

Art and Salvation

Walker Percy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Search for Influence. The Ohio State University Press, 2017

Reading Walker Percy's Novels. Louisiana State University Press, 2018*

Jessica Hooten Wilson's stated ambition is no less than "to revitalize influence studies, especially as they relate to our religious assumptions about aesthetics" (p. 20). On current form, she may well be the one to achieve this. Hooten Wilson's two books are dealt with in tandem not only because they have appeared in quick succession, but because there is inevitable overlap of interest, although they are each of a different character. The first book, more academically specialized, examines one of the primary influences on Percy, namely Dostoevsky, while the second is pitched at a general readership. The chapters in both books helpfully correspond sequentially to Percy's six novels: *The Moviegoer* (1961), *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins: The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987). Moreover, the first book features a preliminary chapter on Percy's two unpublished novels, *The Charterhouse* and *The Gramercy Winner*, while the second includes a biographical overview and an appendix on the non-fiction *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983).

The past two years have seen Walker Percy's star well and truly in the ascendant, yet again. In addition to the two books by Hooten Wilson, it would be remiss of me not to mention Brian Smith's recent monograph *Walker Percy and the Politics of the Wayfarer* (2017), discussion of which must wait for another day. It's not as if Percy's fiction was ever "out of fashion": Percy, as a cultural gadfly, was always swimming against the stream, hence the scare quotes. Steady sales have justified that all of Percy's novels have remained in print. Despite Hooten Wilson's characterization of *Lost in the Cosmos* as a "cult classic," she informs us that it is Percy's biggest seller (p. 123).

Prevailing literary theory is a smorgasbord of theories generating "artless propaganda"¹ and fashionable off-the-peg "isms" that have currency in domains where there is an uncritical philosophical culture (p. 16). Hooten Wilson, unsurprisingly, is having none of that. She unapologetically rejects the *de rigueur* posturing of the inhibitory bores of the "grievance studies" (or what Bloom termed the "School of Resentment") industry (p. 109).

Hooten Wilson states that her "study of Dostoevsky and Percy responds to a secular assumption about human nature that plays out in a couple of ways in literary studies: the sovereignty of the individual as it affects the motivation of the author as well as, for the reader, the necessary death of the author" (p. 11). (The "human nature" I take

* Connotes pagination for *Reading Walker Percy's Novels*.

¹ See D. G. Myers' review of Alvin Kernan's *The Death of Literature*: <https://www.newcriterion.com/issues/1991/1/who-killed-literature> and Mark Bauerlein's *Literary Criticism: An Autopsy*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997 and <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2014/11/13/essay-critiques-role-theory-humanities>.

to be the Humean conception). Shedding light on authorial intention is a fraught enterprise at the best of times (pp. 2, 11, 12, 14, 58). Hooten Wilson's sound methodological approach seeks to negotiate the polarity of erasing an author's agency while still acknowledging that any writer must surely be entering into an extant conversation of mankind. Hooten Wilson poses the supposed dichotomy between imitation and originality (pp. 16, 109) and later a third component, derivation (p. 58). The lasting interest of Hooten Wilson's project lies in the idea that Dostoevsky and Percy mutually refract light on each other (p. 2). It is in this sense that Percy would look to a past master, since Dostoevsky's and Percy's philosophical concerns were broadly similar (p. 16). Thus, writes Hooten Wilson, according to Eliot, "artistic influence is not to be denied or sneered at but rather to be honed and celebrated" (p. 58).

Both Dostoevsky and Percy were concerned with the existence of God and the problem of evil (pp. 5, 7). There are also striking parallels between Dostoevsky's Russia and the post-Civil War American South: "[T]he social problems of Dostoevsky's Russia became the ones of Percy's America" (pp. 89, 69). Both societies were wrestling with the imposition of proximate "progressive" cultures, and the resultant tragic corrosion of a deeply saturated Judeo-Christian tradition, whether one was a believer or not (p. 6). Percy, unlike Dostoevsky, saw the comic and thus moved from the bleak to the hopeful (p. 4). Moreover, whereas Dostoevsky's vision was panoramic, Percy had the individual as his focal point (pp. 11, 61*). He thus affirmed that individuals are the ultimate units of moral value, while, on the other hand, criticizing the methodological-ontological notion of social atomism.

