

ANALYSIS

The Thanatos Syndrome (1987)

Walker Percy

(1916-1990)

"In 1987, Percy published what many regard as his greatest achievement, *The Thanatos Syndrome*. This novel also revives a past Percy character, Dr. Tom More, fresh from a prison sentence for selling drugs to truck drivers, he discovers a fiendish plot to anesthetize the populace by drugging the drinking water of Feliciana Parish in Louisiana. Set in the 1990s, *The Thanatos Syndrome* represents Percy's strongest warning yet against a potential holocaust in Western culture because of its creeping acceptance of situational ethics at the expense of an eternal moral standard that regards all human life as meaningful and precious."

Bruce L. Edwards
"Walker Percy"
Cyclopedia of World Authors II
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 1175

"*The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) reintroduces Dr. Tom More, now back in Louisiana but only recently released from serving a term in prison for trafficking in controlled substances. Percy's plot, similar to that of a popular suspense thriller, has More discovering and indignantly frustrating an attempt by local physicians and engineers to render the populace inoffensive and amenable by doctoring the water supply, but the plot's function is satire, the immediate object of which is the series of atrocities committed in the name of science during World War II by Nazi physicians and technologists. Ultimately, the object of Percy's scorn here is Western civilization's apparent compliance in science's usurpation of the role civilization once accorded the transcendent, real or imagined, in human life.

Even admirers agreed that this last novel, for all its readability, shows signs of hasty writing and the profound weariness that overtook Percy in the years immediately preceding his death in 1990. Nevertheless, in style, tone, and attitude it was of a piece with the other six and contributes, if only minimally, to the unique position that he established for himself in southern literature."

J. A. Bryant Jr.
Twentieth-Century Southern Literature
(U Kentucky 1997) 236

"More takes Father Smith as a tentative model in working against this century of violence. The lapsed Catholic minimizes the significance of his occasionally attending Mass or assisting Father Smith at the liturgy, but More's participation indicates an ongoing reorientation toward the God who cares for victims. Indeed, at the end of the novel, when Father Smith sends More a cryptic invitation to serve in church on the Feast of the Epiphany, its signal words--'A Jewish girl, a visit from royalty. Gifts'--connect the Christmastide celebration with the priest's earlier reflections on the sign that could not be eliminated despite the Holocaust. The feast of the gift-bearing kings from the Orient remembers how the son of a Jewish mother was made manifest to the world even as Herod was pursuing a murderous campaign to eliminate his supposed rival. And it shadows forth a time when Jesus would be victimized under a sign that would mockingly reveal him as the King of the Jews. Percy does not make clear how More will answer Father Smith's request to help at Mass, for the spiritual wandering of this would-be disciple is ever open-ended. Instead, the novel leaves More on a journey toward the day that signifies a revelation amid a victimization, indeed a revelation of the whole victimage mechanism.

Dr. More's care for the victims of the foremost syndrome of his time suggests that he seeks to follow Father Smith and live beyond the scapegoating of the thanatos syndrome. As More helps the priest in tending to those dying from AIDS, the sick and the well form a mutually supportive community of talkers

and listeners: 'We do little more than visit with them, these haggard young men, listen, speak openly, we to them, and they to us, and we to each other in front of them, about them and about our own troubles, we being two old drunks and addled besides. They advise us about alcohol, diet, and suchlike. It seems to help them and us. At least they laugh at us.' The participants in this ministry find a therapeutic reciprocity in the semiotic bond that Percy studied and celebrated in all of his writing. This healing dialogue victimizes no signs and signifies no victims. The differences between 'we' and 'they,' between 'us' and 'them,' collapse in charity, for both patient and professional need help, give and get help, indeed get help by giving help. There is no mimetic strife, no unity against the excluded other, only a salutary mutuality of all those who are somewhere between life and death. After Father Smith decides to return to his fire tower, More must decide between joining a lucrative medical practice with Max or fostering such community by assuming the directorship of the hospice.

Although the novel never reveals More's decision, the issue confronts him with the Azazel convention once again. At the end of part 1, More reflected that Hebrew and Canaanite faith viewed Azazel as 'a demon who lived in the Syrian desert, a particularly barren region where even God's life-giving force was in short supply...a place of wantonness and freedom from God's commandments.' The thanatos syndrome created such a desert in More's Feliciana, where the waters ran with death, victims were regularly sent into the wilderness, and the most sacred laws were violated. More and Father Smith have begun to work toward a South where there are no more offerings for Azazel, no more offerings even for Yahweh, who, as Hosea (6:6) and Jesus (Matt. 9:13) recognized, desires mercy rather than sacrifice. If *The Thanatos Syndrome* ends with a predicament rather than with a definite resolution, perhaps the real decision about desire, violence, and divinity is not just More's alone."

Gary M. Ciuba
Desire, Violence, & Divinity in Modern Southern Fiction
(Louisiana State 2007) 244-45

Michael Hollister (2021)