Percy-Walsh Correspondence

.10 Linear Foot

Loyola University Library

Department of Special Collections & Archives

Collection #13
Percy-Walsh Correspondence

Introduction

In March 1999, William (Bill) Walsh gave Loyola University, New Orleans, three letters and a postcard written to him by Walker Percy. On 19 March, Walsh met with Arthur Carpenter, University Archivist at Loyola’s J. Edgar and Louise S. Monroe Library, and explained the background of the correspondence. Mr. Walsh provided further particulars in a telephone interview on 5 April with Rosalee McReynolds, Special Collections Librarian. Additional information is included in a note written by Walsh to Patrick Samway, S.J. on 20 February 1999.

The brief correspondence between Walsh, a former Jesuit priest, and Walker Percy began in 1980, shortly after Walsh read Percy’s *Lancelot*. Walsh, an Irish-Catholic New Orleanian born in 1925, joined the Society of Jesus in 1942. He left the order in 1973, but remained ambivalent about his decision to enter secular life.

*Lancelot* moved Walsh as a study of evil and rebirth. He particularly empathized with the character of the priest who listens silently as the novel’s central character, Lance, recounts a story of jealousy, deceit, and vengeance set in south Louisiana. The priest and Lance are old acquaintances, having grown up and gone to school together. Lance
ascribes literary and religious persona to the various stages of the unresponding priest’s life: Harry, Harry Hotspur, Prince Hal, Percival, and, finally, John the Baptist, “the loner”.

It was “Percival,” the seeker of the Holy Grail, with whom Walsh identified. None of Walsh’s letters to Walker Percy survive, but he recalled adopting the moniker of Percival in his first letter to Percy. He addressed Percy as Lance. Percy’s letter of 13 February 1980 and postcard of 14 March 1980 reflect the use of these aliases, but in later correspondence the men used their real names.

As he read Lancelot, Walsh felt a pang when Lance reveals that he has observed the priest refusing to say a prayer for the dead at the request of a woman cleaning graves in a cemetery. This suggested to Walsh that the priest had doubts about his vocation. At the same time, Walsh pointed out that when the priest finally speaks at the story’s end, he repeats the word “yes” in response to a series of questions posed by Lance. Although this final exchange between the two characters is somewhat ambiguous, it signifies the possibility of a new beginning for both.

Walsh was at a personal crossroads when he read Lancelot, trying to determine his future. Having also been impressed by Percy’s earlier writings, particularly The Message in the Bottle, he believed that Percy could be a source of guidance. As it turned out, Walsh and Percy never met in person and they spoke on the phone just once.
In the mid-1980s, the Center of Jesus the Lord, a Catholic group in which Walsh was active, purchased a retreat house not far from Percy’s home on the north shore of Lake Ponchartrain. Walsh hoped to organize a reading circle at the house that would be devoted to Percy’s writings, but Percy declined to participate. Percy’s letter of 8 January 1985 implies that he misunderstood the request: “I never heard of a good book getting written by a group or through a group,” wrote Percy, indicating that the author thought he was being recruited to direct the writing of a novel.

Walsh also speculated that health might have been a factor in Percy’s decision. By the mid-1980s, Percy was already suffering from the cancer from which he would ultimately perish and Walsh believed that the author was “guarding his time.” The 8 January 1985 letter is the last one that Percy sent Walsh.

The one postcard and three letters in this collection are arranged chronologically. In addition to Percy’s letters to Walsh, there is Walsh’s note to Patrick Samway, S.J. Walsh’s resume also is included in the collection.
Container Listing

Folder

1. Percy to Walsh, 13 February 1980
2. Percy to Walsh, 14 March 1980
3. Percy to Walsh, 23 April 1983
4. Percy to Walsh, 8 January 1985
5. Walsh to Samway, 9 February 1999
6. Walsh to Samway 20 February 1999
7. Walsh resume