

The Education of Walker Percy

Since the mid-1940s, when tuberculosis forced him to abandon a medical career, Walker Percy, M.D., has been living and writing in the small Louisiana town of Covington, slowly adding to a body of work that now ranks among the best of recent American literature. In five highly acclaimed novels, two volumes of non-fiction, and a series of essays on topics ranging from bourbon to semiotics to race relations in Mississippi, Percy has established himself as an ironic moralist and as a deftly comic chronicler of life in one of America's most peculiar subcultures—the New South. Here, Jay Tolson looks at the novelist's ties to an older South and at other influences on Percy's life and work.

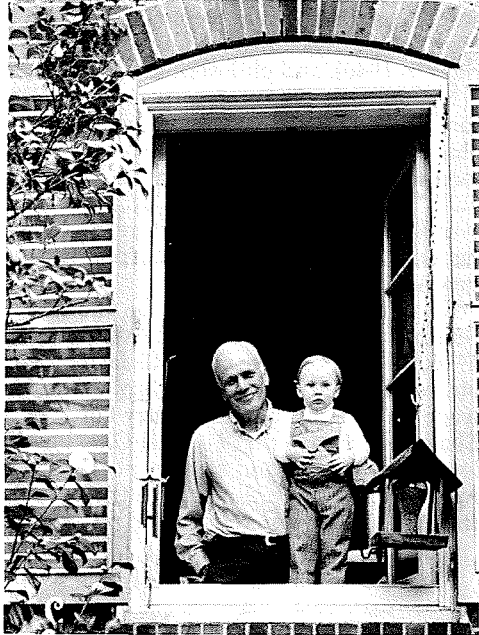
by Jay Tolson

When Walker Percy's first novel, *The Moviegoer*, appeared in 1961, the initial critical reaction was anything but encouraging—little more, in fact, than a few bland short notices in the *New York Times* and other major review outlets. It was just the sort of literary debut that has driven fledgling authors into real estate sales or computer software design.

But just as the *The Moviegoer* was beginning its quiet passage to that special oblivion reserved for unnoticed first novels, the *New Yorker* writer A. J. Liebling picked up a copy of the book, having heard that it was set in New Orleans, where he had recently completed research for an article on Earl Long. Liebling liked the book so much that he recommended it to his wife, Jean Stafford, who happened to be on the 1961 National Book Award panel. She, too, was impressed and nominated it for the fiction prize. Then the seemingly impossible came to pass—a first novel by an unknown Louisiana author, an M.D. who had never practiced medicine, had suddenly won one of America's most prestigious literary awards.

Perplexed literati began asking what this strange novel was up to—this seemingly uneventful story of a young stockbroker, living in a tacky middle-class suburb of New Orleans, moving from one half-hearted romance to another. Why, they wondered, does this peculiar fellow, Binx Bolling, seem to find more reality in movie houses than in his own life?

*Walker Percy at home
with his grandson
in Louisiana.*



And what was one to make of the vague, indeterminate “search” he claims to be set upon? Another mystery was the relationship between Binx Bolling and his proud, uncompromising aunt, Emily Cutrer, a fierce spokeswoman for the aristocratic values of the old, defeated South. If Binx no longer believes in his aunt’s genteel world and its code of self-discipline, moral probity, and duty, then why doesn’t he simply cut loose, go to California, and become a cheerful, guiltless sensualist? Instead, almost perversely, he hangs around and allows Aunt Emily to attack him for his errant ways.

One critic, writing in the *New Leader*, gave the book a positive review, but faulted it for making the protagonist’s search “seem not neurotic but deeply spiritual.” That appraisal was, perhaps as much as anything, a product of the times—the therapeutic age just coming into its own. If Percy had only managed to get Binx on the analytic couch, the review seemed to imply, the novel might really have said something.

The novel’s epigraph, a quotation from the Danish theologian Søren Kierkegaard (“... the specific character of despair is precisely this: it is unaware of being despair”) should have alerted all latter-day apostles of Sigmund Freud to the fact that Percy was interested in a different game, with very different stakes.

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.

Yet the tags do Percy a mild disservice, suggesting provincialism, a somber High Seriousness, and even dogmatism, qualities conspicuously absent from his work. They also obscure the fact that Percy is, first and foremost, a novelist, and as such is committed to finding and defining his own "truth" through the making of his fictional worlds. A sounder approach to Walker Percy, therefore, is one which takes account of the ways his work both resists and incorporates the powerful pressures of background, ideas, and religion.

