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# COSMOS + TAXIS

Studies in Emergent Order and Organization



Symposium on  
Brian A. Smith's  
*Walker Percy  
and the Politics  
of the Wayfarer*

# COSMOS+TAXIS

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## COVER IMAGE

Walker Percy stands with his portrait (by  
Lyn Hill) at home in Covington, LA  
Photo: ©Christopher R Harris  
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## Editorial Introduction

LESLIE MARSH

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The highest compliment that I could pay to Brian Smith is that I wish that I could have written this book. Since there are no bones of contention or glaring omissions, at least for me, there is little I can say that wouldn't be redundant. Smith's achievement lies in his masterful gathering of the many threads across Percy's six philosophical novels, more technical philosophical articles, and other non-fiction essays. Especially gratifying is his inclusion of Percy's uncle Will's *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941) which, in my view, is essential to providing the backdrop to the tumultuous times within which Percy's maturing consciousness was forged.

My original interest in Walker Percy took wing from Elizabeth Corey's book *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics* (2006). When queried about the extended Percy quote used in her book Elizabeth told me that Walker Percy stood as the most Oakeshottian of writers (until then I had not read Percy). Now thanks to Brian Smith's most excellent book, I now have the wherewithal to try and flesh out what perhaps Elizabeth was driving at.

Speaking of Oakeshott, a late addition to this issue is the transcript of a recent lecture by Timothy Fuller, the dean of Oakeshott studies. While not strictly part of this symposium, it offers the benefit of an elegant distillation of Fuller's lifetime of engagement with Oakeshott's (political) philosophy. Percyans, especially if they are coming to Oakeshott as a novice, will find the tone that Tim strikes to be most congenial, as Elizabeth has already indicated, and that Brian has come to appreciate.

Smith's central organizing principle is the idea of the wayfarer. Thematically, Smith draws out four derivative and inextricably related themes from this master principle—that is, of ways of assuaging one's alienation.

- The first, is the American (by no means exclusively so) predilection for consumption both terms of material plenty but also in terms of the consumption of some theoretical fad or other.
- The second, is the pull of the collectivity to sublimate the burden of individuality.
- The third, is the allure of danger and violence as a respite for the alienated.
- Fourth, is the scope for hope in Percy by accepting one's finitude not only metaphysically but also in terms of understanding and knowledge.

Oakeshottians would do well to read Percy and vice versa: the same can be said for Hayekians. The triumvirate of giants, Hayek-Oakeshott-Percy, each in their own way, offer

recognizably congruent criticisms of socio-political rationalisms. This manifests itself in Smith's explication of Percy's critique of scientism and the "cult of expertise", this latter topic being the subject of a recent *Cosmos + Taxic* symposium on Roger Koppl's *Expert Failure* (2018). Other topics of interest that speak to the (classical) liberal mind that Smith expounds upon includes free speech, situated knowledge, epistemic modesty, embodied cognition, and the rejection of all forms of totalitarianism. Understandably, there is much discussion on the role of language and consciousness, since this area remained Percy's longest standing published interest. Those familiar with Hayek's rereleased *The Sensory Order* (2017) and the recent work of moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt (and his idea of viewpoint diversity), may well find Smith's Percy particularly congenial.

Brian Smith occupies a special place within Percy studies. Along with the late Peter Augustine Lawler, he co-edited *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*. There is no doubt that Smith's solo effort is the benchmark work on the topic of Percy's political outlook and will remain so for years to come.

Elizabeth Amato kicks off discussion of what Smith takes to be Percy's central political insight. That is, though alienation is part and parcel of the human condition, the utopian impulse to alleviate this dislocation, is profoundly misplaced. Allen Mendenhall examines Smith's Percy through a Hayekian lens. He invokes Hayek's famous distinction between *cosmos* and *taxic*, which of course is the title of this journal. Farrell O'Gorman focuses on Percy's fraught role of the church and Christianity, specifically within the American context. Jessica Hooten Wilson considers the prevailing problem of a misguided instrumentalism facing the liberal arts. Brian Smith rounds off the discussion with his response.

Our apologies to all directly concerned with this symposium for its delayed appearance. Logistically speaking, as the year unfolded, things became trickier, as it did for most. But in the end, it worked out all right: there are few better than the author of *Love in the Ruins*, that most prescient of dystopian novels, to see out this momentous and tumultuous of years.

## NOTES

- 1 "I tried research one summer... 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 the 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 everywhere. 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. He was actually like one of those scientists in the movies who don't care about anything but the problem in their heads—now here is a fellow who does have a "flair for research" and will be heard from. 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" —*The Moviegoer*.
- 2 <https://cosmosandtaxic.org/back-issues/ct-712/>

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Brian Smith on  
How Our Search for  
“Fugitive Perfection”  
Subverts Our Real  
Communities in Favor  
of the Imaginary in  
Walker Percy’s  
Political Thought

ELIZABETH AMATO

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Brian Smith, in his admirable *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*,<sup>1</sup> presents the most complete analysis to date of Percy’s political thought. Smith’s timely analysis of Percy’s works connects political polarization, outrage culture, feckless leadership, passive culture, neglected communities, and violence to our misguided efforts to overcome our spiritual dislocation. Americans have access to numerous competing and contradictory theories—Smith terms these “mishmash theories”—that all promise relief from our homelessness and hold out “hope for completeness in this life” (p. 1). If we could be made happy and at home in this world, then surely following any one of these theories could do it. Yet, as Percy repeatedly demonstrates and as Smith catalogues, mishmash theories fail by their own standard (see also Lawler and Smith 2013). Americans are materially well off, enjoy robust protections of civil liberty, and are free from arbitrary government, and yet not a whit happier for it (see Amato 2018). What is worse is that Americans are undoubtedly unhappier for it. Instead of making us at home, they exacerbate our alienation because we hope against all evidence to find our perfect home in this world and so devalue the ones we have.

As a remedy to contemporary America’s restive unhappiness, Percy prescribes his politics of the wayfarer, which are oriented around the metaphysical insight that “alienation as a natural fact of life” and one that cannot be overcome by our efforts (p. 4). Feeling restless and never quite at home in this world is normal. The knowledge of one’s homelessness should be a relief; a welcome alternative to modernity’s vain hope that we can make our perfect homes. Smith focuses on the liberating side of Percy’s political thought. Embracing life as a wayfarer is freeing. Recognizing ourselves as wayfarers frees us from the old threadbare theories that emaciate our experiences and lives. Recognizing other people as fellow wayfarers and caring for our admittedly imperfect communities goes a long way towards providing relief to our restless hearts. Percy’s political teaching, Smith argues, hinges on “care and responsibility, placing them alongside humor and irony as central elements of a decent political life” (Smith, p. xxix). Smith shows how Percy’s novels point us in the direction of making temporary homes. Care and responsibility help us see how we can make our communities our temporary homes. Humor and irony provide us with a touch of distance and perspective to cope with the inevitable spiritual dislocation we feel. Moreover, humor and irony keep us humble and incline us to be more forgiving of shortcomings in ourselves and others and less zealous for perfection.

Just so the communities in which we live can be better or worse for encouraging individuals to see themselves and each other as wayfarers. Percy teaches us that “community cannot save human beings from alienation, but the right bonds between people can attenuate this feeling” (Smith, p. 57). Tucked in this short sentence are two crucial points. The first is Percy’s central insight that alienation cannot be overcome entirely by any kind of community; thus we will always be wayfarers. The second, however, presents Percy’s vision for what we can reasonably expect communities to do. Smith emphasizes Percy’s caution and modest hope. Even “decent communities can only do so much to salve the wounds of our existence” (Smith, p. 74). What we need communities to do, according to Smith, is remind us of our human limits and check our desire to escape those limits. These communities are “places of rest” where we can share our lives and accept the duties and responsibilities of living in a community with others (Smith, p. 76). But even these relationships will be imperfect and always lacking a bit. As Smith observes, the endings of Percy’s stories are ambiguous and unsettled for his protagonists who find only partial resolutions to their troubles and belong to imperfect communities.

Smith argues that “Americans have an overly romantic notion of what community might be, and because of this search of fugitive perfection, no actual community can quite live up to our expectations” (Smith, p. 58). Tocqueville famously observed that Americans are anxiously on the move, “dream[ing] constantly of the goods they do not have,” and “tormented by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest route” (Tocqueville 2002, p. 511). The romance of community is that finding the right sort of community will relieve the heart of its weary longings for home. But as Smith observes, because Americans can imagine more perfect communities, the real communities to which we belong are unfavorably compared and found wanting. The community of real people before our eyes does not stir our hearts, but the idealized image in the mind does. Disappointed and bored, we devalue the real in favor of the imaginary. Restiveness undermines our attachment and interest in the places and people with whom we live. Americans long to start over, fresh, and make a new beginning on the grounds that this time they will find the happiness they seek. Searching for a better community leads Americans to treat other people as disposable, diversions, or obstacles rather than creatures much like themselves who feel somewhat displaced. Since we fail to recognize ourselves as wayfarers, we search in vain for communities that will relieve us of our alienation. Instead of trying to understand what unhappiness indicates about the self and to avoid self-reflective inquiry, we view other people as obstacles to our happiness rather than potential fellow wayfarers.

In what follows, I apply Smith’s insights to an analysis of *Love in the Ruins*, in which Percy explores what the American political landscape might look like in the near future. In *Love in the Ruins*, I argue that Percy is remarkably prescient concerning the direction of American political culture and the political dangers that we risk by ignoring our spiritual dislocation (see also Dominy 2015, Akins 2009, and Reinsch 2013). The fruits of spiritual dislocation such as cultural insularity and violence threaten to destabilize our communities. First, Percy shows that American politics on the federal and state levels will continue relatively the same (no major institutional changes, no dystopian scenarios), but despite the apparent normalcy, disappointment and boredom have led to polarization of our political parties, outrage culture, and separate ideological networks and clustering of like-minded Americans in cities and states. Second, Percy looks at suburban communities like Paradise Estates and depicts indifference, lack of leadership, decay of political participation, and the outsourcing of political decisions to experts. Finally, Percy shows that experts are guided by self-interest rather than the public good and fail to educate students. Instead, their education fails to form responsible citizens, encourages passive culture, and prepares the ground for political violence.

In an address given about *Love in the Ruins*, Percy explains that the novel explores what would happen if Americans “generally succeeded” in pursuing happiness and “[y]et something is wrong” (Percy 1991, p. 248). By generally succeeded, he means that Americans appear to have all they need to be happy such as satisfied needs, comfort, leisure activities, and political liberty. The individual, however, feels ill at ease and restless. The individual is unhappy with her happiness. She knows that she ought to be happy but feels “self-hatred and self-destructiveness” (Percy 1991, p. 248). Published in 1971 and set about a decade in the future, in *Love in the Ruins*, Percy exaggerates social and political fractures he saw in his day and links them to

spiritual dislocation. Percy depicts racial violence, riots, an endless foreign war in Ecuador, decaying shopping centers, vagrant communities of hippies and other drop outs, the polarization of the political parties, insipid political leadership, the Catholic Church fragmented, decay of traditional religion, increased federal administration, routine euthanasia of senior citizens, and white flight into the suburbs and safe havens of golf courses and country clubs.

In this futuristic setting, the two major parties are renamed to emphasize their hyperbolic and extreme positions. The Republican Party becomes the Knothead Party since no one can be too knothheaded to serve her country. Knotheads favor knee-jerk patriotism, property rights, and sentimental religiosity in which Christianity serves an auxiliary and subordinate role to support the state. Knotheads deny any tension between the demands of this world and requirements of the next; for them, serving God is easy, because it is serving the state. The Democratic Party becomes the LEFTPAPASANE, an acronym often shortened to LEFTPAPA, which stands for various leftist causes: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, Euthanasia” (Percy 1971, p. 18). The LEFTPAPAS promote an ever growing range of policies, such as euthanasia, to free the individual from her traditional moorings in the name of liberty and the ease of human suffering.

Not only has the center fallen in politics, but Americans are divided culturally, as well. Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS develop separate cultural and social networks so that they rarely have to encounter each other. LEFTPAPAS and Knotheads watch different movies that reinforce their narrow opinions and reveal how impoverished their vision has become. LEFTPAPAS prefer imported movies from Sweden that celebrate sexual permissiveness and films with over the top sexual feats like performing fellatio while skydiving in 3-D (Percy 1971, see pp. 18 and 37). Most often the LEFTPAPAS’ talk of liberation reduces to discarding sexual inhibitions as the path to personal liberty. The Knotheads watch “clean” movies like *The Sound of Music*, which More calls “sentimental blasphemy” (Percy 1971, pp. 18 and 19). Not by profaning God’s name, but by denying the unavailability of suffering and the need for grace for redemption, Knotheads blasphemy God.

In addition to culture, given American mobility, Percy foresees that liberal and conservative Americans will “sort” into political stronghold cities and states (see Bishop 2009). For all intents and purposes, American pluralism seems as healthy as ever. Everyone is free to live as they like and with whom they like. Nevertheless, living miles and perhaps states apart, Americans cannot find contentment and peace. Knotheads suffer from bowel complaints, rages, and conspiracy theories and LEFTPAPAS suffer from anxiety, sexual impotence, and self-abstraction (Percy 1971, see p. 20). Anticipating outrage culture and cancel culture, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS watch the nightly news and rage about the other side (see De Kosnik 2019).

Although the political middle has disappeared, Percy depicts American politics working as usual. No mention is made of any changes to political institutions or structures. The parties may have polarized on cultural issues, but both parties enjoy minor policy successes. Neither side is sufficiently dominant to crush the other side. Nor does there seem to be any real interest in doing so. The parties clash through the political process and the typical compromises take place. For example, the president is a “integrationist Mormon married to a liberated Catholic” and the vice-president is a “Southern Baptist Knothead married to a conservative Unitarian” (Percy 1971, p. 56). The presidential nomination system thoughtfully produced candidates who could appeal to both parties and have credibility with crucial ideological and demographic groups based on their personal identities. Appealing to a broad electoral base while moderating political extremes is exactly what the nomination process is supposed to do. If anything, Percy fails to anticipate how fragile the presidential nomination system is; contemporary readers may be wistful for moderate presidential candidates. Together the president and vice-president give speeches in favor of respect for rule of law, unity, and tolerance—themes readily lifted from almost any political speech. Most meaningful political questions have been settled. Aside from engaging in tit for tat culture war policies, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS favor relatively similar policies on economics and administration. In this future, liberals, it seems, have accepted free market, globalist economics and conservatives have warmed up to federal administration and centralization.

