

LOST IN THE BAYOU: LANGUAGE THEORY AND *THE THANATOS SYNDROME*

by

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(Under the Direction of Hugh Ruppersburg)

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the role of Walker Percy's theories on language, derived from the writings of Charles Sanders Peirce, in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. The argument of this thesis is that the language use of individuals affected by heavy sodium poisoning can best be explained in the terms of Percy's language theories, even though those theories are not elaborated within the novel itself but in various non-fiction works by the author. One of the central tenets of Percy's theory on language is that human language is triadic whereas all other forms of communication (and, in fact, all other phenomena) are dyadic. Percy saw the tendency treat as dyadic the triadic behavior of language to be reductionist and dangerous, which is the commentary inherent in the language use of sodium-affected individuals in *The Thanatos Syndrome*.

INDEX WORDS: *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Charles Sanders Peirce, language use, triadic, dyadic, semiotics, *Lost in the Cosmos*

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father, who never forced me to major in something marketable.

To my wife, who married me regardless.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Although, Walker Percy wrote *The Thanatos Syndrome* as a sequel to his 1971 novel, *Love in the Ruins*, he did not intend to continue writing in the “far out, sci-fi” register of his earlier effort. Percy wanted to “turn things around” instead and take his sequel in a different direction (*Conversations* 206). No more crumbling and factionalized United States surrendering to the ivy. No more impending clouds of toxic fallout or being shot at during breakfast by Bantu guerillas. No more visits by the quasi-supernatural devil-figure Art Immelman. No, in *The Thanatos Syndrome* at least, our protagonist Dr. More was to lead a more conventional life, without even his beloved ontological lapsometer, which had played a central role in his first story.

This reorientation had thematic import, of course. When Percy excised from *The Thanatos Syndrome* all of the “futuristic gimmickry” of *Ruins*, he stopped writing a dystopian novel, a book in the same prophetic vein of *1984* or *Brave New World*, and began writing a “much more contemporary” work of social commentary (206). He changed from predicting future ideas and practices to criticizing ones already in ascendance in the late 1980s. *Syndrome*, to be sure, is a piece of social commentary—a combative and ambitious piece at that. In the interview quoted above, Percy characterized *The Thanatos Syndrome* as his “most political novel... to date” (*Conversations* 206). In a later interview he admitted that “anger” was the source of its satire (*Signposts* 394). For Percy, the target of that anger was nothing less than the entire twentieth century, what he elsewhere called “The Century of the Love of Death” (*The Second Coming* 271), a span of time that “should have been the greatest triumph of civilization

of all time” but that instead turned out to be “the most murderous century of all history” (*Conversations* 242).

The Thanatos Syndrome launches this grand indictment in grand terms. It makes recurrent comparisons of America to the Weimar Republic, employs frequent Nazi imagery, and features the sprawling footnotes, confessions, and prophecies of Father Smith, all of which express anxiety about the future of the United States as well as regret over his own complicity in the atrocities of the Holocaust. But the novel also makes subtler criticisms of various aspects of the “death’s-head” of modern America (*The Second Coming* 271). Women’s liberation, tied up as it was for Percy with the issue of abortion, receives a few jabs in the character of Mickey LaFaye. The “New Age” gets a similar treatment in the characters of Father Kevin and Sister Therese. In a more serious vein, questions about the future of race relations in the South are raised by the dynamics between Chandra and Dr. More as well as those between Uncle Hugh and Vergil. Some critics have even noted the ecological commentary implicit in the sad state of the Feliciana bayou (*Signposts* 390).

Clearly, *The Thanatos Syndrome* makes its attack on modernity along a great many avenues. One of the most important avenues for Percy’s criticism, however, is as yet unmentioned. This avenue is Dr. More’s occupation itself: psychiatry. In fact, Percy mentioned his desire to write about modern psychology as one of the determining factors in his decision to discontinue the science fiction elements that *Love in the Ruins* had included. In his words:

I wanted to have a fellow who was somewhat old-fashioned, a practical psychoanalyst. Instead of using the lapsometer, he had gone back to his roots of Freud and Jung... to talking and listening to people, mostly listening. I wanted to use

that as a device to view current technology, which is actually going on.

(*Conversations* 206)

He went on to explain that “most psychiatry, more and more, has to do with the use of drugs, endorphins to treat emotional disorders” (206). This trend of treating complex psychological problems with simple chemical solutions is, for Percy, indicative of a much more fundamental flaw in the modern “theory of man,¹” a misappraisal of humankind. It is, furthermore, not simply a misunderstanding that denigrates life. It is a misunderstanding that propagates death.

In the exposition of the novel, More introduces this conflict between old-fashioned and then-contemporary approaches to psychiatry, albeit in less dramatic terms than those Percy used in interviews about *The Thanatos Syndrome*. More simply owns up to being, “the only poor physician in town, the only one who doesn’t drive a Mercedes or a BMW” (13). The reason for this is that he, and “old-fashioned shrinks” in general, have been “mostly superseded by brain engineers, neuropharmacologists” and “chemists of the synapses” (13). Where his ilk, over months and even years, take on the “quixotic quest of pursuing the secret of [their patient’s] very self,” their new-generation counterparts “can prescribe a chemical and overnight turn a haunted soul into a bustling little body” (13). More describes this predicament with characteristic resignation. He doesn’t seem to take the failure of his practice too personally, and he finishes the description of his own

¹ In his essay “The Fateful Rift: the San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind,” Percy claims that “our view of the world, which we get consciously or unconsciously from modern science, is radically incoherent” (*Signposts* 271). He went on to explain that science has not accounted for “that which is distinctive in human behavior, language, art,” and “thought itself” (288). The central flaw, then, of the modern theory of man is that it ignores everything that makes a human a human and instead treats the individual as if he or she were simply an organism responding to environmental stimuli, presumably so that the individual still falls under the “standard scientific paradigm which has been sovereign for three hundred years” (288).

increasing irrelevance with the question: “And why not?” (13). Why not, if the new approach is so immediate and so effective? Why not leave off with all this tedious work on the couch and just “engineer” the patients into the resolutions they seek?

In a sense, the entire plot of the *The Thanatos Syndrome* serves as Percy’s answer to this question. The Blue Boy scheme is brain engineering on a massive scale. It is, in fact, simply a means by which the *social* engineers—Van Dorn, Comeaux, et. al.—can prescribe a drug to an entire parish. It is a death-propagating chemical solution. And against this scheme, Percy sets his decidedly low-key protagonist, Dr. More, whose approach, although not as glamorous or efficient as that of the new-school psychiatrists’, treats the individual patient in all the complexity of his or her humanity.

Admittedly, the particular brand of death that Blue Boy spreads is not ostensibly death. The project, in fact, succeeds by a number of different measurements. Crime rates in Feliciana drop, as do rates of teenage pregnancy. SAT scores shoot up in Van Dorn’s academy, and the affected students at the LSU school of engineering “no longer use calculators” due to some of the more exotic results of the poisoning (195). Even the LSU football team has benefitted from Blue Boy. The sodium renders them “psyched up but never psyched out” (195), and they have gone three seasons without a point scored against them. It seems, then, that on many levels the social engineers have exceeded even their own high expectations. *The Thanatos Syndrome*, however, questions that success and suggests that Blue Boy has ushered in death rather than a new life of social stability. The evidences of that failure are simply more subtle than the evidences of success.

In the end, it is a comparison of the novel with Percy’s non-fiction that makes this case most strongly. In other words, an analysis of the language use of the heavy sodium affected

individuals in *Syndrome*, one that applies the theories of language that Percy inherited from Charles Peirce, indicates that Blue Boy did not simply diminish the consciousness of the individuals that it medicated but that it annihilated them entirely. It suggests that Blue Boy participates in “The Century of the Love of Death” in a serious and unsettling way.

CHAPTER 2

PREVIOUS CRITICISM OF *THE THANATOS SYNDROME*

The Thanatos Syndrome was not warmly received by the literary world. Reviewers and critics alike have taken issue with it, in part or in whole. As J. Donald Crowley says, in his book *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, *Syndrome* produced “disparate opinions” in its early readers. Some took issue with its “creaky plot machinery,” but others were awed by the “sheer intelligence alive on every page” (13). The original reception was split, but eventually a more thorough dismissal of the work came from John Edward Hardy’s *The Fiction of Walker Percy*.

