

SIGN-
POSTS
IN A
STRANGE
LAND

WALKER PERCY



ed with an

duction by

ek Samway



Walker Percy

S I G N P O S T S

I N A

S T R A N G E

L A N D

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By Walker Percy

NOVELS

The Moviegoer (1961)

The Last Gentleman (1966)

Love in the Ruins (1971)

Lancelot (1977)

The Second Coming (1980)

The Thanatos Syndrome (1987)

NON-FICTION

The Message in the Bottle (1975)

Lost in the Cosmos (1983)

Signposts in a Strange Land (1991)

SIGNPOSTS IN A STRANGE LAND



*Instead of constructing a plot and creating
a cast of characters from a world familiar
to everybody, he [the novelist] is more apt
to set forth with a stranger in a strange land
where the signposts are enigmatic but which
he sets out to explore nevertheless.*

[Notes for a Novel about the End of the World]

Edited with an introduction

by Patrick Samway

The Noonday Press

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Introduction



When Walker Percy, M.D., died at his home in Covington, Louisiana, on May 10, 1990, he left a considerable legacy of uncollected nonfiction, including three unpublished essays—"Is a Theory of Man Possible?," "Culture, the Church, and Evangelization," and "Another Message in the Bottle"—as well as two unpublished talks—his acceptance speech on receiving the National Book Award for *The Moviegoer* and his remarks "Concerning *Love in the Ruins*"—all of which appear here for the first time. In addition, there is the 18th Annual Jefferson Lecture, entitled "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," which he delivered in Washington, D.C., on May 3, 1989, at the invitation of the National Endowment for the Humanities and which has never before been published in its complete and final form.

All the writings in this book cover a wide range of topics which fall, as I discovered, into three categories reflecting the basic dimensions of Percy's thought: life in the South; science, language, and literature; morality and religion. The earliest piece here (written in 1935, during his undergraduate days at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill), entitled "The Movie Magazine: A Low 'Slick,'" prefigures motifs in his first novel, *The Moviegoer*. His thoughtful and extended Jefferson Lecture, on the other hand, was his last public statement.

One of my tasks as editor was to narrow down and arrange

these writings so as to allow Percy's related ideas and nuanced speculations to assume their proper intertextual weight and importance. For obvious reasons, I have excluded the fifteen essays that Percy collected and published in his book *The Message in the Bottle* (1975), as well as juvenilia, book reviews, panel discussions in which he took part, unfinished essays, and (with one exception) the interviews published in *Conversations with Walker Percy* (1985).

Walker Percy's place in American fiction not only is firmly established in this country, but the steadily increasing number of translations of his novels, as well as the conference on his fiction and nonfiction held in the summer of 1989 in Sandbjerg, Denmark, indicate that international interest in his books is continuing to grow. It is my hope that *Signposts in a Strange Land* will provide readers with a wider range of texts essential for an understanding of Percy's thought than has yet been available.

My task would have been more difficult had it not been for the conversations we had in his home overlooking the peaceful Bogue Falaya in Covington. On one occasion, as he talked about his nonfiction—while tracking out of the corner of his eye the movements of a solitary egret wading in the muddy bayou—Dr. Percy lowered his voice and looked at me directly. For a brief moment, his congenial at-home smile uncharacteristically disappeared: he was explaining how difficult it had been for him to search within himself and articulate his most deeply felt views. His careful and meticulous preparation of these writings became particularly palpable as he described the writing of his Jefferson Lecture. His health was then declining and he knew this lecture would probably be his last opportunity to discuss in detail his belief that the view of the world we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science is radically incoherent. As for his earlier nonfiction, the corrected and emended manuscripts and typescripts that I have examined and worked with leave no doubt that he was equally assiduous in the preparation of all his texts.

