

"The Suicide of Thought: Reflections on Voegelin and Walker Percy"

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I. The Backdrop of Suicide

Walker Percy (1916-1990) was born into an aristocratic, Southern family of Scottish descent. Though noble and successful, the family was haunted by melancholy.¹ [1] Paul Elie writes, "There was a suicide in nearly every generation. One Percy man dosed himself with laudanum; another leaped into a creek with a sugar kettle tied around his neck. John Walker Percy -- Walker Percy's grandfather -- went up to the attic in 1917 and shot himself in the head." (Elie 10) Walker's father, Leroy Pratt Percy, took his life in similar fashion just twelve years later. When Walker was only fifteen, and the family only two years removed from Leroy Pratt's death, his mother drove into a lake with his younger brother in the passenger seat. Most believe it was an accident, but Walker confessed privately that he thought it was intentional.² [2] The impact of these suicides was not marginal; Percy explains, "The central mystery of my life is to figure out why my father committed suicide."³ [3] Though he never considered himself to be suicidal, he often referred to himself as an "ex-suicide."⁴ [4]

1 [1] For the definitive book on the Percy family see Bertram Wyatt-Brown's The House of Percy.

2 [2] For this account see Samway (1997 pp. 54-56). Samway argues persuasively that it was not a suicide, but offers evidence that Walker thought it to be.

3 [3] Samway (1997 p. 316).

4 [4] For one location see Kramer and Lawson (1985 p. 164).

The question of suicide not only hovered about Percy's life, but infused his fictional writings. Each of the six novels references at least one suicide or attempted suicide involving a central character.⁵ [5] In a 1984 interview with Jo Gullede, Percy confesses, "I would like to think of starting where Faulkner left off, of starting with the Quentin Compson who *didn't* commit suicide. Suicide is easy. Keeping Quentin Compson alive is something else. In a way Binx Bolling [of The Moviegoer] is Quentin Compson who didn't commit suicide." (Kramer and Lawson 1985 p. 300). For Percy, the personal and existential question suicide was of interest, but of greater interest was how an individual navigated through the world not committing suicide. One commentator remarks, "The question that interested Percy, then, is how *to live*, day to day and hour to hour." (Desmond 2005 p. 59)

In his writings Percy sought to address not only a deep melancholy that could appear in certain individuals, but a wider malaise that hovered over late modernity. The question of suicide confronted not only individuals, but entire cultures, especially his own.⁶ [6] In one novel his hero remarks on the Battle of Verdun: "Here began the hemorrhage and death by suicide of the old Western world: white Christian Caucasian Europeans, sentimental music-loving Germans and rational clear-minded Frenchmen, slaughtering each other without passion." (1971 p. 40) He sought to explore not only what made such slaughter possible, but how the individual as wayfaring

5 [5] William Allen writes, 'Invariably, Percy's protagonists have a painful relationship with a weak or even suicidal father that eventually drives them to consider taking their own lives, and the resolution in *The Second Coming* of Will Barrett's psychic struggle to deal with his father's suicide appears to be the natural culmination of Percy's fiction.' (1986 p. xii)

6 [6] John Desmond writes, "[Percy] was most concerned with the general ethos of spiritual suicide or despair he witnessed in twentieth century Western culture. It was possible for Percy to speak of an 'age of suicide' or *thanatos*" (2005 p. 60).

pilgrim might turn away from both the individual *thanatonic* compulsion, and the wider love of death that seemed to hover over not only the death camps, but also the everydayness of the ex-urbs and golfing communities.

To my knowledge Eric Voegelin (1901-1985) did not treat the topic of individual suicide in any of his published writings. Yet he philosophized against the backdrop of the German culture that had destroyed not only its Jews, but, in a very real way, itself. The following essay reads Voegelin's philosophy as an attempt to identify the suicidal foundations in the culture, and to provide an alternative foundation for Western existential and political order.

II. Percy and Voegelin: The Connection

My discovery of Percy followed closely on the heels of my first at length encounter with Voegelin's writings in 2002. It was obvious to me that Percy pursued Voegelinian themes. After reading Percy's blurb on the back of Voegelin's Autobiographical Reflections, I had assumed that Voegelin's influence on Percy would be well documented. A perusal of the literature on Percy unveils that precious little is said of this influence; most indexes list only one reference to Voegelin, and the mention is fleeting. Such relative neglect may in fact be warranted: Percy commented frequently on his own writing yet very rarely mentions Voegelin (the two volumes of conversations edited by Lawson and Kramer mention Voegelin only once).⁷ [7] Percy's greatest debt was owed to Kierkegaard and Charles Peirce, and the works of Dostoevsky, Sartre, Camus,

⁷ [7] Cleanth Brooks writes, "Neither has [Percy], so far as I know, ever mentioned Voegelin and may never have read him." Although perhaps valid at the time of his essay, Percy's own admission of having read Voegelin, in addition to the aforementioned blurb, leaves no doubt that Percy did in fact read Voegelin.

Marcel and Heidegger had a lasting effect on him. Percy made this debt clear in his non-fiction writings, and various commentators have retraced these threads responsibly.⁸ [8]

Noted Percy scholars Lewis Lawson and Cleanth Brooks have written essays that explore the connection between Percy and Voegelin concerning the problem of Gnosticism. My own essay only offers to explore in greater depth the proposal of Brooks, to point out "some highly interesting, and I think, significant parallels between the writings of these two men." (Broughton, 261). When the thought of Percy and Voegelin are placed side by side within paradigm of suicide, one can observe a more profound connection between the thinkers than would otherwise be possible.

