



## Walker Percy: American Pilgrim\*

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Look again. Jay Tolson reports what Flannery O'Connor once said to a visitor who admitted to her that he was unenthusiastic about Walker Percy's *The Moviegoer*. "You'd better read it again," she said, in what Tolson calls "her simple but absolutely authoritative way" (324). Once her visitor did, he understood the point of her remark.

We too might profit from her advice. Perhaps we recall Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer* (1961), or even that it won the National Book Award. And if pressed, we may be able to say that he is a "philosophical novelist," a follower of Kierkegaard, a Catholic apologist, and a Southerner. But five other novels followed the first one: *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987). We also have three collections of his non-fiction, the last of them posthumous: *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), and *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991). And Jay Tolson mentions that we will see more, though Percy's work now "lies before us, almost complete" (490).

In his novels, we meet Americans who comically pursue phantoms of hope and embrace many a delusion. And those American phantoms and delusions are also among the subjects of his essays. In both his novels and essays, then, Percy is a pathologist, a pathologist of American life. No wonder that he came to regard himself as not only a novelist but an American moralist.

Tolson claims that Percy is "the most important American moralist since Ralph Waldo Emerson" (13). A striking claim, and one worth considering, espe-

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\*This essay considers the work of Walker Percy with the aid of Jay Tolson's new biography, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992). Numbers in parentheses in the text of the essay refer to pages in Tolson's book.

cially since toward the end of his life Percy came to think that Emerson was the chief source of the pathologies he examines (466).

One way to assess Percy's stature as a moralist is to look again at his life's work with the help of Jay Tolson's fine, remarkably fresh, and readable biography. Appearing as it does only two years after Percy's death at age 74 in 1990, it might well serve as an occasion for assessing this American novelist and man of letters.

Tolson finds "an extraordinary continuity between the man's life and his work" (11). And so he says that "knowledge of his life story reveals the remarkable extent to which Percy saw his work as a form of knowledge, an essay toward understanding what would help him live his life" (11). Tolson handles this continuity skillfully. Readers of his biography will be pleased to find

that he tells Percy's story without disabling Percy's stories from telling themselves or his essays from being heard on their own terms.

One example from among many: In July 1946, Percy drove from his home in Greenville, Mississippi, to New Mexico with his friend Shelby Foote. This was after he had finished medical school at Columbia, stayed twice in two different tuberculosis sanitariums, and met Mary Bernice Townsend ("Bunt"), the young woman who was to become his wife. But here he was in "the vast expanses" of New Mexico, as Tolson calls them, "a place without the complications of family or history, a place that felt as remote from the entanglements of the South as the moon" (191). Free in these ways and in this place, Percy might become whatever he chose to become.

And here in turn is Will Barrett, in Percy's *The Last Gentleman*. He is in New Mexico, as Percy was, and is nearly overwhelmed by freedom: "This is the locus of pure possibility....What a man can be the next minute bears no relation to what he is or what he was the minute before" (quoted in Tolson, 192). Barrett's condition is like that of the young and unfree Percy in New Mexico, as described in Tolson's sharply etched portrait:

But now that he was living from second to isolated second in the rarefied atmosphere of pure possibility, he found that he was oddly dissatisfied, even a little fearful. His existence lacked gravity. If he could do anything, then what he *was*, everything that life had made him up to this point, was irrelevant. (192)

This was a decisive moment in Percy's life. A few months later, still in New Mexico, "in the early autumn on a ranch near Santa Fe," he tells a friend that "I've got to have a life. I'm going to be a writer. I am going to live in New Orleans. And I am going to marry Bunt"(193). He moved to New Orleans, he did marry her, they became Catholics, and he became a writer. And he acquired a life.

Tolson prepares us well for this moment, and all that followed from it, by laying out clearly the elements of a complex family history. It goes back to "the first American Percy" (28), who arrived in Natchez in 1776, and includes the suicides of both Percy's father and grandfather before him. So his fate was, as Tolson says, a difficult one; and he faced it in the decisive moment of his life, by leaving his medical career behind and embracing instead an uncertain future as a writer. Tolson finds in this "a kind of heroism, an intellectual and spiritual bravery," and

he tells us that "one concern" of his biography is to examine the question of "how, and to what extent, Percy's life constituted a heroic, or at least an exemplary life" (12).

We know, however, that the caprices of his first protagonist, Binx Bolling, are anything but heroic or exemplary. We find him in *The Moviegoer*, floating through life and entertaining himself with its possibilities, ironically keeping family and others at a distance, looking at them in their everyday life with a certain aesthetic detachment and disdain. He is so unrooted that he interprets his everyday life in terms of the unreality of the movies he constantly escapes to. He is betrayed by possibility and lives a dream-like life. Like the young Walker Percy in New Mexico, and in the terrifying condition Kierkegaard represents in *The Sickness Unto Death*, Binx Bolling has not yet acquired a life.

