

Sentiment, Science and Thanatos in the Work of Walker Percy

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WHAT I REALLY want to do is to tell people what they must do and what they must believe, if they want to live (PR 300). So wrote Walker Percy to Caroline Gordon, one of his literary mentors,ⁱ after winning the 1962 National Book Award for his first novel, *The Moviegoer*. So much for “art for art’s sake.” An important part of what Percy told people in order “to live,” in his six novels, three volumes of non-fiction, many public lectures, private interviews, and lengthy correspondence concerned what we now call “the culture of life” and “the culture of death.”ⁱⁱ

Accordingly, this widely recognized, major American writer, Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, member of the National Institute of Arts And Sciences, had much to say about contraception, abortion, infanticide, assisted suicide, and euthanasia, as well as about the sacredness and the mystery of life and the goodness and beauty of the world which he once described as “a sacrament and a mystery.”ⁱⁱⁱ And since what this believing, practicing convert to Catholicism had to say about these matters was pro-life, he constitutes, or at least he should, a scandal and a stumbling block to the post-modern cultural establishment.^{iv} At any rate, the pro-life Walker Percy seems to have been largely ignored by the Academy.^v

Percy as a self-trained, but acknowledged and published philosopher (PR 237-245; WPL 174-176) as well as a philosophical novelist, did not consider these matters, the life issues, narrowly, in isolation from one another, or somehow detached from the rest of the 20th century. As will be seen, he frequently linked them and put them in a context larger than that of each issue. To identify and comment on Percy’s pro-life references, we begin with his first novel, *The Moviegoer*,^{vi} a novel in

which there is no such reference in any direct or immediate sense. There is in it, however, articulation of several ideas that become virtual leitmotifs in the body of Percy's work and which often accompany expression of his pro-life convictions, both in his fiction and in his non-fiction.

I

One of these recurring themes can be described as disordered sentiment and its effects. Towards the end of the novel, Emily Cutrer tells her nephew, Binx Bolling, the central character: "...we're sentimental people and we horrify easily. True, our moral fiber is rotten. Our national character stinks to high heaven. But we are kinder than ever" (223). This passage, as is evident, mentions no specific consequences of this sentimentality and kindness. But many other passages in his work do. Some five years later, in "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World," for example, Percy the essayist, writes:

The triumphant secular society of the Western world, the nicest of all worlds, killed more people in the first half of this century than have been killed in all history. Travelers to Germany before the last war [and Percy in 1934 was one of them (PR 114-119)] reported that the Germans were the nicest people in Europe....^{vii}

And some thirty years after *The Moviegoer*, in an essay called "Why Are You a Catholic" (publ.1990), he juxtaposes this disordered sentiment with two very specific concurrent phenomena, if not effects, abortion and euthanasia, and places them in the context of the twentieth century western world. "Americans," he begins : "...are the nicest, most generous, and sentimental people on earth. Yet Americans have killed more unborn children than any nation in history. Now euthanasia is beginning."

“Don’t forget,” he adds, “that the Germans used to be the friendliest, most sentimental people on earth. But euthanasia was instituted, not by the Nazis, but by the friendly democratic Germans of the Weimar Republic” (*Signposts* 310). And in a 1986 essay Percy asks rhetorically, “Is it an accident that [the 20th century] the century of terror^{viii} is also the century of sentimentality?” (“Novel Writing in an Apocalyptic Time” in *Signposts* 156).