Hardy’s examination of the problems in *Syndrome* begins with a section entitled “Time and Place,” wherein Hardy sets out to discuss several of the discontinuities between *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*. Hardy writes, “One of the curiosities of this novel as „futuristic“ fiction is that the culture it represents... seems in some respects less rather than more advanced than the one dealt with in *Love in the Ruins*” (228). In light of what we have discussed previously about Percy’s conscious attempt to break with the style of *Ruins*, these differences (and several of the others Hardy mentions) might not seem so curious. But Hardy seems to interpret them as symptomatic of a sort of shoddiness that invades even aesthetic and thematic endeavors in the novel as well. He takes, for instance, a rather dim view of Percy’s treatment of women and blacks and suggests that there is an uncharacteristic slackness in the plot. After all, he argues, there is “never any doubt that Tom will be able to outwit such a pair of obvious phonies as Van Dorn and Comeaux” (241) while characters like Lucy who “exhaust their usefulness to Tom” tend to be “quietly retired to the background” (238). Certainly the Percy of *The Moviegoer* or *Lancelot* would not have plotted so clumsily. Ultimately, many critics would

come to share Hardy's assessment of *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In a 1996 essay on the subject Richard T. Martin states, somewhat euphemistically perhaps, that Hardy was "not alone in deeming the work inferior to Percy's earlier novels" (209).

Despite its somewhat ambivalent reception, there have still been scholarly studies of the novel. Many of these works characterize the novel as essentially Catholic, highlighting the highly expanded role that Father Smith now plays (compared to his more modest involvement in *Love in the Ruins*), as well as More's participation in Mass near the end of the novel. Others focus on the Holocaust imagery throughout *Syndrome*, with an eye towards Percy's emphatic dictum: "Tenderness leads to the gas chamber" (360). Almost all of them, however, see the work as contrarian, a work that takes to task all thinking, "positivist and nominalist, [that] by attending only to linear causality misconstrues the more complicated relations of mind to matter, subject to object, world to environment, function to ontology, and self to self" (Walter 603). In this assessment, *The Thanatos Syndrome* coheres nicely with the greater body of Percy's work, which, in Crowley's words, "set[s] about diagnosing—and engaging the reader actively to diagnose—the elemental malaise of the postmodern consciousness" (3). It also agrees with Percy's own description of *Syndrome*, offered towards the close of the above-quoted interview with Abadi-Nagi. There Percy explained that *The Thanatos Syndrome* is indeed a combative novel, written against "the widespread and ongoing devaluation of human life in the Western world" and the flourishing of those "certain hidden dogma" in science that lead to such a devaluation.

There has even been work on language use in the novel, some of it specific to the sodium-affected individuals therein, all of it well-researched and resonant with the whole of Percy's oeuvre. Two exemplary treatments of the significance of changes in affected individuals"

speech can be found in Gary M. Cuba's *Walker Percy: Books of Revelations* and Allen Pridgen's *Walker Percy's Sacramental Landscapes*.

In his book, Pridgen characterizes the impoverishment of project Blue Boy's victims as a loss of the "ability to name an experience" (193). "Perhaps the single most important idea in Percy's epistemology," according to Pridgen is that the loss of this ability, this power, "causes a subsequent impoverishment of consciousness and being" (193). In other words, if an individual cannot name anything, that individual cannot participate in the "language transactions with others" by which the "self locates who and where it is" (193). He or she is excluded from the communion of human intersubjectivity and thus distanced, in general, from his or her own humanity.

Cuba describes the effects of heavy sodium poisoning in only slightly different terms. In his explanation, "the novel's subhuman speakers cannot perform one of the essentially human activities for Percy: tell stories" (264). Although his central metaphor for affected individuals is that of a computer or an automaton (which differs from Pridgen's metaphor, borrowed from *Love in the Ruins*, of "angelism-bestialism"), he also points out that the chief loss suffered by those individuals is their ability "make connections," that they have no share in those human occupations of "hourly reciprocity, subtly receiving messages, making sense, sharing" (264). For both of these critics, then, the effect of heavy sodium is that it severs its victims' ties with other selves, setting the one self adrift from all of the other selves whom it might name and by whom it might be named in return.

Pridgen rightly acknowledges that this idea of the danger of a "withdrawal from the actualities of human experience" is something that Percy owes to Gabriel Marcel (193). Marcel, as well as other "Christian existentialists" such as Heidegger and Kierkegaard, "deeply

influenced Mr. Percy's work" (*Critical Essays* 67), which was itself widely identified as Catholic and existential (*Signposts* 375). In the existentialist scheme, intersubjectivity is critically important to the individual. It is a source of both meaning and identity. In Gabriel Marcel's scheme, in particular, one's own identity can never be worked out on one's own. The individual may name everything in the universe with an appropriate symbol, but there is no symbol available for him- or herself: "the one thing in the world which by its very nature is not susceptible to a stable symbolic transformation is" one's self (*The Message in the Bottle* 283). In other words, the self may look outward to behold and name everything else in the cosmos, but it may not look inward to behold or name itself. This task, the naming of one's self, falls to the other individuals in the community, those who can properly see that self in the first place. The heavy sodium of project Blue Boy, however, denies its victims their ability to participate in this exchange. It severs them from intersubjectivity, setting them adrift and rendering genuine self-knowledge impossible.

Pridgen and Cuba, then, do justice both to the text of *The Thanatos Syndrome* and to the philosophical tradition to which Percy attached himself. They also both provide interpretations of the syndrome that are consistent with the novel's status as an attack on the scientific reductionism of the twentieth century. Percy notes in his essay "Semiotic and a Theory of Knowledge" that "the empirical mind can make very little of this entity „intersubjectivity," and the behaviorist nothing at all" (*The Message* 258). It would not be unexpected, then, to find that the essentially behaviorist social engineering of Van Dorn and company disregards that "entity" and actually eliminates it from the society that they are attempting to improve.

Thus, the criticism on the linguistic idiosyncrasies in *The Thanatos Syndrome* has so far been genuinely insightful. It seems to be a fundamentally accurate assessment of how the Blue

Boy project ultimately impoverishes Feliciano parish, insofar as it interprets the language use of the affected individuals as evidence of their alienation from the normal course of human affairs. There is, however, more to be said about the idiosyncrasies themselves. There is more to be said about the proximal linguistic causes of those ultimate effects, and there is a thinker to whom Percy acknowledges an even deeper debt than Gabriel Marcel and the other Christian existentialists—at least as far as matters of language are concerned. That thinker is, of course, Charles Sanders Peirce, who was an implicit subject in much of Percy's fiction and an explicit one in much of his non-fiction.

CHAPTER 3

FICTION AND NON-FICTION FOR PERCY

In a 1962 interview for *The Charlotte Observer*, Walker Percy described his workday as a two-part endeavor: “I work three hours in the morning on fiction... and a couple hours in the afternoon on non-fiction” (*Conversations* 4). He went on to suggest that he considered himself a writer in the “French tradition” (4) rather than the Southern tradition, with which Percy—his affection for Dixie beer, for crawfish, and for bourbon well-documented—seems more commonly identified.

What Percy meant by writing in the “French tradition” and what his two-part workday illustrates is a commitment to expression “in the two forms, art and philosophy” with “one serving the other, art illustrating ideas and ideas in turn fecundating art” (4). His career in letters certainly bears out this duality. Percy’s literary achievements are well known, but, in fact, his essays “written for literary, philosophical, and psychiatric quarterlies” (4) both ante-date and post-date their novelistic counterparts. A look at the periodicals that published those essays illustrates the breadth of the interests that motivated him. Percy was published in, among other journals, *Thought*, *Psychiatry*, *The Journal of Philosophy*, *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, and even *Chronicles*, a monthly magazine on U.S. politics and culture. Contributions such as these persisted throughout Percy’s career. Even in the final years of his life, after *The Thanatos Syndrome* in 1987, Percy was still producing works on philosophy, psychology, theology, and related fields.

Clearly Walker Percy approached his non-fiction, his ideas, with the same seriousness in which he approached his fiction, allotting them both their share of time and energy, allowing

them to inform one another. And one of the topics on which Percy contributed a number of his ideas was the study of language. With various theoretical approaches—psychiatric, linguistic, semiotic—Percy returned to the human capacity for language again and again. His collection of nonfiction, *The Message in the Bottle*, testifies to this “recurrent interest” in “the nature of human communication” and to the “longevity of [his] curiosity” towards it (*Message*, author’s note). The essays published therein were all written over the years from 1954 to 1975, and every one addresses the topic of the book’s extended title, *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*. In his only novel-length work of nonfiction, *Lost in the Cosmos*, musings on language play a similarly prominent role. There, they comprise “an intermezzo of some forty pages” about semiotics², complete with diagrams, Byzantine footnotes, and references to thinkers from Descartes to Heidegger. Language, in Percy, is central, both as art and as an object of scientific inquiry; it fascinated him. In fact, in one of his later interviews, Percy was asked (if he were allowed to “start over”) what he might do differently the second time around. Percy’s reply: “I might study linguistics...” (*Signposts*, 374).

