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1  Mrs. Vashti McCollum sued to have religious instruction discontinued in public schools attended by her son. The Supreme Court ruled in her favour in 1948.
3  Father Leonard Feeney, S.J., insisted that genuine Catholic doctrine excluded the possibility of salvation outside the Church. He and four followers had been dismissed from Boston College and formally ordered to return to the Church, which they refused to do.
4  Waugh’s MS reads, “It is one of the function of an upper class to see that the clergy do not get above themselves…”
5  Waugh’s MS reads, “they have lost their peasant simplicity with acquiring a modest carriage of their rather modest learning…”

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Eudora Welty & Walker Percy: The Southern Imagination

There are close affinities between Chesterton’s Distributists and a group of American writers known as the Southern Agrarians, who included such writers as Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Lytle. The Chesterton Institute is planning to hold a conference on “Andrew Lytle and the Southern Agrarians” in 2010. The Agrarians lamented the loss of traditional Southern culture and their manifesto, an attack on modern Industrial America presented an alternative social vision based on a return to an agrarian society and traditional American values. Their philosophy has been refined and updated by scholars such as Wendell Berry and Allan C. Carlson, a frequent contributor to *The Chesterton Review*. Eudora Welty (1909–2001) and Walker Percy (1916–1990), were two other distinguished Southern writers whose work achieved national fame. William F. Buckley, Jr. interviewed these two writers in his programme *Firing Line*, taped at WMIAA in Jackson, Mississippi on December 12, 1972, and originally telecast on PBS on December 24, 1972 with William F. Buckley, Jr. and panelists Gordon Weaver, Jerry Ward and Dan Hise. This interview was reprinted in the Mississippi Quarterly, 24 (Fall 1973), and published in the book Conversations with Eudora Welty (*Washington Square Press: New York, 1985.*)

Mr. Buckley: The American South has always been a mysterious generator of literary fire and beauty and pathos, for reasons that
have been endlessly explored, for reasons as simple as that men are endlessly curious about any cradle of genius. The new tranquility of the South could conceivably put an end to it—one possibility. Another is that it will bring on a spiritual peace that will permit a more untroubled pursuit of culture and art. But the question will be asked, “What exactly is the Southern imagination? What does it come from and why? Does it have anything distinctive to say? What are its particular attributes?”

There is no way that you can say about Eudora Welty or Walker Percy that they are Southern writers in the sense that their work is done for the benefit of a regional audience. Eudora Welty is as interesting to New Yorkers as Mary McCarthy is to Alabamians. Still, she is a Southerner, born and educated here in Jackson, Mississippi, and at the University of Wisconsin—a brief excursion out of state—then back to begin writing those numinous short stories and novels that have brought pleasure to a generation of readers and distinction to her profession. Her current novel is called *The Optimist’s Daughter*. Other landmarks in her career include *Delta Wedding*, *The Ponder Bean*, and *Losing Battles*.

Walker Percy went out of Mississippi to go to college, all the way up to what Senator Claghorn once insisted should be called “Upper South Carolina.” After Chapel Hill, he went to Columbia and became a medical doctor. That was during the war, but before he had a chance to practice he contracted tuberculosis, which turned out to be a good excuse to do more reading. Years went by and suddenly there was a novel, *The Moviegoer*. It won the National Book Award in 1962; then *The Last Gentleman*, and a year ago the funniest, the shrewdest, the most poignant and jubilant novel of the decade, *Love in the Ruins*.

*I should like to begin by asking Miss Welty: What is it you think you can see better for living in the South than you could living outside it?*

**Miss Welty:** Well, as a writer, I think I see in the South what is the essential, because I take what I know for granted. So I see the new as the new and the old as the old and I feel I am a judge because my eye has been trained by experience so I know where I am. I have a base to see people moving in their true light.
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Mr. Buckley: *Is this an argument against novelists traveling?*
Miss Welty: Not at all. No, I am all for that, too, because then you write from a different point of view—that of the outsider who sees things afresh. I mean I do. I am not speaking for anyone but myself.

Mr. Buckley: *So, it is not anything distinctive about the South that particularly endows your work; it is rather your familiarity with the region. It could as well be the Middle West.*
Miss Welty: It endows me, and it enables me.

Mr. Buckley: *Why?*
Miss Welty: Because place does endow. I feel that I learn through my roots and understand better what I have lived with and come to know, and those are the tools you write with.

Mr. Buckley: *I can understand that, but people, you know, do not much talk about the literary tradition of the Rockies.*
Miss Welty: It may come yet.

Mr. Buckley: —or the Pacific Northwest and, quite apart from the fact that historically the South is an old part of this continent, what is it in the South that grabs people and causes them to want to write about it?
Miss Welty: Well, I do not know. I think this probably has been said a thousand times because all sorts of things have been said.

Mr. Buckley: *Well, it could be true then, if it was said a thousand times.*
Miss Welty: Yes. But I think the Southerner is a talker by nature, but not only a talker—we are used to an audience. We are used to a listener and that does something to our narrative style, I think. I think you could talk in the Rocky Mountains. You would not get anything back but an echo.

