



Apocalyptic Vision in a Nuclear Age: Walker Percy and the Post Modern Entropy

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Abstract: *Appalled by the Post Modern entropy and the gross materialism in which the modern man is steeped in, Walker Percy sets out to diagnose the malaise which he calls 'everydayness and alienation' that encircle the modern age. His novels depict the threatening sense of doom that looms large over the world. His vision is fired by an apocalyptic vision and his novels envision a total destruction of the buttresses of the present order and the emergence of a new one out of its ashes. His protagonists, lonely, adrift and marooned in the world always search for the smallest sign that would redeem them from their quandary. His protagonists, startled at watching the end of their own world undertake spiritual quests to weld their broken selves. Their coming to self consciousness through inter subjectivity marks a definite stage in their lives. Through this communion, contemporary individual can join with others in an authentic revival of cultural values based on creative personal development. Abandoning the watchful insularity that once strangled them, Percy's characters break into a new world of understanding and love. Percy's apocalyptic vision is mundane for the Kingdom of God in Percy's fiction is not achieved at the end of history but rather it dawns into history and grows in the lives of believers. Through their will and action they destroy the present world and start all over again in a new world where deeds measure time and ages may begin or end with a single action and where people do whatever they can to help others and the world.*

Everydayness is the enemy. No search is possible. Perhaps, there was a time when everydayness was not too strong and one could break its brutal strength. Now nothing breaks it – but disaster (Percy 1962:145)

This comment of Binx Bolling, the protagonist of Walker Percy's novel, *The Moviegoer*, portrays not only his own dilemma in the modern age, but of thousands who identify themselves with his estranged circumstance. All novels of Walker Percy, a Physician turned Novelist, (*The Moviegoer*,

The Last Gentleman, Love in the Ruins, Lancelot, The Second Coming and The Thanatos Syndrome) reverberate the sentiment. Percy presents the contemporary world as a moral and spiritual wasteland where ignorant armies clash by night. His people are dismayed and alarmed by the rise of the gross materialism and inhumanity of modern science and technology. They feel themselves alienated not only from traditional values which their forefathers valued most but also from their God. A threatening sense of doom pervades over the characters of Percy's novels. Percy's imagination is triggered by an apocalyptic vision because he perceives the modern world by and large estranged from God. For revamping the present world, Percy envisions a total destruction of the present order and the emergence of a new one out of its ashes. This need constantly haunts Percy's characters. When they are startled to see the end of their own worlds in the smallest of signs like the imminence of a nuclear holocaust or social breakdown or even personal upheaval, they embark on a spiritual journey to gain the impetus for discovering 'love amidst ruins'. The sense of eschatology ultimately leads them to an unveiling that transforms ordinary sights into sacred insights that capacitate the visionary to perceive somewhat as God does.

Just as the apocalyptic tradition looks to the birth of a new age after the destruction of the old, the intimation of apocalyptic among Percy's characters is not the end of things, though it marks the end of a certain period in their lives, but the beginning of a new vision and awareness whereby they once again come to themselves in a world whose "beauty and strangeness has been obscured by a dense film of everydayness" (Kobre 132). The self they come to enables them to work and marry and be outwardly indistinguished from anyone else. They, in Wallace Stevens' phrase "live like Danes in Denmark all the day" (Hawkins 63). Percy's fiction retells the ancient story of biblical apocalypse in which judgment and destruction culminate in recreation.

Percy considers modern man a castaway lost in the cosmos. He is a shipwrecked being isolated and exiled in this world. He does not know "where he came from and who he is and what he must do" (Percy 1975: 149). Cast into the world and never at home at heart, Percy's castaway lives out a primordial estrangement from the very ground of his being and the land with which he feels intimately but obscurely connected. This estrangement, Percy points out, is the result of "an aboriginal catastrophe, "The Fall", in consequence of which he has lost his way and unlike the beasts, became capable of sin" (Percy 1975:18). As a result, men live in inauthenticity, abstraction and everydayness. Though Percy owes these terms to the existentialist thinkers, Percy coins his own nomenclatures for the general feeling of discomfort, dis-ease, disorientation and disquietude experienced by the postmodern man. In *Love in the Ruins* and *The Last Gentleman*, it takes the form of "noxious particles" that influence and worsen the sacred ills of the spirit and "rive the very self from itself" (Percy 1971: 4-5). Modern man lives in a state of alienation and despair for he is well aware that after the 'Fall', man has become "a pilgrim or a seeker of his own salvation, and that the clue and sign of his salvation are to be found not in science and philosophy" (Percy 1975:18). He realizes that Science and technology offer him only the false promise of a heaven on earth sans anxiety, problems and rootlessness. The existential angst and ennui experienced forces him to take shelter in the lap of science. Modern sciences do occasionally provide him revelation about his existence in the world. Such revelations, however, only heighten his terror and nightmare, for he realizes that science provides no way out of the malaise that encircles him. He becomes conscious that it lies in "the news of an actual historical event, involving a people, a person and an actual event" (Percy 1975: 18). He understands that the Eden promised by science is only a will-o-the-wisp and that it is never near at hand. "To say the least" Percy comments, "he is bored: To say the most, he is in pure anxiety: He is horrified at this surrounding: He might as well be passing through a lunar landscape and the signs he sees are absurd or at least ambiguous"(Percy 1975: 84). The prevalent sense in the present century is one of cataclysm with no definite meaning given to life.