III. Tracing the Parallel

In order to give their parallel interests some formal structure, the remainder of this essay will focus on four themes play a prominent role in Percy's and Voegelin's thought. They are: the devaluation of language, the insufficiency of natural science to provide an adequate anthropology and the equation of Gnostic with modernity, and its deleterious consequences.

A. The devaluation of language

Reflecting on the positive influence of Stefan Georg and Karl Kraus in his Autobiographical Reflections, Voegelin writes of "the fantastic destruction of the German language during the Imperial period of Germany after 1870." (1989 p. 17). The destruction of language comes at the hand of "the ideological thinker [who] has lost contact with reality and develops symbols for

⁸ [8] For Percy's own commentary see the essays "Is a Theory of Man Possible," "From Facts to Fiction," "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," (Percy 1991 pp. 111-29, 186-90, 204-21, 271-91.

expressing not reality but his state of alienation from it." (1989 p. 17) For Voegelin, language was never an arbitrary set of markers, but the symbolic means through which a culture or people expressed reality, however imperfectly. Take for example the way armchair Freudians might use the term "repressed." If one fidgets, does not regularly engage in satisfying sexual encounters, appears tense or tightly wound, etc., the Freudian diagnoses a repression that could only be cured by a good orgasm. One could also give the example of "guilt" and the influence of religion. But the point is not to pick on Freudians, for, after all, maybe they have it right; rather, it is to recognize that when such language becomes public, then it has an enormous impact on how the culture understands itself and its relation to what Voegelin calls the divine ground. Instead of an imperfect language striving toward reality, the culture inherits a distorted language that forsakes reality, and Voegelin considers the results disastrous.

For Voegelin, distorted language always has a political impact. Society as ordered relies on a prior intellectual or cognitive order in its citizens, or at least those that make decisions. The destruction of language represents a culture's suicide insofar as it allows space for totalitarianism. Voegelin explains,

The phenomenon of Hitler is not exhausted by his person. His success must be understood in the context of an intellectually or morally ruined society in which personalities who otherwise would be grotesque, marginal figures can come to public power because they superbly represent the people who admire them. (1989 p. 18)⁹ [9]

⁹ [9] Voegelin makes the same point in the essay treated below. He writes, "Is Humboldt's conception, then since it doesn't have a grip in reality, a harmless illusion? This question must unfortunately be answered in the negative. Indeed one cannot realize a Second Reality, but the spiritual closure within it is a real phenomenon and has an actual effect on reality. In this regard the structure of the pneumopathological case doesn't differ from that of the psychopathological: the delusions of a paranoid person also correspond to no reality but the delusions are real and the actions of the paranoid enter into reality." (1990 p. 33)

Voegelin develops this line of thought in a 1966 lecture on National Socialism.¹⁰ [10] Here Voegelin takes to task both Heidegger and Alexander von Humboldt for distorting the German language. Commenting on the treatment of signs in Being in Time, Voegelin writes, "The text concerning the sign [...] transposes factual relationships of our everyday world into a linguistic medium that begins to take on an alliterative life of its own, and thus loses contact with the thing itself. Language and fact have somehow separated from one another, and thought has correspondingly become estranged from reality," (1990 p. 8). On the next page, Voegelin describes Heidegger's project as one in which "we could whip ourselves up into a reality-withdrawing state of linguistic delirium." (1990 p. 9).

The essay later turns to Humboldt, who, for Voegelin, has ruined university education insofar as his model became paradigmatic. Commenting on a passage from Humboldt, Voegelin remarks, "Expressions such as *inner being*, *individuality*, *originality*, *uniqueness of human strength and development*, *developing for his own sake*, etc. indicate a closure against the ground of being." (1990 p. 20). Voegelin objects to Humboldt's use of reality-distorting language. A healthy soul may have difficulty discerning what Humboldt is doing, because their languages are so different. Voegelin explains, "One who himself is not living in a condition of estrangement [...] will have a very difficult time trying to understand a Humboldtian text, since to do this one must first characterize the phenomenon of estrangement in order to compile a sort of dictionary with whose aid one can then relate the language of reality loss to the language of reality." (1990 p. 21-22) Humboldt's philosophy separates the process of education from any public order, and thus the

10 [10] "The German University and the Order of German Society: A Reconstruction of the Nazi Era," (1990 p. 1-35).

capacity to experience the disintegration of society through National Socialism becomes tenable. Of this trend Voegelin writes, "Not only do the movements [of estrangement] spread, but in a society of nonpublic human beings they encounter no serious opposition -- indeed, those who experience them firsthand don't understand in the least what is going on all around them." (1990 p. 26)

Both Humboldt and Heidegger give license to the intellectual climate reigning in modernity where different public languages further erode contact with reality. Voegelin laments,

With the destruction of reality the public language is destroyed. In place of language symbols which relate to the reality of the tensions towards the ground, there appear the various idioms of estrangement. The idiom of "ideals" and "ideas," which was Humboldt's own, as well as that of "values," has already been mentioned. But there are many others -- Marxist and Hegelian, positivistic and scientistic, psychoanalytic and historicist, up to the most recent which Adorno has analyzed in his brilliant invective against The Jargon of Authenticity. I have already made reference to the syndrome of illiteracy which is the result of the destruction of the language." (1990 p. 32)

For the purpose of this paper, it is not important to examine in further detail whether Voegelin treats his opponents fairly. Instead it is to notice the importance he places on the destruction of language. For Voegelin, we are creatures living in-between, living out and living in the tension toward the divine ground. By removing God from reality, we become *ersatz* creators, free to create as we see fit, and thus free to destroy ourselves.