No one could imaginably be more burdened by the weight of the South than Walker Percy. He was born in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1916, the first of three sons. His father, a lawyer, was a descendant of an old, well-established Mississippi Delta family, a clan which claims to trace its roots to the fiery Harry Percy of Northumberland, depicted by Shakespeare in *Henry IV, Part One*. Passion, pride, and a certain recklessness run long and strong in the American Percy family, though in more recent generations those traits have been muted somewhat—or, in some cases, turned destructively inward.

Uncle Will

The first American Percy, Charles, landed in Louisiana shortly after the American Revolution bearing a Spanish grant to land in what is now Mississippi. He may have been a pirate or a last heir of the earls of Northumberland. Nobody knows for sure. All that is known is that Don Carlos, as he was sometimes called, had married a French woman and sired several children when an Englishwoman suddenly appeared, claiming to be Don Carlos's long-abandoned wife. As proof, she presented their son—a captain, no less, in the British Navy.

Don Carlos apparently had very little stomach for the domestic drama that ensued. According to the account of his great-great-grandson, Will Percy, he walked to a local creek, tied a sugar kettle around his neck, and jumped in. That inglorious exit from the world brought an end to the bickering. The wives settled peacefully in the same neighborhood; their children went on to become part of the Delta's landed gentry. It all ended so amicably that it is easy to overlook the dark detail: the suicide.

But that grim fact has haunted the Percy family. Walker's own father took his life when Walker was thirteen. And the act and implications of suicide have figured prominently in all of Percy's fiction. It is, of course, a quick and absolute alternative to a life of quiet desperation, the malady that plagues most of Percy's protagonists.

The suicide of Walker Percy's father was fateful in more than one way. It brought the family to Greenville, Mississippi, and into the house of William Alexander Percy, or "Uncle Will," as the boys called their

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cousin. Two years after the move, in 1931, Walker's mother was killed in an automobile accident. Uncle Will then adopted the three boys.

It was not the usual household. Yet, as Percy later described it, "It did not seem in the least extraordinary to find oneself orphaned at 16 and adopted by a bachelor-poet-lawyer-planter and living in an all-male household visited regularly by other poets, politicians, psychiatrists, sociologists, black preachers, folk singers, itinerant harmonica players." The house was, as Percy went on to observe, "a standard stopover for all manner of people who were trying to 'understand the South,' that perennial American avocation. . . ."

'Lanterns on the Levee'

For a reticent boy with a bookish turn of mind, it was an ideal spot to sit back, observe, and take mental notes of the manners, speech habits, and eccentricities of those, both high and low, who trooped through the Greenville house. It was not every boy, after all, who had the chance to see the legendary Faulkner bash balls on his foster father's tennis court, the erratic game progressively deteriorating with each of Faulkner's visits to the house for a quick snort of bourbon.

Life with Will Percy offered more. For Walker, it was the most thorough education in literature, art, and music he was to receive. Here he was introduced not only to Shakespeare, Keats, and other poets (largely of the Romantic school), whose work Uncle Will read aloud, but also to the great composers—Brahms, Beethoven, Mozart, and Wagner.

"One way to Walker Percy," wrote the critic Alfred Kazin, "is by way of William Alexander Percy." If anything, Kazin understates the connection. Even more than being the source of an incomparable education, Uncle Will was, as Percy himself put it, "a fixed point in a confusing world."

William Percy was the living embodiment of much that was fine and noble, and of much that was muddled and wrong, about the planter class to which he belonged. Percy was a poet, but the book that made his reputation, *Lanterns on the Levee*, was a prose elegy to Delta life, particularly to the "aristocratic" ways of the planter class. His evocation of the Delta's rural rhythms, the rising and falling of the Mississippi's waters, has few equals: "For our soil," he wrote, "very dark brown, creamy and sweet-smelling, without substrata of rock or shale, was built up slowly, century after century, by the sediment gathered by the river in its solemn task of cleansing the continent."

But when Will Percy turned to the Delta people—its blacks, poor whites, and landed gentry—his observational powers gave way to sentimentality and stereotyping. Blacks are lovable folk, generous and caring, but hopelessly enchained to the moment. Incapable of self-governance, they must therefore be taken care of by the responsible people of Percy's class. The white gentry and the blacks are the true partners of the Delta region, since they together pioneered it when it was a wild frontier in the early 19th century. The poor whites, the rednecks and peckerwoods who came relatively late to the Delta from the hills of Alabama and Mississippi, were, in Will Percy's estimation, intellectually and spiritually infe-

rior "to the Negro, whom they hate. . . ."

