

Interpretation

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Brian A. Smith, *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2017, 230 pp., \$95 (cloth).

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Brian A. Smith's *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* is an extraordinary exploration of the writings of a sadly underappreciated observer of the American soul. Through his six novels, two essay collections, and genre-defying parody of a self-help book, Walker Percy diagnoses the unfulfilled longings that threaten to unhinge modern life. Smith offers a comprehensive look at this diverse corpus with an argument accessible even to Percy neophytes.

Like Alexis de Tocqueville before him, Walker Percy exists between two worlds, providing him a unique perspective on the eccentricities of modern life. As a child, following the untimely (and likely self-inflicted) deaths of both parents, a young Walker Percy found himself in the custody of one of the most instrumental figures in his life: William Alexander Percy. Affectionately known as "Uncle Will," William Alexander Percy presented young Walker with the mores of a southern gentleman, an affection for aristocracy, and the virtues of stoic resolve.¹ A youth spent under this tutelage would forever color the lens through which Percy perceived the world. Eventually, he left both Uncle Will and his southern home to pursue a medical degree at Columbia University. The plan was stymied when, after contracting tuberculosis, Percy was forced to spend several years recovering at a sanatorium in upstate New York. There, he (re)introduced himself to Kierkegaard, Dostoyevsky, and Catholicism, each of which had a profound impact on his life.²

¹ Percy writes of the experience: "It was to encounter...a complete, articulated view of the world as tragic as it was noble" (Patrick Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997], 37).

² Samway, *Walker Percy*, 126.

He determined to set aside his long-held medical aspirations and become a novelist. Writing of this transition, Percy notes, “I gradually began to realize that as a scientist—a doctor, a pathologist—I knew so very much *about* man, but had little idea what man *is*.”³ Upon his recovery, Percy married, converted to Roman Catholicism, and returned to the South, where he established a new life as a writer.

These experiences presented Percy with an awareness of alternatives to the dominant narrative of American life. His stoic upbringing and Catholic faith would counterbalance the materialism so prevalent in the West. Likewise, he was familiar with the language and allure of modern science, but chose instead to devote his life to more humane studies. In short, having tasted and seen the best of both paradigms, Percy was uniquely poised to grasp the true strangeness of American life, but to couple this insight with an appreciation for its (sometimes hidden) virtues. Like the heroes of his novels, Percy is himself both an inheritor of and an outsider to his culture. A Tocquevillian disposition of friendly criticism undergirds Percy’s wry wit. As Tocqueville put it, “Men do not receive the truth from their enemies, and their friends scarcely offer it to them; that is why I have spoken it.”⁴ Percy’s advice comes from within liberal democracy, offering a remedy to our ills that is unexpected but not entirely unfamiliar.

Highlighting themes of alienation and homelessness, Smith frames each of Percy’s writings as a coming to grips with the inexplicable yearnings that move men to anxiety, boredom, or restlessness—even (and perhaps especially) amid material plenty.⁵ For Percy, to the extent that men recognize and accept this disquietude as a part of the human condition, they can get down to the business of simply living well. As the late Peter Lawler was so fond of reminding his students, we must become “at home with our homelessness.” Smith refers to this transient disposition as one of “wayfaring,” a state where men embrace the limitations of a life that is ultimately fleeting. One need consider only the titles of Percy’s nonfiction work to see the prominence of this theme: *Signposts in a Strange Land*, *The Message in the Bottle*, and *Lost in the Cosmos*. Within the bounds of finitude, searching for “complete solutions

³ Robert Coles, *Walker Percy: An American Search* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1978), 65–66.

⁴ Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, trans. Harvey C. Mansfield and Delba Winthrop (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 400.

⁵ “Man tries unsuccessfully to fill this void [in his soul] with everything that surrounds him, seeking in absent things the help he cannot find in those that are present, but all are incapable of it. This infinite abyss can be filled only with an infinite, immutable object, that is to say, God himself” (Blaise Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, trans. Honor Levi [New York: Oxford University Press, 2008], 52).

to life's persistent dilemmas" (xv) is counterproductive to truly attainable yet partial solutions. In this light, our yearnings serve a salutary purpose, calling attention to the friction between man and his environment and reminding him of his unique position in the cosmos. Unfortunately, modern man views his alienation as a challenge. Rather than live as a wayfarer, he attempts to dominate nature and re-create the world in his image—to make a home where there was none.⁶ When we mistake our yearnings for disorders to be treated, we compound both our frustration and our confusion when the project inevitably fails.

