

Elzbieta Oloksy

A TALK WITH WALKER PERCY¹

Walker Percy made his debut in fiction with "The Moviegoer", the 1962 National Book Award novel². This and other novels, with the exception of "The Last Gentleman", is set in the South, Percy's native region. He was born in 1916 in Alabama. Orphaned by both mother and father at the age of fifteen, he was adopted by his second cousin, William Alexander Percy, a lawyer, planter and man of letters.

The Percys were especially famous in the Mississippi Delta region. Legal profession has been the heritage of several generations of the Percys; they have been a progressive family vividly concerned with the social and political life of the Delta. The recently located family papers in the warehouse of the cotton compress at Greenville, Mississippi, provide new insights into the family history. Of special interest is a printed copy of the speech given by Senator LeRoy Percy at Greenville Courthouse. It was meant to counter the racist speech of Colonel Joseph G. Camp, an agent of the Ku Klux Klan. Percy's attack was formidable; it drove Camp out of the courthouse and out of Greenville. The tradition of Negro support remained in the family. William Alexander Percy, who was not a politician like his father LeRoy, found his own way of assist-

¹ A version of this interview in Polish appeared in "Literatura na świecie" 1987, No. 5-6, p. 411-422.

² Percy's other works: "The Message in the Bottle" (1975), "The Last Gentleman" (1966), "Love in the Ruins" (1971), "Lancelot" (1977), "The Second Coming" (1980), "Lost in the Cosmos. The Last Self-Help Book" (1983) and "The Thanatos Syndrome" (1987).

ing the Negroes. Himself a poet and author of the famous "Lanterns on the Levee", he helped promote young talented black poets. Walker Percy continued this tradition.

Percy studied to be medical doctor but after graduation in 1941 he contracted tuberculosis while working as an intern in the pathology section of Bellevue Hospital. This was the turning point of his life. He spent two years, and then another year at a sanitarium where for months he saw only the nurse. Though he started publishing his works much later, he discovered his real vocation in the seclusion of the sanitarium. The reading of this period left a tremendous imprint on his own writing, and he read mostly writers who are now loosely identified as existentialists: Kierkegaard, Dostoevski, Marcel, Buber, Sartre, Camus and, as he for the first time acknowledges in this interview, Pascal³.

Elzbieta Oleksy: Most interviews with you boil down to questions about existentialism. What has always intrigued me, and I don't believe you have ever spoken about it, is the presence of Pascal in your writing.

Walker Percy: Yes, it's true. People usually associate me more with Kierkegaard than they do with Pascal, but Pascal is at least as influential as Kierkegaard. Of course, Kierkegaard is much more associated with European existentialism than Pascal. I think my main debt to Pascal is, perhaps, his image of a man in a cell, a man imprisoned. What would such a man do, what should he do? Say, he has ten days to live. How should he spend his time? Well, Pascal said most men would spend that time playing cards or being depressed, but Pascal would say: "Well, I would spend my time trying to figure out how I came here, why I am here". Of course, he was comparing the prisoner's jail cell to our life. He was saying how people have a genius for diverting themselves.

³ E. M o u n i e r in "Existentialist Philosophies. An Introduction" (London 1948) convincingly argues that the existentialist tree can be traced back down a gallery of ancestors among whom we find St. Augustine and the Stoics, Pascal and Kierkegaard, before the trunk divides into several versions of contemporary existentialism. He claims that with the advent of Pascal we come right up to modern existentialism.

E.O.: This is why I asked you about Pascal. It seems that in "The Moviegoer" you play with Pascalian concepts. You present a rather humorous version of Pascal's concepts of "diversions" and "mediocrity".