Despite the outrages and token causes of the LEFTPAPAS and the Knotheads, there are real political concerns that are overlooked and neglected by both parties. First, the shopping centers and buildings blighted by riots are left to decay in neglect (Percy 1971, see p. 9). Instead of addressing the causes of riots or rebuilding, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS retreat to gated communities like Paradise Estates. Second, for the past 16 years, America has been militarily involved in a civil war in Ecuador. The war carries on in the background of the story without any character calling for America's withdrawal or even attempting to justify continued military intervention in a war without justice on either side nor strategic interest (Percy 1971, see p. 19). The civil war, it seems, is a conflict between the supposedly democracy-supporting Catholic oligarchy and the mass-murdering communists. Third, real progress in civil rights for blacks has atrophied due to a lack of concern among whites. Instead, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS occupy themselves with the paternalistic question of whether black servants should sit in the front or back seat of the car. When conservatives pick up their black servants, the servants sit in the back seat and liberals make a point by requiring black servants to sit in the front seat. Percy's satire is unmistakable. Perversely, the civil rights movement is reduced to little more than where whites decide blacks should sit in their capacity as house servants. Neither LEFTPAPAS nor Knotheads consider that the beliefs they profess—whether fraternity and equality or Christian love and brotherhood—might require more action on their part to create a society in which blacks have more occupations, opportunities, and housing available.

Percy shows that Americans retreat from addressing these pressing political problems and so risk the decay of their communities through willful neglect and blindness. "The vines began to sprout in earnest," More reports, and he adds that "[p]eople do not like to talk about it" (Percy 1971, p. 9). While More imagines or hallucinates the vines, he sees the decay and ruin slowly accruing. Gradual decay of American communities is the result of myriad tiny neglects in personal responsibility for the places they live. Indifferent to the places they live and the people with whom they live, Americans are not much moved to care for them.

Percy, as Smith argues, realized that "[w]hat endangered the republic flows from man's boredom with himself amid the most perfect comfort and his inability to call any place home for long" (p. 58). The Americans Percy describes are well-off, free to live how and with whom they please, and yet disappointed and bored with politics. Politics here are understood in the Aristotelian sense, as deliberation about how human beings want to live in common. Americans are disappointed with politics because politics cannot relieve them of their homelessness nor provide permanent solutions to persistent human problems. Religious and ideological differences persist long after material needs have been satisfied. Racial tensions and injustices serve as painful reminders of how imperfect America is.

Put another way, politics is a reminder of our homelessness—that we must live together to live well and that whatever political remedies we enact will be merely temporary and partial fixes. This means that everyday politics is disappointing. Political disagreements are usually resolved temporarily through accommodation and compromise. American pluralism and federalism are ways of peacefully coping with divisions among the citizenry, not overcoming them. Since day to day politics is difficult, partial, and mundane, many Americans eschew engagement. Americans are not much interested in living in common with each other and instead many retreat into like-minded cities and states or into apolitical suburbs.

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy anticipates white flight to the suburbs. Withdrawing from the challenges of their communities, well-off white Americans seek to start over and establish places to live, like gated communities, that are "[oases] of concord in a troubled land" (Percy 1971, p. 17). Unlike the Puritans who, as Tocqueville said, braved hardship "to make *an idea* triumph" and the rebellious colonists who risked their lives for proud self-government, contemporary Americans aim lower for comfort and ease (italics in original, p. 32). Americans, however, are no less industrious than their Puritan forebears in making the suburbs into refuges and Edens from the turmoils and troubles present elsewhere. As a gated community, Paradise Estates is insulated from outside disturbances and social convulsions that its residents only watch about on the nightly news. Within the community, its residents are all white and among the professional classes such as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and scientists. Its residents are not wage-slaves cogs in the machine, but enjoy meaningful, intellectually satisfying work. Differences of religious and political opinion do not dis-

turb their peaceful relations with each other. Everyone belongs to the same country club. Everyone has a family to fill her big house and an “enclosed patio” for enjoying the outdoors. In our contemporary America, many professional, well-educated, whites eschew suburbans in favor of gentrifying urban spaces. Percy may not have foreseen gentrification, but gentrified neighborhoods are similar to suburban gated communities that transform working-class and ethnic neighborhoods into white “middle-class enclave[s]” (Chaple 2016).

As a side note, More frequently mentions (at least seven times by my count) his “enclosed patio,” always in scare quotes (Percy 1971, see pp. 24, 64, 67, 189, 190, 256, 366). The enclosed patio is a hallmark of the suburban home. It is a protected enclosure within a protected enclosure and insulation and privacy are its primary purpose. The shift from front porches to back patios, Richard Thomas observes, was occasioned by the rise of post-war suburbs and marks shift towards increased emphasis on secluded private life. Thomas laments that:

[t]wentieth-century man...has lost part of his public nature which is essential to strong attachments and a deep sense of belonging or feelings of community. Whether the patio is surrounded by walls or left open, it usually remains in the rear of the house, providing privacy but creating a barrier to informal social contacts (1975, p. 127).

More dreads life in his enclosed patio in which he would “breakfast on Tang and terror” (Percy 1971, p. 365). The terror More feels is the terror of having nothing else to contemplate but the self all alone. Enclosed patios were supposed to give suburban dwellers seclusion in which to pursue, uninterpreted, the pleasures of private life, but individuals soon become horrified with boredom of the self.

The best representative of Paradise Estates is Charley Parker. Physically fit and affable, he is a golf pro who started the trend of night golf, which is golfing under large lamps at night and with a heavy dose of saccharine southern charm. To his credit, the Paradise Country Club features a moonlight tournament with a million-dollar award that attracts national attention and golf pros. He has a good wife and two accomplished sons. More describes him as having a “charming little-kid openness about him” (Percy 1971, p. 39). In many ways, Charley is like a child; he is not particularly reflective about who he is or why he does what he does. So long as he keeps busy, Charley is happy. It is not until Charley achieves all that he can imagine—the completion of the Paradise 36 on budget and with grass that needs no maintenance—that he is undone by his success. He achieves all that he thought he needed to be happy and finds it lacking. Briefly Charley wonders who he is but pushes the thought away. Nevertheless, he cannot shake his dissatisfaction. Unaccustomed to such musings, Charley soon becomes depressed and his health and interest in his upcoming summer moonlight tournament wane. He misses his opportunity to learn what his unhappiness might say about himself. Instead, Charley seeks distraction in anger and outrage. He takes to watching the news, getting angry at blacks and LEFTPAPAS, and kicking out his son who dropped out of MIT.

Nevertheless, More describes him as “the best American type”—the sort of guy who “always turns up in a pinch and does what needs doing” (Ibid). Charley turns up in a “pinch” to help people in need during unusual circumstances, but he cannot be counted on to offer assistance under everyday circumstances (Ibid.). More says that Charley would gladly offer his truck to help move people out of the way of a hurricane. But Charley lacks similar concern for his fellow neighbors short of an emergency. The same Charley who would act heroically to help his neighbors during a hurricane cannot be bothered to care how his new golf course affects his community. Other than the Paradise Estates Country Club, which is not a charitable institution, no other entity benefits from Charley’s tournament. Although there are many needs in the community, Charley dedicates his energies to the perfection of a recreational game. The national attention the golf course and tournament attracts is not used to entice other businesses or ancillary goods to the community. Since the grass does not need maintenance and carts eliminate caddies, blacks who are the traditional caddies and grounds crews are fired. Without other jobs, hardship and food insecurity among blacks becomes commonplace.

Why do people help each other during bad times but are indifferent to each other's needs during normal times? More observes that "[t]he mystery of evil is the mystery of limited goodness" (Percy 1971, p. 45). Percy's insight is that heroic virtue, contrary to conventional thought, is easy. Extraordinary occasions call for transcending the ordinary daily considerations that narrow our everyday moral horizons. It is everyday virtue that is challenging, because there is no event to dispense us from the usual moral economy. Moreover, heroic virtue is often expressed in a single, grand act, but everyday virtue should be regular part of one's life. The greater challenge is to accept the duties and responsibilities of living in a community with others during ordinary days. Prudence and magnanimity are needed to negotiate everyday affairs and results are likely to be mixed. Saving someone from a fast approaching hurricane is exciting, but attending town hall meetings is dull work, as is thinking about how to save rather than eliminate jobs. Given his ingenuity and genial nature, Charley could be a leader and find creative remedies to local problems, but he misses those opportunities.

Small neglects add up. More fails to see the same limited goodness and contempt for the ordinary in himself that he sees in Charley. More's indifference to the people within his community causes more harm than he pretends to know. He might have been able to prevent the worst of the riots that damaged the city on Christmas Eve five years ago. The event that sparked the riots happened at Paradise Bowling Lanes, which he co-owned with Leroy Ledbetter. In More's absence, Ledbetter refused to allow a black college couple to use an alley (Percy 1971, see p. 152). Instead, More is relieved that he was not there. That Leroy Ledbetter refused service to a black couple is an all-too-realistic event in small town southern America. There is no easy fix for the mixture of racism and resentment that characterizes much of small-town life, which is why More has so little interest in it. There is no international award for intervening to stop one act of racism at a bowling alley. Scientific breakthroughs bring honor and fame whereas More is likely loose friends and strain relationships by sticking up for a black couple. More has connections among both black and white communities and also considerable tact and patience, but he would rather not use his talents to such (as he sees them) small purposes. Compare More's unconcern for his community to his grandiose hope that he can save the United States from catastrophe and reverse 500 years of Cartesian philosophy with a gizmo he created. He is indifferent to the lives of his neighbors, but hopes that his scientific discovery will be published in a prestigious journal and that he will receive a Nobel Prize for it. Saving America and restoring the western soul are, More believes, the proper scope for his talents. If the everyday scope is depreciated in favor of extreme events, Smith argues that violence is soon to follow.

Perversely, people long for events to jar them out of the everyday so that the impermissible becomes permissible. Violence, Smith, argues, becomes especially attractive. Just as extreme times makes heroic virtue possible, extreme times makes violence permitted. People "enjoy hearing of disaster" because it offers an escape from their everyday lives (p. 123). Most people are not attracted to extreme times in the hopes of performing a heroic deed. Smith explains that "[f]ear and violence can move us out of alienation and into a sense of liveliness that was lacking before" (p. 122). Percy, as Smith argues, recognizes that war is appealing because it "heightens reality" by "shocking us out of our everyday conditions" (p. 127). As a result, our everyday lives compare unfavorably to the increased meaning and significance that war seems to give our lives. Reading about the Battle of Verdun, More longs for some cataclysmic event to carry him out of his ordinary life. Percy understood that "war fills the emptiness of ordinary life by granting the aimless a purpose and the alienated a concrete, relational role in which to live" (Ibid.). War quickly turns individuals into comrades who fight, live, and die for each other. Life is stripped down to survival, but seems intensified because of it.

More has contempt for the Nittany Lions football booster club because the member's support of a football team does not seem meaningful as the soldiers at Verdun. On the contrary, Percy affirms that everyday life is filled with myriad purposes and opportunities for individuals take up responsibility for the care of their communities. A local college football team is often a wellspring of local concern and pride. Football offers the right kind of alternative to the excitement of war, but also offers a break from the ordinary. Nobody dies in football (barring accident). Teams compete against traditional rivals and fans savor victory,

mourn defeat, and either way enjoy speculating about the next season. Booster clubs are usually composed of parents of players, alumni, and loyal fans that volunteer their time. Instead of the totality of comradeship during war, people wear their team's colors during the game. Afterward, everyone changes into their regular clothes. The point here is not to praise football, but the commonplace ways that individuals are drawn to build relationships with other, to exercise leadership, and stewardship of their communities.

Without guidance from would-be leaders like Charley and More, Percy depicts how care for the community is left to people who prefer to exploit without opposition or struggle like P. T. Bledsoe and Moon Mullins. Outside the pristine Paradise Estates, Moon Mullins provides slum housing to poor blacks. Bledsoe is a factory owner who denies promotions to black workers so that they are stuck in Mullins' slums (Percy 1971, see p. 31). Bledsoe is a local business owner, family man, churchgoer, and responsible community member who belongs to numerous civic organizations. This supposedly "upright citizen" uses his social position and networks through civic organizations to maintain white supremacy (Percy 1971, see p. 30).

Without individuals willing to take up the everyday cares of their communities, those responsibilities are handed over to experts. The danger, Smith argues, of rule by experts is that it "may create a society intellectually subordinate to experts" (p. 34). That vulnerable populations like seniors and the mentally ill are managed by federal experts will signal a deeper loss of sovereignty among Americans. In this future, most of the ailments of old age have been cured; seniors can expect to live, long, healthy physically fit and limber lives. Since their children are grown and they have retired from their jobs, the elderly have even fewer personal connections and relations. To keep seniors from contemplating their mortality, they are channeled into special federal housing facilities in an industrial park, known as Fedville, where they are "treated for the blues and boredoms of old age" (Percy 1971, p. 14). Nevertheless, many seniors "grow despondent in their happiness" and waste away despite having their health and every enriching activity available to them (Percy 1971, p. 14). Uncooperative seniors who do not keep cheerfully diverted amid recreational activities supplied to them may be euthanized. Euthanasia does not happen secretly without the public's awareness as part of some dystopian government conspiracy in which people are forcibly killed. Instead Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS are divided on whether the "button" or the "switch" is the best means of preserving the volition of the senior opting for death (Percy 1971, p. 122). With the button, a senior presses a button that stimulates the brain into feeling pleasure. Eventually, the senior presses the button so often that she forgets to eat and soon passes away in a fog of good feelings. The switch delivers a swifter death. A senior flips a switch to send continuously good feelings to her brain so that death by starvation happens more quickly.

