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."*

PHILOSOPHER OF PRECISION AND SOUL: INTRODUCING WALKER PERCY

by Leslie Marsh

Abstract.   This article introduces the work of philosopher-novelist Walker Percy to the *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* readership. After some biographical and contextual preliminaries, I suggest that the conceptual collecting feature to Percy's work is his critique of abstractionism manifest in a tripartite congruence of Cartesianism, derivatively misapplied science, and social atomism.

Keywords: abstraction; consumerism; existentialism; identity; ideology; Walker Percy; philosophical literature; progressivism; rationalism; religion; science; scientism; self; semiotics

THE RATIONALE

At the time of writing, a search revealed that there are only two articles that reference Walker Percy in this august journal. If Percy were merely a novelist, this would not be so surprising, but since he is first and foremost a fully fledged philosopher whose longest standing and deepest concerns congealed around the relationship between science and understanding man's place in the world and the cosmos, then *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* would surely be the perfect match. This symposium is a step in remedying this state of affairs and it just so happens that it coincides with the centenary of Percy's birth.

The phrase "precision and soul" of the title I borrow from Robert Musil ([1930–1943] 1995:1, 636) but deploy it to a much looser and more

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superficial purpose. I use it to broadly connote scientific method and the study of man *qua* man, the former a tradition of theorizing that for Percy has shed little or no light on the latter.

A Biographical Sketch

One of three brothers, Walker Percy (1916–1990) was born into a most distinguished family, with ancestry going back to the Norman William de Percy who arrived in England soon after the Norman Conquest of 1066. Percy's father, Leroy Pratt Percy, was an attorney and general counsel for a major American steel manufacturer headquartered in Birmingham, Alabama. Conscious of their civic status, the family adhered to the notion of "noblesse oblige," a High Toryism that had its roots in the English aristocracy. Leroy, who suffered from what we would term these days manic depression or bipolar disorder (somewhat of a family trait), committed suicide at the age of 40. Walker, who would have been 13, was profoundly marked by this event his whole life. (There has been some speculation that Walker's mother might have committed suicide as well, but nothing definitive has been established—she died in a car crash when Walker was 15.) Either way, suicide seeped into the deepest recesses of Walker's mind, a *bête noir* that, although it was to be the source of a great deal of ongoing personal consternation, was equally the philosophical seed that germinated into his becoming a philosopher. It is interesting that suicide was a prominent theme in the work of philosophical novelists Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre.

Walker and his two younger brothers were subsequently adopted by Leroy's first cousin, William Alexander Percy. William (Uncle Will to Walker) was an extraordinarily cultivated, cultured, bohemian, and kind man, yet was also worldly, having as a soldier witnessed the gruesomeness of the First World War and earning the *Croix de Guerre*. William's learnedness had a profound influence on Walker, who in turn displayed a voracious rabbinical-like thirst for study across the sciences and humanities. Walker attended medical school at Columbia University in New York, specializing in pathology. It has been said that he chose pathology on the grounds that he preferred not to have contact with patients (Majeres 2002). As my colleague Professor David Hardwick, himself a distinguished pathologist, often jokingly says, "My patients don't complain." Another interest of Walker's was psychiatry. He submitted himself to regular analysis while at Columbia in an attempt to quash the demons that were to continue to plague him all his life. Soon after Walker's graduation, his beloved uncle Will died.

While fulfilling his residency in pathology at Bellevue Hospital in New York, Walker contracted tuberculosis. While in convalescence and with much time on his hands to read, the realization dawned upon him that he was more interested in philosophy than in medicine. Now married, Walker and his wife Bunt converted to Catholicism and settled down in

