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Mechanization, Malaise, and the Vertical Search: Walker Percy's "Message in a Bottle" to Teachers

by
Delese Wear

Introduction

At first I thought I was merely reveling in a new literary find. Passionate readers know what I mean: the feeling of discovery, recognition, and even ownership of text, and kinship with and curiosity about author. Love in the Ruins[1] was the first Walker Percy novel I read. It was thick, satirical prose with caustic bites at many aspects of western medicine—most notably the unquestioned positivism pervading research and treatment. Of course, Percy was deadly serious in his very funny characterization of the ills of medicine, including the brilliant but unambitious, bourbon-drinking, womanizing-impaired psychiatrist-protagonist, Dr. Thomas More; the lapsometer, More's invention which could "measure" one's emotional/spiritual existence; and the antiseptic, robot-like, very public, very matter-of-fact treatment of sexual dysfunction at the Love Clinic, clearly a jab at Masters and Johnson. I read the book in three or four days, carrying it from kitchen to bedroom to work, reading passages to anyone who would listen. I thought: if this is Walker Percy, give me more. His writing wasn't just first-rate fiction. It lead me to question aspects of medical and scientific behavior I had not previously examined. It made me squirm with joy.

Then I read the personally-confrontive The Moviegoer,[2] his first published novel and most highly acclaimed. This marked the beginning of a half-year of critically reading and rereading Percy, thinking about the threads that hold his fiction together, arguing with other Percy zealots about which book was his best, which characters his most complete, recommending him to all, and most of all, most troubling, examining what I believed and how I acted on these beliefs in light of his protangonists.

Percy confronts me—and I suspect those who have read several of his books—with what I have identified as three recurring themes. The themes are not subtle or deeply embedded in the texts, but are onmipresent in plot and characterization. These themes are so closely related that while I have identified them below as discrete categories for the purpose of discussion, they are in fact too tangled to be viewed singly without the others. Together in text they delight and inform and, for me, in the best Kierkegaardian sense, create difficulties everywhere.

The three themes surround Percy's explicit commitment to (1) existentialist philosophy; (2) identifying the causes of 20th century malaise; and (3) alternative ways of asking questions. In the following sections I describe each theme, using the language of Thomas More from Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome,[3] Will Barrett from The Second Coming,[4] Binx Bolling from

The Moviegoer, and Lancelot from the book of the same title.[5] Their words, along with Percy's own in a collection of interviews, Conversations with Walker Percy,[6] illuminate these themes in ways otherwise inaccessible (at least to me) except in the language of creative literature and in other works of art. Moreover, I identify the ways in which these themes provoked my own self-examination. These themes, clothed in the language of fiction, have the potential to nudge other readers into critical examination or re-examination of their lived worlds—to make them squirm as I did, and as I continue to do. Finally, it is my intent that the following paragraphs characterize the assumptions I bring to the aesthetic experience, which reading Walker Percy most assuredly is. These assumptions are that an aesthetic engagement 1) occurs contextually in an individual's life; 2) is influenced by (and influences) that individual's values; and 3) is influenced by (and influences) the daily human events, perspectives, and decisions of that individual. It is a vital, fluid experience not divorced from living.

THEME 1: WHAT DOES EXISTENTIALISM SAY TO TEACHERS?

Percy's most consistent message addresses his belief in individual freedom to create, define, and redefine. Unlike the atheist existentialists who many times appear to rub our noses in absurdity, Percy presents protagonists who stumble and fall flat—many times repeatedly—but do so in their struggle to create and change. Will Barrett confronts himself after escaping his affluence on an apparent golf-course Eden to a sojourn in a cave looking for his own life and God, finding at least one of these along with a brilliant young schizophrenic named Allie, herself an escapee from the hospital, her parents, her helplessness. Percy asks of Barrett, "How did it happen that now for the first time in his life he could see everything so clearly? Something had given him leave to live in the present. Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself."[7] Similarly, in a novel length conversation with his friend/psychiatrist, Lancelot uses the wonderous images of cowpaths and tape heads to describe his confrontation with the present which began "when I stepped out of my life routine worn bare and deep as a cowpath across a meadow, climbed out of my rut, stopped listening to the news and Mary Tyler Moore."[8] A strange feeling it was, like "Rip Van Winkle waking up and testing his bones. Was anything broken? Was I still in one piece?....For years, I realized I had lived in a state of comfort and abstraction, waiting for the ten-o'clock news."[9]

But, what to do once out of the cowpath, face-to-face with the present? Lancelot realizes that