Public debate atrophies to competing Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS positions about how federal experts will administer policies. Of course, advocates of both the button and the switch miss the point. Both Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS do a great job signaling concern for free will, consent, and dignity. These values are political truisms. Everyone knows that euthanizing people against their will is bad and so seniors must provide consent. Exceptions (such as insanity) require approval of a judge. More exceptions are likely, Percy hints, which underscores how easily individual autonomy talk slides into subservience to expert opinion. Life is worth living only if one has quality of life. Quality of life is a slippery term and largely left up to experts to determine. Being human is conditional; if one meets certain measurable, objective standards of quality of life—health and happiness—then one possesses dignity. Experts make and measure the standards and those who fall short of standards have fewer legal protections. Given longer and healthier lives, Percy foresees that eventually everyone tires of endless painting and pottery lessons and will be sent to the Happy Isles of Georgia where the federal government keeps a facility for euthanasia. From the perspective of modern science, it is easier to eliminate the unhappy person than to try to understand why suffering and pain are a part of life and how it might draw us toward others.

That the Federal government provides salsa dancing lessons—at taxpayers expense—to seniors to distract them from their mortality and that those who cannot be mollified by the manic pace of recreational activities are euthanized is Percy's best dark comedy. Whether a senior lives in a button or switch state means that the way she dies is determined by majoritarian politics. Public concern for volition and dignity provide a fig leaf to hide the fact that the determination that a senior cannot be rehabilitated is not left up to

her, but by a doctor. The platitudes that “the right of the individual to control his own body” and a “man’s sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his potential” are not followed by those who profess them (Percy 1971, p. 197). Percy puts these words in the mouth of Dr. Buddy Brown, a scientist at Fedville and switch supporter, to illustrate how he gives lip service to principles like dignity and individual autonomy while making life and death decisions for patients. In *Message in a Bottle*, Percy notes “talk of the dignity of the individual” only increased alongside the deaths of millions in the 20th century (Percy 1975, p. 22). When so many decisions that used to be subject to political deliberation are given to experts, “scientists are the princes of the age” (Percy 1983, p. 141).

Percy lambasts the idea that experts are always motivated by the best interests of the patient. Whether Mr. Ives, a mute senior, will be sent to the Happy Isles and the switch or released to his home in Lost Cove is left up to an academic contest, known as the Pit, between Dr. Buddy Brown and Tom More to offer the correct diagnosis. Having a penchant for showmanship, Buddy enjoys a significant student following at the Pit. Reveling in his celebrity, Buddy encourages More to join in the waggish spirit of the Pit and says “let’s give them [the students] a real show” (Percy 1971, p. 196). Buddy is not as interested in diagnosing Mr. Ives as he is desirous to beat More, who is both his rival in this contest and for the affections of Moria, a research assistant. While More expresses concern for Mr. Ives’s life, even he spars more fiercely to impress his sometimes lover Moria.

Diagnosis is a means of knowing or way of coming to knowledge in which a doctor observes visible symptoms to discern and perceive an unseen cause. Like any learner, a good diagnostician learns to perceive unseen illnesses with a practiced eye and a healthy dose of humility that grasping the truth indirectly is perilous. But as the Pit demonstrates, political ideology and hero worship supersede the quest for knowledge. In the amphitheater, the students take their seats according to political affiliation. Knothead students sit on the right and LEFTPAPA students sit on the left and so recreate the seating chart of the revolutionary and murderous French assembly in the 1790s. The students place bets on their favorite doctors and debate their merits like racehorses. As if at a sporting event, the students cheer and boo. Or, as Percy darkly suggests, by describing the Pit like a Spanish bullring, these academic contests have more in common with the spectacle of violence and death between bull and matador rather than reasoned instruction and clinical diagnosis (Percy 1971, see p. 198).

At bottom, cold, reductionist science is not guiding the decisions of the doctors, but rather feverish mob politics. The student audience, not the doctors, make the decision for Mr. Ives’s future. Like all celebrities, the doctors play for the applause of the crowd. The students ostensibly decide, but as More wryly observes, the students are as “fickle as a mob, manipulable by any professor who’ll stoop to it” (Percy 1971, p. 291). As with all mobs, it is unclear who is leading who. The students are encouraged to cheer and jeer and doctors are permitted to “unhorse each other by any means fair or foul” (Percy 1971, p. 220). The norms of the Pit encourage demagoguery and deceit. Whichever doctor can make his side appear the stronger wins, because “the students, left and right, who have no use for weakness in their elders” (ibid.). The Pit teaches the students to prize superior rhetorical skill and showmanship. More is wary of student praise; he will not be led by their cheers or jeers, but securing their support is critical for the benefit of Mr. Ives. So he outwits and outmaneuvers Buddy Brown to show the students that Mr. Ives maintains full control of his facilities and should be allowed to return to his home in Lost Cove.

More’s use of trickery admits that deliberation for the discovery of truth is no longer an effective tool, which Percy, as Smith argues, points to a deeper sickness in education and democratic culture that risks totalitarianism. Students “want either total dogmatic freedom or total dogmatic unfreedom, and the one thing that makes them unhappy is something in between” (Percy 1971, p. 233). Smith opines that the “‘something’ in between would require leaving dogma behind—thinking critically about subject matter for themselves” (p. 39). The last thing students want to do is think for themselves. Their education has not prepared them to approach a subject or text confident in their powers of reasoning. Throughout the contest in the Pit, the students cautiously wait for signs from the professors to indicate which side is winning before they boo or cheer. For example, they become especially nervous when the contest takes an unexpected turn and the pro-

fessors are slow to signal the side for which they should cheer. They look anxiously for someone “who can tell them who’s right” (Percy 1971, p. 233). Their capacity for judgment and discern are undeveloped.

There is a logical progression from the students’s surrender to expert opinion to “establishing habits of subservience throughout their lives” (p. 39). Habits of subservience lead, as Smith says, to “passive culture” that enervates political life (p. 40). Passive culture spills over to politics on two fronts that Smith identifies. First, passive culture saps individuals of confidence in their experiences and powers of reasoning that undermines their capacity as political creatures. They distrust themselves in favor of mouthing prepackaged answers to prepackaged problems. Training students to select the correct key term from a word bank is hardly likely to nurture the openness to new possibilities and the prudential risk-taking needed to respond to political challenges. Without such individuals, political life stagnates and marches on with weary attachment to threadbare arguments and courses of action. Second, passive culture lays the groundwork for “conversion to a totalizing ideology” (Ibid.). Ideology relieves the individual of the burden of understanding the complexities of the world by presenting a simplified account that is readily digested. Without noticing it, the individual places her mind under the tutelage of an unseen expert opinion. Passive culture merely suppresses the self but does not truly tame it. For the individual caught in passive culture, the self seethes. Much of the appeal of ideology is that the individual almost re-captures her sovereignty because she feels empowered by belonging to a political movement.

Students are searchers; they want teachers who can guide them toward truth. As Percy shows, their tragedy is that they want to escape being consumers but cannot. Consequently, students are disappointed when they encounter teachers in the classroom; they are expected to consume educational products the way consumers buy goods. Teachers, Percy argued, should “help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual” (Percy 1975, p. 63). No longer “prizes to be won,” Percy laments that fields of knowledge, texts, and experiences have become things to be consumed and digested (Ibid.). Students passively receive the “educational package” prepared for them by experts (Ibid.). Every lesson, text, and experience has a “take away” already determined by the teacher, or more accurately today, the textbook companies following state standards. The students’ education does not alleviate them of their alienation nor prepare them to see themselves as wayfarers. In fact, as Percy suggests, their education intensifies their anxiety and alienation. Students are anxious to have the prepackaged right answers. It would not surprise Percy to learn that studies show that anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and hopelessness are among the most common mental health troubles of contemporary college students (see Jones et al. 2018).

In the novel’s epilogue, More observes that “[l]earning and wisdom are receding nowadays. The young, who already know everything, hate science, bomb laboratories, kill professors, burn libraries” (Percy 1971, p. 383). Education as the mastery of “take aways” or key terms ensures that students remain students and in tutelage. Knowledge never really becomes theirs. If they cannot obtain an authentic encounter with texts and experiences except mediated by their professors, then the easiest thing to do is to forget what they owe to their teachers. Before their murderous and destructive rampage, More sees that the students repeat “dull truths and old lies with all the insistence of self-discovery” (Percy 1971, p. 219). They forget that they are not the origin of all that they believe and forget that they needed teachers. The students’s turn against learning is a sign of how Percy saw the modern project unfolding. The modern spirit that gutted religious authority will come for science too. “In the end science suffers too” Percy recognizes (1975, p. 22). The young will reject “the new science and the old God” in favor of “fragile utopias of the right place and the right person and the right emotion at the right time” (Ibid.). Students smash idols wherever they find them, including science and learning. Violence is the last hope of an individual already deep in despair to reclaim her sovereignty.

Instead of achieving international fame, Tom More learns that “knowing...is man’s happiness” (Percy 1971, p. 383). According to Percy, as Peter Lawler explains, “the human being is a wanderer *because* he is a wonderer” (italics in original; Lawler 2002, p. 63). Since we can come to know ourselves as creatures that have transcendent longings that are imperfectly satisfied, we can find partial rest in the places we live. More gives up his anxious goal to make America perfect and focuses on making his temporary home. More mar-

ries, has children, resumes his job as a psychiatrist with a small practice, and returns to church. Since many Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS have moved away, his community consists of “mostly eccentrics who don’t fit in anywhere else” (Percy 1971, p. 386). More learns to be a part of his community of misfits. As wayfarers, we will always find the places we live mis-fits. More is as anxious and restless ever but “[w]hat has changed is [his] way of dealing with it” (Percy 1971, p. 384). More’s relationships are imperfect and he still feels homeless at times.” Percy, as Smith summarizes, shows that “[n]one of our communities or churches or relationships can provide a complete source of stability; all of them together can only occasionally allow the human person a sense of fullness and rest that we might believe a glimpse of where we really belong” (p. 177). The life of the wayfarer is the corrective to searching for “fugitive perfection” in which one learns “[w]aiting and listening and looking” (Percy 1971, p. 381).

## NOTES

1 All page references are to Smith unless specified otherwise.

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## Brian A. Smith's Hayekian Walker Percy

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Brian A. Smith submits that Walker Percy “placed great emphasis on the dangers of functional or utilitarian definitions of law” that deny personhood, or the quality of being human (p. 182).<sup>1</sup> I wish to examine Smith’s study of Percy in light of Friedrich Hayek’s anti-utilitarian jurisprudence, which champions political decentralization and the devolution of power to local authorities. Smith, not Percy, is therefore my principal subject, in particular his recent book, *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*. I do not analyze Percy’s novels or writings here, nor review Smith’s book on its merits. Rather, I consider Percy’s account of decentralization and localism, as presented by Smith, through a Hayekian lens. Hayek’s notion of *cosmos* (a legal order that is grown, evolutionary, endogenous, spontaneous, and complex, and that disperses power rather than centralizing it) complements Percy’s sense of place and community as naturally ordering forces. Smith channels Hayek by insisting that “the expert’s relentless pursuit of improvement erodes the layman individual’s capacity for choice, and thus, adds anxiety and displacement in an ever-changing world” (p. 36).

Smith also attends to the philosophical, theological, and political elements of Percy’s novels in the “themes of Western decadence and decline, the persistence of alienation, the allure of war, and the effects of science on human happiness” (p. xv). Focusing on the wayfarer, a traveling or wandering figure lacking any permanent home, Smith highlights the existential angst that Percy’s characters experience in the modern, secular West. “I demonstrate,” Smith says, “the ways that an approach to political philosophy incorporating literature can explore not just the broad social consequences of political ideas, but also the psychological and moral effects of different ways humans live and conceive of themselves” (p. xiii). Accordingly, Smith portrays a Percy for whom calculations of expediency and consequentialist reformism will not suffice fully to protect or even recognize under the law the dignity and bodily integrity of every human person. Unimaginative empiricism, in Smith’s account, does not cure a prevailing sense of alienation during times of hedonistic excess and technological disruption. A sense of place and rootedness, however, shared by members of a common community, engenders a tacitly known order and cultural stability that are antecedent to written law and articulated rules (Hayek 1973, pp. 64, 68, 70, 81, 83, 105). Social solidarity arises out of the unwritten norms that, over time, become written laws; such norms locate dislocated individuals, or prevent the dislocation of located individuals. Percy, in Smith’s words, “helps us understand the persistent

appeal of immersing oneself in a community—and the ideologies that so often accompany such unity” (p. xxiii). These so-called “ideologies” underpin the operative rules and normative standards by which interacting humans habitually and customarily abide, and around which they organize themselves into communities.

Walker Percy, a physician and a creative writer, may not have been a lawyer or a legal expert,<sup>2</sup> but he has been cited in at least 79 law reviews and journals as of this writing.<sup>3</sup> *Second Coming*, his penultimate novel, features the story of Will Barrett, a disenchanted lawyer. Percy’s father was a prominent attorney in Birmingham, Alabama, who had studied law at the University of Virginia (Samway 1997, p. 22) and worked as a trial lawyer in private practice (Samway 1997, pp. 22-23). William Alexander Percy, Walker Percy’s uncle and a graduate of Harvard Law School, was a “gentleman planter and lawyer” who influenced the young Walker Percy (Dewey 1974, p. 273). Billups Phinzy Percy, Walker Percy’s brother, was a law professor at Tulane University Law School. Walker Percy was, in short, raised by and among members of the legal profession and maintained close ties to lawyer friends and family. It is reasonable to assume that these relationships furnished his mind with ideas about the law.

Whereas the law should provide order and stability, the exiled, existential man of Percy’s fiction occupies “a state of extraordinary fragmentation as a result of living in a world that has lost its bearings and is disintegrating” (Sweeny 1987, p. 2). This existential man inhabits a small space in an extensive populace, unsure of his place among the masses. His society is so vast that neither he nor anyone in it can fully know or appreciate the particular facts that motivate others to act. The massive size and scope of his society—which is also, in many respects, *our* society—increases the probability of conflict and disagreement among and between its citizens and residents. “As the range of persons extends among whom some agreement is necessary to prevent conflict,” Hayek explained, “there will be necessarily less and less agreement on the particular ends to be achieved; agreement will increasingly be possible only on certain abstract aspects of the kind of society in which they wish to live” (Hayek 1976, pp. 12-13). People cannot agree on concrete particulars about which they know little or nothing; only on the level of generality is agreement about the desired goals and priorities of mass society possible.

