

Brian Smith on  
How Our Search for  
“Fugitive Perfection”  
Subverts Our Real  
Communities in Favor  
of the Imaginary in  
Walker Percy’s  
Political Thought

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Brian Smith, in his admirable *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*,<sup>1</sup> presents the most complete analysis to date of Percy’s political thought. Smith’s timely analysis of Percy’s works connects political polarization, outrage culture, feckless leadership, passive culture, neglected communities, and violence to our misguided efforts to overcome our spiritual dislocation. Americans have access to numerous competing and contradictory theories—Smith terms these “mishmash theories”—that all promise relief from our homelessness and hold out “hope for completeness in this life” (p. 1). If we could be made happy and at home in this world, then surely following any one of these theories could do it. Yet, as Percy repeatedly demonstrates and as Smith catalogues, mishmash theories fail by their own standard (see also Lawler and Smith 2013). Americans are materially well off, enjoy robust protections of civil liberty, and are free from arbitrary government, and yet not a whit happier for it (see Amato 2018). What is worse is that Americans are undoubtedly unhappier for it. Instead of making us at home, they exacerbate our alienation because we hope against all evidence to find our perfect home in this world and so devalue the ones we have.

As a remedy to contemporary America’s restive unhappiness, Percy prescribes his politics of the wayfarer, which are oriented around the metaphysical insight that “alienation as a natural fact of life” and one that cannot be overcome by our efforts (p. 4). Feeling restless and never quite at home in this world is normal. The knowledge of one’s homelessness should be a relief; a welcome alternative to modernity’s vain hope that we can make our perfect homes. Smith focuses on the liberating side of Percy’s political thought. Embracing life as a wayfarer is freeing. Recognizing ourselves as wayfarers frees us from the old threadbare theories that emaciate our experiences and lives. Recognizing other people as fellow wayfarers and caring for our admittedly imperfect communities goes a long way towards providing relief to our restless hearts. Percy’s political teaching, Smith argues, hinges on “care and responsibility, placing them alongside humor and irony as central elements of a decent political life” (Smith, p. xxix). Smith shows how Percy’s novels point us in the direction of making temporary homes. Care and responsibility help us see how we can make our communities our temporary homes. Humor and irony provide us with a touch of distance and perspective to cope with the inevitable spiritual dislocation we feel. Moreover, humor and irony keep us humble and incline us to be more forgiving of shortcomings in ourselves and others and less zealous for perfection.

Just so the communities in which we live can be better or worse for encouraging individuals to see themselves and each other as wayfarers. Percy teaches us that “community cannot save human beings from alienation, but the right bonds between people can attenuate this feeling” (Smith, p. 57). Tucked in this short sentence are two crucial points. The first is Percy’s central insight that alienation cannot be overcome entirely by any kind of community; thus we will always be wayfarers. The second, however, presents Percy’s vision for what we can reasonably expect communities to do. Smith emphasizes Percy’s caution and modest hope. Even “decent communities can only do so much to salve the wounds of our existence” (Smith, p. 74). What we need communities to do, according to Smith, is remind us of our human limits and check our desire to escape those limits. These communities are “places of rest” where we can share our lives and accept the duties and responsibilities of living in a community with others (Smith, p. 76). But even these relationships will be imperfect and always lacking a bit. As Smith observes, the endings of Percy’s stories are ambiguous and unsettled for his protagonists who find only partial resolutions to their troubles and belong to imperfect communities.

Smith argues that “Americans have an overly romantic notion of what community might be, and because of this search of fugitive perfection, no actual community can quite live up to our expectations” (Smith, p. 58). Tocqueville famously observed that Americans are anxiously on the move, “dream[ing] constantly of the goods they do not have,” and “tormented by a vague fear of not having chosen the shortest route” (Tocqueville 2002, p. 511). The romance of community is that finding the right sort of community will relieve the heart of its weary longings for home. But as Smith observes, because Americans can imagine more perfect communities, the real communities to which we belong are unfavorably compared and found wanting. The community of real people before our eyes does not stir our hearts, but the idealized image in the mind does. Disappointed and bored, we devalue the real in favor of the imaginary. Restiveness undermines our attachment and interest in the places and people with whom we live. Americans long to start over, fresh, and make a new beginning on the grounds that this time they will find the happiness they seek. Searching for a better community leads Americans to treat other people as disposable, diversions, or obstacles rather than creatures much like themselves who feel somewhat displaced. Since we fail to recognize ourselves as wayfarers, we search in vain for communities that will relieve us of our alienation. Instead of trying to understand what unhappiness indicates about the self and to avoid self-reflective inquiry, we view other people as obstacles to our happiness rather than potential fellow wayfarers.