It is important to note here that what Percy meant by “linguistics” is not what linguistics typically means in universities today. Percy didn’t concern himself particularly with philology or historical linguistics. He did not formally investigate grammar or syntax. He was a doctor and a novelist, not an academic linguist, and, while he was certainly conversant with linguistic luminaries from Saussure to Chomsky, he often expressed the sentiment that linguistics as a discipline had lost itself somewhere along the way. In the interview quoted above, he specified

² Traditionally the study of semiotics is much broader than the study of language *per se*, including “signs and symbols as they operate in various fields” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Percy’s focus in semiotics, as this paper will show, is nevertheless primarily on language and secondarily on symbols in the more general sense.

that he would have liked to approach linguistics “with a fresh eye, like Newton watching the falling apple” (*Signposts* 374). He sets this Newtonian approach against the “current academic” approach, which to him seemed needlessly trammled by its own presuppositions. Elsewhere, Percy compared the typical linguist to a Renaissance Scholastic who had “spent thousands of man-hours inside [his] head trying to prove that Jupiter couldn’t have moons and that the earth was at the center of the universe.” What the world needed, in his words, was a “Galileo” of language, someone who would spend time observing the actual phenomenon rather than simply theorizing about it (421).

So what *did* Percy mean when he expressed an interest in linguistics? What exactly was he interested in? Percy was interested in language, which was to him a “discovery... different in kind from all the preceding events” in the entire “fifteen billion years of the life of the Cosmos” (94). Language interested Percy in part because of the singularity, the uniqueness, he perceived in it. Language was the most proximal cause, in Percy’s scheme, of human exceptionalism—not an effect of it. Part V of the intermezzo in *Lost in the Cosmos* states that “this [language] phenomenon may have occurred elsewhere in the Cosmos, or it may have occurred in other creatures on earth. We do not know³” (94). It’s the nature of language that is unique, the (for lack of a less vexed term) structure of language. And the uniqueness for Percy is exactly this: all of the other events in the Cosmos are dyadic. Language, however, is triadic. And it is here that Percy’s debt to Charles Peirce emerges.

³ Percy qualifies this agnosticism with the following: “But it is not known to have occurred elsewhere in the Cosmos and it has not been proved—despite heroic attempts with chimps, gorillas, and dolphins—to have occurred in other earth species” (*Lost in the Cosmos*, 94). A central argument of this paper will be that Percy believed that humanity *was* truly unique, singular, exceptional, etc., but it is important to remember that Percy, although a sincerely religious writer, did not consider human exceptionalism inevitable or a given or the explicit result of divine intervention. His conclusion that humankind was without analogy in the universe was an essentially scientific one, not an article of faith.

It is true, then, that Percy ruminated on problems of language for decades. And as we have just seen, what reviewer Phil McCombs said of Walker Percy's books is also true: "Every paragraph, virtually every phrase... is crafted to mesh with the intricate thinking of the author" (*Conversations* 189). It is therefore highly suggestive that Percy seemed to have Peirce and his linguistic theories in the forefront of his thoughts during the time when he was writing *The Thanatos Syndrome*. In a 1988 interview with McCombs, Percy was asked what his next book after *Syndrome* would be. Percy replied that he was "thinking of something in the line of semiotics, something about human communication, about language" (204). He went on to say that what he wanted to do was "something like J.D. Salinger did, that is, go into absolute seclusion, become a recluse for the next four years and work on Charles Peirce's triadic theory of language" (204). It seems reasonable to assume, then, that Peirce and his theory of language were already on Percy's mind as he was writing *The Thanatos Syndrome* just a year earlier.

CHAPTER 4

DYADS, TRIADS, AND LANGUAGE

Percy appropriated the aforementioned terms “dyadic” and “triadic” from the theories of Charles Sanders Peirce, a 19th century American scientist, logician, and philosopher. Charles Peirce enjoyed an illustrious career in the sciences, winning “international acclaim” for his work in the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey and earning professor- and lectureships from John Hopkins and Harvard University. But he also made “eminent contributions” to fields outside his own. *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, in fact, goes so far as to call him the “most original and most versatile intellect the Americas have yet produced” on the strength of his accomplishments in philosophy and logic, in semiotics, linear algebra, psychology, philology, and early computer theory.

Walker Percy held Peirce in a similarly high regard, claiming that Peirce had “a hundred years ago... laid the groundwork for a coherent science of man” (277). Describing that groundwork, Percy writes:

Peirce said: „There is not one but two kinds of natural events in the world.“ One he called dyadic, the other triadic. Dyadic events are the familiar subject matter of the physical and biological sciences: A interacting with B... Even an event as complex as Pavlov’s conditioned dog salivating at the sound of a bell can be understood as a „complexus of dyads“...

But there is another kind of event, quite as real, quite as natural a phenomenon, quite as observable, which cannot be so understood; that is, cannot be construed by the dyadic model. It is language. (*Signposts* 279-280)

And it is this appraisal of language, this recognition of language's irreducibility by traditional scientific strategies, that forms the core of Percy's linguistics, which, in turn, helps him construct a theory of humankind that satisfies both a predisposition towards "scientific realism" (279) and a belief in the uniqueness of the human experience. But to this "theory of man," we will return later.

To understand the dyad/triad theory in greater detail, one may identify a triad simply by locating the third element in the phenomenon. That third element, in Percy and in Peirce, is meaning, and meaning not in the broadest sense of the word but "meaning of a special sort" (281).

In a dyadic event, a stimulus causes a response. Percy, perhaps hearkening back to Pavlov, frequently uses the example of a household dog to illustrate the stimulus/response dyad. One may say the word "Ball!" to a dog, and the dog (provided, of course, that it's been taught to associate the command and the action) will get up and go look for the ball. The word, even though it on some level shares the great complexity of human language, serves as a simple stimulus to a simple response. The word prompts the search. If, however, you were to say at random the word "Ball!" to another person, that person is not likely at all to get up and go look for one. Instead, he or she is likely to ask "What about a ball?" (*The Message*, 203). In this instance, the word creates no simple response. On the contrary, it introduces that previously-mentioned complexity of the language. It "sets the object at a distance and in a public zone, where it is beheld intersubjectively by the community of symbol users⁴" (203).

In the dog example, then, there are two elements: 1) the utterance from the speaker and 2) the reaction from the dog. In the human example, however, there are three: 1) the utterance from

⁴ This second example is a good illustration of what existentialist "intersubjectivity" looks like in practice. Two (or more) individuals are participating in the interpretation of a single referent.

the speaker, i.e. the word “ball,” which is “one of a class of sounds,” 2) the listener, who may or may not exhibit a reaction, and 3) the ball itself, which is “one of a class of experienced objects.” This latter arrangement, for Percy, forms a triad (*The Message* 305).

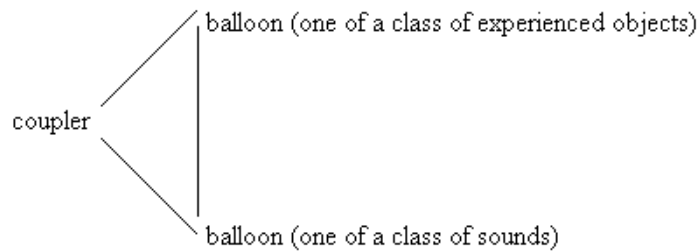
One obvious objection to this dyad/triad scheme is that the dyad doesn’t actually differ from the triad. One might point out that there are three terms in the dyad as well: the utterance, the dog’s reaction, and then, just as in the triad formulation, the ball. It might seem tautological to list the ball for the human but not for the dog, as if the conclusion that the human listener has a capacity for triadic thought prompted the model, rather than the model prompting that conclusion. Percy’s answer for this, however, has already been suggested above, and it is simply that, for the dog, the ball is accidental whereas for the human, the ball is the very thing being “beheld,” (mentally, physically, or both) by the symbol user. In other words, a properly conditioned dog will search for the ball on command whether or not there is a ball, just as Pavlov’s dogs eventually salivated at the bell even if there was no food present. The word elicits an action. For a symbol-using human, however, the ball will always be present (even if it’s present only as a concept). The word elicits no specific action, except the “coupling” of the utterance and the concept in the consciousness of the symbol user. So in the dyadic scheme, there is utterance and action (fetching). In the triadic scheme, there is utterance, the perceived referent of the utterance, and action (coupling).

Percy explains the coupling element in his essay “A Theory of Language”:⁵

For a long time I had supposed that the basic event which occurs when one utters
or understands a sentence must be triadic in nature... That is to say, sentences

⁵ The title of this essay is not quite as concise or dry as this sentence might lead one to believe. The full title is “A Theory of Language: A Martian View of Linguistic Theory, Plus the Discovery That an Explanatory Theory Does Not Presently Exist, Plus the Offering of a Crude Explanatory Model on the Theory That Something is Better than Nothing,” a classic example of, if nothing else, Percy’s flair for never-ending subtitles.

comprise two elements which much be coupled by a coupler... Thus, when the father... points out an object and utters the sound *balloon* and the son looks and nods, an event of the order of that shown in [the figure below] must occur somewhere inside both father and son.



(324—325)

This coupling is what generates the “meaning of a special sort” that Percy considers the hallmark of triadic behavior, and this coupler is the agent who performs it. It is an interior action, not an exterior reaction.

