Walker Percy and the American Pursuit of Happiness
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Walker Percy was an American Catholic and Southern writer best known for novels about the place and purpose of the individual in the universe, but two of his novels (Love in the Ruins, 1971, and The Thanatos Syndrome, 1987) were more explicitly political in nature. Percy’s reflections on the state of the American regime informed several essays as well as his politically-oriented novels. He was concerned about the condition to which the United States had declined in the late twentieth century, and examined how the nation’s pursuit of the wrong kind of happiness contributed to its decline and endangered its future. Percy understood that true happiness lay in virtue and in faith, and he laid considerable blame for America’s cultural decline on its embrace of scientific materialism. While his novels are not didactic, they urge a return to faith as the key to saving American society.

At least since Alexis de Tocqueville, observers of the American scene have warned of problems inherent in American democratic culture. Over time, various commentators have predicted trouble ahead if the nation did not work against the hazards of that culture, warning Americans that they are too willing to allow government to make them comfortable (Tocqueville), lack a grounding in true religion (Orestes Brownson), and lack a well-developed sense of morality (G. K. Chesterton). Some, such as Patrick Deneen, have even argued that Lockean liberalism, by enshrining “sovereign choice and individual appetite [as] the main object of government” (Deneen 2012a), has inevitably led America to its current climate of “hedonic titillation, visceral crudeness, and distraction, all oriented toward promoting a culture of consumption, appetite, and detachment” (Deneen 2012b). Moreover, these observers have all warned that, unless changes were made soon, the United States faced a grim and even dangerous future.

One observer of American culture who fits into this tradition is the writer Walker Percy. Percy is usually identified as a Catholic novelist, often as a psychological or philosophical novelist, frequently as a Southern novelist, and even as a “Doctor of the Soul.” He has also been recognized, secondarily, as a social and political commentator; consider the collection of writings on Percy’s work published under the title A Political Companion to Walker Percy (Lawler and Smith 2014). Nevertheless, even in his nonfiction writings, Percy’s major concerns are not political ones. That
being said, however, it is certainly the case that Percy had political views and that there is a political dimension to at least some of his fiction. Indeed, properly understood, Walker Percy’s novels exhibit a Catholic sense of political truth and a prophetic warning about the direction of American politics and society.

Percy’s fiction primarily focuses on existentialist questions about the place and purpose of the individual in the universe. But two of his novels in particular—Love in the Ruins (1971) and The Thanatos Syndrome (1987)—have much to say about the political realm. When these works are considered in light of another book that Percy admired—Walter Miller’s A Canticle for Leibowitz (1959)—their political message is even more apparent. Percy’s fiction teaches political lessons as well as existential ones. Percy thought deeply about the American regime and the condition to which it had descended in the late twentieth century.

Percy, like Tocqueville, sees Americans as pursuing the wrong kind of happiness. In the tradition of Western philosophy, human happiness was understood not as pleasure but as virtue. As Aristotle put it in Nichomachean Ethics (1098a), “human good turns out to be activity of the soul in accordance with virtue” (Aristotle 2000: 12). Thomas Aquinas refined this position, explaining that humans can achieve true happiness only with God, but that in this world imperfect happiness can be achieved through virtue (which included not only the Aristotelian virtues, but theological virtues as well). Tocqueville and the American Founders, like others in the Western tradition, understood human happiness in the world as the pursuit of virtue. John Adams, for example, commented in his Thoughts on Government (1776) that “All sober enquiries after truth, ancient and modern, Pagan and Christian, have declared that the happiness of man, as well as his dignity, consists in virtue. Confucius, Zoroaster, Socrates, Mahomet, not to mention authorities really sacred, have agreed in this.”

American democratic culture rejected the traditional view and “lowered its sights” toward a more immediate and material idea of happiness. Percy lays much of the blame for this materialism on the dominance of science in Western society. Percy, himself a physician by training, was not opposed to science as such. On the contrary, what he rejected was not science itself but the materialist view embraced by much of the technological and scientific establishment; to that extent, he saw the problem as scientism, or the view that physical science and material forces explain all of reality. The triumph of scientism in Western culture led to the decline of Christianity. Percy goes so far in several places as to refer to the modern world as “post-Christian” (see, for example, Percy 1991:208).
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Percy’s “political” novels make a profound case for the position that contemporary Americans are headed toward disaster. In *Love in the Ruins*, American society and politics begins to break down in palpable ways: social unrest, a breakdown in law and order, political paralysis, and a variety of social ills. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, a different disaster looms: the threat of dehumanization as a means of social control, undertaken by experts in the name of improving humanity. Both fates are clearly undesirable and intended to be warnings; what is even more important is Percy’s warning that Americans’ own pursuit of (false) happiness is the root of the problem.