Mr. Buckley: *Well, does that mean that because you are talkers by nature you develop the art?*
Miss Welty: Yes, we like to entertain and please, and we also rejoice in response, and I think that helps the narrative style.
Mr. Buckley: Whereas, say in New England people would be primarily taciturn?

Miss Welty: I do not know. That is what people say they are. I have not noticed.

Mr. Buckley: I wish they were more taciturn in Massachusetts. Well, the art of communication, therefore, gets practiced in the South, does it, because people spend—

Miss Welty: From the cradle.

Mr. Buckley: Yes. Well, now, does television affect that, as far as you can see?

Miss Welty: I don’t know. It probably does.

Mr. Buckley: Does that make people more passive in their social relations?

Miss Welty: Oh yes, I am sure that there are many other things to entertain us now, but in the early days of the South, people didn’t have anything else to entertain themselves with except each other. That was in the days of the porch-sitting in the Faulkner stories. Don’t you agree, Walker?

Mr. Percy: Yes. To me the advantages are what you say, coming from a region which has a tradition; but also from this tradition I think you have a perspective on the United States’ culture which you would probably not have if you were born and raised in New York or Chicago. So I think one of the advantages of being a Southern writer is the advantage of a perspective so that you are in a subculture in one sense, and in another sense you are able to look at the main culture from outside. I mean it is possible to see the forest better from the outside than from the inside.

Mr. Buckley: Well, is the difficulty that we are trying to finger here, with some writers outside the South in particular, that of deracination? Is this what you mean by saying “talking from the inside”—the idea of roots struck, and productive?

Mr. Percy: Right. I don’t think that you could recognize deracination unless you had some tradition or some fixed point from which to see it. Reminds me of a remark of Flannery O’Connor. When a New York critic asked her why she had so many freaks in
her novels, she said, “Well, in the South we still recognize freaks, you see.”

**Mr. Buckley:** As freaks.

**Mr. Percy:** As freaks.

**Mr. Buckley:** Yes. Because if the freaks are normal, then they cease to be freaks. Well, the fact that one develops roots in the South seems to me to escape answering the question of why does not one develop roots elsewhere that are as productive? Is there an obvious answer to that? Probably there isn’t an obvious answer to it. Is there an unobvious answer to that?

**Mr. Percy:** Well, I think the obvious answer is the difference in the two cultures—Incidentally, the two cultures are merging now and there is less and less difference. I mean, Jackson is more and more like Cincinnati and more and more like Atlanta. But I think that perhaps it is still possible to characterize the South as having a tradition which is more oriented toward history, toward the family, as Eudora said, toward storytelling, and toward tragedy. I mean, we got beat and whereas the North—

**Mr. Buckley:** Was that a tragedy?

**Mr. Percy:** Well, that’s a big question. We can take that up. But the North early on became a technological society, was less interested in roots and tradition. So I like to think of it as kind of a chemical reaction. What happened is you have these two cultures which were far apart in the beginning. They were too far apart, so far apart that there was not much interaction. So I think that for one hundred years Southern literature, before and after the Civil War, was not particularly distinguished. It was ingrown; it was either romantic or it was defensive. It was trying to defend slavery as an institution and, later, trying to defend segregation. Then along about 1920, I think the cultures began to merge and you had a kind of spark jumping so that you had people like Faulkner coming on who began to write about their region but in such universal terms, neither romantically nor defensively, that it made itself understood to people from other parts of the country. And then, I think that this so-called Southern renascence probably lasted maybe twenty or thirty years. Now I think the two cultures have merged so that the
South is more or less like the rest of the country. I don’t really think there are probably any more Southern writers now than there are, say, in Chicago or—I mean young writers coming up.

**Mr. Buckley:** Well, I never meant the observation so much to be numerical as qualitative. Is it your guess that the quality of Southern literary art is going to cease to be distinctive?

**Mr. Percy:** I am not aware that the younger Southern writers are any better than younger writers coming from anywhere else. I don’t know whether Eudora would agree with that or not.

**Mr. Buckley:** Would you, Miss Welty?

**Miss Welty:** I am not sure I have seen enough, but I would agree so far as I know because I think their eyes are no longer self-conscious. I mean the art of writing as a Southerner would now be a self-conscious thing to do, don’t you think? It never used to be. When we were coming along we just wrote because this is where we lived and what we knew. But to write strictly a Southern book now—I think you are quite conscious that you are seeing a segment and that people are going to look at it—

**Mr. Buckley:** If there is any Spanish moss there at all.

**Miss Welty:** I do not know.

**Mr. Buckley:** When you talk about the response of the South, how do you handle the generality? Or is there a generality—maybe it will become one now—that Southern writers are usually discovered by the North?

**Miss Welty:** Well, it’s where the Editors live. Is that what you mean?

**Mr. Buckley:** Well, also the book buyers.

**Miss Welty:** Yes. Well, to speak for myself, I—

**Mr. Buckley:** Do your books sell well in the South, compared to other parts of the country?

**Miss Welty:** Oh, they do not sell well anywhere. I mean I am not much of a seller.
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Mr. Buckley: That is not what I heard.
Miss Welty: But actually though it was the Southerners who were first good to me and first published my work—The Southern Review, in Baton Rouge. It took me six years to sell a story to a magazine of national circulation, but from the start, The Southern Review—

Mr. Buckley: Was most hospitable?
Miss Welty: So I feel that I was discovered in the South. I was.

