BETWEEN RELIGIOUS FAITH AND SCIENCE - WALKER PERCY

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Abstract: *The combination of science and faith is a comprehensive view of both subjective and objective reality. Through the choices that the human being makes, he not only gives the measure of his freedom but can also build his self-destruction. In the modern world, where the material occupies an increasingly important place, this self-destruction can take various forms. Through the bad decisions that people make, they can weaken the self and fall into the abyss of depression. Faith offers a counterweight to this self-destructive capacity because understanding the belonging to a more comprehensive whole, creates a much stronger individual and responsible for his own decisions. If we understand that our decisions do not only concern us, but also bring the destiny of others into the equation, the human being becomes a responsible one.*

Key words: *religion, science, semiotics, medicine, literature*

Walker Percy (1916-1990) was born into a wealthy Alabama family of former slaveholders. Shortly after Walker's birth, his grandfather committed suicide and when he was 13, his father committed suicide as well. Two years later, his mother dies in a car accident. After this long series of tragedies, Percy and his two younger brothers end up being raised by a lawyer and poet cousin. This would profoundly influence him as his greatest passion—literature—would follow him throughout his life. Ever since high school, Percy had been writing essays that he published in the school magazine. In 1935 he published four plays. A degree in 1941 from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in New York City allowed Percy to pursue a career in psychiatry. But after a short time, Percy understood that psychiatry did not satisfy him. During his residency at Bellevue Hospital in Manhattan he contracted tuberculosis. This forces him to retire to the Trudeau Sanatorium at Saranac Lake in the Adirondack Mountains.

To banish his negative thoughts, Percy devotes himself to reading. Percy's favorite authors included Søren Kierkegaard, Fyodor Dostoevsky, Gabriel Marcel, Jean-Paul Sartre, Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann. Although raised in the spirit of science, Percy realizes that there are forces beyond human knowledge. As a result, he becomes more and more attracted to religion. After three years in the sanitarium, Percy returns to the world. Two years trying to define a role in the new post-war world. Thus, in 1945, he began working in Colombia as a pathology instructor. Soon, however, tuberculosis returns.

The uniqueness of Percy's writing reveals a deeply moral character, with strong Christian values but who, perhaps because of his own trauma, tries to elucidate through writing themes such as alienation from society, the rejection of the past and traditions, but also the desperate attempt to adapt to a society that proposes completely different values. Although he is a writing neophyte, Percy has a valuable literary instinct. He chooses his characters from among ordinary people, trying to analyze their experiences with the detachment of an authentic literary realism. The evolution of Percy's characters is one from the physical plane, of the material, of comfort to the higher plane, of moral values. This path is one that the doctor himself has made. His physical suffering, illness and life in the sanatorium, the fact that his daughter lost her hearing at a young age left their mark on his development as a man and even on his literary creation.

In 1956 Percy signed an essay *Stoicism in the South* published in *Commonweal* magazine. In the midst of American society changes, where voices were increasingly heard against the policy of racial segregation, Percy has the courage to make a pertinent analysis of

the state of affairs. Southerners tried to ease their conscience by applying some so-called paternalistic values, but they really failed to understand what equality between people means. Percy doesn't hesitate to blame religion for false noble sentiment as well "it was a Christianity which was estheticized by medieval trappings and a chivalry which was abstracted from its sacramental setting." Analyzing the novel *Sartoris* (1929) by William Faulkner, Percy concludes that what truly brings balance to the human being is not to stop harming one's fellow man for ethical reasons, but the deep feeling that if one were to wrong someone and -would harm himself because Percy believes that all human beings are part of a higher whole that cannot be divided "The nobility of Sartoris—and there were a great many Sartorises—was the nobility of the natural perfection of the Stoics, the stern inner summons to man's full estate, to duty, to honor, to generosity toward his fellowmen and above all to his inferiors—not because they were made in the image of God and were therefore lovable in themselves, but because to do them an injustice would be to defile the inner fortress which was oneself."[1] His own dramas, the illness he had to face and even the uncertainty of a medical career led Walker Percy to perceive divinity, life and the human being on a higher level.