It required no great prescience of Will Percy to see that the days of sharecropping, and therefore of the great plantations, were numbered. And with the gradual erosion of their economic base the cultural and political dominance of the planters would necessarily fade. The consequences of this change were, to Percy, terrible to contemplate. For the genteel Southerner, he believed, was one of the last standard-bearers of civilized values, values that he called chivalric but that were, in fact, far more Roman and Stoic than Christian. Duty, self-control, and honor took clear precedence over charity and faith.

Will Percy's code contained more than a trace of historical pessimism: The aristocratic minority would inevitably lose to the selfish, grasping mob, the *Demos*. Nevertheless, it was incumbent upon the best folk to continue acting as though "virtue was an end," and that the "survival values," mere getting and spending, "were means, not ends."

It is perhaps too easy to criticize William Percy's world-view. The material comfort that allowed his kind to develop such lofty principles was, as we all know, built squarely upon the backs of slaves. There was, moreover, no dearth of cold, hard money-grubbing among the people Percy idealized.

Scenes from the New South

Still, the "fixity" that Walker Percy admired in his adopted father was not all self-delusion or rationalization. Living by his principles placed William Percy in difficult and dangerous straits, not only during World War I but also in his successful campaign to drive the Ku Klux Klan from Greenville. Though many of his class showed no particular concern for the larger life of the community, Will did. During the devastating flood of 1927, it was Will who steered the relief effort. He also provided free legal service to the poor. Will Percy may have been deluded in thinking that his class constituted an aristocracy, but the values he forced himself to live by were not hollow.

And for that reason he has remained (even after his death in 1942) a powerful influence upon his adopted son. There is, in fact, in all of Walker Percy's fiction, and in many of his essays, a sustained dialogue between the two, an effort on the part of the younger to tease out of his elder's creed its best and truest points, and, equally, to show where and why Uncle Will went wrong.

The quarrel with Uncle Will figures prominently in Percy's first novel. There, of course, it is Emily Cutrer who eloquently defends the aristocratic Southern creed. But eloquence alone is not enough to bring Binx Bolling (in whom, undoubtedly, there is more than a little of Walker Percy) into his aunt's camp. He is skeptical that her values are anything more than the elements of a style whose time has passed.

Yet Binx, like Walker Percy, is unable to dismiss outright the old genteel code. Even in reacting to it, he is still strongly affected by it. When Emily Cutrer asks Binx how her values could have meant so little to him, he responds forthrightly: "You say that none of what you said ever meant anything to me. That is not true. On the contrary. I have never forgotten

anything you ever said. In fact I have pondered over it all my life. My objections, though they are not exactly objections, cannot be expressed in the usual way. To tell the truth, I can't express them at all."

Those lines could stand as a kind of coda to Walker Percy's work. The sense of being haunted by the past, by one's own memory, by a tragic ancestral heritage is also a distinctive mark of the Southern writer, though curiously, and somewhat disingenuously, Percy has often denied belonging to the mainstream of the Southern literary tradition. "Faulkner and all the rest of them were always going on about this tragic sense of history," Percy complained in a recent interview, "and we're supposed to sit on our porches talking about it all the time. I never did that. My South was always the New South. My first memories are of the country club, of people playing golf."

It is true that in his later novels, *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), and *The Second Coming* (1980), Percy appears to be dealing with a South that is not very different from Rye, New York, or Grosse Pointe, Michigan. His settings are little pockets of upper middle-class suburban privilege, worlds circumscribed by golf, television, polite church affiliations, tepid adulteries, and the stifling pressure of too much comfort and ease. His protagonists are all men near wits' end, desperate for life, disgusted with their own half-heartedness, eager to care for something that matters.

In the most imaginative of those three novels, *Love in the Ruins*, an apocalyptic satire set in July 1983 in one of those New South suburban enclaves (called Paradise Estates), the narrator, Dr. Tom More, a descendant of the English humanist-saint, ruefully observes the collapse of American society and culture, even as he tries to invent a machine that will restore unity to his patients' riven souls.