Mr. Buckley: In terms of this response, I understand what you mean by saying that the social contact between people in the South is more vivid than in the North, but I have not, in my own experience, seen that this transfers automatically on through the disembodied intermediary of a book.
Miss Welty: Well, I can tell you something that I think would apply; that is, if you grew up in the South when things were relatively stable, when there was a lot of talk and so on, you got a great sense of a person’s whole life. This is because you know all of the families. You know several generations because they all live together. You know what happened to So-and-so clear through his life. You get a narrative sense of your next door neighbor instead of someone you just meet in the supermarket, which you do today, or you just see people in flashes. You had a sense of what happened to them and probably why, because look what happened to her grandmother—

Mr. Buckley: I see.
Miss Welty: —and you watch life and it is happening. Well, that is a novel. I do not mean you would take somebody’s life and make a novel, but your turn of mind would be a dramatic one.

Mr. Buckley: Well, the dramatic turn of mind, of course, makes for readable prose, but it does not necessarily, or does it, make for prose that gets read by a society that does not read?
Miss Welty: No, I was really talking about subject matter, I guess, instead of—

Mr. Buckley: Appealing subject matter.
Miss Welty: Yes. I do not know, that is so individual. I do not see how you could ever make a ... I feel like Walker—it doesn't matter where you were born in that respect.

Mr. Buckley: Pressing the point just a little bit, it is, as you know, widely believed in the North that the South is a Philistia, with two or three, or four or five oases, of which a solid minority are sitting here with me right now, and that you sort of reel drunkenly from Greenville and have to go about five-hundred miles before you find somebody else who is literate. This is, of course, caricature, but they like to buttress it with figures-book sales, for instance. What's the truth there?

Mr. Percy: It may be partly economic. You know, Faulkner used to say that he could sell more—he sold more novels in Japan than he did in Mississippi.

Mr. Buckley: Well, Japan is a lot bigger.

Mr. Percy: That's true. But the point is that it is true, maybe fewer people buy books in the South than they do in New York, but at $8.95 a copy, you know, fewer people can afford it in the South than in New York.

Mr. Buckley: Well, you're talking pre-paperback.

Mr. Percy: Yes.

Mr. Buckley: I am talking about post-paperback.

Mr. Percy: I am talking about those hard covers, where you make your money. What happens at home—for instance, I will see somebody on the street and they will say, “Look, don’t worry, I’m going to read your book. I’ve got my name on the library list, so it’s coming up,” you see.

Mr. Buckley: Are you suggesting, therefore, that the libraries circulate much more here than they do in the North, that most of the reading is done here through library copies?

Mr. Percy: It certainly is done considerably here. I do not know how much is done in the North. A public library in a small Southern town is heavily used, I’ll tell you that.

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Mr. Buckley: Is there a sort of validating correlation between the increase of wealth in the South and the increase in reading?

Mr. Percy: I think so. I think more books are bought, particularly in places like Atlanta or Jackson or New Orleans, where there is more industry, more income.

Miss Welty: More book stores.

Mr. Percy: More book stores.

Mr. Buckley: Okay, let me ask this. The sensibilities of the Southern writer—well, I guess the sensibilities of any writer—are always one of the things he has primarily to offer, and the sensibilities in the South must have inevitably in the past couple of generations, two or three generations, been deeply affected by what was then a distinctive problem here, which was the race problem. What one wonders, and what a lot of people have asked themselves, is how in the atmosphere, let’s say, of the First World War or of the twenties, could a sensitive Southern writer have lived here? In the same way people are saying, “Why don’t people leave South Africa? How is it possible to live in South Africa?” You wrote a very angry article for Harper’s, in 1965, which was unfriendly to the then state of Mississippi. And it was so unfriendly to the state of Mississippi that one wondered, you know, is there a law that requires Dr. Percy to stay here? I don’t have a position on this, but I am anxious to hear you both on the subject.

Mr. Percy: Well, I think you can say two things. I think you can recognize the injustice of the situation which existed at that time and still, to a degree, exists, but from a novelist’s point of view the situation is much more—from a moral point of view, it is very simple. It is either right or wrong, and there was a lot wrong. From a novelist’s point of view, human relations are much more complex than saying that the white racist is wrong and the black protester is right. I mean, Faulkner was always dealing with the complexities of human relations between white people and black people and between black people and black people. So he could create a character like Dilsey, in my mind one of the great characters of American literature, in spite of the fact that there was a great deal of social injustice in Mississippi at the time. I do not really see how one affects the other, you know.

Mr. Buckley: In the sense of continuing a front, isn’t it hard to—Let’s take a reductio ad absurdum. Let me say it explicitly so I am not
misunderstood. I am not comparing life in Mississippi to life, say, in Germany during the thirties, but a lot of people left Germany during the thirties not because they were themselves being persecuted, not because they were Jewish, say, but because they simply didn’t want to live in a society in which they saw that kind of thing countenanced. The question is: Was there an equivalent response by especially sensitive white people during the black days of the Southern experience?

