

about the lack of Keynesian economic policy in the new political economy. However, since the influence of the state has decreased, coupled the association of Keynesian policy with socialism and inflation, this type of economic thinking has been fully discredited.

Skidelsky holds an optimistic vision of the future in *The World After Communism*. While noting that there are rough roads ahead in the post-communism period, the author is tired of the pessimistic view of some of his fellow academics. By analyzing economic trends along with world political history, this book pays tribute to the triumph of global capitalism over the communist menace and collectivism.

Walker Percy, Catholic Socratic?

PETER AUGUSTINE LAWLER

Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist, by Kieran Quinlan, *Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996. 242pp. paper \$11.95 cloth \$35.00*

KIERAN QUINLAN'S *Walker Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist* is a noteworthy attempt to come to terms with the thought of the remarkable physician-philosopher-novelist. Quinlan claims to be the first to take Percy seriously as a Catholic thinker. He believes he has discerned why Percy was one of the few novelists (or for that matter philosophers) in our time actually to have "made a difference" in the

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lives of his readers. But in fact Quinlan hopes to enlighten those who take Percy seriously as an intellectual or moral guide: they are mistaken if they believe Percy is a first-rate thinker or artist, if they believe that anything fundamental he says is true.

Quinlan really means to have written something of an intellectual exposé. Percy's Catholic faith, he reveals, is "highly orthodox," a version that has been authoritatively "discredited" by the intellectual progress of the past forty years. All of Percy's talents as a thinker and artist have been deployed to defend polemically that faith. Percy was the last Catholic novelist because the vision that animated his writing is no longer "viable." It was the product of a particular moment in Catholic intellectual history that has passed.

Quinlan is irritated by Percy's pretensions, which he rightly judges to be quite extraordinary today. Percy said he was a Catholic thinker because what the Church teaches is true. He also said he was a realist, which means he defended the proposition that the human mind can know something about the truth about nature, including one's own nature. Percy adds that there is a natural foundation for what distinguishes human beings as self-conscious knowers from other animals. Quinlan concludes, indignantly, that these views are so intellectually unfashionable that rational inquiry could not have possibly played a significant part in Percy's holding of them.

The consensus of intellectuals today is that one's perception of the truth is determined by the culture of one's time and place. Quinlan employs that fashionable view to tame Percy's thought by locating his claims in cultural context. Percy's intellectual development occurred in the 1940s and early 1950s. It was in the context of the revival of the thought of Saint Thomas Aquinas, called

neo-Thomism, which attracted many anxious and displaced intellectuals. Their attraction to the certainties of Thomism and the Church were in essence escapes from intellectual freedom. Thomism and the Church functioned together "as a secure anchor in a time of turbulence."

Quinlan compares Catholic Thomism to Soviet Marxism. Catholic seminarians were subjected to ideological indoctrination in the same way members of the Communist party were, "and with the same implications." Quinlan, a former seminarian, writes with personal experience about textbooks written in bad Latin dispensing bad Thomism and dismissing quite unphilosophically all rival claims to the truth. There is no denying this indoctrination occurred, and it is not surprising that young minds and passionate hearts rebelled against it. But the liberated Quinlan would also have us believe that textbook Thomism is somehow Percy's Thomism simply by asserting that Percy identified himself with those textbook writers and textbook readers. But Percy was never a seminarian, never read those textbooks, and read with an open mind and a passionate heart as many different accounts of the truth about nature and the human self or soul as he could find.

Quinlan rebelled against the textbook Thomas, and his rebellion, as he acknowledges proudly, was part of a moment in the history of Catholic thought. But Percy loved Thomas because he discovered and read his writing on his own. Quinlan most fundamentally misunderstands Percy because Percy's experience of Thomas's thought as a source of intellectual liberation is not his. Quinlan was liberated from dogmatism by what he believes to be "the cutting edge of philosophy," the dominant "post-Kantian" intellectual opinions of our time. Percy, who understood the arguments for those contemporary opinions ex-

tremely well and, as a young man, accepted many of them as true as a result of his textbook, scientific, psychiatric education, was liberated from their fashionable dogmatism in large part by Thomas.