In what follows, I apply Smith’s insights to an analysis of *Love in the Ruins*, in which Percy explores what the American political landscape might look like in the near future. In *Love in the Ruins*, I argue that Percy is remarkably prescient concerning the direction of American political culture and the political dangers that we risk by ignoring our spiritual dislocation (see also Dominy 2015, Akins 2009, and Reinsch 2013). The fruits of spiritual dislocation such as cultural insularity and violence threaten to destabilize our communities. First, Percy shows that American politics on the federal and state levels will continue relatively the same (no major institutional changes, no dystopian scenarios), but despite the apparent normalcy, disappointment and boredom have led to polarization of our political parties, outrage culture, and separate ideological networks and clustering of like-minded Americans in cities and states. Second, Percy looks at suburban communities like Paradise Estates and depicts indifference, lack of leadership, decay of political participation, and the outsourcing of political decisions to experts. Finally, Percy shows that experts are guided by self-interest rather than the public good and fail to educate students. Instead, their education fails to form responsible citizens, encourages passive culture, and prepares the ground for political violence.

In an address given about *Love in the Ruins*, Percy explains that the novel explores what would happen if Americans “generally succeeded” in pursuing happiness and “[y]et something is wrong” (Percy 1991, p. 248). By generally succeeded, he means that Americans appear to have all they need to be happy such as satisfied needs, comfort, leisure activities, and political liberty. The individual, however, feels ill at ease and restless. The individual is unhappy with her happiness. She knows that she ought to be happy but feels “self-hatred and self-destructiveness” (Percy 1991, p. 248). Published in 1971 and set about a decade in the future, in *Love in the Ruins*, Percy exaggerates social and political fractures he saw in his day and links them to

spiritual dislocation. Percy depicts racial violence, riots, an endless foreign war in Ecuador, decaying shopping centers, vagrant communities of hippies and other drop outs, the polarization of the political parties, insipid political leadership, the Catholic Church fragmented, decay of traditional religion, increased federal administration, routine euthanasia of senior citizens, and white flight into the suburbs and safe havens of golf courses and country clubs.

In this futuristic setting, the two major parties are renamed to emphasize their hyperbolic and extreme positions. The Republican Party becomes the Knothead Party since no one can be too knothheaded to serve her country. Knotheads favor knee-jerk patriotism, property rights, and sentimental religiosity in which Christianity serves an auxiliary and subordinate role to support the state. Knotheads deny any tension between the demands of this world and requirements of the next; for them, serving God is easy, because it is serving the state. The Democratic Party becomes the LEFTPAPASANE, an acronym often shortened to LEFTPAPA, which stands for various leftist causes: “Liberty, Equality, Fraternity, The Pill, Atheism, Pot, Anti-Pollution, Sex, Abortion Now, Euthanasia” (Percy 1971, p. 18). The LEFTPAPAS promote an ever growing range of policies, such as euthanasia, to free the individual from her traditional moorings in the name of liberty and the ease of human suffering.

Not only has the center fallen in politics, but Americans are divided culturally, as well. Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS develop separate cultural and social networks so that they rarely have to encounter each other. LEFTPAPAS and Knotheads watch different movies that reinforce their narrow opinions and reveal how impoverished their vision has become. LEFTPAPAS prefer imported movies from Sweden that celebrate sexual permissiveness and films with over the top sexual feats like performing fellatio while skydiving in 3-D (Percy 1971, see pp. 18 and 37). Most often the LEFTPAPAS’ talk of liberation reduces to discarding sexual inhibitions as the path to personal liberty. The Knotheads watch “clean” movies like *The Sound of Music*, which More calls “sentimental blasphemy” (Percy 1971, pp. 18 and 19). Not by profaning God’s name, but by denying the unavoidability of suffering and the need for grace for redemption, Knotheads blasphemy God.

