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## "A Dark, Abiding, Signing Africanist Presence" in Walker Percy's Dr. Tom More Novels

### Cover Page Footnote

I am grateful to Dr. Benjamin Lockerd of Grand Valley State University for reading and providing very helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this paper. I also am thankful for the many thought-provoking questions and helpful comments I received when presenting an earlier version of this paper at the 2018 SECCLL and from the reviewers.

In American literature, as in American culture more generally, race has played a central role not only in the sense that a great deal of literature is directed at the problems of race, racism, and race relations, but in the means by which racial differences and similarities are used as signs. Many of the tropes, commonplaces, symbols, and values used and reflected by the great American literary works written by white authors, as Toni Morrison writes, are “in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (Morrison 5). The white American literary tradition—like the idea of *whiteness* itself, as James Baldwin (169) and others have pointed out—has in important aspects relied upon a reference to *blackness* and to the experience of black people in America to arrive at its self-definition (Gates 12). The content of the idea of *whiteness* as a racial concept, then, is derived from *blackness* both as it differs and defers, and vice versa. Borrowing Jacques Derrida’s (78) French neologism *différance* to describe the simultaneous differing and deferring of signs, scholars such as Ellen T. Armour (62), Ryan Simmons (84), and others have used the term *racial différance* to describe this mutual derivation of meaning through juxtaposition in the black/white binary. It is this binary and the racial *différance* it feeds from and creates anew that informs the use of blackness as a signifier for readers of the works of Walker Percy.

Complicating both the literary and personal relationship of Percy to the American racial dichotomy is a set of unlikely characteristics; he was both a Southerner and white as well as a committed Catholic. While his Southern heritage and whiteness placed him on the “white” side of the racial dichotomy, his Catholic religious beliefs pushed him toward a sympathy and similarity to the disadvantages and bigotry faced by African Americans. Along with Jews, African Americans and Catholics were frequently grouped

together in the white Southern consciousness as objectionable outsiders. The Knights of Columbus, a Catholic fraternal organization, sensing this commonality, published a series of three books in 1924 exploring the contributions to American society and culture by each group.<sup>1</sup> The best known and most-enduring of these three volumes has been W. E. B. Du Bois's contribution on behalf of African Americans, *The Gift of Black Folk: The Negroes in the Making of America*. Notably, Percy frequently uses this trio of traditionally excluded and mistreated groups in American history in his works, often implying a shared suffering as well as a shared position as signs of humanity's fallenness and God's existence.<sup>2</sup>

Percy's first published work after his conversion to Catholicism was a 1956 essay, "Stoicism in the South," written for the Catholic magazine *Commonweal* in defense of a pastoral letter written by the Archbishop of New Orleans condemning racism and segregation. Percy had been raised in a family with a long history of opposition to "bigotry and narrow-mindedness, especially when it was directed against Catholics, Jews, and Negroes," writes Ralph C. Wood (12). Nonetheless, the stance assumed toward African Americans by Percy's forebears was largely one of paternalism and condescension. The stance of Percy's uncle William Alexander Percy, with whom Percy lived as an adolescent after the deaths of his parents, is recorded in the elder Percy's 1941 book *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son* (Wallach 125). There, Percy champions what he saw as the traditional values of the South, including agrarianism and a feeling of "pity" for poor African Americans (*Lanterns*, 298). As Brendan P. Purdy and Janice Daurio explain, however, the younger Percy realized that "this kindly paternalism . . . masks an inherent belief in the inequality of men" (225). In "Stoicism in the South," Percy contrasts

this paternalism, which he identifies with the Stoic philosophy of ancient Rome, with a Christian perspective on one's relationship to those of other races, writing, "What the Stoic sees as the insolence of his former charge—and this is what he can't tolerate, the Negro's demanding his rights instead of being thankful for the squire's generosity—is in the Christian scheme the sacred right which must be accorded the individual, whether deemed insolent or not. . . . The Stoic has no use for the clamoring minority; the Christian must have every use for it" (86). As Purdy and Dauro explain, Percy is here describing and rejecting the viewpoint of his uncle (213). The sort of "pity" prescribed by his uncle implies the feeling and attitude of a superior toward an inferior; for the Christian, however, who sees "the relationship of humans to each other . . . as children of the same father . . . it is not pity that is called for, but solidarity and love." Wood adds that "Percy the former segregationist" put his words into practice, arguing assiduously for the rights of African Americans, openly condemning the White Citizens' Councils and other segregationist groups, and working for expanded opportunities for African Americans in his native Louisiana (23–24). Percy's religious awakening not only coincided with but cultivated his social and racial awakening.<sup>3</sup>

