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."*

LIFE ON THE ISLAND

by Elizabeth Corey

Abstract. Walker Percy was both a medical doctor and a serious Catholic—a scientist and a religious believer. He thought, however, that science had become hegemonic in the twentieth century and that it was incapable of answering the most fundamental needs of human beings. He thus leveled a critique of the scientific method and its shortcomings in failing to address the *individual person* over against the group. In response to these shortcomings Percy postulates a religious understanding of human life, one in which man's life is understood as a pilgrimage or a search. The person who searches may not find the "object" of his search during his earthly life, but it is likely that he will come to a better understanding of himself by means of it.

Keywords: alienation; anxiety; apostle; boredom; Christianity; dissatisfaction; individualism; island; knowledge; news; Blaise Pascal; Walker Percy; religion; science; search; sovereignty

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Walker Percy's vision of the world will never win the day. Too much a realist and too much a Christian, he is at once deeply pessimistic about modern life and hopeful about man's eschatological future. Unfazed by the glories of modern technology and wryly skeptical about the promises of progressivism and conservatism alike, Percy will never be of use to any political or social movement.

What he does offer is a profound, though lightly worn, erudition and deep insight into the human condition. This insight cuts through the prattle of contemporary self-help literature and makes the promises of most contemporary gurus seem naïve, if not utterly foolish. Perhaps better

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than any other modern novelist, he identifies a fundamental paradox of modern life: Why despite an unprecedented "standard of living" do so many people feel pervasive despair, hopelessness, and anxiety? And why do therapies so often fail? Walker Percy's writing provides answers.

In addition to being a philosopher and novelist, Percy was a medical doctor—a pathologist trained in the modern scientific method. He was also a serious Catholic. Although these characteristics might appear incongruous, in Percy's case they allowed him to diagnose the existential malaise that he observed all around him. The burden of this essay will be to describe Percy's view of the condition of modern man, and subsequently to explain why he thought that the imperatives of science stand at odds with the core, ultimately religious, needs of individual human beings.

The Human Condition

On the opening page of his collection of philosophical essays, *The Message in the Bottle*, Walker Percy poses the following question: "Why does man feel so sad in the twentieth century?" (Percy [1975] 2000, 3). He goes on to wonder why people tend to feel bad in good environments and good in bad ones. Why is war is so appealing to us, he inquires, and why do we have so much difficulty seeing clearly and authentically the things around us? Why must we have our daily experiences "certified" by seeing them in movies or novels, instead of simply living our lives? In short, why do human beings so often have the apparently *wrong* reactions to things?

Percy diagnoses the problem as profound alienation, which is perhaps the most central theme of his fiction and philosophical writings. The alienation he identifies is not always dark and angst-ridden, though it sometimes is, but it grows out of a feeling of unease in the world. We feel unfulfilled despite the fact that we often possess every available material and social good. "In the very age [the modern age] when men lived longest and were most secure in their lives," he writes, "poets and artists were saying that men were most afraid" ([1975] 2000, 25). Percy laments that when postmodern man "arrives at the threshold of his new city, with all its hard-won relief from the sufferings of the past, [it] happens to be the same moment that he runs out of meaning!" ([1975] 2000, 112). Why should this be so?

Part of the reason is that, like all humans at all times, we sense the uncertainty of life and feel anxiety about the future. In this vein, Percy consciously places himself within the tradition of writers like Augustine and Pascal. He joins them in identifying something perennially unsatisfactory about the human condition that has plagued us since the moment of our emergence as a species. In a 1986 interview Percy frankly acknowledged his debt to Pascal: "I owe less to Faulkner and Southern writers and indeed American writers than to certain French writers . . . to go back a way,

Blaise Pascal" (Percy 1993, 158). As Pascal explained the predicament long ago, man

> does not know the place he should occupy. He has obviously gone astray; he has fallen from his true place and cannot find it again. He searches everywhere, anxiously but in vain, in the midst of impenetrable darkness. (Pascal 1995, 400)

This anxious search means that an individual is often unwilling and even unable, as Pascal also famously observed, "to stay quietly in his room" (Pascal 1995, 136). Instead, people seek the diversions of hunting and horsemanship, of gossip, shopping, gambling, and Facebook.