In addition to culture, given American mobility, Percy foresees that liberal and conservative Americans will “sort” into political stronghold cities and states (see Bishop 2009). For all intents and purposes, American pluralism seems as healthy as ever. Everyone is free to live as they like and with whom they like. Nevertheless, living miles and perhaps states apart, Americans cannot find contentment and peace. Knotheads suffer from bowel complaints, rages, and conspiracy theories and LEFTPAPAS suffer from anxiety, sexual impotence, and self-abstraction (Percy 1971, see p. 20). Anticipating outrage culture and cancel culture, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS watch the nightly news and rage about the other side (see De Kosnik 2019).

Although the political middle has disappeared, Percy depicts American politics working as usual. No mention is made of any changes to political institutions or structures. The parties may have polarized on cultural issues, but both parties enjoy minor policy successes. Neither side is sufficiently dominant to crush the other side. Nor does there seem to be any real interest in doing so. The parties clash through the political process and the typical compromises take place. For example, the president is a “integrationist Mormon married to a liberated Catholic” and the vice-president is a “Southern Baptist Knothead married to a conservative Unitarian” (Percy 1971, p. 56). The presidential nomination system thoughtfully produced candidates who could appeal to both parties and have credibility with crucial ideological and demographic groups based on their personal identities. Appealing to a broad electoral base while moderating political extremes is exactly what the nomination process is supposed to do. If anything, Percy fails to anticipate how fragile the presidential nomination system is; contemporary readers may be wistful for moderate presidential candidates. Together the president and vice-president give speeches in favor of respect for rule of law, unity, and tolerance—themes readily lifted from almost any political speech. Most meaningful political questions have been settled. Aside from engaging in tit for tat culture war policies, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS favor relatively similar policies on economics and administration. In this future, liberals, it seems, have accepted free market, globalist economics and conservatives have warmed up to federal administration and centralization.

Despite the outrages and token causes of the LEFTPAPAS and the Knotheads, there are real political concerns that are overlooked and neglected by both parties. First, the shopping centers and buildings blighted by riots are left to decay in neglect (Percy 1971, see p. 9). Instead of addressing the causes of riots or rebuilding, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS retreat to gated communities like Paradise Estates. Second, for the past 16 years, America has been militarily involved in a civil war in Ecuador. The war carries on in the background of the story without any character calling for America's withdrawal or even attempting to justify continued military intervention in a war without justice on either side nor strategic interest (Percy 1971, see p. 19). The civil war, it seems, is a conflict between the supposedly democracy-supporting Catholic oligarchy and the mass-murdering communists. Third, real progress in civil rights for blacks has atrophied due to a lack of concern among whites. Instead, Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS occupy themselves with the paternalistic question of whether black servants should sit in the front or back seat of the car. When conservatives pick up their black servants, the servants sit in the back seat and liberals make a point by requiring black servants to sit in the front seat. Percy's satire is unmistakable. Perversely, the civil rights movement is reduced to little more than where whites decide blacks should sit in their capacity as house servants. Neither LEFTPAPAS nor Knotheads consider that the beliefs they profess—whether fraternity and equality or Christian love and brotherhood—might require more action on their part to create a society in which blacks have more occupations, opportunities, and housing available.

Percy shows that Americans retreat from addressing these pressing political problems and so risk the decay of their communities through willful neglect and blindness. "The vines began to sprout in earnest," More reports, and he adds that "[p]eople do not like to talk about it" (Percy 1971, p. 9). While More imagines or hallucinates the vines, he sees the decay and ruin slowly accruing. Gradual decay of American communities is the result of myriad tiny neglects in personal responsibility for the places they live. Indifferent to the places they live and the people with whom they live, Americans are not much moved to care for them.

Percy, as Smith argues, realized that "[w]hat endangered the republic flows from man's boredom with himself amid the most perfect comfort and his inability to call any place home for long" (p. 58). The Americans Percy describes are well-off, free to live how and with whom they please, and yet disappointed and bored with politics. Politics here are understood in the Aristotelian sense, as deliberation about how human beings want to live in common. Americans are disappointed with politics because politics cannot relieve them of their homelessness nor provide permanent solutions to persistent human problems. Religious and ideological differences persist long after material needs have been satisfied. Racial tensions and injustices serve as painful reminders of how imperfect America is.

Put another way, politics is a reminder of our homelessness—that we must live together to live well and that whatever political remedies we enact will be merely temporary and partial fixes. This means that everyday politics is disappointing. Political disagreements are usually resolved temporarily through accommodation and compromise. American pluralism and federalism are ways of peacefully coping with divisions among the citizenry, not overcoming them. Since day to day politics is difficult, partial, and mundane, many Americans eschew engagement. Americans are not much interested in living in common with each other and instead many retreat into like-minded cities and states or into apolitical suburbs.