> the past, any past, is intolerable, not because it is violent or terrible or doomstruck or any such thing, but just because it is so goddamn banal and feckless and useless....The mystery is: What is one to do with oneself? As you get older you begin to realize the trick time is playing, and that unless you do something about it, the passage of time is nothing but the banality of the past on the pure future. The past devours the future like a tape recorder, converting pure possibility into banality. The present is the tape head, the mouth of time.[10]

Educators-as-tape heads: how might they proceed? What can happen when educators step out of rutted cowpaths? Several things, I believe. First, our whole-hearted, unquestioning acceptance of educational thought and practice might cease, replaced by a belief that the potential for radical

transformation exists, recognizing the need to develop a self-conscious critique that doesn't cling dogmatically to its own doctrinal assumptions. Those of us engaged in educational activity—researchers, teachers, administrators—were long ago seduced by positivist sirens when we investigated a phenomenon merely because it could be examined empirically, then acted on the results of that investigation. This scenario predetermined (and still does) much activity in settings devoted to teaching and learning. Lulled by lowing of "the literature," we slide into well-worn cowpaths, not worrying about where we are headed, since the cowpath determines our direction. But educators who become aware of being the tape head don't travel exclusively in cowpaths. Their awareness is like Lancelot's sudden knowledge of his freedom, of himself-as-tape head, requiring new thought, new talk, impossible as it is to "make conversation in the old tongue, the old worn-out language. It can't be done."[11] Using the old patterns of thought and speech indigenous to educational cowpaths turns the tape head into a "devourer of time...turn[ing] the pure empty future into the shabby past."[12] Critical use of the past is laudable; wholesale acceptance is indeed feckless. We can create in the present tense.

Actually, Percy describes it best, this awareness so important to self-conscious praxis for teachers- and learners-as-tape heads:

> One is not dead! One is alive! One is free! I won't say that one is like God on the first day with the chaos before him and a free hand. Rather, one feels, what the hell, here I am washed up, it is true, but also cast up, cast up on the beach, alive and in one piece....I might try a little something here in the wet sand, a word, a form."[13]

The first theme, then, which I extracted from Percy's fiction, is that we have choices, we act alone in our selection, our freedom is immediately present—much like Lancelot's realization:

> It is simply this: a conviction and a freedom. The conviction: I will not tolerate this age. The freedom: the freedom to act on my conviction. And I will act. No one else has both the conviction and the freedom....what if one sober, reasonable, and honorable man should act, and with perfect sobriety, reason, and honor? Then you have the beginning of a new age. We shall start a new order of things.[14]

THEME 2: TWENTIETH-CENTURY MALAISE

Like the disappearance of the country doctor who made house calls and knew the intimate details of all his patients, teachers who martyr themselves to their work are fading fast. They've burned out or are flickering out or were never ignited in the first place. They have what Walker Percy calls the twentieth-century malaise. It's quite paradoxical, this malaise, especially here in the United States where "we have every reason for being absolutely happy . . .yet our inner worlds are confused and tormented."[15] So why the generalized ennui pervading our culture?

Percy believes its roots rest squarely in our "surrender, albeit unconscious, of valid forms of human activity to scientists, technologists, and specialists."[16] We are confronted daily with "everydayness," with "upside-down-ness" or what Allie particularly feared, the sameness of four o'clock in the afternoon and what to do with it. Binx Bolling described it as "the enemy. . .Perhaps there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its grip by brute strength. Now

nothing breaks it."[17] Lancelot, too, asks, "Is it possible for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane?"[18] Percy answers, "Yes." As clerks in cowpaths, we are either thinking of or waiting for something to happen, usually by someone or something outside of us. We believe that technology can fix it, make it better—and it can fix it in so many ways—but there are limits, and one is that "you can't treat a spiritual disease with a scientific device however sophisticated."[19] Our actions deny these limits, though, when we allow ourselves to be seduced by technology—to make everything, including our physical, intellectual, emotional, even spiritual lives easier, to "make it better." What prompts this wholesale surrender, Percy maintains, is the terror that people feel when they realize that they are stuck with themselves. It is not knowing "who they are or what to do with themselves. They are frightened out of their wits that they are not doing what, according to experts, books, films, TV, they are supposed to be doing. They, the experts, know, don't they?"[20]