W.P.: Quite true. I combine Pascal and Kierkegaard. Kierkegaard has his playful, but also serious, notions of what he calls "rotation" and "repetition". I use that with Binx Bolling in "The Moviegoer". Although Binx hadn't read Kierkegaard he was very much aware of "rotation" and "repetition". He did it playfully, like taking a girlfriend to a movie-house where he hadn't been for years. He would talk about this strange feeling of coming back to this same movie-house. He even remembered the seat; he made the point of sitting in the same seat. It was serious in the way that it made him think of how curious it was that fifteen years should have lapsed between the last time he was there and the present time. It made him think about the nature of time. What is time like? This time is passed and what am I doing? This is when he began, as Pascal would say, to take life seriously. That's when he began his search. Instead of taking his secretaries out he became tired, as Pascal would say, of his diversions.

E.O.: You share with Pascal, Kierkegaard, and other existentialists the mistrust of progress, the conviction of the unrelatedness of science to the human condition. Does existentialism offer any solutions as regards the human condition? In other words, is there any direct contribution to philosophy which should be described as existentialist ethics?

W.P.: Of course, you have to realize that existentialism has gotten to be a bad word. I don't know any serious philosophers who even use it any more and I don't know any serious writers who would call themselves existentialists. The word is used so loosely now that it means almost nothing. I don't use the word either. What I say in my writing, both in the fiction and non-fiction, is that the scientific method is good for understanding the world. But the scientific method cannot understand the individual human being. That is the form of existentialism. It goes back to what Kierkegaard said about Hegel.

He regarded Hegel as the thinker, the scientist of his day. What he said about Hegel I would say about science. Hegel explains everything under the sun except what it is to be a man, or a woman, to be born into this world, to live, and to die. I put it differently: What people don't realize is that the scientific method has no way of uttering one word about an individual creature. Science only speaks about leaves, or stars, or people in so far as they belong to a class. In other words, science is only interested in you in so far as you are like another class of people. But science itself cannot utter one word about the individual self in so far as it is individual. It leaves a huge left-over. We almost automatically believe that science is not only our best way of knowing things but, maybe, the only way of knowing things. If a thing cannot be known scientifically, we believe it cannot be known at all. That's the general torture that we live in. Or, here, in America, anyway.

E.O.: Has existentialism offered any solutions as regards the human condition?

W.P.: Yes, it has done so. Sartre did it. However, I don't quite agree with Sartre. I'm not sure that he distinguishes between moral and immoral acts, these are not the words that he takes very seriously. In my novels, my heroes find themselves in the existential situation of being more or less alone. Most modern novels are about people who are alone. They are in the middle of a big society yet they are, to use a fashionable word, alienated; they don't feel they belong to that society, or the town, or even a family. It can also be said that they are living in a post-Christian world where the ethics of Christianity are no longer as strong as they were a hundred years ago. Napoleon was probably an exception. Christianity is not as pervasive as it once was. By the way, do you know a German writer, Romano Guardini?

E.O.: Yes?

W.P.: I use him as an epigraph to, I think, "The Last Gentleman". He is talking about an existential predicament. He says we are living in a post-Christian world where people are alone but he also says, and this is an important thing, it's the

world where there is less deception; people are alone and, yet, they are capable of forming true relationships. One lonely person finds another lonely person. From this very loneliness, this existential alienation, there is possible a true communion, which in a way is even better than it used to be, when everybody lived in the same system, everybody understood one another, say, in the nineteenth century Europe. Even in this terrible twentieth century, with these terrible wars, millions of people being killed, still, the people I write about find a certain life, and it nearly always involves someone else. What do the French call it? "Solitude a deu". And between the two they create a new world. At the end of "The Second Coming" it takes place through the recovery of Christianity. It happens with most people, in fact. Most of us are brought up in a Christian background. In this country it's mostly nominal, it's part of the culture. Some people go to church, you know. But it's not a very important part of life.

E.O.: You've talked about alienation, a loss of faith. You've also talked about communion between two lonely persons. Would you agree that in respect to philosophical background your fiction ranges from Pascal and Kierkegaard, through Camus and Sartre, to Marcel, his concept of communion?