In *Love in the Ruins*, Percy anticipates white flight to the suburbs. Withdrawing from the challenges of their communities, well-off white Americans seek to start over and establish places to live, like gated communities, that are "[oases] of concord in a troubled land" (Percy 1971, p. 17). Unlike the Puritans who, as Tocqueville said, braved hardship "to make *an idea* triumph" and the rebellious colonists who risked their lives for proud self-government, contemporary Americans aim lower for comfort and ease (*italics in original*, p. 32). Americans, however, are no less industrious than their Puritan forebears in making the suburbs into refuges and Edens from the turmoils and troubles present elsewhere. As a gated community, Paradise Estates is insulated from outside disturbances and social convulsions that its residents only watch about on the nightly news. Within the community, its residents are all white and among the professional classes such as doctors, lawyers, businessmen, and scientists. Its residents are not wage-slaves cogs in the machine, but enjoy meaningful, intellectually satisfying work. Differences of religious and political opinion do not dis-

turb their peaceful relations with each other. Everyone belongs to the same country club. Everyone has a family to fill her big house and an “enclosed patio” for enjoying the outdoors. In our contemporary America, many professional, well-educated, whites eschew suburbans in favor of gentrifying urban spaces. Percy may not have foreseen gentrification, but gentrified neighborhoods are similar to suburban gated communities that transform working-class and ethnic neighborhoods into white “middle-class enclave[s]” (Chaple 2016).

As a side note, More frequently mentions (at least seven times by my count) his “enclosed patio,” always in scare quotes (Percy 1971, see pp. 24, 64, 67, 189, 190, 256, 366). The enclosed patio is a hallmark of the suburban home. It is a protected enclosure within a protected enclosure and insulation and privacy are its primary purpose. The shift from front porches to back patios, Richard Thomas observes, was occasioned by the rise of post-war suburbs and marks shift towards increased emphasis on secluded private life. Thomas laments that:

[t]wentieth-century man...has lost part of his public nature which is essential to strong attachments and a deep sense of belonging or feelings of community. Whether the patio is surrounded by walls or left open, it usually remains in the rear of the house, providing privacy but creating a barrier to informal social contacts (1975, p. 127).

More dreads life in his enclosed patio in which he would “breakfast on Tang and terror” (Percy 1971, p. 365). The terror More feels is the terror of having nothing else to contemplate but the self all alone. Enclosed patios were supposed to give suburban dwellers seclusion in which to pursue, uninterpreted, the pleasures of private life, but individuals soon become horrified with boredom of the self.

The best representative of Paradise Estates is Charley Parker. Physically fit and affable, he is a golf pro who started the trend of night golf, which is golfing under large lamps at night and with a heavy dose of saccharine southern charm. To his credit, the Paradise Country Club features a moonlight tournament with a million-dollar award that attracts national attention and golf pros. He has a good wife and two accomplished sons. More describes him as having a “charming little-kid openness about him” (Percy 1971, p. 39). In many ways, Charley is like a child; he is not particularly reflective about who he is or why he does what he does. So long as he keeps busy, Charley is happy. It is not until Charley achieves all that he can imagine—the completion of the Paradise 36 on budget and with grass that needs no maintenance—that he is undone by his success. He achieves all that he thought he needed to be happy and finds it lacking. Briefly Charley wonders who he is but pushes the thought away. Nevertheless, he cannot shake his dissatisfaction. Unaccustomed to such musings, Charley soon becomes depressed and his health and interest in his upcoming summer moonlight tournament wane. He misses his opportunity to learn what his unhappiness might say about himself. Instead, Charley seeks distraction in anger and outrage. He takes to watching the news, getting angry at blacks and LEFTPAPAS, and kicking out his son who dropped out of MIT.