Though Percy never references the essays cited above, his own diagnosis of the effects of the destruction of language is just as dire as Voegelin's. The destruction of language figures prominently in his novels Love in the Ruins and The Thanatos Syndrome, as well as several essays. Both novels are futuristic accounts of Thomas More, a lapsed Catholic, alcoholic, philandering doctor of immense talent. Dr. More faces medical-technocrats in both novels who use rhetoric to

blind people to their intentions. What follows is a dialogue between More and another doctor named Buddy concerning an extremely grumpy patient should be sent to "Happy Isles" where the semi-lobotomized elderly plan bingo in peace.

"Tom, you and I don't disagree," says Buddy in an earnest friendly voice.

"We don't?"

"It's the quality of life that counts."

"Yes."

"And the right of the individual to control his own body."

"Well --"

"Would you let your own mother suffer?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe you. I know you too well and know that you place a supreme value on human values."

"Yes."

"We believe in the same things, differing only in the best way to achieve them."

"We do?" (1971 p. 167)

Though More often appears more idiot than savant to his fellow doctors, he refuses to be bullied by Buddy in this scene. "Quality of life" does count, but whether it should be the highest priority in a society is another matter. Most loyal and loving children *do* let their mothers suffer, though it causes them grief.

Take another dialogue between doctors, this time between More and his friend Max Gottlieb concerning More's philandering:

"Are you speaking of my fornication with Lola in number 18 bunker?"

"Fornication," repeats Max, nodding. "You see?"

"See what?"

"That you are saying that lovemaking is not a natural activity, like eating and drinking."

"No, I didn't say it wasn't natural."

"But sinful and guilt-laden."

"Not guilt-laden."

"Then sinful?"

"Only between persons not married to each other." [...]

"If it is sinful why do you do it?"

"It is a great pleasure."

"I understand. Then since it is 'sinful,' guilt feelings follow, even though it is a pleasure."

"No, they don't follow."

"Then what worries you, if you don't feel guilty?"

"That's what worries me, not feeling guilty." (1971 p. 99)

Percy's character does not operate on a higher moral plane, but in the syntax of Voegelin, he still recognizes the pull towards the divine ground. Max wants More to reduce sex to a biological urge, but More, perhaps due to his Catholic upbringing, perhaps due to his own contact with reality, resists this move because it represents a detour from reality made possible through language. "Fornication" is an ugly word, like adultery, yet More seems to intuit that only by holding on to these words can he hope to restore his sexuality to order.

More's own struggle for health is set against the backdrop of a society that has become quite sick. This sickness emerges in The Thanatos Syndrome, a futuristic novel written in 1987

but taking place sometime around 2000. Dr. More has just been released from prison and must emerge from his daze in order to bring a halt to the eugenic and psychopharmacological experimentation of a renegade doctor. He is gradually shaken into action by a depressed, ex-alcoholic priest, Fr. Smith, who cannot forget Auschwitz :

"Let me ask you a question as a scientist and a student of human nature," he says, almost in his old priest-friend-colleague voice."

"Sure."

"Do you think it is possible that words could be deprived of their meaning?"

"Deprived of their meaning. What words?"

"Name it! Any words. Tom , U.S.A. , God, Simon, prayer, sin, heaven, world." (1987 p. 117)

For Fr. Smith, the loss of meaning is not just a fact to notice, but an indication of something gone horribly wrong. He continues,

He almost raises his eyes. "If it is a fact that words are deprived of their meaning, does it not follow that there is a depriver?" [...]

I always answer patients honestly. "One explanation if I understand you correctly, is that a person can stop believing in the things the words signify."

"Ah ha," he says at once, smiling as if I had taken the bait. "But that's the point, isn't it?" [... Fr. Smith] "It is not a question of belief or unbelief. Even if such things were all proved, if the existence of God, heaven, hell, sin were all proved as certainly as the distance to the sun is proved, it would make no difference, would it?" [...]

"Why wouldn't it?"

"Because the words no longer signify."

"Why is that?"

"Because the words have been deprived of their meaning." (1987 p. 118)

Take for example the word "data" from the Latin *datum* meaning given or gift. Surely when the word came into English from the Latin it would have imported the notion of things or objects in the universe being given -- given freely, given meaning, given by God, etc. Nowadays data means stuff or information absent of any teleology or indication of a creator that brings all things "seen and unseen" into being. Such examples lead to the chicken and egg question: either the world changed and the language changed accordingly, or some "depriver" began to distort the language and hence changed the world. Though no careful argument is provided, both Voegelin and Fr. Smith seem to argue that language distortion can cause changes in the world.

Later in the novel More confronts Bob Comeaux, who has Cajunized his name from Como, disguising his New York Italian heritage. Dr. Comeaux wants More to sign onto his project. More begins to question Comeaux:

"Are you still disposing of infants and old people in your Qualitarian Centers?"

Bob Comeaux looks reproachful. "That's unfair, Tom."

"I didn't say I disapproved. I was just asking."

"Ah ha. All right! What you're talking about is pedeuthanasia and gereuthanasia. What we're doing, as you well know, is following the laws of the Supreme Court, respecting the rights of the family, the consensus of child psychologists, the rights of the unwanted child not to have to suffer a life of suffering and abuse, the right of the unwanted aged to a life with dignity and a death with dignity. Toward this end we -- to use your word -- dispose of those neonates and euthanates who are entitled to the Right to Death provision in the recent court decisions."