The second theme I culled from Percy's characterization is that malaise leaks into the cracks and holes brought about by our unconscious disfranchisement of our emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves to the "technological other." Realizing this, how might teachers regain these selves? One answer, it seems to me, rests with recognizing the present and possible voices in ourselves, and listening to them. It has to do with teachers inoculating themselves against technology-induced malaise, echoing Lancelot's litany: "I couldn't stand it. I still can't stand it. I can't stand the way things are. I cannot tolerate this age. What is more, I won't. That was my discovery: that I didn't have to."[21]

THEME 3: ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF ASKING QUESTIONS

Percy's protagonists grope in a variety of ways, some more successfully than others, but each has something to tell us as educators groping for meaning ourselves in what we do. Perhaps the best example is that of Binx Bolling's struggle with the "vertical search." In a laboratory one summer Binx finds himself interested in the role of the acid-base balance in the formation of renal calculi. He explains,

> I had a hunch you might get pigs to form oxalate stones by manipulating the pH of the blood, and maybe even to dissolve them. A friend of mine, a boy from Pittsburgh named Harry Stern, and I read up the literature and presented the problem. . . .But then a peculiar thing happened. I became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory. The August sunlight came streaming in great dusty fanlights and lay in yellow bars across the room. The old building ticked and creaked in the heat. Outside we could hear the cries of summer students playing touch football. In the course of an afternoon the yellow sunlight moved across old group pictures of the biology faculty. I became bewitched by the presence of the building; for minutes at a stretch I sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight. I called Harry's attention to the presence but he shrugged and went on with his work. He was absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place. His abode was anywhere. It was all the same to him whether he catheterized a pig at four o'clock in the afternoon in New Orleans or at midnight in Transylvania. . .Yet I do not envy him. I would not change places with him if he discovered the cause and cure of cancer. For he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in. He could do research for a thousand years and never have an inkling of it.[22]

Percy himself believes such singular vertical searching for answers which are there-to-be-found offers only half-truths, or distorted truths, even in the face of our magnificent science which understands the relationships between

> things and organisms, but which has nothing to say about what it is to be a human being, to find oneself in human predicaments. And the question is whether science can address itself to these things at all . . . .I'm sure that the human experience cannot be reduced to any science, but you need a way of thinking about these things.[23]

That, it appears, diagnoses the problem and hints at a cure: in the midst of feeling powerless, after giving over what precious desire for self-direction we maintain to the perceived omnipotence of technology, we lack even the skills to think about, to articulate, to question our plight. Seduced by science, we have not dared to look for meanings—classroom meanings in particular—in ourselves, or in the voices of, say, Ishamel or Emma Bovary or Garp or Binx Bolling. Without underplaying the importance of the collected body of understanding and wisdom we have painstakingly accumulated over years of educational practice, it is possible to fight singularity of perspective and to welcome additional meanings provided by landscapes outside existing cowpaths. Maxine Greene writes of "seeing perspectivally," which enables us to feel that there is always "something else":

> It is to recognize . . .that the various disciplines or provinces of meaning, in their rich diversity of symbolism, offer possibilities of perspective, different ways of directing attention to the lived world . . . .Richard Selzer's account of an amputation in Mortal Lessons can never be totally identified with the report he must have presented after the surgery. John Stone's poem, "He Makes a House Call," from In All This Rain, may have been written by the man who is a cardiologist, perhaps the very cardiologist who was present at his father's surgery; but, even though poet and surgeon are the same human being, the experiences and the reports can never mesh. Whatever Dr. Stone was asked to write down in the hospital on the other hand, possessed no greater or no lesser truth than what we find in his poem. The domain was different; the protocols were different; the cognitive style was different. Each perspective, like each utterance, was irreducible.[24]

Broadly speaking, Percy and his protagonists espouse neither positivism nor postpositivism, scientism nor romanticism, vertical nor horizontal searching: they merely recognize the virtues and incompleteness of any one perspective. Percy wryly describes the pathologist who, after finishing an autopsy, asked his students, "Well, where is the soul?" The pathologist's cowpath of anatomy, or our unilateral acceptance of this learning theory or that, or this instructional design, or that research methodology, all have a particular vulnerability to ignore the soul, too—and perhaps the ultimate goal of being human.

