

search of an acute and unfanatical guide to its social and political implications will surely find it in this book. Yet to my mind, *Feminism without Illusions* lacks a crucial element that would enable it to become the kind of well-thumbed classic that, say, Simone de Beauvoir's *Second Sex* (1949) or Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970) have deservedly become. It is no less intelligent—far from it. But it lacks laughter and people and hard politics. It is too much of an abstract and immaculately annotated academic tract.

This failing reflects, in part, the very success of women's studies, which is no longer merely the preserve of brilliant and eccentric writers working on the margins of respectability. Women's studies has become respectability itself, entrenched in every American university, with its own faculty, its own learned journals (hundreds of them), and its own much-debated methodologies. The gain in scholarly rigor has been enormous. But what has been lost along the way is some of the anecdote, wit, and wickedness which made Greer or Gloria Steinem fun to read and accessible to all. Those worried by the declining support for feminism would do well to give some thought to the question of how its proponents can recover a popular voice. For as it is now, we have an astute women's studies specialist who understands the need to attack elitism but still feels obliged

to write in a manner which only the well-educated and the deeply serious are likely to find congenial.

Moreover, the same restraints that keep Fox-Genovese's analysis so detached and impersonal make her shrink from offering a political program. Yet the nature of her argument should have persuaded her to take the risk. Fox-Genovese protests against individualism in the name of "society," "the community," and the "collectivity," but nowhere does she spell out what she means by these abstract terms. The logical outcome of her reasoning, however, as she must surely recognize, is a re-assessment of the role of the state. For good historical reasons, Americans are far more suspicious of state intervention than are most Europeans. Yet the state is nothing more than a human contrivance. It can oppress and interfere, certainly, but it can also protect, enable, and create. Sooner or later Americans, and particularly women and others who feel disadvantaged in some way, are going to rediscover how to use the state to help themselves. As is always the case, the changing status and demands of women are symptoms, not causes, of much wider and still more unsettling transformations.

—Linda Colley, professor of history at Yale University, is the author of *Lewis Namier* (1989).

The Last Southerner

SIGNPOSTS IN A STRANGE LAND. By Walker Percy. Edited with an Introduction by Patrick Samway. Farrar, Straus. 428 pp. \$25

Born in 1916 into a distinguished family of the southern patriciate, Walker Percy had many advantages. Yet he had also known disorder, sorrow, and displacement even before he found himself in 1942 in an Adirondacks sanatorium, the victim of pulmonary tuberculosis contracted when he was a medical intern at Bellevue

Hospital. Some 13 years earlier, when Percy was 13, his father killed himself, and three years later his mother died in an automobile accident. These traumatic experiences were made somewhat bearable when a remarkable bachelor cousin whom they loved and revered as Uncle Will adopted Walker and his two brothers. Uncle Will was William Alexander Percy, the author of *Lanterns on the Levee*, decorated hero of the Great War, disciple of Marcus Aurelius, and gentleman-poet,

who made his home in Greenville, Mississippi, the fabled center of the "high culture" of the Mississippi Delta. But the comparatively early death of W. A. Percy in the year after Walker Percy graduated from medical school meant the grievous loss of a second father and a second home.

The three-year period at the tuberculosis sanatorium—Percy often compared himself to Hans Castrop in Thomas Mann's *The Magic Mountain*—proved to be the most crucial experience of displacement he had undergone. During the process of his recovery the budding physician was transformed into the young philosopher.