Percy unleashes this feeling of rootlessness in his fiction. The protagonists of all his novels suffer from the malaise of everydayness, angst and ennui and they come into acute consciousness of the dis-ease as the novels proceed. Percy's fictional world posits the contemporary world, more especially America, in a state of alarming decline; its denizens living in a state extraordinary fragmentation in a world that is fast disintegrating and torn by turmoil, crisis and mayhem. The protagonists in each of his novels is a middle class intelligent, outwardly successful Southern White who is acutely sensitive to the inadequacies of conventional social, religious and scientific pieties. He feels sick and estranged to the core and his malaise seems to stem from the Judeo-Christian concept, which professes the perennial rupture of man - a part of the human condition.

The modern scientific society presents only a fragmented image of man, for it is incapable of fully explaining the mystery that encircles him. It gives only a fractured vision of man and of his God. As a consequence, man lives with a sundered body and soul "blind to the revelations of Himself [God] to man" (Chenny 71). He no longer knows and cares who he is; where his going or why he is going there. He is both in the world he is travelling an out of it. He lives ruptured from himself, neglecting the divine and favouring the human. His is a world of the human mind that abstracts him from the world around him coercing him to deal in types, cases and generalizations and without ever dealing with the individual persons in the physical world. To him the world has lost its divine aura and has acquired a secular dimension. He is doomed to live in the very world where he is a foreigner. When

he attempts to live in it, he no longer has any familiarity with it for he considers himself totally an alien to himself and to the world. He realizes all of a sudden that he cannot operate successfully in the abstract realm he has created for himself. His achievements and aspirations mean only his homelessness in the immanent realm. The awareness makes him more estranged and more rootless than he ever is. To convince himself of his humanity, he engages himself in carnal pleasures, for sex he mulls over as a clear sign of persistent humanity. But once it is performed, he once again falls into the malaise for he has nothing else left to do. Thus, Binx Bolling, the central character of *The Moviegoer*, after a series of sex escapades with Kate, his fiancé remarks: "flesh poor flesh failed us. The burden was too great" (Percy 1962:200). Sex offers him only the recognition of his humanity but it tells him nothing about what he is or how to live in the mundane world with body and soul intact. Besides, casual sex, of course, is not a mode to alleviate the sense of alienation. Performed within the sacrament of marriage, sex, as Jack Tharpe remarks, is "a miracle illustrating the ways of God to man" (71). Lost between the transcendent and the immanent realms, he is distanced from both the worlds without having any place any place to firmly set his foot on and the result is everydayness.

Everydayness, a term coined by Percy, makes man lose his consciousness, severing him off from his milieu. It diminishes his energy and vitality resulting in numbness and angst. In everydayness, one accepts everything others say and do without having any personal identity or belief. Such a man deliberately hides himself with the swarming mass of society. Discomfort and disorientation mark their lives, making one, as Robert Brinkmayer admits, "solitary figures, exiles from a society whose moral system lacks a transcendent framework" (13). They lost in the routine of money-making and love-making, suffer from a "loss of creature" so that severed from creation they "inhabit no place and abide by no time" (percy1975:49). They lose objects in their categories and people in their function. They only consider persons things and things abstractions. They find themselves thrust into the world without being consulted and lead a life of mere routine and anonymity. They are Percy's commuters staring blankly out of the window at the landscape that both terrifies and bores them. The world bores them because it is all too familiar to them. It terrifies because they do not know what is in store for them when they step out of the platform. Travelling through but not in world, they are separated from physical universe, other people, even his own flesh, as he speeds on a journey defined by its end. The wayfarer suffers severe setbacks during the travel that triggers him to examine himself "as he had never seen it before. He is astounded by its complexity, its functional beauty. He turns it this way and that" (Percy 1975:109).