Walker Percy was born on May 28, 1916, in Birmingham, Alabama, where his parents, LeRoy and Martha Susan Percy, were part of the social elite of the community. After his father's death from self-inflicted wounds on July 9, 1929, Mrs. Percy took young

Walker and his two brothers to live for a year with her mother in Athens, Georgia. When second cousin William Alexander Percy—a poet, lawyer, plantation owner, and the author of *Lanterns on the Levee* (1941)—invited Mrs. Percy and her boys to move into his home in Greenville, Mississippi, they accepted. Mrs. Percy, tragically, died in an automobile accident on April 2, 1932. Though subsequently adopted by “Uncle” Will, Walker and his brothers nevertheless had a double loss to bear; yet Uncle Will did everything possible in assisting the Percy boys to cope with their grief. Above all, he wanted each of them to receive an excellent education. Walker graduated from Greenville High School in 1933, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1937, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Columbia University in 1941. While an intern at Bellevue Hospital in New York City, he contracted tuberculosis and was sent to a sanatorium in Saranac Lake, New York, to recuperate. Eventually Dr. Percy returned South, married Mary Bernice Townsend, and moved with her to Covington to raise a family and pursue his new career as a writer. His published work includes six novels—*The Moviegoer* (1961), which won the National Book Award in 1962, *The Last Gentleman* (1966), *Love in the Ruins* (1971), *Lancelot* (1977), *The Second Coming* (1980), and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987)—in addition to two works of nonfiction, *The Message in the Bottle* and *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983).

The first section of *Signposts in a Strange Land*, on life in the South, begins with a personal statement: why Percy, in a joint decision with his wife, chose to live in Covington. “Technically speaking,” he writes, “Covington is a nonplace in a certain relation to a place (New Orleans), a relation that allows one to avoid the horrors of total placement or total nonplacement or total misplacement.” As an ideal nonplace, Covington offered the friendly privacy he needed to write, where one “can sniff the ozone from the pine trees, visit the local bars, eat crawfish, and drink Dixie beer and feel as good as it is possible to feel in this awfully interesting century.” (I remember sensing the casual hospitality of Covington the first time I drove through town on a sunny fall day in 1978 to have lunch with the Percys at their home.) Percy once wrote that when a fellow Covingtonian asked him what he did for a living,

he said that he wrote books. But when the townsman pressed him as to what he *really* did, Percy answered, “Nothing”—and both were pleased with the response. Covington is one of the last sleepy towns in Louisiana before one crosses the long causeway to the Big Easy, with a vibrant mixture of Spanish and French history and a culture all its own; clearly, Covington offered Percy the best of all possible worlds.

The other essays in this section trace the people, customs, historical events, ideas, and locales in the South important for an understanding of Percy’s landscape and mindscape: New Orleans with its “lively” and “exotic” cemeteries; reflections on returning to Athens, Georgia; life with Uncle Will in Greenville; the significance of the Civil War, particularly one hundred years after Appomattox; the decline of what can be considered the noble and gracious Old Stoa in the South; modest proposals concerning race relations; and thoughts on the quality of education in Louisiana. This section ends with his own upbeat short history of Bourbon whiskey, complete with “Cud’n Walker’s Uncle Will’s Favorite Mint Julep Receipt.”

The second and third sections in this collection have similar modes of development. In “Is a Theory of Man Possible?,” for example, a talk Percy gave to a group interested in mental health at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, as a result of an appointment there during the 1974–75 academic year, he asks a key philosophical question. In the long run, Percy’s answer (and he says that a positive answer to this question *can* be given) actually demanded for him an analysis of the philosophy of man, the sciences, semiotics, literature, and psychiatry, as well as reflections on his life as a physician and novelist. As a diagnostician of the modern malaise that affects us all, Percy does not limit this investigation to one discipline; rather, he synthesizes a wide body of knowledge, often using his own experience from medicine and science as touchstones to arrive at the truth of the matter. In “The State of the Novel,” originally delivered as the 1977 Hopwood Lecture at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, he expresses one of his important assumptions: “Art is cognitive; that is, it discovers and knows and tells, tells the reader how things are, how we are, in a way that the reader can confirm with as much certitude

as a scientist taking a pointer-reading.” Further, in his Jefferson Lecture, relying on the work of the noted semiotician and pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), he develops the idea that science as we know it cannot utter a single word about what is distinctive in human behavior, language, art, and thought itself—in short, what it is to be born, to live, and to die as a human being. Percy would have us look to the humanities, “the elder brother of the sciences,” and grapple more and more with what Peirce characterizes as “interpreter,” “asserter,” “mind,” “ego,” even “soul”—words and concepts not in fashion in many academic circles today.

By using, however tentatively, the seemingly religious word “soul” in the Jefferson Lecture, Percy showed once again that he tried not to compartmentalize his life and work. As with Teilhard de Chardin, S.J., a scientist and priest whose works (as he once told me) he admired, Percy himself strove for greater unity of vision in his life. And as a convert to Catholicism, he grew steadily in knowledge and love of his adopted religious heritage.

