

“Love in the Ruins”

A Baccalaureate Address

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Her hand rested as lightly on my shoulder as it did at the Washington and Lee Black-and-White formal, what a lovely, funny Valley girl she was.¹

He means a lovely, funny, Shenandoah Valley girl.

The narrator is Dr. Thomas More, from *Love in the Ruins*, by Walker Percy. The novel's full title is: *Love in the Ruins: the Adventures of a Bad Catholic at a Time Near the End*. Percy's Dr. More is my favorite man in fiction. Early in the book he lets the reader know he is a direct descendent of Sir Thomas More, the saint, and that he shares his honored namesake's faith, but there ends the resemblance. He tells us:

I believe in God and the whole business but I love women best, music and science next, whisky next, God fourth, and my fellowman hardly at all.²

My habit has been to read *Love in the Ruins* every twenty years. The book was published in 1971, when I was in high school. I read it then on my mother's advice. This past year, on third reading, I noticed that Dr. Thomas More was something you in the class of 2012 will be by one o'clock tomorrow afternoon: a graduate of Washington and Lee.

Dr. More's lovely, late ex-wife was a Virginian and they had met here. The marriage had been mostly happy until their daughter died, and in that heartbreak they lost connection. That was also when love of God and neighbor slipped down his list of personal priorities. Reading between the lines, one suspects that booze had crept up the list higher than third place. At any time of day, a reader might find him pulling on a flask or bottle. All of this had happened by the time the novel opens.

Before he wrote the novel, Walker Percy previewed it for his good friend Shelby Foote:

"I have in mind a futuristic novel dealing with the decline and fall of the U.S.; the country rent almost hopelessly between the rural Knothead right and the godless alienated left, worse than the Civil War. Of that and the goodness of God, and of the merriness of living quite anonymously in the suburbs, drinking well, cooking out, attending Mass at the usual silo-and barn, the goodness of Brunswick bowling alleys (the good white maple and plastic balls), coming home of an evening, with the twin rubies of the TV transmitter in the evening sky, having four drinks of good sourmash and assaulting one's wife in the armchair etc. What we Catholics call the sacramental life."³

In the novel, Dr. More addresses readers from a not very distant future with bad news. He is sorry to inform us that in the United States "the center did not hold."⁴

Our beloved old U.S. A. is in a bad way. Americans have turned against each other, race against race, right against left, believer against heathen.⁵

The American experiment was failing! He wonders why.

*The U.S. A. didn't work! Is it even possible that from the beginning it never did work? That the thing always had a flaw in it . . . a place where it would shear?"*⁶

It could be. From our founding, this has been a persistent worry. But Dr. More's is not a counsel of despair.

"Don't give up," he says to us.

*Don't give up. It is not too late. You are still the last hope. There is no one else. Bad as we are, there is no one else.*⁷

"You tested us," he says to God.

*You tested us because bad as we were there was no one else, and everybody knew it, even our enemies, and that is why they curse us. Who curses the Chinese? Whoever imagined the Chinese were blessed by God and asked to save the world?"*⁸

Granted, Dr. More is half-drunk. Granted, the view he is espousing, called "American Exceptionalism," is controversial even among Americans, considered by some to be delusional and dangerous. Granted that in some of its expressions it surely is.

Then we remember Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Were it not for Lincoln's insistence on American Exceptionalism, this morning we would be gathered under a different flag. Had King not preached the promise of America as his beacon for a peaceful revolution, then outwardly and inwardly we would be a very different group of people.

I agree with Thomas More. This American faith that we have been blessed and called to great things has been a well-spring of national resilience and renewal. And when we forsake this faith, as our southern forebears, God forgive them, did one hundred and fifty years ago, then our nation reduces down to nothing more than an ingenious design for managing competing interests. We have aspired to more. We are more. Don't give that up.

Which brings us to this morning.

In part, this occasion wants us to look forward. Concerning your future, I'll say this:

For our society to have raised up giants like King and Lincoln, there have had to be thousands, tens of thousands, of people like them whom none of us has heard of. They were the glory of their times. Let that be you.

Let that be you through the three score years or so to which you may now look forward, years for pursuing and I pray finding the merriness of living more or less anonymously in cities, suburbs, towns; for drinking well, but less I trust than you did here; for attending church I hope—or synagogue or mosque—as here most of you probably did not; for

discovering the goodness of a bowling alley, the hard plastic ball gathering momentum down the good white maple floor; for the unscripted moment of armchair marital communion, etc.: the sacramental life.

God bless you, looking forward.

This is also a good day for looking back. And now, having affirmed American Exceptionalism, I ask you to consider the exceptional in your experience of Washington and Lee. This place is different too, and in a way that pertains to what was said about our country's hopes and troubles. We'll begin with that connection.

