

keen night vision. In the re-readings and contemplation her poetry invites, we may get a glimpse also of the language-root place, to a word that enfaiths. It is difficult not to speculate, having read this luminous book, that when God asks Denise Levertov "Where are you?" the answer is "Present."

Jay Tolson. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy*.  
New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992. 544 pages. \$27.50.

Reviewed by Patrick F. O'Connell

The name of Walker Percy was connected in my mind with that of Thomas Merton almost from the time of my first acquaintance with each. Sometime in the mid-1960s, I came across one of those magazine surveys in which famous people recommend books they've recently enjoyed. Among the group was Thomas Merton, enthusiastically touting Percy's first novel *The Moviegoer*, a choice which, as I recall, the compiler thought rather racy for a cloistered monk. At the time I had read little or nothing by Merton, though one or two of his books were around the house, and knew of Percy only because the last page of my paperback copy of *To Kill a Mockingbird* contained an advertisement for *The Moviegoer*, which did indeed sound rather racy ("a *Catcher in the Rye* for adults only"). It was only years later, after becoming much more familiar with the work of both men, that I realized why Merton was so favorably impressed by Percy, though I continued to wonder how Merton had come across the novel in the first place. That question (along with others of considerably more significance for Percy's life and art) has now been answered by Jay Tolson in his fine life of Walker Percy, *Pilgrim in the Ruins*.

Tolson's biography has a thesis, but is by no means thesis-ridden. In his preface the author says a major focus of this book will be to examine "how, and to what extent, Percy's life constituted a heroic, or at least an exemplary, life" (12). He sees Percy's decision in his early thirties to abandon his medical career (already interrupted by a bout of tuberculosis, contracted in the Bellvue Hospital morgue) and become a writer as a sort of Pascalian gamble: writing provided a way to con-

front both the challenges of his own family heritage (which included not only a distinguished record of public service but the suicides of his father and grandfather), and the broader crises of meaning for humanity, America and the South in the mid-twentieth century, with the resources of an art profoundly influenced by his conversion to Catholicism and his reading of Kierkegaard and other existentialist philosophers. While pointing out that the "interest of an exemplary person depends largely on the complexity, and sometimes the enormity, of his or her flaws" (12), Tolson sets his enterprise in opposition to the sort of "debunking" biography which "seems to have no higher goal than, as Elizabeth Hardwick once said, to 'diminish the celebrated object and aggrandize the biographer'" (13). Tolson's respect for his subject and his perceptive yet unobtrusive interpretation of Percy's "life-project" insure that neither of these results will occur.

Tolson finds Percy's life story to be "something of a mystery" (12), not only in the conventional sense but in the deeper, Marcellian understanding as a participation in transcendence, which can be examined and analyzed but not definitively "solved." His actual presentation of the events of his subject's life is quite straightforward, with no attempt to preempt the reader's own judgment as to the "exemplary" or "heroic" character of Percy's life and work; he is thereby more convincing than would be a more blatant attempt to persuade or any artificial manipulation of his data to reinforce his thesis. Percy emerges from Tolson's presentation as a complex, frequently testy, sometimes uncertain human being, with definite limitations in ideas and idiosyncrasies in behavior, but finally as a genuinely admirable person and a novelist and essayist of rare power and insight.

The main outline of Percy's life has been well known to interested readers for some time through numerous interviews and biographical chapters in critical studies: his birth into an illustrious Southern family which included a Civil War hero, a U.S. Senator, and influential lawyers and businessmen; the suicide of his father when Walker was thirteen, and the drowning death of his mother three years later; his adoption by his cousin William Alexander Percy, "Uncle Will," minor poet and author of an important memoir on the changing South, and the most significant influence on Walker's personal and intellectual development; his education at North Carolina and Columbia Medical School, followed by a stay at the famous Saranac Lake clinic after contracting TB; his marriage to Mary Bernice (Bunt) Townsend,

and subsequent entrance of both into the Roman Catholic Church; his long literary apprenticeship, which culminated in the publication in 1961, when Percy was forty-four, of *The Moviegoer*, which went on to win the National Book Award; his interest in the theory of language, which not only informed his fiction but resulted in numerous essays on the central importance of symbols and symbolmaking for human identity; his writing of five more novels, which earned him a reputation as one of the most significant American novelists of the second half of the twentieth century.

