

ver lacked a coherent framework within which to organize and make effective his reformist inclinations. While he was a social activist and humanitarian, while he favored rationalized authority and government initiative, he was at the same time a strong advocate of voluntary responsibility and individual initiative. He evidenced a deep and growing fear of totalitarian domination, especially toward the end of his administration, with the prospect of expanded governmental control under the New Deal. This fear overwhelmed his natural compassion and blinded him to the inefficacy of his anti-Depression policies. Hoover was the victim of "quarreling goals" which he never bothered to try to reconcile.

Burner argues persuasively that this lack of coherence and consistency stemmed from Hoover's commitment to an "engineering ethos" and a related political naiveté. Rational solutions to discrete technical problems would, once determined and proposed, fall into place in the natural course of things. Because Hoover developed no grand political design for ordering and implementing his policies in a climate of antagonism and conflict, he failed to convey a clear, comprehensible message to a distraught society, and he had almost no impact on Congress. "It was perhaps the private man's shrinkage from rough political contact, the predilection for working by himself, and the habit of perceiving problems as requiring rational, impersonal solutions that made Hoover uncomfortable with the rude, demanding Congress, as well as with the press."

With all the obvious differences in background and outlook between Herbert Hoover and Jimmy Carter, it is the commitment to an engineering ethos, with its specific effects in both cases, that identifies a point of striking similarity. James Fallows, in his *Atlantic* article "The Passionless Presidency," depicts Carter's mind-set as that of another engineer-turned-president. "Carter thinks in lists, not arguments; as long as the items are there, their order does not matter, nor does the hierarchy among them....I came to think that Carter believes fifty things, but no one thing. He holds explicit, thorough positions on every issue under the sun, but he has no large view of the relations between them, no line indicating which goals (reducing unemployment? human

rights?) will take precedence over which (inflation control? a SALT treaty?) when the goals conflict. Spelling out these choices makes the difference between a position and a philosophy, but it is an act foreign to Carter's mind."

Along with a piecemeal approach to

problems, there is between Hoover and Carter a similar dedication to organizational efficiency, a similar progressive humaneness, a similar remoteness from the political process, the same ineptness in mobilizing opinion and support. The likeness must not be overdrawn, but neither should it be discounted. **YV**

## Walker Percy: An American Search by Robert Coles

(Little, Brown; xx + 250 pp.; \$12.50)

### Ralph McInerny

I came to this book shortly after having read the letters of Flannery O'Connor. If I were inclined to look for logic in my personal history, I might reflect on the fact that both Walker Percy and Flannery O'Connor are Southern writers, both are Catholic, and both sought in the thought of Aquinas food for reflection on their art. O'Connor referred to herself as a "hillbilly Thomist," and it is somewhat startling to learn that she devoted fifteen minutes every night to St. Thomas. The *Summa theologiae* as bedside reading. Percy's philosophical reading has been considerably wider; as O'Connor never did, Percy tried his hand at aesthetics, at philosophy.

O'Connor's essays reflect on the vocation of writing, while the essays Percy collected in *The Message in the Bottle* are highly theoretical ruminations on the nature of language, of metaphor, of symbol. This is important for reading Robert Coles's somewhat cloying book on Percy, because Coles devotes the bulk of the work to Percy's essays and the philosophical context he feels must be known to appreciate them. From her letters, it is easy to guess what Flannery O'Connor would have made of such a book devoted to herself. I have no way of telling what Walker Percy makes of this extremely laudatory essay on his work. The question is, what are we to make of it?

Coles is misleading in his opening chapter when he suggests that Walker Percy weighs in philosophically with Kierkegaard, Sartre, Marcel, Heidegger, Wittgenstein, etc. The professional philosopher must be amused by the sort of merit-by-association Coles advances.

In fact, the chapter on Percy's philosophical roots has the facile pace of cocktail party chatter, and I would like to think that Percy would find it acutely embarrassing. That Percy responded to the works of these philosophers has its interest, but to suggest that he thereby gets credit for formulating their thoughts is an exciting but, I fear, reckless way of assigning ownership. When Coles goes on to discuss Percy's essays, he makes a great deal of "The Man on the Train" but does not, as his opening chapter suggests he might, draw the obvious comparisons with the Camus of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Rebel*. Camus's argument that an absurd art is impossible does everything, and more, that Percy does for alienation.

What are we to make of Coles's basic assumption in the opening two chapters that we can find the analogue for Walker Percy in such philosopher-novelists and/or dramatists as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Gabriel Marcel, et al.? It is not a thesis I should care to have to defend. The most that can be said for Percy's essays is that they show us a man capable of reflecting interestingly on what he has read. They show us a man out of tune with the times, not because of a programmatic atheism, but, presumably, because of his Christian faith. His account of what has gone wrong with mankind would doubtless differ from Camus's or Sartre's, but do we really get that in the essays? Walker Percy shows a receptivity to what Peter Berger has called "signals of transcendence," but apart from the *via negativa* provided him by existentialism and phenomenology he gives his reader no indi-

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cation that transcendence has done more than signal.

When Thomas Nagel reviewed *The Message in the Bottle* some years ago, he exhibited a good deal of the professional philosopher's condescension toward the amateur. This would have been impossible if Percy had written with the authority of one who shapes the language, as an artist, as the skilled craftsman he is. By mimicking the meta-language of the philosopher, he exposed himself to a justified put-down. Nonetheless the question remains, what is the relationship, possible or actual, between philosophical theory, original or borrowed, and the writing of novels?