Hayek added that, “the more extensive society becomes, the fewer will be the particular facts known to (or the particular interests shared by) all members of that society” (Hayek 1976, p. 13). People with disparate interests who share only partial knowledge of local facts are less likely to form felt bonds and to identify as members of a common community; they are more likely to clash and quarrel. Spontaneous order rather than central planning ensures that their differing needs and purposes channel constructively towards peaceful, prosperous ends, which is to say, towards the maximizing of liberty and the minimizing of coercion. A condition of bigness in mass society leads not only to the centralization of power in the hands of fewer people, but also to the kind of individual alienation Percy depicted insofar as the “absence of relational bonds and personal history in a place leaves one without the capacity to speak of oneself in terms of any locale” (p. 60).

The absence of relational bonds and personal history within a populace also causes disputation and anxieties about belonging: Am I a member of this community? How do I become a member? Should I become a member? What are the prerequisites and conditions of membership? What defines membership? Who decides the rules of membership or the criteria for admission? If I become a member, will I enjoy the freedom to renounce my membership, to leave the community? Are the operative values and rules of the community attractive to me? And so on. Smith explains that “[t]he situation for modern people in relation to community is difficult because these anxieties about belonging exist alongside what Percy saw as actually happening to many American communities: the tendency to standardize” (p. 67). Standardization of the kind Smith describes inheres in the form of order known as *taxis*, which is neither grown nor evolutionary but, rather, made, constructionist, exogenous, planned, designed, simple, and concrete (rather than abstract) (Hayek 1973, pp. 35-54). *Taxis* is predicated on the synoptic delusion, i.e., “the fiction that all the relevant facts are known to some one mind, and that it is possible to construct from this knowledge of the particulars a desirable social order” (Hayek 1973, p. 14). The mass society in Percy’s fiction that causes his

characters to suffer angst and alienation captures the effects of the synoptic delusion. In a decentralized arrangement, by contrast, the complex processes of spontaneous order integrate competing interests as a workable, durable, and stable legal system held together by the mutual adjustments of innumerable individuals responding to changed circumstances (Hayek 1973, pp. 46-47, 113, 119. Power in the decentralized model is diffused and dispersed so that local communities may govern themselves according to their distinct norms and priorities, and so that individuals may freely experience a sense of community and belonging.

Smith suggests that Percy embraces decentralization as an element of sound politics. He claims that, “for Percy, any decent politics requires a respect for local distinctness and history, and a healthy political respect for federalism, localism, and subsidiarity” (p. 182). Moreover, he says, “local distinctiveness makes it possible for people to not see their communities as interchangeable, and for them to develop deep ties of responsibility toward their neighbors” (Ibid). Hayek made a similar point in the following way: “If we can agree that the economic problem of society is mainly one of rapid adaptation to changes in the particular circumstances of time and place, it would seem to follow that the ultimate decisions must be left to the people who are familiar with these circumstances, who know directly of the relevant changes and of the resources immediately available to meet them” (Hayek 1945, p. 524). Hayek, then, whose focus was economic activity, commended decentralization as the optimal solution to the so-called “knowledge problem.” He claimed, “We cannot expect that this problem will be solved by first communicating all this knowledge to a central board which, after integrating *all* knowledge, issues its orders. We must solve it by some form of decentralization” (Ibid). Individuals involved in decision-making on the local level directly feel the consequences of their actions in their communities and are thus better equipped than faraway bureaucrats or officials, who cannot feel the consequences of their decisions on local communities, to understand the immediate needs and wants of their neighbors.

Hayek castigated the synoptic delusion that one person or group of people acting in a governing capacity may design a universally applicable system of order with clear rules that constructively regulate complex human behavior and activities. Rather, the operative rules in different communities develop situationally and contextually; local norms, customs, and practices shape the character and content of those rules. Therefore, rules are not one-size-fits-all or universally acknowledged and understood across time and space. “[T]he rule one ought to follow in a given society and in particular circumstances in order to produce the best consequences,” Hayek stated, “may not be the best rule in another society where the system of generally adopted rules is different” (Hayek 1976, p. 26). As if recognizing this point, “Percy dramatized many ways that without a concrete, relational awareness of what people need, legal and social scientific experts can very easily destroy the basis for local communities to flourish” (p. 183).

Against the synoptic delusion with its reductive approach to community and its tendency to alienate individuals, Hayek celebrated “knowledge of people, of local conditions, and special circumstances”—knowledge that he dubbed a “valuable” asset (Hayek 1945, p. 26). Smith sees in Percy a comparable commitment, summarizing the themes of Percy’s essays about “Southernness” and “the South” as follows: “By making policy around abstract assumptions about the human person with little or no regard for how people actually live, it is very easy for experts to erode folkways and economies around which small towns thrive” (p. 183). Percy’s stories seize on this theme of decentralization: “The conclusions to Percy’s stories vary in their details, but one consistent element in each of these stories is an emphasis on a decentralized scale and scope to human ambition, particularly in politics” (Ibid.). Smith claims, moreover, that these themes are most pronounced in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, “where large-scale government designs collapse, and the characters find themselves returning to the necessity of engaging in politics on a very small scale” (Ibid.).

Utilitarianism, in Smith’s study, is the chief target of Percy’s philosophical labors. Hayek, too, rejected utilitarianism. Hayek contended that Jeremy Bentham’s calculus for measuring pleasure and pain as the principal guide to human conduct does not—and cannot—account for the indeterminate effects of individual decisions on unknown people and places (Hayek 1976, p. 19). The Benthamite calculus is thus a poor

method for ordering society. It can only succeed if the calculating agent is omniscient, which of course no one is (Hayek 1976, p. 20). Working systems of laws in functional societies emerge not out of some wide-spread factoring of utility but from the humble recognition that the material consequences of any one decision cannot be entirely known to the acting agent (Ibid.). “Man has developed rules of conduct,” Hayek explained, “not because he knows but because he does not know what all the consequences of a particular action will be” (Hayek 1976, pp. 20-21). Therefore, Hayek concludes, “the most characteristic feature of morals and law as we know them is ... that they consist of rules to be obeyed irrespective of the known effects of the particular action” (Hayek 1976, p. 21). Presupposing knowledge of the pleasurable or painful effects of particular actions on unidentified individuals in distant communities has dehumanizing tendencies, erasing from the calculus the innumerable adaptations and adjustments of countless people to their unique circumstances. Hence utilitarianism may lead to alienation insofar as the top-down rules it institutes to govern society presuppose a mastery of cultural specificities. Those who find themselves at odds with the controlling rules in mass society—perhaps for moral reasons, perhaps for other reasons—may feel powerless and disoriented when their governing institutions do not represent their needs, wants, or desires.

Percy saw radical decentralization, right down to the level of the neighbor, as an antidote to the alienating symptoms of rationalism or utilitarianism. “Percy suggested throughout his work,” Smith claims, “that only face-to-face confrontations with one’s neighbors can overcome the looming sense of alienation that politics so often brings at the abstract level of party platforms and ideologies” (p. 183). How, exactly, to organize a decentralized system whereby neighborly contact overcomes the demoralizing presence of alienation in mass society is not a question Percy definitively answers. He does not outline a mode of jurisprudence or pronounce a systematically coherent school of political economy. Doing so, in fact, would fly in the face of his commitment to the local, cultural specificities that enable individuals within close-knit communities to flourish and, free from coercion, to realize their possibility as human agents exercising free choice within boundaries established by themselves and their neighbors. Percy adopts an anti-ideological stance towards politics, emphasizing the primacy of the human person rather than of governmental systems and structures (Ibid.). His politics has less to do with government structures, political parties, and abstract ideologies and more to do with family, faith, and community (p. 184). He does not wish for humans to be wayfarers. He rejects “isms” (pp. 183-184).

What does it mean if, in Smith’s words, “we cannot make the world fully our home,” if “all politics can do is keep the peace and pursue what limited forms of justice mankind’s flaws allow”? (Ibid.). It means, perhaps, that the best solutions to the problems created by mass society in this imperfect world involve devolution of power to local levels where personal relationships and reputation mean more than ideology, where the human capacity for mischief is at its least threatening, and where inevitable conflict does the least harm. Devolution undermines unlimited democracy, which, according to Hayek, centralizes and grows power at the expense of regional and local authority (Hayek 1979, p. 145). Percy may not have liked Hayek’s conception of regional and local authorities taking the form of commercial corporations (Hayek 1979, p. 146), but he probably would have agreed with Hayek’s reasons for favoring that form of authority, namely the recovery of a lost sense of place and rootedness. “To re-entrust the management of most service activities,” Hayek said on this score, “to smaller units would probably lead to the revival of a communal spirit which has been largely suffocated by centralization” (Ibid.).

Smith links Percy and Hayek only in passing (e.g., p. 42), but his argument substantiates Hayek’s proposition that, “[t]o the ordinary individual it is much more important to take part in the direction of his local affairs that are now taken largely out of the hands of men he knows and can learn to trust, and transferred to a remoter bureaucracy which to him is an inhuman machine” (Hayek 1979, pp. 146-147). Hayek recognizes here a profound state of alienation and angst occasioned not only by the individual’s disassociation from the decision-making processes that guide his workaday experiences, but also by the deprivation of his agency (or choice) regarding the organization of his quotidian affairs. The charge that economics is dehumanizing should, in his mind, be redirected at political centralization, for which he blames the “inhumanity of modern society.”<sup>24</sup> Smith demonstrates that Percy’s corpus—not just his fiction, but his essays as well—

supports Hayek's thinking about decentralization and local communities. He shows that literary texts can inform and improve our thinking about jurisprudence and the laws and institutions that govern our everyday lives. He might just inspire scholars to consider Percy for insights into the law and jurisprudence, and to analyze the probable and underappreciated connections between Percy and Hayek. In that he will have done a great service.

## NOTES

- 1 All page references are to Smith unless specified otherwise.
- 2 "Although Percy was by no means an authority on constitutionalism, he did have an eye for the logical consequences of this devaluation. He argued that the logical problems American and European societies now face concerning how to draw limitations on euthanasia and abortion would creep in the moment we accepted the first premise that life only holds contingent value." (p. 182).
- 3 This figure is based upon a Westlaw search on January 7, 2019.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 146. It is worth quoting Hayek's full point here: "The widely felt inhumanity of the modern society is not so much the result of the impersonal character of the economic process, in which modern man of necessity works largely for aims of which he is ignorant, but of the fact that political centralization has largely deprived him of the chance to have a say in shaping the environment which he knows."

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## The Wayfarer and the Church

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*Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* should go a long way toward bolstering Percy’s place in an American literary tradition that sorely needs interpreters who live outside of English departments—and wayfaring advocates who speak beyond the bounds of the academy altogether. Smith ably demonstrates how this novelist and man of letters casts light on the limits of the contemporary social sciences and can contribute to more thoughtful consideration of American political life, broadly conceived.

Smith’s book, then, presents a sound, balanced, and in many ways comprehensive assessment of Percy’s thought, with appropriate attention to his fiction and nonfiction alike. As a reader with a particular interest in the relationship between Christianity and American literature, I find that *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* helps to bring into focus one lingering question: how can we best understand or characterize Percy’s understanding of and engagement with “church”—specifically, the Roman Catholic Church? This is, to be sure, a complicated matter. As Smith notes, Percy believed that most modern Westerners have lost the “language and conceptual framework” conducive to the spread of Christianity in an earlier era, and largely for this reason he “adopted” what might seem an “ambivalent attitude toward spreading his faith” (p. xvii).<sup>1</sup> It is also true that “Percy’s account of his church” can seem “somewhat muted” for a writer who is such a “committed Catholic” (p. xxx). Indeed, over the past three decades I have met occasional Catholic readers who find Percy too “cynical.” More often, I have met resolutely secular readers who admire him as an ironist—a keen satirical observer of contemporary American society—and appreciate the fact that even if he somehow sees Christianity as the vital corrective to our society’s flaws, then at least he is respectably indirect about it. Such readers admire Percy not because he is a Christian writer, but despite his being one. Often Smith himself seems to speak most directly to such readers (and in doing so, may ultimately if unintentionally further a kind of stealth evangelism that Percy himself aspired to, as made explicit in his essay “Notes For a Novel About the End of the World”).

Yet Percy’s fiction in fact emphasizes the necessity of “church”—and indeed turns upon it—in a way that *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* can ultimately help readers to attend to more carefully. My own attentiveness to this matter is in part a function of my extended engagement with other twentieth-century Catholic fiction writers, who on the whole tend to be even more “muted” about their Church than Percy—at least in their fiction. Percy’s counterpart from the American South, Flannery O’Connor (1925-1964), provides a particularly vital point of comparison. In

most of his novels Percy might seem a genteel humanist, hardly a Christian writer at all, when read alongside O'Connor: her stories are saturated with religious imagery and feature protagonists who are clearly obsessed with or in a sense living out explicitly theological questions. Yet for all this, literal depictions of "church" are remarkably absent from O'Connor's work: her protagonists almost entirely spring from dissenting Protestant backgrounds and tend to display a fervent individualism in religious matters. She recognized and indeed emphasized that, for better or for worse, "the religion of the South"—and to a large degree, of the United States more broadly—is "a do-it-yourself religion" (O'Connor 1988, p. 350). Accordingly, this writer who lived in the heart of the Protestant Bible Belt features the Catholic Church in only three of her stories: "A Temple of the Holy Ghost," "The Displaced Person," and "The Enduring Chill." By contrast, Catholic sacraments and clergy are quite literally and vitally present in every one of Percy's novels, and in each case increasingly so as the plot develops. Insofar as the novels end ambiguously, each does so only in the protagonist's response (or lack thereof) to a Church that is itself unambiguously present. Indeed, as detailed below, *presence* is one key to Percy's sense of the absolute necessity of "church."