Moreover, we tend toward dissatisfaction with ourselves in both superficial and profound ways. To remedy this we are encouraged to act, to achieve, and to strive—endlessly. In the modern day it is exacerbated by the discontinuity between what is experienced in everyday life and what is promised to us by modern science, technology, and advertising. We therefore remain anxious and unhappy, but constantly hopeful that fulfillment will appear just around the next corner.

Also at the core of modern discomfort lie a fear of catastrophe and a simultaneous longing for something to break up the dreadful ordinariness of day-to-day life. The suburban dweller senses that he or she "stands both in danger of catastrophe and somehow in need of it" ([1975] 2000, 109). Thus in numerous places throughout his corpus Percy describes the phenomenon of someone coming to himself through tragedy, or through the otherwise radical disruption of ordinary life.

One of his favorite illustrations of this phenomenon is the man he terms "the alienated commuter," the businessman riding the morning train to work just as he has every day for the past twenty years. Suddenly there is a wreck! The commuter scrambles off the train and makes his way to a yellow house he has seen thousands of times through the window. He realizes with surprise that *only now* have the house and its inhabitants become real for him. Before, they were "partitioned off" into isolated "zones." The feared disaster has paradoxically given him the sense of reality that he had been missing. It is therefore extremely interesting for the businessman "to stand in the kitchen and hear from the owner of the house who he is, how he came to build the house, etc. For he, the commuter, has done the impossible: he has stepped through the mirror into the *en soi*" ([1975] 2000, 88). The disaster has facilitated an awakening for the commuter, who had long been more or less asleep.

Percy thought that an awakening, or a coming-to-oneself of this kind, was essential for recognizing the true character of human life. For although most of us, as Pascal knew, seek to be diverted from facing the source of our anxiety, the trick is somehow to regain "sovereignty" over our experience, to take back our own lives from the myriad entities that are constantly

trying to persuade or dominate us. This can be done, as the alienated commuter discovers, by means of disaster or crisis or, more rarely, by sheer force of will. One sees, suddenly, that reality has been elusive. This marks the beginning of the search.

Nevertheless, this realization does not in itself provide happiness or fulfillment. It is only the necessary condition for perceiving clearly our true predicament, which Percy designates as one of wandering, of pilgrimage, and of seeking. In the past, he maintains, most Western people understood this implicitly as part of the Judeo-Christian anthropology, even if they did not personally believe it to be true. Human existence

> was by no means to be understood as the transaction of a higher organism satisfying this or that need from its environment, by being "creative" or enjoying "meaningful relationships," but as the journey of a wayfarer along life's way . . . human alienation was first and last the homelessness of a man who is not in fact at home. (Percy [1975] 2000, 24)

In other words, Westerners possessed a shared account of mankind that made sense of our discomfort without promising permanently to ameliorate it. Life was a vale of tears, and it would remain so.

Science and the Scientific Method

This, then, is how Percy sees the human condition. Nevertheless, even if the predicament remains what it has always been, events have intervened to make the situation even more urgent in the present day. From Percy's perspective, the very success of the modern scientific revolution caused a kind of climax in alienation during the twentieth century.

This climax results in part from our acceptance of the authority of science in everything from the testing of drugs to statistical predictions about human behavior. We believe, rightly, that the fruits of science have lengthened our lives and made us more materially comfortable than all prior generations. Expectations about achievement and happiness have increased exponentially. And yet—our fundamental condition has remained the same: anxious, fearful, bored. The difference is that we no longer think of ourselves as pilgrims, with a nature and destiny that lie outside the material world. Instead we are inclined to wonder what, given all our blessings, *could possibly still be wrong*? And this wondering makes the lack of fulfillment that much harder to bear. It seems absurd to feel alienated in the midst of so much available pleasure, so many foods, drugs, and "recreational opportunities."

And there is a crucial further complication. It is not just that heightened expectations have made our unhappiness less intelligible. Percy argues that the science that has facilitated so many good things—comfort, health, and copious amounts of technological gadgetry—has simultaneously

disenfranchised us. As the world has become more technical, we have begun to think that we are incapable of understanding or properly experiencing things for ourselves. Instead, we defer to the cadre of experts that has emerged to analyze, dissect, and categorize experience for us. For instance: to "appreciate" a painting one feels the need of art history training or a professional guide. And it goes without saying that most people haven't the faintest idea of how to repair a faulty computer or car. Still, it is one thing not to feel the need of mastering art history, computer programming or auto repair for oneself; it is quite another when someone "feels in the deepest sense possible that something has gone wrong with one's very self" and yet has no innate resources for confronting the problem (1986, 42). This is the sense of impotence Percy wants to make evident.

