

Walker Percy: Pathologist, Philosopher, and Novelist

with Leslie Marsh, "Philosopher of Precision and Soul: Introducing Walker Percy"; Elizabeth Corey, "Life on the Island"; Stacey E. Ake, "Scientists in the Cosmos: An Existential Approach to the Debate between Science and Religion"; John D. Sykes, Jr., "Walker Percy, Language, and Homo singularis"; and Benjamin B. Alexander, "Confessions of a Late-Blooming, 'Miseducated' Philosopher of Science."

CONFESSIONS OF A LATE-BLOOMING, "MISEDUCATED" PHILOSOPHER OF SCIENCE

by Benjamin B. Alexander

Abstract. This article provides a survey of Walker Percy's criticism of what Pope Benedict XVI calls "scientificity," which entails a constriction of the dynamic interaction of faith and reason. The process can result in the diminishment of ethical considerations raised by science's impact on public policy. Beginning in the 1950s, Percy begins speculating about the negative influence of scientificity. The threat of a political regime using weapons of mass destruction is only one of several menacing developments. The desacrilization of human life from cradle to grave leads Percy to assert that modern science's impact is often radically incoherent. In *The Moviegoer*, Percy finds his existential and theistic voice that would enable him to advance his critique of science.

Keywords: catastrophic wars; Cuban missile crisis; existentialism; William Faulkner's question; Jewish exile; moviegoing; public policy; Regensburg address; religious science; scientificity; theological insight

Walker Percy evolved from obscurity and uncertainty in the 1950s to sudden fame by way of his improbable winning of the National Book Award in 1962 for *The Moviegoer*. In 1989, the National Endowment for the Humanities selected Percy the Jefferson lecturer, its highest honor, and he delivered one of his most famous and complex addresses, "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind."

Among other achievements, Percy was the only American Catholic selected for membership on the International Pontifical Council on Culture

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before which he spoke at the Vatican in 1988. Percy's influence has endured in the writings of both John Paul II and Benedict XVI. Both echo Percy's philosophic analysis of science's limitations a half century after Percy first raised fundamental questions. While Pope Benedict XVI's University of Regensburg's address in 2006 offended Islamic *sheikhs*, the furor unfortunately drowned out the Pontiff's more salient criticism of "scientificity" and the way it diminishes the interaction of faith and reason. Benedict speaks of the "kind of certainty resulting from the interplay of mathematical and empirical elements" that "can be considered scientific." Such certainty requires that what Benedict calls the "human sciences" of "history, psychology, sociology, and philosophy" conform to the "canon of scientificity." This approach, the Pope writes, "excludes the question of God, making it appear an unscientific or pre-scientific question. Consequently, we are faced with a reduction of the radius of science and reason, one which needs to be questioned" (Benedict XVI 2006).

Raising similar observations decades before, Percy, trained as a physician, chose not to practice medicine. Instead he began an examination of what Benedict XVI identifies as "questions raised by religion and ethics" that increasingly have "no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by 'science'" (Benedict XVI 2006). Calling himself "miseducated," Percy credentialed himself as a book reviewer and philosophic essayist. In the autumn 1954 edition of *Thought*, Percy's first philosophic essay appeared, in which he reviewed Suzanne Langer's *Philosophy in a New Key*. He quipped in an interview, "I got no money, but they sent me a whole stack of reprints. . . . Anyway I thought, 'Gee, this is great, I can write something and publish it'" (Tolson 1992, 244).

With new confidence "Walker Percy, MD" (his formal title) soon assesses *The Nature of Physical Knowledge* by L. W. Frederick, SJ, and *Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries* by Mircea Eliade. He notes the books represent the extreme wings of the scientific method, of "quantum physics on the one side and cultural anthropology on the other." Percy adopts an enduring Socratic position in attempting to discover a coherent metaphysics that he hoped would bridge the "extreme wings" of scientific discourse characterized by "schism and semantic quarrels which seem to mark a scientific discipline when it has exhausted an avenue or enquiry."¹

Over the years, Percy increasingly highlights ethical issues raised by scientifically rooted developments, such as when human life begins and whether political regimes should possess nuclear weapons of mass destruction. Percy also monitors how social science influences public policy; he comments on two far-reaching U.S. Supreme Court decisions, the 1954 decision concerning racial integration of public schools and the 1973 decision on the termination of unwanted pregnancies. Percy endorses the 1954 decision mandating integration of public schools, although he foresees that distant federal control could undermine parental authority, resulting

in new types of inequality. Percy argues that an irreligious ideology could gain a foothold “not merely as a necessary and desirable institution in a pluralistic society” but also could turn public education into a “sole and exclusive school, a universal secular academy for secular liberals” (Southern Historical Collection, “South, Quo Vadis?”). Percy makes a fundamental distinction between public schooling and other ways of learning. Based on his own educational formation, he advocated that all parents should have flexibility in educating their children. In a November 1967 letter to the *Clarion-Ledger* (New Orleans), Percy observes: “Surely something is wrong when the support of public schools becomes *coercive* to the point that everyone but the rich is obliged through financial pressure to send his children to public schools” (Southern Historical Collection, “Letter to the Editor” [*Clarion-Ledger*]).