Percy's tendencies in this regard can be viewed in either an international Anglophone or an American context. His fiction with its recurrently strong representatives of the Church—Val Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*, Percival in *Lancelot*, Father Smith in the Tom More novels—in some respects actually mirrors the "confident, triumphalist endings" of earlier twentieth-century novels by English Catholic writers Evelyn Waugh and Graham Greene more than it does O'Connor's fiction (Reichardt 2010, p. 5). One might object that Percy presents his Catholic clergy and religious as quite flawed characters, and indeed they are; but on the whole they and their Church come off better in Percy's fiction than in, say, Greene's *The Power and the Glory*, which is set in a deeply corrupt Mexico and features a "whiskey priest" (whom Percy occasionally cited as a kind of exemplar). Percy's specifically American setting is, of course, quite different from historically Catholic Mexico, or from Waugh's England, and Smith's work implicitly speaks to this fact. Insofar as Smith considers Percy's engagement with "church," he does so by focusing on how Percy shows that any church "can fall prey to extremes that reflect the broken, deranged nature of human communities," even—if not especially—in America (p. 172). But it is important to recognize that Percy is a bit of an American oddity in writing both recurrently and sympathetically about "church" at all. Using the term "church" as implicitly ecumenical, Protestant theologians Stanley Hauerwas and Ralph Wood—both admirers of Percy—have noted the scarcity of even remotely positive depictions of "church" in American literature at large. This scarcity, as they see it, reflects the fact that particular churches in the United States have failed to properly imagine, embody, and enact what it means to be "church." Put simply, "our major [fiction] writers [and poets] have little substantive regard for Christianity because our churches have made it impossible for them to do so": individual churches have "made the gospel of Jesus Christ seem all too much like the gospel of the United States," and "the church" universal has therefore by and large failed to make its "unique and distinctively Christian witness" in this, "the one nation founded almost entirely on an Enlightenment basis" (Hauerwas and Wood 2010, pp. 159-60). These authors decry the general collapse of Christian tradition into a broad "American Creed" that unites the nation, as the faith has become radically acculturated to "a triumphant individualism centered upon a new definition of freedom" that enshrines "the autonomous self" and fosters two "mirror evils": on the one hand, a "moralistic liberalism" that involves spreading a gospel of blindly self-referential "optimism about human nature and destiny"; and, on the other, a necessarily isolating "individualistic pietism" (Hauerwas and Wood 2010, p. 165).

Smith's own reading of Percy in some respects implicitly complements the argument of Hauerwas and Wood. I wonder, though, if it could be more pointed than it already is in distinguishing "church" from "community"—and at articulating the extent to which Percy saw "church" as at once absolutely indispensable to and separate from the success of his American community or communities. At times Smith seems to imply that "community" and "church," though distinct, are for Percy in many respects equal in value. He is surely correct to note that there are inevitable connections between the two: for Percy, "coming to faith" does indeed involve a specific experience of community, as it "reflects not so much an intellectual experience as a relational one" (p. 175). In Percy's novels the relationships that lead to, parallel, prefigure, or oper-

ate in tandem with “church” are often (though not always) marital or otherwise familial. Thus, Smith is entirely correct to say that “Percy’s characters begin and end their journeys in relation to family, community, and the church” (p. 160). The rub comes when he posits simply that each one of these—family, community, and the church—“*can* [emphasis mine] help support a decent life” (Ibid.). The language here suggests that these three are equally valuable, or perhaps equally limited in value. Smith goes on to stress that “None of our communities or churches or relationships can provide a complete source of stability; all of them together can only occasionally allow the human person a sense of fullness and rest that we might believe a glimpse of where we really belong” (p. 177). The accompanying claim that Percy “showed that faith and a church form an irreplaceable resource for the self in an otherwise hostile, meaningless world” cuts both ways: *irreplaceable* stresses value, whereas *an* suggests that this valuable resource for the self is simply one among others (p. 176).

Smith does acknowledge that Percy shows—“indirectly” but consistently—how “faith completes his characters’ varied searches for meaning and truth in life” (p. 172). Yet those characters have to learn not to place too much hope or trust in a church. So what need, then, does faith have of a church? Is church simply a “community” of individuals who each have faith? For Percy, the answer to the latter question is “No.” He could indeed be quite “ecumenical” at times, and he sincerely respected both Judaism and Protestant Christianity (p. 173). Yet he was ultimately altogether clear about his own seemingly “preposterous” belief that Christ founded not churches but “a church” commissioned to make God’s grace sacramentally present in the world, with Peter as its appointed head, and that Christ would guide “this institution until the end of time” (Percy 1983, p. 253). The necessity of such a Church to signify the presence of a transcendent but also immanent God is absolutely essential to whole notion of “wayfaring” as Percy saw it. Furthermore, and more provocatively, Percy’s novels are concerned—on the whole, increasingly so—with the teaching authority of the Roman Catholic Church, with the need for a Church to guide a human reason that seems doomed to go astray on its own. This is in many ways a hidden concern in *The Moviegoer*, but it begins to move out of the shadows in *The Last Gentleman* as the fatherless Will Barrett constantly seeks for someone to tell him what to do, and the nun Val Vaught speaks explicitly regarding the relationship between education and authority. The question of proper authority is clearly at the very heart of *Lancelot*. *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* place bioethical concerns including euthanasia and abortion at center stage—and whether in the novels themselves or in Percy’s remarks related to them, his views on these issues arguably most demonstrate his specific relationship to the Catholic Church in the context of U.S. politics in the 1970s and 1980s.

Smith briefly addresses Percy’s sense of the Catholic Church’s authority in his discussion of the Civil Rights movement, albeit indirectly. First he correctly outlines Percy’s view of the faulty ethos which had characterized both his family and his regional community in the first half of the twentieth century: “Southern Stoicism resulted in a kind of moral blindness, an in particular an unwillingness to embrace either any conception of universal natural law, or a Christian conception of the moral equality of human beings” (p. 94). Notions of national community are relevant here as well, as embrace of a “universal natural law” should ostensibly be a very American virtue—though it is questionable as to what extent “community” in fact exists on a large national scale, as Smith suggests via his recurrent emphasis on subsidiarity. Yet the fact is that in the deep South, neither a national history of inclination toward recognizing universal law nor the deep flawed regional ethos brings about necessary change. Rather, Percy emphasizes the seemingly foreign authority of “the Archbishop” in criticizing “typical Southern attitudes about segregation or labor relations” (p. 95). Percy does see ending racial discrimination as a broadly Christian imperative, not a specifically Catholic one; as Smith notes, he admired Christian leaders of all sorts in this area. Yet as I have argued elsewhere, Percy’s own conversion from young Stoic-agnostic segregationist to mature Catholic opponent of segregation was very much marked by a sense of the Catholic Church’s authority in this regard, and this experience shapes his early fiction in particularly (O’Gorman 1999).

All this being said, I think that there are essentially two reasons why, on the whole, Percy can seem not so committed to “church.” One is that in his fiction the protagonists are always left with an ongoing choice

to join or leave the Catholic Church (unlike the protagonists of, say, O'Connor's two novels, who clearly undergo radical conversions to some seemingly more individualized form of Christianity). The other is that in his nonfiction, he at times lapses into the older Percy family role of public servant—modeled by his Uncle Will—and, speaking to a broad audience, can indeed be quite ecumenical. In such contexts he often wanted to be at least somewhat hopeful about the American future. In the final analysis, though, he believed that the “standard American-Jeffersonian Republican-and Democratic platform self” was lost because it knew not that it was lost, and that it was in need of both a divine sign and an authoritative guide such as he found in the Roman Catholic Church (Percy 1983, p. 12).

Having stated all this to an audience that is much more directly attuned to political concerns than I am, let me close by clarifying: my emphasis on Percy's sense of the importance of the Roman Catholic Church—and of its authority—is not meant to suggest that he was an American Catholic integralist along the lines of Adrian Vermeule. Nor is it necessarily to say that he was as radical a critic of American liberalism as Patrick Deneen or D. C. Schindler have been recently. Having benefited from Smith's careful and compelling assessment of Percy in *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*, I find myself wondering about Percy's likely reaction to these scholars—a topic that Smith is far better prepared to consider than I am. His book has better prepared me to pose such questions and offered renewed hope that Percy's work will endure and continue to speak to the broader audiences that he always sought to reach.

## NOTES

- 1 All page references are to Smith unless specified otherwise.

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## More Than a Diagnostician

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Walker Percy was an expert diagnostician, as Brian Smith repeatedly indicates in his book *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*. Too often readers of Percy find his novels all diagnosis and no cure, yet Smith is apt to highlight what kinds of therapy Percy does supply for our individual, social, and political ills. The problem is that the remedies often remain un-recognizable, even after they are unveiled.

In Walker Percy's second novel *The Last Gentleman*, Sutter Vaught is a stand-in for Dr. Percy. He, too, is a great diagnostician. As his begrudging ex-wife Rita tells the protagonist Will Barrett, "I still think he's the greatest diagnostician since Libman. Do you know what I saw him do? [...] I saw him meet a man in Santa Fe, at a party, speak with him five minutes—a physicist—ask him two questions, then turn to me and say: that man will be dead of malignant hypertension inside a year." Sutter's prediction comes true—though "that's neither here nor there" to Rita. Similarly, in every one of his novels, Percy detects our disease. All our symptoms point to a single cause—our alienation from one another.

We attempt to solve this problem with a variety of methods, and Smith finds two competing options in Percy: theory or consumption. Hence, the "theorist-consumer." "Percy argued that people often oscillate between the acceptance of relatively one-dimensional theories to explain the world," Smith writes, "and consuming the many good and services that our world has to offer" (p. 4). As alienated individuals, we approach one another with limited vision, instrumentalist in our relationships. If we do so, then we are going to be hard-pressed to comprehend any cure that demands a new approach. We would hear such a claim as another "theory" and "consume" it without being radically convicted. Sutter relays this problem to his sister when describing Will Barrett: "Let us say you were right: that man is a wayfarer...who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him...and which he had better attend to. ...What does Barrett do? ...he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better." Here, Barrett reflects the modern American, Percy's primary audience. While the novelist attempts to show the way out of alienation, to reestablish human beings not as theorist-consumers but as wayfarers, the reader will digest only what she desires to hear and no more.

This reminds me of the current problem facing humanities and liberal arts education. Fundamentally different in both means and ends from the technical—or what is misla-

beled as “vocational” studies—the humanities must attempt to use language, data, and play a game that it is ill-suited to its mold. More so than that, the paradigms in the two different fields are so at odds that the adherents of each camp must first step into the other’s shoes entirely, walk in that way, and then determine whether there is truth in the other’s claims. For instance, the study of humanities is not meant to “produce” a graduate who can attain success with a high income, but to teach a person in process how to live as a human being in all situations and times. How to translate that end so that “vocational” schools can understand its merits?

Smith’s book tries to jump several paradigmatic hurdles: it tries to speak to a divided political world about “care and responsibility” as well as “humor and irony” but not through theory, through story (p. 165). In order to make sense of Percy’s cures for society, Smith decodes the message in language that an alienated individual could understand. He interprets for the political theorist (as well as for the citizen!) the point within Percy’s stories, from *The Moviegoer* to the episodes of sci-fi in *Lost in the Cosmos*. Smith masters the difficult task set before him. He believes in the power of literature to transform political thought (citing great sources, such as Susan McWilliams’ “Moral Education and the Art of Storytelling”), and, through criticism, has attempted to do likewise. When Percy explained why he wrote novels instead of essays, he claimed that he needed a broader readership. He also had the models of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn in mind, men who were exiled for their fiction. Their novels had power; they mattered. They scared people, especially those in power, and they cause changed in their national political culture. By attending to Percy’s political thought, Smith challenges readers to see Percy’s power: “Percy’s written legacy reminds us to constantly reknit what the world tears asunder. As wayfarers without a home, we can aspire to no more and justice demands we do no less.”

## Reply to respondents

BRIAN A. SMITH

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I would like to thank Leslie Marsh for organizing this symposium, and each of my respondents for taking the time with my book. Walker Percy once wrote that to receive reviews that both deeply engage with and appreciate what you understood yourself to be doing is such a surprising experience that “One puts it away quick, before it turns into a pumpkin” (Percy 1991, p. 411). Thinking about my book now in light of these comments—almost four years after it went to press—I know what he means.

*Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* arose out of my attempts to work through some of the questions that struck me while reading Percy: How did he think human nature related to language? What did he think explained our manic attitudes toward community? And especially: where did he think America was heading?

As a political theorist, I approached the project somewhat differently than many other Percy scholars had. Rather than employing a book-by-book treatment, I concluded that a thematic approach to Percy’s many writings seemed the most promising route to addressing these points while offering an account of his distinctive social and political teaching. In surveying the many fine works that explore the influences and ideas that shaped Percy’s thinking, I also decided that with one major exception—that of his guardian, William Alexander Percy—I would steer clear of tracing out where and when he may have drawn ideas from others. I think this was justified by the fact that Percy borrowed liberally and idiosyncratically from so many different sources.

To take one example, in a letter to Kenneth Laine Ketterer, Percy explained that he was not a scholar of C. S. Peirce, but rather “a thief”: “I take from him what I want and let the rest go—most of it” (Samway 1995, p. x). Percy may have sold himself short here—Jessica Hooten Wilson said it best when she suggested that the best way to think of Percy’s relationship to other authors is that their influence was a gift to his thought, and that humble imitation and reimagination ought not be thought of as flaws in a writer. We in turn ought to see the writers that influence us the same way (Hooten Wilson 2017, pp. 10-17).

While for the sake of keeping the book on point, I didn’t dwell on questions of influence, it’s hard not to see resonances between Percy and a panoply of other thinkers. Marsh relates Elizabeth Corey’s observation about Percy’s relationship to Oakeshott. I don’t know that I had ever explicitly thought that through—certainly not in the book—but her remark immediately brings to mind Will Barrett’s resolution near the end of *The Second Coming*:

Death in the form of isms and asms shall not prevail over me, orgasm, enthusiasm, liberalism, conservatism, Communism, Buddhism, Americanism, for an ism is only another way of despairing of the truth (Percy 1980, p. 273).

Especially in the shadow of 2020's ongoing political disasters, Percy's resolutely anti-ideological stance seems, sadly, more prescient than ever, making both his thought and Oakeshott's a vital guide for thinking about the threat ideology always poses to decent political life.

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Elizabeth Amato draws attention to several of the most important lessons I tried to articulate in Percy's thought and amplifies upon them in a way I wish I'd done in the book. And while her comments were drafted well before the present crises, they highlight several of the ways Percy remains an essential guide to understanding what is happening to American public life.

