

More Than a Diagnostician

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Walker Percy was an expert diagnostician, as Brian Smith repeatedly indicates in his book *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer*. Too often readers of Percy find his novels all diagnosis and no cure, yet Smith is apt to highlight what kinds of therapy Percy does supply for our individual, social, and political ills. The problem is that the remedies often remain un-recognizeable, even after they are unveiled.

In Walker Percy's second novel *The Last Gentleman*, Sutter Vaught is a stand-in for Dr. Percy. He, too, is a great diagnostician. As his begrudging ex-wife Rita tells the protagonist Will Barrett, "I still think he's the greatest diagnostician since Libman. Do you know what I saw him do? [...] I saw him meet a man in Santa Fe, at a party, speak with him five minutes—a physicist—ask him two questions, then turn to me and say: that man will be dead of malignant hypertension inside a year." Sutter's prediction comes true—though "that's neither here nor there" to Rita. Similarly, in every one of his novels, Percy detects our disease. All our symptoms point to a single cause—our alienation from one another.

We attempt to solve this problem with a variety of methods, and Smith finds two competing options in Percy: theory or consumption. Hence, the "theorist-consumer." "Percy argued that people often oscillate between the acceptance of relatively one-dimensional theories to explain the world," Smith writes, "and consuming the many good and services that our world has to offer" (p. 4). As alienated individuals, we approach one another with limited vision, instrumentalist in our relationships. If we do so, then we are going to be hard-pressed to comprehend any cure that demands a new approach. We would hear such a claim as another "theory" and "consume" it without being radically convicted. Sutter relays this problem to his sister when describing Will Barrett: "Let us say you were right: that man is a wayfarer...who therefore stands in the way of hearing a piece of news which is of the utmost importance to him...and which he had better attend to. ...What does Barrett do? ...he will receive the news from his high seat of transcendence as one more item of psychology, throw it into his immanent meat-grinder, and wait to see if he feels better." Here, Barrett reflects the modern American, Percy's primary audience. While the novelist attempts to show the way out of alienation, to reestablish human beings not as theorist-consumers but as wayfarers, the reader will digest only what she desires to hear and no more.

This reminds me of the current problem facing humanities and liberal arts education. Fundamentally different in both means and ends from the technical—or what is misla-

beled as “vocational” studies—the humanities must attempt to use language, data, and play a game that it is ill-suited to its mold. More so than that, the paradigms in the two different fields are so at odds that the adherents of each camp must first step into the other’s shoes entirely, walk in that way, and then determine whether there is truth in the other’s claims. For instance, the study of humanities is not meant to “produce” a graduate who can attain success with a high income, but to teach a person in process how to live as a human being in all situations and times. How to translate that end so that “vocational” schools can understand its merits?

Smith’s book tries to jump several paradigmatic hurdles: it tries to speak to a divided political world about “care and responsibility” as well as “humor and irony” but not through theory, through story (p. 165). In order to make sense of Percy’s cures for society, Smith decodes the message in language that an alienated individual could understand. He interprets for the political theorist (as well as for the citizen!) the point within Percy’s stories, from *The Moviegoer* to the episodes of sci-fi in *Lost in the Cosmos*. Smith masters the difficult task set before him. He believes in the power of literature to transform political thought (citing great sources, such as Susan McWilliams’ “Moral Education and the Art of Storytelling”), and, through criticism, has attempted to do likewise. When Percy explained why he wrote novels instead of essays, he claimed that he needed a broader readership. He also had the models of Dostoevsky and Solzhenitsyn in mind, men who were exiled for their fiction. Their novels had power; they mattered. They scared people, especially those in power, and they cause changed in their national political culture. By attending to Percy’s political thought, Smith challenges readers to see Percy’s power: “Percy’s written legacy reminds us to constantly reknit what the world tears asunder. As wayfarers without a home, we can aspire to no more and justice demands we do no less.”