

Life and Death Matters

The Thanatos Syndrome, by Walker Percy.
New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1987.

IN SPITE OF his six widely-read novels, his two works of nonfiction (with their original contributions to the study of language and the human psyche), and his two national literary awards, Walker Percy remains a figure on the fringes of the American literary establishment. When he wrote a letter on the subject of abortion to *The New York Times* recently, it never saw newsprint—spiked on the editor's desk. (Imagine this happening to a letter on Reaganomics from Gore Vidal, or on racial discrimination from Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.) This same newspaper, on the occasion of the publication of Percy's *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book*, wheeled out a big gun, novelist Francine du Plessix Gray, to fire a vitriolic review at the book. Nevertheless, a few weeks later, *Lost in the Cosmos* won the National Book Award—a rare, but well-deserved tribute to a compelling writer.

Walker Percy, who has many admirers among scholars and the average, "educated" reader, has encountered so much hostility precisely because his vision is resolutely at odds with the prevailing secular liberalism of the "New Class" intellectuals who dominate our cultural citadels. Indeed, I would venture to say that with the sole exception of Flannery O'Connor, whom Percy has repeatedly cited as a kindred spirit, no other American novelist in this century has more accurately diagnosed the spiritual crisis of modernity.

A Southerner and a Catholic, Percy has a profound knowledge of modern philosophy, psychology, and linguistics. Influenced as a young man by Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, he has developed a form of Christian exist-

tentialism that is at once sympathetic to, and critical of, the modern temper. Percy, like another of his mentors, the Catholic existentialist Gabriel Marcel, believes in the concept of *homo viator*, the notion that man is a wayfarer in the world, a pilgrim in need of a destination. But Percy does not engage in the cosmic melodrama that often seems to afflict French existentialists: both in his novels and satiric sketches, he catches perfectly the domesticated forms of despair that permeate the daily experience of suburbanites.

If Percy can be seen as an antagonist of liberals, he is equally tough on what often passes for conservatism today. Those who pretend that the West's ills can be cured through the purely political means of anti-Communist foreign policy and the unfettering of the free market are in fact *participating* in the modern malaise, according to Percy. Activists on Left and Right are caught up in abstractions; they avoid the fundamental questions about human nature: What is man? What is he made for? Where is he going? Thus the majority of politicians and intellectuals on both sides would rather avoid the "social issues"—abortion, euthanasia, the condition of the family—and get on with their managerial plans for the economy and international relations.

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Percy's vision goes deeper; he writes novels which dramatize the dictum that ideas have consequences ("Books matter," one of his protagonists says). His fiction hovers between the more intellectual content of satire and the more dramatic density of the traditional novel. Conservatives of a more philosophical bent, whose understanding of modernity has been shaped by such thinkers as Eric Voegelin, Richard Weaver, and Jacques Maritain, ought to read Percy's fiction. Given the recent popularity of his latest novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome*, it may be a good place to enter Percy's imaginative world.

The Thanatos Syndrome is set, like the TV series *Max Headroom*, "twenty minutes into the future." The protagonist is Thomas More, psychoanalyst and lapsed Catholic. He has just returned from two years at a minimum security prison for having sold mild doses of amphetamines to truck drivers to help them stay awake on their long cross-country runs. But, on his return to the prosperous (and frankly materialistic) Louisiana parish of Feliciana, More notices something odd about several of his former patients. Before his prison term these patients exhibited the classic anxieties and quirks of alienated and fearful human beings. But they now appear contented, sexually supercharged, gifted with total recall and mathematical genius. To More's alert eye, however, these people seem somewhat less than human: strangely docile, incapable of speech beyond two-word sentences—in short, their behavior is that of the pongids, the order of apes *below* the primates. Soon More is off in pursuit of the conspiracy behind this sweeping change in human behavior.

More's investigation uncovers suspicious behavior on the part of two leading scientists. Bob Comeaux, a psychiatrist, is the director of the Qualitarian Center at Fedville. Fedville is portrayed as a gleaming glass and concrete edifice where the federal bureaucracy operates its many agencies. The Qualitarian Center, which seeks to promote the "quality of life," performs operations known as "ped-euthanasia" and "gereuthanasia." These terms, covering what we would now call

abortion, infanticide, and euthanasia, are possible thanks to the Supreme Court ruling, *Doe v. Dade*, which stipulates that a fetus or newborn does not acquire rights as a human being until it is eighteen months old. Then there is John Van Dorn, a Renaissance man—scientist, nuclear engineer, educator, Olympic soccer coach, bridge champion. Both Van Dorn and Comeaux travel in the professional jetstream where science, federal bureaucracy and funding, and research-sponsoring foundations combine to create the therapeutic state.

It turns out that Comeaux and his colleagues have secretly been dumping quantities of heavy sodium isotope into the Feliciana water supply (although not that of Fedville). Ironically, it is the research done by More into the effects of heavy sodium on cortical function, that leads Comeaux to his experiment in altering human behavior. In short, the effects of heavy sodium are precisely what More, with his alertness to these symptoms, has found in his patients. When he is found out, Comeaux candidly admits his responsibility, but challenges More to criticize the good achieved by the experiment.