While no one needed a prophet to be told that the long months of social distancing and lockdowns would lead to depressions both psychological and economic, what Amato highlights are the observations in Percy's stories and essays that help show why George Floyd's death touched off such a dramatic series of events.

At the moment, we live in a strange rendition of the events of *Love in the Ruins* where protests, riots, and destruction appear to be unraveling the nation. Political enthusiasms of all kinds dominate social media, elites across the nation traffic in conspiracy theories, and many of the nation's civic institutions seem paralyzed in the face of the virus and the violence. As a result, all too many of us wake each morning able to see the opening lines of the novel in a new light:

Now in these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and of the Christ-forgetting Christ-haunted death-dealing Western world I came to myself... and the question came to me: has it happened at last?... Is it that God has at last removed his blessing from the U.S.A. ...? (Percy 1971, pp. 3-4).

On the bright side, in Tom More's world as much as our own, hope remains even as the nation spirals into further disarray. We shouldn't forget that the republic remains what we might make of it through self-government.

Percy knew—and Amato reminds us—that Americans have always found themselves tempted to escape their alienation in political movements. Under normal circumstances, well-ordered families, vibrant faith lived out in church community, and wider circles of civic and business association have attenuated that threat. Months of shuttered civic and social institutions, friendships frayed by distance (or suffocated through proximity), and schooling-by-Zoom created the perfect conditions for Americans to seek a remedy for their alienation in the communities formed by protests and counter-protests.

In this vein, consider a Percyesque hypothetical:

You are a twenty-one-year-old Ivy League student whose campus has sent you home. You are bored of endless remote classes, discussion boards, and mom's deplorable politics. A protest starts tonight in town. You go, and keep turning out every day and night one is held. You meet old high school friends there, and make new ones amidst the festival atmosphere of the marches. A month or so in, you spend a week and a half getting over covid, with vivid nightmares fueled by the terror and excitement of violence. You eventually go back to the marches, but none of it changes anything. School finally resumes, but how do you just go back to class? What about your plan to join Deloitte at the end of senior year? You wonder: Is *this* all there is?

What might Percy's reaction to this lockdown student's plight look like? Percy's account of "The Depressed Self" in *Lost in the Cosmos* springs to mind: "You are depressed because you should be. You are en-

titled to your depression. In fact, you'd be deranged if you were not depressed" (Percy 1983, p. 76). The question before us is what we should do with our sadness, exacerbated as it is by the twin tragedies of covid and civic disorder.

If we reject Percy's wisdom, we might be tempted to think that 2020 would *finally* be the year that Americans' outward professions of happiness yielded to us grappling honestly with our restlessness and secret despair. But that would be too long for an escape and resolution of our alienation—and is just as utopian as seeing salvation in social justice, or some kind of contentment in American greatness restored. We need Percy's help to recognize this truth anew.

Amato highlights perhaps the most urgent reminder Percy can offer: All too many Americans have once again forgotten that politics is a consequence of our homelessness, not a tool with which we can salve our spiritual wounds. Just as in *Love in the Ruins*, political partisans tend to prefer to do the work of politics at the national level, speaking in the most abstract terms and engaging in something more like performance art than the grinding work of governing.

Americans today—both national politicians and ordinary citizens—find themselves drawn to heroic virtue rather than everyday morality. The trouble here, as Amato puts it, is that "heroic virtue is often expressed in a single, grand act, but everyday virtue should be a regular part of one's life." This encourages the idolization of political figures as much as it does the imitation of the talking heads who "destroy" one another in unserious non-debates on television and social media. But it also creates a false picture of what we ought to strive for in living well by prizing the exceptional moments over the everyday, presuming that happiness is found in the fugitive highs of greatness and unattainable anywhere else. It sets us up for a continual repetition of the boredom-elation-despair cycles that Percy depicted in his stories.

Amato captured the ways that I tried to show how Percy can help us restore our sense of life as wayfaring, and why that matters so much. We need to move away from thinking about human life in terms of the pseudo-scientific language of "problems" and "solutions." Instead, Percy reminds us where we can find rest and renewal amidst the inevitable highs and lows of a pilgrim's life.

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By exploring the links between Percy's ideas and F. A. Hayek, Allen Mendenhall opens up a surprising and fruitful line of inquiry. It's surprising because I only turned to Hayek twice in the book (one a brief endnote and the other in-text, discussing his definition of scientism), leaving the reader little explicit reason to see a Hayekian influence on my thinking. But by linking them, Mendenhall captures to a surprising degree much of my view of the ways that these two thinkers intersect, and especially how we can think about matters of thought, language, and politics using their insights together.

I actually expected Mendenhall's analysis of how my take on Percy dovetails with Hayek to start with *The Sensory Order*. I spent a good part of one summer reading the book alongside Percy's essays in the philosophy of language with a friend, and this paring deeply influenced how I have come to think about the hidden order of human consciousness—and especially how much of our moral and political order depends on traditions and lifeways that shape our minds.

Both share a common explanation of alienation as well, in our inability to comprehend the predicament of the self and explain it. For Hayek, it is simply that "no explaining agent can ever explain objects of its own kind, or of its own degree of complexity, and, therefore... the human brain can never fully explain its own operations" (Hayek 1952, p. 185). As a result, we always remain strangers to ourselves, and to others. Percy looked to the singularity of language as the distinctively human capacity and repeatedly noted that despite the quantum advances of all other sciences, all of our attempts to grapple with ourselves come to failure—and we make ourselves miserable with the mishmash theories we use to try to reduce the self to some other factor:

Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the “something more” is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea. Entered as he is into a new age, he is like a child who sees everything in his new world, names everything, knows everything except himself (Percy 1975, p. 9).

Mendenhall draws several other illuminating parallels. I was particularly taken by how he traces the ways that abstraction plays a similar role in both Percy and Hayek’s thought. The mishmash at the heart of synoptic theories tends to encourage their adherents to bring a utilitarian logic to bear on circumstances and subjects that resist that kind of analysis. Whether they are Hayek’s tyrannical planners or Percy’s theory-and-consumption addled characters, those beholden to synoptic delusions suffer the greatest angst and alienation—and tend to cause it in others as well. Calculations of expediency and consequentialist reformism inevitably undermine our human dignity and the moral integrity of those who try to reason by them.

By asking what being a member of a place entails from both Hayek and Percy’s perspectives, Mendenhall points to a place that Percy remedies a missing element in Hayek’s thought. Hayek’s work defends the necessity of general laws applicable to all under which many local innovations and adaptations might flourish. Conservatives—and particularly those of the localist variety—frequently criticize his writings for their insufficient attention to community life. But I think a fair reading like that Mendenhall provides shows that Hayek’s reasoning to a great degree *depends* on the kind of robust community association and devolved power that Percy thought made for a decent polity. Percy’s account of rootedness is richer precisely because it is personal. It opens up a much stronger basis for understanding how norms and traditions “stick” with a people over time—and his stories show us how things fall apart as well. In a way, the drama of these stories completes the theoretical account that Hayek only outlines.

The trouble here is that for both authors, their preferred arrangements require making both politics and economics local affairs. As Mendenhall notes, “Percy saw radical decentralization, right down to the level of the neighbor, as an antidote to the alienating symptoms of rationalism or utilitarianism.” Classical liberals and market-friendly conservatives continually struggle to articulate how we might move back in that direction, and Percy doesn’t offer us much assistance in such a grand project. But he does give us clues for how we ought to think about the everyday work of living and working embedded in and becoming a part of a place—and such guidance might help us manage that in a way that humanizes both our political and economic lives.

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Farrell O’Gorman focuses his attention on the theological dimensions of my book, and offers an important correction to my account of Percy and the Church. I struggled with how to discuss the place of Christianity in Percy’s thought, and my conclusion was, as O’Gorman notes, to highlight the ambivalence and tensions in his reasoning about the Church’s place in American life alongside the faith’s role as a place of rest in our wayfaring lives.

I think he is absolutely correct to emphasize the ways that as a committed Catholic, Percy framed his stories with the authority of the Catholic Church in mind. I emphasized Percy’s ecumenical side more than his Catholicism at times for some of the reasons O’Gorman explains. In reading and rereading the stories, I found myself observing time and again the ways in which his characters would treat their church communities as little more than one more site of theory and consumption. And so I attempted to explain how churches can both provide the necessary promise of a saving faith while also characteristically failing as all human institutions do. It struck me that for Percy, the persistence of the Christian faith in general—and the Catholic Church in particular—despite the extraordinary failures and sins that flow from every institution human beings create, is a sign of God’s providence at work.

O’Gorman’s criticism, however, is on target: if I were to revise the book, I would devote more attention to addressing the ways Percy discussed and recognized that church is more than a simple community of people who share a faith—and that the Church, though separated now by fractures in theology and authority, remains one “commissioned to make God’s grace sacramentally present in the world,” and one that will continue to “signify the presence of a transcendent but also immanent God.”

If I were writing the book today, I certainly would also take pains to explore what Percy might have had to say about the more recent and radical criticisms of American political order that have come from Catholic intellectuals. It is probably true that people have always yearned for restoration and political renewal. Percy was keenly aware of the temptations to nostalgia and especially of the political dangers that flow from that temptation. Bearing these thoughts in mind, my sense is that Percy would have viewed most integralist writings with the same “here we go again” as he imagined in *Lost in the Cosmos* when Marcus Aurelius Schuyler was approached by the man from Carolina wanting an alliance against “them,” and been repelled by the Schmittian logic of friends and enemies that supports so much of this reasoning.<sup>1</sup>

Percy was consistent in his stories and writings that the Church commissioned to make God’s grace known in the world would remain a remnant until the second coming. This not only suggests that politically, Christendom itself offered a corrupt bargain to the Church, but that so much of the lost world traditionalists long to restore was a fantasy. And yet, I suspect Percy would assess the radical traditionalist reactions to “liberalism” and the American regime in somewhat different terms than most of that movement’s critics. He’d ask what longings lead so many intensely intellectual young Catholics to affirm that America was always doomed to liberal implosion, and to embrace the idea that only an explicitly Catholic polity will save us. Even more importantly, he’d probably suggest that the genuine love of neighbors and friends in the Church, as well as in the wider community remains the only way to attenuate those longings.

Anyone can see the fractures in our regime, but to do as many anti-liberals do and argue that our present disorders are actually fruit from a tree poisoned at the Founding, and that this disorder portends America’s doom might strike Percy as yet another species of longing for disaster—one that evades looking to the content of one’s own life and character, and defers a reckoning with the malaise of ordinary life. Movements like integralism look to heroic political action as a salve for our regime’s disorders rather than the slow, patient work of reknitting associational life in our church and community.

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By turning to Percy’s implications for education, Jessica Hooten Wilson notes a challenge: “While the novelist attempts to show the way out of alienation, to reestablish human beings not as theorist-consumers but as wayfarers, the reader will digest what she desires to hear and no more.”

A great writer can sometimes capture a reader’s imagination and overcome resistance of that sort. But the challenges we face today as proponents of humanistic study are compounded by the failure of schools at every level to produce readers that can learn much about how they ought to live as a human being from books. Surely, as Wilson notes, part of the challenge is that humanities scholars have attempted to play the wrong game, as it were, justifying their teaching and writing on utilitarian grounds.

This suggests some alternative paths to restoring liberal learning today. Covid may be a disaster for conventional higher education, but it may also offer up an opportunity for those who embrace Percy’s vision to restore our fellow citizens’ self-confidence as readers and learners. Consider the example of the young student I mentioned earlier: While it is certainly possible that such a person would retreat into isolation and depression, they might also find solace—as Percy did—in some of the books that offer us clues about how we might cope with the reality of our alienated self. But as Wilson implies, that’s not all that likely to happen today without them receiving some help.

Wilson’s worries remind me of Percy’s suggestion that that learning has become a slave to our expectations about it, and the whole theoretical apparatus and set of assumptions about education that we drill into students. Learning doesn’t happen easily in the contexts that it is “supposed” to occur, and a kind of non-

contextual shock is almost required to shake people out of their dogmatic slumber.<sup>2</sup> Percy gives us good reason to believe that textbook-learning offers little more than the death of curiosity. As keepers of liberal learning and lovers of Percy's thought, the task before us is to find new and unconventional ways to expose readers of all ages to the best that has been thought and written—and the disaster before us has given us added incentive to get creative about how to do that.

Wilson reminds us that Percy had the most challenging of models in mind when he took to writing—Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn. The ongoing attempts to police thought and language suggest that whatever might be said about the death of the novel or of reading, the medium retains power—a force that those threatened by the truth will inevitably seek to contain. Percy's great insight into the human condition and the beauty of his writing provide us an opportunity to introduce—he might be inclined to say, “sneak”—discomforting thoughts into the minds of Americans who desperately need to be reminded they are more than organisms in an environment or ghosts behind a social media account.

We remain wayfarers in search of home, and Percy is still one of our best guides to living well while we're here.

## NOTES

- 1 This vignette appears in Percy 1983, pp. 260-1.
- 2 On this idea, see Percy (1975), “The Loss of the Creature,” esp. pp. 57-59.

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## What Can We Learn from Michael Oakeshott's Effort to Understand Our World?<sup>1</sup>

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My intention on this occasion is, first, to say something about what sort of activity Oakeshott understood political philosophy to be; and, second, what he thought the philosophical study of politics might reveal about the world in our time and place.

Although Oakeshott never spent much time talking about influences on his thinking, he did mention a few influences that show us something about his approach. He admired Montaigne's *Essays* and often described himself as a writer of essays. For example, he described his masterpiece, *On Human Conduct*, as a set of three essays whereas most readers would take it to be a systematic whole. An essay is a tentative expression of how one understands oneself and how one understands what is going on in the world. For Oakeshott, the essay is an act of self-disclosure about how one sees things. It is also an invitation to others to say how they see things and thus to keep alive the conversation of mankind regarding the most important matters. In such acts of self-disclosure and response human beings are at their most human.