the undistinguished locale of Covington, Louisiana, well away from the hubbub of—but still within easy reach of—New Orleans. Walker lived in Covington for the rest of his life. Like his father before him, Walker was very civic-minded and was engaged in the life of his adopted town. (Interestingly enough, Walker testified as an expert witness in the U.S. District Court concluding that the Confederate flag by and large *did* connote racism. The view he took predated the current controversies by 45 years!) After having a few philosophical articles published in some leading journals of the time, it became apparent to Walker that not only were his career prospects slim, but that his desire to become a philosophical novelist better suited his temperament. By 1961, Walker had become a reasonably well known novelist if only because of *The Moviegoer* getting a boost by winning the National Book Award that year. His follow-up *The Last Gentleman* (1967) was a finalist for the award, as was his next work *Love in the Ruins* (1971). His next three novels *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and his last, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), did not seem to garner the attention and support of the literati establishment that the first three did; perhaps by then they resented his mordant criticism of their worldview and deemed his concerns and themes unfashionable and perhaps even reactionary. All attempts to have *The Moviegoer* adapted as a cinematic feature have floundered—and perhaps that is not such a bad thing given Hollywood's ham-fisted way of going about things. There was even talk quite recently of the philosophically literate filmmaker Wim Wenders and his collaborator novelist Peter Handke adapting *The Second Coming*.[1] This has come to nothing, however.

THE PHILOSOPHER AS NOVELIST

I am inclined to view Percy as a philosophical novelist much in the tradition of (in no particular order) John Henry Newman (*Loss and Gain*), Walter Pater (*Marius the Epicurean*), Robert Musil (*The Man without Qualities*), Thomas Mann (*The Magic Mountain*), Yukio Mishima (*The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*), and Hermann Broch (*The Sleepwalkers*). As a philosopher-essayist, he has much in common with Miguel de Unamuno (*Tragic Sense of Life*).

For Percy, the serious writer, by definition, must be open to the "mystery of his art" and should not be shoehorned into any one world of ideas, weighed down by some thesis or other heavy-handed didactic exercise, an intellectual honesty he rigorously abided by. For Walker, the serious writer should not be in the business of writing edifying tales. The implicit Catholicism in Percy's novels reflects the philosophical malleability of the tradition—in this sense he was so much more than merely a Catholic writer. With Percy's medical training echoing in the deep background, he took the view that the novelist is a diagnostician, "a literary clinician" so to

speak, identifying "the particular [cultural] lesion of the age." Percy extends the analogy by going on to say that "the artist's work in such times is surely not that of the pathologist whose subject matter is a corpse and whose question is not 'What is wrong?' but 'What did the patient die of?'" (Percy 2000, 206). My colleague David Hardwick has repeatedly expressed the view that pathology is *the natural science of medicine*. And perhaps it really was the pathologist's perspective that Percy distinctively carried though to make him the novelist that be became (Ahuja 2013; Nash 2013b). As Percy himself colorfully put it, pathology was "the beautiful theatre of disease" (quoted in Tolson 1992, 148). Bioethicist Carl Elliott remarks that Percy's

> novels often portray medicine as a profession in decline, sold out to greedy capitalists and narrow scientists. The most appealing doctors in the novels are often burned-out and dispirited; the worst of them are quacks or crooks . . . . Yet Percy's experience as a doctor and a patient shows through in more subtle ways, and perhaps ultimately more important ones. It shows through in the doctorly way that Percy writes, for example, the wry, clinical detachment with which he describes his characters and the circumstances in which they find themselves. Percy's style is reminiscent of the way doctors often describe their patients: sometimes with affection, occasionally with condescension, often with humor—but always with an eye toward diagnosing their particular pathology. Percy himself described it as "the stance of a diagnostician." (Elliott and Lantos 1999, 4–5)

This is hardly a unique outlook. Engineer-philosopher-novelist Robert Musil has a similar view:

> Recently I invented a very fine name for myself: "monsieur le vivisecteur." . . . "Monsieur le vivisecteur"—that's who I am! My life: the wanderings and adventures of a vivisectionist of souls at the beginning of the twentieth century! (Musil 1998, 3)

Percy's cultural diagnostic bears a striking resemblance to Musil's notion of *eigenschaftslosigkeit*, taken to connote the dual idea that a diagnosis is the beginning of the remedy. The diagnosis (for both Percy and Musil) points to the liberal penchant for abstraction; the remedy is a return (in the current argot) to the social situatedness of the individual, or some sense of communitarianism. The idea of *eigenschaftslosigkeit* as exemplified in Musil's masterwork *The Man without Qualities* has been articulated by cultural critic and philosopher Roger Scruton as follows:

> Musil shows the individual conscience, surrounded by a society kept in place by empty routines. In this demoralized order the conscience becomes subjective, vacillating, profoundly unsure of anything save its own impressions. The man without qualities is in fact a man without substance, a subjectivity without a self. (2009, 165)

Again, this idea resonates deeply throughout Percy's writing as we shall soon see.