Nevertheless, More describes him as “the best American type”—the sort of guy who “always turns up in a pinch and does what needs doing” (Ibid). Charley turns up in a “pinch” to help people in need during unusual circumstances, but he cannot be counted on to offer assistance under everyday circumstances (Ibid.). More says that Charley would gladly offer his truck to help move people out of the way of a hurricane. But Charley lacks similar concern for his fellow neighbors short of an emergency. The same Charley who would act heroically to help his neighbors during a hurricane cannot be bothered to care how his new golf course affects his community. Other than the Paradise Estates Country Club, which is not a charitable institution, no other entity benefits from Charley’s tournament. Although there are many needs in the community, Charley dedicates his energies to the perfection of a recreational game. The national attention the golf course and tournament attracts is not used to entice other businesses or ancillary goods to the community. Since the grass does not need maintenance and carts eliminate caddies, blacks who are the traditional caddies and grounds crews are fired. Without other jobs, hardship and food insecurity among blacks becomes commonplace.

Why do people help each other during bad times but are indifferent to each other's needs during normal times? More observes that "[t]he mystery of evil is the mystery of limited goodness" (Percy 1971, p. 45). Percy's insight is that heroic virtue, contrary to conventional thought, is easy. Extraordinary occasions call for transcending the ordinary daily considerations that narrow our everyday moral horizons. It is everyday virtue that is challenging, because there is no event to dispense us from the usual moral economy. Moreover, heroic virtue is often expressed in a single, grand act, but everyday virtue should be regular part of one's life. The greater challenge is to accept the duties and responsibilities of living in a community with others during ordinary days. Prudence and magnanimity are needed to negotiate everyday affairs and results are likely to be mixed. Saving someone from a fast approaching hurricane is exciting, but attending town hall meetings is dull work, as is thinking about how to save rather than eliminate jobs. Given his ingenuity and genial nature, Charley could be a leader and find creative remedies to local problems, but he misses those opportunities.

Small neglects add up. More fails to see the same limited goodness and contempt for the ordinary in himself that he sees in Charley. More's indifference to the people within his community causes more harm than he pretends to know. He might have been able to prevent the worst of the riots that damaged the city on Christmas Eve five years ago. The event that sparked the riots happened at Paradise Bowling Lanes, which he co-owned with Leroy Ledbetter. In More's absence, Ledbetter refused to allow a black college couple to use an alley (Percy 1971, see p. 152). Instead, More is relieved that he was not there. That Leroy Ledbetter refused service to a black couple is an all-too-realistic event in small town southern America. There is no easy fix for the mixture of racism and resentment that characterizes much of small-town life, which is why More has so little interest in it. There is no international award for intervening to stop one act of racism at a bowling alley. Scientific breakthroughs bring honor and fame whereas More is likely loose friends and strain relationships by sticking up for a black couple. More has connections among both black and white communities and also considerable tact and patience, but he would rather not use his talents to such (as he sees them) small purposes. Compare More's unconcern for his community to his grandiose hope that he can save the United States from catastrophe and reverse 500 years of Cartesian philosophy with a gizmo he created. He is indifferent to the lives of his neighbors, but hopes that his scientific discovery will be published in a prestigious journal and that he will receive a Nobel Prize for it. Saving America and restoring the western soul are, More believes, the proper scope for his talents. If the everyday scope is depreciated in favor of extreme events, Smith argues that violence is soon to follow.

Perversely, people long for events to jar them out of the everyday so that the impermissible becomes permissible. Violence, Smith, argues, becomes especially attractive. Just as extreme times makes heroic virtue possible, extreme times makes violence permitted. People "enjoy hearing of disaster" because it offers an escape from their everyday lives (p. 123). Most people are not attracted to extreme times in the hopes of performing a heroic deed. Smith explains that "[f]ear and violence can move us out of alienation and into a sense of liveliness that was lacking before" (p. 122). Percy, as Smith argues, recognizes that war is appealing because it "heightens reality" by "shocking us out of our everyday conditions" (p. 127). As a result, our everyday lives compare unfavorably to the increased meaning and significance that war seems to give our lives. Reading about the Battle of Verdun, More longs for some cataclysmic event to carry him out of his ordinary life. Percy understood that "war fills the emptiness of ordinary life by granting the aimless a purpose and the alienated a concrete, relational role in which to live" (Ibid.). War quickly turns individuals into comrades who fight, live, and die for each other. Life is stripped down to survival, but seems intensified because of it.

