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Walker Percy's great truth

by Emina Melonic

In a letter to Betty Hester dated September 6, 1955, Flannery O'Connor wrote: "The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally. A higher paradox confounds emotion as well as reason and there are long periods in the lives of all of us, and of the saints, when the truth as revealed by faith is hideous, emotionally disturbing, downright repulsive."

This epistolary musing rings true today. Reality is in short supply, and we deal in varieties of mimetic experience, mostly through virtual interaction. But even in our embodied, non-virtual selves, we tend to skirt absolute realities and deny higher truth.

In an essay for this magazine, "How the great truth dawned," Gary Saul Morson explores the notion of novelist as truth-teller in the classic writings on the Soviet gulags. Morson focuses on the Russian writer and gulag survivor Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (1918–2008), who considered truth-telling the most important part of being a novelist. Reflecting on Solzhenitsyn's Nobel Prize speech, in particular the declaration that "Writers . . . can vanquish lies!," Morson comments that "such statements were not mere rhetoric, as they would be if uttered by an American writer—that is, if an American writer could do so with a straight face. They derive from a tradition in which great writers enjoy an almost mystical access to truth and bear the enormous responsibility of using their gifts to discover and express it."

Many in the West today conceive of an author as someone for whom a persona has more meaning and importance than what is under the mask. The writer may have extensive knowledge but rarely knows truth and moral responsibility. Popular ideological trends do not help, promoting as they do a "uniformity of opinion," to borrow a phrase from Solzhenitsyn.

The American author Walker Percy (1916–90) understood that being a novelist bears an enormous moral responsibility. Percy, who hailed from Birmingham, Alabama, combined a Kierkegaardian sensibility with Catholic faith. For him, truth was essential to the writer's craft, but his conception of truth was, like Solzhenitsyn's, distrusting of sterile and reductive formulations. Knowing the dangers of scientism, he said in his Laetare Medal acceptance speech at Notre Dame in 1989 that "while truth should prevail, it is a disaster when only one kind of truth prevails at the expense of

another. If only one kind of truth prevails—the abstract and technical truth of science—then nothing stands in the way of the demeaning and the destruction of human life for what appear to be reasonable, short-term goals."

Much like Dostoyevsky (by whom he was inspired) or Solzhenitsyn, Percy imbued his work with philosophical interiors because he understood that an artist without a moral compass will remain blind to the ugliness and the beauty that surrounds him. If he is merely concerned with aesthetic appearances, he will sooner or later find out that such images of reality are short-lived because they are intellectually incomplete and spiritually bankrupt. Without faith in a reality beyond the empirically verifiable, any approximation of truth is bound to fall short.

For Percy, the pursuit of truth and the craft of writing were synonymous but not necessarily pleasant. The truth will inevitably challenge the false foundations of a culture that devalues faith and God's existence. For this reason, Percy offered, "the novelist likes to irritate people by pointing this out. It's his pleasure and vocation to reveal in his own elusive and indirect way man's need of and openings to other-than-scientific propositions. The novelist . . . has a special calling to truth . . . [and] it is his task to show the derangement" of the world.

This "derangement" is present in all of Percy's literary output, but it is his novel *Love in the Ruins* (1971) that presents the clearest picture of a society in which science reigns supreme. The book's protagonist, Tom More (a self-described "bad Catholic" and "physician, a not very successful psychiatrist; an alcoholic, a shaky middle-aged man subject to depressions and elations and morning terrors, but a genius nevertheless"), invents a device—the Ontological Lapsometer—that measures emotions and allegedly corrects harmful existential states in its patients. This process has nothing to do with a person's deep interior life and everything to do with the neurochemical structure of the mind.

The society around him has been slowly crumbling and is suffering from spiritual malaise. Everything is polarized and divided into groups, and Percy, through More, is merciless in showing the truth of this societal fragmentation: "The scientists, who are mostly liberals and unbelievers, and the businessmen, who are mostly conservative and Christian, live side by side in Paradise Estates. Though the two make much of their differences . . . to tell the truth, I do not notice a great deal of difference between the two."

Far from the Paradise Estates in the Honey Island Swamp, there are even more narcissistic and totalitarian subdivisions pretending to act as communities: "ferocious black Bantus who use the wilderness . . . to mount forays against outlying subdivisions; all manner of young white derelicts who live drowsy sloth-like lives . . . dropouts from Tulane and Vanderbilt, mit and Loyola . . . psychopaths and pederasts . . . antipapal Catholics, malcontented Methodists, espers, ufoers, ex–Ayn Randers." There is no individual and unique personhood in this swamp: only representatives of various groupings that further contribute to the disintegration of civilized society.

Life is disposable, and interpersonal relations are based on the idea not of face-to-face encounter but of inhuman scientific measurements. In fact, the society that More both tries to cure and participates in willingly offers "joyful exitus" (euthanasia) and "Love Clinics" where participants' sexuality is measured in purely biological terms. Doctors observe people's sex acts; the participants believe "in Science without knowing much about it," and yet they "blush" and avoid eye contact with the observers as they perform acts of "auto-stimulation." Shame seeps in, and we can't seem to avoid Original Sin.

Students, too, are "a shaky dogmatic lot. And the 'freer' they are, the more dogmatic. At heart, they're totalitarians: they want either total dogmatic freedom or total undogmatic freedom, and the one thing that makes them unhappy is something in between." There is no permanence in identity and yet no true open-mindedness either. Absolutely everything in More's "paradise" is fluid, and the only thing that's constant is the firm rejection of God and human dignity. Nearly anything is permissible.

The similarities between Percy's hellish utopia and the society we face today are in full view: vaguely scientist ideologies that thrive on fluidity, and the pervasive belief that collectivism is the ultimate good.

Percy's ethical admonitions are equally meant for the novelist himself. For Percy, the novelist's vocation is impossible without faith, which aspires to a more complete sort of truth than the scientific. If a writer accepts his vocation, then he must be prepared to invest the entirety of his being into that habit and the relationship to truth it entails. In a 1977 piece for *Esquire* Percy writes that a novelist has to be "an ex-suicide" and that "a good novel . . . is possible only after one has given up and let go." Once one realizes that there is

> nothing dumber than a grown man sitting down and making up a story . . . that all is vanity sure enough, there are two possibilities: either commit suicide or not commit suicide. . . . If one opts for the latter, one is in a sense dispensed and living on borrowed time. One is not dead! One is alive! One is free! . . . One feels, What the hell, here I am washed up, it is true, but also cast up, cast up on the beach, alive and in one piece. . . . The possibilities open to one are infinite.

Despite Percy's diagnosis of spiritual malaise, his vision of the world aligns with hope and an awareness of his vocation as a writer. Much like Solzhenitsyn, he demands that his entire being be involved in a creative effort that, in faith, aspires to a clear vision of truth. It takes an honest and courageous person to choose life as opposed to death, just as it takes courage to speak the truth. To evade it is a waste of that which is in itself is a gift.

Emina Melonic's work has been published in *National Review*, *The Imaginative Conservative*, *New English Review*, *Law and Liberty*, *American Greatness*, and *Splice Today*, among others.