novel is almost entirely one side of a dialogue. The protagonist Lamar Lancelot is imprisoned. He is speaking to an old friend of his, a priest who has apparently left the priesthood. *Lancelot* has become a violent and depraved man who is a blend of Nietzsche and Robert E. Lee. His outrage against his wife's infidelity becomes an outrage against all that is false and dishonorable in the modern world. Lancelot's listener, Percival, does not speak at all until the very end of the novel. He is put in front of the same question that Lancelot addresses: how does one respond to the depravity of the world? His response to the question is never stated, but it is noted that he does have one and that he is wearing his collar once again. In one of Lancelot's rants he seems to hit on a truth that does more good for his friend than it does for him:

"Can good come from evil? Have you ever considered the possibility that one might undertake a search not for God but for evil? You people may have been on the wrong track all these years with all that talk about God and signs of his existence, the order and beauty of the universe--that's all washed up and you know it. The more we know about the beauty and order of the universe, the less God has to do with it. I mean, who cares about such things as the Great Watchmaker?

But what if you could show me a sin? A purely evil deed, an intolerable deed for which there is no explanation? Now there's a mystery. People would sit up and take notice. I would be impressed. You could almost make a believer out of me ...

You don't look impressed. Yes, you know me too well. I was only joking. Well, half joking."

THE NOBILITY OF THE QUEST:

THE MOVIEGOER AND BINX BOLLING

In the epigraph at the beginning of *The Moviegoer*, Walker Percy quotes his favorite philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, who writes:

“The specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair. Some characters in the novels seem content with empty existences, but Percy’s protagonists all possess this awareness that all is not as it should be and they embark on a quest. This is the beginning of change and it is the beginning of an authentic human existence.”

Early in the novel, narrator Binx Bolling presents himself to the reader and announces that a new factor is at work in his somewhat pointless existence. In his words:

“What is the nature of the search? You ask.

Really it is very simple, at least for a fellow like me; so simple that it is easily overlooked.

The search is what anyone would undertake if he were not sunk in the everydayness of his own life. This morning, for example, I felt as if I had come to myself on a strange island. And what does such a castaway do? Why, he pokes around the neighborhood and he doesn’t miss a trick.

To become aware of the possibility of the search is to be on to something. Not to be onto something is to be in despair.

The movies are onto the search, but they screw it up. The search always ends in despair. They like to show a fellow coming to himself in a strange place – but what does he do? He takes up with the local librarian, sets about proving to the local children what a nice fellow he is, and settles down with a vengeance. And in two weeks’ time he is so sunk in everydayness that he might just as well be dead.

What do you seek– God? You ask with a smile. I hesitate to answer, since all other Americans have settled the matter for themselves and to give such an answer would amount to setting myself a goal which everyone else has reached– and therefore raising a question in which no one has the slightest interest. Who wants to be dead last among one hundred and eighty million Americans? For, as everyone knows, the polls report that 98% of Americans believe in God and the remaining 2 % are atheists and agnostics – which leaves not a single percent point for a seeker.”

THE NOBILITY OF THE QUEST:

WILL BARRETT AND *THE SECOND COMING*

Of all the quests of the protagonists, the direct challenge that Will Barrett makes to God in *The Second Coming* is perhaps the most memorable. A prosperous lawyer and widower who has retired early, Will Barrett spends his days playing golf and pondering the suicide of his father, edging ever closer to the desperate act himself. He finally resolves on a mad scheme in which he will have a showdown with the Almighty. He will go into a cave and wait for a sign and if the sign does not come, he will die:

“Who else but a madman could sit in a pod of rock under a thousand feet of mountain and feel better than he had felt in years, feel so good that he smiled again and snapped his fingers as if he had made a discovery? ... At last, at last at last. It took me a lifetime, but I’ve got you by the short hairs now. One of you has to cough it up. There is no way I cannot find out.

Even if worst comes to worst, he thought with a smile, to suicide, it will turn out well. My suicide will represent progress in the history of suicide. Unlike my father’s, it will be done in good faith, logically, neatly, and unobtrusively, unobtrusive even to the Prudential Insurance Company. Moreover, I shall arrange to be found. What is more, it will advance knowledge.

His plan was simple: wait. The elegance of it pleased him. As cheerfully as a puttering scientist who hits on a simple, elegant experiment which will, must, yield a clear yes or no. He set about his calculations. The trick was to devise a single wait which would force one of two answers, no more, no less. If a yes, then to be able to leave and act on the yes. If a no, then to act on the no, and at the same time euchre the Prudential Insurance Company ...

If you do not speak and the Jews are not a sign, then that too is an answer of sorts. It means that what is at hand are not the Last Days, but only the last days, my last days, a minor event, to be sure, but an event of importance to me.”