Yet no one could have been more surprised than he when he was the sole American to receive an invitation to participate in a symposium at the Vatican sponsored by the Pontifical Council for Culture in January 1988. In his address to this council on “Culture, the Church, and Evangelization,” Percy stated his views about secularism in American society and suggested that the Roman Catholic Church could more effectively use television in its efforts to evangelize. Percy never backed away from his faith, and though he once told his novelist friend and fellow convert Mary Lee Settle that the Roman Catholic Church was a “very untidy outfit,” he often made it clear that this was where he wanted to be. Not surprisingly, he took the trouble to state his opposition to abortion both in an Op Ed article (1981) in *The New York Times* and in an unpublished letter (1988) to the same newspaper.

No matter how he perceived evil—and Father Smith’s “Confession” and “Footnote” in *The Thanatos Syndrome* provide imaginative clues to Percy’s belief, as a novelist, that personified evil exists in our society—he did not feel obliged to write edifying stories in which virtue wins out. In fact, his 1987 talk entitled “Another Message in the Bottle” at an educational conference in New

Orleans, in which he makes some remarkable connections between the novel form and Catholicism, contains honest and direct advice for teachers of today's students: if students do not make a breakthrough into reading—and Percy is thinking about reading in very broad terms—then they probably will not make breakthroughs into other areas of life. Percy believed profoundly in the simple “holiness of the ordinary” in all its facets. The protagonists of his novels, everyday wayfarers whose lives are mysterious, dramatically reflect this.

A word about the titles of some of his essays and talks that might seem to have been omitted from *Signposts in a Strange Land* but are not. Percy would occasionally repeat a talk or an essay and rework it under a different title. The 1978 Phinizy Lecture at the University of Georgia, for example, was reprinted in a slightly different version as “Random Thoughts on Southern Literature, Southern Politics, and the American Future” in *The Georgia Review* (Fall 1978) and the following year as “Southern Comfort” in *Harper's* (January 1979). Likewise, his tribute to William Alexander Percy, here entitled “Uncle Will,” appeared with variations as “‘Uncle Will’ and His South” in *Saturday Review / World* (November 1973) and as an abbreviated introduction to *Sewanee* (1982). The 1977 Chekhov Lecture at Cornell University, issued as “Diagnosing the Modern Malaise” by the Faust Publishing Company (1985), also appeared as “Novelist as Diagnostician of the Modern Malaise” in *Chekhov and Our Age*, edited by James McConkey, and in a revised version as “The Diagnostic Novel: On the Uses of Modern Fiction” in *Harper's* (June 1986). “Mississippi: The Fallen Paradise” first appeared in a special issue of *Harper's* and later appeared with some interesting additions in a book entitled *The South Today*, edited by Willie Morris.

The epilogue contains Zoltán Abádi-Nagy's probing interview and ends with Percy's delightful self-interview, “Questions They Never Asked Me.” Here he responds more directly to the felt difficulties of his readers and fills in the gaps of some of his essays, particularly when he discusses his own fiction. This self-interview, a masterly example of the genre, allows Percy to give marvelous expression to the breadth of his personality. In commenting (see page 422) on the portrait of himself painted by Lyn Hill, Percy

perceptively notes that his figure is standing outside the painting's frame, "somewhat out of it, out of the world that is framed off behind him." At the same time, this image carries on an implied dialogue, which never violates the freedom of the beholder: "*You and I know something, don't we? Or do we? . . . True, this is a strange world I'm in, but what about the world you're in? Have you noticed it lately? Are we onto something, you and I? Probably not.*" This is his personal invitation to explore undiscovered worlds—an invitation he repeatedly offers his readers in both his fiction and his nonfiction.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the following persons for their encouragement and assistance: Joseph L. Blotner and the late Yvonne Blotner, John F. Desmond, Rhoda K. Faust, Shelby Foote, Ben and Nadine Forkner, Robert Giroux, Diana Gonzalez, Linda Whitney Hobson, Lewis A. Lawson, Joseph P. Parkes, S.J., Louis D. Rubin, Jr., Mary Lee Settle, Eudora Welty, and especially Mrs. Mary Bernice Percy.

PATRICK H. SAMWAY, S.J.

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One

L I F E I N

T H E S O U T H