For those who want a closer grained documentation of Percy's life (assuming of course that one's interest has been piqued via his novels and essays), I would recommend reading William Percy's achingly beautiful memoir—it gives immediate context to the world Walker found himself thrown into and sheds light on the most influential person in his life, his uncle Will (William Alexander Percy [1941] 1973). For a wider historical conspectus I would suggest the very erudite and masterful Percy family study by Bertram Wyatt-Brown (1994). For those inclined to take the biographical route, there are two major players, Jay Tolson and Patrick Samway. Tolson (1992) has written a very elegantly conceived and executed biography; though Samway's (1997) effort is more pedestrian, it nevertheless has value. Both works should be read. Needless to say, there is a veritable cottage industry of books and articles on Walker Percy; much of it middling, some bordering on the crass (some things do not have to be explicitly said), but there are gems to be discovered and savored.

I am often asked by the Percy novice what would be the best way into Percy. Perhaps the best overview of his life and work is via a documentary that features several prominent Percy scholars and intimates.[2] Reading-wise, I typically suggest that one begin at the beginning—that is, *The Moviegoer* (Percy 1961)—but given the political climate we are currently experiencing, *Love in the Ruins* (Percy 1971) might have a greater resonance. Given how profoundly polarized the U.S. political landscape has become, this book might just be the ticket. *Love in the Ruins* took wing from the schism that opened up in the televised William F. Buckley–Gore Vidal exchanges of 1968, when the center ground seemed to give way and has since become so obviously deeply corroded from both sides. Percy, however, subtly recast this polarization into notions concerning the pursuit of happiness, short-term fixes provided by consumerism, new age self-help guides, and ideological zealotry. These themes were unleashed with even more force a decade later in *Lancelot* (Percy 1977, 217–20).

Mindful of the discussion's organizing principle—abstraction—a qualification is in order. Much like the Mississippi, although we can pretty much identify the intellectual tributaries that feed the Walker Percy river, it becomes ever more difficult to get a definitive and convenient handle on the overlapping concerns once it has reached the distributary phase. I would concede that there are several ways one could carve up Percy's work. He does unfortunately labor under one or more of these procrustean labels—Christian, existentialist, semiotician, Catholic, conservative, and Southerner, with the permutations thereof—as ill-defined by some of his more hagiographical supporters as by his detractors. While each of these labels is not totally incorrect, they are certainly one-dimensional and I would caution the novice to be alert to this. Percy himself was well aware of this tendency to label him but sadly it continues to this day. With his wide-ranging and subtle philosophical mind, Percy suffers the indignity

of being cherry-picked and appropriated in the service of others' more myopic agendas, especially given that many of the sociopolitical issues that animated Percy are still very much with us and indeed, as indicated a little earlier, are starker than ever before.

Capturing Percy's overriding concern under the aspect of abstraction has the virtue of admitting the aforementioned tally of labels and cross-currents, but hopefully my approach will be seen as more contextually appropriate, thereby avoiding too gratuitous a skewing of his concerns.

THE ABSTRACT SELF

The theme of abstraction operates in a twofold way in Percy: abstraction in the sense of being alienated from one's true or more authentic way of be-ing/self, and abstraction in a methodological sense, the inherent abstraction of scientific method and the more vulgar invocations of methodological individualism—social atomism. These issues interpenetrate one another, making it difficult to tease out the strands in Percy's writings.

The alienation that so animated Percy is deeply connected to the Carte-sian tradition. Noted Harvard psychiatrist and Percyean Robert Coles quotes Percy: "The abstract mind feeds on itself, takes things apart, leaves in its wake all of us, trying to live a life, get from the here of now, today, to the there of tomorrow" (Coles 1999, 127). It entails an estrangement of the self both from the world and from itself. Walker Percy discerned what he took to be a distinctively twentieth-century (peculiarly Western) form of disquieted consciousness—a miasmic *malaise*—consisting in a loss of the self brought about by three inextricably linked phenomena: (1) our inherited bifurcated Cartesian self with its derivations; (2) an uncrit-ical assimilation and extension of scientific a priorism; and (3) atomistic social abstraction in the form of *homo economicus*. The upshot to these unremittingly abstract conceptions of being is that despite living in an age of considerable scientific achievement and attendant technological en-hancement along with material abundance, we have been lulled into a false sense of well-being. This shallow or inauthentic "well-being" is often manifest more as a distraction from boredom, a social palliative or stupor to ameliorate our heightened anomie and desiccated inner life—a rampant consumerism that defines us by what we *want*. But the "consumer" that Percy has in mind is not just of the commonplace "retail therapy" variety but also the consumer of ideas—junk science, conspiracy theories, the New Age movement, cults, gurus of all sorts, fundamentalism, evangelicalism, zealotry of all kinds—all offering salvation that can be institutionalized as political, religious, or *even* academic charlatanism, the latter having a willing supply of vociferous illiberal student acolytes to do its bidding. It should be noted that, although the root of our Western existential malaise is our Cartesian inheritance, I emphasize the adjectival so as not to cast