The implementation in the 1960s of so-called “comprehensive sex education” in public schools further diminishes parental oversight. The label concocted by social scientists masks subtle indoctrination. Percy objects to their theories of behavior rooted in irreligious anthropology where the young are merely regarded as organisms with little control over hormonal drives. In the same 1967 public letter to the *Clarion-Ledger*, Percy updates his 1954 objections in sharper religious terms:

But substantive issues of freedom are involved here for example how to devise a public school system which is not hostile to the Judeo-Christian view of man's nature while at the same time respecting the views of those persons who do not share these views? How to preserve the freedom of the parent to educate his child without sacrificing the excellence of education? (Southern Historical Collection, “Letter to the Editor” [*Clarion-Ledger*])

Later, in *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983), Percy observes that American society has become the most eroticized culture since the Renaissance. Some influential social behaviorists view sexual promiscuity among adolescents as inevitable while Judeo-Christian moral restraint becomes passé. Percy objects to “value-free” normalization of “florid sexual behavior” (Percy 1983, 195). In December, 1988 Percy writes the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* about a local school board and inquires “if a condom vending machine will be installed at the playground entrance so the kids will be safe during recess when they head for the woods.” Percy points out that much tax-supported sex education in public schools is

“value-free,” free of Judeo-Christian values among others; in its very neutrality it promotes the values of a rather aggressive secularism—an ideology in itself. Perhaps this is what our educators want. But a warning is in order. Once this line is crossed and human beings are treated like any other organism, the upshot can only be the barnyard behavior of Orwell's animal farm. (Southern Historical Collection, “Letter to the Editor” [*Times-Picayune*])

THE INCOHERENCE OF SCIENCE

Percy remains consistent in his criticism of unethical scientism in which human beings are “treated like any other organism.” Not surprisingly, he begins the 1989 Jefferson lecture: “Our view of the world which we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science is radically incoherent.” More specifically, Percy notes that, while medical science is efficient when it assesses the “physiology or neurology or bloodstream” of humans, it is “incoherent” in understanding “man *qua* man” (Percy 1992, 271). Percy adroitly maintained this posture throughout his career and remained skeptical of the “isms” he listed in 1977, including “humanism, atheism, agnosticism, Marxism, behaviorism, materialism, Buddhism, Muhammadism, Sufism,” and “occultism” (Percy 1992, 416).

In his essays and novels, Percy is vigilant in avoiding association with gloomy ideological systems with absolutist certitude that span the gamut of political expressions. He transcends categorization and appeals to different audiences, both secular and religious, as well as philosophic and scientific. Percy’s medical education and scientific training gave him the credibility and authority to confront the ethical and anthropological issues posed by the primacy of science asserting its “method” to assess the human being as “an adjusting specimen, an organism immersed in an environment” (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”). He is especially convincing when addressing issues of human life because he writes both as a physician and ethicist—and he holds doctors accountable because he asserts they know exactly what they are doing in disjoining medical procedures from ethical considerations. *The New York Times* refused to publish his letter of January 28, 1988, outlining his position. Percy’s perspective and analysis distinguish him from traditional literary criticism, philosophy, and scientific discourse. Percy couches his criticism of scientism in a layman’s language, separating him from most academic philosophers. He has a wider appeal than the starchy, British Catholic apologists of earlier generations—G. K. Chesterton, Hillaire Belloc, and Evelyn Waugh—whose audience was largely conservative and often fearful of scientific developments. Moreover, unlike the most resourceful of British Catholic commentators, C. S. Lewis, Percy has a command of the specialized vocabulary of scientists, often quoting them in their native languages. With relaxing erudition, Percy leavens the British apologetic tone, while adding learned insights about the impact of science and the insinuation of its methodology in historiography, sociology, psychology, and other social sciences.

Percy notes in a rich unpublished autobiographical essay:

Though I was descended from a long line of lawyers, my own bent from the beginnings had been toward the 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 which makes it beautiful but its simplicity. That is to say, its

constant movement in the direction of ordering the endless variety and the seeming haphazardness of ordinary life by discovering underlying principles which as science progresses becomes ever fewer and more rigorously and exactly formulated. (Southern Historical Collection, "Reflections of a Late-Blooming First Novelist")

Percy's devotion to the "beauty of science" mandated premedical studies at the University of North Carolina and a predictable career path of medical school at Columbia University. Percy observes:

I found myself in the pathology laboratory at Bellevue [Hospital, in New York], where it seemed medicine came closest to being the science it should be and farthest from the arts and crafts of the bedside manner. Under the microscope, in the test tube, in the colorimeter, one could actually see the beautiful theater of disease and even measure the effect of treatment on the disease process to become a physician. (Southern Historical Collection, "Reflections of a Late-Blooming First Novelist")

So far, so good—but Percy soon would detour to Robert Frost's "road not taken." He contracted tuberculosis, leading to two years in a sanatorium where his own precarious health and enforced isolation led him to a dramatic change from physician to philosophic essayist and novelist:

After twelve years of a scientific education I felt somewhat like the Danish philosopher Søren 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. My interest began to turn from the physical sciences and medicine to philosophy and the novel. (Southern Historical Collection, "Reflections of a Late-Blooming First Novelist")

WILLIAM FAULKNER'S QUESTION

The transition enabled Percy to wrestle with a profound question raised by fellow Southerner and Nobel Prize winner, William Faulkner. In his oft-quoted 1949 Nobel address delivered just four years after the atomic bombing of Japanese cities by the United States Air Force, Faulkner posed a central question raised by the fearful alliance between science and weaponry: "When will I be blown up?" As with so much Faulkner wrote, the question remains prophetic, with too many regimes possessing or seeking to acquire nuclear weapons.