**THE WORLDS OF DR. TOM MORE**

In both *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the central character is Dr. Tom More of Feliciana, Louisiana. More is a distant relative of St. Thomas More, whom he invokes at the climax of *Ruins*. He is also not exactly the same character in both novels, nor are the worlds he inhabits in each novel exactly the same. Since the events of *Thanatos* take place in a more stable political environment than those of *Ruins*, it certainly does not seem to be the case that the Tom More of *Thanatos* had exactly the same experiences as the Tom More of *Ruins*. The differences in the worlds of Dr. Tom More allow the author to make related but different political statements.

*Love in the Ruins*

In *Ruins*, Tom More lives in a vaguely apocalyptic America. Civilization is coming apart, as symbolized by the detritus of industrial society all around: broken-down internal combustion automobiles, cracked highways, abandoned motels, etc. Vines sprout everywhere, although they are generally ignored by everyone except Dr. More; this ignorance is further evidence of decline and decay. A post-industrial age is emerging, but it seems to the reader that it is something not quite superior to the Auto Age it is replacing.

Signs of breakdown are all around. The old political parties have become the conservative Knotheads and the liberal Left Party. The Knotheads have succeeded in requiring prayer in black public schools, while the Left takes pride in having removed “In God We Trust” from coins. Knotheads tend to suffer from rages, hypertension, and large-bowel problems, while Leftists suffer from impotence, morning terrors, and abstraction of the self from itself. The Catholic Church in America has fractured into three factions: an American Catholic Church that favors the Latin Mass but makes private property rights its most important dogma; trendy
left-wing Catholics who favor relevance over God; and, a tiny remnant of orthodox Catholics scattered around the nation. Racial tension is increasing and threatening to break out into all-out war (and an uprising by African-American “Bantu” activists occurs during the novel). Euthanasia is widely available and encouraged by the federal government. American intervention in a seemingly interminable war in Ecuador drags on. Creeping vines grow all over, a kudzu-like sign of decay, and More constantly notices the vines sprouting in new spots throughout the novel. Tom More lives almost literally in the ruins of American civilization.

These ruins are mostly spiritual in nature, because by many outward signs America is thriving. The post-Auto Age is one of advancing technology, symbolized by silent electric bubbletop cars that work so well. The Gross National Product remains high, night-time golf is all the rage as a new hobby, and the external life is good (for the moment) in Tom More’s Paradise Estates neighborhood. Physical prosperity stands in sharp contrast to national spiritual emptiness.

While More’s America seems headed for an end that is characterized more by a whimper than a bang, the story builds toward an impending crisis. That crisis comes when the Bantu uprising erupts and outright fighting takes place across the nation. For More, the climax of the conflict comes at his country club, and there is gunfire in the lounge where he has spent so many after-golf afternoons drinking with friends. Reflecting on this descent into violence, More sees America’s “Original Sin”—slavery—as the ultimate source of the tensions he is now prey to.

But it is clear that there is more to the problems of Tom More’s world than just racial conflict. Rather, racial conflict is one symptom of America’s deeper problem: the pursuit of happiness. Percy is skeptical about Americans’ endless pursuit of happiness. In Ruins, as Percy himself put it in a commentary on the novel, “Everyone there [in the America of the novel] has pursued happiness and generally succeeded in being happy. Yet something is wrong. As one character says, we were all happy but our hearts broke with happiness” (1991: 248). Americans, he contends, hold to a “secret and paradoxical conviction that America is immovable and indestructible” (1991: 249). The problem is that America is quite vulnerable to destruction, because its people have pursued pleasure rather than true happiness.

To combat this heartbroken happiness, Tom More works to perfect a device that will enable him to cure anyone’s psychic ills through stimulation of certain portions of the brain by a concentrated emission of radiation. He calls his instrument a lapsometer, and hopes that its perfection will enable him both to solve the miseries of his age and to win a Nobel Prize.
He is approached by a demonic tempter in the form of Art Immelman, who says he represents a foundation that wants to distribute the lapsometer so it can be used to promote “the freedom of the individual to choose his own destiny and develop his own potential” (Percy 1971: 363). That promise sounds eerily like Satan’s temptation of Eve in the Garden, “your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God” (Genesis 3:5).