TO BE ON A QUEST IS TO SEEK SIGNS

In Percy's novels, when a character begins to understand that a quest is necessary, the next step is that he must patiently wait for signs. What are the effective signs for the seeker? For Percy, there are really two: the "other" and "the Jews". The "other" becomes a sign when a person realizes that the incompleteness of our being is not a problem to be solved, but a sign that points to a radical belonging to God and to other people. How can this become a tangible truth? From God's march through history. The term "the Jews" for Percy refers both to the Jewish people, but also to the continuation of God's "dealings in the world" through the Church.

The addled priest Father Smith in *The Thanatos Syndrome* is the archetypal sign seeker. He has moved to a watchtower near his old hospice, which has been closed down. He spends his days watching for smoke and meditating on the state of the world. When Tom More comes to visit him, Father Smith draws him reluctantly into conversation. As they gaze over the forests, Father Smith initiates a word association game. When the word is "Jew," More responds:

"Israel, Bible, Max, Sam, Julius ..."

"May I continue my demonstration, Doctor?"

"For one minute." I look at my watch, but he doesn't seem to notice.

"May I ask who Max, Sam, Julius and Ben are?"

"Max Gottlieb is my closest friend and personal physician, Sam Aronson was my roommate in medical school. Julius Freund was my training analyst at Hopkins. Ben Solomon was my fellow detainee and cellmate at Fort Pelham, Alabama. "

"Very interesting."

"How's that?" ...

"What you associated with the word sign Irish were certain connotations, stereotypical Irish stuff in your head. Same for Negro. If I had said Spanish, you'd have said something like guitar, castanets, bullfights, and such. I have done the test on dozens. Thus these words signs have been evacuated, deprived of meaning something real. Real persons. Not so with Jews."

"So?"

He's feeling so much better that he's doing foot exercises, balancing on the ball of one foot, then the other. Now, to my astonishment, he is doing a bit of shadowboxing, weaving and throwing a few punches.


"That's the only sign of God which has not been evacuated by the evacuator," he says, moving his shoulders.

"What sign is that?"

"Jews."

"Jews?"

"You got it, Doc."



A SIGN THAT POINTS TO THE TRUTH OF THE PERSON: THE OTHER

Percy points out with many modern writers and thinkers that consciousness has become a burden for man. We sometimes numb consciousness to get rid of its demands or we glorify the autonomous consciousness, although the consequence of this is loneliness. The very words we use as conscious beings are borrowed and not invented. The root of our being points towards others and the claim of autonomy only makes us restless.

The quest that Percy's characters undertake is to realize that our contingent nature is a sign. One instance of this in his fiction is the case of Allie in *The Second Coming*. Allie is a young woman who has had a nervous breakdown. She is re-discovering the world, language and herself as she "comes to" after a dreadful electro-shock treatment. In the following passage she is pondering what it is to have a home, but more deeply what it is to be at home in the world. One is at home in the world not when your home is elegant, but when at your very core, you discover that "company is waiting." Percy writes:

"You have to have a home to make merry even if you are away from home. She had a home but it was not yet registered...

Perhaps she had not sunk deep enough into her Sirius self. If one sinks deep enough there is surely company waiting. Otherwise, if one does not have a home and has not sunk into self, and seeks company, the company is lonesome. Silence takes root, sprouts. Looks dart.

On the other hand, look what happens to home if one is too long at home. Rather than go home to Williamsport, she'd rather live in a stump hole even though her parents' home was not only registered with the National Registry but restored and written up in *Southern Living*. Rather than marry and have a life like her mother, she'd rather join the navy and see the world. Why is a home the best place and also the worse? How can the best place become the worst place? What is a home? A home is a place, any place, any building where one sinks into one's self and finds company waiting. Company? Who's company? Oneself? Somebody else? That's the problem. The problem is not the house. People are the problem. But it was their problem. She could wait."

LANGUAGE AND SYMBOLS:

THE PLACE OF UNITY BETWEEN SELF AND WORLD

From Walker Percy's days in the sanatorium to his death he had a passionate interest in language. For him, it was the sign par excellence of the distinctiveness of the human person. He saw the human act of using symbols as qualitatively different from any act of any other organism. When a "namer" couples an object with a symbol, it is an act that does not fit into the cause-and-effect dynamics of the organism. What exactly is it that couples the object to the symbol? This is the question that moved Percy in his journey to grasp the meaning of his humanity.

This fascination with language is very present in the novels, but the place in Percy's writing where he presents his observations on language most explicitly is when he comments on the case of Helen Keller, the famous deaf and blind woman who became an accomplished writer. Below, in a 1975 essay, Percy offers first Helen Keller's own account of the breakthrough moment when she acquired language and then his own reflections on it:

"Someone was drawing water and my teacher placed my hand under the spout. As the cool stream gushed over one hand, she spelled into the other the word water, first slowly, then rapidly. I stood still. My whole attention fixed upon the motion of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten – a thrill of returning thought; and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that "w-a-t-e-r" meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, hope, joy, set it free!"