Descartes as the whipping boy—that was not Percy's intention. (Woods Nash [2013a] nicely riffs on the metaphor of the Cartesian theatre in Percy's *The Moviegoer*.)

Perhaps the most successfully and broadly assimilated and therefore the most damaging form of abstraction is the misplaced *idolatrous* faith in science (scientism) across a range of sociopolitical and economic rationalisms, all vying for dominance under their exclusive and imperialistic monometric descriptions of the human good. (Even in some quarters, an affected humanities scientism is seen as a badge of honor [Hughes 2012]). For Percy, this flattening tendency inevitably depreciates the perennial epistemic gap that surely is a mark of the human condition and indeed is corrosive of the liberal/civil condition, scientism being a sociocultural symptom of this disorder (Laine Ketner 1999; Simone 2005). For Percy, a reputable science of man must surely have as a major part of its brief an explanation that accommodates the ubiquitous meaningfulness of our lives, a distinctly human trait. Whether or not it ever can is a different story.

It is at this juncture that we need to forestall any unduly quick inferences. First, Percy was certainly not antiscience. He had a deep appreciation of its elegance, explanatory power, and translational achievements—in point of fact, he sought to preserve its integrity from corrupting intrusions. Percy wanted to defend the truth value of science from the relativistic excesses of the social constructivism and sociology of scientific knowledge fraternity. Second, Percy was not looking for some reconciliation between "science" and "religion": if one understands each to be in a totally different line of business, each with its own teleology and epistemic character, then the ostensible fault line dissolves. So far as Percy was concerned, if there is a schism it is artificially induced by those who are not comfortable with the plurality of experience and perhaps unwittingly succumb to one or another monometric rationalistic worldview, be it from the religious side or the scientific side (Percy's outlook and temperament has much in common with the modal outlook of Michael Oakeshott, a thinker introduced to this journal some years back [Marsh 2009]). Third, although Percy constantly affirms the moral unity of the human species, he is certainly not dispensing with the prime liberal notion that individuals are the ultimate units of moral value—but he does not do that at the expense of a historically and culturally *situated* individualism. Finally, Percy was not antimarket—he merely rejected the abstract atomism of neoclassical economics and, in some quarters, the tendency to view the market as the sole or primary arbiter of value (i.e., radical right libertarianism).

Keeping all this in mind, the existentialist themes of alienation and authenticity come into play. Broadly speaking, the notion of alienation implies that there is some meaningful essence that can be retrieved or can come to be realized, a more authentic self that is a genuine flowering of one's individuality (*adverbial* to individualism) in contradistinction to a self

that is sunk in gray everydayness. This typically takes place in and through practices, activities, and traditions, the communitarian emphasis on the essentially embedded and embodied conception of the individual person, a truer and more accurate model than described by liberal individualism or atomism or indeed by science.

The self comes into sharp relief in two of Percy's novels, *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and its sequel *The Second Coming* (1980*)*. Here Percy deploys a fictionalized psychiatric disorder, which he terms "Hausmann's Syndrome." "Hausmann's Syndrome," which actually connotes dissociative fugue, is a specifier of dissociative amnesia, a pathology of *identity continuity* (American Psychiatric Association 2013), salient to discussion of the Lockean memory criterion, a major player in personal identity talk. Used as a literary device, it points to a deeper philosophical quarry that found full expression in his book *Lost in the Cosmos* (Percy 1983). Replete with thought experiments, the bread and butter of personal identity theorizing in the analytical tradition, Percy traffics in aporia that cut across first-person phenomenology and third-person heterophenomenology.[3]