Immelman wants an unlimited pursuit of pleasure, which will only make things worse; it will make “sovereign choice and individual appetite” the highest—perhaps the only—good. Human beings will no longer be fully human, but will be slaves to their own pleasure. American civilization will continue to decay, because pleasing the self will be all that matters to anyone. It is only in coming to see the consequences of the lapsometer that Tom More is able to reject Immelman (in part by praying to St. Thomas More for help).

America as it is portrayed in Ruins is a nation that once stood for more than pleasure; it has become a society that places “sovereign choice and individual appetite” above all and is thus headed for trouble. Again, as Percy himself has written, he is concerned with how American civilization might collapse “at the very time everybody is talking about the dignity of the individual and the quality of life” (1991: 250). The decline and fall of the United States, he is warning, is likely to come from our own misordered priorities.

**The Thanatos Syndrome**

Percy’s last novel is more explicit in its message than many of his earlier works, and it is less a comedy than Love in the Ruins. Extended monologues by the character Fr. Smith make clear the author’s lesson for the reader. His purpose is to issue a warning, and that message is presented in the context of a story rather than a screed. Instead of the parodies of politics and the culture wars that set the stage in Ruins, The Thanatos Syndrome places Dr. Tom More in a world that is closer—chillingly so—to our own.

In the world of Thanatos, Dr. Tom More lives in a Louisiana that is part of the suburbanized New South of modern America. While little is said about the larger political milieu, Tom More appears to be a citizen of a stable United States. A prominent feature of More’s community—and a sign of Percy’s concerns—is Fedville, “the federal complex housing the qualitarian center [institution for warehousing and euthanizing the aged], communicable diseases control, and the AIDS quarantine” (Percy 1987: 23). Clearly, the administrative state looms large in More’s Thanatos world, and it is focused on improving the “quality of life.”
Tom More, recently returned home after a prison sentence (he was selling prescriptions to supplement the paltry income of his failing psychiatry practice) notices that something is wrong with his wife, several patients, and many others around him. People are losing important aspects of their humanity and exhibit an array of strange and somewhat subtle symptoms: a change of personality (“a curious flatness of tone”), change in sexuality (“sexual feelings more openly, yet more casually, expressed,” as well as a shift in women from menses to animal-like estrus), speaking in sentence fragments, context loss, and an idiot-savant response (“They’re not idiots but they’re savants in the narrow sense of being able to recall any information they have ever received”) (Percy 1987: 68–69).

Eventually, More is able to determine that heavy sodium being dumped into the local water supply is responsible for this change, and that it is part of a conscious experiment in social engineering by scientists at Fedville. The mastermind of the experiment, Dr. Bob Comeaux, extols its virtues to Tom More in a conversation on the wonders he has wrought with heavy sodium in the water supply: crime in the streets is reduced by 85 percent; child abuse by 87 percent; teenage suicide by 95 percent; teenage pregnancy by 85 percent; hospital admissions for psychological and substance abuse by 79 percent; and, “L.S.U. engineering students no longer use calculators. They’re as obsolete as slide rules. They’ve got their own built-in calculators” (Percy, 1987: 195).

This Huxley-like scenario is complicated in several ways. One is that the people behind it are not only perverse in their desire to manipulate humanity, but they are systematic sexual molesters of children. This molestation is facilitated by giving children extra doses of the heavy sodium that is affecting More’s wife and others, and it renders the young victims into docile and even willing participants in the depravity of the molesters. Only by exposing the molestation and its link to the heavy sodium experiment is More able to halt both activities.