Reading deeply in Dostoyevsky, Kierkegaard, Kafka, Mann, and other modern European writers, the young M.D., who had thought he might specialize in pathology or psychiatry, rejected alike the physiological, the sociological, and the psychoanalytical approaches to the meaning of being. He had earlier undergone three years of psychoanalysis, but now he diagnosed himself as a victim of the spiritual malaise Kierkegaard called "the sickness unto death." Becoming more and more convinced that "science can say everything about a man except what he is in himself," he eventually found himself irresistibly attracted to the Christian concept of existence as a pilgrimage of the soul. Giving up the practice of medicine almost before he had begun it, he became a convert to Roman Catholicism and, granted leisure by an independent income, began an obscure career as a philosophical essayist. Having a strong literary bent, however, he read widely in modern literature and discovered that the modern novel was wholly concerned with the theme he was pursuing as a philosopher: "man as dislocated, disoriented, uprooted, homeless." Inspired by Camus's and Sartre's novels of alienation, he turned to the task of becoming a novelist himself. He was in his forties, far past the beginning age for the average novelist, when his do-it-yourself apprenticeship in fiction ended in *The Moviegoer* and a National Book Award in 1962. Before his death on May 10, 1990, at his home on the Bogue Falaya ("river of

mists" or "river of ghosts") in Covington, Louisiana, where he had gone to live with his wife and children in 1948, Percy would publish five more novels—*The Last Gentleman*, *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World*, *Lancelot*, *The Second Coming*, and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. He also would publish a collection of essays, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, and a work that defies categorical description, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*.

Now we have what may be the final addition to the Percy nonfiction list, Patrick Samway's skillfully and imaginatively organized gathering of 43 miscellaneous writings. Containing everything from a 1935 undergraduate essay on the movie magazine to his major 1989 essay on language and being, "The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," *Signposts in a Strange Land* makes nearly all of Percy's nonfiction conveniently available. But the volume claims an importance well beyond that of convenience. The truth is that, although he seemingly made a choice between being a novelist and a philosophical essayist, Percy was never able simply to assume that he was a novelist. He constantly employed the essay to define his particular identity as a novelist: *Signposts in a Strange Land* contains, for example, essays such as "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science," "Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time," "How to be a Southern Novelist in Spite of Being Southern and Catholic."

In his introduction, Samway acknowledges the dramatic relationship between the essayist and the novelist in Percy's career. The very title *Signposts in a Strange Land* is derived from an earlier essay, "Notes for a Novel about the End of the World," in which Percy attempted to define the mission of the novelist: "Instead of constructing a plot and creating a cast of characters from a world familiar to everybody, he [the novelist] is more apt to set forth with a stranger in a strange land

where the signposts are enigmatic but which he sets out to explore nevertheless."

Even more revealing of his sense of vocation as a novelist is Percy's parodic, outrageous interview with himself (originally published in *Esquire* in 1977), "Questions They Never Asked Me, So He Asked Them Himself." Essentially the self-interview is a meditative essay on the "knack" of being a novelist, given Percy's own situation: that is, his awareness of holding a general citizenship in the "here-and-now" of the second half of this century and a particular citizenship in the American South. A novelist in this situation, Percy says, has a relation to the world that is like that of an "ex-suicide." He "realizes that all is lost, the jig is up, that after all nothing is dumber than a grown man sitting down and making up a story to entertain somebody or working in a 'tradition' or 'school' to maintain his reputation as a practitioner of the *nouveau roman* or whatever." When "one sees that this is a dumb way to live, that all is vanity sure enough, there are two possibilities: either commit suicide or not commit suicide." If the choice is not to commit suicide, the "here-and-now" of the present century opens to the novelist and he comes into a sense of creative freedom. Not, to be sure, the freedom of God on the first day of creation, but a freedom like that known to a man who has undergone the disaster of shipwreck and been cast up on a remote beach. If the castaway is a writer, his freedom is the realization that dead writers may be famous but they are also "dead ducks" who can't write anymore. "As for me," the survivor says, "I might try a little something here in the wet sand, a word, a form . . ."