Mr. Percy: Oh, I am sure some Southern writers did leave. I know quite a few who left and moved to New England.

Mr. Buckley: For that reason?

Mr. Percy: Not just for that reason. Strangely enough, many of the so-called “agrarian writers,” members of the agrarian movement, who were defending the values of the old South, seemed to have ended up in Northern universities.

Mr. Buckley: At Yale.

Mr. Percy: So they certainly were not leaving in protest, but I think maybe what one does—at least for myself, the best thing to do is to stay where you are.

Miss Welty: I do, too, because I was here all that time and I felt the unreality of late night telephone calls from strangers asking me, “How can you stay in that place? Why don’t you use all of your novelistic powers and so on and write some things against this?” And really, I assumed that my whole life I had been writing about injustice, if I wanted to, and love and hate and so on. They are human characteristics which I had certainly been able to see long before it was pointed out to me by what happened in those years. I was always against it, but what I was writing about was human beings. I put it in the form of fiction; that is, in dramatic form. I was writing about it from the inside, not from the outside, and when it was stated from the outside it seemed to me so thin and artificial.

I once did a story—I was writing a novel at the time, and when Medgar Evers was assassinated here—that night, it just pushed up to what I was doing. I thought to myself, “I’ve lived here all my life. I know the kind of mind that did this”—this was before anyone was caught. So I wrote a story in the first person as the murderer, because I thought, “I am in a position where I know. I know what this man must feel like. I have lived with this kind of thing.”
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Mr. Buckley: Did you sound like Beckwith when you were through?
Miss Welty: I think so. It was published in the New Yorker almost overnight. In the meanwhile, Beckwith had been arrested, so we had to change everything in it that would in the least seem to incriminate his trial.

Mr. Buckley: Was there a lot to change—which would be high tribute to your—
Miss Welty: Nothing was changed that mattered. The things that were changed would be like the color of automobiles—

Mr. Buckley: My point was did you end up knowing his profile so clearly that in fact—
Miss Welty: I think I had it on the inside, but as somebody said to me, “No, you thought it was a Snopes and it was Compson.” But at that time there wasn’t too much difference, you know.

Mr. Buckley: Artistic license, yes.
Miss Welty: No, but I did know the inside and I wrote from the interior, because I felt that I could. That’s the only time that kind of thing ever happened to me.

Mr. Buckley: That would not have been possible, let’s say, writing about, oh, Speck in Chicago.
Miss Welty: Oh, no.

Mr. Buckley: —or any of those people?
Miss Welty: No. What I was writing about really was that world of hate that I felt I had grown up with and I felt I could speak as someone who knew it, and I didn’t think anything else written about things like that were anything else but, more or less, tracts.

Mr. Buckley: Hatred can be useful too, can’t it?
Miss Welty: Well, really, I just wrote from deep feeling and horror. You know, it was a real story.

Mr. Buckley: There was a reference in one of your pieces to the final evolution in the attitude of William Faulkner. I didn’t altogether
understand it, but I think you were saying that he had been latitudinar-
ian in his attitude on the race problem and was finally catapulted out
of it by some episode. Is that correct?

Mr. Percy: I am not sure I remember, but I think what happened
was that he published a notorious letter in—

Mr. Buckley: Yes, in the Reporter.

Mr. Percy: Was it in the Reporter or Commercial Appeal—about
the time of the troubles in the early sixties, in which he said he felt
his Mississippi rancor coming up and he said; “There’s going to be
some shooting in the streets, and Mississippians are going to be do-
ing the shooting.” And he seemed to favor it. But I think it is fair
to say that in the last few years of his life he certainly reversed his
attitude on that and was certainly on the side of civil rights, judging
from repeated statements he made at the University of Virginia and
also at West Point.

Miss Welty: Yes.

Mr. Buckley: If someone undertook the challenge of tracing the
evolution of his position on it in his novels, would they come up with
something?

Mr. Percy: Well, that would be hard to do because I think, here
again, his attention as a novelist was not devoted to the issue, he was
devoted to people. Nothing is more difficult to write than it good
protest novel. The angrier you are, the worse the novel you are liable
to write.

Miss Welty: That is true.

Mr. Buckley: Yes, you made that point in an essay, I know.

Miss Welty: Did I? Well, I believe it.

Mr. Percy: It’s true. And the people who manage to do it, do it
in spite of the fact that they are starting out to write a propaganda
novel. Now I am thinking of somebody like Dostoevsky, who would
start out to write a tract. He’d read something in the paper that
made him mad and he would write an anti-revolutionary novel, but
somehow or other the genius in the novelist took over and it became
a great novel in spite of his strong feelings against a certain political
or social issue.
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**Mr. Buckley:** *Has there been a good protest novel written in the South?*

**Mr. Percy:** Yes, I can only think of one. Richard Wright’s novel—well two, Ralph Ellison’s, which I think transcends reason. It’s a great novel. It transcends the protest and the character becomes a universal figure of modern alienation—which was a remarkable feat he pulled off, I think.