Faulkner's words had an impact on Percy's best friend, Shelby Foote. Long before he became an acclaimed historian of the three-volume *The Civil War: A Narrative*, Foote was a struggling, relatively unknown novelist. He wrote Percy, in November, 1956:

We're building up for genocide beyond anything the Russians ever contemplated; not on purpose, but through stupidity and lack of moral fiber. I don't blame Eisenhower; I think he's exactly what we deserve. I think he

expresses us at the present we've reached, sorry as it is. And I think that's why we (or at least you) voted for him. (Tolson 1998, 112)²

In 1960, Democratic Party candidate John F. Kennedy was elected President of the United States, much to the relief of Foote and admiration of Percy. The Cuban missile crisis of October, 1962 made Foote's fear of genocide and Faulkner's Nobel question about being blown up appear even timelier. Robert Kennedy, in *Thirteen Days*, his memoir of the near-nuclear exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union, concludes with a reflective, unanswered footnote in the idiom of Socrates, the founder of political philosophy, about the menacing alliance of nuclear weaponry and foreign policy: "What, if any circumstance or justification gives this government or any government the moral right to bring its people and possibly all people under the shadow of nuclear destruction?" (Kennedy 1969, 98).³

In Walker Percy's essays (some unpublished), as well as in his first novel *The Moviegoer*, published two years before the Cuban missile crisis, Percy wrestles with the questions posed by Faulkner, Foote, and Robert Kennedy. All three raise ethical issues about the fearful alliance of nuclear weapons and scientism. Moreover, Percy and these three were troubled by the bellicose foreign policy of the superpowers that threatened a nuclear exchange. Percy was no anti-American and deplored the predatory imperialism of the Soviet Union. He also dissented from American neoconservative foreign policy rooted in messianic exceptionalism. Its advocates believed in robust interventionism throughout the world and nations adopting the ideals of racial equality, economic justice, and enfranchisement. By contrast, Percy was not the heir of utopian politics. His Confederate ancestors failed decisively to expel the militant forces of democracy known as "Mr. Lincoln's army" from Southern soil. In the Civil War's tragic aftermath, Percy remained quietly "unreconstructed." He was loyal to regional history as fundamental to American identity (the current irrational removal of the symbols and icons of memory would have raised objections).⁴ Percy in 1962 confounded a television journalist, revealing he could write *The Moviegoer* "because we lost the war" (Tolson 1992, 298). Rooted in the soil of Louisiana, Percy had little allegiance to global democracy. Its imperial designs were opposed by the Soviet Union and its allies during the Cold War. The Cuban missile crisis threatened the *rapprochement*, leading Robert Kennedy to ask if "any government" had the "moral right" to expose its citizens to the "shadow of nuclear destruction." Percy reframes the question this way: "This tragedy is not the catastrophic wars of the 20th Century—though God knows these are tragic enough. These particular events are only symptoms of the tragedy; indeed they might even be said to be desperate attempts to escape it" (Southern Historical Collection, "Which Way Existentialism?").

THE RECLAMATION OF EXISTENTIALISM

There was, however, according to Percy, a philosophy largely born of the “catastrophic wars” and which was critical of science: existentialism. Percy recasts its maligned French advocates who had suffered World War II up close and personal—they had experienced the ghoulish aspects of science in witnessing gas chambers and genocide. Percy puts the European existentialists on the side of the angels in relation to their skepticism of science. In one of the best essays ever written about these French thinkers Percy observes that their philosophy “has not been taken seriously in America” and that

its gloomy and sensational, not to say obscene, character seems to many to be merely a historical phenomenon, the cultural backwash of two great wars, relevant to the particular plight of Europe, but hardly relevant to an intact prosperous America and to the timeless issues of philosophy. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

Percy, however, recognizes that Camus, Sartre, and others raise fundamental anthropological issues ignored by what he calls the “objective mindedness” of “sciencing.” Percy notes:

The existentialist, though admitting the competence of the scientific method over some aspects of life, would place human existence prior to the scientific method, as that which practices the method rather than that which can be understood by the method. In support of this reversal, they would point out that the scientist explains everything except himself and his science. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

In the aftermath of Nazi genocide and the detonation of atomic bombs, existentialists challenged the destructive legacy of scientism. As a reflective physician retooling himself as a novelist in the late 1950s, Percy believed that they have a point. He observes:

It is not inconceivable that even Sartre’s atheistic existentialism may be in the end far more productive for Christianity than many present-day Christian spokesmen who deal with religion in terms of mental hygiene, business success, and whatnot. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

As he would do in *The Moviegoer*, Percy extends the philosophic insights of French existentialism across the Atlantic to the American middle class suburbs of the late 1950s. He addresses the stereotypes of existentialists that allow many Americans to ignore their message. Percy challenges this oversight:

The modern world, not merely the slums of Paris but the pleasant American suburb, is implicated in a special sort of tragedy. . . . The tragedy has rather to do with the fundamental banality, the loss of meaning, of modern life—

what Heidegger calls the “every-day-ness” and the homelessness of life in the modern world, a world which Marcel refers to as a broken world. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

The first incarnation of this “fundamental banality” for Percy appears surreptitiously in his own dedicated moviegoing, which he began in his undergraduate days at the University of North Carolina. Because of his own distractions, Percy by the mid-fifties had become an astute observer of popular culture, adopting a bemused, skeptical posture similar to Binx Bolling, the narrator of *The Moviegoer*. By this time, most Americans had acquired televisions and enjoyed a weekly series, “Father Knows Best,” broadcast on both CBS and NBC networks from 1954 to 1960. The affable Jim Anderson, an insurance salesman played by Robert Young, offered sage advice whenever one of his two children had a problem. The series became a fixture in American popular culture (along with “Leave It to Beaver” and “Ozzie and Harriet”) in the idyllic celebration of the middle-class family.

