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Walker Percy's Novels as Diagonis of his Affirmative Vision Pointing the Way to Redemption

Dr. S. Chelliah

Professor, Head & Chairperson,
School of English & Foreign Languages,
Department of English &
Comparative Literature
Madurai Kamaraj University,
Madurai - 625 021. (T.N). India.

It is an accepted fact that Walker Percy is a writer with a message always in all ways possible, whose novels do significantly picture the American life in all its richness and variety and demonstrate the secular spirit of the contemporary American society. His novels are, no doubt, nothing but social documents, highlighting the predicament of contemporary Americans living in a materialistic society with total disregard for religious and ethical values. His primary concern is to show to this black gloomy world the way to salvation. His novels can rightly be called a withering critique of what is spiritually insane in the contemporary American society and in the world at large pointing to a way out of this spiritual muddle. They are in a sense 'gospels of redemption'.

Walker Percy (1916-1990), the physician turned novelists was born on 28th May 1916 in a family which was liable to suicide mania. At the age of twelve, he had the traumatic experience of witnessing his father, Le Roy, committing suicide. Just three years after, his mother lost her life in an automobile accident. The teenaged orphan Percy was reared by his father's cousin by name William Alexander Percy who exerted tremendous influence on shaping Percy's literary career. For the young Percy, uncle Percy did everything to help him grow in an atmosphere of culture and music and exemplified the stoic philosophy of life. Recognizing his help, Percy himself once said:

"What he was to me was a fixed point in a confusing world. This is not to say I always took him for my true worth and set my course accordingly. I did not.... But even when I did not follow him, it was usually in relation to him, whether with him or against him, that I defined myself and my direction" (P.xi)

After graduation, Percy got interested in science and joined the University of North Carolina. He was fascinated by the elegance, the order and the beauty of science. He continued his scientific studies at Columbia University's College of Physicians and took his M.D. degree at the age of twenty five. The fascination of science for Percy gradually gave way to more fundamental questions about life. His mind was more and more perplexed by "the nature and destiny of man especially and more immediately the predicament of man in a modern technological society' (P.28). Eventually, Percy realized that scientific and technological development and material concern of science have deprived man of the essential flavor of life. Science said nothing about "what it is to be a man living in the world". Percy writes:

“After twenty years of scientific education, I felt like the Danish philosopher, Soren Kierkegaard, when he finished reading Hegel, ‘Hegel, said Kierkegaard, explained everything under the sun except one small detail; what it means to be man living in the world who must die’. (P.28)

He was found wandering throughout Europe searching for an anchor. His reading of S. Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel and Martin Heidegger eventually led him to Catholicism. In Catholicism, he found the answer to the malaise afflicting the contemporary American society. He was so obsessed by the role of the apostle who is capable of bringing redemption to mankind, that he wanted to assume the role of an apostle himself. Though Percy had no credentials or was commissioned by God to be an apostle, he believed that he could effectively play the role of the apostle through his writings. “In becoming a writer, as in his professing. Catholicism, he believed himself to be born again, born to a new understanding” (Alfred, 85). Gradually he became fully conscious of his apostolic mission of bringing salvation to man who is entangled in the modern vice of materialism. He has to his credit publication of novels as follows: 1. The Movie Goer which brought the National Book Award in 1962. 2. The Last Gentleman (1966) 3. Love in the Ruins (1971), 4. Lancelot, (1977) 5. The Second Coming (1981), 6. The Thanatos Syndrome (1987) and The Message in the Bottle and Lost in the Cosmos as non-fictional works.

Percy’s novels do explore the existential angst and despair of modern man. In a sense, it may be said that his novels are nothing but the physician turned novelists diagnosis of the malady afflicting the post-modern world. Yet, his vision is rather affirmative pointing the way to redemption. Percy believes that a Christian novelist, especially a Catholic novelist, has an apostolic role in this materialistic society. Percy defines the Christian novelist as “a writer who has one explicit concern with the nature of man and the nature of reality where man finds himself” (P.102). However, it is not an easy task in the contemporary world where religion and God are pushed into the background and science and technology are worshipped in their places. As Percy says, we live in a world where “the words of Grace are worn out as smooth as poker chips after it has been cashed in” (P.116). Percy is of the view that everyone in Christendom seems to believe in God but actually does not; it is as if “everybody started the game with one poker chip which is the same as starting with none” (116). Words like God, Salvation, Baptism and Faith are pretty well used up. So the task of the novelist, as the Psalmist says, is to “sing a new song” (Psalm 98:1) using new words. In his opinion, the novelists responsibility is “to focus upon the mystery, the paradox, the openness of an individual human existence” (MB, 108) and the task of the novelist is to portray how the alienated man comes to himself and how his relationship is affected by the change in him. He insists on the modern winter being “a passionate propagandist” showing men the way to redemption.

