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Special Issue: Walker Percy in the Twenty-First Century

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Karey Lea Perkins and Rhonda Renée McDonnell

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Walker Percy's Importance in the Twenty-First Century

Rhonda Renée McDonnell and Karey Lea Perkins

In “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” Walker Percy asserts, “Something is indeed wrong, and one of the tasks of the serious novelist is, if not to isolate the bacillus under a microscope, at least to give the sickness a name, to render the unspeakable speakable” (206). How fresh that line reads today, as collective attention is turned to diagnosing illness and seeking means of inoculation against disease. Percy’s use of medical language is the result of his education at Columbia University Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, where he developed his stance as a diagnostician. After a life-altering illness of his own (tuberculosis), Percy’s attention turned away from medicine and toward philosophy, ultimately leading him to fiction writing. However, he never abandoned his orientation to the world, remaining a doctor to the end, even addressed throughout his life as Doc Percy by friends and neighbors in Covington, Louisiana.

Percy presciently identified the turmoils of our current age. In the second half of the twentieth century, his characters experience anxiety, depression, and suicidal tendencies while he observes in the culture around him that people falsely believe all is well. Percy writes, “[T]he novelist . . . feels more and more like the canary being taken down the mine shaft with a bunch of hearty joking sense-making miners while he, the canary, is already getting a whiff of something noxious and is staggering around his cage trying to warn the miners, but he can’t understand them nor he them” (“State” 139). For much of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century, such was the behavior of the Western world, but that is no longer the case. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, as Percy predicted, the jig was up. Societies, not just in the USA but across the Western world, fragmented under increasing pressure from political polarization. While medications for mental health ailments long have been on the rise (Ilyas and Moncrief 393), those increases intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic (DeAngelis). According to *The New York Times*, “We are depressed, anxious, tired and distracted. What’s new is this: Almost

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a quarter of Americans over the age of 18 are now medicated for one or more of these conditions” (Schwartz). Percy wrote during the age of avoidance about those maladies people were experiencing, naming those maladies that people were not willing or able to acknowledge. Now, we are more likely to acknowledge our troubles, but what do we do next? Are prescriptions the answer? And what about the continued political and social turmoils that Western societies are facing? As Percy predicts in *Love in the Ruins*, “There are Left states and Knothead states, Left towns and Knothead towns but no center towns” (16). This situation isn’t a unique ailment of the USA: England, France, Germany, and other countries face similar polarization, with left and right increasingly at odds and little to no middle ground. At the same time, the trusted old conveyors of mores, churches and schools, are under fire.

In the past, as Percy notes, people had ways to combat disaster that are not open to us in the present:

It is one thing to live in bad times where a common language is spoken, values and beliefs shared in common, like the fourteenth century, which had the Black Plague but also had Langland and Chaucer, one of whom wrote about how bad things were and the other told stories and cheered everybody up and both were understood. It is something else to live in a time of great good and evil which nobody understands, where there are many kinds of discourse each of which makes a kind of sense to its own community, but where the communities don’t make sense to each other . . . (“Novel-Writing” 158-59)

Reading his words now creates the charge of recognition that Percy describes in his essay, “The Man on the Train”: “Yes! that is how it is!” (83). That may be reason enough to study Percy, but his writing has more to offer than an identification of our current troubles. Knowing that he sees the world we now inhabit suggests that he may provide some direction to us. We suspect it is his contemplation of the existential anxieties that are so much a part of contemporary life that first draws readers to him. Certainly that was the case for both of us. However, once readers are immersed in his writing, the existential top layer peels away to reveal profound questions and an attempt to answer those questions with nothing less than a radical anthropology, a theory of humanity.

This Walker Percy issue of the *South Atlantic Review* is the result of some sobering realizations. First, we have been aware that Percy’s genius seems to be fading from the college syllabi that once introduced him to a generation of students. Early in our scholarship of Percy, mentioning his name resulted in knowing nods and recollections of

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reading (at least) *The Moviegoer*. Now, in the twenty-first century, that is rarely the case. Nothing eats away at the soul of an academic more than hearing a quizzical “Who?” when the subject of lifelong study is mentioned. Of course, one might say that he is in good company. A great many of the once-heralded twentieth-century authors who were on those syllabi with Percy are suffering the same fate. Particularly those who, like Percy, wrote novels that have proven difficult to bring to the big screen or who, like Percy, did not write short stories. The second realization was of Percy’s increased relevance during “these dread latter days of the old violent beloved U.S.A. and the . . . death-dealing Western World” (Percy, *Love* 3). After years of a pandemic and increased political polarization across much of the Western world, incidents of rage, mass violence, free-floating anxiety, depression, and general malaise abound. We seem to have arrived at the crises Percy predicted over the course of his career, which leads to our third realization. Percy is as essential as he has ever been—perhaps even more than in the past. We did not compile this issue as a vehicle for blind adulation of Percy. Rather, we gathered Percy scholars to take a variety of approaches to Percy, to see what he has to offer to denizens of the twenty-first century.

In this special issue, we offer you essays covering the gamut of Walker Percy’s work from a variety of perspectives. Michael Kobre’s “We Wear the Mask: Race and Representation in the Fiction of Walker Percy” examines race in the works of this Southern author growing up and writing in the heyday of the strife-torn civil rights movement of middle twentieth-century America. Gary Cuiba’s “Hearing Percy: Deafness, Fatherhood, and Fiction” discusses deafness and American Sign Language in Percy’s life and novels; Percy had a deaf daughter and spent his career studying language and semiotic. H. Collin Messer discusses Augustinian influences on suicide and baptism in *The Last Gentleman*. Rhonda McDonnell’s “Southern Hauntings: William Alexander Percy’s Influence on Walker Percy” uses Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* to chart Percy’s growth to independence as a writer and illuminate some more obscure passages in his novels. Karey Lea Perkins’s “Reading by the Numbers: The Peirce-Percy Semiotic in Walker Percy’s Fiction” and Kenneth Laine Ketner’s “The Emergence of Walker Percy’s Radical Anthropology” both elucidate Percy’s unique semiotic anthropology, particularly the influence of philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, illuminating its impact on Percy’s novels. Lamar Nisley’s “Walker Percy’s Diagnosis and Prescriptions for the 21st Century” examines the prophetic Percy’s continued relevance and importance thirty years after his death while Farrell O’Gorman’s “Coming in from the Porch: Walker Percy and the English Department” offers suggestions and guidance for

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teaching an oft-overlooked Walker Percy in today's literary classrooms. Finally, Stacey Ake provides an incisive and entertaining review of Percy's newest book, the posthumously published *Symbol & Existence: A Study in Meaning* (2019).

Readers, we wish you long and continued triadic joy in the intersubjective experience of reading Percy and reading about Percy.

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