Percy wants to get beyond the idea that the explanation of my going to the drinks cabinet to get a bourbon can be exhausted by a neurophysiological account of the firings in my brain, without reference to the content of my beliefs and the broad tissue of human convention. This situated concrete dimension must surely be accommodated because reflexive thought, self-consciousness, and most importantly language are distinctively human capacities. Percy takes a distinctly Peircean-Wittgensteinian "meaning as use" approach to the vexed notion of language and meaning—a topic that will be closely examined by experts (Marsh forthcoming). Were Percy around today, he might well take some comfort from the growing but nonetheless still heterodox rejection of the Cartesian tradition, namely, the situated cognition wing of cognitive science (much of it taking inspiration from Heidegger) and to a lesser extent the so-called Austrian (and behavioral) economics program. What binds this broad "movement" is the view that notions of autonomy, sense-making, embodiment, emergence, and the phenomenological must be factored into any explanatory model of man worth its salt.

SCIENTISM AS HANDMAIDEN TO PROGRESSIVISM

As already indicated, Percy across his novels and nonfiction writings waged an ongoing battle against "scientism," the idea that every intelligible question has either a scientific solution or no solution at all. Scientism for Percy was meant to be taken as a pejorative term, since on his account it embodies a dogmatic overconfidence, brimming with ideological fervor, its immodesty leaving no place for transcendence. Susan Haack, one of the very few (perhaps only) mainstream analytical epistemologists to

have referenced Percy, shared some of his concerns. For Haack, scientism is actually two casts of mind. In one guise, it consists in an exaggerated deference toward science, "an excessive readiness to accept as authoritative any claim made by the sciences, and to dismiss every kind of criticism of science or its practitioners as anti-scientific prejudice." In its other guise, it is *anti*science, an exaggerated suspicion of science, "an excessive readiness to see the interests of the powerful at work . . . , and to accept every kind of criticism of science or its practitioners as undermining its pretensions to tell us how the world is" (Haack 2003, 17–18), the latter connoting the radical postmodern relativistic outlook that was mentioned earlier.

So what has this to do with progressivism? Epistemic humility is not seen as a cultural virtue: it is the *zeitgeist* of the modern age that we exist in a (misperceived) linear trajectory of progress, progress here taken to be coextensive with *improvement*—morally, socially, technologically, economically, and scientifically. Progressivism thus conceived is clearly a "grand narrative" notion, which on closer scrutiny is subject to all the weaknesses of such constructions. It is impossible to determine whether a change for the better in one part or aspect of the system is progressive for the system overall since there is no Archimedean point from which progress can be assessed. Every change alters some state of affairs, destroying or modifying it—that much one can accept. Musil captures this idea:

> "It seems to me," Ulrich said, "that every progressive step is also a retrogressive step.
>
> Progress exists always in one particular sense. And since our life as a whole has no sense, there is as a whole no progress either."
>
> Leo Fischel lowered his newspaper. "Do you think it better to be able to cross the Atlantic in six days or to have to spend six weeks on it?"
>
> "I should probably say it's definitely progress to be able to do both." (Musil 1995:1, 528)

Granted we live, in some real sense, in the best of times (e.g., reductions in child mortality, vaccine-preventable diseases, access to safe water and sanitation, malaria prevention and control, prevention and control of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis control, and declining poverty [World Health Organization 1998]). But we *also* live in the worst of times— Auschwitz-Birkenau, Holodomor (man-made famine), Cambodia, and more besides—the dark side to technocracy. This is the thrust of Percy's highly disturbing novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), reflecting a culture that in its "genteel" theoretical reduction of man to matter, *in practice*, "kills our capacity for triadic signification—the source of our sense of self—as a 'cure' for psychological suffering" (Mattix 2013, 146). The widespread implementation of (say) the drug methylphenidate seems to be implicitly justified on purely utilitarian grounds (Pratt, Brody, and Gu 2011, 1–8).

