

FROM THANATOS TO EROS: DR. THOMAS MORE'S ODYSSEY CRITIQUING THE POST MODERN WORLD

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Abstract:

Walker Percy's The Thanatos Syndrome is concerned with the post modern world's social engineering scientific methods to improving man's happiness without ever considering the human a unique being with body and soul. Percy, through his hero, Dr. More, lashes out at the world's excessive fascination for modern technology and death. Percy asserts that modern science regards man as an object that could be placed under the microscope, bisected and dissected and detect the mysterious working of the mind. Percy shoves off any science that does not attend to the psyche of man. Modern man Percy believes, can be purged off his malaise only by talking and listening to other humans and thereby creating an intersubjective relationship with his fellow men.

Keywords: *Thanatos, Eros, intersubjectivity, malaise.*

Walker Percy (1916 - 1990), the physician turned novelist, acutely conscious of the pitfalls and secret agendas of modern scientific social engineering methods to enhancing man's happiness, fiercely and fearlessly attacks those scientific methods that pretend to augment man's happiness in his novel *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) through his protagonist Dr. Thomas More. His encounters with the satanic forces that appear in different guises in the novel mirror the postmodern world where ghosts and phantoms tread upon the face of the earth in diverse forms claiming that they can advance human happiness through modern scientific engineering if the humanoids completely surrender to their whims and fancies. Percy asserts that these methods, in fact, actually sacrifice man's capacity for happiness, his consciousness in the name of promoting animalistic well being. *The Thanatos Syndrome* is Walker Percy's angry outburst on the 20th C. American life which has harrowing parallels with the 'Wiener Republic' he has created in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Percy holds strongly that every novelist has "a quasi prophetic function". and cautions the generation about "the nature and destiny of man, especially and more immediately the predicament of man in a modern technological society" (*From Facts to Fiction* 28). The novelist, Percy argues performs, just like the prophet for "he shocks and warns his readers by speaking of last things" and his words, perhaps, may be in "radical disagreement with his fellow countrymen" (*The Message in the Bottle* 104). The novelist functions like "a coalminer's canary of old - as a warning sign". (*M.B.* 101). The modern utopian social engineering projects such as eugenics, geroethanesia, pedueuthanesia are clandestine methods for exterminating those useless to themselves or the world, unwanted infants, the old, victims of severe mongolism, epilepsy, encephalitis, arteriosclerosis, schizophrenics, etc. in the name of mercy and charity. The pursuit of happiness, instead of being the reason for life and liberty, becomes the justification to deprive individuals of life and liberty." This is not the age of enlightenment but the age of knowing what to do", Dr. More laments (*T.S.* 75). Percy gives terrifying expressions to the sickness of the modern world which he calls 'sickness unto death'. Percy argues that this sickness unto death that first manifested itself at the battles of Verdun and Somme did not end with Dachau or Hiroshima but continues even today in modern societies in multifarious camouflaged and sly devices to bring a virtual end to the

evils of child abuse, wife battering, teenage pregnancy, drug addiction, anxiety depression and even AIDS. Percy forcefully illustrates how the scientific approaches to pursuing happiness sacrifice our capacity for happiness, our consciousness, in the name of promoting animalistic well-being. *The Thanatos Syndrome* presents a grim cautionary tale of the Thanatos Syndrome wrought by science to improve the quality of life. *The Thanatos Syndrome* is a critique of scientism, the belief that science alone can make true statements about the world. For Percy, such a perspective always dehumanizes. Because when a man is viewed as a matter, all personal and social ills are ascribed to chemical imbalances in the brain and call for pharmacological solutions. Science says everything about man, his organism and constitution, but Percy says it is blank about "what it is to be a man living in the world" (*From Facts to Fiction* 28). It cannot utter a single word about an individual as an individual but only in so far as he resembles other individuals (Luschei 7).

The Novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, is a prophetic showing of a mad world just a few years into the future. The novel is an entertaining assault on the modern society's palpable sins, the manipulative and reductionist practices of social sciences, the real and self-righteousness of ultra-conservatives, the splintering of Governments into clandestine groups, often working across purposes inside the same organization. Percy highlights the deficiencies in current public discourses that stem from flaws within the political order's understanding of the human person. The doctrine of rights, because it is incomplete, does not sufficiently protect individuals who are considered lacking in self-sufficiency from oppression. Our Public discourses rely too heavily on an abstract concept of the individual as an independent, self-sufficient being in whom autonomy is the essential characteristic. Percy is over-concerned with "the nature of man, especially and more immediately the predicament of man in a modern technological society" (*From Facts Fiction* 28).

The novel, at the surface level, may appear like a suspense thriller with all its ingredients, such as heroic chases and flights, child abuse and sex; murder and violence. But *The Thanatos Syndrome* is something much more than this. It chronicles the never-ending battle between good and evil in a world where men find themselves "broken, sundered, busted down the middle, self ripped from self and man pasted back together as a mythical monster, half angel, half beast but not man" (Love in the Ruins 326). *The Thanatos Syndrome*, as the Freudian title implies, is concerned with the postmodern world's fascination with death in all its forms. The malaise, Percy presents here is man's eternal longing to lead a life of pleasure without any biological or ontological moorings. What modern society craves is a life without any of its ugly manifestations, pains, disease, and aging. In the pursuit of this desired goal men "surrender their sovereignty, their own selves", Percy laments "to experts the way they surrender their cars or their GI cards to doctors" (*Diagnosis of the Novel*, 42). Modern man's confidence that the ineluctable mystery of an individual can be explained and cured by science is parodied in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Science, Percy tells, offers no life but a kind of death-in-life. It is the malaise of death-in-life that confronts the world of *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

The Thanatos Syndrome begins as a mystery, not a murder mystery or a medical mystery but a psychological mystery. Dr. Thomas More, both the hero and the anti-hero of Percy's novels, *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, is a collateral descendant of the saint Sir Thomas More, the English martyr and the author of *Utopia*. In *Love in the Ruins*, Dr. More had been a victim of bouts of depression, suicidal tendencies and the failure to adjust himself. He is, now, cured of his earlier malady - angelism and bestialism - that had turned the would-be saint into a devil's disciple through the timely intervention of a very loving and affectionate woman, Ellen Oglethorpe. He regains his faith, frequents the church and confession and is cured of his excessive attachment to the possibility of scientifically improving the lot of human beings with his lapsometre. Though, Dr. More still has not fully abandoned his faith in the power of scientific gadgets for improving man's life; he discovers that:

There is more to it[human beings] than neurons. There is such a thing as the psyche. I discovered I became a psyche-artist, as I have said, a doctor of the soul, an old-style Freudian analyst, plus a dose of Adler and Jung. I discovered that it is not sex that terrifies people. It is that they are stuck with themselves. It is not knowing what they are or what to do with themselves....." (*The Thanatos Syndrome*, [T.S.] 88).

In, *Love in the Ruins*, he had been charged by the medical board and sentenced for selling "one hundred prescriptions of and two hundred prescriptions of Dalmane capsules at one dollar per dose" to long-distance truckers to help them regulate their sleep pattern and drive safely. (T.S. 26-27). Incarceration teaches Dr. More to abandon his boundless commitment to his lapsometre with which assuaged the disease of the soul and became "one of the few left, yes, a psychiatrist, an old fashioned physician of the soul, one the last survivors in a horde of Texas brain mechanic's, M I T neurone circuitrists" (T.S. 16) in science and the unshakable. Prison does wonders for Dr. More. "Two years in the clink has taught me a thing or two' Dr. More tells," I don't have to be in a demonic hurry as I used to be. I don't have to plumb the depths of modern man.....nor worry about the human condition My scale is smaller (T.S. 67). In prison, Dr. More learned detachment and cultivated a mild low-grade curiosity. His megalomania was shattered by the prison life and instead of striking pacts with the devil to save the world, he learned to lead a small life and notice small things. "In a word", Dr. More comments, "prison restored my humanity if not my faith.....I make a good deal of people, give them considerable thoughts....I listen to them carefully" (T.S. 81).

