

ANALYSIS

The Second Coming (1980)



Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

"In Percy's *The Second Coming* (1980), Will Barrett, from *The Last Gentleman*, has traded his earlier sense of 'middle distances' for a disorientation that involves loss of attention span and present moment; a condition that increases pressures until he is deemed mad. Will Barrett is now a generation beyond the young man of *The Last Gentleman*, having married and fathered a daughter, become a successful Wall Street lawyer, and then felt it all fall apart. The key image here is one of disintegration, which is the first stage toward some wholeness. Will seeks unification of self, if possible, by way of a cave and greenhouse, which is inhabited by Allison, the daughter of a dentist and Kitty Vaught, Will's former love from the earlier book. To pull disintegrative elements together before they destroy, Will has become an outlaw; not so much to express himself as to deny the world. Denial is the initial step toward recognition.

Around and above, Will views a world of fragmentation, incoherences. He is obsessed that the Jews are pulling out of North Carolina, and this is a sign, a Biblical warning, that the world is moving toward Armageddon, without any chance for redemption. Poised on the edge of madness and insanity, feeling first one and then the other, Will cannot accept a world that is godless and empty. Percy writes wittily and yet with foreboding:

'Did the growing madness have something to do with the Jews pulling out? Who said we could get along without the Jews? Watch the Jews, their mysterious comings and goings and stayings! The Jews are a sign! When the Jews pull out, the Gentiles begin to act like the crazy Jutes and Celts and Angles and redneck Saxons they are. They go back to the woods. Here we are, retired from the cities and living deep in the Southern forests and growing nuttier by the hour. The Jews are gone, the blacks are leaving, and where are we? deep in the woods, socking little balls around the mountains, rattling ice in Tanqueray, riding \$35,000 German cars, watching Billy Graham and the Steelers and M*A*S*H on 45-inch Jap TV.'

A gloss on the above: The Jews are somehow a conscience, not exalted, in their presence a balance for Saxon madness. Golf is a key metaphor of the novel--Will and his 'sane' colleagues all play and derive from it a focus for their lives. Tanqueray gin and Mercedes luxury cars are backgrounds for parties and daily survival, and Sutter Vaught, the Ivan Karamazov figure from *The Last Gentleman*, is now a television addict.

Such arrangements of life indicate to Will that we are a society devoted to the love of death: 'The name of this century is the Century of the Love of Death. Death in this century is not the death people die but the death people live. Men love death because real death is better than the living death.' Kierkegaard's caution that connection to something other than self must be preceded by the loss of all faith is well heeded. Will is

'rotating,' in Kierkegaard's sense, moving from one position to another while he seeks direction, even seeking death in the cave beneath the golf course as a way of finding something or forsaking it all. If routine life--little balls, Tanqueray, German cars, Jap television--is a form of death, why not seek the real thing? 'Bad as wars are and maybe because they are so bad, thinking of peace during war is better than peace. War is what makes peace desirable. But peace without war is intolerable.... Men either kill each other in war, or in peace walk as docilely into living death as sheep into a slaughterhouse.'

Will's pursuit, then, as the novel trails his rotation, is for something that is not living death, while he evades the madhouse in the process. For to others, kind as most are, he is mad. Similarly, to others, Allison, Kitty's daughter who lives in a greenhouse, is mad, an inmate from a mental institution who should not be left to herself. Yet she manages, with her twin talents as singer and 'hoister.' Percy has a marvelous insight here in Allison's ability to work ingeniously with block and tackle, first hoisting an eight-hundred-pound cast-iron stove, and then with her knowledge hoisting Will when he 'falls into' her greenhouse from the cave. He falls, she hoists, together they are in balance in an imperfect world.

The hoisting turns Allison into both a craftsperson and a godlike creature. Will 'falls into'--he really 'falls up' from--the cave, and he is saved by Allison's craft and belief in herself as hoister. Her ability to lift is counterpointed to Will's golf, and while the golf course features strangely dressed men hitting a tiny ball with a variety of clubs, all aiming for distant holes, she plays out a life-and-death game in hoisting a cast-iron stove so as to heat her greenhouse. It is a miraculous juxtaposition, fully integrated into the mature Percy's vision of life: hoisting, an old stove, the ability of a woman to save herself, counterbalancing golf, gin, Mercedes.

The eighty-five-year-old stove is part of a pastoral vision which is an aspect of salvation; as is the greenhouse, penetrated by light, turned into a glittering diamond by lightning: a form of vitality as against the dead glitter of wealthy people playing golf around it. Will has inherited perhaps forty million from his 'fat wife,' a woman devoted to good works and to eating herself to death. She became so fat she was able to move only in a wheelchair, for her polio-weakened hip could no longer support her. While Will was happy with her, it was a conventional, unexamined happiness: he married her not for her money but because she wanted him to. He brought her pleasure, but himself only passivity. His 'first coming' was a neutral existence, his 'second' will be active, or not at all. If no lift is forthcoming, he prefers extinction in the cave.