He attributes such feelings of powerlessness to the bifurcation of the world into laymen and experts, consumers and sellers, where

> experts and planners take special measures to teach and edify the consumer. The measures taken are measures appropriate to the consumer: the expert and the planner *know* and *plan*, but the consumer *needs* and *experiences*. (Percy [1975] 2000, 61; italics in original)

Human life comes to consist primarily in what we buy, eat, read, and watch; we are customers and clients, not doers and makers. In this way, most of all, do we feel alienated. Our own lives are no longer our own, but are served up to us by various media in "experience packages" like blogs, television shows, and college courses.

How does this manifest itself in daily life? Percy explains the phenomenon in a variety of ways in an essay entitled "The Loss of the Creature" ([1975] 2000). There he argues that contemporary people have lost a sense of sovereignty over their lives. We cannot, like the first person ever to see the Grand Canyon, actually *see* the canyon in front of us. What we perceive instead is a complex of symbols, likely imbibed over decades, about what The-Trip-To-The-Grand-Canyon is supposed to be. Indeed, when we now travel anywhere in the world, we expect destinations to live up to the glossy photos of promotional brochures and travel guides. Likewise, when we are at school we are fed a steady, nutritional diet of obligatory learning: Shakespeare's sonnets, biological specimens for dissection, *Middlemarch*. Yet we no longer feel that we own these experiences. We constantly look to others to certify them, to tell us that *yes*—this is what one is supposed to be seeing, doing, and feeling.

The loss of sovereignty over experience happens because experts have "zoned" the world into areas that exclude the ordinary person's inadvertent discovery of meaning. Spontaneity and surprise disappear when people think they must see only the approved or most valuable sights, which have been precategorized. This kind of zoning takes place in multiple arenas. Recreation is reserved for park spaces; artistic experience takes

place in museums; travel happens at tourist sites; learning is an activity reserved for the classroom. In each of these situations, an expert hands the consumer a predigested (or "curated") package of recreational product, cultural product, travel product, or educational product. The consumer's role is then to imbibe these in precisely the form the experts prescribe. But the meal leaves him hungrier than before.

Who among us has not had the experience of seeing some famous site or picture and subsequently wondering: was it really worth all that? Or of reading some "great book" and finding it disappointing because it did not measure up to our prefabricated expectations? Could any Caribbean island vacation really measure up to the perfect images one sees in certain television advertisements? And when it doesn't, we feel cheated, disappointed, and duped. This is what Percy identifies so well as the loss of sovereignty. So does it mean "that we should get rid of museums?" No, he replies, but "the sightseer should be prepared to enter into a struggle to recover a sight from a museum" (Percy [1975] 2000, 62). This task of recovery is also central to his thought.

We lose sovereignty in another way too. Because we revere science, and because science aims at universality, we often suppose that what really matters is not the individual case but the *class* of things and the regularity of behavior exemplified by that class. The dogfish on the dissecting board is important not because it lies before us on an ordinary Tuesday morning in Baton Rouge, but because it exemplifies a group (and a set of theorems) much greater than itself. Its importance derives from the generalizations we may draw about it. And as human beings we, too, come to imagine that we are not so much individual persons but "examples" of the categories *white* or *black*, *man* or *woman*, or perhaps simply *Homo sapiens*.

But this is a strange inversion of the far more natural outlook in which each of us naturally feels himself or herself to be the absolutely unique and irreplaceable center of the universe. Here is where one begins to see the conflict that Percy considers central to twentieth-century alienation. The problem of modernity is that despite all the good science can do, it fails to

> utter a single word about an individual molecule, thing, or creature in so far as it is an individual but only in so far as it is like other individuals. The layman thinks that only science can utter the true word about anything, individuals included. But the layman is an individual. So science cannot say a single word to him or about him except as he resembles others. It comes to pass then that the denizen of a scientific technological society finds himself in the strangest of predicaments: he lives in a cocoon of dead silence, in which no one can speak to him nor can he reply. (Percy [1975] 2000, 22)

Percy thus sees science as incapable of speaking to the demand that life mean something—and not "human life" in general, but "my" particular, idiosyncratic, and unrepeatable life.