Chastened by the prison life and armed with new pedagogy, vigour, and views that could work miracles in society, Dr. More steps out into the world. The new world, he finds madder, more frenzied, faddish, schism riddled and everyone dancing after a new messiah. Once out in the world, Dr. More feels himself adrift from his life, cut off from others including his family members and unable to define his very life in authentic action against the powerful forces of the secular world. The world becomes too much for him and so he withdraws to his parish Felicinia. As Dr. More continues his practice in the parish he notices that "something strange is occurring in our region. I have noticed it both in the patients I have treated and in ordinary encounters with people". Dr. More notices "certain small clinical changes" among the people. (T.S. 1). Dr. More realizes that he has "stumbled on to something" (T.S. 4). Feliciana parish is threatened by a utopian social engineering conspiracy that tries to re-create a society free from the causes of human misery and unhappiness. Dr. More notices that his patients display a peculiar loss of self, characterized by their attenuated speech patterns. They speak in fragmented sentences and answer questions out of contexts. They speak like developmentally disabled children without any self-awareness or a full understanding of their situation. In language, they sounded like "Chimp Lama" (T.S. 22). They have become comically overt and animals like "a very dead rat with a drop of blood hanging like a ruby from its nose" (T.S. 4). To them, as Fr. Smith, the companion of Dr. More, remarks "words no longer signify, because the words have been deprived of their meaning" (T.S. 118). For Percy, the literal loss of the capacity of the people to use triadic signs and language is a symbol of the widespread loss of the self in the modern world in the late twentieth century. Like the doses of heavy sodium that zap self-awareness, the world's constant production of immediate dyadic pleasures-pleasures like pornography and roller coasters that produce a direct physiological response-reduces the population's capacity to use triadic signs. He sees clues and slight differences that point toward a peculiar sickness or loss of self among the inhabitants. His former patients do not exhibit their "old terrors" but appear to be cured of them. Instead of anxiety and discontent, they display "a mild vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits" (T.S. 21). The Thanatos syndrome looms large over their lives. Dr. More remarks that "it is not Principalities and Powers that reign the last days of America but that "Azazel' the demon that has let loose the death syndrome" ushering in a new age- the age of the Thanatos syndrome (T.S. 64). The symptoms of his patients provide

Dr. More the clues and signs for “detecting its significance in a network of implications” (Cuba 257). He considers it his obligation as a psychiatrist to rummage through the realm of Azazel for the various names of death so that in the end Eros may triumph over the Thanatos and thus, discover the clues to meaningful existence with body and soul intact in the modern technological society. Through detective spy work, More unearths the perpetrators behind the community's loss of self and the syndrome of death. To his dismay and surprise, More discovers that Bob Comeaux and Van Dorn have been adding heavy sodium to the water supply as part of a project called 'Blue Boy' to decrease crime and misery and increase well-being and happiness. The Blue Boy project enjoys significant and remarkable success. It reduces many social evils, such as crime, unemployment, suicide, violence, domestic abuse, teenage pregnancies, the spread of AIDS, drug use, anal intercourse, gays and lesbians, depression, anxiety, and suicide, in short, all the maladies affecting the modern man. The Blue Boy project aims at affecting the death of the human race by creating a race of computers. They aim to create the perfect man, the New Adam thereby fulfilling the American dream. Dr. More approaches them to join him in his work of healing the patients, ministering to the suffering, improving the quality of the individual regardless of race, creed or national origin” (T.S. 190) “by talking and listening, mostly, listening to another troubled for months, years..... (T.S. 13). Dr. Bob, however, invites Dr. More to join their team to engineer a good life for all devoid of any anxiety, worry, or despair and offers him a coveted position and heavy salary. Dr. More refuses to join their team and be “the devil's advocate” (T.S. 193), Dr. Bob tells him: “what he does is following the laws of the Supreme Court, respecting the rights of the family, the consensus of child psychologists, the rights of the unwanted child not to have to suffer a life of suffering and abuse.; the rights of the unwanted aged to a life with dignity and a death with dignity” (T.S. 199). They once again entice Dr. More to join the team: “Tom, We need you. We want you on the team. We need your old sour, sardonic savvy to keep us honest” (T.S. 201). Their arguments outwardly seem convincing to a common man, but Dr. More is not convinced, for Dr. More, like his creator, Walker Percy, understands the larger implications of their meddling with free will, the right of the individual to pursue his rights and thoughts to discover his self. Dr. More, though, dislikes Comeaux and Van Dorn's methods initially seem impressed with their results. He flounders to provide a counterargument to Comeaux and Van Dorn's claim that their methods have superseded his own. Surprised and perplexed by the world of Comeaux and Van Dorn, Dr. More visits Father Smith, whom he had met in the mental asylum in *Love in the Ruins*. Fr. Rinaldo Smith is “Ezekiel's watchman unto the house of Israel” (*Ezekiel* 33: 19) who has closed himself in a fire tower to do penance for the wrong-headedness of the world. Father Smith is Percy's true spokesman who “represents Percy's most uncompromising attack on science.” (Deems 137). Fr. Smith sees through the scientists' claims and links their abstracted love of humanity and eugenic policies to the Third Reich. If Dr. More fails to tell Comeaux that what they are doing is wrong, Father Smith uncompromisingly condemns and refutes Comeaux and Van Dorn's project. Whereas, Dr. More is compromised by his breakthrough research on heavy sodium that made Blue Boy possible and his own ambivalent sympathies with Comeaux's goal to reduce human suffering and improve the human lot, Father Smith staunchly and adamantly opposes the project. So Fr. Smith angrily asks Dr. More: “Do you know Where tenderness always leads To the gas chamber..... Tenderness is the first disguise of the murderer” (T.S. 128). What usually begins as a quality improvement programme normally ends up in disaster and extermination. Such projects as the Blue Boy Project are real menaces to human beings. Such projects lay one's life in danger and uprooted from its ontological moorings. Therefore, such projects, Fr. Smith cautions, should be nipped in the bud, so that mankind can live without the fear of the Thanatos. As Percy discloses to his interviewer, McCombs: “Once you ignore the uniqueness and sacredness of the individual human being and set up abstract ideas for the improvement of society, then the terminus is the Gas Chamber” (810) because scientist's view is only “a mishmash view of man, a slap-up model put together of disparate bits and pieces” (M. B 19).