Pastoral, however, is not an undifferentiated or sentimentalized form of salvation. For another, earlier, pastoral experience is, in part or full, behind Will's bouts with madness. That pastoral experience involved Will's father and *his* desperation, his hunting trip with his son, in which he planned to shoot the son (Will) and then kill himself. The mystery is why four shells were found, and Will finally figures out the reason: 'One shell for the single [bird], two for me [Will], one for you [Ed Barrett].' Barrett, however, only grazes his son and misses himself; later completing his own death in the Georgia woods by a chance he cannot comprehend, but he considers himself 'already dead.' He is an expert on dying, near dying, death; and he contemplates both barrels in the mouth. Percy writes:

'And what samurai self-love of death, let alone the little death of everyday fuck-you love, can match the double Winchester come of taking oneself into oneself, the cold-steel extension of oneself into mouth, yes, for you, for me, for us, the logical and ultimate act of fuck-you love fuck-off world, the penetration and union of perfect cold gunmetal into warm quailing mortal flesh, the coming to end all coming, brain cells which together faltered and fell short, now flowered and flew apart, flung like stars around the whole dark world.'

Yet such death, attractive as it is, is masturbatory: one sucks off the Winchester and in the process blows out one's brains. Will then contemplates doing it with a Luger, which he carries in his Mercedes. He also keeps a hunting rifle handy, and moves, half-mad, among rifle, car, golf, and Luger, all forms of death. At this moment before he enters the cave to extinguish himself or to discover some living element, he is, this man worth forty million, an outlaw on the run from America, a Gary Gilmore of self-destruction.

The greenhouse saves; not only energy, but life itself. Alive by chance, Will seeks out Allison, first in his golf clothes and then naturally, in the nude, when she bathes and nurses him after his suicidal venture

into the cave beneath the golf course. Arising from the cave, he achieves, finally, the second coming, an Easter. Unlike the first, it is a form of mutuality, not an aspect of masturbation. The second coming is not Yeats's rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem, but, for Percy, the turning of a death-oriented situation into a living one. With plans to use Allison's property and his money to turn the land into log cabins, into forms of living things. It is still possible to exchange a passive death for an active life; and their combined madness--she an inmate, he an outpatient--will be productive."

Frederick R. Karl
American Fictions 1940-1980
(Harper & Row 1983) 532-34

"Having exorcised the demon, Percy abruptly changed directions again in *The Second Coming* (1980), returning to the character of Will Barrett some twenty years older and a lawyer now instead of an 'engineer.' In this tender and delightful love story, Will, still searching, discovers Allie, a sanatorium escapee with problems of her own and language that is always right yet at the same time a bubble or two off center. Will's despair, his ludicrous Pascalian wager designed to provoke God into revealing his existence once and for all, and his coming to terms with good and evil, faith and uncertainty, are all conveyed in an engaging, ear-popping language. Combining Will's outsider's perspective with Allie's Rip Van Winklish return to society, the novel is in Percy's own words 'a breakthrough': 'It has a feeling of affirmation, of celebration. I've never done this before.... And I think this is the first time I've actually seen a way out of this predicament' (Henry Kisor, 'Dr. Percy on Signs and Symbols,' *The Critic*, 11 September 1980, p. 5). His publishers decided to reward him by bringing out *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (1983), an amusing but overextended parody of self-help manuals and a cartoon version of the themes of his novels."

Mark Johnson
"Walker Percy"
Fifty Southern Writers after 1900
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain
(Greenwood 1987) 348

"Attempting to write his first 'nonalienated,' or optimistic novel, Percy revived the character of Will Barrett for his 1980 book, *The Second Coming*. The now widowed Barrett finds true love--and God--in a densely plotted, comic work that revealed a new emphasis of affirmation in Percy that earned back the critical respect he had lost with *Lancelot*. The critical and financial success of *The Second Coming* was rewarded by Percy's publisher by bringing out his quirky, nonfiction book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, in 1983."

Bruce L. Edwards
"Walker Percy"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1175

"Percy's last two novels strike more positive notes. *The Second Coming* (1980) returns to Will Barrett, this time retired to his native North Carolina, where as a disillusioned Episcopalian still hoping for some sign of an Apocalypse he surveys in vain all forms of religion in the Judeo-Christian world. In the southern scene, presumably the most religious part of the United States, he finds only chaos. Hence he confronts in detail the circumstances of his father's suicide and contrives an elaborate plan for taking his own life. Luckily when this attempt at a desperate resolution fails, he has at hand a guide in Allie Huger, a refugee from psychotherapy, who is hiding in an abandoned greenhouse. In her whose neuroses are roughly complementary to his own, he finds the communion and perhaps the Second Coming that he seeks."

J. A. Bryant Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 235-36

Michael Hollister (2021)