Tolson enriches this basic biographical framework with a wealth of new and fascinating detail. He traces the background of the Percys and the Phinizys (Walker's mother's family) as it extends through five Deep South states. He carefully examines the circumstances of Percy's mother's death and convincingly refutes the rumors that it too was suicide. He considers in depth the profound influence of Will Percy's Southern romantic-stoicism on his young cousin, who eventually rejected Will's philosophy of life but never diminished in respect for his integrity. Tolson also reveals the surprising fact that Will Percy was himself a fallen-away Catholic, courtesy of his Louisiana Creole mother.

One of the central threads running through the book is Percy's lifelong friendship with Shelby Foote, who became a novelist long before Walker thought of writing fiction, and whose advice and support were crucial for Percy both professionally and personally. While Percy's reputation later outstripped his friend's, Shelby's recent celebrity as principal commentator for the Public Television *Civil War* series, which has made him probably better known and certainly more recognizable than his fellow novelist, would surely have both pleased and amused Walker. Tolson also explores the influence of novelist and fellow-convert Caroline Gordon on Percy's initial experiments in writing fiction; her instruction and encouragement were Percy's most important training in the novelist's craft. Tolson also reveals that Percy's investigation of language theory actually predated by some months the discovery that his daughter Ann was suffering from a severe hearing loss: Bunt and Walker's successful struggle to assist their child to surmount her handicap is itself an inspiring story of determination, perseverance and love.

The author also details the bizarre, or perhaps providential, circumstances which led to Percy's winning the National Book Award, even though his publisher hadn't even submitted *The Moviegoer* for

consideration: the fact that A. J. Liebling's interest in Louisiana politics, specifically Huey Long, led him to pick up a new novel with a Louisiana setting, which impressed him so much that he passed it on to his wife, novelist and NBA judge Jean Stafford. The lack of enthusiasm of Alfred Knopf (and even more so of Mrs. Knopf, who airily dismissed the award winner's offer to sign a copy of his novel) is wryly described, as is the sharp observation of rival publisher Robert Giroux, which led Percy to switch firms and resulted in a mutually satisfactory association for the rest of Percy's career.

Tolson also relates that Walker's brother Phin had been in the same PT-boat squadron as the young John Kennedy (and had actually witnessed the ramming of Kennedy's boat and pleaded, in vain, that the boat he was on check for survivors), and that while Walker was an enthusiastic Kennedy supporter, Phin turned down an offer to coordinate this old friend's Louisiana campaign, and voted, as he usually did, Republican! The Kennedy election encouraged Percy's own commitment to social change, as did his association with a number of progressive church people, and while he remained in a number of ways a cultural conservative, he became a strong supporter of civil rights, both publicly in his writing and privately as a member of the Community Relations Council in his home town, Covington, Louisiana. (In his later years, he would be an equally committed and articulate supporter of the pro-life position on abortion.) These are just a sampling of the many strands of Percy's life which Tolson weaves together skillfully and compellingly, concluding with a sensitive discussion of Percy's struggle with cancer and his death on May 10, 1990.

Tolson is particularly good at relating Percy's own background and experiences to characters and events in the novels, while remaining free of any simplistic attempt to reduce the art to a commentary on the life, or vice versa. But he does point out, for example, the extent to which the character of Aunt Emily in *The Moviegoer* draws on that of Uncle Will; how Will Barrett's father in *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming* is an amalgam of a number of the Percy men; how the genesis of *The Second Coming* is to be found in the sudden arrival at Percy's door of an old fraternity brother, a retired business executive from North Carolina who told his wife he was going out for cigarettes and impulsively hopped a bus for New Orleans; and the way in which Percy's own unsettling experiences during his 1934 visit to Germany found their way into his final novel *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

Tolson wisely eschews providing capsule plot summaries of the novels or any developed critical commentary of his own, but he does give a thorough sampling of the initial reviewers' responses to each of Percy's books, as well as an account of longer studies which appeared during Percy's lifetime, so that the reader is able to get a good sense of the reception which the various books received (particularly as Tolson freely expresses his own agreement or disagreement with many of the evaluations he cites, both positive and negative).