Percy's thought on race is perhaps most clearly revealed in his admiration for Albert Murray's 1970 essay "The Omni-Americans: Black Experience and American Culture." In his essay, Murray argued that "for all their traditional antagonisms and obvious differences, the so-called black and so-called white people of the United States resemble nobody in the world so much as they resemble each other" (24). In a claim that echoes the earlier claims of Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* and *The Gifts of Black Folk*, Murray claims that American culture is "irrevocably composite," containing important

influences from the cultures of each of the people groups which have contributed to it, including especially people of African descent. Contrary to the claims and desires of the segregationist and the racist, says Murray, African-American influence has so pervaded American culture from its beginning that Americans are all, in a sense, “mulatto” (Baker 55). According to Percy’s glowing review of “The Omni-Americans,” Murray’s essay was the “most important book on black-white relations in the United States, indeed on American culture, published in this generation” (Feeney 71). Percy’s belief in the omni-Americanness—that is, the pervasive influence—of African Americans and African-American culture underlies his frequent use of racial *différance* in his novels as a means by which to explicate what he perceived to be the spiritual illness of modern America.

In his novels *Love in the Ruins* (1971) and *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), Percy recounts the adventures of Dr. Tom More. Like Percy himself, More is white, Southern, Catholic, and a psychiatrist deeply interested in the ailments of the human mind and soul. In the first of the two novels, *Love in the Ruins*, More invents a machine that he calls a lapsometer and which, according to More’s assessment of own invention, “can measure the index of life, life in death and death in life” (190). It is, he says, “the first hope” of “Western man” for restoring the proper relationship between the body, mind, and soul since the “famous philosopher Descartes” severed these aspects of the human person from each other in the seventeenth century (191). In short, the lapsometer is a device which can diagnose and treat the ailments that have long plagued the souls of human beings in the Western world (Lawson 39). As More describes it, the lapsometer works wonders on most of his patients, including himself; after giving himself “a light brain massage” with it, he proclaims, that his existential “terror [is] gone,” that he feels

“clairvoyant . . . , prescient, musical, at once abstracted, seeing things according to their essences, and at the same time poised for the day’s adventure in the wide world” (245). The potential for such a device, as More sees, is nothing short of the ability to “save the world” (382).

However, More notes, “my invention is not perfected yet. I haven’t finished with it” (200). The lapsometer possesses one great flaw; its “sensors won’t penetrate melanin pigment in the skin.” Black people are impenetrable to the lapsometer. There may be a somewhat subtle reference here to the question of Percy’s uncle in *Lanterns on the Levee*, “Is the inner life of the Negro utterly differently from ours?” which leads him into a discussion of the “hints of a traditional lore alien to us and unfathomable by us” (*Lanterns* 304). In addition to reflecting a certain historical reality, this lack of ability on the part of whites to understand the inner worlds of African Americans also possesses important symbolic value for Percy. The symbolic value of this impenetrability as a commentary on race relations may be illuminated through reference to Du Bois’s concept of the Veil of separation between the white and black worlds.