W.P.: And Mounier. And also the Jewish philosopher, Martin Buber. He was the one who had the "I-Thou" concept. Yes, you're right. This is what happens. It is the evolution from a nominal Christianity to a loss of Christianity, a loss of faith, isolation, alienation. Maybe first a human relationship: a man finds a woman, or something about her, or a woman finds a man or something about him. It's not like St. Anthony in a desert who goes there and finds God all alone. Except that this is what Will Barrett tries to do in "The Second Coming". First he tries to find God alone in the cave. You see, he takes Pascal very seriously.

E.O.: Yes, he called Pascal "the only French intellectual who was not insane". But then, although Will is attracted to Pascal's idea of making a bet on God's existence, he, Will Barrett, wants to know for sure.

W.P.: I've forgotten whether he mentions Pascal. Yes, I

think he does mention Pascal. But he said Pascal was not good enough. Pascal trivialized the situation. He said: "Either God exists or God doesn't. If God doesn't exist it doesn't matter. You may just as well bet that God exists. So, what have you got to lose? If God exists you won, if God does not exist it doesn't matter anyway". That always struck me as a little silly. It strikes Will Barrett as silly. He says: "I'm not going to make a wager like that and hope that in the end I win, I am going to find out now". And he said: "Is there any-reason why I can't ask God to show Himself?" After all, that happened in the Old Testament. God showed Himself. In the New Testament, too. So he performs this really nutty experiment of going down in the cave to get an answer from God. My question to the reader and to you is: "Does he get an answer from God?"

E.O.: Yes, he does.

W.P.: What's the answer?

E.O.: A toothache, isn't it?

W.P.: Right. Here he is demanding God to manifest Himself as if he were Moses or somebody. And what does God give him? A toothache. And maybe that's the best thing God could have done. So, to get back to your earlier question, I suppose you could call it existential ethics. You start from the solitariness, then there is a search in the fashion of both, Kierkegaard and Pascal, then the human connection, the human communion and the finding of God through that human connection.

E.O.: Do you think that the shift of emphasis in contemporary American fiction from ethics toward overwhelming aesthetic issues is in any way significant concerning the future of fiction?

W.P.: I have no idea what the future of fiction is going to be. I think ethics has also gotten to be a bad word. I'm trying to think of the last ethical novelist, maybe somebody like Hemingway. He had a very strange ethics. His idea of ethics was a man behaving well under stress. What happened, though, was that for the last thirty years or so the quest of the intellectuals, writers and readers has not been for ethics, which they see as something imposed like ten commandments, but for au-

thenticity, self-realization. A lot that came from the old existentialist movement. "How to find myself, who am I", we went through twenty years of that in this country with the rebellion of the sixties. A lot of self-deception was involved in this movement. And the novels that come out of it are very serious. A typical writer is Jack Kerouac. There is no ethics involved there, it's a search for authentic experience, of finding the right place and the right companion, so that now he can say: "This is it, this is the real thing". By finding it he means that he has found the right spot in California or Mexico, he has the right companions and they're drinking the right booze or taking the right drugs and they have great feelings. That substituted ethics in the American novel.

E.O.: To change the subject, your involvement and the involvement of your family in the movement for civil rights for the blacks is well known. What has intrigued me, however, is that the blacks frequently appear in your fiction as butlers and housekeepers. Elgin, a graduate from M.I.T., is at best Lancelot's confidant, not really a friend. Isn't this a patronizing trait in your fiction?

W.P.: Maybe it is. That's the way it was. Those were the blacks that I knew when I was growing up. I mostly write about young men and young women who grow up in the traditional Southern environments. Those were the kinds of blacks that we knew. It's not quite true, though. In "Love in the Ruins", which is a futuristic novel, there is a kind of black revolution, Bantu rebellion. Thomas More has a few revolutionary friends there. Willard Amadie and Victor Charles go from being butlers, and house-boys, and waiters at the country club to active guerrilla fighters. I guess these are the only ones. But, you know, one writes about what one knows. I was not really in the active civil rights movement. We have a small interracial group here, a few blacks and a few whites, who try to do small things. Maybe some day I'll write about that. My main interest was a traditional relationship and how that changed. Anyhow, it's very difficult to write about civil rights movement. Most of the novels written about that are not very good; they are full of passion and politics. As novels they are not too suc-

cessful. I can't think of any off hand that I greatly admire. In fact, the best ones are not about politics and the movement. I'm thinking about Alice Walker's book.