But perhaps the best known and probably the most strikingly paradoxical expression of this misguided sentimentality is found in Percy’s last novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*.^{ix} In “that peculiar novel,” as he once characterized (SF / WP 292) his most sustained explicitly pro-life novel, the eccentric Father Simon Rinaldo Smith tells a group gathered for a mass before the opening of a hospice, “tenderness leads to the gas chambers” (360).^x A little later Father Smith adds, “more people have been killed in this century by tender-hearted souls than by cruel barbarians in all other centuries put together (361). And a few lines later, addressing the physicians present, and echoing Mother Teresa, for whom, of course, Percy had great admiration (WPL 379) Father Smith says,

If you have a patient, young or old, suffering, dying, afflicted, useless, born or unborn, whom you for the best of reasons wish to put out of his misery—I beg only one thing of you, dear doctors! Please send him to us. Don’t kill them! We’ll take them—all of them! Please send them to us! (361)^{xi}

With mention of “young” patients to be “put out of [their] misery,” Father Smith, of course, adds infanticide, a new element in the ensemble. And in fact, in the virtual world of this novel, set in an indefinite proximate future, what Percy calls “pedeuthanasia” is practiced and quite legally, since, anticipating the wishes of a Peter Singer, Percy tells us a neonate “according to the Supreme

Court” gets “its legal rights” at the age of eighteen months (199).^{xii}

In a 1988 interview focusing on this novel (see n.12), Percy explained, “...the point Father Smith was making was that it’s a slippery slope to go from humane euthanasia to the removal of the unfit and undesirable. Once you ignore the uniqueness and sacredness of the individual human and set up abstract ideals of the improvement of society, then the terminus is the gas chamber” (*More Conversations* 191).

And about the time this interview was published (August 1988) in a letter to Professor K.L. Ketner, a semiotician with whom Percy often corresponded, he wrote:

...You already know my feelings: if one does not grant a religious warrant for the sacredness of life, one must consider the scientific grounds, i.e., that there is no essential difference between the human organism, genetically or hormonally, before and after birth. Thus if you allow the destruction of the unborn for however good and private a reason, why not get rid of undesirable 1 year olds, or middle-aged subversive professors for that matter?^{xiii}

Earlier in 1988, on the fifteenth anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, in a letter to *The New York Times* that was not even acknowledged, let alone published, Percy writes, once we accept “the principle” that “...innocent human life can be destroyed”—even “for the most admirable socio-economic, medical, or social reasons—then it does not take a prophet to predict what will happen next, or if not next, then sooner or later” (*Signposts* 350-51). *The Human Life Review*, it should be noted, did publish the letter cited in their Spring 1988 issue (49-51).

Earlier still, in 1981, Percy had issued a very similar warning. In an April 11 letter to a former student, Walter Isaacson, who had written a pro-abortion article in *Time*, Percy wrote:

Once the traditional Judeo-Christian principle of the sacredness of life is breached in the name of whatever sanction of convenience, public

welfare, efficiency and so on—I'm afraid you may have turned loose some devils you may not want to have around later. Once abortion is sanctioned, for whatever good and humane reasons, I don't see why we can't get rid of the aged and useless and infirm for similar reasons. (quoted. in WPL 358)

II

Another important, frequently recurring theme in Percy's work involves science and may also be found in *The Moviegoer*. Like Dostoevsky, whose work he was very familiar with and which was a strong influence on him (PR 168, 173, 208, 305; SF/ WP 162), Percy^{xiv} was very much aware—despite, or perhaps, because of, his strong scientific background—of the limitations of science and of the effects of a perverted, misused, tyrannical and Promethean science.^{xv} He expresses this awareness fairly mildly, even lyrically, in *The Moviegoer* in a passage where Binx recalls a summer in college when he and a friend, Harry Stern, were doing serious research on “the role of the acid base balance in the formation of renal calculi” (51). Binx, more than a little like an Alyosha Karamazov or a Father Zossima, his spiritual director,^{xvi} “was extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons”—in this case, “in the laboratory,” i.e., “extraordinarily affected” not so much by “renal calculi,” which, he assures us, provide “quite an interesting problem,” but by the August sunlight...streaming in the great dusty fanlights and [lying] in yellow bars across the room. The old building tick[ing] and creak[ing] in the heat...the motes ris[ing and fall[ing] in the sunlight,” but Harry, Percy writes, is “absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place” (52),^{xvii} cares about nothing but the problem in his head and is “no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in” (52). At bottom, he cares mostly about the general and about abstract theory (see also PR 473) and, as Gabriel Marcel (whose work Percy knew well

(*Conversations* 245-46) might have described Harry: he sees life more in terms of problem to be solved than mystery to be revered—a dangerous vision, as far as Percy was concerned.