**Mr. Buckley:** *In what category would you put Styron’s Nat Turner?*

**Mr. Percy:** Well, actually I did not think of it as a novel. I thought of it as a historical study—

**Mr. Buckley:** *Great heavens, was it accurate?*

**Mr. Percy:** Truthfully, I like it a lot less than I did his first novel and I have ambivalent feelings about it. I’m not sure it truly represented what Nat Turner was really like.

**Mr. Buckley:** *Was that his objective?*

**Mr. Percy:** I don’t know what it was. In spite of the good things in it and the fact that I enjoyed it, when I finished it I couldn’t help but wonder what Nat Turner was really like. Was he like this? Maybe I doubted it.

**Mr. Buckley:** *I never got the impression that he was supposed to be like that. However—Well, you talk now about the merging of the cultures and I guess it was inevitable. I guess also everybody seems to agree on what one stands to gain from it. What does one stand to lose?*

**Miss Welty:** Some identity, probably, but a different reaching identity. I don’t know. I see the novel or literature, whatever, just as if it were an ocean and all these various things like the novel of protest, the novel of this and that, are just like little chips floating on it. But I feel that the novel itself, which is a work of imagination, is so much more profound and so much more full of monsters and beautiful things and just a big world in itself. That is the part that matters; that will always be there. And all these other things just come and go and float around on it. They are important, but they are not everything.
Mr. Buckley: Well, you are talking now exclusively as a novelist and—

Miss Welty: Well, that’s all I am.

Mr. Buckley: Right. No, well, you are more things than that. You are also a human being and an American and a Southerner. I can imagine Caruso talking about the biological evolution of the Italian race based on whether “X” number of bel cantos would come from it. Let’s concede that there will always be something for a novelist to do. I think that that, in fact, has been established. What is it that, in terms of that which is socially desirable, threatens now to go or to atrophy with the—I got a stuffy letter from a doctor saying I should say atrophy. Is that right?

Mr. Percy: That was the last way I heard it.

Mr. Buckley: —that threatens to go as a result of the merging of these cultures?

Mr. Percy: Of course, what we stand to lose, not just from the point of view of the novel but from the point of view of the culture, is a result of a homogenization—one excerpt coming to look just like another one, so that an excerpt of Jackson looks like an excerpt from any other city in America. The task of a novelist is something else. I think the task of a novelist—and I would like to think and I would like to hope that maybe the Southerner, with his peculiar tradition, might contribute to this—is somehow to humanize the new American culture. Maybe somehow he can bring his talents to bear on the supermarket and the shopping center and the shopping mall and treat it in ways in which, say, a Connecticut or New York novelist is unable to.

Miss Welty: Well, you wrote The Moviegoer.

Mr. Percy: Yes, of course, I think that is the task of the novelist. What we are seeing the end of is the end of the traditional Southern novel where you are dealing with small towns, country people, and in a few years there won’t be many left. So, for better or for worse, we are going to have to deal with it, with the new scene. It’s going to be quite a trick.

Mr. Buckley: Yes. You will obviously have to do that and you have anticipated it in your last novel where you deal, I hope, with a world
that we’ll never have to deal with as a practical matter. But, in a search for the sources of the Southern imagination, one thinks of certain Southern strengths. You’ve named a couple of them. You name now only the loss of identity as one of those that will be dissipated by this fusion of the two cultures. What, as a practical matter, will this mean? Will this mean that people in their attitude toward Mississippi will exhibit less of the sort of Confederate syndrome? Will they care less to preserve the home of Jefferson Davis, or will they feel less of a sense of at-homeness when they are here? Is that what you anticipate?

Miss Welty: I don’t know. I was just thinking from the workmanship point of view of the novelist—I mean, I am not a bit interested in preserving the home of Jefferson Davis.

Mr. Buckley: Why not?

Miss Welty: Because I am interested in human beings who are alive. I mean, I respect history for what it is, but I am speaking as a worker, somebody who likes to write. I like living life. What I want to do is find out what people alive today—

Mr. Buckley: But you were talking about the importance of the grandmother just a few moments ago.

Miss Welty: I know, but that is all part of it; I mean that’s a—

Mr. Buckley: But she’s dead.

Miss Welty: A character is a taproot that goes clear down. It used to be that it didn’t have very far to go to get maybe something that was easier to see, but now there are so many layers of life, so many blurrings, so many homogenous things together that you have to send a taproot down perhaps deeper. But you are always going to get the same thing, because what you want is an essence, a dramatic entity, the human being to be shown as unlike any other human being. That’s what human beings are, and you’ve got to show them that way. That Jefferson Davis doesn’t have much to do with it is what I am trying to say.

Mr. Percy: Of course, I think the bad thing that has happened with the South has been the loss of Southern tradition in these magical twenty or thirty years which I think are more or less gone. The best thing that’s happened, and in the past ten years I think—and I believe people don’t really realize this—is for the first time in
Southern history, for the first time in one-hundred and fifty years, the South is no longer defensive. I mean for the first time since the revolutionary days, around 1820 or 1830, the South is not trying to defend this peculiar institution or what followed it. I don't think we realize how much Southern talent and Southern brains went to defending this. I remember growing up when the best brains in the Senate and the House from the South were devoted to defending against the anti-lynch bill, devising parliamentary maneuvers to defeat the anti-lynch bill. That to me is a poor way to spend your time and energy. So now I think the rest of the country is in so much trouble, and the South knows this and whatever the good and bad of this, at least the guilt of the South is sufficiently assuaged so that it's no longer defensive.