One episode, however, mocked a French café scribbler, a caricature of Sartre. Percy took exception, noting that Jim Anderson even with his dapper demeanor is worse off than the existentialist bohemian with unkempt hair. The nonconformity points to fundamental philosophic issues not occurring to Anderson in his comfortable suburban lifestyle. The “father” purporting to “know best” really knows nothing—the greater problem, however, is that he is unaware of his ignorance. Anderson is a tolerant and compassionate character—as Percy notes, “a Christian and a nice guy as well as being scientifically enlightened” (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”). He, however, unlike the existentialist, is philosophically unaware of his true predicament. Percy states:

In his view, a human being, himself included, is in the world as an object merely of his physiology, his psychological reactions Man in his ultimate humanity, falls entirely within the purview of the scientific method, as much as sodium chloride, the potato beetle, or a stellar explosion.

Expounding further, Percy observes:

Jim Anderson’s belief, shared explicitly by men as diverse as Francis Bacon and Arnold Toynbee, and implicitly by fifty million Jim Andersons, is this: all real knowledge that we have or ever will have is the objective knowledge acquired by the scientific method; man’s happiness comes from the fruits of this method, from the knowledge gained thereby of himself and the world, from the application of scientific techniques and the consumption of the products of science. Religion and art are accepted, but as “extra-scientific” activities and as such subject to the scrutiny and approval of the Method. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

Within this purview, the “extra-scientific” activity of religion renews the Enlightenment discipline of religious science. It had displaced the medieval sapiential inquiries of theology and philosophy practiced by Augustine and

Thomas Aquinas. The religious scientist essentially reduces theology to surveying various practices and rites of diverse peoples for cultural assessment. Few communities elude the methodology. Summations result usually in dry, wooden prose. Ernest Hemingway, using satire, in his short story "The Natural History of the Dead," an impersonal account of battlefield fatalities in World War I, mocks the idiom of religious science:

The colour change in Caucasian races is from white to yellow, to yellow-green, to black. If left long enough in the heat the flesh comes to resemble coal-tar, especially where it has been broken or torn, and it has quite a visible tar-like iridescence. The dead grow larger each day until sometimes they become quite too big for their uniforms, filling these until they seem blown tight enough to burst. The individual members may increase in girth to an unbelievable extent and faces fill as taut and globular as balloons. The surprising thing, next to their progressive corpulence, is the amount of paper that is scattered about the dead. Their ultimate position, before there is any question of burial, depends on the location of the pockets in the uniform. (Hemingway 1953, 441)

Percy is adept in unmasking such descriptions by religious scientists. They embrace the dispassionate style of Hemingway's naturalist narrator. Percy was particularly provoked by the smug insights of articles appearing in both *Look* and *Life* magazines in 1955. The writing dilutes the older discipline of theology to make it conform to scientific theories. Percy takes exception:

Best of all, an article in *Look* magazine announced the glad tidings that now a scientist might believe in religion because the Law of Probability allowed the possibility that miracles could happen: once in a great while a body might fly straight up instead of falling down or water over a flame might freeze. All is well in *Life* magazine too. It is true that in one issue an article on primitive man seemed to say that all the higher religions evolved from crude cult, but in the same issue an editorial called for a return to Christianity. If the reader was puzzled as to how Christianity with its peculiar historical claim grew out of fetish-and-nurtunja rite, and if it did, why it should merit his special allegiance, he must have been reassured by the equanimity of *Life* and her editors. For here it all was lying peacefully together between the same covers, science, religion and girls thrown in for good measure. (Southern Historical Collection, "An Apologetic Work")

In another unpublished essay written in 1956, Percy writes:

Movies, radio, and television have much to say in support of God and religion and little, openly, to say against them. Does this second fact mean that the first fact has been reversed? Perhaps. There is evidence, however, that both facts obtain and exist side by side by virtue of a kind of gentleman's agreement and a somewhat schizophrenic gentleman at that. (Southern Historical Collection, "The Scandal of Judeo Christianity")

He goes on to note, however, that the “gentlemen’s agreement” has led to “a shotgun marriage in which all difficulties are knocked willy-nilly together in the name of national morality, mental hygiene, laziness, and God knows what” (Southern Historical Collection, “The Scandal of Judeo Christianity”). Percy has little patience for the American dream rooted in what he calls “the standard American-Jeffersonian high school commencement myths,” especially if they diminish the historical concreteness of the Judeo-Christian experience (Percy 1983, 16).