In 1961, Percy made his literary debut with *The Moviegoer*. Even though the source of inspiration for this book was the existentialist writings of Kierkegaard, Percy's novel is a breath of fresh air in the American literary landscape of the time, bringing the writer immediate fame. Readers are drawn to the drama of the hero Jack "Binx" Bolling, a young stockbroker in New Orleans. Back from the Korean war, Jack must adapt to a new existence, to a changing society, and all this further disturbs the soul tormented by existential questions. Increasingly alienated from the world around him, Jack finds solace in reading and going to the movies. Some exegetes saw in this first book a metaphor of Cartesian thinking.[2] Known for his opposition to Descartes, Percy seems to start his literary career strong. The objective detachment proposed by Descartes is countered by Percy by encouraging introspection, despite the suffering it can cause. Percy considers that detaching from the existential plane and entering the world of abstract ideas is harmful because it takes us away from the final goal - that of understanding ourselves.

His next novel, *The Last Gentleman* (1966) was greeted with reserved enthusiasm by critics who criticized his lack of initiative in subverting conventions "Thus, though Percy's second novel does aim at making a broad statement about the modern condition and has its moments of heavy handed symbolism, it does no great violence to the conventions of realistic fiction."[3] The themes that Percy resumes in this second novel are the Southerners' inadaptation to the increasingly competitive environment imposed by the Northerners, suicidal ideation, the traumas of war. Southern society's inability to come to terms with the past and failure to accept the present are Percy's recurring themes. The doctor's characters suffer frustrations and identity crises that the author can't seem to find answers to. The oscillation of the characters between good and evil, life and death, which Percy creates, makes the novel seem painted in black and white, which the whole construct lacks the depth that shades of gray can offer. Even if he did not practice medicine for a long time, science led him to see existence in a duality and opposition, not as a fragile balance between various experiences. The central character, Williston Bibb Barrett, a southerner resettled in New York, fails to accept the new reality and the result is anxiety. Barrett's attempt to maintain

[1] Walker Percy, *Stoicism in the South. Epictetus or the Psalms?*, July 6, 1956, available on https://www.commonwealmagazine.org/stoicism-south, accessed on September 10, 2024

[2] Woods Nash, *The Moviegoer's Cartesian Theater. Moviegoing as Walker Percy's Metaphor for the Cartesian Mind* in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, p. 29

[3] Frederick C. Crews, *The Last Gentleman, by Walker Percy*, in *Commentary, Culture and Civilization* Section, September 1966

Southern traditions in order not to betray his family collides with the new life he is trying to build in cosmopolitan New York.

The failed suicide attempt is a cry for help from a soul torn by indecision of the choice - the past or the present. Barrett makes the mistake of repeating what he saw in the family of origin. All the turmoil, anxiety and even attempted suicides fit with his family history. Percy subtly points out that anyone can make the mistake of thinking they are a continuation of family traditions instead of analyzing what led to the family's downfall. The only escape, according to the author, is to get out of the trap, to accept the suffering and create a new path. Percy's misfits are not without intelligence. On the contrary, they have education and even knowledge, but what makes the difference is the passage of existence through the emotional filter. And, paradoxically, the more the they abstract, the more they move away from the individual goal. As the traumatic events intensify, Barrett becomes more self-possessed and able to adapt to change. Percy informs his reader of the character's emotional fragility when he portrays him as amnesiac, semi-deaf, and frequently experiencing deja-vu episodes.

The struggle is between the conscience that pushes him to follow family traditions and his own desire for independence. Perhaps the same feelings of frustration were felt by Percy himself whose father committed suicide. Like the author, Barrett goes through the nightmare of his father's suicide. The character of Percy, the author's alter ego, tries with all his being to break away from these traumas in order to build a future for himself. Leaving the family law firm, the parental home and the safety of the South, Barrett takes on a new, much more modest existence as a caretaker. Due to a lack of financial funds, Barrett finds a second job, as a caretaker in a wealthy Jewish family. Percy draws the reader's attention to the fact that, contrary to popular belief, a disadvantaged background builds character as it gives poor family members a purpose.