**Miss Welty:** I agree.

**Mr. Percy:** I think this is going to lead to a release of Southern energy, both in the political field and, I hope, literary fields.

**Miss Welty:** I agree, and when I said that about Jefferson Davis, what I meant was that we do not have to go back to that to tell us anything. When I said I wasn't interested in Jefferson Davis I mean we have other things. That lack of defensiveness I guess is what I was really meaning. We don't have to say anything except—

**Mr. Buckley:** *I didn't really mean that the whole of the South was expected to focus on nineteenth century icons. I was using him purely as a symbol. Everybody in the South knows who Jefferson Davis was and this is one thing that distinguishes the South from other parts of the country. Now one talks about the South as the last true American community, and a community has its myths, its history, that it nourishes and cherishes and that, I take it, is going to be one of the casualties. Perhaps you may say, in balance, worth losing, but it is a loss just the same, right? That's why I am wondering whether twenty years from now the South will be literally indistinguishable from the North with the single exception that the weather will be hotter, or maybe they will change that too.*

**Mr. Percy:** I don’t know. That is a good question. I hope not.

**Miss Welty:** I hope not, too.

**Mr. Buckley:** *You say you’re not. I’ll bet you’re working on a novel that gives all the answers and you’re husbanding the details. Let’s hear*
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from the panel. Mr. Dan Hise of the English Department of Millsaps College.

Mr. Hise: First, I would like you to say a few more things about how the Southern writer can contribute to the rest of the country and help humanize our culture. You have all mentioned shopping centers.

Mr. Buckley: By the way, are you against shopping centers?

Mr. Percy: No, no indeed. I will have to back up on that. You see, I come at literature from a different point of view from Eudora Welty. We speak of Southern writers, and we have something in common and we have a lot different. She’s a woman of letters in the best sense of the word. She practices the art of the novel and practices—She is about the best we’ve got. I practice a lower, a more bastard art, actually. I came at it from science. I was brought up with a scientific education and I’m not particularly well-read. So what happened to me—I did some science, medical school, and got interested in the scientific method and I made what to me was a great discovery. It was nothing new—it was discovered before that by Kierkegaard—namely, that science, the scientific method, cannot make a single statement about the individual man insofar as he is an individual. It can only describe a man insofar as he resembles other people. So science can say nothing whatever about the individual man. So it suddenly occurred to me, “How do you go about talking about the individual man?” Finally I came to realize that a novel could be approached as a very serious effort—an extension of science, if you will—to explore the individual man, what I call the post-modern man, his predicament, his perennial predicament, his particular historical predicament and do it in a very serious way. So, to answer your question, my novels attempt to be an exploration of what it is to be a man living in a particular time in a particular place. If you are talking about making him human, this is part of the exploration. I am trying to explore what it is to be human, what it is to live in a certain place at a certain time.

Mr. Buckley: Professor Jerry Ward of the English Department of Tougaloo College.

Mr. Ward: Yes, Mr. Buckley, perhaps this was an oversight in programming, but as we try to find what are the sources of the Southern imagination, it seems to me that we should have considered the black writers from the South.
Mr. Buckley: Well, two of them were mentioned.

Mr. Ward: Now, we did mention Ellison and we did mention Richard Wright. We said nothing about Margaret Walker Alexander, for example, or Ernest Gaines or Alice Walker, who is from Georgia. It seems that if we are looking for something in the South that is new, a group of writers who have not decided that the South is really dead and who are still trying to find something there to hang onto, something that they can develop in their writing, it would be coming from the younger black writers and some of the older ones. Now there is something that Miss Welty uses quite a bit in her work that a lot of the black writers have been using and are trying to develop in a new way, and that is folklore—a feeling for the people, a feeling for those things that have been closest to the hearts of the people although they might not have received any kind of academic recognition. I am just wondering—I would like to address this to Miss Welty. In your own writing, do you feel that this is perhaps the one thing that marks it as Southern—a very fine feeling for the human being in a way that Northern writers or Western writers might not be capable of handling?

Miss Welty: I don’t understand the question. Do I feel that what?

Mr. Ward: I am trying to find out what is the source of power in your own writing. Would you say that it is folklore?

Miss Welty: Well, I am certainly aware of all the existing folklore that is here; I mean, I will use anything, you know, whatever is about that I think truly expresses what I see in life around me. I have used not only Mississippi folklore but Greek and Roman myths or anything else, Irish stories, anything else that happens to come in handy that I think is an expression of something that I see around me in life. I don’t start out just to write something and use folklore. It’s just there to be plucked.

Mr. Buckley: What about the larger question of Mr. Ward, namely that the black experience in the South ought itself to be the source of a tremendous amount of artistic interest?

Miss Welty: I agree. I have read a good many of our new young black writers and think highly both of their work and their capacities. I think that’s certainly a resource that is going to be very powerful in the future.
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Mr. Buckley: Dr. Gordon Weaver, the director of the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi.