Later in the book, Binx, in a disconsolate state, borrowing, in effect, from François Villon and Dante,^{xviii} speaks, among other things, of being “in the thirty-first year of [his] dark pilgrimage on this earth and knowing less than [he] ever knew,” which doesn’t prevent him from speaking of “the great shithouse of scientific humanism where needs are satisfied,” and “everyone becomes an anyone...” (228).

The next year (1962), when accepting the National Book Award for *the Moviegoer*, Percy brings out further implications of what he sometimes called “scientism” (*Signposts* 279) and which he distinguished from true science.^{xix} He concludes his remarks saying “the book attempts a modest restatement of the Judeo-Christian notion that man is something more than an organism in an environment...he is a wayfarer and a pilgrim” (*Signposts* 246).

That is to say, life is for something more than for getting to a destination here on earth. “An organism in an environment” is at its overall destination and, of course, for a mere organism, an unwanted pregnancy or Alzheimer’s is simply a problem to be solved, nothing sacred, nothing mysterious about the lives involved. “Scientific humanism” provides the solutions.

And just as “disordered sentiment,” heard early—in *The Moviegoer*, recurs frequently in later works, so too does “misused science” or “scientism.” In Percy’s 1977 “Self-Interview[:] Questions they never asked Me (So He Asked Them Himself),” he asked himself whether “scientific humanism [was]...a rational and honorable alternative” to his Catholicism, as well as to Protestantism and Judaism. He replied to himself, in part, “It’s not good enough...That won’t do... a poor show. Life is a mystery, love is delight...one should settle for nothing less than the infinite mystery and the infinite delight, i.e. God” (*Signposts* 416-17).

More devastating was the opening of his Jefferson lecture delivered in May 1989. The eighteenth lecturer in this prestigious annual series sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, directed at that time by Lynne Cheney, Percy tells the approximately 800 members of his invited audience (K / P 143) in the first paragraph of his lecture, titled “The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind”:

Our view of the world, which we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science, is radically incoherent. A corollary of this proposition is that modern science is itself radically incoherent, not when it seeks to understand things and subhuman organisms and the cosmos itself, but when it seeks to understand man, not man’s physiology or neurology or his bloodstream, but man *qua* man, man when he is peculiarly human (*Signposts* 271).

Earlier, the same year in the preface for a book called *The New Catholics*, Percy, paraphrases a passage from another one of his major influences, Soren Kierkegaard who is commenting on Hegelianism, “the science of his day.” Percy tell us that for Kierkegaard “Hegel explained everything in the universe except what it is to be an individual, to be born, to live, and to die” (*Signposts* [343]).

And in 1987 in a short piece occasioned by the September 11-13 papal visit to New Orleans called “If I had Five minutes with the Pope” (whom Percy admired greatly) (WPL 325, 392), he advises John Paul II not to worry about scientists since they are pursuing truth.

They become a matter of concern only when they begin mucking around with human life with their high technology; e.g., *in vitro* fertilization, wherein surplus fertilized ova are either discarded or frozen or experimented with—in the name of improving the “quality of Life” of mankind....Scientists tend to be smart about things and dumb about people.

A little later, he adds,

if a scientist is detected treating unborn human beings in such a manner... I suggest that the scientist's own genetic material be examined by impartial fellow scientists and that the scientist himself be accordingly, discarded, experimented with, or frozen (SS 346, 347).

But privately, as early as 1980 in a September 10 letter to Shelby Foote, outlining his projected *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (publ.1983) he could already refer to his

old hobby-horse that science is extraordinarily stupid about people as people and the consequence of this stupidity (combined with an instinctual confidence in science) is going to do us all in if we don't do something about it (SF / WP 270).