Oakeshott also acknowledged Hegel for understanding our world as the continuous experience of oppositions to be mediated, reconciled only to disclose further oppositions to be mediated in the continuous flow of experience which constitutes the historical character of the human condition. Oakeshott did not adopt the progressive theory of history with which Hegel is often credited, but he did adopt Hegel's method of explaining what is going on in the world in terms of fundamental oppositions in search of reconciliation. I will provide illustrations of this from many places in his writings.

Oakeshott described himself as a skeptic who would do better if only he knew how to do better. In this he invoked the skepticism of Montaigne along with the dictum of Hegel that the main lesson we learn from history is that we do not learn from history if by learning from history we imagine that the oppositions we must deal with are identical to those of the past and are susceptible to the same responses. The Owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk; our wisdom is largely gained in the retrospective contemplation of what is past. This insight might moderate our tendency to rush headlong into the future, lacking as we do answers in advance.

Here also is the influence of David Hume on Oakeshott's thinking, especially Hume's essay on the Skeptic. There Hume remarks that "philosophic devotion...like the enthusiasm of a poet, is the transitory effect of high spirits, great leisure, a fine genius, and a habit of study and contem-

plation...” (Hume 1987, p. 167). However, Hume says, such a state cannot sustain itself. It must reattach to the actualities of common, historical existence. Hume thus recommends a virtuous temper to counteract alienation from the world. To lose connection to the dailiness of life is to lose sight of the weakness of philosophy’s claim to authority. When Hume wrote this he was recalling the Allegory of the Cave in Plato’s Republic.

Reflection at its best “insensibly refines the temper” against the illusions of passion and quiets the mind without inducing that indifference which would diminish the pleasures of life. If there is no philosophical cure for the human condition, there may be a philosophical cure for the philosophical ill: The philosopher has encountered problems he cannot solve. Thus the skeptic philosophizes also about philosophizing, warning against the pretension that philosophy should rule. Hume had already recognized that the age of ideology was dawning, that the lust for abstract theorizing was growing, that the classical defense of moderation was in decline, that philosophers were tempted to become politicians.

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Oakeshott, acknowledging Montaigne and Hume, and deriving his method of analysis from Hegel, thus describes himself as a skeptic who would “do better if only he knew how.” (“Political Education”, Oakeshott 1962, p. 111) In this Oakeshott was formulating his own response to the possibilities and perils of the modern situation. For him, the philosophic examination of politics seeks to describe the character of political activity quite apart from defending or attacking particular polices. The philosophic examination of politics is not an effort to participate in current arguments but rather to understand why the arguments take the form they do.

Politics is a self-contained manner of human activity; it does not require an independent theory to get it going, to maintain its momentum, or to carry out its self-chosen activities. The philosopher, Oakeshott says, speaks in the indicative or descriptive mood, expressing in other words what has already been expressed in the words and actions of daily life. The practitioner of politics does not require this exposition from the philosopher, often choosing to ignore the philosophic description altogether.

Speaking indicatively, Oakeshott said that politics is the “activity of attending to the general arrangements of a set of people whom chance or choice have brought together” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 112). More specifically, this usually means “the hereditary co-operative groups” called “states.” The modern state began to come into being long before us and may persist long after us. We never possess a blank slate on which we may write what we want. To think we can start from scratch is to suffer an illusion. This illusion is nonetheless evident in our world and must be noticed as a feature of the rhetoric of politics.

For Oakeshott, “politics springs neither from instant desires, nor from general principles, but from the existing traditions of behaviour themselves.” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 123) “Arrangements,” in short, are neither merely desires nor merely principles. They are a manner of living, a way of life, composed over time by the myriad choices of individuals in the society of each other, establishing practices through which they render their association concrete and humanly possible.

Such arrangements, of course, have consequences. They are the product of intelligence responding to its surrounding circumstance according to its understanding of those circumstances. In responding, human beings discover “intimations” to pursue, possibilities which are not necessary implications but present themselves as significant. There are always more such intimations than can be followed up at any moment. Choices among the possible avenues of exploration must be made. Political debate makes its appearance here: “relevant political reasoning will be the convincing exposure of a sympathy, present but not yet followed up, and the convincing demonstration that now is the appropriate moment for recognizing it” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 124)

There is no logically implied direction to be discovered, no self-evidently right intimation among all the intimations that come in for consideration. Human beings find their purposes in life in constructing purposes as they respond to their circumstances. All such responses, no matter how far removed from our

own sympathies, are exhibitions of intelligence at work with intermittent success. We cannot specify our final goal or *the* final goal. We may be able to minimize the chance of disaster “if we escape the illusion that politics is ever anything more than the pursuit of intimations; a conversation, not an argument” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 125). On this point, we might respond to Oakeshott that such conversation nevertheless regularly becomes stridently argumentative.

For some the philosopher may have a depressing effect when the philosopher is obliged to say that in politics, “men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbor for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 127). (One will note that the postulate of this view is expressed in Montaigne’s advice about making a friend of death).

Perhaps with regret the philosopher puts aside the possibility of superhuman wisdom, but also perhaps with relief points to the traditions without which we would fall into a morass of random choices. The emphasis is on the capacity of human intelligence to continue to use the resources of its history. There is confidence that intelligence is not likely to be exhausted. In our moment, the responsibility is ours. It is not likely to be the final moment, and, in any case, we cannot act as if it were. We do not and cannot know that. Nor can we unmake the inheritance we have. History cannot be taken back. Thus we must go on.

Tradition, says Oakeshott, “is not susceptible of the distinction between essence and accident, knowledge of it is unavoidably knowledge of its detail: to know only the gist is to know nothing” (Oakeshott 1962, pp. 128-9). Intimacy with tradition may yield stability without rest. Politics is best conducted in the attitude of energetic sobriety. This attitude results from having grown up hearing the already ongoing voices of one’s world, and having learned to speak with them. The study of history, properly conducted, will introduce us to the detailed, concrete nature of our way of life, and will illustrate on a broader scale what is true of our own experience. The lesson will be that a manner of living indicates how we may conduct ourselves but not what we are required to do, nor where we are required to go. We may gain inspiration, Oakeshott thought, from “thinkers and statesmen who knew which way to turn their feet without knowing anything about a final destination” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 131).

Political philosophy – philosophic reflection on the character of politics – may help us to think straighter about the concepts we employ. Here and there it may reduce the incoherency of our thinking. But it has no capacity to guarantee success in political activity. All of the foregoing reflections may be seen as the effort of a political philosopher to escape from his own occupational illusions by looking directly at the object of his investigation, namely, politics itself.

There we see what political actors actually succeed in doing: they pursue the intimations of the traditions of which they are a part. They may deny this and seek to do something else. Ideologies promise that we can escape the world we have inherited. Proponents of ideologies can sometimes persuade others that they have escaped this limitation. They can rename the Tower of Babel and vary its architectural nuances. They can attempt to pursue perfection as the crow flies. They can also become cynical graspers after power for its own sake. What, finally, they cannot do is to fend off the reassertion of the human condition as it has always been.

Fortunately, the death of false ideas is not identical to the death of the human spirit. It arises from its own ashes. Nevertheless, it would be to the good to avoid recipes for the production of ash heaps where possible. Sensible politicians will do so. Philosophers cannot produce sensible politicians, but they can be irritating reminders of the limits of politics. Philosophers might notice sensible politicians and speak their praises simply by describing them. In so doing, they perform a not altogether useless task. Their task is to understand why the world is the way it is, not to postulate a program to liberate us into a world beyond change or to reach the end of history.

Political philosophers in a special sense are thus of a conservative disposition. This is not to be confused with what is currently discussed as “conservatism” whether paleo- or neo-. Oakeshott’s reference is specifically to a disposition from which no obvious generalizations about views on specific policy ques-

tions may be drawn. The political philosopher is not in the business of determining of which ideas it may be said that their time has come, or gone. This conservative disposition reveals the nature of the skeptical way. Plans to eliminate contingency, or to “give the government back to the people,” or to achieve “peace in our time,” or to “make poverty history,” claim a potential for control the historical record does not support.

If one were to ask Oakeshott, “Why ought governments to accept the current diversity of opinion and activity in preference to imposing upon their subjects a dream of their own?” His reply is “Why not? Their dreams are no different from those of anyone else; and if it is boring to have to listen to the dreams of others being recounted, it is insufferable to be forced to re-enact them. We tolerate monomaniacs, it is our habit to do so; but why should we be ruled by them?...Government...does not begin with a vision of another, different and better world, but with the observation of the self-government practised even by men of passion in the conduct of their enterprises...the intimations of government are to be found in ritual, not in religion or philosophy; in the enjoyment of orderly and peaceable behaviour, not in the search for truth or perfection” (“On Being Conservative”, Oakeshott 1962, pp. 187-88). Here is Oakeshott’s critique of the enlightenment project, and of rationalism in politics, in the wake of the horrendous events of the twentieth century. What then is the proper role of governing? For Oakeshott, it begins with the rule of law.

Governing involves the making and enforcing of rules of conduct. Rules of conduct are not prescriptions for how we ought to live. They are adverbial conditions, specifying that, whatever we choose to do, we must do it under certain conditions. Such conditions may help or hinder us in the pursuit of our aims. The function of the rules of conduct, however, is neither to help nor to hinder, neither to pronounce in favor of nor against particular self-chosen pursuits of individuals, but to encourage the capacity for self-regulation.

Governing provides a structure of laws. When successful, it will reduce the number of unfortunate collisions among interests. It will insure compensation for injuries. It will punish those who refuse to abide by rules of conduct. But government is “not the management of an enterprise, but the rule of those engaged in a great diversity of self-chosen enterprises...not concerned with concrete persons, but with activities...not concerned with moral right and wrong...not designed to make men good or even better...” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 189). Such a government seeks only “necessary loyalty” because it is indifferent to truth and error alike. Such a government may expect “respect and some suspicion, not love or devotion or affection” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 192). Oakeshott is describing procedural governance as the means to allow for the widest range of human self-regulation through voluntary transactions.

Rules of conduct will have to change over time, of course. Such modification as is necessary “should always reflect and never impose, a change in the activities and beliefs of those who are subject to them, and should never on any occasion be so great as to destroy the ensemble” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 190). Even armed with this disposition it will not necessarily be an easy or simple task to act in accord with it: “To rein-in one’s own beliefs and desires, to acknowledge the current shape of things, to feel the balance of things in one’s hand, to tolerate what is abominable, to distinguish between crime and sin, to respect formality even when it appears to be leading to error, these are difficult achievements” (Oakeshott 1962, p. 195).

Reflection of this sort fosters being at home in the world. As with Montaigne, we discern a pattern of movement from natural harmony at birth to the disharmony of youthful exuberance, to the reflective return to the world which we must inhabit and which differs from the one of our poetic images and political fancies. There is no rule enforcing this upon us. We may experience this with greater or lesser grace, but it is the capacity to find the days of age equal to the days of youth which qualifies us for undertaking political activity.

There is a parallel between the wisdom of the philosopher and the practical insight of the mature politician. But they do not need each other to come to them. Oakeshott thought we should be thankful if they can live safely together in the same polity.



Throughout his writings, Oakeshott explored a number of oppositions in search of mediation which characterize the modern situation. Among them are these:

Empirical politics—Ideological politics

Politics of Skepticism—Politics of Faith

Nomocracy—Teleocracy

Morality of habit and affection—Morality of reflective thought

Civil Association—Enterprise Association

I will say something about each of these oppositions and offer a tentative conclusion about what we can learn from them about our world, divided as it is between impatience and disillusionment.

The distinction between the empirical style of politics and the ideological style of politics was a central feature of “Political Education,” Oakeshott’s inaugural lecture as Professor of Political Science, presented at The London School of Economics and Politics in 1951. The “empirical” style suggests a kind of ad hoc response to the kaleidoscopic array of issues one confronts everyday, a kind of not well-organized pragmatism often generating contradictory responses. Opposing this style is the ideological style which, impatient with the disorderly character of the prevailing order, seeks an independently designed plan for the society—a model of how one imagines the society ought to look—coupled with the demand for the power to impose that design in order to bring to an end the sloppiness of the existing situation. The opposition between the empirical and the ideological style is mediated by recognizing the possibility of an orderly but revisable set of judgments as to what it is possible to achieve, involving something like the practical judgment described by Aristotle in the *Nicomachean Ethics* and the *Politics*.

At about the same time as his 1951 lecture, Oakeshott was writing a book which he never published, the typescript of which only came to light after his death in 1990, the book subsequently published with the title, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*. The “politics of faith” describes the utopian or millennialist aspirations to direct our existence towards a final stage of harmony and relief from the ordeal of history. Marx’s belief in the final withering away of the state in favor of a post-political tranquility is one classic image. The “politics of scepticism” arises as a warning against concentrated centralized power, exemplified in the modern constitutional state. Oakeshott thought that both of these were modern responses to the emergence of the modern state beginning about 500 years ago, setting up a polarized field of argument in which each side energizes its opposite even as it seeks to dominate. Each responded to the centralization of power in the modern state beyond anything found in the premodern period, particularly as the technology of control expanded in unprecedented ways—an issue we currently clearly worry about, for example, in the era of the surveillance state. For Oakeshott, modern history is characterized by the unresolved opposition between the politics of faith and the politics of skepticism which he thought was observable in all modern states. The current debate over the “constitutional state” versus the “post-constitutional state” instantiates this conflict.

In his lectures on the history of political thought at LSE, Oakeshott developed a theory of law based in the opposition between “nomocracy” and “teleocracy.” The first, nomocracy, refers to the rule of law strictly speaking as a set of procedural norms to provide the background conditions which reinforce the capacity of individuals to interact with each other through self-regulation, reinforced by the law, promoting mutual recognition and accommodation. The alternative, teleocracy, implies that there is a specific arrangement of human beings to be achieved, defined as an end or goal to be reached through government regulation ad-

justing and directing self-regulation. This is often described nowadays as the rule of experts. In its moderate form it advocates the use of governmental power to nudge people in the right direction through limited coercion. Current debates about the “administrative state” or the “deep state” reflect the underlying unresolved opposition of our time. One recent legal theorist has described this opposition as the difference between the rule OF law, and rule THROUGH law.

