

Editorial Introduction

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The highest compliment that I could pay to Brian Smith is that I wish that I could have written this book. Since there are no bones of contention or glaring omissions, at least for me, there is little I can say that wouldn't be redundant. Smith's achievement lies in his masterful gathering of the many threads across Percy's six philosophical novels, more technical philosophical articles, and other non-fiction essays. Especially gratifying is his inclusion of Percy's uncle Will's *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (1941) which, in my view, is essential to providing the backdrop to the tumultuous times within which Percy's maturing consciousness was forged.

My original interest in Walker Percy took wing from Elizabeth Corey's book *Michael Oakeshott on Religion, Aesthetics, and Politics* (2006). When queried about the extended Percy quote used in her book Elizabeth told me that Walker Percy stood as the most Oakeshottian of writers (until then I had not read Percy). Now thanks to Brian Smith's most excellent book, I now have the wherewithal to try and flesh out what perhaps Elizabeth was driving at.

Speaking of Oakeshott, a late addition to this issue is the transcript of a recent lecture by Timothy Fuller, the dean of Oakeshott studies. While not strictly part of this symposium, it offers the benefit of an elegant distillation of Fuller's lifetime of engagement with Oakeshott's (political) philosophy. Percyans, especially if they are coming to Oakeshott as a novice, will find the tone that Tim strikes to be most congenial, as Elizabeth has already indicated, and that Brian has come to appreciate.

Smith's central organizing principle is the idea of the wayfarer. Thematically, Smith draws out four derivative and inextricably related themes from this master principle—that is, of ways of assuaging one's alienation.

- The first, is the American (by no means exclusively so) predilection for consumption both terms of material plenitude but also in terms of the consumption of some theoretical fad or other.
- The second, is the pull of the collectivity to sublimate the burden of individuality.
- The third, is the allure of danger and violence as a respite for the alienated.
- Fourth, is the scope for hope in Percy by accepting one's finitude not only metaphysically but also in terms of understanding and knowledge.

Oakeshottians would do well to read Percy and vice versa: the same can be said for Hayekians. The triumvirate of giants, Hayek-Oakeshott-Percy, each in their own way, offer

recognizably congruent criticisms of socio-political rationalisms. This manifests itself in Smith's explication of Percy's critique of scientism and the "cult of expertise", this latter topic being the subject of a recent *Cosmos + Taxis* symposium on Roger Koppl's *Expert Failure* (2018). Other topics of interest that speak to the (classical) liberal mind that Smith expounds upon includes free speech, situated knowledge, epistemic modesty, embodied cognition, and the rejection of all forms of totalitarianism. Understandably, there is much discussion on the role of language and consciousness, since this area remained Percy's longest standing published interest. Those familiar with Hayek's rereleased *The Sensory Order* (2017) and the recent work of moral psychologist Jonathan Haidt (and his idea of viewpoint diversity), may well find Smith's Percy particularly congenial.

Brian Smith occupies a special place within Percy studies. Along with the late Peter Augustine Lawler, he co-edited *A Political Companion to Walker Percy*. There is no doubt that Smith's solo effort is the benchmark work on the topic of Percy's political outlook and will remain so for years to come.

Elizabeth Amato kicks off discussion of what Smith takes to be Percy's central political insight. That is, though alienation is part and parcel of the human condition, the utopian impulse to alleviate this dislocation, is profoundly misplaced. Allen Mendenhall examines Smith's Percy through a Hayekian lens. He invokes Hayek's famous distinction between *cosmos* and *taxis*, which of course is the title of this journal. Farrell O'Gorman focuses on Percy's fraught role of the church and Christianity, specifically within the American context. Jessica Hooten Wilson considers the prevailing problem of a misguided instrumentalism facing the liberal arts. Brian Smith rounds off the discussion with his response.

Our apologies to all directly concerned with this symposium for its delayed appearance. Logistically speaking, as the year unfolded, things became trickier, as it did for most. But in the end, it worked out all right: there are few better than the author of *Love in the Ruins*, that most prescient of dystopian novels, to see out this momentous and tumultuous of years.

NOTES

- 1 "I tried research one summer... A friend of mine, a boy from Pittsburgh named Harry Stern, and I read up the literature and presented the problem... But then a peculiar thing happened. I became extraordinarily affected by the summer afternoons in the laboratory. The August sunlight came streaming in the great dusty fanlights and lay in yellow bars across the room. The old building ticked and creaked in the heat. Outside we could hear the cries of summer students playing touch football. In the course of an afternoon the yellow sunlight moved across old group pictures of the biology faculty. I became bewitched by the presence of the building; for minutes at a stretch I sat on the floor and watched the motes rise and fall in the sunlight. I called Harry's attention to the presence but he shrugged and went on with his work. He was absolutely unaffected by the singularities of time and place. His abode was everywhere. It was all the same to him whether he catheterized a pig at four o'clock in the afternoon in New Orleans or at midnight in Transylvania. He was actually like one of those scientists in the movies who don't care about anything but the problem in their heads—now here is a fellow who does have a "flair for research" and will be heard from. Yet I do not envy him. I would not change places with him if he discovered the cause and cure of cancer. For he is no more aware of the mystery which surrounds him than a fish is aware of the water it swims in" —*The Moviegoer*.
- 2 <https://cosmosandtaxis.org/back-issues/ct-712/>

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