"Neonate? Euthanate?"

[...] "A neonate is a human infant who according to the American Psychological Association does not attain its individuality until the acquisition of language and according to the Supreme Court does not acquire its legal rights until the age of eighteen months." (1987 p. 199)

Comeaux is one of the "deprivers" portended of by Fr. Smith in the previous passage. He recognizes that for a society to begin to kill its own without protest a shift in language is needed. Like the National Socialist term "useless eater," a euthanate is now something less than a human being. What Percy no doubt found compelling was that the language of rights and compassion could be just as able a manservant as the national socialist language of *Volk* and *Reich*.

Later in the novel Comeaux refers to "Doe v. Dade, the landmark case [...] which decreed, with solid scientific evidence, that the human infant does not achieve personhood until eighteen months." (1987 p. 333) Percy's own opposition to abortion was staunch, and his attack on abortion is thinly veiled here.¹¹ [11] Comeaux's logic is clear so long as the language is fuzzy. Why not euthanize neonates if they don't achieve personhood, according to solid scientific evidence, until eighteen months? The fuzziness can be located both in "personhood" and "evidence." On what basis would scientists be able to determine personhood? What "scientific evidence" would be able to determine such a non-quantifiable entity as personhood? Comeaux must distort and deprive words in order to implement his project. Dr. More is a moral dud but a good diagnostician. Just as he senses something awry in his patients, so he senses something awry in Comeaux's rhetoric.

Percy also makes similar points in his prose essays. In a 1971 talk titled "Concerning Love in the Ruins," Percy explains that for a society to come apart at the seams, "One thing that happens is that words change their meanings. The good old words remain the same, but the meanings begin to slip. In 1983 [...] we will still be using words like 'freedom,' the 'dignity of the individual,' the quality of life,' and so on. But the meanings will have slipped." (1991 p. 248) In "Novel-Writing

¹¹ [11] Percy wrote several pieces on abortion. See "A View of Abortion, with Something to Offend Everybody," and "An Unpublished Letter to the Times," (1991), 340-42, 349-51

in an Apocalyptic Time" he laments the effect of destruction of language on the novelist. Words have lost their meaning, yet words are the tools of the trade for a novelist. He explains, "But how can even Dante write about the love of God, the love of a man for a woman, if he lives in a society in which God is the cheapest word of the media [...] And "love?" Love is the way sit-com plots and soap operas get resolved a hundred times a week." (1991 p. 161). The words no longer signify, and consequently society becomes alienated.

Percy recognizes that the loss of meaning has dire consequences, but like Voegelin, he thinks that public intellectuals, though outnumbered, are not defenseless. Percy opines that the only option left open to the novelist is to attack:

Anything other than assault and satire can only be understood as a confirmation of the current corrupted meanings of such honorable old words as love, truth, beauty, brotherhood of man, life, and so on. There may be times when the greatest service a novelist can do his fellow man is to follow General Patton's injunction: Attack, attack, attack. Attack the fake in the name of the real." (1991 p. 161)

Certainly his thinly veiled assault on abortion rights was such an attack, and one could easily construe Voegelin's project as a philosopher as an answer to Percy's exhortation. In another essay, Percy addresses the problem that televangelists pose for authentic Christians: "What makes it difficult for him [the authentic Christian] is that they are proclaiming the same good news he believes in, using the same noble biblical words, speaking of the same treasure buried in a field, but somehow devaluing it." (1991 p. 180) How can the authentic Christian respond? Percy suggests two possibilities given the situation -- "For he is working with a prostituted vocabulary which must be either discarded or somehow miraculously rejuvenated." (1991 p. 181)

Both Voegelin and Percy connected the loss of language with the fundamental breakdown of order in late modernity. Thought as expressed in language can become suicidal. For both

thinkers, however, the point is not simply diagnosis, but also to articulate some kind of alternative. Voegelin explains: "In resistance to the dominance of idols -- i.e., of language symbols that have lost their contact with reality -- one has to rediscover the experiences of reality as well as the language that will adequately express them." (1989 p. 93-94) To the degree that Percy understood the importance of language for Voegelin's diagnosis of modernity's ills, he no doubt appreciated their common efforts -- albeit through different media -- to address the problem.

B. The insufficiency of natural science

Both Percy and Voegelin considered themselves scientists insofar as they pursued truth and knowledge. They chose their fields based on a desire to recapture reality, not to flee from it. Moreover, they did not wish to minimize the enormous advancement made possible through the scientific method and its application to technology. Yet both figures realized that modern natural science could only treat a limited area of reality, and that the majority of both scientists and laypeople had no idea of these limitations.

In 1951 Voegelin gave a series of lectures at the University of Chicago that became The New Science of Politics. Voegelin postulates in the "Introduction" the need for a new theory of politics, for political scientists since the latter half of the nineteenth century have adopted a positivistic method of scientific inquiry. The whopping success of natural science led to the belief that its method was supreme for all forms of inquiry; in addition, any other method of knowledge possessed no relevance. (Voegelin 2000 p. 90). As a consequence all metaphysical inquiry became obsolete. Voegelin writes,

A study of reality could qualify as scientific only if it used the methods of the natural sciences, that problems couched in other terms were illusionary problems, that in particular

metaphysical questions that do not admit of answers by the methods of the sciences of phenomena should not be asked (2000 p. 91).