Percy makes a much stronger condemnation of scientism, however, in an interview that appeared in the summer 1987 *Paris Review*. Asked by the interviewer what "the main target" of his satirical anger in *The Thanatos Syndrome* was, Percy replied:

It is the widespread and ongoing devaluation of human life in the Western world –under various sentimental disguises: "quality of life," "pointless suffering," "termination of life without meaning," etc.. I trace it to a certain mind-set in the biological and social sciences which is extraordinarily influential among educated folk–so much so that it has almost achieved the status of a quasi-religious orthodoxy (Signposts 394).

III

A third important, frequently recurring theme in Percy's work is death. On the personal level he became acutely aware of death at an early age. There were several suicides in his family. Among them was his father's when Walker was thirteen, and, he

believed, his mother's when he was sixteen (WPL 56).

On a wider plane, he develops a strong consciousness of the "culture of death" in the twentieth century, which he describes as "the most scientifically advanced, savage, democratic, inhuman, sentimental, murderous century in human history" ("Why Are You a Catholic" in *Signposts* 309). References to this phenomenon abound. Dr. Tom More, a psychiatrist and the central character in Percy's third novel, *Love in the Ruins*,^{xx} locates the beginning of the age of death in the year of Percy's birth, 1916. Referring to a history of World War I, his "usual late-night" reading, Tom tells us:

For weeks now I've been on the battle of Verdun, which killed a half million men, lasted a year, and left the battle lines unchanged. Here *began* [italics added] the hemorrhage and death by suicide of the old Western world: white Christian Caucasian Europeans, sentimental music-loving Germans and rational clear-minded Frenchmen, slaughtering each other without passion (47; see also WPL 65).

Some years later, Tom More, also the central character in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (publ. 1987) develops this death era genesis theory further. While serving time in prison for selling prescription drugs illegally to truck drivers, he finds in the prison library

a new history of the Battle of the Somme, a battle which, with the concurrent Battle of Verdun, seemed ... to be events marking the beginning of a new age....In the course of these two battles, two million young men were killed toward no discernible end. As Dr Freud might have said, the age of thanatos had begun (86).

Percy definitely saw that age as an age that included abortion. In "A View of Abortion, with Something to Offend Everybody," a 1981 op-ed piece that *did* get published in the *New York Times* (June 8, A -15) he wrote: "True, legalized abortion—a million and a half fetuses flushed down the disposal every year in this country—is yet another banal atrocity in a century where atrocities have

become common place” (Signposts 340). But in a 1988 interview speaking of the 20th century and abortion, he told the interviewer “it’s a lot more than that [abortion]. We’re talking about the thanatos, the death syndrome as the spirit of the times” (More Conversations 191; see note 8 below).

Among the illustrations of this “spirit of the times” in Percy’s work, in which more than abortion figures, a particularly outrageous example is found in *Love in The Ruins* (publ.1977). More, reflecting on some of the ideological iconic figures revered by the medical students in the medical center where he is both patient and faculty member, refers to

the late Justice William O. Douglas^{xxi} a famous qualitarian who improved the quality of life in India by serving as adviser in a successful program of 100,000,000 abortions and an equal number of painless ‘terminations’ of miserable and unproductive old folk (219).

And in the world of this novel, we note, when denizens of “Senior Citizens compounds” are deemed to have lives “devoid of value,” as Hoche and Binding would put it (whose book Percy was very much aware of) (“An Unpublished Letter to the Times” in Signposts 350; see also PR 455, s.v. “Werham”), they are packed off to “the Happy Isles Separation Center” where they may pull the “Euphoric Switch” themselves or have relatives throw it for them if they are judged “legally incompetent” to do it themselves (121,122; 221). Another illustration, however, of “the death syndrome as the spirit of the times,” as Percy expressed it in the interview just mentioned, comes, not surprisingly, from the novel evoked by the phrase “death syndrome.” Once more Father Smith, based in part on St. Simon Stylites, whom Percy characterized elsewhere as “a fellow in northern Syria, a local nut, who stood on top of a pole for thirty-seven years” (“Self-Interview” in Signposts 418), once more, Father Smith is the pro-life spokesman. Addressing Dr. Tom More, he affirms disturbingly,

You are a member of the first generation of doctors in the history of medicine to turn their backs on the oath of Hippocrates and kill millions of old useless people, unborn children, born malformed children, for the good of mankind—and to do so without a murmur from one of you. Not a single letter of protest in the august *New England Journal of Medicine* (127).

