

## Standing to the Side and Watching: An Introduction and Remembrance about Interviewing Walker Percy

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*Victor A. Kramer with Dewey Weiss Kramer*

I first had the pleasure of meeting Walker Percy in October 1972 when we were both invited to participate in the Dedication for the "James Agee Room" of the Simmons Library at St. Andrew's School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Quiet, diffident, soft-spoken and witty, Percy seemed a bit bemused that he was there at an event honoring Agee up "on the mountain". Percy's family, and his famous "Uncle", William Alexander Percy, had been, for years, visitors to the well known Monteagle Campgrounds, and that place, near Sewanee and St. Andrew's had been one of the assembly places for many Southern Writers for decades. Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle were then living close to Sewanee, and Lytle was one of the Agee Event Speakers. These were significant Southern writers who had made names for themselves, but Percy seemed a kind of outsider and he stood beyond that defined circle. Interestingly, he and I actually conducted our conversation standing on the front steps of the library distanced from the event.

Later through the editorship of Will Campbell for *Katallagete* both Percy and Merton served together on the Editorial Board of that ecumenical journal, exchanging materials by mail, and as Percy put it in 1983 when we went to Covington, Louisiana, to give him a copy of the *Reference Guide* for Andrew Lytle and Peter Taylor, the Southern writers, as well as for Percy's work, which I had compiled and edited, it was inevitable that he would talk about writers like Tate and Lytle, Agee and Caroline Gordon, his "mentor." But again, as we spoke, Percy still seemed to both of us to remain a bit on the outside. So it was no surprise when he professed this also to have been so when he experienced his only actual meeting with Merton.

They had come together for the Board Meeting of *Katallagete*. They had only corresponded a little bit before, but Merton knew *The Moviegoer*. They had also corresponded about material which went into the third novel too, *Love in the Ruins*. Thus, while it was not easy to talk, this interview demonstrates, as Paul Elie relates

in his study of these two scholarly writers, that he and Merton were cut of the same cloth and shared a lot of similar experiences as converts. This is what Merton stressed in the interview.

In my own recent talk for the Percy Panel for The International Thomas Merton Society General Meeting in Memphis in 2007, I related some important remarks which Percy made to us on that afternoon, May 1, 1983, about being in Germany in the summer of 1934. He talked about his wandering about the German countryside observing Nazi Brown Shirts who were moving about in an almost crazy manner. This was before he wrote *The Thanatos Syndrome* with its similar fictionalized recollections. Percy remembered that summer as a season of madness and how it made such a vivid impression on him. This was, in a sense, the same Germany which Merton passed through in the middle 1930's, and I therefore think it may be correct to say what was witnessed by both of these perceptive young men at that time planted the "seeds" which led to their conversion and to their creating parallel work as Christian writers and witnesses. It would be good to write an essay about "their" arguments with the Gestapo. Both Merton and Percy learned in their ways to distance themselves from the madness, the craziness of contemporary culture. Both sought ways instead to focus on the transcendent love of God.

What Percy said to us on that May Sunday afternoon in 1983, as transcribed here, yet also before the tape recorder was turned on for a full two hours preceding, demonstrated his total Christian commitment and concern for the society of which we are all part. Percy's books, especially the six novels, demonstrate a growing compassion for all persons as demonstrated in his awareness of the Sacramentality of every moment.

Before Percy let us turn on the tape recorder, he was musing about his own life of grace, and Merton's and the fact both were given the insight to enter the Church. He clearly didn't mean this in any prideful way. He simply meant he and Merton had been quite fortunate to have been able to recognize God's grace and accept it. Maybe that appreciation is why both Percy and Merton cultivated the roles of solitary observer. By distancing themselves they were able to see the bigger picture and pray.

When we did this interview Percy would not admit that the book imagined in *The Moviegoer*—on the character Kate's psychiatrist's bookshelf—with its burlap cover so resembling a first edition of the 1949 *Seeds of Contemplation*—was an indirect refer-

ence to Merton's very popular book of the 1950's and the need for contemplation. But we know, and knew then and later, that Father Smith of *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome* is to some degree an indirect portrait of Merton—a compliment to both of these wise and quiet writers.