Under the cumbersome onus of everydayness, man fall into a 'thyself' system where everyone becomes anyone without any definite purpose. They live their lives in concealment and protect their lives with the mask of complacency. In such a state they accept the standards of the public –the public media, the public institutions, and the public world-view- in place of any reflective conception of themselves. Such people listen to what scientists say and do what they do instead of doing something original that distinguishes them from typical, the ordinary and acceptable. They have only a vague apprehension that their lives are out joints without any mooring or substance. They realize that "something is wrong here and [they] don't feel good" (Percy 1975: 106). Yet they cannot discern what actually is wrong with them and with the world at large.

Percy argues that modern man's feeling of rootlessness and everydayness is basically due to the scientific view of man as "an organism conditioned and governed by the requirement of his environment and in due time capable of achieving perfect happiness by adapting himself to his environment. Such a view is opposed to the Christian doctrine of 'the Fall' which attributes our alienation to our separation from God precipitated by the fall of Adam and Eve. Modern science, however, teaches man that he can live happily here relying solely on scientific advancement without any regard to God. Percy argues that despite the great promises of a bright future assured by science man is still discontented, alienated and fragmented. Science does not teach man how to live as a man with body and soul intact. In "Delta Factor", Percy laments that man feels so bad in the twentieth century despite

the tall claims laid down by science. It is because the scientific view of man as an organism no longer holds good and the Judeo-Christian concept of man having body and soul is negated. As a consequence, modern man lives “as consumer units their scientists understand them to be” (Percy 1975: 19). Since science says nothing about man’s role and place in the world, man feels rootless and “live by reason during the day and in night dream bad dreams”(Percy:1975:45).

In “Coming Crisis in Psychiatry”, Percy says that empirical sciences cannot handle the problem of alienation successfully and adequately. A biological or social approach to man can never fully explain the phenomenon of alienation. Though science can satiate man’s social and material needs, he need not necessarily be mentally healthy, for he is desperately alienated from himself “as things as commodities and nothing” (Percy 1957:392). A psychological approach to alienation, on the other hand is “silent about the sickness of modern man, his emotional impoverishment, and his sense of alienation”. These out-looks “construe man as organism responding to its environment by maintaining itself and adapting itself to its environment” (Percy 1957: 417). Only a vision that admits transcendence – a true notion of man toward God – can fully explain the malaise afflicting man, Percy argues.

Alienated homelessness and everydayness are the controlling concepts in Percy’s fictional world. Modern man “has lost something...[and] his is sick unto death” comments Percy (1975:19). Scientific theories, which present “a mish-mash view of man, a slap-up modern, put together of desperate bits and pieces”, cannot explain the malaise that envelops the twentieth century (Percy 1975:19). ONLY THE Judeo-Christian view of man which takes into account the “aboriginal catastrophe – the Fall – can fully describe the rootlessness of man (Percy 1975: 24). Percy works out his doctrine of the malaise within the framework of Catholic dogma. Percy to his interviewer, Carlton Creemans, summarized his notion of alienation as follows:

Man is alienated by the nature of his being here. He is here a stranger and a pilgrim, which is the way alienation, is conceived in my books. It is the orthodox sort of alienation, but expressed I hope in unorthodox or fresh language (284).

Percy considers everydayness the first cause of alienation. A second reason for the malaise is inauthenticity. It is the antithesis of authentic meaningful life, involving a surrender of personal sovereignty and playing a role alien to one-self. An inauthentic person flees for refuge into the crowd to escape from his individual self. Such a person accepts the standards and myths of the crowd without ever observing his personality. The reference to the couple riding in the: Dodge Sedan” in *The Moviegoer* is an example of inauthentic experience. Binx, the protagonist of the novel finds himself playing a role alien to himself. He is comfortable and smiling, all his papers are in order he sits next to a beautiful girl – a recipe for happiness judged by the standards of the society – but Binx realizes that he has fallen into inauthenticity. He suddenly discovers that his new “Dodge Sedan” is “a regular incubator of Malaise” (Percy 1962: 121).

A third cause of the malaise, Percy tells is abstraction, i.e., the absorption of concrete personality into theoretical shadow through self-objectification. a victim of abstraction takes a purely functional life but as an activity that yields a certain return on the world’s investment. An abstracted individual objectifies himself reducing himself into mere symbols and masses. Modern empirical sciences threaten the individual with self-objectification by valuing his function rather than his self. Abstraction eradicates personality by giving primary importance to efficiency rather than individuality. Tom More of Percy’s *Love in the Ruins* laments: “Man has so abstracted from himself and the world around himself, seeing things as theories and himself as shadows that he cannot, so to speak, reenter the lovely ordinary world. Instead, he orbits the earth and himself. Such a person, and there are millions, is destined to haunt the human condition life Flying Dutch-man (Percy1971:29).