In *The Souls of Black Folk* and elsewhere, Du Bois describes the Veil as the invisible barrier that separates African Americans from whites and vice versa, hiding from the views of each the lives and souls of the other (Zamir 104). Percy explores the fracturing of the Western—or, in *Love in the Ruins*, more specifically, the white American—soul. According to More’s description, the social, or outer, and personal, or inner, layers of this soul have separated from each other, resulting in a fall of the self from itself (*Love in the Ruins* 36). Du Bois’s idea of double-consciousness both mirrors and amplifies the diagnosis of Percy-via-More concerning the Western soul. Du Bois originally

derived the idea of double-consciousness from his philosophical mentor at Harvard University, the pragmatist philosopher William James, for whom double-consciousness, writes Keith E. Byerman (15), “was a form of mental illness in which the victim experienced self-alienation, an inability to maintain a coherent self-image.” Du Bois built upon this concept, which bears a great deal of similarity to the phenomenon described by Percy, to explain the “two-ness” of the African-American soul as he encountered and experienced it: “an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder” (364). While Percy describes the Cartesian soul of modern man severed between outward and inward, Du Bois describes the souls of African Americans as having been severed by the Veil into American and African segments. The result is the inability of whites to see behind the Veil and to understand the souls of those on the other side, as well as the inability of the lapsometer, a device designed by a white Southerner—surely with other whites in mind—to diagnose the split as it occurs in the souls of African Americans.

In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the second of Percy’s Dr. Tom More novels, and the last novel he wrote before his death, More finds himself in opposition to a conspiracy by a rogue element within a government scientific agency. The rogue scientists poison the water supply of an area of rural Louisiana with Na-24, otherwise known as heavy sodium, resulting in a seemingly miraculous utopian society. According to More’s description of the inhabitants of the area, “In each there has occurred a sloughing away of the old terrors, worries, rages, a shedding of guilt like last year’s snakeskin, and in its place is a mild fond vacancy, a species of unfocused animal good spirits” (21). The “heavy sodium



reduces crime by 85%, neurosis by 79%, and AIDS by 76%. It also results in a 20% increase in IQ" among the people to whose water supply it has been added (Schiedermayer 71).

In addition to curing those who drink it of all mental and spiritual ailments from depression and anxiety to criminality, the effects of Na-24 on this Louisiana parish's white residents is to make them into beings like both computers and animals simultaneously (Cheever 351). They are able to solve difficult mathematical equations quickly and provide precise distances between cities from memory. More's wife develops the ability to "calculate the probabilities of distribution of cards in individual hands as accurately as a computer" while playing bridge (*Thanatos Syndrome* 68). At the same time, however, women begin "presenting rearward"—a term More claims to have borrowed from primatologists—to desirable men (20). The men, for their part, also begin to exhibit signs of a reversion to ape-like habits, including chest-pounding, teeth-baring, and an inordinate desire for bananas (343–344).

The effect the Na-24 has upon the black inmates of a prison located in the affected area, however, differs from its effects on its white consumers. Rather than reverting to a primitive animality or becoming human computers, these African-American prisoners return to slavery. As More describes his first sight of the phenomenon (266),

Standing on the top deck of the stranded crew boat, we look out over the vast prison farm. Rows of cotton, mostly picked, stretch away into the bright morning sunlight. Hundreds of black men and women, the men bare-chested, the women kerchiefed, bend over the rows, dragging their long sacks collapsed like parachutes. Armed horsemen patrol the levee.

. . .

From all around, as murmurous as the morning breeze, comes the singing.

*Swing low, sweet chariot,  
Coming for to carry me home.*

Bob Comeaux, the head of the project to distribute the Na-24 through the parish's water supply explains to More that "they're enjoying it" and "some of them don't want to leave and go back to the streets of New Orleans and Baton Rouge." Elizabeth Amato (63) notes, for both African Americans and whites, though in different ways, "social ills are overcome, but lost is the individual freedom to answer the question 'how to live' both for oneself and as a participating member of society."

The scene and its meaning bear some illustrative similarities to Booker T. Washington's description of the coming of Union soldiers to the plantation where he had been born enslaved. In the first chapter of his autobiography *Up from Slavery*, Washington describes the reading of the Emancipation Proclamation by these Union soldiers and the initial joy with which the news of freedom was greeted on the part of the adults among the enslaved people. As Washington describes it, however, this initial enthusiasm quickly subsided in the face of "the great responsibility of being free" (21). The formerly enslaved people quickly began to realize that freedom entails the tremendous burden of choice. While Comeaux's assurances to More that the prisoners-*cum*-slaves are happy to return to the life of plantation slaves are undoubtedly self-serving, there is also an element of truth in the relief at unburdening oneself of the need to make choices.