E.O.: "The Color Purple"?

W.P.: That is a remarkable novel. Yet, she talks about these very black people you've mentioned: black maids, cooks, servants. The way she shows their relationships is what I call good fiction.

E.O.: You've mentioned that this may be one of your future subjects. Are you working on a novel, right now?

W.P.: Yes. I'm working tentatively on a sequel to "Love in the Ruins". It's on what happens to Thomas More later. You see, this form, the futuristic novel, which is also satirical, gives me a chance to talk about the South and about this country in terms which are difficult to do in a straightforward novel. It gives you a lot of latitude to be satirical: about the politics, about the Republicans and the Democrats; also about medicine and about science.

E.O.: Do you consider your fiction as part of the Southern heritage? Or, is it rather that the writer, if he is any good, should transcend local limitations and relate to the American experience or human experience as such?

W.P.: That's good question. Also, this is the question which always faces Southern writers. The Southern writer is in a unique position in American literature which is both fortunate and unfortunate. The fortunate thing is that the Southern Renaissance in literature occurred rather recently, in the last fifty years, beginning with the Tennessee poets, the Nashville poets; Tate and Warren, and many others. They were good poets, and critics, too, who really established major trends in American poetry and American criticism. Then, of course, Faulkner came along about the same time. That's the first time that the South began to express itself, in fiction. I always thought it was strange because before the Civil War people in the South liked to pretend that we had a great civilization. Where was the art, where was the poetry, where was the literature? I bet you would have trouble naming a Southern writer before the Civil War. There weren't any to speak of.

E.O.: How about Poe?

W.P.: He was not very typical. But that was a good thing, this energy which suddenly found a voice, not only in their poetry, in their criticism, which was usually conservative criticism, but also in the novels which were mainly of Faulkner. But also of Robert Penn Warren, Eudora Welty, and very importantly, Flannery O'Connor. The unfortunate part of it is that Southern writing gets stereotyped in the general American view of literature. When you think of Southern writing, you think either of old romantic writing, what we call magnolia and mint juleps, or of the gothic and bizzare Southern writing, like Faulkner and O'Connor. And so, I don't like the fact that Southern writing gets pigeon-holed into these categories. For instance, I get uneasy when people call me a Southern writer because I say: "Well, you don't call, say, John Updike a Northern writer and nobody calls Saul Bellow a Mid-Western writer".

E.O.: They call him a Jewish writer and this is also a category.

W.P.: True, but not as much as, say, Bernard Malamud or Philip Roth who are much more Jewish in their themes. But, of course, it's true, I am a Southern writer. I couldn't write what I write if I was born in Montana. But I noticed a real difficulty that Northern reviewers have with Southern writers. They like to categorize us into one or two pigeon-holes, and if we don't fit there they don't know what to do with us. I simply would like for Southern literature to be less parochial, so that you don't think of it as being Southern any more than you think of Updike and Cheever as being New England. But I think that's changing.

E.O.: This reminds me of what you said once about having lived a hundred miles from Faulkner and having been more influenced by Camus than Faulkner.

W.P.: That's true. I read the Russians and the French before I read Faulkner.

E.O.: You've talked about religion and the blacks. These are typically Southern themes. There is yet another Southern theme which, in your fiction, comes late. It's violence and

It takes place for the first time in "Lancelot". Do you think that writing about violence is a categorical imperative on the part of an American novelist?