Percy is upset with the notions of religion as myth as well as religious science reducing faith to an intellectual category. He takes to task, for example, the dean of religious science, the Swiss psychiatrist and psychotherapist, Carl Jung:

When Jung approves the Catholic dogma of the Assumption, not because it is true but because it validates the anima archetype, no one is served: surely not science, for something is wrong when science starts prescribing what it does not believe to be true; not religion, for religion learned long ago that the embrace of the gnostic, who wants the symbol but not the fact, is the kiss of death. (Southern Historical Collection, “An Apologetic Work”)

The Jungian orientation persists in the optimistic religious science of Western politicians. Having little training in theology, they nevertheless insist there is little difference among Jesus, St. Francis, and Mohammed. They pronounce mythical characters of global religions proclaim messages of peace. Theology, on the other hand, would probe deeper to ascertain actually what each messenger believes. Are the beatitudes of Jesus the same as Mohammed’s prophecies? For example, Benedict XVI in the aforementioned Regensburg address recalls a theological inquiry at a meeting in 1391 in Turkey between the “erudite Byzantine emperor Manuel II Paleologus and an educated Persian on the subject of Christianity and Islam, and the truth of both” (Benedict XVI 2006). Criticizing the “startling brusqueness” of the emperor, Benedict nevertheless cites his framing of the fundamental issue concerning the relationship between religion and violence:

Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached. . . . “God”, he says, “is not pleased by blood—and not acting reasonably (*σὺν λόγῳ*) is contrary to God’s nature. Faith is born of the soul, not the body. Whoever would lead someone to faith needs the ability to speak well and to reason properly, without violence and threats. . . . To convince a reasonable soul, one does not need a strong arm, or weapons of any kind, or any other means of threatening a person with death.” (Benedict XVI 2006)

Benedict’s analysis of the emperor’s question revisits a theological question first raised by Plato in *The Republic*. It is an ontological one having to do with the very nature of God’s being and whether violence against

unbelievers and infidels is compatible with God's nature. The answer is a decisive no. The Pope describes the emperor:

[A]fter having expressed himself so forcefully, [he] goes on to explain in detail the reasons why spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul. (Benedict XVI 2006)

Engaging in theological reflection, the Pope probes what "he calls a dangerous state of affairs for humanity" rooted in "disturbing pathologies" of religion (Benedict XVI 2006).

By contrast, religious science, does not address "disturbing pathologies" and discourages metaphysical questions raised by theologians. Why consider deeper issues when the consumer can emotionally express or participate in whatever rites or myths fulfill personal needs or goals? Mosques, synagogues, and cathedrals are all equal because they promote community and fellowship; they supposedly affirm compassion and tolerance through interfaith dialogue. They embody the teaching of America's great founding religious scientist, Thomas Jefferson, who proclaimed whether "my neighbor believes in one god or twenty gods, it neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg" (Jefferson 1975, 210).

Against Jeffersonian optimism about the benign character of world religions, Percy speaks of the "existential revolt" by its French advocates. Unlike Jefferson, the existentialists are not circumscribed by the assumptions of the Enlightenment that mistakenly elevate science while ignoring larger metaphysical questions. Percy recognizes existentialism as "one of the seminal movements" that represents "a major shift of direction of the Western mind, perhaps the first since the Enlightenment." The major shift entails an exposure of the "colossal oversight" of the scientific method practiced by what Percy calls the "objective-minded man" (Southern Historical Collection, "Which Way Existentialism?"). He is aloof and reliant on statistics and surveys of empirical patterns of world religions, a cafeteria of tribal patterns and rites. Percy is troubled by what he perceives is a forced reconciliation between religion and science. In the unpublished "The Scandal of Judeo-Christianity," he elaborates:

The so-called existentialists, Sartre, Heidegger, Jaspers, Marcel, as well as their progenitors, Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, differ about many things but they all agree that the objective posture of the sciences is wholly inadequate as a means of knowing man, both in its avowed attempt to understand man as a specimen-object and in its hidden elite category of man as scientist-man. Man is neither. He is neither that which can be so understood or that which so understands. He is both and more. (Southern Historical Collection, "The Scandal of Judeo Christianity")

Percy admires existentialism's "absolute seriousness in its investigation of human reality," the surreal quest avoided by the practitioners of science.

Percy addresses them (speaking to the scientists as “you”), “with reference to you, which matters a great deal to you because the oversight has caused you the utmost suffering. The oversight is to you yourself” (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”).

Echoing Percy, Benedict XVI laments how scientism may lead to the constriction of reason interacting with faith. The process results in an emphasis on “subjective conscience.” In this situation “ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter” (Benedict XVI 2006). Percy also criticizes the subjectivity of science. Its advocate “may as well be dead, for he is not a living person at all. His death-in-life may be manifest by the symptom of anxiety—the glimpsing of his own desperate plight and of the possibility, unrealized, of becoming himself” (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”).

Scientific methodology insulates many of its adherents from more fundamental issues that impinged on the French existentialists and which most American consumers avoided in the 1950s—and who still persist in fulfilling needs with a proliferation of experts dispensing advice. Percy observes the American paradigm entails the satisfaction of

all the needs, which can be abstracted by the objective point of view. One satisfies sexual needs, nutritional needs, emotional needs, personality needs, needs for community service, in-group living, and even “religious needs.” He is tolerant, patriotic, liberal-minded, unprejudiced, and all the rest. In other words, he tries and succeeds in living up to the objective standard of what it is to be a human being, whether this be the standard of the baccalaureate or the standard of the book on Mature Living or the standard of *Father Knows Best*. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

By contrast, French intellectuals who had endured World War II witnessed what Winston Churchill called “perverted science” evident (gruesomely) in the public policy of Nazi systematic genocide. Percy admires Albert Camus who witnessed Jewish friends disappearing from the streets of Paris daily at the hands of German occupiers. Percy observes that Camus,

who is an atheist and who sees the world as an absurd place has nevertheless set forth in his last book, *The Fall*, a picture of man which is a great deal closer to the Christian concept of wounded human nature than the cheesy Pelagianism of *Readers Digest* with its Christian veneer and its heartwarming anecdotes. (Southern Historical Collection, “Which Way Existentialism?”)