From Dostoevsky, Percy learned how to write fiction full of conviction (p. 9). Like Gerard Manley Hopkins, who commented that his "life is determined by the Incarnation down to most of the details of the day,"² Percy, even as a "bad Catholic," internalized the idea [the gift of the Word or *logos* (pp. 100-101*, 50, 43)] that reality is both immanent and transcendent (pp. 57, 72, 67*). This incarnational aesthetic was to be an ongoing bulwark against the inherent imperialism of scientism, the idea that every intelligible question has either a scientific solution or no solution at all (pp. 10, 46-49, 98-99, 27*). That Percy "plundered" Dostoevsky primarily for his ideas and not his art must surely be the primary impulse behind his literary impulse being philosophical. I, as have others, have made the case that he was first and foremost a philosopher, temperamentally more suited to using the vehicle of fiction to express the subtlety of his ideas (p. 42).³

A question that exercised Percy was "How does a Catholic fiction writer handle Catholic Faith in his novel?" (p. 60). There is something to be said for Shelby Foote's point that art could proffer salvation (p. 39),⁴ but without requiring a commitment to the slogan *l'art pour l'art* of the Aesthetic movement of the 1880s. Percy was not a careerist. As a man of independent means he didn't have to earn as a living as a writer, but he palpably had an existential calling to work out some philosophical problems. Hooten Wilson tells us that "Percy learned from Dostoevsky how to create novels that made Christianity palatable to a modern audience" (pp. 18, 63).

² *The Sermons and Devotional Writings of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. Christopher Devlin, S.J. London: Oxford University Press, 1959. p. 263.

³ *Walker Percy, Philosopher*. Ed. Leslie Marsh. New York: Palgrave, 2018.

⁴ Hooten Wilson cites John Paul II's letter to artists (p. 87*): https://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23041999_artists.html

As Hooten Wilson rightly points out, Percy's most well-known novel *The Moviegoer*, was embraced by the modern reader for the wrong reasons. It was *not* intended as an affirmation of modern despair (pp. 60, 63), something some people also mistakenly attributed to Camus' writing as well. Much as Camus did, Percy stressed the "faultiness" in any earthly definition of happiness (p. 66*). Hooten Wilson invokes Solzhenitsyn's dictum that, "If humanism were right in declaring that man was born to be happy, he would not be born to die" (p. 97, p. 21*). The banality of daily existence makes us gravitate to happiness that can be "purchased, consumed and wasted" at the expense of the examined life (pp. 16*, 18*, 19*, 27*, 28, 66, 69*, 78-79*) exemplified by the utilitarianism of the *Thanatos Syndrome* (p. 157). The big search is not intended to diminish the "Little Way," "the sad little happiness of drinks and kisses, a good little care" (pp. 19, 54, 91*, 108*). Binx, the protagonist of *The Moviegoer*, Hooten Wilson explains, is a Dostoevskian narrator because he does not possess a definitive view of the world, unlike his aunt Emily and other "know-alls" in the novel. This becomes more explicit in Percy's non-fiction, manifest as his anti-rationalistic critique of our Cartesian inheritance (pp. 95, 62). Binx's doubt is "part and parcel" of his faith (p. 53).

In Hooten Wilson's view, *The Last Gentleman* is "Percy's most direct and intentional copy of a Dostoevsky novel, i.e. *The Idiot*, reconstituted in a twentieth-century Southern setting (p. 59). That may well explain my predilection for it, but I don't think that it would have occurred to me that Barrett was modeled on Myshkin, who in turn is modeled on the Don Quixote "holy fool" tradition (pp. 18, 63). In a footnote (p. 67, note 30), Hooten Wilson quotes Dostoevsky: "Of the most beautiful figures in Christian literature, the most complete is that of Don Quixote. But he is only good because at the time he is ridiculous".