Instead of being opened by the *eros* for a knowledge that sets humanity apart, positivism and scientism paradoxically shield humanity from this knowledge.

Positivism also leads to an illusory bifurcation from which the world "science" had yet to recover in the English language. This bifurcation was popularized by Wilhelm Dilthey and then Max Weber. Explains Voegelin,

This situation was created through the positivistic conceit that only propositions concerning facts of the phenomenal world were "objective," while judgments concerning the right order of the soul and society were "subjective." Only propositions of the first type could be considered "scientific," while propositions of the second type expressed personal preferences and decisions, incapable of critical verification and therefore devoid of objective validity. (2000 p. 96)

Anyone who has offered a careful argument only to be opposed by the cry, "Well, that just your opinion!" is familiar with the phenomenon derided by Voegelin. Under such a construction faith becomes the polar opposite of reason, and belief the polar opposite of fact. Beside the metaphysical and religious consequences, political consequences follow as well. If the decision to be a Marxist or national socialist is simply a matter of opinion based on a subjective value, then political science cannot determine any political order to be superior to another.

Percy's makes a similar critique of scientism, but applies the critique differently. Though the critique appears in many novels, he spells out his objections most poignantly in two essays, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," and "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind." For Percy, the problem of science is not "that the Western world and the life of the Western man has simply been transformed by scientific technology." (1991 p. 210) One cannot use a typewriter to make a living, pick up the phone to call one's editor, and drive's one's daughter to

school while simultaneously lamenting the transformation brought about through science. Instead the problem is a misapprehension of what science does and what its limits are. Percy states: "the scientist, in practicing the scientific method, cannot utter a single word about an individual thing or creature insofar as it is an individual but only insofar as it resembles other individuals. This limitation holds true whether the individual is a molecule of NaCl or an amoeba or a human being." (1991 p. 211). In an age where the terms like "personhood" and "self-realization" gain such popularity, it is problematic that the dominant worldview can say nothing about "what it is like to be an individual living in the United States in the twentieth century." (1991 p. 213) The culture as a whole has surrendered (in most cases unconsciously) what is uniquely human to the realm of technology and science, and as a result experiences as deep sense of alienation with no real solution. Science has not brought about the deep sense of loneliness and anxiety; instead these stem from a scientific-reductionistic culture that does not accept the objectivity of any other perspective than that of science.

In his last public talk, the prestigious Jefferson Lecture given in 1989, Percy spells out this problem with greater detail. Percy outlines the "fault in the modern mind" as follows: if one takes Psychology 101, "Here's what one studies or at least hears about -- and I mention only those items most familiar to sophomores: neurons, signals synapses, [...] brain, mind, personality, self, consciousness." (1991 p. 273) The first four words refer to realities than can be measured or seen, whereas the last four terms refer to realities, "which cannot be seen as things or measured as energy exchanges." (1991 p. 274) There is a gulf between the two created by Descartes, and most moderns do not even know that it is there, let alone do they have the faintest notion about how one might cross it. Percy cites a psychology textbook that states, "What can a physiological psychology say about human self-awareness? We know that it is altered by changes in the structure or chemistry

of the brain. We conclude that consciousness is a physiological function, just like behavior." (1991 p. 275) Percy finds such statements hopeless: "To say that mind is a property or function of the organization of the brain is like saying that Raphael's *Orleans Madonna* is a property of paint and color." (1991 p. 275) Unless natural science makes space for sciences that can treat the non-quantifiable, it is doomed to repeat reductionist explanations for realities that cannot be reduced in this manner. For Percy, science thus conceived fails as a science.

Just one example from Percy's fiction will suffice. In Lancelot the hero, Lancelot Lamar, finds himself in a mental institution where he retells how he got there to a priest. Central to Lancelot's breakdown is an affair that took place between his wife and another man. Much of the latter part consists in the absurd attempt to tape his wife in the act of adultery when he already knows it to be the case. Lancelot laments,

But why? Why did it become the most important, the sole obsession of my very life, to determine whether or not Margot slept with Merlin when in fact I knew she had, or at least with somebody not me? [...] Her fornication, anybody's fornication, amounts to no more than molecules encountering molecules and little bursts of electrons along tiny nerves -- no different in kind from that housefly scrubbing his wings under my hair. (1977 p. 89)

The hero employs an MIT technophile to tape the whole matter, but his madness derives from his already having granted natural science the last say in reality. An affair can only be understood in the concept of non-empirical realities that would include fidelity, love, and betrayal. But for Lancelot, the inability to construe the matter as anything more than "molecules encountering molecules" lands him in an insane asylum after a grand act of arson and murder.

C. Gnosticism and Modernity's Banality

Both thinkers vociferously criticized the Gnostic characteristics of a modern world wrecked with suicidal behavior. Cleanth Brooks argues that Percy and Voegelin's "key shared idea [is] that the Gnostic vision has escaped its traditional religious context to invade the modern political world in secular philosophies. (Broughton p. 261) Voegelin and Percy are not the only two thinkers to refer to the last century in disparaging terms,^{12 [12]} but if one combines this with a diagnosis of a spiritually bankrupt philosophy, then their company becomes much smaller. The point is not that they are "cranky" as Percy once referred to himself in a talk (1991 p. 316) but that late modernity had become suicidal due to a life-negating Gnosticism as well language devaluation and scientism.