THE MOVIEGOER AND PHILOSOPHIC EXILE

A few years after Percy’s compelling defense of the existentialists in “Which Way Existentialism,” he revisits the issues in *The Moviegoer*. The novel’s protagonist, Binx Bolling, is an original amalgam, paradoxically both existentialist and theist without a French accent. Unlike Jim Anderson in “Father Knows Best,” he is aware of the limitations of science and his

own spiritual exile. Binx is a scion of an aristocratic family from New Orleans that expects him to become a famous doctor or lawyer. Binx demurs in concocting an anonymous, mediocre life in Gentilly, a suburb of the grander old garden district of New Orleans with its columned homes. A stockbroker, Binx watches television, goes to the movies, and chases his secretaries in order to live out the romantic encounters in the films he sees. Binx is devoutly skeptical of science; this began when he became an exile from the college laboratory. There Binx realized that preparation for medical school only estranged him from his classmates. He recalls his friend, Harry, at the college laboratory:

He was absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place. His abode was anywhere. It was all the same to him whether he catheterized a pig at four o'clock in the afternoon in New Orleans or at midnight in Transylvania. He was actually like one of those scientists in the movies who don't care about anything but the problem in their heads—now here is a fellow who does have a "flair for research" and will be heard from. Yet I do not envy him. I would not change places with him if he discovered the cause and cure of cancer. For he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. He could do research for a thousand years and never have an inkling of it. (Percy 1960, 5)

Binx becomes a spiritual pilgrim pursuing what he calls the "search," discovering the path trail-blazed by Dante in the *Divine Comedy*. Percy in *The Moviegoer* repackages the famous opening lines where Dante "came to himself in a dark wood." Binx has a similar epiphany as he lies wounded, under a "chindolea bush" in 1951 on a Korean battlefield, where he makes a pact with God to save him—and the Almighty delivered. Binx returns to New Orleans but soon forgets the covenant with his deliverer. He resumes seduction quests with his secretaries. He goes through the motions in reading *Consumer Reports*, owning a "first-class television set," and paying "attention to all spot announcements on the radio about mental health, the seven signs of cancer, and safe driving" (Percy 1960, 7). He realizes, however, he needs to fulfill the deep naggings of what he admits to being: "nominally at least also a Catholic" (Percy 1960, 48).

The process of Binx becoming a revert to faith is one of fits and starts. Half way into the novel he ends up at his mother's bungalow. Binx had hoped to seduce his secretary, Sharon, on a beach near New Orleans. A minor car wreck leads Binx to stumble instead into Judeo-Christian revelation at a family gathering of new kin. After the death of Binx's father, his mother has remarried and Binx has acquired an infant half-brother, strategically named John-Paul. Binx describes him as "a big fat yellow baby piled up like Buddha in his baby chair an infant smeared with crab paste and brandishing a scarlet claw" (Percy 1960, 137). The image is a satirical inversion of the original John-Paul Sartre, the existential

philosopher scribbling in a French café. In terms of Binx's developing perspective, Sartre's thought is undeveloped, even infantile.

Percy is acknowledging through Binx, however, that French existential thought is his "half-brother" philosophically. In *The Moviegoer*, however, Binx moves beyond what Percy presents as its limited perspective. In proper existential style, Binx begins to keep a notebook. But his musings are not about God's abandonment or the necessity of atheism. Unlike Sartre and Camus, Binx writes he "cannot rule God out." He scribbles further, "Now the only sign is that all the signs in the world make no difference. Is this God's ironic revenge?" (Percy 1960, 146). The question is theological. Binx seeks to ascertain if among the choices of religion there is actually an authentic revelation.

Percy had been wrestling with this issue in earlier unpublished essays that preceded the crafting of the marvelous scene in *The Moviegoer*. His ruminations enter into Binx's reading choices. Binx notes *A Study of History*, by the famed British historian Arnold Toynbee, is a "fundamental book," one of several the young stockbroker reads on "key" subjects. After studying Toynbee, Einstein's *The Universe as I See It*, and a "book called *The Chemistry of Life*," Binx concludes one night in a hotel room in Birmingham, "though the universe had been disposed of, I myself was left over" (Percy 1960, 70). Binx is wrestling with "being," his own existence. Separated by an ocean from the existentialists, Binx encounters their struggles. He moves beyond religious science to questions of being posed by Aristotle. Binx confronts, Percy would say fortuitously, what Aristotle describes in the *Metaphysics* as a "science which investigates being as being and attributes which belong to this in virtue of its own nature" (Aristotle 2004, 45).