Nowhere is this techno-ebullience more evidently false than in coming to grips with the subjective felt experience of, for example, pain or beauty, what in philosophical jargon are termed *qualia* (Wyatt-Brown 1994, 304), let alone the issues of meaning and intentionality that we mentioned earlier. It may well be that the very idea of the mind explaining itself entails a logical contradiction, forever doomed to self-referentiality. As Percy repeatedly says, the "self can perceive, formulate, symbolize, everything under the sun except itself" (Percy 2000, 127) and adds:

> Why it is possible to learn more in ten minutes about the Crab Nebula in Taurus, which is 6,000 light-years away, than you presently know about yourself, even though you've been stuck with yourself all your life? (Percy 1983, 1)

Percy feels that where science loses its coherence is where it blithely extends its explanatory reach across both *dyadic* and *triadic* organisms. Science is eminently well equipped to say something about spatiotemporally located entities, be it physiology or neurology, Venus and Mars, or even Halley's Comet—the dyadic—a two-way relation of the observed and the observer. But when it comes to the linguistic, the sociological, or the anthropological, all partaking in symbol-mongering *and* attendant intentionality, then a dyadic relation fails miserably. It makes no sense whatsoever in saying that a tiger is alienated or that a fish should consider the nature of water. Man on the other hand inhabits a world of symbolic forms that is triadic, a tripartite relation that can be defined as things > the observer/interpreter > a community, of which the observer is part. Even if there were known bridging laws between physics, chemistry, biology, psychology, and sociology, something of the self would be left over. Percy would no doubt be in accord with Wittgenstein's dictum that "we feel that even once *all possible* scientific questions are answered, our problems of life have still not been touched upon" (Wittgenstein 1922, 6.52). Or as Elliott writes,

> One reason is that even if we know all that there is to know about neurochemistry, we cannot explain everything about human behavior that is relevant to psychiatric disorders within the vocabulary of neurochemistry. (Elliott 1992, 245)

It is the recognition of the disjunction between the dyadic and the triadic that constitutes the beginnings of the search—man as wayfarer and *homo viator*—an ongoing theme in Percy's work.

As has already been made abundantly clear, Percy had a deep appreciation of science. Indeed, he sought to *preserve* its integrity. Given science's formidable success, it not surprisingly gets coopted and perverted from within science—scientists themselves are no less immune to the full range of human failings. But of more concern to Percy is the charlatanism

prevalent within society at large: "there is no piece of nonsense that will not be believed by some and no guru or radio preacher, however corrupt, who will not attract a following" (1983, 172). Science can be compromised by market pressures: data massage and article retractions are now commonplace. Equally common is the phenomenon of science being made functional to some sociopolitical agenda be it from the *il*liberal or "regressive" left or the *il*liberal right—as Haack (2013, 175) rightly says, "advocacy is not inquiry, and a fortiori not science." This is applicable to the whole political spectrum—assuming of course these terms left/right/socialist/conservative retain any meaning beyond the prevailing terms of mutual abuse (Percy 2000, 58, 248, 416). In this vein, Percy gives short shrift to, for example, "scientific creationism" (and other junk science): Percy is absolutely firm in his stance that "Darwin was right about the fact of evolution, and his contribution was unprecedented. Evolution is not a theory but a fact." Walker Percy, therefore, offers cold comfort to the zealous brand of religiosity characteristic of fundamentalism in general across the religion spectrum. In Percy's view religious vocabulary has also been cheapened and is divorced from reason, notably scientific reason.

A Danse Macabre of Wants and Satisfactions

Cartesian abstraction has a socioeconomic analogue manifest in the guise of *homo economicus* so favored by orthodox economics. *Homo economicus* is conceived as purely formalized rational maximizer without any situated and cognitive constraint. However critical Percy is of scientism, he is equally (perhaps more so) critical of the prevailing socioeconomic mores, a critique wielded with a blisteringly mordant wit. He pours scorn not only on the northeastern US sophisticates but also on the so-called bible belt of the South: "A flatulent Christendom and Yankee money grubbing," Percy himself feeling "like Lancelot in search of the Holy Grail who finds himself at the end of his quest at a Tupperware party" (Percy 2000, 182, 180) or "that bastion of boredom, inertia and restlessness, the workplace" (Temple and Darkwood 2001, 102).