As Voegelin explains, his applications of Gnosticism to modern phenomena began with The New Science of Politics, and he admits that his application was hardly novel; it had already begun in 1835 with F.C. Baur's Die christliche Gnosis (Voegelin 1989 p. 66).^{13 [13]} Yet Voegelin's own reputation was linked to his correlation and condemnation of both Gnosticism and modernity. Both apocalypticism and Gnosticism involve a form of escape from the *metaxy* or in-between that constitutes being human. Fringe movements of both the right *and* left in Voegelin's

^{12 [12]} Dupuy writes, "[Percy] is a survivor of what he often called this 'century of death.'" (Dupuy 1996 p. 91) Voegelin makes just as dire an analysis when he speaks of the grotesque devolution of public speech: "The grotesque, however, must not be confused with the comic or the humorous. The seriousness of the matter will be understood, if one visions the concentration camps of totalitarian regimes and the gas chambers of Auschwitz in which the grotesqueness of opinion becomes the murderous reality of action." (1990 p. 260)

^{13 [13]} The most recent effort to view modernity and modern philosophy through Baur's Gnostic lens can be found in the ongoing project of Cyril O'Regan, who has promised seven volumes outlining this development. For the first volume see O'Regan, Gnostic Return in Modernity (Albany, NY : SUNY Press, 2001).

Europe had engaged in brutally destructive violence as a result of this desire for escape. In his 1968 essay "Configurations in History" Voegelin explains this escape:

There is also another type of objectifying escape, which is not into a future time, but rather into the beyond, into perfection in a spiritually understood eternity beyond this world. This escape into the beyond, with various means of escaping the structure of this world of society and history, is what was called in antiquity gnosis. The various gnostic movements advise man how to escape from the structure of the world into the spiritual, pneumatic existence beyond this world [...] into the pleroma beyond history. (1990 p. 107)

The alienation resulting from scientism and devaluation of language increases the appeal of Gnosticism, for it enables one to move from despair to escape.¹⁴ [14] Voegelin considered the search of a person who has the sense of not quite belonging to be a healthy spiritual enterprise, but the attempt to eradicate the in-between status that defines creaturehood constituted a depraved alternative.

Voegelin acknowledges that Christianity made the growth of Gnosticism possible due to its eschatological and other-worldly elements. It is not surprisingly that Gnosticism became the great Christian heresy in the early Church (Voegelin 2000 p. 190). But its growth and expansion since the twelfth century, and more poignantly since the nineteenth century leads Voegelin to implore readers of The New Science of Politics "to recognize the essence of modernity as the growth of Gnosticism." (2000 p. 190) Precisely as knowledge that replaces the Christian uncertainty that we know "neither the day nor hour" and that we work out our faith in "fear and trembling," Gnosticism endowed "man and his intramundane range of action with the meaning of

¹⁴ [14] Dupuy calls Gnosticism "a stepbrother to the deification of science" (2002 p. 92). Voegelin writes: "With the prodigious advancement of science since the seventeenth century, the new instrument of cognition would become, one is inclined to say inevitably, the symbolic vehicle of gnostic truth. [...] Scientism has remained to this day one of the strongest gnostic movements in Western society." (2000 p. 191-92)

eschatological fulfillment." (2000 p. 193) Certainly one must act in history, and there seems to be no basis for condemning Stalin's Five Year Plan *qua* plan without likewise condemning the Marshall Plan. But instead of an improvement *through* time that Christian and classical civilizations sought by introducing the academy, the gymnasium, the university and the hospital into society, Gnostic movements seek to end the problem through an *eradication* of time. Voegelin explains the problem thusly:

On this apocalyptic spectacle, however, falls a shadow; for the brilliant expansion is accompanied by a danger that grows apace with progress. The nature of this danger became apparent in the form that the idea of immanent salvation assumed in the Gnosticism of [August] Comte. [...] Here is a Gnostic paraclete setting himself up as the world-immanent Last Judgment of mankind, deciding on immortality or annihilation for every human being. (2000 p. 194)

It makes no matter for Voegelin whether Gnosticism is self-consciously secular, as in the case of Comte or Marx, or religious, as with the Puritan reformers. Voegelin's chapter on "The Puritan Case" is a devastating critique of the latter. Of it he writes, "All this has nothing to do with Christianity. [...] The Saint is a gnostic who will not leave the transfiguration of the world to the grace of God beyond history but will do the work of God himself, right here and now, in history." (2000 p. 207). And if one can do God's work in the here and now, there is no reason why God need exist. Nietzsche's self-definition as a murderer of God is for Voegelin the logical outgrowth of Gnosticism (2000 p. 195).

Most rational people operate with a conviction that they know right from wrong, or possess a *gnosis* that includes some liberation or salvation from error or darkness. But whereas Christianity regards sin and evil as parasitic on the good, or as some perversion of the order of creation, Gnosticism advocates a dualism that rejects the goodness of creation and the body. The confrontation with evil takes a far different shape due to its dualism. Voegelin explains that for

Gnostics, "Social evils cannot be reformed by legislation; defects of governmental machinery cannot be repaired by changes in the constitution; differences of opinion cannot be settled by compromise. 'This world' is darkness that must give way to the new light." (2000 p. 210) As Voegelin sees it, all Gnostic movements result necessarily in violent outbursts. And though Marxism and fascism have largely faded from the picture, the violence resulting from the description given by Voegelin does not. If one replaces a few words, the following passage sounds like something that could have been written since 9/11/2001 :

The Saints can foresee that the universalism of their claim will not be accepted without a struggle by the world of darkness but that it will produce an equally universal alliance of the world against them. The Saints, therefore, will have to combine "against the Antichristian powers of the world"; and the Antichristian powers in their turn will "combine against them universally." The two worlds [...] will, thus, become in historical reality two universal armed camps engaged in a death struggle against each other. [...] The real danger of contemporary world does not lie in the technologically determined global extent of the theater of war; their true fatality stems from their character as gnostic wars, that is, of wars between worlds that are bent on mutual destruction. (2000 p. 211)

Voegelin's chilling and prophetic analysis not only helps explain both leftist and rightist totalitarianism, but eerily foretells the truth that American Gnosticism would continue to engage in a "death struggle" with the forces of evil even with the downfall of Soviet communism. Percy's conflation of Gnosticism and modernity would allow for an equally prophetic diagnosis of the late twentieth century.