W.P.: Apparently commercially yes. It is difficult to pick up a novel now that is not either very violent or explicitly sexual. But I don't think it applies to the art of the novel. "Lancelot" is violent for particular reasons. I chose him as a different kind of a rebel. He, too, is an outsider. He was an outsider as much as Binx Bolling, and Will Barrett and Thomas More. But they were Pascalian. They had hope and they had embarked on various kinds of quests. The only quest that Lancelot is embarked on is, what he called: the quest of the unholy grail. He is also alienated, he is an alienated Southerner. Just like Barrett and Bolling, he does not like what he sees about American civilization. He doesn't like the vulgarization of culture, and the increase in what he sees as immorality, and the crookedness, corruption, politics. But, unlike my other protagonist, he does not undertake an interior quest. He is not interested in God. So, his solution for his alienation is a kind of fascism, or nazism. In a way, he admires the nazi; only he says: "The nazis were stupid". You know, I spent a summer with the German family, the nazi family when I was about fifteen. I saw what the early nazi movement was like. And it was very exciting. Well, here was the old Weimer republic and along comes this real elan. I'm telling you, that was a very exciting thing to see.

E.D.: You say you were fifteen at that time. Did you ever come to evaluate your initial fascination with the movement?

W.P.: Sure, Well, Marcel writes about this. Marcel writes how it is very easy to condemn Hitler, Stalin and the mass movements. He despises the mass movements all over Europe. But he says what people overlook is the excitement and the fact that mass movements answer to an emptiness in a Western soul. So, he understood it although he is the last man to approve of it. And to hear this from Marcel who was French, Jew, Catholic, existentialist, to hear him praising the excitement of nazism is extraordinary. Of course, then it turned into something which was absolutely destructive. Now, what I meant to say was that

Lancelot saw the good side of nazism. He says that the trouble with the nazism of Germany was that it was stupid.

E.O.: This is quite a theory.

W.P.: I'm making up some of it. But Lancelot does say that the nazis were stupid; there was no need to persecute the Jews. It's senseless and cruel to kill six million Jews. What you do is you destroy what's evil. He had this nutty idea of starting what he called the Third Revolution which was going to make America clean and wipe out all the corruption. He makes a beginning; he wipes out half of the Hollywood crew who come down there.

E.O.: It has always seemed to me that what you say in "Lancelot" is, in a way, kin to Mailer's theory of the American as hipster. You know, the new success myth based on the demonstration of courage and the purging of violent emotions; the life on the brink of death and the dream of orgy and of love. Mailer's protagonist, Stephen Rojack, is like Lancelot, a Grail Knight of a particular order, the essence of his Grail - is a sexual sin. But it appears that, from what you've said, here the analogy ends.

W.P.: Well, I wanted it to be an upside-down quest for God. Lancelot says to his friend, the priest: "Don't give me any of that stuff about religion or God. The only way I could be convinced of it would be if I could find something that, I believe, is a true sin. Then I might believe in God". It's like saying: "If I can find the devil..."

E.O.: St. Augustine said this. The existence of God can be proved by the existence of evil.

W.P.: Right. That's exactly it. He's in the same predicament as my other protagonists, but his quest is turned upside-down, inside-out. He is searching for an absolute evil. But he is also a reformer, in a way. He wants to have the Third Revolution. He wants the best of the South to win. He is imagining himself like a Civil War soldier, a young man suntanned, standing in the gap of a mountain in Virginia. As a matter of fact, I got it from a Hollywood movie, "Cabaret", have you seen it?

E.O.: Yes.

W.P.: "Cabaret" was about a rather degenerate Berlin society before Hitler. And, do you remember? There is a café scene. A Hitler youth gets up and sings a song. The song goes like this: tomorrow is mine, tomorrow will be free, tomorrow is ours. Well, this is what excited Lancelot. He pictured himself as a good nazi who could accomplish a revolution without doing the atrocities of the Germans.

E.O.: You have often emphasized that people feel bad in good environments. Lancelot tells us that the only time members of his family were successful was during the time of war. Binx Bolling acquires a sense of reality after his car accident. The examples proliferate in your fiction. Do you derive your conviction from your observation of people in good environments?

