*Lanterns on the Levy*

William A. Percy

A short review by John Mays.

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What I can’t get over is that I was 54 years old before every hearing of this tremendous book. The first time I read it I could only compare it to *The Education of Henry Adams* because of its noble sentiment and erudite, aristocratic style.

I know there are those in our number who bristle at the notion of praising anything aristocratic, believing such praise to be tantamount to promoting injustice. However, there is also the depressing fact that as we have lost the aristocracy in the West, and in the American South, and along with them we have lost manners, nobility, personal character, and appreciation for beauty and discipline. As Percy writes, “…our exteriors have increased in importance while our interiors have deteriorated…Vulgarity [is] a contagious disease like the itch, unlike it is not a disease of the surface, but eats to the marrow. As a class I suppose the Southern aristocrat is extinct, but what that class despised as vulgar and treasured as excellent is still despised and treasured by individuals scattered thickly from one end of the South to the other….Their distinguishing characteristic probably is that their hearts are set, not on the virtues that make surviving possible, but on those that make it worthwhile.”

I was warned that the book might be racist. I found that warning off the mark. In Walker’s introduction he states that Will’s views and his own on the race question are “divergent,” but he doesn’t say Will’s views were racist. Rather, Will seems a paragon of justice and human feeling. His references to an “inferior race” are always contextualized. He never means innately inferior, only culturally inferior due to differences in education and enculturation. This is a topic our members will certainly want to pursue.

I was also warned about Will’s supposed homosexuality. Indeed, if you start digging around online you will find plenty about that. But there is not a hint of it here, and in fact, quite the opposite. Will writes much about nobility, character and the shoddiness of the decadence he finds surrounding him. In this book I found nothing to discuss on this topic.

Walker’s introduction is so good I have little else to say, so I will simply trot out some more of my favorite quotes. Every one of these quotes makes me ache for the world that was lost before I even got here.

“Going mad for honor’s sake presupposes honor.”

“No system of government is good without good men to operate it.”

“A man’s job is to make the world a better place to live in so far as he is able and to attend to his own soul. Direction enough for any life.”

Regarding his teacher Judge Griffin, “I perceived grandeur and nobility and struggle even when I didn’t understand.”

“Tolerance and justice, fearlessness and pride, reverence and pity, are learned in a course on long division if the teacher has those qualities as Judge Griffin had.”

“The church wouldn’t recognize religion if they met it in the middle of the big road.”

“That one of my fellow creatures happens to be a German or a Hottentot or even a Northerner seems less exciting to me than that he is a human being, engagingly and pitifully like me.”

“Manners are essential, and are essentially morals.”

“I am appalled at the self-centered egotism of youth and its incapacity for real understanding or pity.”

“The rise of the masses…the election of demagogues horrifies nobody…The voters choose their representatives in public life not for their wisdom or courage but for the promises they make.”

“All we need anywhere in any age is character…Leveling down’s the fashion now, but I remember the bright spires—they caught the light first and held it longest.”

“Honor and honesty, compassion and truth are good even if they kill you, for they alone give life its dignity and worth.”

“Not science but the Christian sects are causing the death of religion…As object of faith Hitler has Race, Stalin the State, America Success, which is Mammon.”

Finally, while reading Marcus Aurelius, “Some day we may possess new senses with which to perceive…But through the equipment we now possess, these five poor senses of ours, we can see daily what no atom built and no dust bred: it is given man to behold beauty and to worship nobility. He is shaken when he sees these two, but not because he feels them alien. Only when he is in their presence does the air taste native and the place seem home. These are the only reality to his profoundest self; he needs no proof of them and no explanation. They are, he is, and over him there passes a shudder of recognition. These recognitions are brief moments, but moments we may live by for our brief years. Who gave us these perceptions gave us too, no doubt, the heavens’ laws and conjured up creation. I think if one would sit in the Greek theater above Taormina with the wine-dark sea below and Aetna against the sunset, and if there he would meditate on Jesus and the Emperor, he would be assured a god had made earth and man. And this is all we need to know.”