The novelist Marilynne Robinson has written a collection of essays under the charming title *When I was a Child I Read Books*. This is an aside, but I have to tell you my favorite sentence in the book. The author grew up in rural Idaho and then went east to Brown for college. She writes:

*I went to college in New England and I have lived in Massachusetts for twenty years, and I find that the hardest work in the world—it may in fact be impossible—is to persuade Easterners that growing up in the west is not intellectually crippling.*⁹

Like Walker Percy forty years ago, Robinson loves our country and is worried for its future. She describes an ethos, hard won, that has long sustained us. The worry is that we are losing it.

She says:

“Western society at its best expresses the serene sort of courage that allows us to grant one another real safety, real autonomy, the means to think and act as judgment and conscience dictate. It assumes that this great mutual courtesy will bear its best fruit if we respect, educate, inform, and trust one another. This is the ethos that is at risk. . . . We were centuries in building these courtesies. Without them “Western civilization” would be an empty phrase.”¹⁰

That brings us to Washington and Lee.

If ever there was a college that meant to weave this deep-seated mutual courtesy into the educational fabric, it was Washington and Lee. It could so easily have been otherwise, and let us now praise R.E. Lee. Robert E. Lee's insistence here on civility and courtesy following defeat, reverberated South and North, and helped put this broken country back together—in a decade whose troubles make ours almost vanish by comparison. “Love in the ruins,” that was.

Now a confession: I did not attend Washington and Lee. My graduating daughter does, and my father did, but not me. Instead, I went to Amherst College.

Hey Marilynne Robinson, I'll raise you a nickel. You think back East they were a little frosty about your intellectual credentials. Try going North with "Hi y'all. I'm from Arkansas."

Amherst had begun as a training school for mission-minded frontier New England clergy. By my time, perhaps the one residue of that was the moral-minded faculty, especially in American Studies, which was my major. Professors wanted students to leave and make America a better place for everyone. Apparently I absorbed their message, because this morning I have repeated it to you.

I have always appreciated Amherst, but something deep in my southern heart was glad when, first, our son chose Sewanee, and then our daughter, Mary Olive, decided to come to Washington and Lee. For one thing, it occurs to me that perhaps a given name of Mary Olive might not ease a woman's way in Massachusetts.

These past four years watching from afar, it has seemed to me that this place has given you the same quality and kind of education, in warm contact with the same quality and kind of teacher, as I received at Amherst—but with a different under-layer. It is the old difference between *Cavalier and Yankee*, which was the title of a book American Studies majors read forty years ago.

"We have only one rule here," said President Lee to incoming students, "to act like a gentleman at all times." The students knew what he meant.

The Last Gentleman is the title of Walker Percy's second novel. In this book, the protagonist is a young man from Mississippi who has relocated to New York, where he runs into an Alabama woman and her mother. The mother looks the young man over and, the author says, "she could have married him on the spot and known what she was getting."¹¹

Gentle men and women of the class of '012, your education has had a different flavor than would have been the case had you chosen Amherst, Brown, or Smith. A gentleman is courteous, neighborly, mannerly, and will not lie, steal, or cheat on chemistry examinations. With a gentle lady, it is the same. You did learn that here. If you trespassed that rule, you felt guilt. If another trespassed, you felt dismay. From now on, this belongs to who you are.

There is more.

Shelby Foote, in a letter to Walker Percy, spells out what he had always loved about the South. He said it had to do with courage, hardcore independence, and:

*The way a rich man always had to call a poor man "Mister."*¹²

It had to do with southern black folk who, Foote said, “stood up for a century under what would have crumpled the rest of us in a month.” It had to do with southern women’s way of being female.

Foote was writing fifty years ago. Since that time, in at least two respects the southern gentleman has definitely gotten better. (1) Now he does not drink and drive; and (2) Now he does believe in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments to the U.S. Constitution. I know we all agree that those are both significant improvements in the definition of a gentleman, and that the second was a long time coming.

Now brace yourselves, because for about the next sixty seconds my comments will have to do with sex.

As regards the rules that govern this other important sphere of social interaction, I hope that for the past four years your more intimate involvements have been guided, protected, and perfected by commitment, fidelity and love. Yes, I read the Ring Tum Phi; and no, I’m not saying I believe they always were. I am saying, as a gentleman, that is how it always should be. As a priest, I can add that it is never too late to start. With commencement comes a new beginning.

Speaking of dismay, imagine my daughter’s that I have mentioned s-e-x. She knows my methods. Mary Olive and I were in the car on our way here four years ago this August. Driving along through Tennessee, I reached over and turned off whatever music source it was, and said: “OK, for the next one minute the subject is sex. You do not have to talk, but you will have to listen.” I said my piece, as she considered how bad it might hurt to jump from a car moving seventy miles an hour.

