

The Last Man in America Who Believes in Love

Lancelot

by Walker Percy

Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 257 pp., \$8.95

Reviewed by Bruce Cook

WHEN critics draw up lists of important American novelists, as they love to do, Walker Percy's name is one that is often and unjustly omitted. Why should this be? After all, he made a spectacular debut, winning the National Book Award with his first novel, *The Moviegoer*, in 1962. And his second, *The Last Gentleman*, won him a nomination for the same prize in 1966. His third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, and his recent work of philosophical nonfiction, *The Message in the Bottle*, were enthusiastically received—as this new novel, his fourth, should certainly be, too. He is admired, respected, and read—yet somehow nearly always forgotten by the list-makers.

Perhaps he is overlooked because he is the most difficult of all contemporary novelists to fix in any of the usual convenient categories. Born and raised in the South, the son of an old southern family, he is content to make his home there today, in Covington, Louisiana. Yet the fiction of Walker Percy notably lacks the local color—the magnolias and honeysuckle—and the Faulknerian, Old Testament sensibility for which southern writers are noted. He is essentially a philosophical novelist; but a rare one, for there is such a crisp clarity to his writing, and such a lot of humor, that it is quite without pretension.

If Percy is a philosopher, then he is an existentialist; if an existentialist, then not an atheist like Sartre or Camus—though he owes something to both—but a disciple of Gabriel Marcel, the late French Christian existentialist who found no difficulty in reconciling Catholic dogma with

that most subjective and experience-oriented philosophy. For Walker Percy is himself a Christian, a Catholic, and he carries that onus as a novelist.

A few years ago, he wrote an excellent essay, "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World," which is contained in *The Message in the Bottle*. In it, he discusses the responsibilities, advantages, and disadvantages of being an American Christian novelist at a time when we are witnessing "the passing of one age and the beginning of another." Things are no easier for the Christian novelist than they are for the secular writer, Percy assures us. In fact, they may be a little more difficult. The subject of the post-modern novel is post-modern man, his predicaments and his despair, and if the Christian novelist is

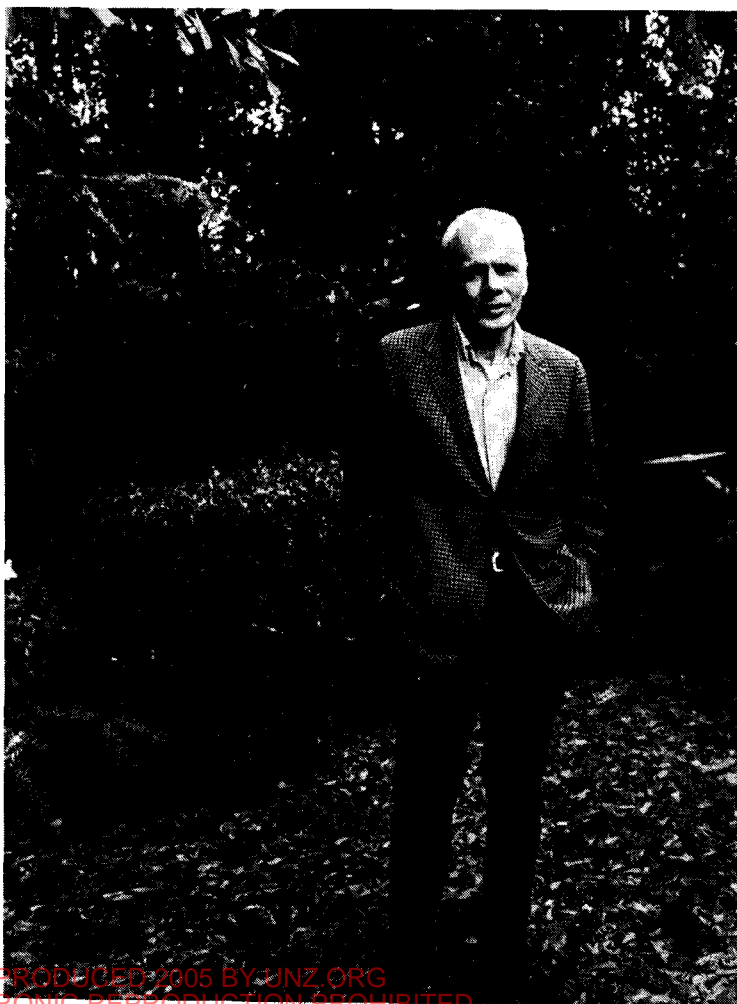
to write honestly in this age, Percy contends, then he, too, must work on the same raw material as his secular colleague:

The American novel in past years has treated such themes as persons whose lives are blighted by social evils, or reformers who attack those evils, or perhaps the dislocation of American expatriates, or of Southerners living in a region haunted by memories. But the hero of the postmodern novel is a man who has forgotten his bad memories and conquered his present ills and who finds himself in the victorious secular city. His only problem now is to keep from blowing his brains out.

