
A Cautionary Tale for Adults

Walker Percy: *Lancelot*;

Farrar, Straus & Giroux; New York, 1977

by John Glass, Jr.

At one point in *Lancelot*, Walker Percy's latest novel, the protagonist and narrator, Lancelot Andrewes Lamar, visits the set of a movie being made in the small Southern town in which he lives. Lance's wife, Margot, has a part in the movie, and some scenes are being filmed at Belle Isle, the Lamar family mansion. On this occasion, however, the crew is set up in town for a scene in which the movie's hero, a "Christ-like hippie" who has come to revive all the dead folk in the community, liberates the librarian by having sexual intercourse with her against a background of novels by Dickens, Thackeray, and Scott. Worried that Lance may not fully appreciate the subtleties of the scene, the director hastens to explain that the novels represent "the drying up of Western juices." He is terribly excited by the symbolism of it all: "What we are trying to get across," he informs Lance, "is that it is not just screwing, though there is nothing wrong with that either, but a kind of sacrament and celebration of life." The hippie, he adds, "could be a high priest of Mithras." The absurdity of all this—and much more like it—Percy handles extremely well. Indeed, *Lancelot* provides additional proof, if any were needed, that Walker Percy is a very talented comic writer.

Like all serious comedy, however, Percy's has a grim side. The director's enthusiastic explanations of symbolism—punctuated by reminders to the actor-hippie that it is vitally important to hear

Mr. Glass, a Southerner and an English scholar, by nature takes a reserved view of Catholicism's quandaries in Louisiana.

his fly being unzipped—serve as a kind of prologue to the most important part of the episode. After one take, as the hippie zips his fly and begins to complain to another actor about bad advice from his broker, Lance catches sight of the real librarian, a woman he has known all his life. Heretofore an apparently sensible woman, she seems suddenly possessed. Almost in tears, she is begging that the company use her house for a scene, and hearing that her plea will be considered, she weeps openly and wrings her hands, overcome by gratitude. "I just can't tell you what it means to me," she sobs. Lance thinks she has gone mad, but she is not the only one. A moment later another perfectly respectable matron appears, offering to do "anything, anything, for the company, even carry klieg lights." That ordinary sane people should behave this way is, of course, funny; but to understand the special grimness of the scene, one must realize that women like these—sober and respectable spinsters, wives, and widows—were for long years the conservators of traditional values and mores in small Southern towns. That they, of all people, should be afflicted with this madness points up emphatically the disruption of our age. This point is well made, and Percy himself seems deeply disturbed by the madness he has diagnosed.

That madness and its effects are a major concern in *Lancelot*, but the concern is not a new one for Percy. In three earlier novels he has examined the predicament of modern man and presented protagonists who are alienated from the world in which they live. The case of Lance Lamar, however, seems to be the most desperate so far. Lance tells his story while confined to a cell in the New Orleans Center for Aberrant Behavior,

or as he himself more simply puts it, "a nuthouse;" and much of his time is spent denouncing the moral confusion of modern society. In the end he utterly rejects a corrupt world and determines to establish a new order. One is not unsympathetic to his desire, but there seems little likelihood of success in such a venture.

Lance's aberrant behavior, the behavior for which he is confined to the Center, includes a little electronic voyeurism, a murder, and a rather spectacular bit of arson, all part of what he calls a quest for the unholy grail, genuine evil. The quest begins with Lance's accidental discovery of his wife's infidelity, a discovery which sobers him—literally—and forces him to look at himself and his world for the first time in years. But such a quest is especially difficult when the prevailing belief is that "everything and everyone's either wonderful or sick and nothing is evil," and Lance in fact concludes that his search has failed, that there "is no unholy grail just as there was no Holy Grail." He is mistaken. He does find what he seeks, but he does not recognize the "nothing," the cold emptiness, he discovers at the heart of evil.

One suspects that there will be many readers who will not like what *Lancelot* has to say. Lance Lamar's denunciations of the permissiveness of modern society are harsh and sweeping, but they are very often just. But many, even of those readers who agree with Lance's judgment, may be uneasy about the end of the novel. For *Lancelot* is finally a thoroughly Catholic novel, and at the end Percy offers only two possibilities: either the violent rejection of the world, which Lance proposes, or acceptance of a Christian sacramental view.

Lance has a silent listener to his narrative, a long-time friend called Percival, who is now both a Roman Catholic priest and a psychiatrist. Although Percival does not speak in the novel except to answer a series of questions at the end, his presence is crucial. It is Percival's presence which sparks Lance's recollection of the events which follow the discovery of Margot's infidelity, and as Lance's story progresses, the reader watches its effect on Percival. Apparently seriously troubled himself at the beginning, Percival appears gradually to recover his faith. He once again takes to wearing what Lance calls his "priest clothes" and finds himself able to offer prayers for the dead, a thing he had earlier refused to do. At the end, as Lance, about

to be released, is preparing to set off for Virginia to establish his new order of things, Percival too prepares for a departure—to a small parish in Alabama, to make bread into the Body of Christ, to give communion to suburban housewives, and "to forgive the sins of Buick dealers." Both characters—and apparently Percy as well—agree that no other responses to what Lance calls Sodom are possible.

Technically, *Lancelot* is not a flawless novel. The device of the silent listener which Percy borrowed from Camus creates a bit of awkwardness, especially at the start. Moreover, despite the glimpses of him the reader receives, Percival remains almost too shadowy a character to bear the weight the novel places on him.

