

The Last Gentleman Grades Papers

by W. Kenneth Holditch

In the summer of 1976, amid all the hoopla related, however tenuously, to the two hundredth birthday of the United States, Loyola University of New Orleans indulged in a bit of hoopla of its own having nothing to do with anybody's birthday. In periodic radio spots an intense voice demanded "Do you have an unfinished novel stored away in the attic? Is there a book you've always wanted to write?" In colleges throughout the deep South appeared yellow posters declaring in bold black letters: "Fiction Writing. A Course Instructed by Walker Percy." Interested persons were advised to submit manuscripts, along with self-addressed stamped envelopes to Percy himself. The poster informed readers that "Manuscripts need not be complete. Percy will select promising manuscripts and help the authors finish their projects." And the intense announcer assured his listeners that Mr. Percy would read "each and every" submission.

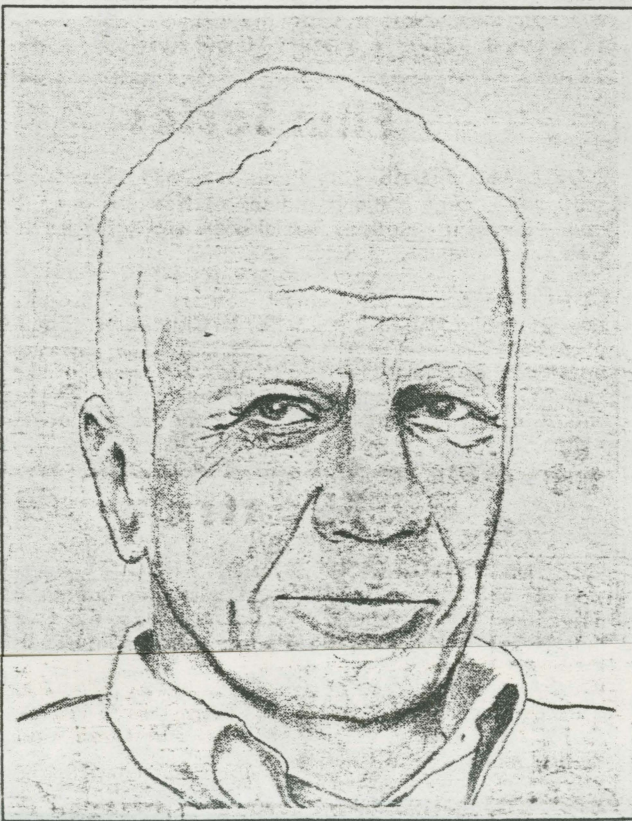
Obviously the sort of campaign to attract the attention of a sizable segment of the public. Every literate (and even perhaps semi-literate) Southerner has at least one unfinished novel in the works (or in the attic), and the opportunity to work with one of the leading novelists in America would be a rare one. It is no surprise, then, to discover that more than 150 manuscripts were submitted, though it is surely surprising to discover that Walker Percy did indeed read "each and every one of them." From the applicants, he selected a class of 12.

"The Twelve Apostles" one wag in the class labeled us. Disciples, certainly if not apostles, for all of us, even the few who had known him before, stood in some degree of awe of our instructor and his talent. Walker Percy is in every sense of the word a "gentleman" (if not the last, perhaps one of the last); indeed, who else would undertake to read so many manuscripts and to instruct a group of aspiring writers of fiction? He is also a very Southern gentleman. Shelby Foote has stated that if he ever knew a Delta aristocrat, it was writer William Alexander Percy, and one suspects that something of that "aristocracy," whatever it may be, has been passed on to the nephew.

Percy had taught before, a Twentieth Century novel course at Loyola several years ago and recently a similar course at LSU, Baton Rouge. He lacks the egomania one (at least one who is himself a teacher) has come to expect from the typical university professor, so that the student soon must learn to listen carefully. The tossed-away line, the under-the-breath comment may very well be a gem of truth from a man with a wide background of learning who combines (strange bedfellows indeed) an understanding of literature with a comprehension of science, and obviously finds the two not incompatible.

"Creative writing cannot be taught," he says. All that the teacher of such a class can offer a student, he believes, is inspiration, counsel, and that most important and most rare of qualities in aspiring artists, a sense of discipline. It was these elements, then, that Percy strove to impart. The class was structured as a seminar, meeting once a week for two to three hours with students and teacher sitting around a large table, sometimes sipping on a bit of wine. One or two authors read from their own work at each session and lengthy discussions followed. In addition, Dr. Percy was available for private conferences every week.