Politically, the nation is divided between raving liberals ("Lefts") and equally rabid conservatives ("Knotheads"), each side pursuing its goals with mad disregard for compromise. A war in Ecuador has been going on for 15 years. "Not exactly our best war," More observes. "The U.S.A. sided with South Ecuador, which is largely Christian, believing in God and the sacredness of the individual, et cetera, et cetera. The only trouble is that South Ecuador is owned by 98 Catholic families, is governed by a general, and so is not what you would call an ideal democracy. North Ecuador, on the other hand, which many U.S. liberals support, is Maoist-Communist and has so far murdered two hundred thousand civilians, including liberals who did not welcome communism with open arms."

Political divisiveness is only part of the problem in this troubled land.



LeRoy Percy

Even the Catholic Church has split, half of it committed to theological relativism, the other half (the American Catholic Church, with its papal headquarters in Cicero, Illinois) to the Latin mass and a new feast day called Property Rights Sunday. The Protestant Churches are little better off, having gone the way of mindlessly cheery TV promotionalism and Christian golf tournaments.

Percy's concern here is clearly not only the South, or even the New South. His scope is set on the larger nation. But at the novel's end, after things have fallen apart and even begun to make a modest recovery (only now Paradise Estates is 99 percent black), Dr. More, the driven alcoholic doctor who had hoped to cure his patients' spiritual dividedness with his machine, lives contentedly for the first time in his life, inhabiting old slave quarters with his new wife, hoeing collards in his small garden, and maintaining a small practice. It is a romantic agrarian vision, the arcadia of so many Southern writers, and it is based upon the belief that rustic simplicity is a means to the good life. It is, in fact, Faulkner's tragic sense of history turned inside out: a comic vision of the past re-created. Dr. More's new world also happens to restore some of the best elements of Will Percy's idealized society—a place where concern for community and friends prevails over narrow, selfish interest.

An impatience with the vulgarity and insipidness of today's deracinated, urbanized, industrialized world accompanies the agrarian vision of many Southern writers, and Percy partly shares that impatience. Indeed, in his fourth novel, *Lancelot*, Percy's distaste for contemporary decadence almost becomes splenetic.

Strength from Defeat

The narrator of that novel, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, a former college football star, a Rhodes scholar, a lawyer, and a cuckold, tells his story from a New Orleans mental institution, where he has been placed after killing his wife and her lover. "I cannot tolerate this age," he confesses to his old friend, a priest named Percival. As he talks, it becomes clear that his opinions and values are similar to those of Will Percy, but even more ferociously held. "Make love not war?" Lamar rages. "I'll take war rather than what this age calls love." Recounting how his life went wrong, Lamar rails against moral looseness and proposes a new, stern morality of the strong. "Which is a better world, this . . . Happyland U.S.A. or a Roman legion under Marcus Aurelius Antonius? Which is worse, to die with T. J. Jackson at Chancellorsville or live with Johnny Carson in Burbank?"

If in explaining his South, his New South, Walker Percy has repeatedly insisted upon its similarities with other parts of the country, he nevertheless betrays an acute awareness of how regions—and not only the South—shape character, or at least outward behavior. Percy frequently uses regional traits to amusing effect. At the beginning of his second novel, *The Last Gentleman* (1966), the protagonist, Will Barrett, a Mississippian who has dropped out of Princeton, moved to New York, and taken a job as a dehumidification engineer in Macy's, falls in with a band of Ohioans and, like the good chameleon he is, quickly adopts their ways. "He hadn't

been in their company a week before he became one of them: He called a girl named Carol *Kerrell*, said *meat* for mirror, *tock* for talk, *ottomobile*, *stummick*, and asked for *carmel* candy. The consonants snapped around in his throat like a guitar string. In April he went to Fort Lauderdale. In short, he became an Ohioan and forgot the old honorable quarrels of the South, had not a thought in his head nor a care in the world."

There is a good dose of nastiness and condescension in this portrait of Ohioans, as well as a strong suggestion that Southerners are somehow deeper and more interesting than folks from other places. One finds similar encounters between the complicated, past-haunted Southerner and the more one-dimensional non-Southerner throughout Percy's fiction. Even when the Southerners appear to be bested by others (Lancelot Lamar, for example, is cuckolded by a Californian who speaks fluent psychobabble), the Southerners seem to draw strength from defeat. Defeat can make a person more cunning, more ironical, and thus, in one way, stronger.

Walker Percy, M.D.