Whereas a rich family cripples characters because the individual lacks the desire to prove himself. True suffering is what hardens character. And this is also witnessed by Barrett. Only when he has to face the vicissitudes of life does he become truly free within himself. The Southern traditions in which Barrett was raised, of honor and restraint, are violated by the new norms of consumerism and debauchery. As he discovers different characters, Barrett begins to analyze, become more critical and create a value system to which he can relate. The moment Barrett makes the decision to live and not kill himself, his spiritual evolution begins. Hope gives him the strength and motivation to continue his personal adventure called life.

Like Fyodor Dostoevsky, Percy analyzes contemporary man and his inability to adapt to a constantly changing society. Although Percy's writing has been commented and cataloged trying to draw a similarity between it and realist or existentialist literature, Percy's novels have a unique flavor “But if Percy entered the literary world an unknown quantity, it did not take long for the labels to catch up with him. He was categorized, variously, as a Southern novelist, as a philosophical novelist working in the tradition of such European "existentialist" writers as Dostoevski, Sartre and Camus, and, finally, as a Catholic novelist. The labels are not, in any strict sense, inaccurate. Percy is Southern both by birth and by upbringing, Catholic by choice (he and his wife converted shortly after their marriage in 1946), and philosophical by inclination.”[4]

In 1971 Percy published a new novel, *Love in the Ruins* (subtitled *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*). As in the previous novel, Percy takes up the theme of the human being’s alienation. The symbolism the author uses is not very subtle. The central character is Thomas More, descendant of the author of *Utopia*. More is a psychiatrist in the city of Paradise and invents an Ontological Lapsometer, a device that can

[4] Jay Tolson, *The Education of Walker Percy*, in *The Wilson Quarterly*, Spring 1984, pp. 157-158

diagnose and treat the mental illnesses that underlie the perversion of society. Like everything good humanity has produced, this device can also be used for selfish and evil purposes. As in real life, Percy's fiction reveals the treacherous way in which the corruption, vanity and thirst for power of a few can subjugate entire communities. Lacking the necessary money to promote his invention, More turns to the immoral Art Immelman. Before he can fight back against Immelman, the city is engulfed in the revolt of those oppressed for centuries. And Percy's character ends up living a modest but meaningful life alongside these outlaws who have established a new social order.

The character of the next novel, *Lancelot* (1977), Lancelot Andrewes Lamar is a lawyer accused of murder. After killing his wife, he ends up in a mental institution. The reader learns about the character's past from his monologues. Percy's symbolism is visible from the title as he inversely likens his character to Sir Lancelot du Lac, knight of the Round Table and seeker of the Holy Grail. It's just that Percy's Lancelot finds himself in a struggle with the modern society whose depravity and moral corruption he's denouncing. Lancelot tries to start a revolution of morality. Percy's story brings a literary novelty, making the reader wonder what is madness and what is real. If the person in the psychiatric institution is fighting for the return to normality, what could those outside be? The confessions that Lancelot makes take place in the presence of Harry, the priest-psychiatrist. This time, also, we can identify the duality that Percy faced throughout his life-religion and science.

The Second Coming (1980) is a sequel to the first novel and has Will Barrett as its central character. He tries to commit suicide by taking barbiturates and retreating to a cave near the house. He is found and rescued by a woman who escaped from a mental hospital. Percy's thesis is that lack of faith, denial of the Creator, and increased individual pride can have devastating effects on human beings. The void created by lack of faith can only be filled by depression, alienation and anguish. All these are attributes of the fall of the human being. Through the love that Will Barrett develops for the woman who saved his life, he atones for having turned away from God.

