
THE SECOND COMING. By Walker Percy. Pp. 411 New York, Pocket Books, 1980

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Concerning the condition of actuality, Walker Percy's novels clearly exhibit a critical emotion. A look at his fictive universe betrays that his characters move and act within the confines of an ethical vacuum. Consequently, the protagonist of Percy's fiction is a bored and rejecting figure. Embarked on a search, he aims at finding a means to remain human in the world transformed by technology; in the meantime he 'indulges' in everydayness to such an extent that his life passes into a state of dream. It is Percy's conviction that the center does not hold any longer, that the world is doomed to entropy. He cynically asks a question: "What if the Bomb should not fall"¹. In short, his vision carries an apocalyptic message.

As Lewicki demonstrates², the image of the End of the World is an optimistic image in that it denotes the reappearance of the world, after its total destruction, as "a glorious, purified Paradise, where there will be no evil." Yet the apocalyptic image, to Lewicki, has been substantially altered in the nineteenth and, predominantly, twentieth century American literature, as it is employed to denote "gloom rather than hope" and "destruction rather than renewal". It seems, however, that Walker Percy's late novels, and especially, The Second Coming, though preeminently carrying an apocalyptic message, convey, at the same time, a fairly optimistic meaning.

Lancelot, the novel Percy wrote in 1977, culminates in a scene of apocalyptic intensity: the protagonist adopts the role of the judge of the depraved, executes judgement in defeating the apocalyptic beast, and reappears at the end purged and redeemed. Confronted with the image of waiting for an imaginary wolf in Albee's play or Oedipa Maas's awaiting "the crying of Lot 49" in Pynchon's novel, the final optimism of Lancelot, if only metaphorically, strikes a new key. Optimism and the affirmative sentiment are carried even further in Percy's most recent novel, The Second Coming.

The protagonist Will Barrett, a middle-aged version of an earlier character from The Last Gentleman, is a characteristic Percy hero: reticent, detached, disengaged. Having inherited "50 or 60 million" from his late wife Marion, he leads the life of ease at an estate of 10,000 acres in North Carolina. It is a common trait throughout Percy's fiction that the protagonist is either a man successful in business or an heir of great wealth. In fact, this is where Percy's existentialism, though fundamentally associated with European existentialism, acquires a specifically American identity. The everydayness of Will's life consists in his assisting his wife in various philanthropic activities and in his attendance to abundant funerals. It is this last activity which makes Will realize that "without death one misses his life". After his wife's death he continues to perform his habitual activities, additionally playing a lot of golf.

His spiritual malady exhibits many symptoms. For one, it manifests itself in his total lack of emotional involvement. His utmost reaction to what is customarily regarded a sad event, i.e., the death of his wife, is wonder /"What struck him was not sadness or remorse or pity but the wonder of it. How can it happen that one day you are young, you marry, and then another day you come to yourself and your life has passed like a dream?"/ His emotional sterility is also suggested when he meditates why he married Marion; unable to establish one positive reason, he concludes: "Why not?" It comes, therefore, as no surprise that he estimates his married years as spent in total indifference /"They looked at each other curiously and wondered how they could have missed each other, lived in the same house all those years and passed in the hall like ghosts"/. Will, like Lancelot in Percy's previous novel, speaks of love in quotes, he admits he is not sure what the word means. And finally, there are organic symptoms of his "malaise": lapses of consciousness, déjà-vue, delusions. As these accumulate, Will meditates suicide and, ultimately, carries his convictions into effect. He insures his life for one million dollars, appoints his friend a beneficiary and devises the scheme that will eliminate suicide. He subsequently goes to a labyrinthian mountain cave and awaits a sign.

This is how crazy he was. He had become convinced that the Last Days were at hand, that the world had fallen into the hands of the only species which knew how to destroy itself along with all other living creatures on earth, that whenever in history this species had invented a weapon, it had forthwith used it... The very persons who spoke most about "people's democracy" or "the freedom and sacredness of the individual" were most likely, he was convinced, to be possessed by demons.

Such is Will's conviction and he is determined to await a sign from God, in which case his belief will be confirmed and he will be saved. If he receives no sign, the end will be his and not the world's. What issues in the course of events may be interpreted as an apogee of Percy's cynicism, or else, as an expression of his very individual sense of humor. Will Barrett is saved by a toothache which drives him out of the cave; he falls into the greenhouse and in love with its inhabitant, Allison. Tended affectionately by her, he recovers and terminates his search for the reason to live. He will marry Allison.

So far, the attention has been on Will Barrett because his quest constitutes the focal point of the novel. Yet it is primarily Allison who remains in the reader's memory as an unforgettable character. She is a helpless schizophrenic who is bullied by parents and doctors. It is a common contention today that mental diseases are worsened by careless treatment and can be cured with tender care and love rather than pills and shock therapies. Allison is a case in point. She escapes from a sanitarium and wanders into a greenhouse. Her energy, physical strength, enthusiasm and skill are remarkable, and she successfully adjusts the greenhouse to serve her needs. Her acceptance of Will Barrett, after his intrusion into her realm, and her immediate emotional response are not pathetic but natural and convincing.

Estimating Percy's outlook in a broader context of his literary output, it may be assumed that he considers his protagonist's heated response to the threats of the 20th century

as justifiable and normal reactions of a modern man confronted with the dehumanized forces of contemporary life. It, therefore, comes as a surprise that he promotes Will's response as madness. Another flaw in Percy's otherwise solid narrative can be found in the transformation that his protagonist undergoes which does not seem to be psychologically motivated in a convincing manner.

It goes without saying that The Second Coming presents a further development in Percy's attempt to discover a means to relate his characters to life. The suggestion, already signalled in Lancelot, is that the only way for his protagonist to achieve a mental equilibrium is through his genuine attempt to communicate with another human being. It also seems that this aim is to be achieved through the repudiation of the illusory quality of life. And even if his insistence on the supremacy of the real over the illusory can be seen as somewhat betraying his considerations expressed elsewhere, the development should be emphatically applauded.

NOTES

- ¹ Percy deals with this and other problems in his essay "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes". Partisan Review XXVIII /1956/
- ² Zbigniew Lewicki, "Fire and Ice: American Apocalyptic Tradition and Contemporary Entropic Imagery", in M. Sienicka /ed./, Traditions in the 20th Century American Literature/ Poznań: Wydawnictwo Nauk Uniw. A. Mickiewicza, 1981/, pp. 175-187