We now see one reason why Percy turned from the writing of technical philosophy to novels. It is sad that Quinlan, traumatized by the textbooks and exhilarated by his anti-Thomistic rebellion, is so prejudiced against Percy that he cannot read his novels with any real enjoyment. But admirers of Percy should not be so prejudiced against Quinlan that they do not see the honesty of his rebellion, or his accurate portrayal of and devotion to the dominant intellectual community of our time.

The strength of Quinlan's contextual analysis is that, by locating Percy among the Thomists, he actually points to the core of his thought. He rightly rebuts those who say that Percy is fundamentally an existentialist. Kierkegaard and Heidegger showed Percy the inability of systematic theories, those of the Hegelians and the positivists, to account for the experiences of the individual human self. They also showed him how fundamental the decision is of how to live one's life. But for intellectual orientation Percy turned to Thomas. He said that Thomism is the true existentialism, the best way of accounting for fundamental human experiences. He added that he disagreed with the existentialists that human freedom is simply a subjective, inexplicable, and absurd experience. Percy sees contemporary existentialism as the inevitable consequence of the reductionism of modern, Cartesian science. Science abstracts from and then denies the reality of distinctively human experiences of soul or self. Existentialism is the result of the fact that human beings continue to have those experiences, although they have been convinced by scientific experts,

mistakenly, that they have no empirical or natural foundation.

For Quinlan existentialism is better than Thomism precisely because it honestly defers to the truth of modern science, which now claims that even the certainties of science and scientists have dissolved in view of the accidental origin of all things human and non-human. Neither the universe nor man has any "originary purpose," and both are radically finite. Today almost all "intellectually informed and honest human being[s]" understand "the genesis of our science as well as of our religion." Hence they "are free from the imperatives of each while at the same time adapting what is useful for our unsponsored, directionless, and disturbing journey."

Quinlan can say that neither religion nor science is true because he defers to the core truth of science, the inexplicable contingency of all that exists. All that is left for us to do is live by what we find to be useful, whatever may help get us through this life. It would seem that Quinlan's affirmation of illusion is more radical than that of any Catholic or Thomist, precisely because his view of the truth is so much more, if not terrible, at least empty. Those who really see the truth are free to reject its "imperatives." Quinlan criticizes the observation that "Percy had deconstructed the Enlightenment idea of man." But he affirms for himself what Percy actually shows: that Enlightenment idea actually self-destructed.

For the intellectual community, Quinlan reports, the proper attitude toward the search for truth or purpose is "resigned skepticism." We do not really know anything but the contingency of everything. Quinlan criticizes Percy for being "more eager to propagate dogmatic truths than engage in Socratic dialectic." But how could there be such a dialectic in the intellectual world Quinlan describes? Some say that "resigned skept-

icism" is the rational culmination of Socratic dialectic, the result of the awareness that the search that animated the dialogue was futile.

But, surely, engaging in Socratic dialogue depends on the conviction that the search for answers to fundamental questions about the cosmos and oneself might have some success. Thomism, with its confidence that reason can provide human beings moral direction and that revelation only completes reason, not supplants it, is much more Socratic than dogmatic. Percy's authentic thought is that the dogma promulgated by scientific experts of our time is that the Socratic search is both futile and unnecessary for the living of human life.

Percy's argument for the necessity of the search for human life is empirical or Socratic. He explains that there is a natural foundation for the "cognitive joy" human beings experience when they understand something about the world. He also notices that for some, scientists or philosophers, that joy is so intense that the ordinary world seems unendurably dreary by comparison. But the self, or what truly distinguishes human beings, remains elusive for scientists and science. Scientists cannot explain to themselves with their science why it is they desire to or can know the truth, or for that matter why human beings can deny what they really know, deceiving themselves and others. Science cannot explain how or why an impersonal or selfless cosmos brought into being self-conscious beings, who, as a result of their self-consciousness, are alienated from all else that exists. Science, as Socrates first complained, cannot explain the scientist or locate him in the cosmos he can describe.

