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REVIEW ARTICLE

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# Existentialism in Walker Percy's Love in the Ruins

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Walker Percy, one of the major South American novelists dealing with the predicament of contemporary man, focuses on existentialistic streaks in his fictional world. Like others, he has adopted this fictional method for the analysis and development of character and also as a new structure for the achievement of narrative progression. He knew himself, maintains Alfred Kazin, as "part of History, a larger meaning, whether it was America the colossus, the juggernaut, the great melting pot into which he did not want to melt… There was an unconscious depth to his writing."[1] As in existential fiction, opines Richard Lehan, Percy's novels take place in "a prolapsed world, often cut off from the ordinary workaday world, where characters are haunted by the past and bound by the absurdity of their situation."[2] Percy adds to this two states of narrative consciousness, one of perception and the other of reflection, and also a sense of the grotesque.

Percy's interest in existentialism can be documented from his many philosophical articles as well as from the novels themselves. The most important of these essays, "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes "is a study of alienation, its causes and possibly its cure. He is fascinated by the displacement, the kind of existential estrangement from self and surrounding that Albert Camus or cares who he is, where he is going, or why he is going there. He is Percy's "man on a train, the commuter, staring blankly out the window at a landscape that terrifies and bores him-bores him because it is all too familiar, terrifies him because he does not know what awaits him when he steps off the platform-alone."[3]

His characters have a life of their own and are at best uncertain clues to their author's private attitudes and views. All, however, share a condition that Percy felt to be the common lot of perceptive postmodern humans everywhere: existence in a secular post-Cartesian world that offers at best illusory prospects of wholeness. Their options, asserts J.A. Bryant, were "either to accept passively their situation as aliens in that world or to seek a remedy that the world cannot provide."[4]

Walker Percy's alienated man is lonely and unloved, an isolated forlorn consciousness. He can find peace, however, through social communion, through sharing his concerns with someone equally or even more greatly plagued. The Bomb, for example, is not a real source of anxiety for him because "when everything else fails, [he can] always turn to [this] with his sober second thoughts-'I can tell you this much, I am profoundly disturbed."[5]

There is a comfort in sharing such dread, warmth like spending a sheltered evening by a cabin fire while the wind and sea roar outside. A far more disturbing question, according to Percy, is "What if the Bomb should not fall? What then?" This question implies no hope of deliverance, no way of escaping what Percy calls everydayness, no way out of the rat trap that the Bomb would bring so comfortably and so quickly. Percy believes that a sense of well-being often accompanies a public knows that his suffering will be shared- something Camus described in La Peste when Cottard, a murderer hunted by the police, finds a sudden sense of well-being when the citizens of Oran fear the plague, just as he feared the police.

What Percy repeatedly describes in his learned articles is a kind of 'existential communion'-an overlapping of consciousness which breaks down the barriers between individuals, moves them from an I-it to an I–Thou relationship. He rejects Sartre's idea that hell is another person. "L'enfer c'est auttres, "Percy says. "But so is heaven."[6] Percy, in fact, rejects all phenomenological theories of consciousness-all attempts to "bracket" sense data and to regard it, as do most of the existentialists, as distinct in itself, beyond interpretation, explanation, and evaluation. Borrowing much from George H. Mead, Percy maintains that the phenomenologists start with consciousness and never get back to reality.

For Percy, consciousness is a public, not a private matter, "arising from the social matrix through language."[7] All consciousness is shared, the beauty or strangeness of an object linking people together, binding them like an accident to a common moment-

to even a common fate. Thus, where Descartes would say, "I am conscious of this chair," and where Sartre would say, "There is consciousness of this chair," Percy says, "This is a chair for you and me."

Life thus becomes a search for shared consciousness, for a communion of mind, for the affirmation of self which can only be found in the reflection of another. Failure to find this-and what we are talking about, of course, is love- leads to nothingness, an emptiness of mind and soul, the blank atare of the commuter from the window of the eight-fifteen.

The way one moves from an I-it to an I-Thou relationship is by what Percy somewhat pretentiously calls rotation. The commuter breaks the circuit and destroys 'everydayness.' 'The road is better than the inn,' said Cervantes, a remark Percy takes literally to mean that salvation is in the journey, especially the aimless journey, which allows pure possibility. Here the commuter is in motion, on the road, open to all experience that may come his way, under no personal or social pressure whatever. Here also the commuter is a kind of voyeur, writes Richard Lehan, "seeing but not being seen, walking silently through dark streets and blackened fields, fondling the world with his eyes, or parking his camper at night noiselessly beside a house as does the central character in The Last Gentalman."[8] The road becomes an escape from the responsibility others have to accept. This is the journey of Huck Finn, and like Huck's journey it is not an isolated one. Huck, Percy points out, has Jim, a prepuberty vision of la solitude a deux.