Mr. Weaver: I would like to address this question to both Miss Welty and Dr. Percy in going back to something that Mr. Buckley said. I recognize it’s a spurious kind of comparison between Nazi Germany and Mississippi, but proceeding on that kind of fallacious basis, among the people who left Germany and suffered the suppression, to some extent, were writers. I am just curious if you ever felt, either of you, during the time of the more dramatic troubles in Mississippi or in the South, any kind of insecurity as writers; that is to say, the South was proud of you as writers and often times would hold you up to the North, I assume, as symbols of their culture, but did you feel that you were safe only so long as you might have stayed away from anything that was politically touchy or something? I don’t mean to suggest that you did, but did you ever feel that there was an atmosphere coming out of, perhaps, the political superstructure that one had best stay away from these things if one was going to stay in the South and be comfortable there? Did you ever feel the hand, then, of government, however far back in the shadows, as a writer?

Miss Welty: I didn’t feel any avoidance in anything I was doing and I might get just as mad as I could be about things at home and then I would go up to New York and the things that people would say there made me madder and I would feel defensive because there was a great void of ignorance between the two parts of the country. I think a writer, all his life, is aware of all sorts of threatening and menacing things going on. This time was very open and dramatized and the whole world knew about it, but there are always the human threats of people, of injustice and all these other things that go on through your whole life, and you can’t run away from that. That’s the life of which you are writing and of which you are taking part. I can’t see that you ever avoid anything. As long as you are writing an honest story about human beings, you’re writing about the same thing. Maybe I talk too much.

Mr. Buckley: When you say that you cease to be defensive actually it was Walker Percy who first made the point—do you go on feeling some bitterness over the hypocrisy of the North?

Miss Welty: Yes, I—
Mr. Buckley: During the period that has ushered in the so-called “Southern tranquility,” it has ushered in a national recognition of entrenched bigotry in other parts of the country that made a living off of moralizing at the expense of the South. Now, is this bringing on a vindictive reaction on the part of Southern intellectuals or a generous reaction?

Mr. Percy: Well, I think the point is that the North is so preoccupied with its own difficulties that the Northern moralists are no longer concerned with the South. They are too busy. They are very busy wolfing with their own problems. And the old Northern habit, particularly New England habit, of using the South as the American demon and scapegoat, is no longer true. I, for one, feel no bitterness nor desire to redress grievances. I think that’s the good thing about it—both sections of the country feel much more American in the face of our common problems, now, rather than in the problems that divided us before.

Miss Welty: I think so, too. Actually, I think you felt that all the time among individuals—I mean your friends in the North with everything always open, the understanding was always there. It was the casual person at the dinner party who never met you before who would say something that would really make your hair stand on end. I don’t feel anything about that now either.

Mr. Percy: Strangely enough, even at the worst times, there was never a time when I felt that I, in spite of my opinions, should leave Mississippi or Louisiana. This may be hard to understand, but even at the worst times—I think paradoxically the South is known for its violence, a good bit of violence, but at the same time there is a certain tolerance and civility toward people and their opinions. Maybe it’s because Southerners look on writers as harmless and eccentric and you’re expected to say strange things—

Mr. Buckley: And do.

Mr. Percy: And do.

Mr. Buckley: Mr. Hise.

Mr. Hise: I was wondering, Dr. Percy, when you named your central character in Love in the Ruins Thomas More, whether you weren’t intending to present a redefinition of America, since the original Thomas More, in a sense, defined America in the first place—Utopian myth, the new Eden.
Mr. Percy: No, that wasn’t the reason. Unlike the first two novels, I wanted to establish a Catholic point of view and to identify the main character as a Catholic of a certain sort—not Irish, but English, which is a strange category in itself. It’s a small minority. Here again, it’s a question of perspective. I figured that the descendant of an English Catholic would be in a particularly advantageous position to see all around him, to see his fellow Catholics, his fellow Protestants, and other people. I wanted to establish a Catholic from a certain Catholic point of view from the beginning.

Mr. Buckley: Mr. Ward.

Mr. Ward: Yes. Mr. Percy, in an interview once you said some things about the loss of God. You didn’t call it the death of God; you called it the loss of God, or the loss of man’s power to believe in God. Do you see that this has been a kind of result in the South of some of the problems that we’ve had? Do you see that the young Southern writer, perhaps, is going to turn to other things, other than institutionalized religion or the old traditions, as a source of sustenance?

Mr. Percy: Yes, I think you’re right. He certainly is. But if I recall the article correctly, I was defining religion in a very broad sense of saying that a writer is often addressing himself to ultimate concerns and he is a religious writer whether he is dealing with God or the loss of God. In either case it is a religious quest and, as Ptolemy once said, all issues are ultimately religious. So, whether the writer is dealing with God or the loss of it, to me it falls in the same category.

Mr. Buckley: Mr. Weaver.

Mr. Weaver: I am wondering, given the tradition of fine Southern writers, is it possible that a number of writers who happened to be from the South and wrote about Southern subjects, stories located in the South, may have been overrated by the rest of the country because there were so many good ones? Have bad or mediocre writers crept into national literary reputation on the shirttails of writers like yourself or Faulkner?

Miss Welty: Are you asking me?

Mr. Weaver: Yes, either or both of you. Miss Welty.