More has contempt for the Nittany Lions football booster club because the member's support of a football team does not seem meaningful as the soldiers at Verdun. On the contrary, Percy affirms that everyday life is filled with myriad purposes and opportunities for individuals take up responsibility for the care of their communities. A local college football team is often a wellspring of local concern and pride. Football offers the right kind of alternative to the excitement of war, but also offers a break from the ordinary. Nobody dies in football (barring accident). Teams compete against traditional rivals and fans savor victory,

mourn defeat, and either way enjoy speculating about the next season. Booster clubs are usually composed of parents of players, alumni, and loyal fans that volunteer their time. Instead of the totality of comradeship during war, people wear their team's colors during the game. Afterward, everyone changes into their regular clothes. The point here is not to praise football, but the commonplace ways that individuals are drawn to build relationships with other, to exercise leadership, and stewardship of their communities.

Without guidance from would-be leaders like Charley and More, Percy depicts how care for the community is left to people who prefer to exploit without opposition or struggle like P. T. Bledsoe and Moon Mullins. Outside the pristine Paradise Estates, Moon Mullins provides slum housing to poor blacks. Bledsoe is a factory owner who denies promotions to black workers so that they are stuck in Mullins' slums (Percy 1971, see p. 31). Bledsoe is a local business owner, family man, churchgoer, and responsible community member who belongs to numerous civic organizations. This supposedly "upright citizen" uses his social position and networks through civic organizations to maintain white supremacy (Percy 1971, see p. 30).

Without individuals willing to take up the everyday cares of their communities, those responsibilities are handed over to experts. The danger, Smith argues, of rule by experts is that it "may create a society intellectually subordinate to experts" (p. 34). That vulnerable populations like seniors and the mentally ill are managed by federal experts will signal a deeper loss of sovereignty among Americans. In this future, most of the ailments of old age have been cured; seniors can expect to live, long, healthy physically fit and limber lives. Since their children are grown and they have retired from their jobs, the elderly have even fewer personal connections and relations. To keep seniors from contemplating their mortality, they are channeled into special federal housing facilities in an industrial park, known as Fedville, where they are "treated for the blues and boredoms of old age" (Percy 1971, p. 14). Nevertheless, many seniors "grow despondent in their happiness" and waste away despite having their health and every enriching activity available to them (Percy 1971, p. 14). Uncooperative seniors who do not keep cheerfully diverted amid recreational activities supplied to them may be euthanized. Euthanasia does not happen secretly without the public's awareness as part of some dystopian government conspiracy in which people are forcibly killed. Instead Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS are divided on whether the "button" or the "switch" is the best means of preserving the volition of the senior opting for death (Percy 1971, p. 122). With the button, a senior presses a button that stimulates the brain into feeling pleasure. Eventually, the senior presses the button so often that she forgets to eat and soon passes away in a fog of good feelings. The switch delivers a swifter death. A senior flips a switch to send continuously good feelings to her brain so that death by starvation happens more quickly.

Public debate atrophies to competing Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS positions about how federal experts will administer policies. Of course, advocates of both the button and the switch miss the point. Both Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS do a great job signaling concern for free will, consent, and dignity. These values are political truisms. Everyone knows that euthanizing people against their will is bad and so seniors must provide consent. Exceptions (such as insanity) require approval of a judge. More exceptions are likely, Percy hints, which underscores how easily individual autonomy talk slides into subservience to expert opinion. Life is worth living only if one has quality of life. Quality of life is a slippery term and largely left up to experts to determine. Being human is conditional; if one meets certain measurable, objective standards of quality of life—health and happiness—then one possesses dignity. Experts make and measure the standards and those who fall short of standards have fewer legal protections. Given longer and healthier lives, Percy foresees that eventually everyone tires of endless painting and pottery lessons and will be sent to the Happy Isles of Georgia where the federal government keeps a facility for euthanasia. From the perspective of modern science, it is easier to eliminate the unhappy person than to try to understand why suffering and pain are a part of life and how it might draw us toward others.

That the Federal government provides salsa dancing lessons—at taxpayers expense—to seniors to distract them from their mortality and that those who cannot be mollified by the manic pace of recreational activities are euthanized is Percy's best dark comedy. Whether a senior lives in a button or switch state means that the way she dies is determined by majoritarian politics. Public concern for volition and dignity provide a fig leaf to hide the fact that the determination that a senior cannot be rehabilitated is not left up to

her, but by a doctor. The platitudes that “the right of the individual to control his own body” and a “man’s sacred right to choose his own destiny and realize his potential” are not followed by those who profess them (Percy 1971, p. 197). Percy puts these words in the mouth of Dr. Buddy Brown, a scientist at Fedville and switch supporter, to illustrate how he gives lip service to principles like dignity and individual autonomy while making life and death decisions for patients. In *Message in a Bottle*, Percy notes “talk of the dignity of the individual” only increased alongside the deaths of millions in the 20th century (Percy 1975, p. 22). When so many decisions that used to be subject to political deliberation are given to experts, “scientists are the princes of the age” (Percy 1983, p. 141).