While Percy makes use of the effect of racial *différance* to signify the human desire to unburden the self from the need for choice, he also makes use of racial *différance* as a signifier for the desire to return to full humanity, including both the integration of the self

and the freedom to choose. At the moment of the final showdown between More and Comeaux in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, the Negro spirituals sung by the inmates-cum-slaves outside can be heard in the prison building where the confrontation is taking place. Each time there is a break in the exchange between Comeaux and More, the singing enters in. Each time Comeaux is confronted with the deleterious and dehumanizing effects of his Na-24 experiment, he stands in silence, the spirituals rising to the fore from the background: "Silence, except for the spirituals" (*Thanatos Syndrome* 331–332). The interruption of the spirituals into Bob's last attempt to defend his program is, for Percy, the in-breaking of a sign of the endurance of humanity in spite of attempts by Bob and those like him to reduce humankind to something less than human by removing the interlinked elements of choice and self-awareness.

It is the perspective of the Psalms that all humans are children under the fatherhood of God that turned Percy toward an integrationist stance in regards to race relations and the Negro spirituals are in many ways a continuation of the Psalmists' ideas, attitudes, and faith. As Purdy and Daurio write of Percy's relationship to the Psalms in his thought on race, "the theology of the Psalms is the theology of blacks in the South, the less powerful in the land of the powerful, the Africans in the antebellum South held in their own Babylonian captivity" (213). In spite of his persistent segregationist stance, Percy's uncle, too, had credited the Negro spirituals, much as the younger Percy credited the Psalms, for "awakening kindred compassions in the core of my being" (*Lanterns* 27). A further influence on Percy's use of the spirituals may be found in Murray, who held, explains Josef Sorrett (213), that "the religious rituals of ordinary black Americans revealed an awareness of the inconsistencies and limitations of the human condition."

This both precisely summarizes the symbolic value the Negro spirituals carry in *The Thanatos Syndrome* and draws upon previous white and African-American writing on the significance of the spirituals. Bob Comeaux's assurances of the contentment of the inmates-*cum*-slaves echoes the similar assurances of the contentment of the slaves by the slave-owning class of the antebellum era (*Thanatos Syndrome* 266). Thomas R. Dew (9–10), a Southern slave-owner, historian, and college professor, wrote in his 1832 *Review of the Debate in the Virginia Legislature of 1831 and 1832*, "Since the slave is happy . . . should we endeavor to disturb his contentment by infusing into his mind a vain and indefinite desire for liberty, something which he cannot comprehend and which must inevitably dry up the very sources of his happiness?" So ubiquitous did this contention of the happiness of the black slave become, writes Margaret Malamud, that "images of the 'merry' slaves even appeared on Confederate currency that portrayed slaves happily working in the fields" (112). Percy, then, is associating Comeaux, and those whom he sees Comeaux as representative of, with the Southern slave-owner who claimed of his slaves that by depriving them of the burden of freedom and choice he was contributing to their happiness.

Simultaneously, however, Percy deploys racial *différance* to confront the reader with the question of whether such a loss of freedom is worth the contentment it may apparently produce. Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, and other formerly-enslaved people who wrote about their experiences under slavery frequently noted that while the spirituals were interpreted by outsiders as a sign of contentment among the enslaved, the spirituals were in fact expressions of a deep grief at the loss of liberty.<sup>4</sup> Du Bois, drawing both upon Douglass's writing on the Negro spirituals as well as his own experiences,

posited a centrality for the spirituals, which he referred to as the "Sorrow Songs," within African-American life as well as claiming for the songs a prominent place among African-American contributions to American culture (*Souls* 536–537). According to Du Bois, the "Sorrow Songs" are the universalization of the unique experience of bondage by African Americans, a point that Du Bois emphasizes through pairing bars of musical notation from the "Sorrow Songs" with lines of poetry by European and white American authors in the epigraph of each chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk* (Smith 115).<sup>5</sup> By emphasizing the common humanity of black and white people, Du Bois also emphasizes his belief in the universal message of the African-American experience conveyed through the sorrow songs, a message of the human longing for freedom; as Du Bois writes in the opening chapter of *The Souls of Black Folk*, "there are to-day no truer exponents of the pure human spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes" (370). The interruptions of the Negro Spirituals into the confrontation of Comeaux by More, then, are interruptions of "the pure human spirit" of freedom and the desire to be fully human even at the cost of ostensible happiness.