Fired by the words and ire of Fr. Smith who serves as “a mask for Percy, the prophet or shaman who leads the readers into a new world of moral awareness”, Dr. More determines to put an end to the Blue Boy Project (Hughes 6). Dr. More, allying himself with his cousin, Lucy Lipscomb, an epidemiologist, caves themselves in the upstairs of his old plantation home with a battery of computers to root out the evil with the roots. Dr. More detects that the root of the disease is the heavy sodium-induced drinking water, having the power to quietly suppressing the troubleshooting areas of the cerebral cortex, secretly funneled from a nearby nuclear plant. Dr. More and Lucy together raid the Blue Boy Project at Bell Ame and demand Dr. Bob to close down the project. Dr. More can never agree with Bob's project of treating “the ills of the society by dumping stuff [sodium] in the water supply” (*T.S.* 218). Yet in the heart of heart, Dr. More is mesmerized by the scientific as well as the social success of the Blue Boy Project. It has reduced crime by 80%, child abuse by 87% teenage suicide by 95%, wife battering by 73% teenage pregnancy by 85%, and AIDS by 76% (*T.S.* 191). Noticing Dr. Nore wavering between the phantasmagoric world of the project and the words of Fr. Smith, Dr. Bob, once again invites him to join the project, “attack us from your own expertise. Name one thing wrong we are doing” (*T S* 193). After all, “we live by the same lights, share certain basic assumptions and goals”.((*TS* 190). Dr. Bob also threatens to send Dr. More back to prison for parole violence, if he does not join them.