The malaise of everydayness has crept into every field of human activity throwing men into the vortex of despair. The most despairing character of the despair experienced by modern man is that he is unaware of it.

Percy quotes a phrase from Kierkegaard's *The Sickness unto Death* as epigraph to his **The Moviegoer** to highlight the specific character of despair: "... the specific character of despair is precisely this: It is unaware of being despair" (Percy 1962: V). Percy borrows this quotation from Kierkegaard to evince the fact that men like Binx Bolling (*The Moviegoer*), Will Barret (*The Last Gentleman*) Dr. Thomas More (*The Thanatos Syndrome*) and Lancelot (*Lancelot*) who are already dissatisfied with all the good thing of the materialist middle ground of American life, find that such a life no longer brings them the desired pleasure. They struggle to disentangle themselves from the malaise and to stand once again on an even ground as individuals, recognizing the sovereignty of his own self and that of others.

Percy's characters exhibit the symptoms of the malaise that encircles them. All of his protagonists suffer from a particular des-ease or mental frustration that bespeaks tellingly of their alienation. Binx Bolling's "insomnia", Will Barret's constant fits of 'déjà vu and amnesia', Dr. More's 'morning terrors', Lancelot's 'identity crisis' etc are symptoms of their homelessness and alienation. To worsen their feeling of estrangement, they all suffer from a secret psychic wound received from a weak even a suicidal father, who may be an alcoholic, a cuckold or a bribe taker. The father of each protagonist either tries to or does kill himself. The weight of the father's suicide on posterity is Percy's thematic obsession. They were unable to give their children a purpose in life. So Percy's protagonists, lonely, adrift, and marooned in this world always search for the smallest sign that may redeem them from their predicament. At the beginning of their quests, they all experience a kind of epiphany that Percy calls, "a kind of natural revelation.... a revelation of being" (Percy 1975: 109). From Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*, to Dr. Tom More, in *Thanatos Syndrome*, see the sign of the thanatos before they return to the world and to themselves. The return to self consciousness frees the castaways from their solitary self absorption, make them aware of themselves and attentive to the world around them. They now enjoy what Eric Voegelin calls the "reflective tension in existence" by which humanity finds it is "a part of being, capable of experiencing itself as such (Ciuba 4). Through a series of small spiritual self revelations, Percy's men break out off the loneliness and despair created by their narcissism and begins communicating with others. Through this communication, Percy suggests, contemporary individuals join with others in an authentic revival of cultural values based on creative personal development. However similar their symptoms are they all emerge as individual characters, masterfully shaped by nuance and subtlety. The protagonists of Percy engage themselves in a pilgrimage from "the dislocated post modern world back into the ancestral past and onto a transcendental timelessness" (Luschei 169). Abandoning the watchful insularity that once sustained and strangled them, Percy's characters break into a new world of understanding and love, like Binx Bolling of *The Moviegoer* and Will Barret of *The Last Gentleman*, finally achieving the kind of intersubjective union that is itself a concelebration of being and an intimation of a more transcendent union. It makes Percy apocalyptic vision earth bound for the Kingdom of God in Percy's fictions is not achieved at the end of history: "it breaks into history and grows in the lives of believers" (Kobre 130). Percy's vision ends up with a sense of fellowship, "a dialogue of husband and wife (Binx and Kate in *The Moviegoer*), son and father-figure (Barret and Sutter in *The Last Gentleman*), priest and confessor (Lancelot and Fr. Percival) in *Lancelot*, or a psychiatrist and patient (Fr. Smith and Tom more) in *Love in the Ruins*" Hobson 164). Percy's vision leads thus not to thanatos but to a new life in flesh and spirit. The 'D- Day' does occur for Percy. It happens not at the end of history or at the end of life but in the daily life of his characters. Through their will and action they destroy the present world and after that destruction they start all over again in a new world life the phoenix where deeds measure time and ages may begin or end with a single action, where people do whatever they can to help others and the world. As Fr Smith exhorts Thomas More in *Love in the Ruins*:

Meanwhile, forgive me but there are other things we must think about: Like doing our jobs, you being a better doctor, I being a better priest showing a bit of ordinary kindness to people,

particularly to our families – unkindness to those close to us is such a pitiful thing – doing what we can for our poor unhappy country” (Percy 1971: 340).

Despite the alarm that Percy’s fiction registers, each of his novels shows how the world ends for only a few individuals, yet the entire history of the City of Man depends on such personal choices to live in the City of God.

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