Percy lambasts the idea that experts are always motivated by the best interests of the patient. Whether Mr. Ives, a mute senior, will be sent to the Happy Isles and the switch or released to his home in Lost Cove is left up to an academic contest, known as the Pit, between Dr. Buddy Brown and Tom More to offer the correct diagnosis. Having a penchant for showmanship, Buddy enjoys a significant student following at the Pit. Reveling in his celebrity, Buddy encourages More to join in the waggish spirit of the Pit and says “let’s give them [the students] a real show” (Percy 1971, p. 196). Buddy is not as interested in diagnosing Mr. Ives as he is desirous to beat More, who is both his rival in this contest and for the affections of Moria, a research assistant. While More expresses concern for Mr. Ives’s life, even he spars more fiercely to impress his sometimes lover Moria.

Diagnosis is a means of knowing or way of coming to knowledge in which a doctor observes visible symptoms to discern and perceive an unseen cause. Like any learner, a good diagnostician learns to perceive unseen illnesses with a practiced eye and a healthy dose of humility that grasping the truth indirectly is perilous. But as the Pit demonstrates, political ideology and hero worship supersede the quest for knowledge. In the amphitheater, the students take their seats according to political affiliation. Knothead students sit on the right and LEFTPAPA students sit on the left and so recreate the seating chart of the revolutionary and murderous French assembly in the 1790s. The students place bets on their favorite doctors and debate their merits like racehorses. As if at a sporting event, the students cheer and boo. Or, as Percy darkly suggests, by describing the Pit like a Spanish bullring, these academic contests have more in common with the spectacle of violence and death between bull and matador rather than reasoned instruction and clinical diagnosis (Percy 1971, see p. 198).

At bottom, cold, reductionist science is not guiding the decisions of the doctors, but rather feverish mob politics. The student audience, not the doctors, make the decision for Mr. Ives’s future. Like all celebrities, the doctors play for the applause of the crowd. The students ostensibly decide, but as More wryly observes, the students are as “fickle as a mob, manipulable by any professor who’ll stoop to it” (Percy 1971, p. 291). As with all mobs, it is unclear who is leading who. The students are encouraged to cheer and jeer and doctors are permitted to “unhorse each other by any means fair or foul” (Percy 1971, p. 220). The norms of the Pit encourage demagoguery and deceit. Whichever doctor can make his side appear the stronger wins, because “the students, left and right, who have no use for weakness in their elders” (ibid.). The Pit teaches the students to prize superior rhetorical skill and showmanship. More is wary of student praise; he will not be led by their cheers or jeers, but securing their support is critical for the benefit of Mr. Ives. So he outwits and outmaneuvers Buddy Brown to show the students that Mr. Ives maintains full control of his facilities and should be allowed to return to his home in Lost Cove.

More’s use of trickery admits that deliberation for the discovery of truth is no longer an effective tool, which Percy, as Smith argues, points to a deeper sickness in education and democratic culture that risks totalitarianism. Students “want either total dogmatic freedom or total dogmatic unfreedom, and the one thing that makes them unhappy is something in between” (Percy 1971, p. 233). Smith opines that the “‘something’ in between would require leaving dogma behind—thinking critically about subject matter for themselves” (p. 39). The last thing students want to do is think for themselves. Their education has not prepared them to approach a subject or text confident in their powers of reasoning. Throughout the contest in the Pit, the students cautiously wait for signs from the professors to indicate which side is winning before they boo or cheer. For example, they become especially nervous when the contest takes an unexpected turn and the pro-

fessors are slow to signal the side for which they should cheer. They look anxiously for someone “who can tell them who’s right” (Percy 1971, p. 233). Their capacity for judgment and discern are undeveloped.