So these principles are the essential ones to Percy’s linguistic theories. Language is a physical phenomenon available to scientific observation and analysis. Nevertheless, language functions in a way that is qualitatively different from all other (known) physical phenomena. This difference derives from the triadic nature of language, which is distinguished from the dyadic nature of other phenomena. At the apex of the language triad is the “coupler,” the agent present in a triadic process that is not present in a dyadic process.

To this theory may be added one more important tenet. As mentioned above, Percy did not necessarily believe that human beings, *homo sapiens*, were the only beings in the cosmos capable of triadic thought. *Homo sapiens* were simply the only species in which Percy considered triadic behavior to have been conclusively demonstrated. The connection between humanity and the triad is even more fundamental, however, for Percy. In his understanding,

language is not only the source of human exceptionalism; language is the source of human *consciousness*.

In “A Theory of Language,” published in 1975, Percy did not elaborate much on that “apex of the triangle,” the “coupler” (327). He called it a “complete mystery” and merely *suggested* that it might be “a „self,” or some neurophysiological correlate thereof” (327). By *Lost in the Cosmos* in 1983, though, Percy was evidently ready to talk more explicitly on the subject. There he calls it a self, a “sign⁶-user”, and sets it against the non-self of “signal-using organisms” in the rest of the animal kingdom: “The signal-using organism has an environment. The sign-user has an environment, but it also has a *world*” (99). This is an important distinction for Percy, implying dramatic differences between the signal-user and the sign-user:

An organism exists in its environment in only one mode, that of an open system responding to those segments of its environment to which it is genetically programmed to respond or to which it has learned to respond.

But a self must be *placed* in a world. It cannot *not* be placed. If it chooses by default to not be placed, then its placement is that of not choosing to be placed.
(110)

For Percy, this is the very picture of the human condition, of human consciousness. We are uniquely (so far as we know) aware of our own predicament. Our awareness extends beyond the mere exigencies of our environment. We are not exempt from those exigencies, of course. We simply have other motives, other directives, other preoccupations in addition to them. We negotiate our place in the world, assessing, reassessing, searching, enduring manifold setbacks and false-starts and miseries throughout the whole project of placement. It is rare, in Percy’s

⁶ This thesis will, following Percy’s lead, use the words “sign” and “symbol” interchangeably and will use both to denote a triadic behavior or event. Likewise, this thesis will use the word “signal” and the phrase “stimulus response” interchangeably and will use both to denote a dyadic behavior or event.

view, that anyone succeeds in a successful placement of themselves, in understanding their own predicament, and yet the drive to place ourselves is “a basic human need,⁷” (*The Message* 296) something for which we all⁸ suffer to one extent or another.

And this situation too is a function of the triad. It is a function of perceiving that special sort of meaning which is fundamentally different from a mere stimulus—and of our reactions to that perception. This is the consciousness in which every human participates, both generated and preserved by our ability to traffic in symbols.

⁷ Percy borrows this phrase from Suzanne Langer’s *Philosophy in a New Key*, but he does not accept her version of that need *in toto*. For Langer, the human need to symbolize (themselves, others, the world, etc.) is a need like “sex, hunger, defense, etc.” (*The Message* 295). Percy, on the other hand, sees it more or less as a byproduct of the process by which an individual attempts to “know” (295) the world. It is not a biological drive as much as it is a function of attempting to name *anything* in the first place. For a fuller discussion of how naming anything leads to an attempt to name *everything* (and eventually one’s own self), see the *Lost in the Cosmos* intermezzo, section XI.

⁸ This “all” can be qualified to extend only denizens of the modern, Western world, where “the passing of the cosmological myths and the fading of Christianity as a guarantor of the identity of the self” ensures that we remain “dislocated” (*Lost in the Cosmos* 12).

CHAPTER 5

THE SYNDROME OF *THE THANATOS SYNDROME*

The plot of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, as discussed earlier, picks up when Dr. Tom More returns home from a recently concluded prison sentence. His "two years in the clink have taught [him] a thing or two," namely that he needn't be in such a "demonic hurry" and that cultivating a certain "mild, low-grade curiosity" makes life quite a bit more manageable than thinking "that the world was going mad and that it was up to [him] to diagnose the madness and treat it" (67). More no longer thinks on that "grandiose, even Faustian" scale (67). Upon his return, he's more interested in small-scale peculiarities than sinister plots. Nevertheless, his new low-key, detail-oriented style leads him to discover just such a plot.

At the beginning of chapter one, Dr. More narrates that, "For some time now I have noticed 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" (1). More, true to his recent commitment to curiosity, pursues this "something strange" even as he tries to make passably smooth transition back into his old routine. He has to meet with Bob Comeaux and Max Gottlieb to work through some of the legal issues surrounding his medical license. He has to reintegrate himself into his family, which frankly seems to have done fine without him. He also has to see if he has any patients left for his psychiatric practice. But all the while he is compiling a list of little behavioral oddities that seemed to have inherited from the ivy vines of *Love in the Ruins* a tendency to crop up everywhere, unobserved by anyone but More. Eventually he begins to suspect, due to the regularity of these oddities, that they are symptoms of an as-yet-undiagnosed syndrome.

It is his cousin, Dr. Lucy Lipscomb, who finally takes Tom's intuitions seriously. She gives him access to a federal epidemiological database and helps him discover that elevated levels of heavy sodium in the blood are the common factor in everyone whom he has observed exhibiting symptoms.

From there, the plot takes a turn away from diagnosis and towards detective fiction. Tom works diligently to get to the bottom of the mysterious "Blue Boy" project which seems to be intentionally dumping heavy sodium into the municipal water supply of Feliciana parish. He uncovers the players behind it, who include Dr. Comeaux and his band of qualitarrians⁹ as well as a new arrival on the Louisiana scene, the genius "Renaissance man" (44) Dr. Van Dorn. Then he sets about trying to expose Blue Boy to the public, all the while trying to avoid a re-arrest that would stop him uncovering the scheme. And that's the basic conflict in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Dr. More's decidedly laid-back efforts to thwart Blue Boy against Van Dorn and Comeaux's attempts to keep the project intact (and even to recruit More into it).

The resolution of this plot, however, is mostly irrelevant to this thesis. What concerns us here is how the symptoms that Blue Boy inflicts upon people reflect a very specific theory of language, sign, and consciousness and how an understanding of that theory will facilitate a fuller understanding of, among other thematic considerations, why the syndrome of *The Thanatos Syndrome* is appropriately named "thanatos." A summary of the symptoms will be useful here. Fortunately, before he even collaborates with Lucy over the database at Pantherburn, More has already ventured this enumeration of his syndrome's effects:

Change of personality: From the familiar anxieties, terrors, panics,
phobias I used to treat to a curious flatness of tone...

⁹ qualitarrians, in *Love in the Ruins* and *The Thanatos Syndrome*, are those doctors who believe in euthanizing lives of low quality. They wish to maximize mean quality of life regardless of whatever moral issues may be at stake.

Change in sexuality: Sexual feelings more openly, yet more casually, expressed... changes in sexual behavior in women... a hint of estrus-like behavior...

Language behavior: Changes from ordinary talk in more or less complete sentences... to two- or three-word fragments... reminiscent of the early fragmentary telepathic sentences of a three-year-old, or perhaps the two-word chimp utterances described by primatologists...

Context loss: They respond to any learned stimulus like any other creature but not like an encultured creature, that is, any human in any culture.

Idiot-savant response: They're not idiots but they're savants in the narrow sense of being able to recall any information they have ever received... like a computer ordered to scan its memory banks. (68—69)

Two of those symptoms obviously represent some sort of impoverishment in the linguistic capacities of the patients: the change in "language behavior" and the loss of context. On the other hand, the others, especially, for instance, the absence of "anxieties, terrors, panics," and "phobias," do not seem to correspond to a loss of language abilities.

An application of the theory of language that Percy inherited from Charles Peirce, however, not only best explains the specifics of the obviously linguistic impoverishments, it explains all five symptoms *as* essentially linguistic ones. It suggests that Percy did not simply invent this syndrome out of whole cloth. He didn't just group various symptoms that might, in the aggregate, indicate a certain impoverishment or loss of those characteristics which are

essential to humanity. It suggests that instead Percy extrapolated these symptoms from a theory that he had spent almost his entire literary career elaborating, that *The Thanatos Syndrome* is in an important sense an exploration of that theory rather than a work of pure creative fiction.

CHAPTER 6

LANGUAGE BEHAVIOR

If this thesis is correct, and the entirety of the syndrome results from the loss of the “sign,” of the capacity to think triadically, then obviously the language use of the sodium-poisoned individuals must bear this loss out. At the plainest level of analysis, one would expect to find that an individual, even when he or she is ostensibly participating in a conversation, is actually only *reacting* to some series of dyadic stimuli and responses—not acting according to the motives or whims of the sovereign self implied by triadic thought. Dr. More characterizes the move from pre-sodium language use to post-sodium language use as a move into “telepathic speech” (69). This description is a useful one in assessing whether or not a triadic to dyadic shift has occurred.