"If there was a bifurcation in our knowledge of ourselves and our peculiar and most characteristically human activity, with a terra incognita in between concealing the mystery, surely I was straddling it and looking straight down at it. Here in the well-house in Tuscumbia in a small space and a short time, something extremely important and mysterious had happened. Eight-year-old Helen made her breakthrough from the good responding animal which behaviorists study so successfully to the strange, name-giving and sentence-uttering creature who begins by naming shoes and ships and sealing wax, and later tells jokes, curses, reads the paper, writes *La sua volontade e nostra pace*, or becomes a Hegel and composes an entire system of philosophy."

THE MESSAGE IN THE BOTTLE:

AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT IS NECESSARY TO RECOGNIZE THE SIGNS

Percy's reflections on language, on signs and on the nature of Christianity all come together in one striking essay, "The Message in the Bottle." In this essay, Percy employs the metaphor of a castaway to differentiate types of knowledge we seek in life. A discovery such as "The pressure of a gas is a function of heat" is an example of a scientific truth that is as true on the island as it is true anywhere else. A discovery that "A war party comes from Bora Bora" is an important piece of information for the castaway, but it is not a universal truth. It is news.

The hearer evaluates a claim of scientific truth and a report of news quite differently. The hearer of news has a predicament and he must evaluate whether the bringer of the news is believable and whether it helps him. For the hearer of a claim of scientific truth the bringer of the claim does not matter. He can be a fraud, but if one can repeat the proof, it is valid. Percy offers as an illustrative example the following:

"... if during the meeting [this is a conference of leading intellectuals] a fire should break out, and if then a man should mount the podium and utter the sentence "Come! I know the way out!" – the conferees would be able to distinguish at once the difference between this sentence and all the other sentences which have been uttered from the podium. Different as a bar of music is from a differential equation, it will be seen at once that the two share a generic likeness when compared to a piece of news. A radical shift of posture by both teller and hearer has taken place. The conferees will attach a high importance to the sentence even though it conveys no universal truth and even though it may not be verified on hearing...

If the newsbearer had announced, not that he knew the way out, but that world peace had been achieved, they would hardly heed him. If he commanded them to flap their arms and fly out through the skylight, they would hardly heed him. But if he spoke with authority, in perfect sobriety, and with every outward sign of good faith and regard for them, saying that he knew the way out and they had to follow him, they would heed him with all dispatch."

The interesting twist that occurs in Percy's essay is that he introduces a third category of knowing in his metaphor of the castaway. The castaway learns things that would be true any time or anywhere (scientific truth), he learns things that bear on his own needs of survival on the island (news), but there is another category of news: that which pertains to his situation as castaway. Even when all of his organism needs are met – he is safe, well-fed and protected from the elements – he still feels a displacement as he longs to journey home. A statement that pertains to this predicament is news (not a piece of universal truth), but can only be heard by someone who understands that they have this predicament. If someone arrives to say that a ship will be passing soon and the man on the island can board it, this is only important news to someone who thinks being stuck on the island is a problem. Percy concludes his essay in the following way:

“Since everyone is saying “Come!” now in the fashion of apostles – Communists and Jehovah’s Witnesses as well as advertisers – the uniqueness of the original “Come!” from across the seas is apt to be overlooked. The apostolic character of Christianity is unique among religions. No one else has ever left or will ever leave his island to say “Come!” to other islanders for reasons which have nothing to do with the dissemination of knowledge sub specie aeternitatis [universal scientific knowledge] and nothing to do with his own needs. The Communist is disseminating what he believes to be knowledge sub specie aeternitatis – and so is the Rockefeller scientist. The Jehovah’s Witness and the Holy Roller are bearing island news to make themselves and other islanders happy. But what if a man receives the commission to bring news across the seas to the castaway and does so in perfect sobriety and with good faith and perseverance to the point of martyrdom? And what if the news the newsbearer bears is the very news the castaway has been waiting for, news of where he came from and who he is and what he must do, and what if the newsbearer brought with him the means by which the castaway may do what he must do? Well, then, the castaway will, by the grace of God, believe him.”

SACRAMENT AS A RESPONSE TO THE HUMAN PREDICAMENT

In Walker Percy's thought and in his art the sacramental has a primary place. It is God's response to the problem of reconciling the transcendent and carnal dimensions of our being. The sacrament is the promise of the "company waiting" at the depths of our being that Allie from *The Second Coming* longed for.