Another complication is presented by the character of Fr. Smith, who puts the Fedville experiment into a larger perspective for Tom More. Fr. Smith is one of those characters who appears mad only because he is the most sane person in the book. He has a job as a fire spotter (he sits in a fire tower looking for forest fires) and reaches the point where he refuses to come down from his tower. Dr. More is sent to talk with him, and Fr. Smith delivers an extended monologue on the origins of the Nazi Holocaust in the cultured liberal scientists of Weimar Germany—it was these apostles of scientific progress who preached a gospel of euthanasia. Among these “enlightened” thinkers, the major disagreement was the extent of euthanasia, whether it should involve the elimination of those who were “useless
Walker Percy admired *A Canticle for Leibowitz* and thought seriously about it. Not only did he report in a 1971 essay on the book about his “recorded enthusiasm for it and the fact that I have read it several times” (Percy 1991: 227), but he also appropriated elements of the novel’s plot and the character of the Abbot Leibowitz for use in his book *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983). To that extent, *Leibowitz* can be seen as forming part of the intellectual context for *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Most commentators on *Ruins* and *Thanatos* have overlooked Percy’s admiration for *Leibowitz*, but that regard is relevant to understanding Percy’s “science fiction” novels. For *Leibowitz*, too, is a book about the effects of Original Sin on civilization.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* has the form and adheres to some of the conventions of the standard science-fiction stories of the 1950s, but it has long been admired for transcending its genre fiction roots. The story unfolds in three parts—related but separate novellas—that trace the history of North America following the nuclear war that destroyed civilization in the 1960s. As a reaction to this great Fire Deluge that destroyed nearly everything, survivors turned against not only those who they blamed for the war (politicians, scientists, and engineers) but all who were educated; in the Great Simplification that followed, mobs did their best to destroy whatever was left of learning, culture, and technology. Each of the three stories in the novel centers on the monks of the Albertian Order of Leibowitz, a Catholic confraternity founded in the ruins of atomic war by a
Jewish engineer-turned-priest who found refuge from the mobs in a monastery and turned his energy to preserving what is left of civilization and culture. Not only did the Abbot Leibowitz manage to assemble and hide kegs of books, papers, charts, and anything else that could be found with scraps of information on them, but he built a monastery to preserve this Memorabilia against the day when humanity would be ready to start learning again. The first story takes place during the dark ages when the Church is the only glue that holds the shreds of civilization together, and monks still copy the Memorabilia by hand. In the second story, it is a time of renaissance, when a new civilization (centered on the empire of Texarkana) is beginning to rediscover science and technology lost for centuries. By the time of the third story, humanity has surpassed (in technology) what had been achieved before the nuclear war—there are starships that explore the galaxy, robotic cars, and voluntary but systematic euthanasia of those (the old, the infirm, and those misshapen by the lingering consequences of nuclear fallout, etc.) who are considered unfit. In the end, facing an impending second nuclear war, the Leibowitz Order (with the encouragement of the Vatican) launches a starship with a crew of monks, priests, and bishops to protect the Faith and the Apostolic Succession on other worlds.

*A Canticle for Leibowitz* is almost allegorical in its tales of humanity after nuclear war. It has been widely—but not universally—misinterpreted as an antiwar or anti-nuclear novel, (see, for example, Michaud 2014) when in reality the author’s purpose was quite different. As Walker Percy himself put it in his appreciation of *Leibowitz*, “the book has a secret” (Percy 1991: 228). Percy does not reveal the secret that he sees hidden in the book, because he says this will ruin it for the reader. He says also that one either will “get it” or not. But the secret can be told if it helps to illuminate the context of Percy’s own works: the message is that humanity is fallen and there are effects of Original Sin that are not just personal. Even a nuclear war cannot change the nature of humanity, and the fallen humans who survive disaster will still grasp after wealth, power, pleasure or whatever. As long as humans are humans, there will be pride, greed, ambition, envy, and other sins that have social consequences. It is in the second and third parts of *Leibowitz* that this message is most clearly seen.

Pride is of course the great vice that led to the Fall, and *Leibowitz* shows it to be endemic to humanity. In Part II, “*Fiat Lux,*** the Leibowitzan abbey is visited by an apostle and genius of the new learning, Thon Taddeo, who has come to study the Memorabilia for evidence of the scientific achievements of the civilization that was destroyed in the Fire Deluge. Taddeo has made remarkable discoveries, including significant work in the field of optics, and he has the bitter experience of finding proof that
his own work cannot be more than a rediscovery of knowledge that the pre-Deluge civilization already possessed. The scholar even adheres to the theory, advanced by one of his academic colleagues, that the people of his era are not the descendants of creatures of the race that built the technology of the Twentieth Century. In other words, post-apocalyptic humans are of a different species than those who lived before the Flame Deluge. On hearing Taddeo’s explication of the theory, the abbot replies, “Why do you wish to discredit the past, even to dehumanizing the last civilization? So that you need not learn from their mistakes? Or can it be that you can’t bear being only a ‘rediscoverer,’ and must feel that you are a ‘creator’ as well?” (Miller 1959: 235)