While Binx remains skeptical of books of religious science, they are the favorites of his aunt Emily. Binx describes her as "an Episcopalian by emotion, a Greek by nature and a Buddhist by choice." Adopting the perspective of a religious scientist by default, she advises Binx: "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." The fatalism of the proclamation could have been lifted from the pages of Marcus Aurelius. Binx tells us, "She is right. I will say yes. I will say yes even though I don't really know what she is talking about" (Percy 1960, 54).

A few years earlier, Percy had rehearsed Binx's smart-ass comments in an unpublished review, "Toynbee and the Rope Trick," in which Percy assesses Arnold Toynbee's 1956 book *A Historian's Approach to Religion*. Toynbee describes the rise and decline of twenty-three civilizations. He describes the parallels of life cycles of growth, dissolution, and final collapse leading to a new genesis. Toynbee found the uniformity of patterns sufficiently repetitive to chart them in graphs. As Percy does with his critique of "Father Knows Best," he demurs. He laments that Toynbee's historiography

is rooted in the scientific method marketed cleverly through fashionable coffee table editions with glossy pictures. The anthropological implications of Toynbee's observations trouble Percy. He refers to the famous Harvard cosmologist, Alfred North Whitehead, and what he termed "the fallacy of the misplaced concrete." What Whitehead meant is that the scientific method of a religious science becomes more real than the events it surveys and compartmentalizes. Percy argues in the review of *A Historian's Approach to Religion* that Toynbee employs the "objective-mindedness" of science to suggest that all religions are similar. Jewish exiles in the Old Testament are little different than any other dispossessed people. As a result, Toynbee diminishes their chronicle in the Old Testament to just another cultural phenomenon for categorization. Percy criticizes Toynbee's methodology:

What anyone did or suffered takes place at some tenth remove from reality, since it is a particular expression of a mode of behavior of a certain cultural stratum of a city-state of a minor successor-state etc. etc. The concrete single act, far from being the ultimate mysterious focus of being, becomes contempt for history, an evisceration of the world's reality toward the end that the actual happening is inevitably looked upon as a sort of cosmic trash left over after the sweep of the abstraction. (Southern Historical Collection, "Toynbee and the Rope Trick")

Percy would further hone his criticism of Toynbee through Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer* who resists the "sweep of abstraction." The concreteness of the Jewish exile particularly interests him. Unlike Toynbee, Binx does not perceive Israelite history as an archetype of dispossession that he assesses from the privileged stance of ethnology. Instead, he observes "I have become acutely aware of the Jews. . . . Anyhow it is true I am Jewish by instinct. We share the same exile. The fact is, however, I am more Jewish than the Jews I know. They are more at home than I am. I accept my exile." He rejects the notion that a Jew should fulfill an assigned role such as "scientist or an artist" or a "specimen to be studied." Rather, for someone like himself "awake to the possibility of a search," to pass a "Jew in the street for the first time" is like "Robinson Crusoe seeing the footprint on the beach" (Percy 1960, 88).

Little more than a decade after the unspeakable Nazi scientific experimentations and mass extermination of the Jews, Binx's observations reflect a post-Holocaust consciousness. Percy provides a refreshing hopeful perspective at mid-century that counters the long history of cruel anti-Semitism from Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice* to Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*. Invoking characteristic bitterness, Hemingway, unlike Percy, highlights the cavalier anti-Semitism of the Lost Generation. From the first page prejudice begins against Robert Cohn, the self-absorbed Jewish character. Unlike Binx Bolling's guarded hope, Jake Barnes, the narrator, is a stoical, terse, American veteran of World War I. A journalist, Barnes

broods in the promiscuous environment of Paris during the jazz age with its liberated women, daily drinking, and casual sexual encounters. Looking at himself in the mirror, Barnes, tragically emasculated, regards himself as a wounded specimen. He regards Robert Cohn in much the same way. Theoretically, Jake supposedly fought to make good on Woodrow Wilson's pledge: "to make the world safe for democracy." Instead Barnes, much like Tom Buchanan in *The Great Gatsby*, popularizes scientific anti-Semitism. He reveals that Robert Cohn became a decent boxer to "counteract the feeling of inferiority and shyness he had felt on being treated as a Jew at Princeton." Overmatched often, Cohn's "nose was permanently flattened" which Jake notes "certainly improved" his face (Hemingway 1926, 11).

Binx's connection with the exile of the Jews does not occur to Hemingway's characters. Cohn produces a "very poor novel" and "read and re-read" a "sinister book" called *The Purple Land* in order to learn how to behave like an English gentleman (Hemingway 1926, 17). Even though Cohn looks fashionable on the tennis court, Jake mocks his engaging in bridge, tennis, boxing, and writing. No matter—he is *still* a Jew. Cohn's rage, alienation, and jealousy result in his savage beating of the young Spanish bullfighter, Pedro Romero. Cohn disappears from the narrative more sinned against than sinning, rejected by his gentele "friends." Nothing is resolved and the novel presents Hemingway's favorite device: the retreat into anonymity and silence.

By contrast, Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* would see Cohn as a providential character providing clues that could lead the Lost Generation to a path of renewal. Instead, their cavalier bigotry lays the groundwork for the later gas chambers of the Nazis. They degraded the Jewish experience to depraved horrors rooted in the idea that a specific people could be treated scientifically as "specimen to be studied." From the post-Holocaust perspective of *The Moviegoer*, the anti-Semitism of *The Sun Also Rises* appears dated—and gratuitously cruel. Binx, by contrast, maintains an interest in the Jews and perceives in their wondering and exile a pattern to understand better his own.