Literally, ‘Redemption’ means ‘a liberation by a payment of a price or ransom’, but in religion, the term signifies salvation from perdition wrought by a Saviour or by the individual himself. According to an Encyclopedia, of Religion, “Like the concept of salvation, sacrifice and justification, the concept of redemption belongs to a cluster of religious notions that converge upon the meanings of making good, new or free or delivery from sickness, famine, death and mortality”. Redemption in this sense bears the closest kinship to salvation. Redemption may be brought about by God or by one’s own actions. It makes possible the recovery of a Paradise Lost, of a primordial blissful state. The New Testament views redemption as deliverance of man from sin, death and God’s anger through the death and resurrection of Christ. “As one men’s fate

brought condemnation on every one, so the good act of one man [Christ] brings everyone life and makes them justified” (Romans, 5:18). St. Paul means by ‘ransom’ the love of God. In Percy, redemption is directed toward the integration of the cosmic, social and political order in the present moment of the community rather than in after life, in spite of his belief in immortality. It is an experience gradually gained by the individual himself. The awareness of his predicament in the contemporary materialistic society spurs him on to a search, which helps him to regain his lost identity. Through inter subjectivity and interpersonal relationship with other human beings, he regains his lost redemption as the realization of his lost self in the cosmos.

The fictional heroes of Percy achieve redemption through self-exploration of the existential angst and despair experience by them. His protagonists reject the materialistic view of man. It is rejection of the much hailed American success dream. Scientific and technological advancements have given only material benefit to and no needed peace of mind. Percy is one of his talks with John Carr notes:

“..... man is neither an organism controlled by his environment, nor a creature controlled by the forces of history.... is a strange creature whom both Thomas Aquinas and Marcel called ‘homo viator’, man the way farer man the wanderer. So to me, the Catholic view of man as pilgrim, in transit, in journey is very compatible with the vocation of a novelist”. (p.46)

Catholicism enabled Percy not only to form a view of man’s fate, i.e., man as a way farer, but it also provided him with a system of morality to believe in. The modern man is caught up in ‘everydayness’ (Heidegger). He is also much involved in the process of everyday life that he has become an “incommunicado, being able neither to speak for himself nor to be spoken to, he is both in the world he is travelling through and not in it” (MB 87). Man is a castaway, an exile marooned on an island where he has lived all his life and yet is not at home. He knows that life on the island is “something of a charade” (143) Percy believes that in order to attain redemption, man has to transcend his everydayness, a term he uses for the malaise be setting post second world war man. It is a state of numbness which devitalizes one’s physical and psychic energies. Everydayness causes a “generalized loss of awareness that walls a person off from his surroundings and diminishes his vitality” (Martin, 21). Percy explains that modern man is so caught up in the everyday world that “..... religion becomes a sort of stereo type and something you go through every day” (Carr, 43). A specific character of everydayness is the loss of visibility, where everyone tends to live a life in secrecy, and protect his life with a mask. Under this protective covering, life goes on uninterrupted. In this State, he accepts the standards of the public – the public media, the public institution, the public world view – instead of any reflective conception of himself. He listens to what others say, does what they do instead of attempting to do something original which distinguishes him from the typical, the ordinary and acceptable. He considers his life to be meaningless. Thus, the discomfort and disorientation he faces in life, set him on a quest for a spiritual centre for his life. Another cause of the modern malaise is inauthentic, the antithesis of a meaningful life. It involves a surrender of personal sovereignty where the individual plays roles alien to himself. He flees for refuge into a crowd and thus escapes from his individual self. He accepts the norms, standards and myths of the crowd, without even observing his personality. The reference to the couple riding in the “Dodge Sedan” (121) in *The Movie Goer* is an example of inauthentic experience.

Binx, the protagonist of the novel *The Movie Goer*, finds himself playing a role alien to him. He is comfortable and smiling, all his papers are in order and he sits next to beautiful girl. It is a recipe for happiness measured by the standards of the society. But the two of them have fallen into inauthenticity, Binx discovers that his new Dodge Sedan is a “regular incubator of malaise” (MG, 121). A third cause of the malaise is ‘abstraction’. It is prominently treated in all of Percy’s novels. When one falls into abstraction, one objectifies either one’s self or to others and thus human beings are reduced into mere symbols or masses. Modern technical society does exactly the same. It threatens the individual with self-objectification by valuing his function rather than his self. It gives primary importance to efficiency rather than individuality. Abstraction thus eradicates ‘personality’. According to Walker Percy, the only way out of this malaise is the religious way. But ‘everydayness’ has crept even into the religious character of man throwing him to the inauthenticity and abstraction by a recognition of his exile. That is, when man recollects himself, he can rediscover “things a new and afresh” (Carr, 43). Once he recognizes his own predicament and identifies the causes of the malaise that encircles him, he begins his search for an egress. One familiar way of escape from this aesthetic sphere of existence is ideal. Sometimes death offers such an ordeal as in the case of Lonnie in *The Movie Goer* and Jamie Vaught in *The Last Gentleman*.