Ambition, envy, and other vices drive the story to its conclusion in Part III, “Fiat Voluntas Tua.” In the thirty-eighth century, humanity has not changed, and the great powers of that age race headlong toward a second nuclear war. But also of concern to Abbot Zerchi, leader of the Leibowitzian monks of that era, is the systematic destruction of the weak, the infirm, the misshapen, and the unwanted in “Mercy Camps” that dot the land. Standing before a “Mercy Camp” set up near the abbey is a statue meant to invite the despairing masses to consider euthanasia as an alternative to their suffering or loneliness. The statue, as the abbot realizes, bears a “marked similarity to some of the most effeminate images by which mediocre, or worse than mediocre, artists had traditionally misrepresented the personality of Christ” (Miller 1959: 315). At its base is the single word “COMFORT.” As humanity slouches toward self-destruction by nuclear conflict or suicide, the Church sends a mission to the stars to preserve the Apostolic Succession and to try to build a Christian society.

Among those who remain, there may be hope for something better. A two-headed woman, Mrs. Grales, experiences a radical change that may be a portent. Her baby-like second head, which has lain dormant so many years, wakes up as her elderly head falls permanently asleep. The abbot tries to baptize this newly awakened creature, Rachel, but she stops him. She even gives him the Holy Eucharist from a ciborium. And the abbot realizes that Rachel has been born without Original Sin. As he dies from an illness that has eaten at him throughout the story, the abbot prays the Magnificat—as the author puts it, “He wanted to teach her these words as his last act, for he was certain that she shared something with the Maiden who first had spoken them” (Miller 1959: 335–36).

In his commentary on Leibowitz, Percy concludes with a reference to this scene. He imagines that when the starship full of monks finds intelligent life elsewhere, at least one of the astronauts will have the sense to ask these extraterrestrials questions about what really matters: “How is it
with you? Did something go wrong? Was there a disaster? If so, where do you presently stand in relation to a rectification of the disaster? Are you at a Time Before? Or a Time After? Has there been a Happening? Do you expect one?” (Percy 1991: 233) In these questions Percy is asking about the Fall and its consequences—the disaster is the Fall, the Happening is the Incarnation, and what really matters is whether a race understands that it is fallen and needs redemption.

THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS AND ITS TREATMENT

Taken by themselves, but especially in the context of A Canticle for Leibowitz, Percy’s “political” novels can be seen as centered on questioning what it means to extol the “pursuit of happiness” as one the highest political goals. He once told an audience that Love in the Ruins “is really about the pursuit of happiness”(Percy 1991: 248). Percy is concerned with the fate of the American experiment, and predicts a failure of that experiment when the pursuit of (false) happiness is all that is left.

Because Americans now live in what Percy and others have called a “post-Christian” milieu, they inhabit a universe that is strictly material. Yes, some people still practice religion, but faith has been relegated to the private sphere and has no public relevance. In contemporary American society, happiness can be nothing more or less than pleasure and human beings are little different from other animals (Percy 1991: 394–96). Until his conversion at the end of Love in the Ruins, Tom More pursues happiness as pleasure (sexual and otherwise). In Thanatos, Bob Comeaux touts the benefits of heavy sodium in terms of material happiness, and the ring of child molesters that More discovers is motivated by a disordered pursuit of pleasure. The people in these novels are not striving for virtue; they are searching for pleasure. Consequently, they are miserable because they are inevitably unfulfilled.

Percy sees the American regime as headed for trouble precisely because it cannot see that it is in trouble. Americans do not understand that they live in a fallen world, and that civilization requires more than the pursuit of pleasure. By pursuing pleasure rather than true happiness they risk their very humanity. Percy’s message is not some simplistic “let’s get back to the pristine world of the Founders”; rather, it is a more fundamental argument about the need for Americans to recover what was lost in embracing materialism, or else face the failure of the American experiment. Indeed, Percy once told an interviewer that one day the United States would decay as a consequence of “weariness, boredom, cynicism, greed, and in the end helplessness before its great problems” (Percy 1991: 393). Because it can never truly fulfill the human longing for happiness, the endless
pursuit of pleasure would render Americans exhausted and increasingly unsatisfied. Tocqueville himself could not have said it better: the United States requires more than just the Constitution and the laws to survive; it needs a citizenry devoted to more than bread and circuses. But the wisdom here is not exclusively that of Tocqueville; rather, it is the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian understanding of the world.