Percy’s preoccupation with language in his non-fiction has already been established. But careful attention to the phenomena of language, especially in dialogue, crops up in his novels as well. In *The Moviegoer*, for instance, the protagonist Binx Bollings monitors the mood of his secretary Sharon by noting how often she defaults into her Eufala, Alabama accent. He gauges the disposition of Mercer, his aunt’s negro butler, by much the same trick:

Today he does not say “Mister Jack” and I know that the omission is deliberate, the consequence of a careful weighing of pros and cons. Tomorrow the scales might tip the other way (today’s omission will go into the balance) and it will be “Mister Jack.” (*Moviegoer*, 21)

There is great significance in even small verbal variations for Binx, and the dialogue of the novel that he narrates is alive with such linguistic subtleties. A scrupulous reader will find no shortage

of similar indicators of Percy's attentiveness to language in his other novels as well—from the journals of Sutter Vaughn in *The Last Gentleman* to Allison's attempt to recreate English in *The Second Coming*.

The majority of the dialogue in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, as well, displays this level of sophistication. People say one thing and mean another. Dramatic changes in meaning hinge on small variations of tone or diction. Some subjects are talked through, others around. Oblique references abound. A conversation that evidences all of these subtleties occurs in chapter five, where Dr. More meets with Dr. Comeaux and Dr. Gottlieb about the circumstances of his return to medicine. It is a highly layered interaction.

One source of this layered-ness comes from the unique motives each of the individuals brings to the discussion. Dr. Comeaux, already involved with Blue Boy, wants Dr. More under his supervision (presumably to prevent him from becoming too much of an interference and also because Dr. More's neurological expertise might benefit the project). Dr. Gottlieb, on the other hand, is a long-time friend of More's and wants him to return to a full medical practice as soon as possible. Finally, Dr. More just wants the meeting to be over with, regardless of what is to be done with him. He's displaying that particular species of discomfort typical of a Percy protagonist in a serious conversation.

What More notes about Comeaux—that “there is a space between what he is and what he is doing. He is graceful and conscious of his gracefulness, like an actor” (26)—can be said of Gottlieb and More as well. None of them are absolutely straightforward. Their sentences are always calculated. Comeaux, for instance, reads the rules concerning a doctor's re-entry into practice “in a neutral clerk's voice, sighting past his folded arms,” (26) thereby emphasizing the necessity of More remaining under close supervision without emphasizing his own interest in

keeping More there. Gottlieb addresses increasingly agitated protests to “the space between [More] and Bob Comeaux,” to “the four walls,” and even to the nearby “Mississippi River” (23-24) in order to register his discontent without personally affronting Comeaux. The two posture and maneuver, Comeaux affecting an air of just having “dropped in from the stables” (23) and Gottlieb behaving like “a local doctor summoned before a congressional committee” (24). Ultimately, every word, every gesture, every conversational gambit they make is triadic. They are all signs that signify their different referents—obvious or obscure, present or absent—and that imply a consciousness in their users, a consciousness now trying to assert something outright, now trying to dance around an issue, always aware of the ebb and flow of the exchange. It is not a simple meeting about a point of legal protocol. It is an exchange that exceeds the complexity of even the most knotty and labyrinthine diagram of dyads.

Elsewhere, too, in *The Thanatos Syndrome* one can see the “thirdness” of the triad on full display in the dialogue. One can see that there are signs, referents, and couplers all simultaneously in play. Kev Kevin and Debbie Boudreaux, an ex-Jesuit and an ex-Maryknoll nun respectively, are a married couple that Dr. More counseled before his trip to prison and again after his return.

Before his jail time, their arguments were acrimonious but also profoundly triadic. Their exchanges assumed that both participants (as well as the observer and analyst, Dr. More) understood references to distant objects and people, to various philosophies and systems of thought. They revolved around the introduction of outside concepts into the intersubjective milieu of the fight:

Debbie: The trouble with you is you’re still a closet Jesuit. Even though you’ve taken up transcendental meditation and teach it to the salespeople at your

little ashram... And the truth is, like the Bhagwan and most Orientals—and most Jesuits—you have contempt for women

Kev: The trouble with you is you’ve turned into the worst kind of man-eating bitchy feminist. You’re known as the Bella Abzug of the LADA (Louisiana Automobile Dealers Association)... (80)

In these accusations, there are symbols within symbols. The term Jesuit is thrown at Kev to symbolize his inability to break cleanly with his past, but it also symbolizes a certain religious backwardness and a dubious attitude towards women. The word sits at the intersection of so many of Debbie’s polemics that it’s hard to untangle just which one of them, if any, is the most central to her general contempt of Kev. Kev, in turn, calls Debbie a “feminist” but even for such a specific label he has to delineate finer shades. As a “siddha” and an adherent of “non-sexist” (81) beliefs, Kev approves of feminism as a social critique. He only disapproves feminism as an excuse to “hate men” (80). These exchanges are fraught with special meanings.

Later, however, upon Dr. More’s return to Feliciana, the triads seem to have vanished from the communication between Kev and Debbie. They have vanished from the speech of Mickey LaFaye as well, and Donna S-----, Enrique Busch, even More’s wife Ellen, who is only partially dosed, as it turns out. All these individuals exhibit what More describes as a reversion to the “telepathic sentences of a three-year-old” and what a student of Percy’s nonfiction can recognize as an inability to traffic in triadic language signs. Language for them *is* telepathic in a sense. It simply attempts to effect whatever desire crosses their minds, be that to greet or, as in the case of Donna, to request an object that catches the eye or, in the case of Mr. Busch, to express gratitude for a favor just

performed. Language is a tool, not a method of prompting memories or a means of abstraction or a reference to spatially distant events. It only deals with immediacies, with present stimuli. It inheres neither the “meaning of special sort” nor the quality of “intersubjectivity” that both Peirce and Percy insisted were the very fabric of human linguistic exceptionality.

Compare Kev and Debbie’s return trip dialogue to their earlier exchanges. Where before they had known “all the tactics of marital warfare” and had brought those tactics to bear with great emphasis and aggression, now they “sit side by side on [More’s] couch” and “utter little noises of gratitude” (83). More elaborates that these noises are “not sentences, but exclamations: „Dear Doc,“ „Our Doc,“ „Oh boy, Almond Joy,“ and suchlike” (83). More further observes “They are pleased to see me and I them. There is no space of irony between us” (82). Suddenly they have entered a realm of straightforward and uncomplicated communication. Kev and Debbie have come for one reason, to obtain from Dr. More a medication for the lymphadenopathy virus that has spread in their “couples community” (83). Once they receive the prescription, Dr. More receives “hugs and thanking noises” (83) and the two depart. This exchange was brisk and comprehensible, not fraught with any sly references or double meanings. This exchange, by all appearances, consisted of nothing but a series of dyadic “I need therefore I will attempt to obtain” calculations on the part of the now-peaceful couple.

The changes in language behavior that Dr. More observes can therefore be understood as the loss of the sign, which is to say the loss of the ability to understand or to employ signs. Speech becomes “telepathic” because the sodium poisoning reduces it from a means of knowing and naming and negotiating one’s identity to a means of achieving only immediate goals, of

responding to those portions of the dyadic-speaker's environment that affect him or her significantly. This new type of speech is not the kind that can support the world of the sign-user. It is instead fragmentary and basic, capable only of certain manipulations of the environment by the signal-using organism.

CHAPTER 7

CONTEXT LOSS

Another important symptom of the syndrome More encounters is the loss of context or, more specifically, the loss of an awareness of context. The individuals in thrall to Blue Boy “respond to any learned stimulus” that they happen to receive (69). They do not evaluate the appropriateness of that stimulus or of their response to it. Dr. More, for instance, may ask his patients, out of the blue, where a city is. If that patient knows where the city is, he or she will provide the answer immediately—no questions like “Why do you ask?” no apparent suspicion of being baited or joked around with, no misgivings at all, just a matter-of-fact response. They are, in other words, much like the dog discussed in section three above that immediately responds to the word “Ball!” They are unlike the person in that example who responds, “What about a ball?”

We have discussed how important dialogue is in the writings of Percy, and how significant those certain oddities of dialog in *The Thanatos Syndrome* seem against the background of Percy’s usual writing habits. The importance of context is another such constant in Percy’s writings, especially in relation to certain topics that were a perennial concern of his.

Perhaps what prompted Percy to write in 1977 that he was “fed up with the subject of Southern writing” as well as “the place of the artist in American society, race relations,” and “the Old South” (*Signposts*, 398) was that these issues had been some of the central concerns of his writing from *The Moviegoer* on. And even before *The Moviegoer*, before his literary career began, Percy was in some measure involved with the “subject of Southern writing.” He lived for a number of years, after all, with his uncle William Percy, an author who often wrote in that “ancient posture of Southern apologetics” (60).