In his 1948 essay, “The Tower of Babel,” Oakeshott distinguished between the morality of “habit and affection” and the morality of “reflective thought.” He thought that in our time we have increasingly resorted to the morality of reflective thought. This means increasing suspicion of inherited moral habits, even suspicion of all tradition altogether. In a way this means continually second guessing ourselves, continually questioning our motives, feeling that we cannot expect others to observe the same rules of conduct that we may continue to respect. Oakeshott thought that this must lead to constant anxiety and unease. It is not that traditional notions of conduct disappear but that we allow ourselves to be embarrassed by them.

Finally, in *On Human Conduct* Oakeshott presented the opposition between “civil association” and “enterprise association.” He thought that this was the most comprehensive description of the oppositional character of modern history which he had been attempting to describe throughout his study of modern politics. One can see the connection of this description of the oppositionality to the other attempts that go back to his efforts beginning with *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933, and expressed also in his 1939 book, *Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, and in his Harvard lectures of 1958, *The Morality and Politics of Modern Europe*. In *On Human Conduct* (1975), Oakeshott elaborates at great length the distinction between a society of largely self-governing, self-regulating individuals supported by the rule of law or nomocracy, and the idea of the modern state as a managerial enterprise involving the pursuit of a single goal in which governors manage us through laws and regulations, treating us as individuals who play our roles in a vast division of labor pointing to a unified outcome or end, at which point the conversation of mankind will become a song in unison.

If we consider all these attempts, these essays to understand ourselves and the world we inhabit, we might say that the fundamental opposition in the twenty-first century is between impatience with the failure of the end of history to materialize and disillusionment with the proclamation of its coming. We have become suspicious of the enlightenment project but we find it difficult to give it up. Like Icarus we have flown too close to the sun; unlike Icarus we have survived our fall and must make sense of what has happened to us.

Thus Oakeshott: “The predicament of Western morals, as I read it, is first that our moral life has come to be dominated by the pursuit of ideals, a dominance ruinous to a settled habit of behaviour; and, secondly, that we have come to think of this dominance as a benefit for which we should be grateful or an achievement of which we should be proud. And the only purpose to be served by this investigation of our predicament is to disclose the corrupt consciousness, the self-deception which reconciles us to our misfortune (“Tower of Babel”, Oakeshott 1962).

This conclusion is one aspect of Oakeshott’s self-disclosure; it suggests stoic resignation regarding the human condition since the world must be as it is and as it will come to be. Beyond that, however, there was cheerfulness and enthusiasm for life discernible to anyone who knew him. This is evident in his 1929 essay, “Religion and the World,” where he criticizes “worldliness,” the disposition haunted by guilt about what has past and intense anxiety about what is to come. The result is to depreciate present possibilities, seeking perhaps desperately to live elsewhere than in the moment one has been given which nevertheless remains inescapable. To overcome this was, I believe, the point of view informing Oakeshott’s life work. Echoing Montaigne, Oakeshott sought to overcome the anxieties of self-consciousness through openness to the intimations of immortality, where immortality is understood not as a future state of affairs but as the poetic experience transcending the dailiness of life.

## NOTES

- 1 A lecture presented to the Laboratory for Research on Politics, Behaviour and Media, Pontifical Catholic University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, October 29, 2020. I want to thank Professor Luiz Bueno and the members of the Laboratory for inviting me to discuss with you the significance of the work of Michael Oakeshott, the leading British political philosopher of the twentieth century. I also remember fondly the time when Daniel Marchiori and later Felipe Cardoso worked on Oakeshott's thought with me in Colorado Springs. I am most happy to be with you all even if, for the time being, only remotely.

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## REVIEW

Revolution and  
Resignation:  
Ernst Troeltsch's  
Correspondence  
1918-1923

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Troeltsch, Ernst (2020) *Briefe V (1918-1923)*. Herausgegeben von Friedrich Wilhelm Graf in Zusammenarbeit mit Harald Haury. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter. *Ernst Troeltsch Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. Band 22.

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Aber, Not und Liebe brechen Eisen.  
(But necessity and love break iron)

—Troeltsch, 6.December 1922

Ernst Troeltsch is remembered primarily in the English-speaking world as one of the most famous Protestant theologians in Germany. He taught systematic theology at Heidelberg between 1894 and 1915, the year he moved to Berlin. There, he was a professor of philosophy and wrote primarily on various cultural issues. But after the war, he was also engaged in politics and for a number of years was the undersecretary for education in the early post-war government. This collection of letters is the final volume of Troeltsch's correspondence and covers the years between the end of the war in November 1918 and his untimely death in February 1923. This volume contains much about Troeltsch's philosophy of culture, his changing political beliefs, his academic duties, and about his colleagues, friends, and family. Together, these letters provide a sense of what it was like to be a professor in Berlin during the months of revolution and the years of deprivation. It reveals Troeltsch's struggle between faith and darkness; that is, between hope and resignation. This volume is valuable in that it not only provides an account of Troeltsch's ideas, but also helps to fill out the conception of Troeltsch not just as a theologian, but as a philosopher, a political thinker, and as a human being. As such, these letters inform us of what it was to live and work a century ago and how one particular person attempted to confront numerous crises.

Writing on November 11, 1918 just after the Kaiser abdicated, Ernst Troeltsch wrote to his former student and friend Gertrud von le Fort: "Thus, the end is here! Worse than I had thought in my most earnest estimation!" ("Also, das Ende ist da! Schlimmer als ich bei ernstester Einschätzung gedacht habe!") (p. 61). What Troeltsch could not have anticipated was that it would get much, much worse over the course of the next four years.

First, there was the political situation in Germany between November 1918 and February 1923. In that first letter

to le Fort, Troeltsch wrote about the abdication of the Kaiser, Prince Max von Baden's resignation as Chancellor, and about the chaos in the streets. He and others finally realized that they had been duped by the former government's propaganda and that the secret had finally been revealed. Most likely he spoke for many when he admitted that he was totally shaken (pp. 62-64). Writing to his English friend Baron von Hügel at the end of January 1920, Troeltsch was still rather pessimistic: he was fighting for reason and order during these "evil days" and he complained about illness and death (pp. 222-223). But he also did not have much hope that the current generation would live up to the moral and spiritual challenges and he warned of the continual plundering and the "pure anarchy" (pp. 98, 120). These problems caused him to be overly nervous, eternally uneasy, and to suffer psychologically (pp. 121, 155). Despite this, Troeltsch was not content to remain on the sidelines and he engaged in politics. Troeltsch was elected to the parliament in January 1919 and was appointed Undersecretary of Education. He complained that he was endlessly involved in speaking engagements, reading letters, and writing replies (p. 222). He admitted that he was not suited for that position: "I am only a simple teacher and no politician." ("Ich bin doch eben ein simpler Gelehrter u[nd] kein Politiker.") (p. 121). Yet, he continued in that political capacity until March 1921, and he wrote that he was now finished with politics and would concentrate on his scholarly work (p. 312). That included not only finishing his massive work *Historismus und seine Probleme* but also his numerous book reviews (pp. 353-455, 358, 367, 394, 407). And, he was beginning to plan the projected second volume.

Troeltsch was relieved that he was no longer Undersecretary and later in June 1922 he wrote that no one wants anything from someone who lacks influence (p. 400). Nonetheless, he was still overworked. He often turned down invitations to lecture or to contribute to various editions. He complained often of being overburdened and to feeling "half-dead" (pp. 100, 178, 206, 210, 252, 284, 321, 323, 424, 435, 450). That did not hinder him from being elected Deacon of the philosophical faculty at Berlin in August 1922. He understood that it would be strenuous, but he also knew it would improve his finances. Unfortunately, he underestimated the burden of being in charge of 80 professors and 5,000 students (pp. 407, 445). The burden of being Undersecretary and then Deacon were not the only burdens. His wife was often unwell and always nervous.

Troeltsch had married Marta Fick in 1901 and their marriage was mostly a happy one. However, it was clouded because of Marta's nervous temperament and frequent bouts of illness as well as his own precarious physical health. Their lives seemed to have improved after 1913 when their son Ernst Eberhard was born; however, that period was short-lived. Whatever nervousness Marta had experienced before the November 1918 revolution, the situation in Berlin served to magnify it. Marta's letters are not included in this collection but they are cited in the introduction. Writing to le Fort in mid-January 1919, she complained about the gun battles raging in the street just below their windows (pp. 3, 6). Troeltsch wrote to le Fort in early March and announced that they had a "household catastrophe"—not only was the cook hospitalized because of a severe case of the flu, but their son had an infection in one ear. More disturbing was that Marta was suffering from chronic sinusitis (p. 124). In a December letter to one of his sisters Troeltsch indicated that everyone was in relatively good health but their house lacked sufficient heating (p. 211). At the end of January 1920, Troeltsch wrote to Baron von Hügel and admitted that they were having to make do with old clothes and were often going hungry (p. 222). But by March things appeared to have improved—both Marta and the son were in good health (p. 245). It seems that Troeltsch began to make excuses for Marta: in an April letter to le Fort, he noted that since she had no time, he was writing. He mentioned that they had no cook and complained that the household suffered from continual nervousness (pp. 256-257). Troeltsch continued to have financial problems: in August he thanked von Hügel for his generosity, but in November he wrote to his friend Paul Wernle that their financial situation was terrible (pp. 330, 345). In a letter to le Fort from April 1922, Troeltsch was far more forthcoming about the problems with his wife's health. He reported that she was ill the entire year—she felt weak and was easily tired. In fact, she was unable to do much of anything. Her physician came and was able to calm her some but was unable to do much. In October she suffered even more debilitating attacks so Troeltsch chose another doctor who promptly performed a two-hour operation. The doctor later explained that if he had waited even a half an hour, it would have been too late and she would have died. Marta then spent almost a quarter of the year in a clinic suffering from inflamma-

tion of the veins and thrombosis; and she was not released until eight days before Christmas. She was still unable to walk but was beginning to recover. Troeltsch sent Marta and their son north to her relatives in order to rest and recuperate. They did not return to Berlin until April. During their absence, Troeltsch was again forced to take care of the household as well as doing his academic and political work (pp. 368-369). In June, he wrote to von Hügel and recounted Marta's health issues and around the same time he wrote to le Fort. There, Troeltsch complained that the servant girl had stolen from them and then disappeared. And, he noted that many girls had chosen to emigrate and if they did return, they were filled with revolutionary thoughts and did not want to work. He added that shortly after Marta and the boy returned from the north, she suffered another illness. This time it affected her kidneys and she was still ill (p. 393). Troeltsch sent von Hügel another letter in October and thanked him for sending twenty-four English Pounds. Because of the high rate of inflation, he needed it. Yet, not everything was bad; Troeltsch was proud of his son and he sought refuge where he could. When he found time to escape Berlin, he would head south to his home area in Bavaria and would often find comfort along the shores of some of the area's numerous lakes. There, he would swim, boat, and walk, which help bring strength to his body and some peace to his mind (pp. 333-338, 405-406, 409, 411). But what he was really looking forward to was his trip to Great Britain. Von Hügel had arranged for Troeltsch to travel in March of 1923 and to give lectures in London, Oxford, and Edinburgh (pp. 405-408, 413, 434). In an early December 1922 letter to von Hügel, Troeltsch noted that he was generally in good health and as was his family. He was also pleased that his *Historismus* book was in print and that fifty copies had already been sent to colleagues, friends, and scholars (pp. 420-422, 430, 448). He wrote again how he was working on his lectures and was concerned that the translations were going to be too difficult for von Hügel—not because of any problems with von Hügel's perfect German but that Troeltsch's nuances would be hard to convey. Troeltsch indicated that he was going to spend a few days in January resting up and was eagerly looking forward to meeting von Hügel after an almost twenty-year gap. However, on January 13, 1923, he contracted the flu and had to cancel his lectures and then he suffered a heart attack. However, he believed that he would recover and he had his assistant send a letter dated January 23 to von Hügel. In it, Gertrud Jung conveyed Troeltsch's desire to give the lectures and especially, to see him again. Jung also suggested that Troeltsch was convinced that he would regain his health no later than mid-February and that he would be able to make his British trip (pp. 466, 468). Unfortunately, he suffered an inflammation of the lungs and he died on February 1, 1923.

During the years 1919 and 1923, Troeltsch had endured much and suffered more. First, there was the revolution which was followed by on-going political unrest. Then there was the Kapp Putsch in March 1920 which was followed by Max Weber's death in June. There were the many months of rapid inflation and Walther Rathenau's assassination in June 1922. Despite all this, Troeltsch insisted that he still had hope, because "without it one cannot live" (p. 252). But in the end, misery and darkness overcame hope and light. Need and love may break iron, but it was fate which finally broke Troeltsch.

This volume of letters provides a portrait of Troeltsch in his public and private life and it helps us to understand why Troeltsch was regarded so highly during his life. If one wants an even fuller portrait, one can recommend the other four volumes of correspondence or each of the already published volumes in the *Kritische Gesamtausgabe*. The best biography remains the one written by Walther Köhler. Although it was published in 1941, Köhler was one of Troeltsch's students and shared much of his theological and philosophical outlook. Hans-Georg Drescher's biography is more recent and has been translated into English. However, Drescher approached Troeltsch from the historian's point of view, just as Köhler had done from the theologian's point of view. Thus, what is lacking is a fuller account of Troeltsch's social-philosophical writings. Moreover, we still await the Troeltsch biography which will do justice to the theologian-philosopher-sociologist-political thinker.

## NOTES

- 1 Troeltsch 2020: 443. Ernst Troeltsch's concluding words in a letter to the English theologian and community organizer Arthur Wilford Bonsey. Bonsey had studied with Troeltsch at Heidelberg in 1912-1913.
- 2 The editors of this volume pointed out in one of the hundreds of informative footnotes that during the period between the end of June 1922 and January 1923 the Pound went from being worth 56,000 Marks to being worth 950,000 Marks! The editors' point about the tremendous inflation is well-taken, but they overlooked the fact that in this particular instance that the rate of exchange was actually to Troeltsch's benefit. Troeltsch 2020: 425 and note 2.
- 3 Von Hügel had spent several days in conversations with Troeltsch in Heidelberg during a 1902 trip through Europe.
- 4 *My Ernst Troeltsch and the Spirit of Modern Culture* provides a critical examination of many of Troeltsch's cultural issues. Berlin/Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2021. (*Troeltsch-Studien*. N.S. 6).

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