At important moments in the novels, the protagonists are moved by at least the possibility of the sacramental. What follows is a striking passage near the conclusion of *The Moviegoer*. Binx Bolling is lurching into marriage with the very troubled Kate Cutrer. In the midst of a strained conversation with her, he sees a man leaving church on Ash Wednesday:

"His forehead is an ambiguous sienna color and pined: it is impossible to be sure that he received ashes. When he gets in his Mercury, he does not leave immediately but sits looking down at something on the seat beside him. A sample case? An insurance manual? I watch him closely in the rearview mirror. It is impossible to say why he is here. Is it part and parcel of the complex business of coming up in the world? Or is it because he believes that God himself is present here at the corner of Elysian Fields and Bons Enfants? Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim, dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus?"

In another example, we see the Tom More of *Love in the Ruins* returning to the Church after a long period of whiskey, women and song. In the context of the novel, old rites of public penance have been re-instated. His Georgia Presbyterian wife looks on at him as he leaves the confessional:

"No what bothers her is an ancient Presbyterian mistrust of things, things getting mixed up in religion. The black sweater and the ashes scandalize her. Her eyelid lowers – she almost winks. What have these things, articles, to do with doing right? For she mistrusts the Old Church's traffic in things, sacraments, articles, bread, wine, salt, oil, water, ashes. Watch out! You know what happened before when you Catholics mucked it up with all your things, medals, scapulars, candles, bloody statues! When it came finally to crossing palms for indulgences. Watch out!

I will. We will.

Father Smith says mass. I eat Christ, drink his blood."

THE SOVEREIGN WAYFARER

The world of Percy's fiction was troubled and his characters tottered on the brink of desperation. He was unsparing in his characterization of the destructive confusion of our time, but in the end he was a hopeful writer. He believed that it was possible for man to avoid the tragic reduction into "autonomous consumer" and become a "sovereign wayfarer" walking towards a destiny through the circumstances of life.

An example of a character becoming a sovereign wayfarer may be found

near the conclusion of *The Second Coming*. After Will Barrett's wild travails he is being housed in a retirement home. He has fallen in love with Allie and he also senses that the eccentric old missionary Catholic priest in the home knows something of importance. The priest has two fixations: the Seaboard Airline Railroad and the Apostolic Succession, the continuous physical link with the Apostles. Will is not curious about the first, but he becomes very curious about the second and begins to see a road opening up in front of him:

"By now Father Weatherbee had also risen and sidled past, keeping the desk between them, nodding and smiling. If only he could get back to the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe and the lonesome whistle of the Seaboard Airline, the only things in all of America he recognized.

Will Barrett stopped the old priest at the door and gazed into this face. The bad eye spun and the good eye looked back at him fearfully: what do you want of me? What do I want of him, mused Will Barrett, and suddenly realized he had gripped the old man's wrists as if he were a child. The bones were like dried sticks. He let go and fell back. For some reason, the old man did not move, but looked at him with a new, odd expression. Will Barrett thought about Allie in her greenhouse, her wide grey eyes, her lean muscled boys' arms, her strong quick hands. His heart leapt with a secret joy. What is it I want from her and him, he wondered, not only want but must have? Is she a gift and therefore a sign of a giver? Could it be that Lord is here, masquerading behind this simple silly holy face? Am I crazy to want both, her and Him? No, not want, must have. And will have."

DEATH & LEGACY



Walker Percy was named the Jefferson Lecturer for the National Endowment for the Humanities in 1989 in recognition of his contribution to American literature for a quarter century. His lecture, entitled "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind" focused on a primary theme of his writing and essays. He began his presentation affirming that "the view of the world that we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science is radically incoherent, not when it seeks to understand things and subhuman organisms and the cosmos itself, but when it seeks to understand man qua man". What followed was his last passionate appeal to his countrymen that we acknowledge the fullness of our humanity and not breed confusion by treating human beings as if they are simply advanced organisms.

Percy was already greatly weakened by prostate cancer when he gave the lecture and he died less than a year later in his own home in Covington, Louisiana. He was buried in nearby St. Joseph's Abbey. He loved this Benedictine monastery and had become a member of the lay confraternity a few years before so that he could be buried there.

What is the lingering impact of this prominent voice in American letters? There have been some, like his best friend Shelby Foote, who saw Percy's achievement as primarily literary. In his eulogy in an October 1990 ceremony in New York, Foote quotes a critic of Dostoevsky who said: "A hundred years hence when Dostoevsky's psychology will seem as much of a historical curiosity as his theology seems to us now, the true proportions of his work will emerge..." Foote added "Similarly, I will state my hope that Walker Percy will be seen in time for what he says in simple and solemn fact – a novelist, not merely an explicator of various philosophers and divines..."

For many of Walker Percy's readers, though, the value of his work is much more than literary. His enduring

legacy is that he has moved and continues to move people to see that there is something remarkable about their existence. His writing moves people to reflect on their being, to become aware and critical of the understanding of the person that emerges from our culture, and to seek with a true heart those things that really correspond to our humanity.