Percy's last novel, *Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), is a sequel to *Love in the Ruins*. The novel has some of the most profound themes - individual alienation, the elimination from society of the sick and old, the inability of the human being to define himself and religion as the last bastion in the face of the fall of humanity. The story takes place in a town called Feliciana. The central character, Thomas More, is a psychiatrist released from prison who notices strange behavior in his fellow citizens. He discovers that the authorities are testing the population so that the animalistic behaviors of the people are rekindled while the weakened ones die. The problem that the novel raises is that of the morality of trying to change the human being. Even though we apparently have many flaws, no one has the right, Percy seems to be saying, to shape human nature. Only free will can dictate change. Psychiatrist More, even if he is a fallen hero, seems to be the solution to the dilemma that humanity is experiencing. Accused of selling amphetamine to truck drivers, More is serving two years in prison. Returning to his hometown, More experiences the shock of seeing the city's inhabitants tortured by panic attacks, compulsive grabbing, anxiety and depression. Although apparently more intelligent, the inhabitants are driven by abnormal sexual instincts. At the same time, communication skills and emotional intelligence are very low.

More's ally becomes a former professional enemy - Bob Comeaux. His integrity, despite past differences, makes him the only one he trusts. It turns out, however, that Dr. Comeaux is responsible for dumping a large amount of sodium isotopes into the drinking water, but also for euthanizing children whose families no longer want them. Comeaux's explanation for his actions is that he was trying to reform the people of Feliciana. In an attempt to eradicate crime, drug use, and mental health problems, Doctor Comeaux took the initiative to reprogram individuals by changing their behavior. The issue Percy's novel raises

is the morality of restraining individual will in the name of the common good. Doctor More, a man of science, doesn't know what to do when he learns the truth. More goes to church where he meets Father Simon Rinaldo Smith, a former alcoholic who currently cares for the terminally ill. As Percy accustomed his readers, the representative of the church, and through him faith in God, tries to stop the whole horror. More manages to thwart Comeaux's plan and everything returns to normal. Even if the author was a man of convinced science, he discovered that the excess of rationality can kill the ineffable of consciousness and as such he begins to reject this. Orientation towards the metaphysical plane can provide answers regarding our self but also how we relate to the higher self. Humanization implies a reverse journey compared to what society imposes on us. If in the world of consumerism, the way is outward, the true path is inward "Scientism is the belief that science alone can make truth statements about the world. For Percy, such a perspective always dehumanizes."[5]

Percy didn't just write fiction. He signed and satirized *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), a book about existentialism. Percy, through this work, tries to increase the individual's awareness of his own faults. And one of the fundamental mistakes that people seem to make is to lock themselves into a paradigm of thinking, refusing other opinions. *Lost in the Cosmos* is yet another critique of consumerism that traps the individual in small pleasures that do not enrich him with anything. Entering this mouse wheel, the individual no longer hopes for anything and becomes a victim of his own pleasures.

The only way we can extract ourselves from this vortex is to develop our own mechanisms to filter the toxic environment that society imposes on us. With no universal recipe, the individual who becomes discouraged but the search, reiterates Percy, must continue if we are to be victorious. There are no fixed solutions because each person has to find his/her own inner peace and his/her own way of reaching peace with life. And help should not be sought outside but within us.

The hardest journey is in our own consciousness. We are all in a search for balance and meaning and the way we try to solve this enigma of the self can be one of running away from reality (through material accumulation, excess alcohol, sex or drug use) or purpose can be sought in the spiritual, metaphysical area (by detaching from the self-other binary and understanding higher truths such as belonging to an entity far above us).

The paradox of the modern world is that, developing science, in search of the answer, we move further and further away from the goal. Science only has objective, quantifiable answers but the human being is much more than data. And Percy comes up with the example of medicine. A medical graduate and practitioner himself, he understood how limited this branch of science is because, instead of treating the cause of pathologies-often of spiritual origin, medicine tries to treat only the visible manifestations of the disease. The human spirit, Percy seems to conclude, is far more complex than the technology we produce.

Constantly searching for answers, Percy published three essays in 1975 *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is*, and *What One Has to Do with the Other*. The essays are based on theories of semiotics. Percy resumes the opposition between religion and science in these works. Written from 1954 to 1975, the essays in *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man* is attempt to bridge the gap between understanding the human being and understanding how we communicate. Percy is convinced that if we can decipher how language was produced and how we use it, we can understand how we relate to existence. The abstraction and symbolism of language are the two components that differentiate us from other forms of life.