Somewhat more problematic, perhaps, is Tolson's tendency to focus on the distinction between the aesthetic and the moral dimensions of art to the point that they sometimes seem at odds. He writes, "Artist though he was, Percy became and remained a moralist who saw the end of art not in formal perfection but in the adequacy of its gesturing toward the truth that would make him free" (11). He sets up a kind of running contrast between Percy's approach and that of Shelby Foote, who is presented as a representative of the modernist creed of self-contained "objectification of sensibility, of an affective exquisiteness," an "elevation of sensibility above all else" (493).

While Tolson pays tribute to Percy's "artistry and resources as a novelist," in particular his keen observation of social manners, his "high comedic ends," his control of language, and his examination of "the human heart in conflict with itself" (492), he seems at once distrustful of an emphasis on formal concerns and somewhat doubtful that the excellence of Percy's fiction can be sustained on purely formal grounds. He justly stresses that Percy saw his fiction as a vehicle for raising fundamental questions about the human search for meaning, and as a means of suggesting, often in the most indirect ways, answers to some of these questions. He rightly points out, "Faith as a means of knowledge, as perhaps the highest form of knowledge, was the enabling condition of Percy's art. It was the substance of his artistic vision, and the final justification of his labor" (493). But he seems unaware that the goal of "formal perfection of the work" is also at the heart of the Thomistic aesthetic of Jacques Maritain's *Art and Scholasticism*, for example, which according to Tolson was one of the "staples of Percy's reading" (237) at the time of his initial experiments in writing fiction.

In calling him "the most important American moralist since Ralph Waldo Emerson" (13), Tolson not only reveals his deep appreciation of Percy's thought, but places him in a context where the specif-

ically aesthetic, formal, fictive aspects of his writing are implicitly accorded a subordinate role. It is perhaps instructive to see the progression Tolson uses in his opening reference to the "life story of Walker Percy—physician, novelist, philosopher, moralist" (11). It remains to be seen whether this strategy of shifting the ground for a defense of Percy's lasting significance is ultimately to be a successful one, or if it will simply reinforce the suspicion in some quarters that the novels are basically cleverly disguised didactic treatises. At any rate, this issue does not detract from the admirable job Tolson does of presenting the story of Percy's life with clarity, order, and insight.

In the context of that story, Percy's relationship with Thomas Merton had a relatively minor but not insignificant impact on both men. The two were contemporaries (Merton a year older) who had a number of things in common: each lost both parents at an early age (Percy being more fortunate in his guardian than Merton in his); each had actually been at Columbia during the same period (Percy of course in the medical school); each settled, finally, in the South. Most importantly, each was a convert to Roman Catholicism, a writer, and a person who resonated strongly to the insights of existentialist philosophy.

Tolson provides a succinct account of the two men's contact with one another, which began when Merton wrote an appreciative letter to Percy in January 1964 about *The Moviegoer*, which a monk visiting from another monastery had requested and received from Percy and later passed on to Merton (thus the solution to the mystery of how Merton had come across it in the first place). Merton recognized and applauded the quest for existential integrity at the heart of the novel, and he admired what Tolson calls the "art of indirection and reticence" (315) with which the theme is conveyed. This initiated a correspondence which continued until shortly before Merton's death. Merton was equally enthusiastic about Percy's second novel, *The Last Gentleman*, which he called, in a pre-publication letter to Robert Giroux, "one of the sanest books I have read in a long time" (330), though one wonders what Merton made of the novel's satiric portrait of the "pseudo-Negro" Forney Aiken, whose experiment in dying his skin is clearly modeled on that of Merton's friend John Howard Griffin. Merton actually contributed ideas and suggestions on Bantu metaphysics and other topics for the work in progress which was to become *Love in the Ruins*, but he did not live to see it published.