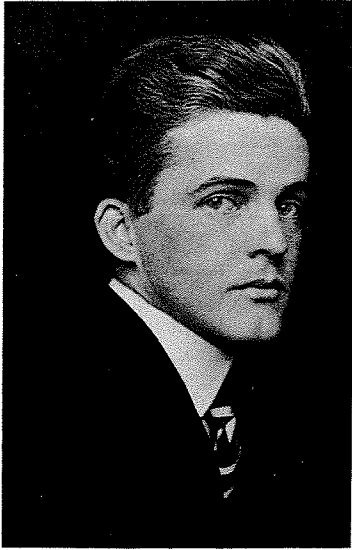
The suicide of Percy's father and rueful pessimism of his Uncle Will both no doubt fed that great self-uncertainty which marks the early stage in the development of an ironist. That uncertainty could easily have destroyed Percy, had he not, perhaps instinctively, set out on a very sane course of action when he stepped out into the world on his own.

After leaving Greenville to attend the University of North Carolina, Percy decided to take the pre-med curriculum. It was not the expected course of study for a person who had as early as his high school years shown literary leanings, and Percy, on the occasions he has been asked about that decision, has usually been vague, almost evasive, suggesting that he made it more or less to satisfy Uncle Will.

Whatever the reason, the choice was wise. Forcing him to work through a rigorous body of knowledge, the study of science and medicine was helpful in taking the introspective young man out of himself. Medicine instructed Percy in objectivity and distance. It also gave him another handle on the world—a handle that he has ably exploited in his fiction, where doctors and medicine figure prominently. Indeed, while being skeptical of those who place total faith in science, Percy has used the scientific world-view to heighten the intellectual tension of his novels, opposing it to various forms of subjectivism, healthy and unhealthy.

Percy received his M.D. from Columbia University's College of Physicians and Surgeons in 1941. He seemed right on professional course when, in the midst of his internship in pathology at New York's Bellevue Hospital, he contracted tuberculosis. The disease proved to be more than a physical or professional setback; it was a crisis, much like the ones that beset the protagonists of his novels, and it forced him to reconsider the direction of his life.

Recuperating in a sanatorium in western New York while the Second World War ran its course, Percy began, as he himself described it, "to read, for the first time, modern literature." By that, he meant modern European literature, philosophy as well as fiction. Reading Dostoevski,



Will Percy

Camus, Marcel, Sartre, and Kierkegaard (particularly Kierkegaard), he found, again in his own words, "that my feeling of outsideness, of abstraction, of distance, alienation, or whatever, was nothing more or less than what the modern writers had been writing about for 100 years."

Percy emerged from this self-imposed cram course in existential literature wary of science, or at least of its overly ambitious claims to explain human behavior. The process of generalization, necessary to the scientist, inevitably obliterated the individual, rendered him, in fact, irrelevant. Psychoanalysis was typically misguided, Percy concluded, in its effort to reduce the mystery of individuals to a system of libidinal imperatives. The social sciences were similarly arrogant and ill-founded. These objections were very much like the ones that Kierkegaard

had raised against Hegelian philosophy, which dominated mid-19th-century European thought: Both scientism and Hegelianism dispensed with the individual in order to explain man and history with a body of laws.

But what was Percy, a man of science, to do with this new-found knowledge?

He did not know immediately. After recovering, he briefly taught pathology at Columbia, but a relapse sent him back to the sanatorium. Years later, he confessed that he was the "happiest doctor who ever contracted tuberculosis and was able to quit [medicine]." Continuing to read his Europeans, Percy gradually awoke to the possibility of a career as a writer.

From the decision to be a writer to the publication of *The Moviegoer* was a long stretch of roughly 15 years, lived, for the most part, in relative isolation in Covington, Louisiana, a small town located across Lake Ponchartrain from New Orleans. Percy settled there shortly after his marriage in 1946 to Mary Townsend, a nurse whom he had met in Greenville during visits home from medical school. Percy chose this spot because he needed a "nonplace" to get down to the solitary business of writing.

Living off an inheritance from Uncle Will, Percy spent his apprentice years writing philosophical essays, reviews, articles, and two unwieldy (and unpublished) novels. The poet Allen Tate read the first of these fictional efforts and commented tersely on its main defect: "This is dreadful—you've simply got to put some action in it."

To refine his craft, Percy went back to the best Europeans. In *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*, for example, he took over certain strategies of Albert Camus, creating characters aware of something wrong in themselves and in the world around them but uncertain

where the cause of the problem lies. Binx Bolling and Will Barrett suffer, like Merseault in Camus's *The Stranger*, from a condition one might describe as moral drift. Absurd, or seemingly absurd, acts seem to be the only means of finding out where they are or what they should do. Binx's decision to marry his emotionally troubled cousin Kate Cutrer (a decision that outrages his aunt) is a first step toward breaking a cycle of meaningless repetitions. Percy's use of an obsessed, unbalanced narrator in *Lancelot* borrows the narrative technique that Dostoevski perfected in *Notes from Underground*. It allows Percy, as it allowed the Russian novelist, to expose the ills of his society from an unusual perspective, extreme but not totally dismissable.