The foregoing passages illustrate something of what Percy thought about the century of death; some observations he made about the subject in a 1988 interview titled in its published form, “Century of Thanatos: Walker Percy and His Subversive Message,” can serve as a final illustration; “thanatos,” Percy noted,

is a big term. It covers the twentieth century, and the main thing is the peculiar paradox....We have the coming together of these two extraordinary occurrences—this is the most humanitarian century in history—more people have helped other people, more money has been spent, more efforts have been made... from tremendous missionary efforts, the foundations, the hospitals, to helping the Third World, FDR’s New Deal to help the poor people. But at the same time it is the century in which men have killed more of each other than in all other centuries put together, and this before the atom bomb (McCombs in *More Conversations* 200).

And, we add, before *Roe v. Wade*.

ABBREVIATIONS

Conversations--*Conversations with Walker Percy*.

GSW--*Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky*.

K/P--*A Thief of Pierce* [:] *The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*.

More Conversations--*More Conversations With Walker Percy*.

MB--*Message in a Bottle*.

PR--*Pilgrim in the Ruins*.

SF/ WP-- *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*.

Signposts-- *Signposts in a Strange Land*

WPL--*Walker Percy: A Life*.

NOTES

i. Percy's nearly life-long friend, the novelist and Civil War historian, Shelby Foote, was another such mentor for Percy, albeit self-appointed. See *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy*, ed. Jay Tolson (New York: Norton, 1997) *passim*.

ii. Pope John Paul II's *The Gospel of Life* constitutes a *locus classicus* for the use of these terms. In #12, for example, he speaks of "the emergence of a culture which...takes the form of a veritable 'culture of death'." In #92 he speaks of "building a culture of life" and in #95 of "the dramatic struggle between the 'culture of life' and 'the culture of death'...in our present social context." "*Intellectuals*," he adds in #98, "can also do much to build a new culture of human life." See also #86, 87, 95, 100. Earlier, in *Crossing The Threshold of Hope* (New York: Knopf, 1994), John Paul II asks rhetorically, "Isn't there a sad truth in the powerful expression *culture of death*"? (p.208).

iii. "The Holiness of the Ordinary" in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1990; reprint, Picador, 2000) p.369.

iv. A survey of scholarship on Percy suggests that for the most part, as a pro-life writer, he has received little attention. Tolson, in the epilogue to his biography *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), writing of Percy's future place in American literature, speaks of "his conservatism," which "makes him unpalatable to most schools of the 'politically correct'" (p.490).