This episode provides a characteristic example of the ways in which Percy makes use of racial *différance* in his novels. Social commentary is frequently subsumed under the spiritual message of his work while the societal implications of the spiritual message remain in view. Percy is never able to absolutely overcome the black/white binary; it is as permanently embedded in his own perspective as it seems to be in American society generally. The inability of the lapsometer to penetrate the melanin in skin and the quite different effects of the Na-24 on its black and white imbibers both point to what seems to

be the permanence of Du Bois's Veil, an unbridgeable gulf between the experiences and resultant identities of black and white Americans.

Percy is able, however, to use the dehumanizing treatment of African Americans within the slave society of the South as a means by which to interrogate the loss of human freedom as a means to happiness, and to turn instead to a common brotherhood of man, however flawed, under God. In so doing, he exhibits the potential for positive and universalizing interpretations of the Africanist "other" that Toni Morrison identified as running throughout white American literature. While the black-white binary of American culture has often been an insidious influence, Percy, though not transcending it, employs its semiotic potential as a means by which to emphasize the common and universally flawed humanity of all people.

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**Notes**

<sup>1</sup> The three volumes were dedicated to Jewish Americans, African Americans, and German Americans, respectively. The Germans were chosen as representatives of traditionally Catholic ethnic groups because of increased anti-German feeling sentiment among Americans following World War I. In short, not only were most German immigrants of an objectionable religion (Catholicism) but of an ethnic group whose nation had been on the wrong side, so to speak, of the Great War. See Daniels 2007, 86.

<sup>2</sup> For example, see the grouping of "Blacks, Jews, Catholics" as targets of the Ku Klux Klan in *Lancelot* (Percy 1978, 156) and the similar connection in *Thanatos Syndrome* between stereotyping of Jews, Irish Catholics, and African Americans (Percy 1987, 122). In the context of Percy's nonfiction writing, he similarly groups "blacks, Jews, and Catholics" as objects of Southern bigotry in, for example, "Why Are You a Catholic?" (Percy 1991, 305).

<sup>3</sup> One rather interesting example of Percy's engagement in the political battles of the Civil Rights Era occurred in 1970 when he testified in federal court as an expert witness on the Confederate flag. A suit had been brought against a newly-desegregated Louisiana high school by several African American students over the display of the flag in the school as well as unequal treatment of black students at the school. Percy's conclusion was that the flag is a symbol of "segregation, white supremacy, and racism" that must be removed ("Hebee Pondering").

<sup>4</sup> Frederick Douglass provides one of the earliest interpretations of the Negro spirituals by a former slave in his 1845 autobiography *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. There, Douglass writes, "I have often been utterly astonished, since coming to the north, to find persons who could think of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy" (19). Indeed, says Douglass, "they told a tale of woe which was then altogether beyond my feeble comprehension." In her 1861 autobiography, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, Harriet Jacobs offers an account of the singing of a spiritual that affirms Douglass's impressions. After an elderly woman slave told her fellow slaves of her extreme sorrow at having the last of her children taken away from her to be sold, says

Jacobs, “the congregation struck up a hymn, and sung as though they were as free as the birds that warbled round us” (519).

<sup>5</sup> For Du Bois, writes Arnold Rampersad, “the sorrow songs are a message to the world” that beautifully convey an aspect of the human experience which had been largely ignored, namely the sufferings of captive and mistreated people and the endurance of the human spirit—including its longing for freedom—throughout these trials (80–81). As Byerman, this pairing “symbolizes common humanity, despite racial difference” (35).