The reality of death and the possibility of a life after death offer a means to awaken him out of the torpor of everyday life into some kind of an active search for what life itself is a really about. It means, a person like Binx Bolling or Will Barret, who is already dissatisfied with all the good things’ the aesthetic sphere of existence offers, finds that such a way of life no longer brings him any pleasure and undertakes a quest for an anchorage which gives meaning to his otherwise meaningless life. In Percy’s novels, ordeal is a man’s first encounter on the road to being, whether in the form of a shock which pierces the certain of everydayness or as the final recognition of his predicament by which man in his freedom guides his life into authentic existence. It helps man to recover his lost vision. However, the wayfarer, who is aware of his predicament can overcome all obstacles by “Rotation and Repetition” – two terms Percy borrowed from Kierkegaard.

In *The Movie Goer*, Percy defines ‘Rotation’ as “the experiencing of the new beyond the expectation of the experiencing of the new” (P.144). Rotation can occur in various forms of life. Like Binx Bolling reading or watching a film or spending his spare time in the company of women, one can escape, everydayness for a time. Another kind of rotation is ‘Amnesia’. It is a kind of zone crossing which helps one to escape alienation forever. Rotation is practiced by a man who lives in the “aesthetic sphere” of existence. In the aesthetic stage, a person is deeply involved in the world and shunning all commitments and responsibilities, he pursues pleasure. ‘Repetition’ is a return to the past in search of self-a coming to terms with a haunted and guilt laden world. Repetition is of two types; authentic and inauthentic. In an inauthentic present way of life, undertakes a journey to the home of his youth. There he realizes the psychic distances between the way he was the then and the man he is now. He returns home, resigns himself to his fate and continues to live his everyday life like a stoic until his quiet death. In an authentic repetition, the hero returns to the home of his youth; realizes the disparity between what he was an what he is now. The realization brings him a psychic shock which leads him either to despair and near suicide or to a revelation and a religious conversion as in the case of Bink in *The Movie Goer* and Barret in *The Last Gentleman*.

John F. Zeguner commenting on the theme of redemption in Percy's novels, speaks about the indirect way through which the Percy hero reaches his redemption. "Percy's thought evolving via inter subjectivity from alienation to authenticity finally arrives at redemption" (P.30) Redemption can be realized only through an agency either internal or external. "The message in the bottle is not enough" says Percy, "if the message conveys news and not knowledge sub specific aeternitatis. There must be someone who delivers the news and who speaks with authority" (P.148). For Percy, the Roman Catholic Church is the authoritative voice. It is time that Binx Boling, the protagonist of *The Movie Goer* finally embraces Catholicism to save himself from perdition. But Will Barret, the protagonist of *The Last Gentleman*, achieves redemption when he acknowledges the value of interpersonal relationship. Percy does not make clear whether Barret has embraced Catholicism in the process might equally be the cause of one's redemption. As Hobson observes Percy's novels generally conclude with a sense of fellowship, "a dialogue of husband and wife, son and father, figure, priest and confessor or psychiatrist and patient" (P.164) His novels are a virtual update on what is happening in the new South, "on the prevailing custom of liberated blacks, Pentacostal Christians, secular liberals and knothead conservatives" (Donald, 70). Percy's place in American literature as Hobson observes is:

"as individual as the man himself; satirist, humanist, poet, philosopher, linguist and man of faith. Percy can be read on many grounds. He tells a good story, satirizing the middle ground of American prosperity and complacency; but he is also a serious writer like nuclear physicist, freeman, Dyson or C.P.Snow...." (170)

Percy's novels offer a ray of hope to the modern man who is too much involved in the ways of the world painting a way out of the malaise. In becoming a writer, as in professing Catholicism, he has been born again to a new understanding of the predicament of modern man. He wants a hopeful novel pointing out a way of this gloomy dark world where ignorant armies clash by night. All his novels, therefore, portray man who regenerate into salvation and redemption through a new understanding of their life and their roles in the society and Percy's protagonists are so painfully caught up in everydayness that everything appears ordinary and stereotype being estranged from society, from their own selves and from God. Too much of faith in science and technology contaminates man's daily existence making him fall prey to restlessness and despair. In a state of utter restlessness of things falling apart, Percy heroes are revealed as damned men seeking redemption.

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