v. There are some who have not ignored the pro-life Walker Percy. The

biographies by Jay Tolson (see n.4 above) and Patrick Samway (*Walker Percy: A Life* [New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997]) treat these matters *passim* as does, very usefully, *More Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1993). See also Franz Link, “‘The Unsubsumable Minority’: Euthanasie und Genozid bei Raymond Federman und Walker Percy” in Bernd Engler and Franz Link ed., *Zwischen Dogma und sakular Welt: zur Erzählliteratur englischsprachiger katholischer Autoren im 20. Jahrhundert*. Paderborn : Schöningh, 1991: 125-134; Germain Marc’hadour, “Walker Percy in the Wake of Thomas More,” *Moreana*, 32 no.123-24 (Dec. 1995)127-36, as well as his review of *The Thanatos Syndrome* in vol. 28 no.108 of the same journal, pp.115-16. See also Marion Montgomery. “Walker Percy and the Christian Scandal,” *First Things* (April 1993) 38-44. Kieran Quinlan several times addresses, and at certain times, challenges Percy’s Pro-Life positions in *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1996)13, 129, 136, 174-75, 225. Patricia Wesley, M.D., to whom I owe much of my original interest in the pro-life Percy, pays very considerable attention to him in the light of these issues in “Abortion, Academe and the American Psychiatric Association,” *New Oxford Review* (March 1992) 11-14. I have treated Percy briefly in connection with his pro-life convictions in several issues of the University Faculty for Life newsletter, *UFL Pro Vita* (Nov.1996) 6; (Nov.1997) 6; (Oct.1998)1-2; (Feb.1999) 2,4; (May 1999) 2,3. Extensive, sustained treatment of Percy as a pro-life writer (apart from the present article) seems to be non-existent.

vi. Walker Percy, *The Moviegoer* (New York: Knopf, 1961; Noonday, 1972).

vii. Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1975; reprint, 1987), p. 105.

viii. In the paragraph preceding Percy’s rhetorical question, he credits the French philosopher and sociologist Raymond Aron (1905-1983) with the coining of this phrase: “It is a...century...called by Raymond Aaron [sic] the century of terror” (156).

ix. Walker Percy, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971; reprint, Picador, 1999). It was completed in 1986 and published in March 1987 in a press run of fifty-nine thousand copies (PR 451, 464, 466).

x. For a discussion of this phrase and variations on it in the novel and its relationship to a passage in Flannery O'Connor, see Montgomery (38,39). O'Connor had written in her Introduction to *A Memoir of Mary Ann* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Cudahy, 1960): "In the absence of ...faith now, we govern by tenderness....a tenderness which...cut off from the person of Christ is wrapped in theory. When tenderness is detached from the source of tenderness, its logical outcome is terror. It ends in forced labor camps and in the fumes of the gas chamber" (p.19). Percy said he did not have Flannery O'Connor in mind in these passages (Montgomery p.39).

xi. A notable instance of Mother Teresa's making this appeal was at the 1994 National Prayer Breakfast in Washington where she addressed members of the Congress, President Clinton, Vice President Gore and their wives. Towards the end of her remarks, in connection with abortion, she said, "we are fighting abortion by adoption.... 'Please don't destroy the child; we will take the child'.... Please don't kill the child. I want the child. Please give me the child. I am willing to accept any child who would be aborted..." quoted in *UFL Pro Vita* (May 1994) 5 from the Feb.3, 1994 Catholic Archdiocese of Washington D.C. publication no.49, p.3. A variation of this appeal found in *Mother Teresa in her Own Words* (ed. Jose Luis Gonzalez-Balado), reads, "Do not kill the children. We will take care of them. That is why our orphanages are always filled with children" (New York: Random House, 1997) p.68.

xii. Percy elaborates on this fictional Supreme Court decision in a 1988 interview he granted to Phil McCombs titled "Century of Thanatos: Walker Percy and his Subversive Message" originally published in *Southern Review*, 24 (August 1988); reprinted in *More Conversations*, p.191.

xiii. *A Thief of Pierce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*, ed. Patrick Samway (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1995), p.63).

xiv. *Conversations with Walker Percy*, ed. Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, ed. (Jackson: Univ. Press of Mississippi, 1985), pp. 222-23.

xv. See, for example, Dostoevsky's 1877 "The Dream of a Ridiculous Man; A Fantastic Story" in which the central character, "a modern

Russian progressive" (*Great Short Works of Fyodor Dostoevsky* [New York: Harper & Row, 1968] p.729) dreams he is in the Greek Islands during the Golden Age where and when he corrupts their pre-lapsarian inhabitants; science makes its appearance; a guillotine is erected to ensure that their newly devised laws are carried out (p.734). Eventually, wars break out, but there is a general belief "that science, wisdom, and the instinct of self-preservation" will "force mankind to unite into a harmonious and intelligent society"; to expedite this "the 'very wise' did their best to exterminate" as soon "as possible the 'not so wise' who might interfere (p.735). More insistently, the short novel *Notes from the Underground* (1864) which Percy knew well (PR 208, 264, 291) illustrates Dostoevsky's impatience with a naive secular faith in science.