Love in the Ruins is a work of alarming prescience. It anticipates the socio-political-tribal maelstrom of the Twitter age, and as such it offers perhaps the best way into Percy for the novice reader. It is Dostoevskian in its scope, insofar as Percy diagnoses the "spiritual sickness of an entire nation" (pp. 19, 87), which one may well extrapolate to Western civilization writ large. Percy, like Dostoevsky, was repulsed by a Christianity that was coopted into the service of a political agenda (pp. 89, 91). That is, he rejected the philosophically defective impulse to derive political conclusions from religious premises. And while rabid ideologues of any political hue carry no truck with Percy (pp. 97, 135, 150, 151), his ire is especially reserved for the Left's inherent authoritarianism in its degradation of language into euphemistic hollowness (p. 114*). In this regard, Hooten Wilson makes the insightful connection between Dostoevsky, Orwell and Percy (pp. 137-141, 143, 151-152, 113*, 117*). Moreover, both Dostoevsky and Percy were at one in grasping that those who so profess their "love for mankind" are myopic in failing to perceive that the technocratic implementation of this "love" paved the road to Auschwitz and Holodomor (pp. 155, 118*, 129-130*). More broadly, the word "love", as an utterance of everyday usage, may well be the most cheapened of words (pp. 143, p. 101*).

Footnote's remark that art could proffer salvation (cf. the John Paul II letter) brings to mind Wittgenstein's gnomic remark in the *Tractatus*: "Ethics and aesthetics are one" (6.421). In the *Notebooks 1914-1916*, Wittgenstein characterizes art and the good life as *sub*

specie aeternitatis, whereby a work of art is mystically understood. This, as Malcolm Budd explains, is the object “seen from the point of view of one who is living eternally (in the sense of timelessly) in that she is living in the present”.⁵ Michael Oakeshott once wrote “. . . the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better things to come, but as *aventures*, themselves encounters with eternity.”⁶ These sentiments appear to jibe with Percy’s belief in the transformative power of art, something that he drew heavily from Dostoevsky (p. 10).

If Hooten Wilson is to fulfill the promissory note that she has issued in *Walker Percy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and the Search for Influence*, there are a few aspects to her thinking that could be enriched. This said, one cannot impugn Hooten Wilson’s explication of Catholic philosophical theology, Russian literature, and their relationship to Percy’s writings: that alone is an impressive enough achievement. It could be illuminating, though, to examine the so-called “Catholic novel” via earlier novelists such as John Henry Newman, Walter Pater, Evelyn Waugh, and J. R. R. Tolkien and more contemporaneous writers such as Graham Greene, Shūsaku Endō, Ayako Sono, David Lodge and others besides. Moreover, since Hooten Wilson has made aesthetics a key tenet of her life’s work and has wisely eschewed the aforementioned propaganda industry, her work would be greatly bolstered by a general infusion of *philosophical* aesthetics. Roger Scruton, who would find Hooten Wilson’s aspirations most congenial, would be the perfect gateway theorist to her assimilating names such as Bosanquet and Collingwood. Peter Lamarque’s work, too, would offer Hooten Wilson a great deal more conceptual bite and precision. Three names who have done distinguished work well-worth investigating, specifically within the conjoined area of religion and aesthetics, are Gordon Graham, Frank Burch Brown and Ralph C. Wood.

Hooten Wilson is precisely the sort of academic that those contemplating undertaking a genuine liberal arts degree should seek out – she has actually spent time in an archive! *Reading Walker Percy’s Novels* is a little gem that should be on every Percyean household’s bookshelf.⁷

⁵ *Aesthetic Essays*, Malcolm Budd. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, pp. 253-254.

⁶ *On Human Conduct*, Michael Oakeshott. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975, p. 85.

⁷ This work reminds me of the distillatory prowess of R. G. Bury’s *The Fourth Gospel and the Logos-Doctrine*. Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1940.