Percy defends the possibility of scientific knowledge, the Enlightenment ideal, against what might be called Quinlan's postmodern skepticism. Scientists have achieved great success in accounting

for the cosmos as a cosmos. But the scientist himself is lost, as Percy says, in the cosmos. Binx Bolling, in Percy's *The Moviegoer* (1961), undertook a different sort of search or wandering in response to this experience of dislocation. He came to realize that even scientific inquiry is a "diversion" from the knowledge required by human beings. But most scientists do not turn from the detachment of scientific objectivity to the search for the mysterious depths of the self. Refusing to acknowledge that their knowledge does not free them from their personal disorders or anxieties, what they still share with all other flawed mortals, their tendency is to conceive imaginatively of political projects that they believe will employ their knowledge to free them from their human misery. By denying that need to engage in the Socratic search, modern scientists are too readily seduced by an undisciplined or romantic imagination.

Percy's last and most political novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), describes several such projects, examples of the mixture of science and romanticism that compose the misanthropic ideologies of our century. Scientists claim to be motivated politically by compassion and the quality of life. They see that self-consciousness is a misery-producing illusion, and at the root of most or all of the criminal disorder and cruelty in the world. So they aim to use chemotherapy to suppress that part of the brain that makes self-consciousness possible, as well as to alter human nature to perfect it. They aim, above all, to eradicate the capacity of human beings to be moved by knowledge of one's own death. They want to keep human progress from being impeded by unproductive anxiety and anger.

The argument supporting the scientists' chemotherapeutic project is powerful in our time. Without Socratic inquiry or religious faith perhaps we can-

not help but conclude that human beings would be better off if they did not know they are going to die. Can Quinlan, for example, really give an argument for the goodness of the life of the self-conscious mortal? America's leading enlightened pragmatist and the darling of our intellectual community, Richard Rorty, explains that the human experience of death is no more genuine than any other. Finally, all human experience is nothing but idiosyncratic or private fantasy, and we do well not to affirm as useful any view of the truth that makes us uncomfortable or unproductive. Rorty explains that the romantic imagination does and should triumph over scientific objectivity, keeping us from being moved by what we really know about the cosmos and the ineradicable contingency of our existence. Rorty's linguistic propaganda hopes to achieve the same effect as chemotherapy.

But the ambitious, illegal chemotherapeutic experiments of *The Thanatos Syndrome* fail, primarily because the scientists exempt themselves from the treatment. They aim to use science to cure the disorder of others, and they do not look for and so find nothing flawed or malformed in themselves. So their personal disorders or obsessions distort their scientific imagination, producing the illusion that human beings can somehow remain human but be well-ordered or unresistant to the scientist's will after the treatment. It turns out that the scientists have no concern for those whom they treat at all. They manipulate others to alleviate their own anxiety. Their pity is self-pity.

One of the scientists, John Van Dorn, really wants to abuse children sexually. He believes, in the reductionistic manner of modern science, that personal anxiety can be cured by sexual satisfaction, and that there is a connection between a strong sexual drive and human excellence. In a world where he can abuse

freely, human excellence will flourish and he will be freed from his human misery. But Van Dorn can achieve sexual freedom only by denying the children their sexual freedom. He creates a world where he can do anything to them without their resistance. Van Dorn believes that his scientific knowledge places him above the law, but the law exists to keep disordered selves like his own from violating the rights of others. The combination of romanticism and scientific objectivity deprives others of their rights or their personal sovereignty. It is the foundation of tyranny justified by compassion and the quality of life.

Percy shows us the connection between such political schemes and what scientists do, in the novel and in today's world, quite legally. They make judgments concerning abortion and euthanasia according to a "qualitarian" standard. They aim to eradicate human suffering and deformity, but they do not see clearly that they could achieve their goal only by killing all self-conscious mortals. But kill they do, in the name of the goodness of life. Their scientific goal is euthanasia, a perfectly good death, which they hold that human beings cannot achieve on their own. So they offer chemotherapeutic remedies to deprive human beings of the experience of death for their own good. The scientist's judgment concerning self-conscious mortality is most clearly a reflection of his own anxious disorder, and it does not depend at all on any Socratic inquiry into the actual experiences of self or soul of most human beings.

Quinlan would have us believe that Percy's opposition to abortion and his farfetched connection of abortion to euthanasia depend on his uncritical acceptance of discredited Catholic dogma and not at all on rational inquiry. But Percy's partisanship might actually be attributed mainly to his practice of a certain form of Socratic political phi-

losophy. He explains why we have reasons to distrust the political judgments of scientific experts concerning the self or soul, and he shows us the best secular argument against making exceptions in the name of either compassion or the quality of life to the right to life.