[5] Micah Mattix, *Walker Percy's Alternative to Scientism in The Thanatos Syndrome*, in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, p.145

The explanation for Percy's attraction to the literature of Sartre and Heidegger is, according to Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith, that the coldness that Percy himself felt towards science is offset by the idea that man he is the only one capable of making his own way in life. The human being, endowed with free will, has the freedom of choices but also the responsibility for these decisions. Both Heidegger's and Sartre's emphasis on individuality and the freedom of the human being to decide his own destiny struck a chord with Percy who was trying to respond to his own dilemmas—the illness and the trauma of losing his grandfather and father.

Percy felt that medicine, and science as a whole, could only come up with partial answers. Religion occupied an important place in the doctor's life so, at a crossroads, Percy's thought system took on elements of existentialism, religion and science. Percy believes that every system of thought that humanity has proposed has had weak points. Thus, science focuses on the outside of the human being, without trying to explore the depths of consciousness. Religion opens a door to the metaphysical but restricts individual freedom and existentialism puts subjectivity first. We believe that Percy proposes a system at the confluence of these forms of perception of the human being in an attempt to provide as comprehensive an area as possible of what man is. Percy tipped the scales in favor of religion.

Unshakeable faith is, according to the doctor, what gives strength to the edifice called consciousness: "Percy's «theory of man» is, for him, a kind of Christian apologetics. It doesn't prove that the Christian account of who we are is true, but it does show that believing in its truth is compatible with what we can see with our own eyes as knowers. What we really know about evolution suggests, in fact, special creation of our species and particular persons and the deep, irreducible reality of personal love. It even suggests that our freedom is not for private, incommunicable experiences of conscience but for both shared scientific discovery and participation in the truthful, institutionalized community called the church, organized for thought and action. In other words, it suggests what our freedom—our wandering—is for. Percy's intention, of course, is not to politicize the church or to have public policy animated by the personal virtue of charity, but to show how our political life is limited and sustained by who we are as truthful, social, personal, joyful, and loving beings. We can be as home as we can be with our family, friends, and country and all the good things of this world when we understand the true cause—both through science and through faith—of our homelessness."[6]

Regarding the impact that medical studies have had on his novels, Percy admits that, in a purely medical manner, he tries to identify evil as a doctor makes a diagnosis. The detective work, probing human consciousness that Percy did in his novels would not have been possible without his medical studies: "my whole stance, my whole set of mind in writing novels, is unlike most of American novelists. It is the attitude of a doctor which is diagnostic-maybe therapeutic in the end-but still mainly diagnostic in my case. It is the attitude that there is something wrong. Something wrong with the character or wrong with the world. (…) I'm always writing on the narrow edge between psychosis and neurosis and «the norm»."[7]

Scientist by medical training, Percy has gone through various stages—from anthropology to psychology, from scientism to the body versus soul binary. Percy discovered that the adventure of man in search of self could no longer be explained by science, and as such he turned his attention to religion. Percy sensed that modern society, despite

[6] Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith, Walker Percy, *American Political Life, and Indigenous American Thomism* in *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*, *Literature in English, North America*, University Press of Kentucky, 2013, p. 5

[7] Peggy Castex, *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, Edited by Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, University Press of Mississippi, 1993, p. 55

technological progress, is on a downward curve in terms of human consciousness. Lured with the illusory materialism proposed by the consumerist society, human beings drift away from the ultimate existential truth.

Not even Percy was without the allure of science when he tried to find out the true meaning of existence. Except that Percy used the theory of language, itself a science, to dismantle scientism. As such, Percy dismantles the dualism proposed by Descartes and assiduously promoted by the modern world. The division between body and soul proposed by the Cartesian doubt pulls the human being either towards materialism and rationalism or towards excessive abstraction.

Torn between extremes, the human being can barely find his moral compass in the contemporary world. The denial of imperfections, the lack of acceptance of these mistakes to which we are subject, only brings us even greater anguish. Perhaps from the pride of becoming the Creator, the human being will become his own executioner.

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