The class represented a broad spectrum of types, occupations, interests: several teachers (English teachers, of course), housewife, secretary, social worker, newspaper reporter, and even one authentic dyed-in-the-wool



college student. Eight were working on novels, one of which was completed in the course of the semester. All write with talent, albeit in varying degrees.

One is curious about common denominators, since one is curious about the reasons why these 12 should have been chosen out of more than 150 applicants. "Each one of you," Dr. Percy said, "is trying something different, experimenting in a particular way." It is noteworthy that all of the novels were being written in the first person, that all except one had New Orleans settings, that all had a certain jaundiced, cynical, notes-from-underground quality with heroes and heroines (a bit like Percy characters Binx Bolling or Will Barrett, in a couple of cases) who are alienated in one way or another—but, come to think of it, what Twentieth Century hero or heroine isn't? (Percy himself cautious that it is characteristic of the modern novel, "the times being as apocalyptic as they are," to be marked by aimlessness, a sense of dislocation and a loss of meaning, but these elements must be used so that something begins to happen.)

In his comments on the manuscripts (pencil markings that are, as he points out, virtually illegible until he decipher them for the student), in his conferences with the individual writers, and in his class remarks, Percy exhibits a wide knowledge of literature and of the art of novel writing (or craft if you will) as well as a deep philosophical insight into human psychology, especially the psychology of the aspiring writer.

He warns against imprecision of language—blurring and mixing of metaphors, too many adjectives and adverbs; for elements of language are the tools of your trade

and must be respected. Remember, he says, that it is better to underwrite than to overwrite. Percy points out that the first sentence of the novel is the most important sentence, the first paragraph the most important paragraph, reading as examples the openings of *A Farewell to Arms*, *Moby Dick*, *The Stranger*, and *The Dharma Bums*. If you get the first sentence perfect, the whole novel follows from it. And every sentence must contribute to the movement of the action.

Repeatedly he cautions the novice writers that the novelist must not expect too much of his reader, must indeed think of him hypothetically as a six-year-old child while at the same time being considerate of him.

Other warnings and observations: "Don't ever relate a dream in fiction; or, if you do, don't tell that it is a dream." "Atmosphere is useful only if it leads into the action." "Our literary sense of justice demands a Ulysean revenge." "Going back home—that's what we're all writing about." "There is an old rule—in a novel you render, you don't tell; it's a good rule; you don't tell feelings, you show them."

Something of Percy's view of the real significance of the novel is indicated by his observation that "I think it's the very nature of the novel that we require some kind of victory. The human spirit has to respond in some way. We can't accept a meaningless defeat—unless we say that's what it's all about. If it is a tragedy, we need a purgation. We don't want a complete victim."

One evening, during a discussion of autobiographical elements in fiction, he reminisces about his uncle William Alexander, recalling how the elder Percy used to tell certain stories over and over again, polishing and altering them until ultimately they acquired the artistic form in which they appeared as part of *Lanterns on the Levee*.

As any careful reader of Walker Percy's novels (*The Moviegoer*, *The Last Gentlemen*, *Love in the Ruins*) knows, he is much concerned with place. In this regard he remarked that it was a shame one of the class members was from north Mississippi, since Faulkner had so well mined that region; and the area across the lake around Covington where he himself lives he described as "the richest mother lode of fiction writing of the United States, perhaps, lying between Southern Louisiana on the one side and the Southern Baptist belt on the other."

Certainly the highlight of the semester for most members of the class occurred the evening Walker Percy read aloud the first two chapters of his new novel, *Lancelot*, to be published March 1 by Farrar Straus and Giroux. The novel is in the form of a monologue of Lancelot Andrews Lamar and concerns itself, as do the previous three, with problems of communication between human beings. Like his Arthurian namesake, Lancelot is in quest of something, though not the grail. He is driven in his quest by what he calls "the worm of interest." So were the aspiring writers after the reading had ended, anxious to know the outcome of the quest, intrigued by the mysteries suggested by the novel's opening.

At a party which brought the course to a close, we all vowed (hope springing eternal as it does) to keep in touch, to read each other's works when they were published, to benefit from what we had learned and experienced. One novel is finished, several at least are underway; no doubt others will be completed; one or two might even be published. It is not wise to speculate. But none of us will forget our encounter with a remarkable and compelling and intensely creative "gentle man."