Binx's engagement with other cultures, however, entails interactions with his own immediate community. His seemingly mundane interactions enable him to associate with others in what appears to be the most anonymous of places, a movie theater. Binx, however, goes to neighborhood cinemas such as the Tivoli to savor its unique locale. He talks with employees to discover what is happening in their lives, adding new friends to his Christmas card list. Percy calls such encounters the "holiness of the ordinary" (Percy 1992, 368). Without such interactions, Binx reveals he would be

lost, cut loose metaphysically speaking. I should be seeing one copy of a film which might be shown anywhere and at any time. There is a danger of slipping clean out of space and time. It is possible to become a ghost and

not know whether one is in downtown Loews in Denver or suburban Bijou in Jacksonville. (Percy 1960, 75)

Discovering place and fellowship through moviegoing reverses consumerism's loneliness. For Binx the process is incremental.

In an earlier story, "Young Nuclear Physicist," Percy provides a contrast to Binx's discovery of community. Anticipating the displacement of Will Barrett in Percy's later novel, *The Last Gentleman*, Ralph Budd is a de-racinated nuclear physicist from Arkansas in New York. He is solipsistic and devoted to mathematical abstraction. Unlike Binx Bolling, who attends neighborhood theaters and talks with employees, Ralph enjoys anonymous moviegoing in New York. He is much like Antoine Roquentin in Jean Paul Sartre's novel, *Nausea*:

There was no local movie theatre inevitably nicknamed "The Axilla" or "The Perineum" and frequented by blocs of students who were obliged to hiss and cheer at the proper moments. And thank God there was no Old Pops the janitor who has been with us as long as anybody can remember. (Southern Historical Collection, "Young Nuclear Physicist")

Disdainful of former friendships and determined to reduce his social life to mathematical analysis, Ralph sorts through responses to a want ad he places seeking a female companion. (The situation prophetically anticipates internet dating web sites and the quest for real assignations). However, Ralph Budd cannot risk rejection in actually meeting someone named Nancy. Instead, he follows her and a companion to a New York bar and concludes (before he ever meets her) he needs to brush up on Arkansan country music by studying books from the public library. At the story's end, Ralph is alone in his apartment, honing his singing skills.

CONCLUSION: "I HAVE SOMETHING TO TELL YOU"

Unlike Ralph Budd of "Young Nuclear Physicist," Binx Bolling's spiritual walk in *The Moviegoer* is not systematically scientific; he meanders as pilgrim believer.

The path leads him to occasional theological discussions similar to those found frequently in the pages of Flannery O'Connor's fiction. Percy greatly admired her, was sustained by a distant friendship, and famously identified her as a "polemical Catholic" (Lawson and Kramer 1985, 43). Percy was no Flannery O'Connor, just like he realized there was only *one* William Faulkner. O'Connor had her own apocalyptic theology in her searing violent fiction. On the other hand, Percy developed his own evasive, oblique style that enabled him to advance an existentialist critique of science rooted in the nuanced faith of his narrators. Percy notes, "God forbid do I feel obliged to write edifying tales where virtue wins out and the Catholic

faith triumphs over high class ‘secular humanists’ or low-class Mafia types” (Percy 1992, 369).

From such a resourceful position, Percy reaches a wide audience—expanding beyond canonical figures such as the nineteenth century Jesuit poet, Gerard Manley Hopkins. Percy wrote his editor upon *The Moviegoer’s* publication in 1962: “And Knopf was such a grand old house before you had truck with dirty writers. Can’t speak for Updike or Mailer but mine is the worst of all because it pleases no one. It’s too Yankee to suit Southerners, too vulgar to suit Catholics, too Catholic to suit humanists, out but not way out” (Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center). The magic of conversion and science’s limitations grow slowly, almost imperceptibly in Percy’s fiction and more directly in his essays. On the final page of an angry, profane rant of 200 plus pages by Lance Lamar in Percy’s novel, *Lancelot*, the former star college halfback waits to hear from his old pal, Father Parsifal. He has become a priest. He tells Lance, his “wacked-out” friend, “yes, I have something to tell you” (Percy 1977). The reply echoes Percy’s own skeptical voice with its rootedness in the sapiential wisdom of Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Dante, as well as Shelby Foote, William Faulkner, and the French existentialists. Percy recovers their testimony in rich prose more enjoyable and philosophically penetrating than most scientific discourse.

NOTES

1. Walker Percy Papers, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Wilson Round Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In consultation with the Walker Percy estate, I hope to edit Percy’s unpublished writings for a collection entitled *Confessions of a Miseducated Novelist*.

2. Foote was a dedicated “yellow dog” Southern Democrat who would vote for an animal rather than a Republican.

3. Kennedy’s question echoes Abraham Lincoln’s famous conclusion of the Gettysburg address that “government of the people, for the people, and by the people shall not perish from the earth.” The formulation has become the credal statement of American civil religion tirelessly cited for over a century by many politicians. After Robert Kennedy’s frightful sleepless thirteen days during the Cuban missile crisis, he wisely derives from Lincoln’s oratory a larger ethical question that circumstances forced upon him and his brother, President John Kennedy.

4. It should be noted that Percy gave expert testimony about the meaning of the Confederate flag in a court case. He pointed out white supremacists of the civil rights era had distorted its meaning and that African American students in Louisiana public schools should not have to endure its display.

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