Tolson also describes the one, curiously unsatisfactory visit of Percy to Gethsemani (for an editorial board meeting of the journal *Katalagete*, held at Merton's hermitage), when "both turned awkward and shy" (341), Percy persisted in addressing Merton as "Father Louis," and their conversation remained somewhat inconsequential and forced. But he points out that their mutual respect was not lessened by the encounter, and their epistolary contact continued to flourish. One of their common interests was the race question, though Tolson does not include my favorite Percy-Merton story, mentioned by Michael Mott, in which Percy mailed to Merton a racist card he had been given which included the instruction, "Pass this Card on to another White man"; Percy's sardonic comment was, "Well, you're a white man, aren't you?" (*The Seven Mountains of Thomas Merton* [Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1984] 492).

Tolson does point out that Merton's linkage of the racial issue with the Vietnam War, "might eventually have opened into a wider political rift between the two men" (342) had Merton not died soon after, since Percy was much less sure of the immorality of the war than was Merton; though one wonders what the author of the scathing "Letters to a White Liberal" in *Seeds of Destruction* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1964) would have made of being called "a more doctrinaire liberal" (316) than Percy. Though the contact lasted less than five years, because of Merton's untimely death, it was clearly an important one for both men, and Tolson gives it its due, even saying that for Percy the beginning of the correspondence "served as a partial antidote to the shock of the Kennedy assassination two months before. It might not have put Percy back on the right track immediately, but it reminded him what his best track was" (316).

Tolson's discussion also suggests further areas of exploration, not only in the areas of literature and race relations, but in the two men's shared antipathy to Cartesian dualism: some of Percy's statements about the shortcomings of Descartes' anthropology sound remarkably like the Merton of *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New York: New Directions, 1968) and other late works. It would be interesting to examine how Percy's solution to the problem, a Peircean "triadic" theory of language as symbol and link between persons, compares to Merton's endorsement of the primordial, preverbal unity of subject and object found in Zen. Some of the information provided by Tolson could serve as a starting point for such a project.



Unfortunately, extrapolating from Percy's own mistaken comment that Merton had gone to Burma, Tolson states that he died there rather than in Thailand (342; see the 1984 interview with Victor A. and Dewey W. Kramer, "A Conversation with Walker Percy about Thomas Merton," in Lewis A. Lawson and Victor A. Kramer, eds., *Conversations with Walker Percy* [Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1985] 310, 317). This is one of a handful of errors which an alert, and religiously literate, editor should have caught. He also refers to Romano Guardini as "Guardino" in one place (386), and confuses the Elizabethan poet and musician Thomas Campion with the Jesuit martyr Edmund Campion (466). He contrasts Sartre's atheism with Percy's "convinced fideism" (238), though elsewhere he makes clear that Percy considered faith "wholly compatible with reason" (200), a position antithetical to fideism. He misquotes Stephen Dedalus' declaration "Non serviam" (James Joyce, *Ulysses* [New York: Random House, 1934] 582; see also James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* [New York: Viking, 1964] 117 as "non servo" [491], which is not only the wrong tense [present for future] but the wrong verb ["servo" (I keep) for "servio" (I serve)]. Actually, Latin does not seem to be Tolson's strong subject, as he also uses the impossible form "annum mirabilis" (223) for "annus mirabilis" (or "annum mirabilem"). There is also a possible source of confusion when Tolson states that the Forney Aiken section of *The Last Gentleman* is "blatantly lifted" from John Howard Griffin's account of passing as a Negro in *Black Like Me*, and then goes on to note that the "entire episode . . . is a pretty rough sendup of what southerners often derisively refer to as 'northern liberals'" (308); Griffin, of course, was a Texan. There are also a couple of evident misprints: "journal" for "journey" (306) and a missing word in the sentence: "An artist needs *not* to see or his work too clearly" (371).

These, however, are minor blemishes on a major achievement. Taken together with Patrick Samway's recent edition of Percy's previously uncollected non-fiction pieces (*Signposts in a Strange Land* [New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991]), *Pilgrim in the Ruins* is a splendid summing up of Walker Percy's life and career, and an essential starting point for further exploration of his contributions to contemporary literature and thought.