The tenets of those apologetics were simple, as were the implications for a greater theory of word and sign interpretation. The Southerners maintained that the “Southern way of life,” although not blameless, had been “better for both black and white” than the postwar society that Northern politics had produced in the South. They maintained that the North had misunderstood the institution of slavery as well as the mores of Southern society. They maintained that Northern intellectuals had only ever had a superficial acquaintance with the Negro, offering as proof of this claim the observation that the postwar North was no better able to treat blacks as equal citizens than the Southern planters had been. As Percy points out in “The American War,” the North ultimately failed in accommodating the very people that they had emancipated. He points out that even “a hundred years” after the Civil War, Northern cities still had “large, undigested, and mostly demoralized black ghettos” (*Signposts*, 82). Percy considered this “triumph” of Southern perspicacity to be a hollow victory. Nevertheless, the inability of the North to respond appropriately to the black diaspora did seem to vindicate the South’s contention that the North has misinterpreted the predicament of the negro from the beginning.

Percy did not merely corroborate this criticism in a few of his essays. He also fictionalized the complexities of the black/white relationships (the very ones Southern writers accused Northern intellectuals of missing entirely) on several occasions. In *The Moviegoer*, for instance, there is, again, Mercer, butler to Binx’s aunt. Mercer’s identity sits at a peculiarly Southern crossroads. Binx’s aunt, for whom Mercer works, “truly loves him and sees him as a faithful retainer, a living connection with a bygone age” (23). Binx knows, on the other hand, “that Mercer steals regularly from her by getting kickbacks from the servants and tradespeople” (23). Still, Mercer is no simple “thief.” He considers himself a “remarkable sort of fellow... well-informed in science and politics” (24). This complex intersection of competing

understandings, one that could not have occurred elsewhere in the States, is what makes Binx uncomfortable around Mercer. Binx hates it “when [Mercer’s] vision of himself dissolves and he sees himself as neither, neither old retainer nor expert in current events” (24). It’s when the structure formed by these visions of Mercer—both the visions of others and his own private one—collapses, or at least shivers under its own weight, that Binx feels anxious, perhaps that the unvarnished truth about Mercer’s relationship to his employer might be too upsetting for his aunt or Mercer to take. At any rate, in Percy’s view, the old Southern way of life had produced a sophisticated code of behavior, a finely articulated prescription of roles for both its black and white participants. And even one hundred years after the society that wrote that code began to break apart, its tenets still demanded a considerable analytical *savoir faire*.

Love in the Ruins, too, addresses the minute intricacies of race relations in the South. There is the character of Dr. Colley the “super Negro¹⁰” and the politics of the “Christmas gifts¹¹” that More must navigate. There is also More’s long conversation on the subject with Brother Uru, the leader of the Bantu guerillas. But perhaps the single best illustration of how detailed even the unspoken laws of black/white interactions could be comes in the incident between Dr. More, Victor, and Leroy Ledbetter at the Little Napoleon. Dr. More, with characteristic carelessness, had not eaten properly on a hot day in a Louisiana July. On his way to Leroy Ledbetter’s Little Napoleon for a drink, he fainted. Fortunately for More, Victor Charles, a negro dog-catcher, happens upon him soon after he collapses. Victor attends to More’s condition at the

¹⁰ See *Love in the Ruins*, pp. 107—108 for a fuller discussion of the “super Negro,” a type partially embodied in *The Thanatos Syndrome* as well (as Virgil). The “super Negro” is basically an educated, successful black individual still living in the South. They exist as a contact zone between the mores of the Old South and the freedoms of post-civil rights America. It is yet another instance of a highly complicated, highly contextualized investigation of the race problem in Walker Percy’s Louisiana.

¹¹ “Christmas gifts” typify the ambivalence of the white aristocracy of Feliciana Parish to the black lower class. It is the practice of giving money to black service staff around Christmastime, which on the one hand indicates generosity but on the other hand disavows the need for any institutionalized financial safety net for the lower-class workers. See *Love in the Ruins* pp. 89—96.

nearby animal shelter, and then helps him up the hill and into the bar. The incident occurs then, when Victor, in the act of depositing More on a barstool, steps too close to the bar for the Leroy Ledbetter's taste. Blacks, after all, were not to be served at the bar or to approach it. They had a window of their own through which they could do business with the bartender.

Both the explanation of Victor's "violation" and the analysis of all three individuals' responses to it are painstakingly detailed:

Hanging on to Victor, I did not let him go until we were inside. I should have either dismissed him outside or held on to him longer. As it was, letting go of Victor when the bar was in reach, I let go a second too early, so that Leroy Ledbetter, turning toward me in the same second, did not see me let go but saw Victor just beside me and so registered a violation. Not even that: a borderline violation because Victor was not even at the bar but still a step away.

...

A near breach, an insignificant incident. A stranger observing the incident would not have been aware that anything had happened at all, much less that in the space of two seconds there had occurred a three-cornered transaction entailing an assignment of zones, a near infraction of zoning, a calling attention to the infraction, a triple simultaneous perception of the mistake, a correction thereof, and an acknowledgement of that—a minor breach with no consequences other than these: an artery beats for a second in Leroy's temple, there is a stiffness about Victor's back as he leaves, and there comes to my throat a metallic taste.

(*Love in the Ruins*, 150—151)

The depth of complexity here, if the depth of the analysis of it is any indicator, is remarkable. To be a successful member of such a hyperaware community requires a real responsiveness to convention and expectations. It requires a knack for interpreting tiny and potentially ambiguous signs. To be a stranger to this community means that tremendous amounts of information will not just be misunderstood but missed entirely. The impenetrability of these interactions to an outsider then, was not only at the center of Southern rebuttals of Northern criticism but also a motif of Percy's fiction. It can be taken as a given then, that in Percy's fiction the interactions of Southern whites and Southern blacks involves nuanced use of language, gesture, and other signs as well as a keen, bordering on morbidly keen, awareness of context—both immediate and historical.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Dr. More once again analyzes the context and content of an ostensibly simple interaction in now-familiar massive detail. This time it is between himself and Frank Macon, an old black janitor that More has known for forty years (10). More, freshly returned from jail, passes Frank in the hall for the first time, and they talk briefly. As far as More is concerned, "One would have to be a Southerner, white or black, to understand the complexities of this little exchange. Seemingly pleasant, it was not quite. Seemingly a friend in the old style, Frank was not quite" (11). What seemingly happened was an exchange of greetings and an opportunity for old acquaintances to catch up. What actually happened was that Frank pointed out a racial inequality. He pointed out that, although Dr. More had "got caught," he "still got out sooner than [Frank] would have" (11). Frank, imitating "polite amazement" and "playing the game of Southern manners," was calling attention to a very real disparity between the legal treatment he could expect as a black janitor and the treatment that More had enjoyed as a white doctor. The exchange was indeed "not quite" pleasant.

More wraps up his narration of their first meeting with an assessment reminiscent of the summary of the Little Napoleon event: “That was my encounter with Frank Macon a week ago, a six-layered exchange beyond the compass of any known science of communication but plain as day to Frank and me” (11).

The commonality, then, between Percy’s inheritance from the rhetoric of the Old South, his characterization of Mercer, and his descriptions of the various exchanges in which Dr. More participated is that each revolves around a knot of associations and conventions and suggestions that are easily understood by the insiders of the community but incomprehensible to outsiders. Each revolves around a group, an operating context, of mutually established signs¹² that are liable to misinterpretation, especially to someone without prior familiarity. To put it another way, these events are triadic. These events are even tetradic, which is a term that describes a triadic event being “intersubjectively beheld” by two sign users (a tetradic diagram is simply a model of two individuals interpreting the same sign simultaneously¹³). Something like a step towards a countertop never signifies merely a step towards a countertop. It signifies that and something else as well, a potential infraction of a social “zone” for instance. A reference to “yard work” (such as in the Frank/More conversation) never refers only to Dr. More’s new tan. It refers to his prison sentence as well and the relative lightness of that sentence and in general the many privileges that Dr. More enjoys in comparison to his friend the janitor. There is always a third point of reference where the additional yet important meaning resides.

In chapter three of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, however, Dr. More has a second encounter with Frank Macon and that additional dimension is notably absent. They meet “in the same hospital, the same corridor” and, as far as More can tell, it’s “the same Frank swinging the same

¹² a considerable amount of these signs are, not incidentally, verbal. See descriptions of Mercer’s self-conscious accent and Macon’s self-conscious manipulation of accents.

¹³ see *Lost in the Cosmos* diagram 8, page 97.

brush” (11). Yet something has changed dramatically. Frank, unbeknownst to More, has come into contact with Blue Boy’s heavy sodium. More describes the unexpectedly short exchange:

He simply stepped aside, not switching off the machine, neither servile nor sullen, not ironical, not sly, not farcical, not in any way complex, but purely and simply perfunctory.

“How you doing, Frank?”

“Good morning, Doctor.”

“Still featherbedding—“ I begin in our old, chafing style, but he cuts me off with, of all things, “Have a nice day, Doctor”—and back to his polishing without missing the swing of the machine. I could have been any doctor, anybody.