The third theme I garnered from Percy protagonists is that of recognizing multuple openings for meaning-making while addressing the pitfalls of any single opening. The latest Educational Researcher, or Harvard Educational Review, or TIP, or this paper—for the most part, the fruits of much vertical searching—still do not adequately examine the "sector of the world about which science [can] not utter a single word: What it is like to be an individual living in the United States in

the twentieth century."[25] Our students, a Tolstoy novel, our teaching, a Matisse canvas, our classroom lives, a Mozart concerto—not one of these can be reduced to a Jacques Loeb tropism with roots exclusively, completely in biochemical responses. As Gerald Weissmann argues in his collection of essays on science and society, The Woods Hole Cantata,

> We now know, or at least believe, that the simple, rational anticlerical positions of Diderot and the philosophers, or of Loeb and the mechanists, are no more likely to resolve the problems of war and violence (*or student indifference, or teacher satisfaction*) than is the text of the "Gloria." And while mechanistic philosophy may describe adequately how science works, it does not offer consolation for the world it produces: Vivaldi may be more appropriate to the task.[26] (this Author's italicized words)

SUMMARY

I have attempted to describe three themes embedded in Walker Percy's writing: a belief in one's freedom and a commitment to action, a recognition of malaise and a desire to avoid its seduction, and an openness to the validity of multiple interpretational modes. I do not mean to imply that the creative literature of ennui, of learned and imposed helplessness, is unique to Walker Percy (or that portrayals of ennui are unique to literature, for that matter). I return frequently to other writers, such as Adrienne Rich and Margaret Atwood who in verse and prose illuminate women's particular struggle. In "Diving Beneath the Wreck," Rich's explorer describes her search

> I came to explore the wreck.
> . . . .
> I came to see the damage that was done
> And the treasures that prevail.
>
> We are, I am, you are
> by cowardice or courage
> the one who find our way
> back to this scene
> carrying a knife, a camera
> a book of myths
> in which
> our names do not appear.[27]

Likewise, the unnamed protagonist in Atwood's unforgettable novel Surfacing vows with a wolf-like vengeance after a spiritual awakening in the Canadian wilderness "to refuse to be victim again."

Yet while these individuals emerge with newfound strength and resolve, their strident, superhuman determination not to be seduced by any given reality is sometimes troubling as I try to personalize their examples by acting in the first person. In contrast, Percy's protagonists remain vulnerable, flawed, and always very human. They inch toward meaning-making without beating their chests, recognizing without inviting the inevitability of remissions and setbacks. For this person who is a teacher, but also a woman, and a mother, and a wife, and a daughter, and a sister, and a

friend, Walker Percy is still another opening—an indirect communication via fiction—as I continue may maze-like adventure looking for meaning and purpose in my work life and my personal life which are, of course, the warp and weft of the same fabric.

ENDNOTES

[1] Walker Percy, Love in the Ruins (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1971).

[2] Walker Percy, The Moviegoer (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1962).

[3] Walker Percy, The Thanatos Syndrome (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1987).

[4] Walker Percy, The Second Coming (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1980).

[5] Walker Percy, Lancelot (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1977).

[6] Lewis A. Lawson & Victor A. Kramer, eds., Conversations with Walker Percy (Jackson, Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 1985).

[7] Percy, The Second Coming, p. 123.

[8] Percy, Lancelot, p. 67.

[9] Percy, Lancelot, pp. 69-70.

[10] Percy, Lancelot, pp. 109-111.

[11] Percy, Lancelot, p. 89.

[12] Percy, Lancelot, p. 112.

[13] Lawson & Kramer, Conversations with Walker Percy, p. 165.

[14] Percy, Lancelot, p. 166.

[15] Lawson & Kramer, Conversations with Walker Percy, p. 135.

[16] Walker Percy, Diagnosing the Modern Malaise (New Orleans: Faust Publishing, 1985), p. 13.

[17] Percy, The Moviegoer, p. 117.

[18] Percy, The Second Coming, p. 123.

[19] Lawson & Kramer, Conversations with Walker Percy, p. 84.

[20] Percy, The Thanatos Syndrome, p. 88.

[21] Percy, Lancelot, p. 163.

[22] Percy, The Moviegoer, p. 46.

[23] Lawson & Kramer, Conversations with Walker Percy, p. 221.

[24] Maxine Greene, "Humanities in the Lives of Professionals," in Literature and Medicine: A Claim for a Discipline, ed. Delese Wear, Martin Kohn & Susan Stocker (McLean, VA: Society for Health and Human Values, 1987), p. 10.

25 Percy, Diagnosing the Modern Malaise, p. 11.

[26] Gerald Weissmann, The Woods Hole Cantata, in The Woods Hole Cantata (New York: Dodd, Mead, & Company, 1985), p. 13.

[27] Adrienne Rich, "Diving into the Wreck," from The Fact of a Doorframe (New York: Norton, 1984), p. 164.