In both *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, older virtues which once had a larger role in the American regime—faith, virtue, and human dignity—have been discarded in pursuit of happiness qua pleasure. Seeking only happiness and comfort, Americans have made themselves miserable: in *Ruins*, misery takes the form of medical ailments and political chaos; in *Thanatos*, misery takes the form of social pathologies that Bob Comeaux and his collaborators seek to end by depriving the general population of its humanity.

These themes are somewhat Tocquevillian in that they see the dangers of materialist democracy triumphant. Tocqueville himself warned that democracy can lead to a society of nameless and faceless equals, above whom stands “an immense and tutelary spirit” (Tocqueville 1956: 303). That “spirit” is the state. “For their happiness [understood as pleasure] such a government willingly labors . . . it provides for their security, foresees and supplies their necessities, facilitates their pleasures, manages their principal concerns, directs their industry”(303). In *Thanatos*, Bob Comeaux’s social engineering with heavy sodium conforms to this sort of situation, and Tom More sees it for the disorder and oppression that it is. He forestalls the oppression by exposing the other consequences of dehumanization (the most offensive being child molestation—isn’t that but the pursuit of happiness for some people?), and life goes on.

In *Ruins*, it does not seem at first glance that there is much danger of this sort of benevolent despotism, because of the turmoil in the political realm. But the turmoil and heartbroken happiness of the people lead Dr. More to seek a cure in his lapsometer. This will be the instrument for facilitating pleasure. The device, especially as Art Immelman proposes to use it, will result in stripping away an individual’s humanity, making each person a sub-human pursuer of pleasure alone. The American regime went into decline because people pursued only pleasure, and More sees that the lapsometer will make things radically worse. It is only when More realizes that his invention will make things worse that he turns away from it. He chooses to put it aside and live a simple life with his wife and children. At the end of the novel, Tom More has reordered his priorities and now strives to become a hard-working, humble, and religious striver for virtue.
In *Leibowitz*, William Miller worries about ambition, greed, the quest for power, intellectual hubris, and related evils that could lead to humanity’s destruction. He is not necessarily warning about nuclear annihilation, as some have misunderstood the novel, but about how humans refuse to learn from their mistakes and depend on God. The Church is the central instrument by which God offers fallen humanity the way off of its path toward destruction, though Miller does not claim that hope can come only through full communion with the institutional Church.

All of these themes reflect the wisdom of the Judeo-Christian worldview, rather than just a Tocquevillian view, because they exhibit what we might call a “sober view of democracy.” Indeed, in *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), Pope St. John Paul II discussed the problem of democratic disregard for life in terms reminiscent of Walker Percy’s thinking:

The State is no longer the “common home” where all can live together on the basis of principles of fundamental equality, but is transformed into a tyrant State, which arrogates to itself the right to dispose of the life of the weakest and most defenceless members, from the unborn child to the elderly, in the name of a public interest which is really nothing but the interest of one part. . . . Really, what we have here is only the tragic caricature of legality; the democratic ideal, which is only truly such when it acknowledges and safeguards the dignity of every human person, is betrayed in its very foundations.

In *Ruins* and *Thanatos*, Percy also holds faith up as a weapon against the temptations of the world. In *Ruins*, Tom More acknowledges himself a “bad Catholic” but in the end returns to church, Confession, and regular practice of the Faith. In *Thanatos*, Fr. Smith is Percy’s messenger and the representative of sanity, although his sanity is so profound that it appears to be madness to those caught up in the endless pursuit of pleasure. Percy suggests that materialism can be countered by faith and a proper sense of humanity, which echoes Miller’s view: In the centuries following the nuclear war of *Leibowitz*, it is the Church that resoundingly proclaims the dignity of humanity (condemning extermination of the misshapen victims of fallout and euthanasia), teaches the truth, protects the flickering candle of learning, promotes true science, advocates intellectual humility before God, and maintains an understanding of the proper priorities in life. Percy’s counsel of faith is not a simplistic call for Americans to find God and be saved; rather, it is something more along the lines of a “long twilight struggle”1 between Americans and their temptation to materialism.

Percy’s faith gave him the ability to discern America’s brokenhearted happiness, and suggested a way out of that misery. The political message of Walker Percy is not easily converted into a slogan, but one might serve.
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Percy himself liked interesting bumper stickers. Perhaps a Percyish slogan could be something like the old cartoon of the guy on the sidewalk with the sandwich board that read “Repent! The end is near.”

Notes

1. “Long twilight struggle” was George Kennan’s famous phrase to characterize the policy of Containment that he argued should mark American foreign policy against Soviet aggression.

References


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