In this context one can appreciate Percy's fundamental commitment to individualism. The individualism he prizes is not an atomized, rational-choice variety, but the traditional Judeo-Christian notion that each and every human being is of inestimable value. Of course behaviorists can and do use humans as data points in scientifically valid ways, but these scientists cannot speak coherently to any particular person's search for meaning.

Percy quotes Alfred North Whitehead on the "fallacy of misplaced concreteness," which mistakes "an idea, a principle, an abstraction for the real." As a consequence, Percy writes,

> the "specimen" is seen as less real than the theory of the specimen. As Kierkegaard said, once a person is seen as a specimen of a race or a species, at that very moment he ceases to be an individual. Then there are no more individuals but only specimens. (Percy [1975] 2000, 58)

This is the problem of modern science: specimens may suffice for many kinds of research, but they are not sufficient for describing the desires of John or Margaret for fulfillment and happiness. To the degree "that we allow ourselves to perceive ourselves as a type of, example of, instance of, such and such a class . . . to this same degree do we come short of being ourselves" (Percy 1986, 42).

This is precisely what William James identified in *The Meaning of Truth* as "vicious abstractionism." A concrete situation is understood

> by singling out some salient or important feature in it, and classing it under that; then, instead of adding to its previous characters all the positive consequences which the new way of conceiving it may bring, we proceed to use our concept privatively; reducing the originally rich phenomenon to the naked suggestions of that name abstractly taken, treating it as a case of "nothing but" that concept, and acting as if all the other characters from out of which the concept is abstracted were expunged. Abstraction, functioning in this way, becomes a means of arrest far more than a means of advance in thought. [. . .] *The viciously privative employment of abstract characters and class names* is, I am persuaded, one of the great original sins of the rationalistic mind. (James 1987, 951–52; italics in original)

Yet abstraction is crucial to the scientific enterprise, where scientists often aim precisely at *isolating* variables in order to see the specific part they play in an organism as a whole. By contrast, abstraction is emphatically not crucial for an individual's self-understanding, in which my identification as "white" or "female" offers only the barest suggestion of what my identity might in fact be.

Here is the crux of the matter. The scientific revolution has yielded a situation in which the great triumphs of research and technology govern our lives. We make extensive use of the machines and technology that science provides. Our expectations for health, productivity and lifespan have become exponentially greater. At the same time, we find that these

victories over the natural world leave us less grounded than before and, if anything, more likely to lament the powerlessness we feel in the face of death, when so many other obstacles have been overcome. What Percy considers worst of all is when people have either given up the search for meaning or are unaware that existence requires a search. Then they are "quite content to live out their lives as the organisms and consumer units their scientists understand them to be" (Percy [1975] 2000, 19).

The Religious Walker Percy

With this as background, it is crucial to turn to that other aspect of Walker Percy—his identity as a serious religious believer. As he candidly admits, he is a Catholic Christian, but he also defies the secular world's common characterizations of religious believers. He possesses not an ounce of ostentatious piety and is entirely unsentimental about Christian doctrine. He does not argue that Christianity solves all the problems of earthly life, or that once converted the believer's future becomes all flowers and smiles. Instead he focuses on the discontinuity between life on earth and human hopes for permanent happiness and fulfillment. It is just the conflict I have described above.

If a novelist writes about "ultimate concerns," Percy maintains, then he must declare his allegiances. "For what his allegiance is what he is writing about." Thus he says quite straightforwardly: "I speak in a Christian context. That is to say, I do not conceive it my vocation to preach the Christian faith in a novel, but as it happens, my world view is informed by a certain belief about man's nature and destiny which cannot fail to be central to any novel I write" (Percy [1975] 2000, 111).

Christianity manifests itself in many ways in his fiction, but in his philosophical work Percy's primary image for the Christian life is the image of man as a castaway on a desert island, "a stranger who is in the world but who is not at home in the world" (Percy [1975] 2000, 142). Here is how he describes the island-dweller:

> [A]ll is not well with him. Something is wrong. For with all the knowledge he achieves, all his art and philosophy, all the island news he pays attention to, something is missing. What is it? He does not know. . . . He only knows that his sickness cannot be cured by island knowledge or by island news. . . . . Nor would it avail to say to him simply that he is homesick and that all he needs is to know who he is and where he came from. He would only shake his head and turn away. For he knows nothing of any native land except the island and such talk anyhow reminds him of Sunday school. (Percy [1975] 2000, 143–44)

The metaphor here is not hard to see, nor is its continuity with Heideggerian *Geworfenheit* (being "thrown" into the world). The Christian thinks of himself as living only a transitory earthly life, informed by faith that

comes to him as a message in a bottle "from across the seas," to use Percy's language again. "To be a castaway is to be in a grave predicament and this is not a happy state of affairs. But it is very much happier than being a castaway and pretending one is not. This is despair" (Percy [1975] 2000, 144). It is the despair of the man on the train *before* it crashes, of the woman living with anxiety or depression in a comfortable house in the suburbs, of the culture-consumer who does not realize why nothing he takes in ever fully satisfies, and does not care to find out.