(12)

A key word in this description is “perfunctory.” As we have seen, elsewhere in Percy even ostensibly straightforward interactions between black and white Southerners are anything but. Even elsewhere in *The Thanatos Syndrome*¹⁴, these conversations are like glaciers, hinting at very little of their true proportions on the surface. Words in these conversations can be loaded; they can be disingenuous or satirical or freighted with unintended significances. They are calculated and often subtly contentious. What they *aren’t* is perfunctory.

But here, in More’s second meeting with Mr. Macon, we have a “simply perfunctory” response. One could not plot the “three-cornered transaction” in the Little Napoleon or the original “six-layered exchange” of pseudo-pleasantries with Frank as a series of dyads on any whiteboard no matter how spacious. On the other hand, one could plot this second encounter quite neatly: 1) Dr. More approaches → Frank moves out of the way; 2) Dr. More greets → Frank responds in kind, and 3) Dr. More attempts to continue speaking → Frank declines. The

¹⁴ see the interactions between Virgil and Hugh or More and Chandra.

only dyad in this series that might seem too complex to fairly represent as a dyad is the last one. It might seem to imply a real awareness of conversational conventions. The description that follows, however, does not support such an interpretation. According to More, all Frank did was “dispose of [him] with standard U.S. politeness... the easiest way to get rid of people.” He likens Frank’s dismissal as what one might expect as “a drive-up customer at Big Mac’s” (12). To read any sort of depth into the dismissal, then, seems something of a stretch. Frank used the conventions of the language to accomplish a goal, to be sure, but both those conventions and that goal were obvious and immediate¹⁵.

This is a striking difference, then. It was striking to Dr. More, and it should be striking to any of Percy’s readers who are familiar with the depth of context that typically usually underlies interactions between the races in Percy’s fiction. Mr. Macon’s speech has changed from the “calculated” parody and “jeering” that More endured in their first encounter to the “blank” that More observed in their second. He seems to have lost all sense of the context of their interaction as well. Before, Frank referenced, either directly or indirectly, his and Dr. More’s conversational history, their occupational statuses, their families, and the social milieu in which they live. It is difficult, in fact, to parse out all the mutual understandings and shared experiences that Dr. More and Frank take for granted, so nested is their discourse in context. But one week later, Dr. More “could have been any doctor, anybody” (12). There was nothing in the exchange specific to Dr. More or to Frank or to the relationship that for forty years had existed between them. There was no apparent context.

¹⁵ The best analogy for this sort of dyadic language use Percy describes in “A Theory of Language.” There, he provides several examples of utterances that don’t behave as triadic utterances. It is this type of utterance, such as the “Malinowski’s example of the Trobriand fisherman shouting, „Mackerel here!”” (*The Message in the Bottle*, 300) that theorists interested in a pure stimulus-response theory of language rejoiced in. B.F. Skinner, for instance, perennial enemy of Percy that he was, could account very comprehensively for that sort of behavior with his theory of operant conditioning.

There are several more examples in *The Thanatos Syndrome* of similar transformations of eliminations of context.¹⁶ The Frank episode is simply one of the most dramatic, representing as it does a significant departure from a tendency observable throughout the entire body of Percy's work. Elsewhere in Percy, characters must always be conscious of the context of their interactions, at times they are almost morbidly so. Here, however, Frank only deals with immediacies, with present stimuli. His speech implies neither the "meaning of special sort" nor the context of "intersubjectivity" that both Peirce and Percy insisted were the fabric of human linguistic exceptionality.

¹⁶ Another clear example is found in, once again, the change that occurs in the lives of Kev and Debbie. Compare their dialogue before More's imprisonment (where it assumes a knowledge of an almost bewilderingly wide array of cultural, philosophical, and psychological constructs, both old and new: transcendental meditation, the Bhagwan and the Maharishi, man-eating feminism, the Louisiana Automobile Dealer's Association) and with their dialogue after his return (where it consists of interjections like "Wow" and "Oh boy, Almond Joy" and "thanking noises") (83). There is considerable context needed to understand the first session. There is no context (beyond the immediate task at hand) needed to understand the second session.

CHAPTER 8

IDIOT-SAVANT RESPONSE

The idiot-savant response is probably the next most obvious symptom of a loss of triadic function¹⁷. In many ways, the savant status of affected individuals is simply an extension of their lack of sensitivity to context. It's a function of their newfound freedom from interfering connotations and remembrances. In his original description of that symptom, Dr. More notes that the memory of an affected individual differs from that of a normal individual's precisely in that the affected individual's memory is not "subject to all manner of lapses, repressions, errors," (69) while the normal individual's is.

To appreciate properly how this newfound ease rests upon the loss of language, one must remember that, for Percy, the one characteristic separating humanity from the rest of the animal kingdom was the capacity for triadic thought. A human was not an animal plus a soul or an animal plus a mind, strictly speaking.¹⁸ A human was simply an animal that had made the "breakthrough" from a dyadic stimulus-response to a triadic understanding of signs. As Percy mentions in *Lost in the Cosmos*, a person is still an organism in an environment but he or she is also a sign user in a "world" (99).

In fact, Percy tended to imagine that there was some breakthrough moment in the actual history of human evolution, before which humans were instinctual hunter-gatherer primates and after which they were hunting-gathering *homo sapiens*. In one of his earlier essays, "The Delta

¹⁷ It is important to note that "idiot savant" is being used here simply as a description of the ease with which affected individuals perform calculations and recall facts. Walker Percy, given his stance on the inherent dignity of humanity, would in no way advance the notion that clinically-diagnosed idiot savants are somehow less than human.

¹⁸ Percy himself often used the words "soul" and "mind," but it is important to remember that, for him, these were metaphors for the unique sort of consciousness that triadic thought produced.

Factor" Percy envisions that moment happening around a campfire following a successful bison hunt. Up until that moment, the cry "Bison here!"¹⁹ had served simply to galvanize the tribe into action during the hunt, to alert the others of the prey item's presence and to ensure that it might be quickly attended to. This night, however, one of the hunters "tries to recapture [the sensation of the hunt], to savor it, and so repeats the crude hunting cry meaning *Bison here!*" The others eventually come to understand that the first does not mean "*get up and hunt now*" but instead means "*Remember him, remember the bison*" (*The Message in the Bottle* 38), which is the key moment of transformation. Then as the others "wait and see it, see the bison, savor seeing it, something happens, a spark jumps..." (38). Finally, in Percy's words, there "was something new under the sun, evolutionarily speaking" (39).

It is also important to note that this new type of consciousness introduced, in Percy's understanding, a certain instability in the organism's assessment of its world. Prior to crossing over the triadic threshold, an organism concerns itself only with those "elements of the Cosmos which affect the organism significantly" (*Lost in the Cosmos* 99). This selectivity creates an environment with many "gaps," but it also allows the organism to deal more effectively with outside stimuli. Those things that it either "is genetically coded to respond to or has learned to respond" to, it responds to (99). Everything else it ignores. As Percy points out, when there is nothing in an organism's environment that it can respond to, "it goes to sleep" (71). The system is a model of efficiency, produced by the "three and a half billion years" of the evolution of "organic life" on Earth (88).

For a triadic trafficker in signs, however, the correspondence between individual and world is considerably more complicated. And while the triadic mind is capable, of course, of

¹⁹ Percy is slightly more specific than this. Percy did not imagine that the hunter-gathers actually had the language "Bison Here!" He simply imagined that they had a "crude" hunting cry equivalent to that exclamation (*The Message in the Bottle* 38).

greater achievements of analysis and understanding, it is also more prone to error. For one thing, the consciousness of a sign user, which is roughly speaking that sign user's world, contains concepts that do not correspond to anything in that sign user's environment (such as "unicorn" or "boogerman") (100). For another, it may fail to include as concepts any number of objects that actually *are* present in the environment (such as the galaxy M₃₁) (101). Essentially, the consciousness attempts to construe everything that it hears of or perceives or thinks it perceives. In Percy's words, "The Cosmos is accounted for willy-nilly, rightly or wrongly, mythically or scientifically, its past, present, and future" (99). He points out that "even the gaps are named—by the word *gaps*" (99). Percy's discussion of this drive to "account for" everything in the environment, and of the various problems the drive causes, culminates with the example of a hunting accident:

If a hunter is conscious of an animal in the field, it is part of the act of consciousness to *place* it—as a rabbit, fox, deer. The signing process tends to configure segments of the Cosmos under the auspices of a sign, often mistakenly. It is often possible to *see* a certain pattern of light and shadow as a rabbit, ears and all...