Percy's anti-Gnostic orientation emerges clearly in four of the six novels: Love in the Ruins, Lancelot, The Second Coming, and The Thanatos Syndrome. Lewis Lawson has already written two essays on the presentation of Gnosticism in Lancelot; Cleanth Brooks' article provides a cursory overview of the confrontation with Gnosticism in the entire Percy corpus, and Edward

Dupuy tackles the question with greater depth.¹⁵ [15] My own treatment will take another look at Thomas More before concluding with Will Barrett's flirtation with and then rejection of Gnosticism in The Second Coming.

In Love in the Ruins, Percy translates the Gnostic dualism into the dialectic between angelism (rejection of corporeality) and bestialism (reduction to corporeality). Dr. More blames the downfall of his marriage on his wife's angelism: "My poor wife, Doris, was ruined by books [...] not by dirty books but by clean books, not by depraved books but by spiritual books. [...] A certain type of Episcopal girl has a weakness that comes on them just past youth [...] They fall pry [sic] to Gnostic pride, commence buying antiques, and develop a yearning for esoteric doctrine." (1971 pp. 55-56) Perhaps his wife is right to become tired of his adolescent lustiness, but Doris opts for a disincarnate angelism. More's own sacramental, analogical imagination derived from his Catholic upbringing makes him wary of Doris' turn.¹⁶ [16] Consider the following dialogue that More recalls:

15 [15] See Lawson, "The Gnostic Vision in *Lancelot*," and "Gnosis and Time in *Lancelot*," (Lawson 1985 pp. 196-209, 210-226); Brooks, "Walker Percy and Modern Gnosticism," in Broughton, 260-72; and Dupuy, "Repetition and *Bios*: Surviving Life in a Century of Gnosticism and Death," (1996 pp. 89-119). Lawson uncovers a great number of representations of Gnostic ideas, though some of the sexual symbolism and its relation to Gnosticism may not have been intended by Percy.

16 [16] Later in the novel Percy makes it clear that Catholicism is the antidote to Gnosticism. More recounts Sundays where he would leave Doris and go to mass with his daughter. After receiving the Eucharist and More recalls returning to his befuddled wife: "'My God, what is it you do in church?'

What she didn't understand, she being spiritual and seeing religion as spirit, was that it took religion to save me from the spirit world, from orbiting the earth like Lucifer and the angels, that it took nothing less than touching the thread off the misty interstates and eating Christ himself to make me mortal man again and let me inhabit my own flesh and love her in the morning." (1971 p. 217)

"We don't relate any more, Tom"

"I'd like to relate now."

"I know, I know. That's how you see it."

"How?"

"As physical."

"What's wrong with physical."

Doris sighed, her eyes full of sunlight. "Who was it who said the physical is the lowest common denominator of love?"

"I don't know. Probably a Hindoo [sic]." (1971 p. 57)

Doris and Tom More live out Gnostic dualism. His fixation on sexuality moves her towards Gnostic flight, yet her Gnosticism only entrenches More's bestialism. More laments, "Lately her mournful spirituality had provoked in me the most primitive impulses. In ten seconds' time my spirits had revived. My heart's desire was that she sit on my lap in the yellow muscadine sunlight." (1971 p. 57) In the same recollection More and Doris finally understand the other's position, but only after Doris has committed a kind of spiritual infidelity by giving her mind over to an New Age Englishman named Alistair:

"You know the trouble with you, Tom?"

"What?"

"You don't understand a purely spiritual relationship."

"That's true."

Somewhere Doris had got the idea that love is spiritual. So lately she'd had no use for my carrying on, [...] putting her down in the zoysia grass, etcetera, with friendly whacks on the thick parts and shouts of joy for the beauty of the morning, hola! I do truly believe that she

came to look upon her solemn spiritual adultery with that fag Alistair as somehow more elevating than ordinary morning love with her husband. (1971 p. 60)

It bears repeating that Percy's hero in this book, and in all of his books, is a moral mediocrity. Percy never wrote an ethical novel and would have bristled at the notion of judging Catholic art by the moral behavior of its characters. Voegelin defends his treatment of National Socialism along similar lines in the 1938 preface to The Political Religions. Voegelin sought to avoid the step made by such intellectuals as Thomas Mann, "who proclaim [their] deep aversion to National Socialism through strong ethical judgments." (2000 p. 23) For Voegelin, Nazis should be opposed on a deeper, *religious* level: "Thus, although I do not mean to imply that the struggle against National Socialism should not also be an ethical one, it is, in my opinion, not conducted radically enough, because the *radix*, the root in religiousness, is missing." (2000 p. 24) It is not enough to say "that we are concerned with merely a morally inferior, dumb, barbaric, contemptible matter." One must get at a deeper spiritual disease that permits and promotes the ethical thuggery of National Socialism.