W.P.: Sure. Also in bad environments. Who was it? It was a European philosopher who said: "What would man do without war?" War is men's greatest pleasure. Women have a better sense, you know, women don't believe that. Before now we had this luxury that men could go out and have war without destroying the whole world. You can't do that now. I can remember the excitement of World War II. My uncle wanted us to get in the war very badly. When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor was the first time I'd seen him happy for a long time. He was sick, it was shortly before he died. He was delighted that it had happened. Everybody was delighted, excited. It was much more true with the Civil War, that was the time of the greatest happiness in the South.

E.O.: One of the greatest paradoxes, isn't it?

W.P.: Sure. Of course only half of them came back and the South was destroyed. Somewhere I said people get things backwards. People are always saying: What if the Bomb falls?

E.O.: Yes, it's in "The Man on the Train: Three Existential Modes". You reverse the question.

W.P.: Yes. Suppose the Bomb does not fall. Well, my theory is that man's nature, not woman's, is such that he gets bored, and he gets excited by the prospect of violence. Why do you think there is violence on television? Because people like it. Everything is different now because even men realize that this

war would be the last one. But I was always fascinated by the excitement of war. The worst thing that happened was that my two brothers went into the army. They went into most dangerous branches of the service. One brother flew a bomber, the other brother was on the Pacific, on a torpedo boat. He was on the same squadron as Jack Kennedy, he was Kennedy's friend, he saw Kennedy's boat get shot. And there I was like Castorp in "The Magic Mountain", sitting on a mountain up in New York state. I had TB. They were the happy ones and I was the unhappy one. Then, what happened in 1964 when the Vietnam war came along, the happy ones were the ones who got out of it, who didn't go, who went to Canada. And the unhappy ones had to go. So, there's been a change.

E.O.: You have time and again expressed this paradox still differently, speaking about the blacks, who, as long as they don't live up to the standard of the affluent white people don't have their share of alienation, They're better off?

W.P.: In a way but you have a hard time convincing a black person of that. I think what Thomas More is saying in "Love in the Ruins" to one of the black revolutionaries is: "You think you've got trouble. Wait till you get what we have. Wait till you live here, in this country club. "Well, it's true. That doesn't mean that there is any excuse for the oppression of the black people. Even now, in spite of the black revolution, there is discrimination against the blacks. Half of the young blacks in New Orleans are not employed, And there is serious poverty - actual hunger. It seems almost obscene to tell somebody like that who is really suffering that: "Well, we affluent, white people have our troubles, too. "That doesn't make any sense. But it's true that as the black middle class arises, and there are beginning to be middle class writers, they'll know what I'm talking about.

E.O.: Considering this very complicated contemporary scene, what is, to you, the role of a writer today?

W.P.: The role of a writer. Well, it seems to be, for me anyway, to affirm people, to affirm the reader. The general culture of the time is very scientific, one might call it "scientistic" on the one hand, and simply aesthetically orien-

ted, on the other. This does not satisfy a certain reader. So, the reader is left in the state of confusion. The contemporary state of a young American man or woman is that he or she has more of the world's affluence than any other people on this earth and yet he is more dissatisfied, more restless. He experiences some sense of loss which he cannot understand. For him, the traditional religion does not have the answer. So the role of my kind of writer is to speak to this person about this whole area of experience that he's at or she's at. This is what you feel, this is how you feel now. My original example in "The Message in the Bottle" is that you take a commuter, the man on the train. He has everything, he succeeded. He lives in Greenwich, Connecticut. He's making a hundred thousand dollars a year, and he comes into New York every day. He's moved into a better house, to a better country club, has a very nice wife and nice kids. He is riding on this train and he wonders: what am I doing? He can open a newspaper, and he can see a column which says something about the mid-life crisis. He can read some popular advice from a popular psychologist who would say why you have your mid-life crisis. But this doesn't satisfy him. He picks up a book by an American writer, John Marquand, which is about a man like himself, a commuter on the train who has the same sense of loss. So, I say that there is a tremendous difference between a man on the train who is in a certain predicament and the same man on the same train with the same predicament who is reading a book about a man on the train. The role of a writer is very modest. It's to identify the predicament. The letters I get are from people who say: I didn't know anybody who talked like that, I know what you mean, you have described my predicament. I get letters from the businessmen (the men on the train), from young men, and from young women, and they're excited because I've named the predicament. That doesn't sound like much, that's a very modest contribution but it's very important. You see, I agree with Kierkegaard. He said: "I'm not an apostle, it's not for me to bring the good news. Even if I brought the good news, nobody would believe it". But the role of a novelist, or an artist, for that matter, is to tell the truth, and to convey