There is a logical progression from the students’s surrender to expert opinion to “establishing habits of subservience throughout their lives” (p. 39). Habits of subservience lead, as Smith says, to “passive culture” that enervates political life (p. 40). Passive culture spills over to politics on two fronts that Smith identifies. First, passive culture saps individuals of confidence in their experiences and powers of reasoning that undermines their capacity as political creatures. They distrust themselves in favor of mouthing prepackaged answers to prepackaged problems. Training students to select the correct key term from a word bank is hardly likely to nurture the openness to new possibilities and the prudential risk-taking needed to respond to political challenges. Without such individuals, political life stagnates and marches on with weary attachment to threadbare arguments and courses of action. Second, passive culture lays the groundwork for “conversion to a totalizing ideology” (Ibid.). Ideology relieves the individual of the burden of understanding the complexities of the world by presenting a simplified account that is readily digested. Without noticing it, the individual places her mind under the tutelage of an unseen expert opinion. Passive culture merely suppresses the self but does not truly tame it. For the individual caught in passive culture, the self seethes. Much of the appeal of ideology is that the individual almost re-captures her sovereignty because she feels empowered by belonging to a political movement.

Students are searchers; they want teachers who can guide them toward truth. As Percy shows, their tragedy is that they want to escape being consumers but cannot. Consequently, students are disappointed when they encounter teachers in the classroom; they are expected to consume educational products the way consumers buy goods. Teachers, Percy argued, should “help the student come to himself not as a consumer of experience but as a sovereign individual” (Percy 1975, p. 63). No longer “prizes to be won,” Percy laments that fields of knowledge, texts, and experiences have become things to be consumed and digested (Ibid.). Students passively receive the “educational package” prepared for them by experts (Ibid.). Every lesson, text, and experience has a “take away” already determined by the teacher, or more accurately today, the textbook companies following state standards. The students’ education does not alleviate them of their alienation nor prepare them to see themselves as wayfarers. In fact, as Percy suggests, their education intensifies their anxiety and alienation. Students are anxious to have the prepackaged right answers. It would not surprise Percy to learn that studies show that anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, and hopelessness are among the most common mental health troubles of contemporary college students (see Jones et al. 2018).

In the novel’s epilogue, More observes that “[l]earning and wisdom are receding nowadays. The young, who already know everything, hate science, bomb laboratories, kill professors, burn libraries” (Percy 1971, p. 383). Education as the mastery of “take aways” or key terms ensures that students remain students and in tutelage. Knowledge never really becomes theirs. If they cannot obtain an authentic encounter with texts and experiences except mediated by their professors, then the easiest thing to do is to forget what they owe to their teachers. Before their murderous and destructive rampage, More sees that the students repeat “dull truths and old lies with all the insistence of self-discovery” (Percy 1971, p. 219). They forget that they are not the origin of all that they believe and forget that they needed teachers. The students’s turn against learning is a sign of how Percy saw the modern project unfolding. The modern spirit that gutted religious authority will come for science too. “In the end science suffers too” Percy recognizes (1975, p. 22). The young will reject “the new science and the old God” in favor of “fragile utopias of the right place and the right person and the right emotion at the right time” (Ibid.). Students smash idols wherever they find them, including science and learning. Violence is the last hope of an individual already deep in despair to reclaim her sovereignty.

Instead of achieving international fame, Tom More learns that “knowing...is man’s happiness” (Percy 1971, p. 383). According to Percy, as Peter Lawler explains, “the human being is a wanderer *because* he is a wonderer” (italics in original; Lawler 2002, p. 63). Since we can come to know ourselves as creatures that have transcendent longings that are imperfectly satisfied, we can find partial rest in the places we live. More gives up his anxious goal to make America perfect and focuses on making his temporary home. More mar-

ries, has children, resumes his job as a psychiatrist with a small practice, and returns to church. Since many Knotheads and LEFTPAPAS have moved away, his community consists of “mostly eccentrics who don’t fit in anywhere else” (Percy 1971, p. 386). More learns to be a part of his community of misfits. As wayfarers, we will always find the places we live mis-fits. More is as anxious and restless ever but “[w]hat has changed is [his] way of dealing with it” (Percy 1971, p. 384). More’s relationships are imperfect and he still feels homeless at times.” Percy, as Smith summarizes, shows that “[n]one of our communities or churches or relationships can provide a complete source of stability; all of them together can only occasionally allow the human person a sense of fullness and rest that we might believe a glimpse of where we really belong” (p. 177). The life of the wayfarer is the corrective to searching for “fugitive perfection” in which one learns “[w]aiting and listening and looking” (Percy 1971, p. 381).

## NOTES

1 All page references are to Smith unless specified otherwise.

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