The implications of Gnosticism have more wide-ranging consequences than the break-up of a marriage. More describes his mother as a "Catholic gnostic" with certain powers of clairvoyance (1971 p. 150-51). She prefigures the violence inherent in the Gnostic worldview by justifying her hatred of Fr. Smith by declaring, "He who is not with you is against you." (1971 p. 152). This war breaks out later, but between a group of militant blacks and the home-owning whites in Paradise Estates. The leader of the militants later confronts More and explains his plan:

"Let me put it this way, Doctor. You know what we're going to do. We're going to build a new society right here. Only you don't think we can do it, do you?" [...]

"You haven't done very well so far." [...]

"You're not talking to Victor [an uneducated black acquaintance of More] now. You're talking to a Ph.D. in political science. Only I didn't choose to be a black-ass pipe-smoking professor." [...]

"You've had Liberia a long time."

"So?"

"Look at Liberia . You've had Haiti even longer."

"So?"

"Look at Haiti "

"You know something, Chuck. You got a smart mouth. We're liable to do to you what you did to the Indians."

The turn to violence does not stem from a lack of education or a moral gruffness. Instead the black militant has a doctorate in political science, presumably the kind that Voegelin lambasted so vociferously in The New Science of Politics. The desire for a new society allows no room for compromise or collaboration. Instead it depends on the extermination of what must be conceived as a wholly evil force.

More's own scientific invention, the ontological lapsometer, serves as a metaphor for the scientist- technocratic solution to social ills. It falls into the hands of a Gnostic social engineer who wants to use it to gnostify the entire population. More understands the ramifications:

"Do you realize what this would do to a man, especially a student?"

"I know, says Art, smiling good naturedly. "But I like to hear you say it."

"It would render him totally abstracted from himself, totally alienated from the concrete world, and in such a state of angelism that he will fall prey to the first abstract notion proposed to him and will kill anybody who gets in his way, torture, execute, wipe out entire populations, all with the best possible motives and the best possible intentions, in fact in the name of peace and freedom" (1971 p. 280-81)

The Gnostic bent of More's mother becomes realized in the Bantu chief and government bureaucrat who see no reason to wait for the apocalypse when they can enact it on their own,

Though not a political novel like Love in the Ruins or The Thanatos Syndrome, The Second Coming also presents a Gnostic-suicidal dilemma. A middle-aged will Barrett wants to know the truth about God. But instead of a Marian waiting in the metaxy, Barrett brags, "My project is the first scientific experiment in history to settle *once and for all* the question of God's existence. [...] Would not the outcome of such an experiment be a clear yes or a clear no, with no maybes?" (1980 p. 192, emphasis mine) Barrett decides to go on a type of hunger fast until he witnesses a convincing theophany. He crawls into a cave that suggests Plato's cave and the desire for illumination. Ordinary reminders of being embodied remain as necessary evils -- "he could piss down the chimney, but feces must be deposited on a square of foil, packaged, and put away, else he'd foul his own den." (1980 p. 211)

Barrett is not simply a depressive suicidal like his father was. Instead, he is caught in the throes of Gnostic dogmatachy and he will become a Gnostic martyr: "My suicide will represent progress in the history of suicide. Unlike my father's, it will be done in good faith, logically, neatly [...] What is more, it will advance knowledge [gnosis]." (1980 p. 211-12) Despite Barrett's careful planning, reality gets in the way. The narrator explains, "A clear yes or no answer may not be forthcoming after all. The answer may be a muddy maybe. In the case of Will Barrett, what went wrong could hardly be traced to God or man, Jews or whomever, but rather to a cause at once humiliating and comical: a toothache." (1980 p. 213) Barrett's body interrupts his attempted angelism.

Struggling to crawl back out of the cave in total darkness, Barrett accidentally falls into the house of Allison, his future love interest, who resides in a greenhouse. Barrett's fall from the cave into a greenhouse symbolizes the Gnostic fall in reverse: just as with Tom More's massgoing, having a body is the medium through which they are saved, not condemned. After recovering consciousness, Barrett rediscovers his body -- "He opened his mouth and she poured water into it. There are few joys greater than drinking cool water after a serious thirst." And later, when he woke, "She fed him a large bowl of oatmeal. Why had I never noticed how good oatmeal is?" (1980 p. 227) Reality is not primarily noetic but sacramental: God does not reveal himself ahistorically and pneumatically to the intellectually gifted, but historically to the Jews and sacramentally through bread, water, oil, and wine.

Percy's response to Gnosticism is Catholicism. In a public address Percy ends by recalling Will Barrett and the suicide of Barrett's father. His father killed himself after listening to Brahms and reciting "old sad poetry." Barrett's memory is triggered by feeling an iron hitching post next to a tree. "It was not in the Brahms that one looked and not in the old and sad poetry but -- he wrung out his ear -- but here, under your nose, here in the very curiousness and drollness and extraneousness of the iron and bark." (Percy 1991 p. 220) Percy explains, "Will Barrett, too, sees something in the bark, the same extraneousness as he calls it, gratuitousness, but for him it is an intimation, a clue to further discovery. And it is not something bad he sees but something good. [...] He has caught a glimpse of the goodness and gratuitousness of created being." (1991 p. 221) Though Voegelin did not share Percy's Catholic faith, one could imagine him being positively disposed towards Percy's attempt to juxtapose *thanatonic* Gnosticism and an unapologetically incarnational Christianity.

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