The bilious narrator engages in a running argument with never fully identified addressees simply called "Gentlemen" who would maintain that "today science has succeeded in so far dissecting man that at least now we know that desire and the so-called free will are nothing but—" (GSW p.284). Further, these "Gentlemen," drawing on science would teach that man "is nothing more than a sort of piano-key or organ-stop" and "that whatever he does is not done of his own will at all, but of itself, according to the laws of nature (282).

xvi. Regarding the effect on Alyosha of "the slanting rays of the setting sun before the icon to which his mother...held him out" when he was a child, see *The Brothers Karamazov* (New York: Vintage, 1991) pp.26-27; for the effect on the eight year old Zossima of "God's rays pouring down in the church" where his mother had taken him during Holy Week, see p.291.

xvii. In contrast to Harry Stern, Will Barrett, the central character of Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1966, reprinted 1974) ponders "as usual, the mystery of the singularity of things" (188).

xviii. Compare line 1 of Villon's *Le Testament*, "*En l'an de mon trentiesme aage*" ("in the thirtieth year of my life") *Poesies* (Paris: Trianon, 1933), p.27 and line 1 of Dante's *Inferno*, "*Nell mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*," *Dante's Inferno* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1939; rpt., 1975), p. 22. In Thomas G. Bergin's edition and translation, which Shelby Foote recommended to Percy (Foote /Percy 171), this line

reads, "Midway along the journey of our life," *The Divine Comedy* (New York: Appleton Century Crofts, 1955), p. 1

xix. For a useful introductory discussion of this distinction, see Kenneth Laine Ketner, "Rescuing Science from Scientism: The Achievement of Walker Percy," *The Intercollegiate Review* 35/1 (Fall 1999) 22-27.

xx. Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* [:] *The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971; reprint, Picador, 1999).

xxi. The historical Justice William O. Douglas died in 1980.

While Walker Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* shows how a reductive scientism always dehumanizes, it also suggests that human language—particularly of the sort we find in the literary arts—functions both as a testament to the reality of non-material things and as an impediment to the “progress” of scientism. This article first summarizes Percy's view of language and, second, examines how reading plays a role in Thomas More acting morally. Do you want to read the rest of this article? Request full-text. 2006. Suicide in the Literary Work of Walker Percy/*Der Selbstmord im literarischen Werk*. *Fortschritte der Neurologie-Psychiatrie* 74: 101–106. Google Scholar. Hayek, Friedrich. 1952/2017. *The Sensory Order and Other Writings on the Foundations of Theoretical Psychology*. Ed. with a Foreword Viktor J. Vanberg. 1999. *Rescuing Science from Scientism: The Achievement of Walker Percy*. *The Intercollegiate Review* 35 (1): 22–27. Google Scholar. Majeres, Kevin D. 2002. The Doctor and the “Delta Factor”™: Walker Percy and the Dilemma of Modern Medicine. 2013. Walker Percy’s Alternative to Scientism in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In: *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*. Eds. Peter Augustine Lawler and Brian A. Smith, 145–157. So wrote Walker Percy to Caroline Gordon, one of his literary mentors, after winning the 1962 National Book Award for his first novel, *The Moviegoer*. Some years later, Tom More, also the central character in *The Thanatos Syndrome* (publ. 1987) develops this death era genesis theory further. While serving time in prison for selling prescription drugs illegally to truck drivers, he finds in the prison library a new history of the Battle of the Somme, a battle which, with the concurrent Battle of Verdun, seemed to be events marking the beginning of a new age.... In the course of these two battles, two million young men were killed toward no discernible end. As Dr Freud might have said, the age of thanatos had begun (86). Percy definitely saw