The character in *The Thanatos Syndrome* who acts resolutely or politically to bring the chemotherapeutic and "qualitarian" projects to an end, Dr. Tom More, is a dissenter from the dominant approach in psychotherapy. That approach is to use chemicals to deprive human beings of the experiences that make them miserably anxious, to truncate the soul or self in the name of contentment. More is a "psyche-iatrist," an old-fashioned physician of the soul. He holds that experiences of self or soul are integral to the human condition, and that human lives can be improved if human beings are encouraged to explore the mysterious depths of those experiences by talking about them. His dialectical approach aims not completely to rid human beings of their misery, but to allow them to come to terms with and experience the joyful compensations for it that come through self-understanding.

More says his colleagues have contempt for ordinary human experience, and they think themselves above its empirical investigation. They do not find it to be an object of their curiosity. But More discovers that nothing is more wonderful or curious than the human self. By attentively listening to his patients, he discovered how strange, wondrous, and courageous most people are. They have it within themselves to live with their anxiety, to experience the goodness of life even, or especially, in the face of death. He has empirical evidence that the chemotherapists are wrong about euthanasia. It is possible for self-conscious mortals, even in the absence of religious faith.

After thwarting the chemotherapists,

More turned the patients in the "qualitarian" or euthanasia center over to Father Rinaldo Smith. He knew this priest was bizarre and ineffectual, and he had no idea whether he was up to the task. Nevertheless he trusted him. The priest favored the "hospice" approach to the dying, and he explained to More why he loved the dying in the hospice he ran. He said only they are happy, because they are able to tell the truth to themselves about themselves. The truth is we are all dying, but most of us make ourselves unnecessarily miserable by employing with imperfect success a variety of diversionary strategies from that fact. We avoid genuine or Socratic inquiry about oneself. Father Smith said that when he was among the dying in the hospice, he found so much happiness and so little genuinely human suffering that he had no desire to convert them to anything. He agrees with More that the dying have it within themselves to live in light of the truth and thereby find it possible to experience what is genuinely good about human life. They can experience the joys of the present by coming to terms with the future. They can really see what is lovable about deformed, feckless fellow mortals. Percy explains better than even Allan Bloom the twinship of love and death, and even how both depend on the possibility of Socratic or dialectical inquiry about the self or soul.

Dr. More's empirical observation on the basis of his psycho-iatric practice is that Socratic inquiry, learning how to die, can achieve considerable success. That fact turns out to be at the root of both human dignity and human rights; of all theoretical opposition to tyrannical efforts by scientific or ideological experts of one sort or another to deprive us of our selves or souls; and of the true

foundation of our individuality. Rorty is wrong when he says the antidote to human cruelty is tenderness or pity. The self-pity of our science or theory—the false perception that the self or soul is a cruel deformity to be extinguished—has been the main cause of the ideological terror and killing of our spectacular century of death.

Quinlan's mistake is to say that Percy's Thomism is un-Socratic. Its premise is that only Socratic or dialectical inquiry about the human self or soul can help human beings live better lives and provide the foundation for human dignity and human rights. This inquiry only points to the possible truth of revelation, and it can be good for human beings even if they do not have the gift of faith. But it will not produce absolute certainty, perfect happiness, or an untroubled world. Even we Socratics remain flawed mortals, born to trouble, and we have no illusions that we can transform our condition through our own efforts. So the only way to judge the truth of what Percy teaches is to trust one's own judgment about one's own experiences. He is perfectly willing to agree with Quinlan that one should not begin by deferring to the authority of priests, but neither should we defer to the scientific experts who deny the soul's, or the self's, very existence. Quinlan, it seems to me, has not come to terms with his own troubled soul or self. He is anxious about the extent of and truth about his liberation, which is why he is unreasonably indignant about Percy's claims for truth. Percy is a Catholic thinker, to be sure, but his most important points of dissent from the intellectual consensus of our time can be affirmed by thoughtful and attentive non-Catholics perhaps just as well.