Percy then asks what the novelist's metaphorical identity as an ex-suicide has to do with "being southern." The answer, he says, is both positive and negative. For the southern writer, with all his "special miseries . . . isolation, madness, tics, amnesia, alcoholism, lust and loss of ordinary powers of speech," is also "as marooned as *Crusoe*." Or was. In today's Sunbelt South, the southern writer is in danger of

losing his greatest asset: his sense of eccentricity. If he is deprived of his psychic distance from nonsouthern writers, what will the southern writer do? Start writing like Saul Bellow? The deprivation entailed in the modification and disappearance of southern eccentricity affects the southern writer's strongest resource, the resource that made the French go "nuts over Poe and Faulkner," the feeling of being "somewhat extraterrestrial . . . different enough from the main body of writers to give the reader a triangulation point for getting a fix on things."

Yet in a little-known essay on Herman Melville reprinted here, Percy suggests the way a southern writer can move beyond his "extraterrestriality," his Robinson Crusoe-like isolation. Melville's situation was hardly enviable, having written his masterpiece *Moby-Dick* and seen it sell a few hundred copies and go out of print, and then spending his last 20 years as a customs inspector on the New York docks. Percy feels for Melville because "there's no occupation in the universe that is lonelier" than the novelist's. Yet his true kinship with Melville, Percy says, comes from the fact that "the post-Christianity and alienation of the New York writer took a hundred years to reach Mississippi." And so Percy was forced, as Melville had been earlier, into "a dialectical relation to a shared body of [Christian moral] belief." Whether the writer is a "scoffer" (as Melville was) or a "believer" (as he himself is), Percy says, hardly matters: If the writer is unafraid to encounter "ultimate questions" with the freedom of the artist, he belongs to an inalienable vocational community." When Melville gave Hawthorne a copy of *Moby-Dick*, he told him he "had written a wicked book, broiled in hellfire, and that he felt fine, as spotless as a lamb, happy, content."

Melville's loneliness had yielded to the sustaining sense of "ineffable sociability" that fills the writer when "the writing works and somebody knows it." It is not incidental that in speaking of Melville, "a lapsed Calvinist from a middle-class family," Percy makes the New Yorker spiri-

tually one of the community of New England writers. Raised in that "South, which has been called a Christ-haunted place . . . something like New England a hundred years ago," Percy himself, like all serious southern writers, was also a spiritual New Englander. According to all indi-

cations, however, Walker Percy may be the last of this line.

—*Lewis P. Simpson is the former editor of the Southern Review and the author of, most recently, Mind and the American Civil War (1989).*

The Return of History

LEARNING TO CURSE: Essays in Early Modern Culture. By Stephen J. Greenblatt. Routledge. 188 pp. \$25

Something strange is happening to Shakespeare. Anyone who reads current Shakespeare criticism expecting to find high-minded debates over the nature of irony and ambiguity (let alone cozy discussions about order, degree, and hierarchy or the ethics of revenge) is in for a big surprise. Scholars are now likelier to be found tracking the Bard amid narratives of early encounters with Native Americans, Tudor treatises on gynecology and tranvestism, 16th-century exorcisms and trials for witchcraft, erotic dreams about Queen Elizabeth, the policing of the London suburbs, or the Renaissance vogue for collecting artefacts, fossils, and ostrich eggs. Whatever one's response to this new turn happens to be, boredom will not likely be part of it.

How fashions change. The New Criticism of the last generation held that history was marginal to the study of literature. New Critics like Cleanth Brooks and W. K. Wimsatt were obsessed with "close

reading," with intricate and detailed explication of the work—with text rather than context. Authors were seen as individual geniuses who used irony and ambiguity to rise above local considerations. They wrote at a safe distance from the frantic activity of their world, producing texts that were unbounded by time.

For the past two decades, however, history has been reentering the study of literature. Indeed, in the 1980s, the "New Historicism" captured the academic highground by all but erasing the once-firm boundary between a literary work and its historical context.

Stephen Greenblatt, a professor of English at Berkeley, can claim paternity for

this school. *Learning to Curse* follows *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (1980) and *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988) in redrawing the Shakespearean map. Influenced by anthropology, linguistics, and social theory, Greenblatt argues that history is no mere background for literature. Shakespeare's plays may seem to rise above their contexts, but in truth they were no less involved than nonliterary documents in the