The island, then, is the world; and the island-dweller, mankind. The knowledge that counts on the island is often moral and practical: Is Megan secretly angry at me? Will my employment contract be renewed? Should my son study business management or art? All these questions have answers that we are capable of finding over the course of time. There is even a place on the island for non-practical pursuits like science, art, and philosophizing, where a knower stands outside "and over against the world as one who sees and thinks and knows and tells" (Percy [1975] 2000, 128). Worldly knowledge of this kind can, or could potentially, be discovered by smart human beings, and is subject to verification. This, too, is of value to those island-dwellers who desire it. But the latter requires an attitude or posture of distance. When one is involved in science, philosophy, or art, he or she does not stand in *need* of anything but rather aims "objectively" to know or imagine.

Moral and political pursuits do indeed imply a certain need, in which the knowledge one seeks might better be called "news." News is distinguished from purely objective knowledge by its *immediacy* for the hearer, its aim of answering a question or supplying a lack. The man dying of dehydration does not want to hear that the messenger knows where the diamonds are, but where there is a nearby source of water. If, however, a man has no need or (more likely) fails to recognize his own need, then the message—whatever it is—will fall on deaf ears.

To extend the metaphor just a bit further, certain *kinds* of "knowledge" and "news" are appropriate for the island and its dwellers: what will the weather be tomorrow? Is the fishing good this time of year? This kind of information comprises most of what humans are concerned with most of the time. Yet the island-dweller who *also* recognizes himself as a castaway sees that something is still missing. It is with this person that Percy is most concerned. Indeed, "everything" depends on the circumstances of the hearer (Percy [1975] 2000, 131).

The metaphor's connection to the Christian message should now begin to come into clearer focus. News from "across the seas" about man's true condition and what is required for salvation can only come to someone who is prepared *by need* to hear it. It is akin to the message of Christianity given by Jesus. What matters most is the "relevance of [the] news" to a person's predicament. The man at home, "the satisfied man, he who does

not feel himself to be in a predicament" will never heed it (Percy [1975] 2000, 133–34). Neither will the person who is only "objectively" oriented toward the world, if such a person could exist at all. Only the castaway, dissatisfied and aware of his dissatisfaction, can receive the message.

Percy is following Kierkegaard (2010) here, who in his 1847 essay "Of the Difference between a Genius and an Apostle," argued that the genius and the apostle are categorically distinct types. The work of the genius corresponds to Percy's description of "objective" knowledge. It is human work and human knowledge, no matter how difficult or extraordinary the achievement may be. The work of the apostle, on the other hand, corresponds to the greatest existential need for the most consequential news: where mankind has come from, and where we are going. A genius may contribute a great deal, but his work will eventually be assimilated into human history. Only an apostle can bring the saving news, the radically strange news that comes directly from the God who sent him. If an apostle's news were subject to verification by the scientists and philosophers, "this would mean that God and the apostle must wait in the porter's lodge while the learned upstairs settle the matter" (Percy 1993, 146). Most importantly, the apostle's news is emphatically not "island news" but news "from across the seas."

Percy, like many other Christian thinkers, did not think that the person or message of Jesus, the eternal come into historical time, could ever be empirically or objectively verified. It is a piece of news "which cannot be so arrived at by any effort of observation or reflection however strenuous and yet which [is] of immense importance to the hearer" (Percy 1993, 142). Such a view does not imply that one ought to give oneself over to irrationality in general, or abandon island life altogether by forgetting "to eat and sleep and love." It does mean, though, that "one searches nevertheless and that one lives in hope that such a message will come, and that one knows that the message will not be a piece of knowledge or a piece of island news but news from across the seas" (Percy 1993, 144). This is the hope I spoke of at the beginning of this essay—a hope not for material existence but for a spiritual one.