What would you say, Tom . . . if I gave you a magic wand you could wave over there [Baton Rouge and New Orleans] and overnight you could reduce crime in the streets by eighty-five percent? . . . Child abuse by eighty-seven percent. . . Teenage suicide by ninety-five percent. . . Teenage pregnancy by eighty-five percent. . .

This is precisely what Comeaux's experiment, code named "Blue Boy," has done. Even L.S.U. now has perfect winning seasons. The twist is that Comeaux's project has been undertaken secretly and without proper authorization out of fear that it would not have been approved.

More is incapable of arguing against Comeaux; he refuses, however, the lucrative offer to "join the team" because of his instinctive mistrust of Blue Boy. The only voice that speaks up against the forces represented by Comeaux and Van Dorn is that of Fr. Simon

Rinaldo Smith, a crazy alcoholic priest who runs a hospice for AIDS patients, deformed infants, the elderly, and the terminally ill. Fr. Smith is no paragon of virtue, but his own youthful admiration of the Nazis, and for several brilliant German psychologists who subsequently committed atrocities against children, has led him to be deeply distrustful of abstract schemes to benefit something known as Mankind. In fact, Fr. Smith sees an incipient Holocaust in the policies of Fedville. "Do you know where tenderness always leads?" he asks. "To the gas chamber."

The words are intentionally shocking; indeed, they are meant to be a form of shock treatment. The last thing either a liberal or a conservative wants to hear is that America is a proto-totalitarian state, outwardly prosperous and sophisticated, but rotten at the core. Like Tom More, who experiences both discomfort and embarrassment on hearing these words, we are more complicitous with evil than we would like to admit. Along with Malcolm Muggeridge, Percy is convinced that the West is afflicted with a death-wish, an estrangement from being itself. "In the end, one must choose—given the chance," says Fr. Smith. "Choose what?" More replies. "Life or death. What else?"

Percy's analysis of our culture is strikingly similar to that of the sociologist Philip Rieff. In his seminal work, *The Triumph of the Therapeutic*, Rieff argues that in the post-Christian and post-Freudian era, man no longer orients himself by moral disciplines which constitute community, but seeks instead his own, individual comfort. "Where family and nation once stood, or Church and Party," Rieff writes, "there will be hospital and theater too, the normative institutions of the next culture. . . . Religious man was born to be saved; psychological man was born to be pleased." In words that apply directly to the materialistic world portrayed in Percy's fiction, Rieff continues: "With their secondary needs automatically satisfied, men may no longer need to have something in common, as an end, to love. The organization of indifference may well succeed the organization of love, producing a culture at lower cost to individual energies."

As Percy depicts it, Fedville is the "organization of indifference" masquerading as "the organization of love." The Qualitarian Center exists to allow the culture to function "at lower cost to individual energies." That is why Comeaux is incapable of resisting the use of a "magic wand," despite the fact that it inevitably removes the unique personality of the individual and reduces him to the level of animality. The reaction to anxiety on the part of those who seek comfort is to retreat from the high moral demands which constitute human identity.

Rieff touches on another major theme of Percy's when he writes: "Compassionate communities, as distinct from welfare states, exist only where there is a rich symbolic life, shared, and demanding of the self a hard line limiting the range of desires." From his earliest published essays, Percy has called attention to the decay of language in our time. Fr. Smith emphasizes this loss of a rich, symbolic life when he contends that words have been "deprived" of their meaning in the modern world; when we speak of God, world, man, we hear sounds only, shorn of their evocative or denotative power. Without language that is attuned to experience, we are incapable of sharing a common life; we lapse into solipsism and anarchy. But a fragmented society can last only so long. Eventually men will seek a harsh, totalitarian order rather than disorder. In this novel Percy is exploring themes that obsessed another prophetic novelist and student of language, George Orwell.

In one sense, *The Thanatos Syndrome* poses the typical "what if" scenario we are accustomed to find in science fiction. But Percy's novel is in actuality a Swiftian satire on the abuse of science. As in the experiments of the "projectors" on the floating island of Laputa in *Gulliver's Travels*, Blue Boy is an application of an abstract solution to complex psychic and moral problems. At a deeper level, the novel probes the effects of the Faustian will to power which characterizes modernity. How is it that Renaissance men, like a Faustus or a German psychologist or a John Van Dorn, can combine intellectual brilliance and seeming altruism with inhuman

brutality? The answer is much the same as that given by the Grand Inquisitor in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*: better to bargain with the devil, exchanging human freedom, with all its anxieties and attendant responsibilities, for the "peace" of a regulated society. The twist to this arrangement, which the devil is careful not to divulge, is that by reducing man to the level of cattle, men become as expendable as cattle.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Percy is posing another uncomfortable question: are we

already employing "Blue Boy" solutions to our social and moral problems? The answer, of course, is up to the individual reader. Yet the novel, for all its ominous implications, ends on a note of cautious hope. Our neuroses and anxieties, much as we try to exorcize them with self-help books and anodynes of all sorts, stand as testimony to our humanness; they bespeak sin, guilt, responsibility, and the strange, persistent hope of redemption.

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