This identification of Percy's overarching project is not particularly novel, and Percy is quite transparent about his intentions. Smith's contribution is instead situating this thesis within the context of Percy's entire oeuvre, bridging his fiction and nonfiction works (xxii). He then ties Percy's diagnosis of the individual soul to a greater political framework. With such an expansive lens, Smith is able to sketch the outlines of a complete human society. Through careful development, he is able to offer extraordinary nuance as he details Percy's implicit philosophy of politics, considering the individual in relation to family, church, local community, and nation. Each of these communities offers a respite from the persistent suffering of this world and points the wayfarer towards a more permanent and transcendent home. However, as we will see, these havens can be (and frequently are) abused by men who do not understand our proper situation in the world.

Smith structures his work sequentially in order to address Percy's complete thesis, offering the reader a clear sense of the problem at hand, why it persists, and where we should go from here. Part 1, "Diagnosing the Malaise," presents Percy as "[carrying] the disposition of a pathologist into his work as a writer" (1). Part of this diagnosis is noting the excesses of current treatments: those that overemphasize ("immanent" theories) or underemphasize ("transcendent" theories) our embodiment. Each fails because it ignores the essential (and intractable) duality of man's embodied soul.

In part 2, "American Attempts at a Cure," Smith highlights the unique struggle Americans face in coming to self-knowledge. As part 1 explores how our Lockean philosophic inheritance pulls us toward the overreliance on scientific expertise, part 2 seems to suggest that our religious and aristocratic heritage (praised by Tocqueville) pulls us to an overreliance on communities.

⁶ This is consistent with Eric Voegelin's concern regarding our attempts to "immanentize the eschaton" in *The New Science of Politics: An Introduction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

Both forces could be salutary if moderated by appropriate expectations. Instead, we push them beyond their intended limits, asking of them perfect contentment rather than merely a temporary respite. The result is yet another bifurcation of the American soul. We ask too much of our political and social institutions, only to find ourselves ever disappointed. “Seeking a complete remedy for our alienation,” Smith observes, “we thrust ourselves into communities, and when they do not satisfy us, we frantically retreat into isolation” (55). This vacillation between solidarity and stoic individualism fuels a dangerously wanton spiritedness, bound to either a caricatured patriotism or honor. We are shaken out of our boredom only in moments of extraordinary severity—natural disasters, accidents, and other brushes with mortality. These moments bring temporary clarity but, unfortunately, they also propel us to a deep fascination with violence and ultimately with war. Smith seems to imply that one of Percy’s deepest concerns is that we will destroy ourselves simply because we can think of nothing better to do.

Finally, in part 3, “Coping with Alienation,” Smith offers a vision of reform for both human intellectual potential and our communal obligations. Through his stories Percy hoped to present readers with both a purified social science and a more moderate account of human institutions such as family, community, and faith. Smith uses these latter chapters to clarify Percy’s otherwise obscure fascination with semiotics by connecting the constructed yet transcendent nature of language to the similarly murky field of social science. As disciplines such as political science and psychology become increasingly analytic and empirical, they lose touch with the normative discovery that makes such questions worth asking in the first place. A zeal for measurement and proclamations of what new “studies show” discourages the revisitation of fundamental principles and definitions. Similarly, Smith points out Percy’s frequent use of “partial resolution” among his characters to highlight the incomplete nature of human contentment. It is through self-reflection and reconsideration that his characters come to understand both their brokenness and their potential, reminding the reader of Pascal’s uneasy reconciliation of man: “Man’s greatness lies in his capacity to recognize his wretchedness. A tree does not recognize its wretchedness. So it is wretched to know one is wretched, but there is greatness in the knowledge of one’s wretchedness.”⁷ It is a modest hope, but of firmer quality than empty promises of immanent perfection.

⁷ Pascal, *Pensées and Other Writings*, 36.

Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer is a significant accomplishment and deserves careful reading. Smith has the uncanny ability to weave the disparate threads of Percy's writings into a cogent narrative understandable even to those less familiar with the author's work. Generous quotations offer context and clarity that frame Smith's argument in Percy's own witty cadence. Both Smith's thesis and his evidence are accessible without being pandering. Further, his endnotes are an extraordinarily helpful resource to those who do wish to dive deeper into the rabbit hole of Percy scholarship, and highlight connections to more traditional political philosophy. Those seeking a completely articulated political philosophy from Walker Percy may walk away from this book dissatisfied, but the fault lies with the nature of Percy's "partial resolutions" rather than Smith's analysis. Percy does not offer us a city in speech, nor indeed much of any structure for concrete law in a polis. Instead, he frames a human disposition, instructive for citizens and statesmen alike. As for Smith's work, perhaps the greatest among its many merits is that it whets the appetite just enough to entice readers to revisit Percy's novels yet again.