Tonight, we are having dinner in the Ruins, a lovely spot on a campus so full of them. It will be a group of graduating women and their families. Something I remember from my own college graduation is a certain awkwardness concerning families. The problem is, here we parents are out of place. Yes we are loved, but we are intruders, and especially in these final days of the life you have made together on this campus. Mom wants her hug, Dad wants that picture, while you glance at one another sideways, struggling to know when and how to say good-bye, and not wanting to. Love in the Ruins, that is.

Sometimes it hurts. C.S. Lewis named four loves: *eros*, for romance; *philia* for friendship, *storge*, for love of home and family; and *agape*, “love divine, all loves excelling”—which is the love that guides, protects, perfects the other three. All four loves are with us here this morning, but the love that has filled your hearts this final week is *storge*.

For four years, it was quietly growing, from that first late night trip back on Traveler. *Storge* is: springtime on the Maury River; sweeping up the frat house basement, red-eyed, on the morning after; shuffling off to class by twos and threes on a cold, rainy February morning; together dreading finals; teams celebrating victories; suffering defeats; friends celebrating, and sometimes suffering, Fancy Dress.

The other loves will travel with you as you spread out across the planet, but your *storge* cannot leave the Shenandoah Valley. That's what hurts. Homesickness is our name for missing *storge*. Come tomorrow, early Friday, you are leaving home.

About nine years ago, we were sitting in the Washington and Lee admissions office. I was thumbing through the brochures and such, all laid out so neatly on the table. I noticed one titled "A Place Like No Other." It was the 2003 Baccalaureate address, given that year by retiring Professor Thomas Litzenburg. The title implied a doctrine of Washington and Lee Exceptionalism. I opened it to pass the time.

I began to read, then: "Oh my goodness," I said out loud. In the second paragraph there was a story I knew to be about my father. Professor Litzenburg wrote:

Some years ago a prominent alumnus and much beloved trustee of the University was called to this podium to deliver the Baccalaureate Address. Elderly and weakened by illness, he hesitated before speaking. After a pause that seemed interminable he finally began. In a halting voice that barely rose above a whisper, he said, "I love this place."

I wasn't here that day, but I knew the story. "God, I love this place," I think, was how my father put it.

The illness that had so weakened him was Alzheimer's disease, and it was rapidly getting worse. The fear in that long moment of hesitation, for those who knew this, was that his memory had failed him: he had forgotten where he was and what he had to say. When he finally spoke, they found out the opposite was true. His memory had filled his heart.

"God, I love this place," he said.

What did my father, class of '39, love about Washington and Lee?

He loved the white-columned, red-bricked, green-lawned, beauty of it, without question. Who would not?

I know he loved the southernness, although my father was actually a Yankee: born in Michigan, raised in Montana. Tell it not in Gath. He loved "Yes ma'am," "No sir," and "OK Sugar, are you ready for your check or do want another cup of coffee?"

He loved this place for slowly, surely accepting change. As a trustee, he helped open Washington and Lee to women. He loved this mix of old and new: genteel, thoughtful, tradition-mindedness, joined with liberal, scholarly engagement with new ideas, and readiness for progress. He loved that here the center holds.

He loved remembering his sweetheart, a seventeen year old Mary Baldwin freshman he'd met on a double date his senior year: what a lovely, funny Mary Baldwin girl she was. I've seen the picture: he in black tie, she in fancy dress.

They had eight daughters (three died as infants) and one son. They never lost connection. At his death, they had been married more than fifty years.

Of love, we are promised that it never ends. Prophecies and tongues will cease. Even knowledge—so hard won!—will pass away. For our knowledge is imperfect and “when the perfect comes, the imperfect will pass away.” Childhood ends. Then college. Still so many miles from perfect—and yet so beautiful, so memorable, so good.

¹ Walker Percy, *Love in the Ruins* (New York: Open Road, 1971) Kindle edition, location 1195. All Kindle locations are approximate.

² Ibid, 125.

³ Jay Tolson, ed., *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 129.

⁴ Percy, *Love in the Ruins*, 320.

⁵ *Love in the Ruins*, 303.

⁶ *Love in the Ruins*, 990.

⁷ *Love in the Ruins*, 1010.

⁸ *Love in the Ruins*, 1005.

⁹ Marilynne Robinson, *When I Was a Child, I Read Books* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Geroux, 2012) Kindle edition, 1250.

¹⁰ Robinson, 680.

¹¹ Percy, *Last Gentleman*, Kindle, 832.

¹² Tolson, *Letters*, 125.