Love in the Ruins is a very different kind of novel for Percy. It is both fantasy and satire. Set in the future, it describes a divided America that finally comes to ruin where, an informed reader knows, Americans have turned against each other; race against race, right against left, believer against heathen. The Catholic Church has split into three groups and feuds among itself at the same time that it battles nonbelievers. The most powerful branch is the American Catholic Church which emphasizes property rights and the integrity of neighborhoods, and which plays The Star Spangled Banner at the elevation of the host.

Tom More aspires to heal the sickness of the present age. The disease lies in the very psyche of mankind, which leaves society vulnerable and exposed. Initiated by Descartes who sundered soul from body, man is left having his soul haunt his body and making him a ghost in his own house. Man simply is lost in the cosmos and lost to himself. Scientific humanism and mass culture-the two malignant tumors to threaten the very survival of the human race-are the chief reasons for the modern malaise.

In what is a departure from his earlier novel, Percy now equates individual well-being to the true prosperity of society. The corollary is that the sickness of the soul would be reflected in the condition of society as well. Percy deals with Tom More in a Freudian manner. The protagonist himself states this when he says that he belongs to a breed fast vanishing-and that his method of Psychiatry (for Tome More is a physician and a psychiatrist) concerns with the root sense of the term, the psyche. More laments that "unfortunately, there still persists in the medical profession the quaint superstition that only that which is visible is real. Thus the soul is not real. Uncaused terror cannot exist. Then, friend, how come you are shaking?"[9]

In a review, Melvin Bradford is able to perceive the importance and singularity of this novel. According to him, "Love in the Ruins is a creation sui generis, shaped not at all upon the pattern of any predecessors' and that the 'book is an apocalypse or (in the current usage) a dystopia, set in the 1980s and in a South we may still recongnise."[10] The point about the apocalypse should direct our attention to the purpose of the novel- to satirize man's shortcomings, not in a Swiftian misanthropic sense, but in order that man may stop things falling apart. The anxiety of Tom More for his country and his desire that the sorry state of affairs be improved on, his contribution towards making America an Eden on the earth are all obvious from the very beginning. On the opening page of the novel we have Dr. More ruminating: "Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A.?" for More feels that U.S. tend towards entropy. (LR:3) The reference to God is perhaps because Tome More is a Catholic, albeit a bad one. But more than a preoccupation with his own self (More has more than a handful of worries-the death of his daughter haunts him still, his wife leaves him for a heathen Englishman and his alcoholism threatens his professional life), the good doctor is anxious of the state of the U.S.

In Love in the Ruins, the apocalypse is seen to have already arrived. The outward signs of cracks in the roads and buildings, the overgrowth of vines in public places, the rising racial conflicts and political rivalries in the land testify to the fact that society is on the verge of a violent explosion. The protagonist Dr. Thomas More asks in awe and dismay: "Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. and what we feel now is just the clank of the old historical machinery?" (LR-3)

Dr. More is a failed physician, a bad Catholic, an alcoholic and a womanizer. He is the representative of Southerners of Percy's time. Yet, this forty-five-year old physician's perception and assessment of the social, moral and cultural climate of his time is most realistic: "These are bad times… Principalities and powers are everywhere victorious. Wickedness flourishes in high places." (LR-4) Sensing the impending doom he lives along with his three women in the abandoned Howard Johnson Inn to survive and start a new life after the end. But, as the end does not occur physically, Dr. More thinks that the world will be annihilated psychically. He also thinks that his prize invention, the lapsometer, can scan and cure the

infirmity of the human spirit and thus save the world from destruction.

The instrument, nonetheless, falls into the hands of Art Immelmann, the evil incarnate, who, with its help, unleashes the forces of anarchy, let alone cure the spiritual malady of the people. Dr. More realizes his own foolishness and the inability of his scientific knowledge to remedy the invetrate ailment of the human soul. So he puts aside his proud plan for perfecting the world. He marries Ellen, rears children, and lives in humility thinking that he can thus lay the foundation for a Utopia. But at the novel's end, we find him yet to be redeemed. He runs after bodily pleasures and still needs his whiskey in large quantities.

Like so many others in this mad world, Dr. More is a walking contradiction, a veritable paradox. He suffers from simultaneous depression and exaltation, hate and love, trust and mistrust. Unable to reconcile the contradictions that sunder himself, Dr. More suffers a mental breakdown. His is a split personality, bedeviled by schizophrenia and ambivalence. He thus joins the many characters in modern fiction for whom madness is the final end, or the final end but one-suicide. When Dr. More cuts his wrists, he asks himself that question that connects him with characters as diverse as Meursault and Jacob Horner: Is life worth the effect? Like his predecessors, he decides to believe that life can be joyous. He recovers enough to work on his invention, a lapsometer, which allows him to measure the electrical activity of the brain and correlate his reading with personality traits. Dr. More is thus able to determine the anxiety or rage level of his patients. While this work does not cure him, he finds that his own insanity gives him a means of understanding. Once again, being crazy in modern America seems preferable to being sane. "Not being crazy, being sane in a sane world is the craziest business of all, Dr. More concludes. (LR: 106)

Dr. More's story would end here if Dr. Immelmann did not come upon the scene. Immelmann has discovered the means of using the lapsometer to both generate and relieve emotional conditions. Ideally, this will lead man back to paradise; will allow him to reconcile body and spirit, control love and hate, anxiety and ennui, depression and exaltation. However, for political reasons, Immelmann uses the lapsometer to aggravate and accentuate the contradictions within the individual. This leads to a state of emotional war between Christian and atheist, the Right and the Left, poor and rich, black and white, and scientist and humanist.