Like a number of European writers, André Gide, Thomas Mann, and, once again, Dostoevski, Percy uses physical illnesses to force his characters to confront their spiritual and moral malaise. (And here of course he is helped by his medical training.) When Will Barrett of *The Last Gentleman* is casually adopted by a most unusual Southern family, the Vaughnts, and is taken back to the South with them, he finds himself increasingly affected by their brilliant young son, Jamie, who is dying from leukemia. Jamie's terminal condition makes it impossible for Will—whose "will" is weak—to keep putting off decisions. Binx Bolling's crippled brother and Tom More's daughter (who dies of cancer) serve similar functions, giving the protagonist of each novel what critic Frederick Karl describes as "energy and function, to proceed to the ethical stage of his life, where he assumes responsibility for it and his actions."

What Is Humanity?

All of Percy's novels, from *The Moviegoer* to *The Second Coming* (where Will Barrett reappears, successful but still deeply troubled), are studies of what Kierkegaard called "stages in life's way." As Martin Luschei first pointed out in his book on Percy, *The Sovereign Wayfarer* (1972), the development of the characters in Percy's novels often follows the Kierkegaardian progression from the aesthetic stage to the ethical stage and then on to the religious stage—or at least to the brink of this last stage. Not that this pattern is neatly duplicated in novel after novel. But we see such characters as Binx Bolling, Will Barrett, Tom More all beginning as pleasure-seekers, dabblers, spectators, men who live for the moment and believe in nothing. Still, they have one advantage over most other people: They sense that something is wrong. Keen observers, they are aware of sham and a general emptiness in their surroundings. Knowing there should be something more, they are on to the possibility of a search—for what, exactly, they are not yet sure.

Most of Percy's protagonists attempt to move to the ethical stage—the point at which one decides to live according to a code, a morality, a system of ethics. But like their creator, most of Percy's protagonists finally conclude that the code alone is inadequate (the great exception being Lancelot Lamar, who becomes a fierce enforcer of his warrior ethic). And this awareness brings them to the ultimate choice—what Kierkegaard called the "leap of faith."

Percy himself made this leap when he converted to Catholicism. But Percy's faith does not lead, in his fiction, to simple solutions. Dr. More, even after he has begun his simplified life, married, and returned to the Church, still feels the old pull of lust for other women; he still wants to perfect his fantastic machine; he cannot even regret his past sins.

Faith even appears a little suspicious. At the end of *The Moviegoer*, Binx Bolling sees a prosperous-looking black man coming out of a church after mass and cannot decide whether the man has come because the church is socially fashionable or because he believes that God is present there. "Or is he here for both reasons: through some dim dazzling trick of grace, coming for the one and receiving the other as God's own importunate bonus?" Binx asks. He quickly offers his own answer: "It is impossible to say."

What, then, does Percy teach us if he remains silent on that most important question of faith, the question to which all of his fiction leads?

First of all, despite his denials of being a "typical" Southern writer, Percy delves brilliantly into the subject of the hold of the past on the individual. One's own history, for better and for worse, constitutes a large part of one's individuality. A person who cannot come to terms with what he came from will never amount to much, at least not in Percy's fictional worlds. And that perhaps is a valuable lesson in an age that sees pasts as easily discardable.

Championing true individualism, Percy's work exposes the dangers of accepting ready or bogus explanations of what we are and why we do things. Since we are largely products of a scientific age, we must be most wary of using science to explain away our individualities. Accordingly, Percy takes particular delight in attacking the tyranny of experts. But all theories holding that man is basically this or basically that, a no-good rotter or a potential angel, come in for a share of Percy's scorn.

Most importantly, Percy teaches us the dangers of death-in-life, and he does so with considerable sympathy for the man in the middle. Percy's characters are middle-class professionals, doctors, lawyers, people who work hard and would like to do good but who find that dutiful obedience to routine is not enough. This seems a bleak message, but Percy holds out hope. Hope lies in searching. Indeed, Percy suggests that a person's humanity consists largely of his attempt to find it. And because the search is open to all who will venture upon it, Percy's fiction stands as one of the most affirmative statements in contemporary literature.