In spite of flaws, however, *Lancelot* is a thoroughly readable novel. All the good stuff of a Gothic thriller—an old house with creaking timbers, a raging storm, apparitions, murder, madness—is here, much of it borrowed, one suspects, from the late E.A. Poe. Here, too, are most of those trappings which seem especially to delight Northern readers of novels by Southern writers—the network of aunts and cousins, and quaint and curious names, the hints of a dark and bloody past. Yet the novel is more than either Gothic romance or a piece of local color. Finally it is a cautionary tale, not unlike Dante's *Comedy* if we may take the epigraph seriously, designed to show us the lost souls so that we may purpose amendment in ourselves. ■

Establishment's Polite Dissatisfaction

"It is not a cheery book, and those of us who would make Percy out to be a safe Christian novelist had better beware . . ."—*The Christian Century*

"Art . . . should be a little less pompous, a lot more serious. It should stop sniveling and go for answers or else shut up . . ."—*The New York Times Book Review*.

"Lancelot's fantasy of setting out for Virginia ('where it all started'), and there inaugurating a Third Revolution founded upon honor, chivalry, and the suppression of pornography could be enjoyed as comic megalomania if we did not suspect a certain authorial complicity in the protagonist's program . . ."—*The New York Review of Books*.

". . . one finds it hard to take seriously the novel's message of total destruction . . ."—*The New Leader*.

"He rails on, a voice in a wilderness of porno shops and massage parlors, playing Jeremiah to Hugh Hefner, Larry Flynt, and company. It is the voice of one who sees himself as the last man in America who believes in love . . ."—*Saturday Review*.

"Percy seems to have backed himself into an empty corner with his obsessed and isolated seeker . . ."—*The New Yorker*.

". . . when (Percy) ruminates philosophically on sex and sin and violence and evil and the craziness of the age, it is hard to take him seriously, even when his comments are seemingly rational and plausible . . ."—*The Progressive*.

"Absurd mutterings . . ."—*Rolling Stone*.

The Thriving Virulence And Well-Heeled Deviation

Gore Vidal: *Matters of Fact and of Fiction: Essays 1973-1976*;
Random House; New York, 1977.

by Otto J. Scott

There is something nearly inexpressibly dreary about this collection of articles recycled from *The New York Review of Books* and *New Statesman*. They reveal a great deal about the author; too much, in fact, for decency. A sense of embarrassment rises, similar to the sensation of watching an actor in an X-rated movie who smiles into the camera throughout his gyrations.

Yet the book is valuable, in a macabre sort of way, for its glimpses into a set of people and their attitudes usually as closed and mysterious to the everyday world of normal persons as the painted catamites of Hollywood & Vine, or the hideous cellars of Greenwich Village. In discussing the *Memoirs* of Tennessee Williams, for instance, this passage occurs:

"I don't remember whether or not I ever told Tennessee that I had actually seen but not met him the previous year. He was following me up Fifth Avenue while I, in turn, was stalking yet another quarry, I recognized him: he wore a blue bow with polka dots. In no mood for literary encounters, I gave him a scowl and he abandoned the chase just north of Rockefeller Center. I don't recall how my own pursuit ended. . . ."

Mr. Scott is attracted to both fairness and historical research which enables him to see his contemporaries in proper dimensions.

That glimpse of street-walking is sandwiched, however, between rhapsodic descriptions of the reviewer, Vidal, and his recollections of various parties and encounters in Rome shortly after World War II, which is described as a "golden dream." A little later Vidal smiles again at the reader, and says, "Incidentally, I am mesmerized by the tributes to my beauty that keep cropping up in the memoirs of the period." Those, we are free to infer, are tributes from persons who most often express their lofty sense of aesthetics in the art of graffiti.

His comments about other writers are less admiring, with the exception of Mary Renault. Her recreations of a bisexual Pagan world lead to some predictable sighs over a vanished Eden, and bitter asides on an evil Christianity. For the rest, writers are apt to get short shrift and no mercy from Vidal (one hesitates to call him Mister). Solzhenitsyn was by "nature destined to write manuals of artillery," Herman Wouk is too Jewish to write about upper class "goyishers," the teachers who toil over novels are "hacks" who produce books to be taught and not read—and only the Italian author Italo Calvino is worthy of a full-article panegyric.

In time, these reminiscences of Vidal squeezed between comments on other writers, times and events, add up to a series of strip-teases of a remarkable sort; of a person who has forgotten—or who has closed his eyes—to the fact that the

eyes of the world are unwinking and penetrating. There is also a gathering sense that Vidal has reached the stage that overcomes certain types of actors, or other public figures, who begin to become exaggerations of themselves. The role overtakes, and the writer—in this instance—merges into performer.

That becomes horridly evident in the last section, which contains the articles on "fact." These range from the times of President and Mrs. U.S. Grant to Howard Hunt, ITT and Robert Moses. President Grant has not been well treated by American historians, who—at least in this century—seem to find it hard to forgive this nation for its history. But to call U.S. Grant, a man who would have been a Caesar in Rome, and his wife—"these two odd little creatures"—is to fall into a back-of-the-stairs assessment once too often. Vidal also describes Charles Sumner, a true grotesque, as "brilliant." Such judgments, displayed as a part of a tedious article on the Grants, inspired by the General's intelligent *Memoirs* and the somewhat silly effort of his widow, do not exhibit any historical insight into an era still very near our own. For President Grant crushed Sumner as contemptuously as a man squashes a bug, and will remain a great historical figure long after Vidal ceases to be a footnote of our times.

But Vidal's treatment of General Grant, like his assessment of ITT is so much a part of the Radical Camp school