a kind of knowledge which cannot be conveyed by science, or psychology, or newspapers.

E.O.: Is this edifying?

W.P.: Edifying. You've picked up all the bad words. Well, "edifying" is a perfectly good word, but it has very bad connotations in English. Well, in the largest sense, it is edifying, because it's helpful, it creates hope. At its best it's affirming, it affirms the reader in the way he or she is at. It offers an openness and some hope. And that's about all a novelist can do.

Covington, Louisiana, May 8, 1984

Walker Percy remained a doctor to this day, always diagnosing and always prescribing. He diagnosed the malaise that afflicts a contemporary American as alienation, and his prescribed therapy is intersubjectivity, the I-Thou relationship. If he is aware that he takes his cue from existentialists, he at the same time exercises a degree of caution when applying the term to his own writing. And he has good reasons: for almost two decades the term has been used with what might be called intellectual promiscuity. It has been applied to texts with no visible specialized philosophical implications, to writers who never demonstrated interest in existential thought per se. This kind of charlatanism Percy has in mind when he says that existentialism is a "bad word". But this writing is existential in the sense Camus' novels are existential. They are fictional representations of philosophical categories which, in Percy's case, is all the more decipherable as he so earnestly talks about his indebtedness to existentialism. As he has said in the interview, his main interest is in the nuances of the human condition, in man as a being constantly structuring his existence through the choices that he makes in an absurd world. This, needless to say, is the crux of existentialism.

Above all, Percy's fiction fulfills two fundamental functions. While comprising such typical motifs in Southern literature as racial problems, religion and violence, his novels

move beyond regional literature and hark back to the tradition in American literature which says "no in thunder", as Melville and Hawthorne do. Moreover, in his disappointment with scientific - technological humanism, Percy revokes in his fiction a pastoral ideal of order. In "The Second Coming", two alienated characters, a man and woman, reconstruct their lives in a greenhouse. This is precisely the point Percy wishes to make. In his own words: "The modern literature of alienation is in reality the triumphant reversal of alienation through its re-representing... (It) is an aesthetic victory of comradeship, a recognition of plight in common"⁴.

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WYWIAD Z WALKEREM PERCY

Powyższy tekst jest wywiadem ze znanym pisarzem amerykańskim Walkerem Percy. Percy urodził się, mieszka i tworzy na Południu Stanów Zjednoczonych. Jego powieści są pod wieloma względami charakterystyczne dla pisarstwa z Południa, reprezentowanego przez takich pisarzy jak William Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren, czy też Flannery O'Connor. Takie typowe wątki w twórczości Percy'ego to religia i problemy rasowe, czy też konfrontacja kodeksu dżentelmeńskiego z rozpadem norm moralnych. Z drugiej jednak strony cechą wyróżniającą jego powieści jest wpływ, jaki na pisarza wywarła myśl egzystencjalna. Dyskusji nad tymi problemami poświęcony jest wywiad.

Pionierskim jej aspektem jest zasugerowana przez prowadzącą wywiad zbieżność problematyki powieści Percy'ego z niektórymi założeniami filozofii Pascala, powszechnie dziś uważanego za prekursora egzystencjalizmu. Percy przyznaje słuszność tej tezie i rozwija temat wpływu Pascala na jego twórczość.

⁴ See W. P e r c y, *The Message in the Bottle*, New York 1975, p. 93.