That last bit quite neatly describes the situation of Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, the hero—if that is quite the word—of Walker Percy's new novel, *Lancelot*. There he sits in his neat little cell in the nuthouse, refusing at first even to remember the circumstances that brought him there. He is paid a series of visits by a priest-psychiatrist, a friend from his youth, who gradually draws from him the story of the terrible fire at Lancelot's ancestral home, Belle Isle; the death of his wife, Margot, and the others staying there; and the details of what happened during the week or so leading up to the tragedy.

Walker Percy—"A voice in a wilderness of porno shops."

© Jill Kremenitz



Bruce Cook's *Dalton Trumbo* was published in January by Scribner's.

The novel is told completely in Lancelot's voice. Although exchanges between the teller and his listener are implied, we never actually hear the priest—only the narrator recounting, digressing, justifying, haranguing. In form, it is a *récit*, that distinctively French, first-person narrative of which the most familiar example to American readers is Camus's *The Stranger*. In content, it is in at least one sense a confession to a priest—even though Lancelot asks no forgiveness for what he has done and ends up offering the priest moral counsel himself. And what has he done? As he sees it, in murdering a houseful of people he did no more than serve as judge on his own bench and then faithfully carry out the sentence that he himself had handed down.

The trouble begins for Lancelot when he discovers by a casual check of his daughter's blood type that he could not possibly be her father. Diligent research reveals that the girl's natural father is a motion-picture director who at the very time of Lancelot's discovery has come back into Margot Lamar's life and is directing a film on location nearby. Margot, an actress of sorts, has wangled a part in it and is frequently absent from home. Lancelot becomes a man quietly obsessed: he must have *proof* of his wife's infidelity. This he ultimately gets with the help of his houseboy—a reserved young black on summer holiday from MIT—and \$10,000 worth of videotape equipment. Playing God, he has a go at omniscience, sitting back and witnessing it all on playback. What he discovers, however, is that Margot has left her director-lover for the producer of the picture, an altogether more contemptible sort. But no matter: Lancelot will wreak vengeance on them all.

Now, what I have given here in summary is what happens in the book—not what it is *about*. The beauty of the *récit* form is that the narrator (the speaker) is not tied very tightly to his narrative. He may range wide, backing and filling at will, commenting on the action, drawing his own conclusions. This Lancelot does most freely, and as a result, what the reader is offered here by Walker Percy is not some mean, spare tale that might better have been handled as a short story, but rather a complete, living and breathing novel. By the end of the book, we know a great deal about Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, his personal history and predilections. We learn a little about his first marriage, his career as an unpopular civil-rights lawyer in the fictitious Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, and finally, more than a little about his court-

ship of Margot and their early life together. Walker Percy manages all this brilliantly, using suggestion and ellipses as can few other writers in our age of overstatement, evoking a night in a sentence, an episode in a single paragraph. And in this way he works a kind of magic: he makes the book bigger on the inside than it is on the outside.

But what this particular form does best for Walker Percy is to allow him to give full vent to his prophetic voice. Frankly, I wouldn't have guessed he had it in him. The tone is entirely new. Speaking through his madman, Percy is positively eloquent in his rage:

I cannot tolerate this age. And I will not. I might have tolerated you and your Catholic Church [speaking to the priest], if you had remained true to yourself. Now you're part of the age. You've the same fleas as the dogs you've lain down with. I would have felt at home at Mont-Saint-Michel, the Mount of the Archangel with the flaming sword, or with Richard Coeur de Lion at Acre. They believed in a God who said he came not to bring peace but the sword. Make love not war? I'll take war rather than what this age calls love. Which is a better world, this . . . fornicating Happyland U.S.A. or a Roman legion under Marcus Aurelius Antonius? Which is worse, to die with T. J. Jackson at Chancellorsville or live with Johnny Carson in Burbank?

He rails on, a voice in a wilderness of porno shops and massage parlors, playing Jeremiah to Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt, and company. It is the voice of one who sees himself as the last man in America who believes in love.