Deer hunters, who are increasingly shooting each other more often than deer, invariably report: "But I *saw* a deer!" (106)

The hunting example makes, in fact, a useful touchstone that one can apply to *The Thanatos Syndrome*. The one metaphor More uses repeatedly for idiot-savant retrieval is that of a computer performing a search, or, as he writes in chapter eight, a "mainframe at NIH scanning its data bank" (193). Scanning a field for quarry and scanning a digital bank for bit of information are not, ultimately, un-analogous. Just as the hunter's own desires mislead him in the

hunt, causing him to perceive a rabbit or a deer where there is none, the normal individual's various desires and preoccupations and anxieties are liable to interfere with some of the more search-like functions of the mind. Elsewhere in *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy describes the average denizen of the twentieth century as a "little traveling suck of care, sucking care with him from the past and being sucked towards care in the future" (79). This is the very picture of oppression via context. Those figures of the sign-user consciousness that have no actual referent in the world—the hopes, fears, worries—cloud and distort an individual's conscious acts of memory.

The sodium-affected individual, however, suffers from no such distortions. For him or her, there is no distracting context. He or she has unfettered access to the powerful functions of the highly evolved human brain. They can make no true analysis of their lives, of course. They can achieve no critical distance from their own situation. They can, however, call to mind a fact or make a calculation or estimate a quantity with the instantaneousness of an instinctual reflex or a conditioned response. They are highly evolved information storers and processors, newly freed from all the other mental extravagances that at once crowded and inhibited the functioning of their brains. The savant response is simply this newfound divorce from the manifold "cares" of personal contexts. It, too, is a relegation to basic, dyadic behavior.

CHAPTER 9

CHANGE IN SEXUALITY AND CHANGE IN PERSONALITY

The changes in the sexual behaviors of affected persons, especially the women, is another symptom of the thanatos syndrome, and it's another logical consequence of the loss of higher-level triadic thinking. As the capacities for idiot-savant-like mental acuity were best explained in terms of the loss of context, the changes in sexuality are probably best explained in terms of the loss of the sign.

Tom originally notes certain gestures of sexual availability in Mickey LaFaye. Previously shy, guarded, and introverted, she now lounges in the hospital bed where Dr. More examines her "like a satisfied Duchess of Alba, full arm lying along sumptuous curve of hip" (6). She's no longer anxious and frightened like the "Christina in Wyeth's painting" (6). She's "bold" and "assertive" possessed of a curious flatness of gaze (7). Mickey's sexual changes, however, do not receive the same extensive treatment that Donna's do. Donna is, in fact, the one who unsettles Dr. More with her sudden sexual forwardness. During her first, post-prison-sentence consultation with More, she comes around the desk while he is distracted and surprises him:

She has come around my desk, barefoot and silent. She backs into me.

...

She is engaging me, so to speak. To describe her backward embrace, I can only use the word primatologists use, *presenting*. She was presenting rearward.

Enough of this. What probably saved me from the erotic power of her move was its suddenness and oddness. (20)

This is a far cry from the Donna whom Dr. More had counseled previously, a young lady who had been sexually abused by her father, a young lady with deep interior conflicts and misgivings about sex.

In the course of her sessions with Dr. More, Donna had eventually worked through her tortured history. She and More had explored routes by which she might “face the old two-faced Janus of sex” that consisted on one side of her father and on the other side of the “Galahad” by whom she longed to be rescued. As it turned out, Donna was a romantic, what she really believed in was nineteenth century romantic love—perhaps even thirteenth century. She believed in—what?—a knight?” (15). And is the abandonment of this belief, formulaic and essentially literary, that best illustrates how the changes in her sexuality result from the loss of the sign.

In *Lost in the Cosmos*, Percy postulates that one of the ways in which a self *defines* itself in these modern times is by modeling its behavior around a previously established role, which is essentially a complex of symbolic conventions. This self “achieves its identity by taking roles and modeling its own role from the roles of others, e.g., one’s mother, father, housewife, breadwinner, macho-boy-man, feminine doll-girl, etc.” (11). It is clear that Donna, in part at least, was attempting to model herself after a role in a similar way. She had in her mind a role for herself, a modern day damsel in distress. She had in mind a chivalric role for her rescuer. She even had an idea of how their relationship would begin that in an “ordinary round of life there would occur a meeting of eyes across a room, a touch of hands...” (15). The highly symbolic and conventionalized character of these roles and these hopes is clear.

All of it, however, disappears in the wake of her encounter with Blue Boy. She is not falling victim to her old memories of abuse. She is not hoping for the realization of her storybook dreams. There are no such considerations—no trace of those notorious complexities that

humankind has built up around romance—to guide her sexual behavior. She simply acts according to biological drives in the simplest and most straightforward way possible. She acts like the primate that she is biologically because she lacks those very symbol-mongering capacities that elevated her species from the basic sublunary existence of primates in the first place. She “presents” because her guiding signs are absent.

The changes in patients’ personalities that Dr. More notes, the shift from “the familiar anxieties, terrors, panics, phobias [he] used to treat to a curious flatness of tone” (68), should be relatively easy, at this point, to conceptualize as a loss of triadic behavior as well. The losses at the roots of the other symptoms provide good explanations for this one. The loss of the symbol removes, in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the human consciousness and all its concomitant worries and fears. It ensures that there is no more “world” for the individual to navigate cautiously, only an environment that suggests a given response with a given stimulus. There is no context to distract or mislead the patient, no hopes or preoccupations to distort his or her perception. There is just the free and uncluttered operation of the highly evolved human brain, just the question of what the patient wants in the moment and how best to acquire the object of that desire. The “flatness” is in effect the cumulative loss of all those capacities that taken together constitute for Percy the self.

The most inexplicable thing, then, about Dr. More’s assessment of the changes in his patients’ personalities is that he seems to want to undo them. They have lost all the old ills of their spirits, but More wants to bring those ills back. Then again, perhaps it’s not so surprising after all.

At one point during his musings, Dr. More remarks that he is continually “amazed at the trouble [people] get into and how few quit. People are braver than one might expect” (81). At

another point he acknowledges the inherent and unique difficulties of the human experience, that people are “born to trouble as the sparks fly up” (13). And it where these two ideas meet that one can locate Dr. More’s reason for preferring the anxious, haunted, troubled old selves to their placid new replacements. More believes in a life aware of the world rather than one of merely responding of the environment around it, even granted the tribulations such an awareness inevitably causes. More believes in the dignity of the individual negotiating his or her own identity, even if they only ever succeed in provisional and limited ways. He believes in the project even if it is a doomed one. He prefers it, at any rate, to the smooth unconsciousness that the brain engineers offer.

CHAPTER 10

CLOSING THOUGHTS

In the end, *The Thanatos Syndrome* stands or falls as a work of literature rather than a work of theory. It is a novel, not a treatise on language. Nevertheless, Percy's theory of language—adapted from the writings of Charles Peirce and intimately connected to his own “theory of man”—receives an accurate and finely articulated representation in *The Thanatos Syndrome*. The book takes on a giant opponent, “the widespread and ongoing devaluation of human life in the Western world” (*Signposts* 394), but it is important to note that even these large-scale, century-wide indictments hinge on the small-scale portrayals of what's happening in the minds and the lives of sodium-affected individuals.

In the final pages of the novel, Mickey LaFaye visits Dr. More at his clinic. She is a long-standing patient of his. Before the advent of project Blue Boy, she had suffered from anxieties, fears with no apparent source, and recurrent nightmares. To More, she had resembled “Christina in Wyeth's painting,²⁰” (6) alienated, full of a yearning bordering on despair, frightened. After she began receiving her doses of heavy sodium, however, she predictably settled down into an existence of serene contentment. But now, months after Blue was discontinued, she is returning to her old self, terrors and all.

Now, she “blows” in and “heads for the sofa in the inner office” without a word to Dr. More or his secretary. Eventually she explains to Dr. More that's once again having an “attack,” once again “terrified” (370):

²⁰ The painting is *Christina's World* by Andre Wyeth.

Her great black eyes, as rounded as a frightened child's, are full on me. One hand is holding the other. She is actually wringing her hands, something you seldom see...

She falls silent, but her eyes are softer, livelier, are searching for mind as if I were the mirror of her very self. She lets go of her hand. She almost smiles. She ducks her head and touches the nape of her neck as she used to.

"Well?" I say.

She opens her mouth to speak.

Well well well. (372)

These are the final words of the novel, the final note. It is a note of surprise, of course, but also one of acceptance. The return of Mickey's pains and problems, her ghosts, is well with Dr. More.

The Thanatos Syndrome, then, can be understood as an assertion that the normal course of an individual's life, even though it will always involve real tribulation and real tragedy, is still preferable to the drugged serenity that the engineers offer. That such a serenity is actual despair, that it is actually death, is an idea in Percy at least as old as *The Moviegoer*. One does not need to understand the contributions to Percy that Charles Peirce made in order to appreciate it. But what that understanding might allow for is a greater appreciation of how such huge phenomena like the "Century of the Love of Death" actually result from a series of tiny, seemingly benign compromises. Why not ease up on the "quixotic quest" of understanding one's self? Why not treat a phobia here with a prescription or an anxiety there with a pill? Why not defer the serious questions of mental or social health to the appropriate experts?

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, where a molecule of a heavy sodium can suppress one function of the human brain and thereby annihilate an entire self, Percy suggests that even questions as small as these have tremendous consequence.

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