Lost Walker Percy Story Published for First Time

A dedicated search by Rice University faculty member Logan D. Browning has produced an undiscovered short story by Walker Percy, which will be published for the first time in The Hopkins Review this spring.

Browning combed through Percy’s archives after the literary magazine, based at Johns Hopkins University and published by the Johns Hopkins University Press, published posthumous works from Donald Barthelme, a good friend of Percy, in its initial volume in 2008. Browning is the editor of SEL Studies in English Literature, another JHU Press journal.

Working with the noted author’s family, Browning found “A Detective Story” in Percy’s papers at the Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill. The year Percy wrote the text is unknown.

“Certainly, it seems to have come from an early period in Percy’s fiction writing,” Browning writes in a companion essay published in the issue. “Ultimately I think the most likely composition date is in the late 1950s, but I would not be surprised to learn from the discovery of additional evidence that the story had been composed at any time between 1946 and 1972.”

The story focuses on William, a man who suddenly goes missing and the ensuing search by his wife, Sally, and two married friends, Jamie and Helen. Browning says the story unveils a rare decision by Percy to make the narrator someone other than the protagonist.

“The quintessential Percy protagonist, William, fascinates Jamie or James Polk Rodgers the narrator and we only know William through Jamie’s eyes,” he writes. “Percy seems to have had some idea of experimenting with narrative doubling here, and he creates a story where narrator and protagonist in many ways mirror each other.”

The newly-discovered story anchors the newest issue of The Hopkins Review, which returned in 2008 after a long hiatus. The issue features several other short fiction pieces, poetry, book reviews, essays and art. Five pieces from the 2008 volume were nominated for the Pushcart prize.

More information on the magazine is available at http://www.press.jhu.edu/journals/the_hopkins_review/.

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