It is possible to regard the novels of Sartre as concrete exemplifications of his philosophical theories. It is equally possible to regard his philosophical theories as reflections on the insights of his novels. The same might be said of Camus and Marcel. But what kind of transaction is this? Surely it would be an odd notion of the novel that saw it as simply an illustration of some abstract thesis. Walker Percy's reflections on the nature of symbol, on the autonomy of artistic insight, would make him more than a little hostile to that suggestion. But if art does not proceed from antecedent theoretical judgments, what is the relation between theory and practice in this realm? It is a major disappointment of the book that Coles raises, perhaps unwittingly, questions like these and then leaves them untouched, with the result that the reader might be led to think that Walker Percy, having first sorted out a number of abstract matters in his essays, proceeded to illustrate theory in his novels.

Surely the Christian brings to his art a total interpretation of the significance of human life, and, if his faith and art are related at all, the Christian worldview should play a role in what he writes. One recalls the simplistic remark that the *Divina Commedia* is the *Summa* in verse. The quickest way to free oneself from such nonsense is to reflect on the common Christian vocation and the billions of people called upon to enact it. Is the Christian vocation an invitation to homogeneity? If all believers acted as they should, would they be indistinguishable from one another? The canon of the saints is a sufficient refutation of that. No more does the acceptance of Christianity limit

what the novelist may do, nor does it dictate what he will do. With regard to the relation of any theoretical or common presupposition to the novel, the play, or the story, any adequate account must employ more subtle instruments of analysis than exemplification or illustration.

A far more interesting reflection for the writer is the one that permeates the letters and essays of Flannery O'Connor: What does the common Christian vocation say about the activity of being a writer? From Aquinas via Maritain, O'Connor took what for her was the liberating conception that artistic activity aims at the perfection of the thing made, the *bonum operis*. It is neither self-expression nor some coded statement of a private vision, but an effort to achieve truth by making something truly. But this leaves many questions as to

when, how, and for what motive a person should engage in such activity. For guidance on these questions O'Connor turned to her religious beliefs. It was her Thomistic conviction that no true art could be in conflict with the truth that revealed itself in Jesus. Her conviction, not her theory—and the conviction survived any number of unasked-for counsels from Jesuits.

I love Walker Percy's novels. If I had to pick a favorite, I would waver between *The Last Gentleman* and *Love in the Ruins*. My delight in these stories does not need to be expressed in a summary, an interpretation, an explanation. These novels are good enough to survive misguided transpositions into other keys. Walker Percy is a good enough novelist to survive this accolade from Robert Coles. 

## The German Churches Under Hitler: Background, Struggle, and Epilogue by Ernst Christian Helmreich

(Wayne State University Press; 616 pp.; \$30.00)

### Gordon Zahn

As the product of precise and extensively documented scholarship, Professor Helmreich's study of the difficulties experienced by the German churches under Nazi domination merits honor grades. More than a hundred pages of footnotes and annotated bibliographical references evidence mastery of the widest range of relevant published sources. Actually, allowing for his helpful analyses of the "before" and "after" situations, Helmreich devotes less than three hundred pages to the Hitler years and the relationship between an increasingly unfriendly state and the generally resistant churches.

As might be expected, major attention is given to the Lutheran, Evangelical, and Roman Catholic communities, but the two summary chapters dealing with the special problems encountered by the "free" churches, sects, and other para-religious bodies are more than adequate. The step-by-step account of the negotiations leading to the controversial concordat between the Vatican and the

Third Reich is familiar enough, and the author duly records the dissatisfaction of both parties with the finished product and their attempts to use its provisions to their own advantage in the troubled years of strain and open struggle. Less familiar, and therefore more valuable, is the description of a seemingly unending series of organizations and reorganizations within the Protestant churches, complicated as they were by the intensity of the conflict between the state-encouraged "German Christians" and the heroically dissident "Confessing Church." Helmreich covers these developments in patient detail, sometimes at the risk of losing the interest of a reader who might be less patient toward what at times appears to be little more than factional rivalries and verbal contests.

In this respect the book's greatest strength is also its basic weakness (quite apart from the intimidating price, which probably will restrict it to research and library catalogues); the account is too overwhelmingly factual and dependent

upon documentary sources. The impression one gets is that "church" is used only in the sense of an organizational entity, and that the "struggle" finds its most significant expression in such things as leadership personnel and structure, formal declarations of official bodies, budgetary allocations, and headcounts. As a result, though we can see how leading churchmen like Bishop Wurm, Martin Niemöller, Cardinal Bertram, et al., were placed in the contests with Nazi officials, only rarely (and then most vaguely and indirectly) do we get any hint about how their actions affected members of their flocks. Even these distinguished leaders are presented almost exclusively in their official roles. They come through to us as names and titles, not as very human personalities taking heroic risks or making accommodations. Their fears and hopes as private persons seldom, if ever, enter the story.

To cite but one instance of how too rigid a reliance upon documentation can reduce the impact of the struggle, there is the distressingly brief reference to Max Josef Metzger. Helmreich carefully reproduces the invoice of "death expenses" imposed by the authorities upon Metzger's religious order following his execution and cremation; but, apart from the mere statement that he was punished for writing a letter to a Swedish bishop asking him to mediate peace (not strictly correct, incidentally), there is no further indication of this particular martyr's extensive activity in the pre-Hitler Catholic peace movement, no acknowledgment of the lack of understanding on the part of his bishop, not even any reference to his early and significant contributions to the ecumenism that Helmreich counts as one of the major postwar benefits of the Nazi years. Metzger is at least mentioned, unlike Franziskus Stratmann, Edith Stein, Sigmund-Schultze, and others who carried at least as much of the battle with the Nazis as the ecclesiastical officials issuing their formal statements.

This failing, if such it is, relates more to Helmreich's objective than to the way he has carried it out. Helmreich has written his book, and it is very good indeed. What is urgently needed now is for someone to write a quite different history of the struggle from the perspective of the ordinary believer. Perhaps the very thoroughness of the pre-