When disaster seems inevitable, More retreats with three of his girl friends to an abandoned Howard Johnson motel to wait out the holocaust. The novel ends with More marrying Ellen, his nurse. Like a new-day Adam, he starts all over again in a new world. But the world is not really that new. The old arguments are revived to justify the old injustices, although now the oppressed is sometimes the oppressor, and the old feelings of anxiety and distraction-of-self seem all too visible. Ellen is a consolation, perhaps Dr. More's only consolation, proving that love can make even the ruins tolerable.

Like so many recent novels, Love in the Ruins, argues Richard Lehan, "describes a world gone mad, a world that challenges understanding."[11] Like Bellow's Mr. Sammler, Dr. More is a secular saint who refuses to become the victim of the absurd or to accept the madness that others impose upon him. Bradford provides a hint of Percy's intention:

But a dystopia ('near the end of the world') must sometimes be soberly satiric. Its action proper and enveloping action are naturally identical. And their focus is upon the course of history-ultimately upon mistakes, made in the public weal by those concerned with (in the larger sense) its government… Percy's 'future' in this book is not thus intended; it is not the warning of an evil to come so much as it is a mere caricature of the present shape of things.[12]

Thus, Linda Hobson calls this novel "a prophetic vision of public and private apocalypse in America."[13] In an interview with Charles Bunting. Percy states the reason for writing a futuristic novel:

It's a good way to do satire. It gives you a chance to speak to the present society from a futuristic point of view. Than you can exaggerate present trends so that they become noticeable and more subject to satire.[14]

In the same interview, the writer's attempt to place the novel in the Western tradition is mentioned. Percy says that "the use of the Faust theme was deliberate."[15] In this sense the novel becomes an allegory as well. Faustus exchanged his soul for knowledge. Modern man is doing the same, in his pursuit of gnosis, in his furthering of progress and in his passive role as Mass Man. Man has become a ghost to haunt his own house and the world is peopled by such insubstantial wraiths.

Lewis Lawson is one critic who places Tom More in the tradition of Gnosticism and defines him as a "thoroughgoing Gnostic, who conceives of the apocalypse as a secular event and believes that he can either preclude its occurrence or, if it occurs, use it to further that progressive movement in history that all Gnostics detect."[16] Zoltan Abadi-Nagy finds the novel with "its Layer I, and Layer II- the social self and the inner, individual self-a comic attempt to solve

Marcel's dilemma about his separation."[17] Bradley Dewey makes a fine assessment of the novel:

Percy's Love in the Ruins hits the reader full in the face with a rollicking, lusty satire set in Lousisiana during the 1980s ('at a time near the end of the world'). Simultaneously frightening and outrageously funny, the novel describes a future America where our current problems-polarization, technological breakdown, psychic estrangement-have pushed us to the brink of apocalypse. The issues confronted and the solution suggested leave no doubt that Percy stands firmly, if humanly, in the orthodox Catholic tradition.[17]

The narrator begins asking: "The U.S.A. didn't work! It is even possible that from the beginning it never did work, that the thing always had a flaw in it, a place where it would shear, and that all this time we were not really different from Ecuador and Bosnia-Herzegovina, just-richer." (LR: 56-57)

Walker Percy is the most explicitly existentialist of American novelists. The study of Percy's novels reveals and establishes his preoccupation with apocalyptic end and renewal. Apprehensions of an imminent end are expressed by the characters in the midst of the horrors and disasters of the present. The novels depict the socio-cultural climate of the present and warn, it seems the readers to take cognizance of the impurities that permeate it. They harp on the fact that the world has reached an irredeemable state and they urge us to wake up. Percy believes that people today are responsible for what they have become. But he makes the point again and again that the situation is not totally irredeemable. As an orthodox Catholic, he looks at the world from a Christian point of view. He has infinite faith in the beauty and dignity of human life and the glory and grace of God. He expresses his hope that things can be better and Utopia of Edenic perfection can be realized here and now in the debris of the present. Percy is essentially a writer with a religious temperament. In his optimism and robust affirmation of the innate essential glory of human life, Percy asserts that God is not dead, or rather that we cannot afford to let Him die.

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