Walker Percy's *Thanatos Syndrome*
and the Temper of Suburban America

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*Thanatos Syndrome* is another novel of redemption from a doctor of medicine who studies personality. Walker Percy's work embraces the language and history of medicine, psychiatry in particular, but his books scope wider than that. For example, *Thanatos Syndrome* reflects the temper of suburban America much better than the selective scan from newspapers in their coverage of the ineluctable Presidential election campaign of 1988.

His earlier novels have frequently been clinical: here he adds the perspective of epidemiology. In *Love in the Ruins*, we had Dr. More working on a draft of his paper, over and over in the manner familiar to the junior investigator, often to the accompaniment of long shots of Early Times whisky (a brand-name for nostalgia, surely). In *Thanatos Syndrome*, there is less drinking and more scientific thinking, although the central epidemic idea opens up such a capacious Pandora's box that the material becomes unwieldy.

Walker Percy began his novels in the dream world. In *Moviegoer*, his first, Cary Grant, Tony Curtis and their ilk were more important than the realities of New York. The amnesic states of *The Last Gentleman* and the macabre recording of adultery on video in *Lancelot*, where life


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was an impossible gothic mêlée, continued to keep reality at a safe distance. This remove offered by dreams, psychosis, alcoholism and even organic brain syndromes in the novels of Percy, however, is less important than his rendering of everyday life.

Precise evocation to capture the significance of the ostensibly banal is a Percy principle. His novels offer the study of communication between people, a taxonomy of relationships. Percy's psychiatric poetics concern pattern recognition: his understanding of the American South is shown by meticulous selection of what is said and what is left unsaid. From his own family history, Percy chooses a Southern drawl as the vehicle for the expression of dialogue, but it is wrong to assign this author only a regional significance.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, our hero is once again Dr. Thomas More, once again in Louisiana, in the parish of Feliciana, which, despite its name, is a refuge for "all manner of malcontents," with "too many malls, banks, hospitals, chiropractors, politicians, lawyers, realtors, and condos with names like Chateau Charmant." The dilapidated psychiatrist More, who has been away from his practice for a couple of years, serving a prison sentence for imprudent prescribing, embodies the humanist qualities of the namesake who defied Henry VIII. *The Thanatos Syndrome* shows, however, that Feliciana is far from utopia.

One of More's old patients, Mickey LaFaye, is the index case of what becomes the Thanatos Syndrome. She is suddenly endowed with super-human capacity for mental arithmetic, but is unaware of her new powers. She also loses some normal sexual inhibitions, again without insight.

Dr. More collects cases in the growing epidemic, which is the replacement of terrors, worries, rages and guilt by a mild, fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits. These mood changes have accompanied the therapeutic effect of tampering with the water supply—in the name of social engineering—by some of Dr. More's colleagues. These cattle-rustling medical bureaucrats have splendid offices in Fedville, a "complex" alongside the "qualitarian centre" and AIDS quarantine. The period is thus set in an uneasy near future when quality of life is a therapeutic intervention effected by the government, not just a hypothetical measure in epidemiology. In Fedville they have apparently earned the right to suspend the civil liberties of A.I.D.S. patients in a quarantine which presumably extends not the forty days of yore, but indefinitely.

Even casual social contacts in Feliciana are blunted by the syndrome. When More interrupts the floor-polishing Frank Macon, the seventy-five year old black janitor simply steps aside, "neither servile nor