Although different from Walker Percy's previous novels, *Lancelot* relates to them all in curious ways: using the movie company at Belle Isle as the very incarnation of what he sees as our new Sodom, he puts a peculiar negative twist to Binx Bolling's reveries on film themes in *The Moviegoer*. In *The Last Gentleman*, Norman Mailer was one of a couple of writers he satirized mercilessly, and yet in *Lancelot* we have a novel that in its tone, in a couple of its incidents, and in its fine prophetic rage is quite like Mailer's *An American Dream*. And if *Love in the Ruins* is, as Percy subtitled it, "The Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End of the World," *Lancelot* is no less an end-of-the-world novel—albeit a far bleaker, more powerful, and desperate one.

It is, finally, an absolute piece of art, the best novel by an American I have read since *Humboldt's Gift*. How can the list-makers now overlook Walker Percy? ●



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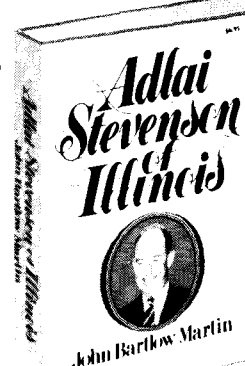
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A Technician's Romance

A Place to Come To
by Robert Penn Warren
Random House, 401 pp., \$10

Reviewed by Richard Howard

NEAR the end of Robert Penn Warren's tenth novel, the narrator and central figure explains his boredom yet again: "But now my research and writing, like women, became valuable to me as a way to fill up time, and as I had more time to fill I had more fame. I tried to be kind to my students, but to bear down on them. I still had one belief, held with some passion, that good technicians—and you notice my choice of the term, for what it is worth—are better than bad ones."

It is difficult not to believe the novelist (and difficult not to believe he is speaking for himself, the obsessed professional) when he turns to us this way, addressing his readers directly from the center of his story. Here is a narrative of one man's

self-recovery, believed in by its narrator and made believable to us only insofar as it is the product of a good technician. Of course, a good technician, in matters of fiction, is not necessarily a writer who avoids mistakes. Rather, I think he is a writer who can turn his mistakes, his crudities, and even his fatigue to his own advantage. He can perceive in a sentence about lovemaking—"I am sure that, in the occasion at my house, we both had expected to recapture something of the old magic"—both the corny shorthand that is unacceptable even to his hero *and* the necessary refinement of it, nearly a hundred pages later on: "I have never had the slightest notion of what happiness is—what I thought of all my life as happiness was only excitement." A good technician, then, is the storyteller who trusts his talent, if not his tale; his words, if not the world.

And it is hard for the reader to trust the tale told in *A Place to Come To*. So extreme are the terms of it, so sensational the world whose ways are grinningly recounted here, that we need a lot of slow convincing if we are to be brought round.

We do get what we need, and Robert Penn Warren's novel is a success, but you would never believe it in any words but his.

Jediah Tewksbury, age nine, begins the telling of his story with the death of his father, at the end of World War I, in an accident that spreads a pall of penis envy over the boy's entire life. Not even in Hemingway has the central male figure been such a successful (and determined) lover as this affectless Alabama outsider, spurred by his iron-maiden mother to escape the South. With the assistance of the kind of old-maid Latin teacher that one assumes had been patented by Faulkner, Jed does escape the South, even though—once the University of Chicago, marriage, widowhood, and even fighting with Italian partisans behind Nazi lines have intervened—the South is not to escape Jed. For the native returns—to Tennessee, and to a sybaritic set of high-living profligates, including, of course, the Pretty Girl from back home in Alabama, who is now up in the world and down on her luck. Jed makes terrible depredations, as an earlier generation of southern novelists used to say, among the ladies, and must again escape—to Paris, Chicago, another marriage, fatherhood, fame, and fortune. "Hating the South I had fled it," he says, "and ever afterwards blamed my solitude on that fact. I had fled but had found nowhere to flee to. I told how I had tried to buy my way out of solitude by supporting the causes of virtue, but I felt isolated even from that virtue, an interloper, one might say, into Yankee virtue."

IN THAT passage, surely, the difference between my graceless summary and Warren's "good technique" is apparent. Whenever one is tempted to put aside this romance—for that is what it is, this account of spiritual withdrawal—Warren is there at one's elbow, murmuring slyly that yes, the characters, even if they are only effigies, are incredible; and that yes, the plot is manipulated entirely by the appearance, at seasonable intervals, of letters, phone calls, and behind-the-scenes shenanigans; but that there is more to this romance of the Recovered Comrade than that. There are words here in which all things are said to happen, even made to happen, and these words are worth hearing out: "With the



"Déjà vu!"

Richard Howard is the author of six volumes of verse, winner of the 1976 P.E.N. Translation Prize, and a professor of English in the Writing Seminars of Johns Hopkins University.