Conclusion

To summarize what has been argued so far: Walker Percy sees the human condition as one of anxiety, boredom and dissatisfaction despite the great quantities of comfort and pleasure that are now widely available. People seek to escape this condition either by ignoring it or by diverting themselves—or perhaps most often, by diverting themselves in order to ignore it.

The condition is exacerbated by the ascendency of modern science, which continually extends the human lifespan and offers unprecedented conveniences. Yet although science has heightened our expectations for

happiness, it also makes us feel that we must hand over "sovereignty" to experts who promise to mediate life for us. We therefore feel a sense of disenfranchisement as we are served "experience packages" rather than real experience. Finally, as part of this surrendering of sovereignty, we come to see that science cannot offer substantive goods to individuals *qua* individuals. Each of us still must make sense of life and figure out how to approach the unavoidable fact of death. Only news from across the seas is satisfactory for this purpose.

Walker Percy was not an evangelist in any commonly accepted mode. Indeed, more than nearly any modern religious believer, Percy appreciated the remarkably difficult task of making the case for Christianity in a secular culture. He even catalogues the ways in which modern people have moved away from finding meaning in religion and now look for it elsewhere: "What most of us seem to be seeking [in place of the search for salvation] are such familiar goals as maturity, creativity, autonomy, rewarding interpersonal relations, and so forth" (Percy 1986, 41). And our hopes for salvation now lie (perhaps) in liberal politics: in the "unlimited hope for man's well-being," or in conservative politics: "If [only we could] defeat Communism and revive old-time religion and Americanism," or in city planning: "if we could [only] solve international problems and spend our yearly budget on education and housing, we could have a paradise on earth" and so on (Percy 1993, 105). He has a keen eye for utopian propensities just about anywhere.

He even spots utopianism within science itself, observing the "radical transformation in the very consciousness of Western man" that I have described above. The problem is that this consciousness "has been transformed by a curious misapprehension of the scientific method. One is tempted to use the theological term *idolatry*" (Percy 1986, 41–42). The most radical examples of this are phenomena like the "cryonics" movement, which aims to preserve legally dead human bodies for potential resuscitation when medical techniques improve. But transhumanism in general, which has largely developed since Percy's death in 1990, is another example of what he would certainly have categorized as technological idolatry. He would have characterized all of this as a willful rejection of human limits in the hope of artificially changing the human condition—in short, a repudiation of the most central Christian teaching about original sin.

Given his rather bleak assessment of modern life, what did Percy think could be done? In one sense, not much; since he thought Western Christendom was already more or less at an end—"like the cartoon cat that runs off a cliff and for a while is suspended, still running, in mid-air but sooner or later looks down and sees there is nothing under him" (Percy [1975] 2000, 19). He was quite sure that we now live in a post-Christian world and that there was no going back to a fictional prelapsarian paradise. Yet he also emphasized the importance of the novelist's role as a kind of prophet.

As such, the novelist is in a certain sense removed from the daily goings-on of the busy world and is able to see with a fresh, or perhaps merely ancient, perspective. A prophet's role is not to *remedy* but to speak clearly in his diagnosis.

Novelists, artists, and educators all share a central task, which Percy identifies as "recovering sovereignty" over experience. The novelist's task in particular is to lay bare the contemporary situation so that individuals might be capable of seeing both *that* they are dissatisfied and *why*. All fiction, he writes,

> can be used as an instrument of exploration and discovery, in short, of sciencing. In a new age, when things and people are devalued, when meanings break down, it lies within the province of the novelist to start the search afresh, like Robinson Crusoe on his island. (Percy 1986, 45)

Yet the very object of the search may be something indefinable. So far from seeking some clear, identifiable objective, the novelist's aim is to see and to express "the mystery, the paradox, the *openness* of an individual human existence." If the scientist's aim is to clarify and simplify, the novelist's is "to muddy and complicate" (Percy 1993, 108).

Perhaps most of all, Walker Percy's aim is to recover a sense of the poetic quality of human life. He reminds his readers that we need not all be caught up in the worlds of science, technology, business, and consumption, where human beings are treated as specimens for investigation or as consumers to be sold to. We are instead sovereign individuals, capable of both greatness and wretchedness and everything in between. We are capable of living intentionally and finding meaning in the daily experiences of ordinary human life. For Percy, the central task for human beings is a religious one: to discover the meaning of it all and to live according to what we have discovered.

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