Percy was dismayed by the phenomenon of vast swaths of the populace lost in a reflective sunkeness seemingly driven by voracious and vacuous consumerist appetites, cannon fodder in the service of economic growth: "A great culture is known through its artists and its saints and not by its GDP" (Percy 2000, 182). It may come as a surprise to many that Percy's view has some resonance with the Marcusian "one-dimensional man" and the theme of cultural commodification. Percy's scathing humor in this regard was captured by the 1970s BBC TV adaptation of David Nobbs's biting satire *The Fall and Rise of Reginald Perrin*.[4] We pick up the action when Reggie is interviewed about his new venture:

Colin Pillock: Tell me, Mr. Perrin, are you running this community for the benefit of humanity, or simply to make money, or is it a giant confidence trick?

Reggie Perrin: Yes.

CP: I hope you're not going to tie yourself to this monosyllabic repetition of "yes."

RP: No.

CP: Oh good, because our viewers might think it a waste of time for you to come here and say nothing BUT "yes."

RP: Yes.

CP: So, which of them is it, Mr. Perrin? A social venture for the benefit of mankind? Purely a commercial venture? Or a con trick?

RP: Yes. It's all three of them. That's the beauty of it.

CP: What kind of people come to this community?

RP: Well, at the moment we've got a stockbroker, an overworked doctor, an underworked antiques shop owner, a disillusioned imports manager, and an even more disillusioned exports manager. Three sacked football managers, a fortune teller who's going to have a nervous breakdown next April, a schoolteacher who's desperate because he can't get a job, a schoolteacher who's even more desperate because he has got a job, an extremely shy vet, an overstressed car salesman and a pre-stressed concrete salesman. People with sexual problems, people with social problems, people with work problems, people with identity problems. People with sexual, social, work and identity problems. People who live above their garages, and above their incomes, in little boxes on prestige estates where families are two-tone, two-car and two-faced. Money has replaced sex as a driving force, death has replaced sex as a taboo, and sex has replaced bridge as a social event for mixed foursomes, and large deep freezes are empty except for twelve sausages. They come to Perrins in the hope that they won't be ridiculed as petty snobs, but as human beings who are bewildered at the complexity of social development, castrated by the conformity of a century of mass production, and dwarfed by the immensity of technological progress which has advanced more in fifty years than in the rest of human existence put together, so that when they take their first tentative steps into an adult society shaped by humans but not for humans, their personalities shrivel up like private parts in an April sea.

Though this show was set in the suburbia of 1970s Greater London, it is pretty much an extension of the 1950s American suburban homogenization populated by routinized ghostly bipedal life forms that so animated Percy.

Writing two decades in advance of the Internet becoming mainstream and before the rise of the ubiquitous "selfie," Percy wryly observed that "people in the modern age took photographs by the million: to prove despite their deepest suspicions to the contrary that they were not invisible" (Percy 1975, 26). Again we hark back to Percy's notion of the lost and

disembodied self. Percy, for deep psychological reasons (Hawellek 2006) that we've only hinted at, recognized the grim drudgery of Reggie Perrin's middle-class life. For Percy, Wednesday was totemic of a nondescript day, the greater part of our experience, the "in-between" times which "ought to be the best of times" but for the most part are strangely diminished and devalued (Percy 2000, 163)—a zombie-like existence deprived of life *and not knowing it*. As Percy so starkly put it in *The Last Gentleman*:

> Where he probably goes wrong, mused the engineer sleepily, is in the extremity of his alternatives: God and not-God, getting under women's dresses and blowing your brains out. Whereas and in fact my problem is how to live from one ordinary minute to the next on a Wednesday afternoon. Has not this been the case with all "religious" people? (Percy 1966, 354–55; see also Percy 2000, 311)

What Percy is getting at is some notion of Kierkegaardian existential authenticity and individuality, something that is not part and parcel of subhuman organisms' experience—the tiger and fish examples mentioned earlier. To live one's life in imitation, merely expressing the lowest common denominator cultural features of an age, is a profoundly mediocre form of existence for a human being. Percy, it should be noted, is in no way deriding the common touch or experience (Wyatt-Brown 1994, 322), nor is he recommending the grandiloquence of what passes for the intelligentsia, those subscribing to some off-the-peg worldview that too must stifle the individual's "search." Indeed as Wyatt-Brown put it, Percy

> called attention to the vacuity of "everydayness," the monotonous routines that dulled the sense and the minds of ordinary people, but most especially the upper-class professional heroes of his novels. (1994, 311)

Epilogue

Given Percy's existential bent and his debt to Kierkegaard, one could be forgiven in thinking that Percy would have a Kierkegaardian-like dourness: nothing could be further from the truth. Percy wields a blisteringly mordant wit targeting all comers—few are spared—especially in his nonfiction. It is no surprise then that it was Walker Percy who saw the comedic genius in John Kennedy Toole's posthumously published Pulitzer prize–winning novel *A Confederacy of Dunces*, Percy being instrumental in the process (Marsh 2013).