Until, that is, he marries Kate Cutrer and begins his hazardous passage from the world of the “living dead” toward a new life. That passage and the novel as a whole is in effect a wry commentary on a major theme in American life and letters. Binx Bolling’s detachment reminds us of a long standing American zeal to free the self from the complexities of history, family, and everyday life. Such zeal is everywhere. Listen for a moment to freedom-loving undergraduates, for example, and it is likely to spring right up out of the insubstantial dreams of American cave life that afflict them. As we see in the novel, though not from these cave dwellers, the irony is that the autonomous self is a burden rather than a blessing.

This is the point at which Percy joins issue with Emerson. Remember Emerson telling us in “The American Scholar” address that

the world of any moment is the merest appearance. Some great decorum, some fetish of a government, some ephemeral trade, or war, or man, is cried up by half mankind and cried down by the other half, as if all depended on this particular up or down.

The human beings who inhabit this world are “men...of no account” until they and this darkling world they inhabit are reclaimed by “Man Thinking.” Though this figure of sheer reason works “in solitary abstraction,” he nonetheless cheers, raises, and guides lesser “men by showing them facts amidst appearances.” Public life in this vision of Emerson’s has no more substance than does the everyday world that passes before Binx Bolling’s eyes.

Similarly with Thoreau. Impatient with vulgarity and moral compromise and affecting a heroic posture, he imagines a condition of “absolute freedom and wilderness, as contrasted with freedom and culture merely civil” (*Walden*). “Merely civil,” says Thoreau; and he means by the phrase such things as elections, the work of government, and our great national debates. This plane of life is morally unsound, in his judgment.

When we turn from Emerson and Thoreau to Percy, who reflects critically on their work, we might expect a different judgment about the “merely civil.” But he seems to arrive at much the same judgment they do. He is a “pilgrim in the ruins,” in the title of Tolson’s biography; and those ruins are distinctly American. What was once “merely civil” has fallen prey to the dangerous lunacies of twentieth-cen-

ture life, and with Percy’s help we see ruination all about us. And not only ruination but apocalypse. By naming his biography as he does, Tolson reminds us of *Love in the Ruins*, Percy’s third novel. Its subtitle is “The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World,” which sounds the novel’s apocalyptic theme.

It is useful to remember that Walker Percy did a residency in pathology after he completed medical school at Columbia. And he came later to understand his work as a novelist in medical terms (see especially “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” and “Physician as Novelist” in *Signposts in a Strange Land*). What then is his diagnosis of the American condition? It is that we are betrayed by our freedom, as his wonky heroes regularly are. His novels offer us a many-sided, nuanced pathology of American freedom, and this from a man who as a student had acquired a “lasting regard for the clear declarative sentence” (112). Those sentences of his are pleasing, and

they make us laugh.

But a pathology of American life, especially one as entertaining as Percy's, leads us to wonder about its health. We learn from Tolson that Walker Percy himself was public spirited and in his own way carried on a family-bred tradition of civic responsibility. Yet his comic indictment of the regime, though more genial than the high-minded severities of the Transcendentalists, seems equally detached from the "merely civic" and the important question of its health.

Toward the end of his life, we hear from Tolson, Walker Percy "had come even more to the view that Emerson's was the mind most singly responsible for legitimizing the abandonment of tradition, history, and even society in the name of the imperial Self and the pursuit of happiness" (466). Praise be to Walker Percy for having traced out the lunatic consequences of Emersonian high-mindedness in our day.

Percy does this with such charm and verve that we might forget, but should not, that the follies of Emersonian high-mindedness coexist in our national life with a different account of American freedom. It is the one bequeathed to us by the Federalists and the Anti-Federalists in their debate over our constitutional order. They too were aware of certain ill effects of liberty and aimed to control them without destroying it. More specifically, Publius was interested in "curing the mischiefs of faction" but recognized that they could not be cured by "destroying the liberty that is essential to [faction's] existence." This would be a "remedy" that is "worse than the disease" (*Federalist* No. 10).

And so on the one hand they devised a way of constituting liberty that held the promise of working, as such constitutions had never worked in the past (see *Federalist* No. 9), and that in fact has lasted. On the other hand, that constitution creates an arena of freedom in which follies of every kind abound.

Thus the paradox of the "large commercial republic" bequeathed to us by our founders: an order of public life, as well as the private disorders within it that arrest Percy's attention.

This sobering paradox gives us a rich and enabling context for assessing Walker Percy's conversation with Emerson and his many descendents.