

WALKER PERCY

The secular reader, moving on a superficial level, could take Percy to be illustrating what the secular reader assumes Christian belief to be. Certifiable madness. But what is a scandal and a folly to the worldly, is the only sanity there is.

He was the non-Catholic's favorite Catholic novelist, and that was worrisome. Secular readers obviously relish tales of how awful it is to be Catholic, how repressive to be told that guilt follows on sin, when of course we all now know that you're okay and I'm okay and guilt is just an unwillingness to get in touch with oneself.

Write a novel with mad priests, sadistic nuns, and parents who teach you that sexuality is not a team sport, thereby thwarting your cheerful natural impulse to mate with everyone in sight, and with impunity, and you may make it as a Catholic novelist in the late 20th Century in the U.S.A.

Did Walker Percy sell out? Did he cater to the anti-Catholicism that is the anti-semitism of the liberal?

Trained as a medical doctor, converted to Catholicism, one of the most laid-back of writers, yet remarkably productive, Walker Percy began his literary career with an amazing novel, *The Moviegoer* (1962) which won the National Book Award, and followed it with *The Last Gentleman* (1966). Then, in *Love in the Ruins* (1971), he altered from being the latest

in the amazing list of Southern writers and became what would have been *sui generis* if it weren't for Flannery O'Connor and a couple of others -- a Southern Catholic writer.

The evolution, or more properly the gradual revelation, was a logical one, since what Percy was making clear was the ultimate foundation of his meditative criticism of man in the modern world. It had been possible to see this, as the title of his second novel suggested, as an appalled gentleman's reaction to the ascendancy of the Snopeses in contemporary America. But this was not the lament of a nostalgic Confederate who wanted to think of the War Between the States as one between Northern vulgarity and the Southern championship of the good life.

Love in the Ruins may be Walker Percy's best novel. A sign that he himself thought so is the fact that his last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), was a sequel to it. Here is its beginning. "Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself in a grove of young pines and the question came to me: has it happened at last?" It is the end of the world, the beginning of the end, end times. Percy had entered his apocalyptic phase.

Six years later in 1977, *Lancelot* appeared, with lines from Dante set before the story.

He sank so low that all means

*for his salvation were gone,
except showing him the lost people.*

For this I visited the region of the dead...

The movies are back, but this time it is the making of one, not the passive absorption of them in a dark theater.

The Second Coming (1980) made clear the technique Percy had evolved to make his increasingly overt Catholic sensibility palatable to a wide range of readers. The hero escapes from a mental institution, descends into a cave in search of a proof for the existence of God and a sign of the apocalypse. Are we to think of those Christ haunted crazies of Flannery O'Connor's, whom she saw as what happens when Christianity becomes unmoored from the Church? Not quite.

Percy had come to see that seriously to believe the Christian message nowadays is to qualify as insane. The trick then is to accept this judgment and to show from the vantage point of this putative insanity the genuine insanity of the standpoint from which the Christian is seen as crazy. Oblique. Indirect. Kierkegaardian. Artful.

The secular reader, moving on a superficial level, could take Percy to be illustrating what the secular reader assumes Christian belief to be. Certifiable madness. But what is a scandal and a folly to the worldly, is the only sanity there is. *The Thanatos Syndrome* happened to be Walker Percy's last book. It appeared in 1987 and he died in 1990. Perhaps he

would have written another novel, but it is difficult to imagine where he could have gone -- and taken the secular reader with him.

The last novel picks up and extends Percy's concern with the tendency to regard human beings as things to be altered, manipulated and controlled by drugs and oppressive psychological techniques. In danger of being lost is the free and responsible agent, wounded by sin, capable of salvation, who is the concern of Christ's salvific act. A recognition of the human capacity for evil, as a consequence of freedom, is a presupposition of salvation.

"For some time now I have noticed that something strange is occurring in our region. I have noticed it both in the patients I have treated and in ordinary encounters with people. At first they were only suspicions. But yesterday my suspicions were confirmed. I was called to the hospital for a consultation and there was an opportunity to make an examination."

The novel is set in Walker Percy's neighborhood. He has no need for travel to find an objective correlative for his spiritual concern. The priest who eventually passes judgment on what is happening is mad, crazy, dismissable on naturalistic grounds. Percy exhibits an almost Dostoevskian penchant for the holy madman as spokesman.

In his three prose collections, Walker Percy ranges from wildly comic exercises to sober essays, to apocalyptic effusions which rival those of any of his fictional characters. *The Message in the Bottle* (1975) is a

well organized book on the subject of language. An analytic philosopher who reviewed it undertook to chide one of the masters of English usage on the nature of language. He might have been invented by Percy.

Lost in the Cosmos (1983), "The Last Self-Help Book," is wildly funny, employing what became a favorite genre for Percy, the self-administered questionnaire. I would say that no one can read it without finding himself eased into the kind of self-examination urged on us by spiritual writers -- but what then is to be made of the wide secular readership the book had?

A sign that he had gone too far may be found in the resounding silence that greeted the posthumously published non-fiction book (his third), *Sign-Posts in A Strange Land*, edited by Patrick Samway (1991). The final collection bears similarities to both of the earlier ones since Father Samway, to his credit, is reluctant to let anything go uncollected.

The death of Walker Percy does not simply leave a gap in the ranks of Catholic novelists. In many respects, he was, if not the last gentleman, certainly the last Catholic novelist of consequence in this country. Now we have whimpering whining pseudo-confessional schlock from disenchanting Catholics whose aim is currying favor with their pagan contemporaries. What Walker Percy would have thought of them can be guessed from his mock Donahue show in *Lost in the Cosmos*.