For Percy, man is *homo symbolificus* living in a *Welt* (world) rather than merely in an *Umwelt* (environment). Man *qua* man can only plausibly be studied and understood as a situated being, not an abstract entity. The modern liberal civil condition exists at the nexus of science, religion, politics, markets, art, and more besides, and liberalism's greatest achievement was to wrest independence from epistemic monopolies such the theocratic

state, or the expansive and centralized state, or corporate monopolies. So far as Percy was concerned, if there is a schism between religion and science, it is artificially induced by those who are not comfortable with the plurality of experience and perhaps unwittingly succumb to one or other monometric rationalistic worldview, be it from the religious side or the scientific side. Though Percy's intuitions match those who are of the view that the phenomenology of experience cannot be (and may in all probability can never be) accounted for by science, his ambitious project was to subject the abstract Cartesianism ("a disembodied barren intellectuality" [Wyatt Brown 1994, 320]) characteristic of most philosophy of mind to a more nuanced situated understanding of cognition and notions of social identity, without falling prey to positing a bloated or irrelevant/divisive social ontology.[5]

NOTES

1. Reported at http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/12/23/wim-wenders-talks-about-his-3-d-pina-bausch-documentary.html and https://imagejournal.org/artist/wim-wenders/.

2. This documentary can be rented from https://mediam.ca/production/2204-Walker-Percy-A-Documentary-Film#production. Many of the issues touched upon in this symposium can be found in Percy's Jefferson Lecture of 1989 (http://www.c-span.org/video/?c4356254/walker-percy-jefferson-lecture) (a transcript is published in Percy 2000).

3. Whether or not Percy was familiar with classics in the genre such as Bernard Williams's *Problems of the Self* (1973), Thomas Nagel's "What Is It Like to Be a Bat?" (1974), Frank Jackson's "Epiphenomenal Qualia" (1982), Derek Parfit's *Reasons and Persons* (1984), Kathleen Wilkes's *Real People: Personal Identity without Thought Experiments* (1988), and several more besides, I cannot definitively say—the task of locating Percy within this literature is a project in the works (Marsh forthcoming).

4. Series 3, episode 5, the opening scene, available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m0WbfYCoccA. Here, the protagonist Reggie Perrin is interviewed on a program entitled "Pillock Talk" ("pillock" is a colloquial Briticism for an idiot). The background to the series in brief: Our hero lives the highly routine life of a suburban commuter. The stresses of his mundane life begin to surface, with Reggie leaving his clothes on a beach in an apparent suicide. Reggie, alive and well, tours the countryside under various guises, but realizes that he misses his wife Elizabeth. Reggie attends his own memorial service in the guise of Martin Wellbourne. Elizabeth realizes that he is Reggie, but does not let on, and they become engaged. Martin Wellbourne is then employed at Reggie's previous employer Sunshine Desserts, but like his old self Reggie, gets bored. Reggie (now back as himself) opens a shop called Grot, selling useless dadaist products. To his amazement it is a success and soon has a chain of stores nationwide. Yet again he realizes that he is back in the routine he tried so hard to escape. Bored, Reggie tries to destroy Grot by employing unsuitable people in unsuitable

roles. The upshot—even more success! Reggie then has a new idea: a community for the middle class and middle-aged where people can learn to live in peace and harmony.

5.   As this "symposium" unfolds, Elizabeth Corey eases us into the discussion by way of a more general perspective (it should be noted that it was Elizabeth who first turned me onto Percy's work). Stacey Ake then distinctively brings her theological, philosophical, and scientific interests to bear on Percy. This is supplemented by John Sykes's further emphasis on Percy's stance as a semiotician. Benjamin Alexander rounds off this collection of articles with a piece that draws a great deal upon the Percy archives, giving some sociocultural–theological context to Percy as both novelist and social critic.

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