Miss Welty: Who are we to say? I mean, I would hate to think that anybody was trying to—
Mr. Weaver: I don’t mean a self-conscious plan, but just that the non-South may overvalue any writer from the South.

Miss Welty: No, I don’t know of a single case myself, but I don’t think so. I don’t see how that could well be.

Mr. Weaver: Well, there have been, for instance, writers from the South who have very explicitly exploited, for instance, the troubles of the sixties and that kind of thing. I don’t want to name names, but there are some who have written novels about—

Mr. Buckley: Go ahead, you may if you like.

Mr. Weaver: I would rather not. But you said before—

Mr. Buckley: Is that Southern civility?

Mr. Weaver: —that these concerns with social protest struck you as being somewhat outside what you thought were really the profound and valuable things in literature, and I just wondered if you would agree that the Northern critics, and so on, may look at all Southern writers in a lump and it may have the effect of giving cachet of a kind to some mediocre Southern writers?

Miss Welty: I am not familiar with whoever it is you are talking about, I guess, but I think—

Mr. Buckley: That’s because you are too choosy.

Miss Welty: No, but I think the thing is general, anyway. The whole country is full of people who are jumping on bandwagons every time they go past the corner in every concern. But I don’t think you can blame any section of the country—I mean, put the cause of it on any section of the country. Those things are either good or bad according to their own merits. I don’t feel—

Mr. Percy: I think it would be a question in terms of people who were influenced by Faulkner, Southern writers who were influenced by Faulkner. Incidentally, I think this is the reason Faulkner has been both a blessing and a curse to the South—a blessing because he is probably the greatest American novelist of this century and a curse because he was so powerful and influential that many Southern writers, younger writers who came after him, were influenced even to imitate his idiosyncrasies and his styles and his sentences. I can think of a few writers, whose names I will not
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mention, who have published as imitation Faulkners.
  Miss Welty: But that is a different kind of influence.
  Mr. Percy: Yes.
  Miss Welty: That’s an honest kind and a benign one, even if it
does not work out very well.
  Mr. Percy: But I think that it is important to get out from under
the big name.
  Miss Welty: I do, too. I mean one is a fashion and the other is
a serious attempt.

  Mr. Buckley: Mr. Hise.
  Mr. Hise: You never did, Dr. Percy, get to the question of the Civil
War as a tragedy. Shouldn’t it be thought of more as a sort of fortu-
nate fall in C. Vann Woodward’s sense that the South could no longer
participate in the American myths and it has taken the rest of America
one-hundred years to find out what the South found out at the time of
the Civil War?

  Mr. Percy: Well, in the last novel I wrote, the novel ended on the
hope that the South could do for the country what the North did
one-hundred years ago. The North saved the Union, which is prob-
ably a good thing and I was hoping—in the novel, the country falls
apart again here. In this case, it is the great Northern cities which
break away from the rest of the country. It was hoped in the novel
that the reconciliation would take place in the South and extend to
the black-white reconciliation, liberal-conservative. This was a hope
and it would certainly be poetic justice if this would happen.

  Mr. Buckley: Does that answer your question or does that evade it?
  Mr. Hise: So it’s not really a tragedy? Hopefully.

  Mr. Buckley: When you say that much of what happened to the
South is the result of its having got beat, do you mean chastened?
  Mr. Percy: No, I was thinking of the novelist’s equipment and
maybe a tragic sense of life being an indispensable part of this
equipment. And the North, never having lost a war, didn’t have it
and so, if this is the case, then the South certainly had a tragic sense
of life for a long time after the Civil War.
Mr. Buckley: And why did that not, during the nineteenth century, result in interesting novels? You said because it was over-defensive?

Mr. Percy: I think it was defensive. It was either romantic or defensive and there was too much hurt and too much anger. I think it took a while to be digested and I think it happened along about 1920 or 1930.

Mr. Buckley: Would you say that Japan and Germany will need themselves also to pass a couple of generations before their writers can write interestingly?

Mr. Percy: Well, they got help from the United States in their reconstruction.

Miss Welty: Yes.

Mr. Buckley: And your point was that that sapped the bitterness? Well, what about the defensiveness?

Mr. Percy: You mean in Germany and Japan?

Mr. Buckley: Yes. In the American South, there was a lot of ante-bellum enthusiasm, but there isn’t in Germany very much enthusiasm for their experience.

Mr. Percy: Right. History seems to be accelerating. Things happen so much faster than they used to. World War II seems to have been forgotten by the Japanese and the Germans. Of course, they don’t like to think about it—and as I say, the material effects—

Mr. Buckley: But the old order was all that the South had left, wasn’t it?

Mr. Percy: For a long time.

Mr. Buckley: And, under the circumstances, mooched on it in every sense of the word.

Mr. Percy: Yes.

Mr. Buckley: In sum, commendable?

Mr. Percy: I would like to think that the Southern Literature in the nineteenth century was good, was first class, but I don’t think it was. I can only think of one or two writers who compared with the New England writers.
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Mr. Buckley: Thank you, Dr. Percy. Thank you, Miss Welty, and gentlemen of the panel, ladies and gentlemen.

Eudora Welty

Walker Percy