Dr. More falls into an ordeal just like every Percyian hero. Utterly confused and unable to make a decision, Dr. More once again rushes to Fr. Smith and requests his help to climb out of the ordeal. Fr. Smith just listens to him and does just nothing to buck up his courage. He just says: “in the end, one must choose - given the chance. Choose what”? Dr. More retorts. “Life or Death, what else”? the priest replies (*TS* 257). The casual comment of Fr. Smith puts an end to Dr. More's ordeal. Fr. Smith is uncompromisingly opposed to the scientists and has no doubt that every human being has dignity based on being a creature of God, created in his image and called to fulfill his vocation toward beatitude. Without a strong foundation that consents for dignity and sovereignty, no such projects can increase human happiness. Fully grasping the sly undercurrents of the Machiavellian projects of Dr. Bob, Dr. More rejects their alluring and clandestine world. He chooses Eros over the Thanatos and thereby ends his complicity as a scientist who tolerates a new brand of fascism. Dr. More brings people together, unites them, and shows them how they can help each other. He exposes the dangers of the Blue Boy project to the public and forces Dr. Bob to close down the centre. Dr. More blows up the water tank and allows Dr. Bob to exit quietly. More knows that killing Comeaux and Van Dorn will not remove the human longing for death and self-destruction. The Comeaux and Van Dorn of the world cannot be defeated entirely, nor can the impulse toward death be located within specific individuals whose disposal will set the world aright. More explains: “We know something: movies and TV don't know. Here's where movies and TV go wrong. You don't shoot X for what he did to Y, even though he deserves shooting. You allow X a way out so he can help Y” (*TS* 332). More's strategy is not to convince someone that he is in need of someone else, but to show him how he can help another person. The ordeal at Bell Ame and the destruction of the project purge Dr. More from the world's deadly kindness and fascination toward the Thanatos. The water contaminated with heavy sodium that flows through the taps of Felicinia is only one of the demons that operate in the world. The age is still held captive for such demons as Bob Comeaux and Van Dorn do continue to exist and unleash terrifying demons of tender-heartedness in the guise to better the world and man's happiness. The century itself is sick unto death since the true causes of the disease are not psychological alone but also spiritual. His responsibility, Dr. More recognizes is to combat demonism here and help those possessed by it so that he can create a world where Eros triumphs over the Thanatos. Dr. More acknowledges as Flannery O'Connor remarks, “our salvation is a drama played out with the devil which is not simply a generalized evil but an evil intelligence determined on its own supremacy” (168). His job, then, as a psychiatrist, is to listen to his patients, drop his demonic hurry and try “to get at the root of the trouble, at the soul's own secrets by venturing into the heart of darkness by

talking and listening, most listening, to another troubled human for months, years" (*T S* 13). With this purport, Dr. More opens once again St. Martha's Hospital that he had closed down in *Love in the Ruins* to work with his patients instead of looking for signs of the end of the world. He resolves to "listen to people see how they stick to themselves in the world, hand them along always on their dark journey and be handed along (*M.G* 233). Dr. More's approach, as Jon Young remarks "is less like a cure and more like a process involving mutuality and reciprocity between the physician and the patient" (134). Dr. Thomas More decides, as William Alexander Percy remarks, "to make the world a better place to live in, so that as he is able - always remembering the results will be infinitesimal and attend to one's own soul" (213). Dr. More comprehends the deficiencies of the current public discourses that stem from flaws within the political order's understanding of the human person. The doctrine of rights, because it is incomplete, does not sufficiently protect individuals who are considered lacking in self-sufficiency from oppression. Our Public discourses rely too heavily on an abstract concept of the individual as an independent, self-sufficient being in whom autonomy is the essential characteristic. Giving primacy to the preservation of individual autonomy mistakes the autonomous self, a theoretical creation, for the good of the whole person. Walker Percy enunciates this peculiar phenomenon in *Lost in the Cosmos*:

The self sees itself as a sovereign and individual consciousness, liberated by education from the traditional bonds of religion, by democracy from the strictures of class, by technology from the drudgery of poverty and by self-knowledge from the tyranny of the consciousness and therefore free to pursue its own destiny without God. (13)

Dr. More, thus, conquers the Thanatos syndrome and recognizes himself as not a genius intending to set right the world but by a Self under God reveling in the beauty of Eros. (13).

Percy points to the search with our fellow wayfarers as the means for us to find peaceful respite now, in company and conversation with others and living in hope of happiness. The wish of his creator, Walker Percy, the fiery words of Fr. Smith and tending the vilifications of Dr. Bob Comeux and Van Dorn convince Dr. More that consciousness and concern for others are the only effective tools to combat the earthly demons who jeopardize the uniqueness of the individual and to achieve the victory of Eros over Thanatos. Dr. More's Odyssey over the darkling planes of 20th century where ignorant armies fight by night, Kissel comments, offers Dr. More the possibility "to affirm life over death, permanence over inconstancy, and the significance of the individual life upon which a constant relationship between two people is based" (131).

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