

WALKER PERCY AND THE MAGIC OF NAMING: THE SEMEIOTIC FABRIC OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Walker Percy thought a paradigm for the modern age, human beings, and life does not exist, and no paradigm vying for supremacy (religion, scientism, new age physics and philosophies) succeeds. He sought to create a “radical anthropology” to describe human beings and life. His anthropology has existential roots and culminates in the philosophy and semeiotic of American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce. Unlike any other creature, humans have symbolic capacity, first manifested in a child’s naming and demonstrated in human being’s unique language ability, the ability to communicate through symbol and not just sign. Percy conveyed his anthropology in his last three novels through a number symbolism corresponding to the theme of each novel based on Peirce’s Cenopythagoreanism, viewing the world through the paradigm of number. In *Lancelot*, Percy uses the symbol of the inverted three to illustrate Lancelot’s inverted search for evil. In *The Second Coming*, he uses diamonds and squares and fours to illustrate community and authentic communication in the novel. In *The Thanatos Syndrome*, he uses twos and sixes to represent the search for dyadic solutions to triadic problems. Percy sees a synechistic and synchronistic interconnected “fabric of life” to the universe, enabled by human symbolic capacity, or Peirce’s concept of relations.

INDEX WORDS: Walker Percy, Charles Sanders Peirce, Kenneth Laine Ketner, Radical anthropology, Symbol, Semeiotic, Semiotics, Naming, Language theory, Susanne Langer, Thirdness, Dyad, Triad, Tetrad, Scientism, The Thanatos Syndrome, The Second Coming, Lancelot, The Moviegoer, Paradigm, Sacrament, Intersubjective, Community, Synechism, Synchronicity, Fabric of life, Pragmaticism, The Message in the Bottle, A Thief of Peirce, Coupler, Interpretant, Cenopythagoreanism

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	viii
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS	ix
1 THE PROBLEM: PARADIGM LOST	1
1.1 The Mystery of Human Beings.....	1
1.2 The Background: Some Biographical and Cultural Influences on Percy	8
1.3 Some Literary and Intellectual Influences on Percy.....	17
1.4 The First Failure: Psychology.....	30
1.5 The Second Failure: Scientism.....	48
1.6 The Third Failure: New Age Physics and Philosophies.....	61
1.7 Existential Roots: <i>The Moviegoer</i>	71
2 THE CHILDREN: THE MAGIC AND MYSTERY OF NAMING	94
2.1 The Children: Crossing the Symbolic Threshold.....	94
2.2 Symbol as Joyful Affirmation	106
2.3 Symbol as Pairing and Denotation	111
2.4 Symbol as Empty, Different, and Arbitrary	117
2.5 Symbol as World and Myth.....	121
2.6 Symbol as Art, Music, and Religion.....	124
2.8 Symbol as Existential.....	127
3 PARADIGM FOUND: SEMEIOTIC: FROM SIGN TO SYMBOL.....	134
3.1 Charles Sanders Peirce Takes on Charles Morris	134
3.2 Valency Analysis.....	152
3.3 Twos and Dyads: Cause-Effect Sign.....	155

3.4	Threes and Triads: Uniquely Human Symbol	159
3.5	Fours and Tetrads: Symbol as Intersubjective Communication.....	169
3.6	Symbol as Consciousness	174
3.7	The Coupler: Dyadic Semioticians Fail to Describe the Triadic Event	178
3.8	The Coupler: Waltzing Toward the Interpretant	193
3.9	The Semeiotic Fabric of Life: Reality as Continuous	209
4	THE NOVELS: ARITHMECRIT	224
4.1	To Be or Not to Be (a Novelist)	224
4.2	ArithmeCrit.....	230
4.3	Lancelot: The Inverted Three: The Moviemakers	242
4.4	The Second Coming: The Treasure Hunt for Diamonds, Fours, and Community	268
4.5	The Thanatos Syndrome: Dyadic Solutions and the Mark of the Beast—A Brave New World	299
5	THE DIVINE: FROM SYMBOL TO SACRAMENT	318
5.1	Symbol as Order in the Midst of Disorder: The Fabric of Life.....	318
5.2	Symbol as Magic and Mystery	324
5.3	Symbol as Divine: “The Word”	336
5.5	Symbol as Divine: Sacrament	341
5.6	The Wanderer and the Wayfarer.....	362
	WORKS CITED AND WORKS CONSULTED.....	371
	APPENDICES	390
	Appendix A: The Four Stages of Symbolic Transformation.....	390
	Appendix B: New Physics: Quantum Mechanics.....	403

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

THE NOVELS

MG = *The Moviegoer* (1961)

LG = *The Last Gentleman* (1966)

LR = *Love in the Ruins* (1971)

L = *Lancelot* (1977)

SC = *The Second Coming* (1980)

TS = *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987)

NON-FICTION

MB = *Message in the Bottle* (1975)

LC = *Lost in the Cosmos* (1983)

SSL = *Signposts in a Strange Land* (1991)

SE = *Symbol and Existence: A Study of Meaning* (Percy's unpublished manuscript in the UNC-Chapel Hill archives)

LETTERS AND INTERVIEWS

Con I = *Conversations with Walker Percy* (1985)

Con II = *More Conversations with Walker Percy* (1993)

KK = Ketner, Kenneth Laine. Letter to author. 21 June 2011.

TP = *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy* (1995)

1 THE PROBLEM: PARADIGM LOST

1.1 THE MYSTERY OF HUMAN BEINGS

Juliet:

*"What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet."*

Romeo and Juliet (II, ii, 1-2), William Shakespeare

* * *

I believe that an impartial empirical analysis of the extraordinary act of symbolization will bridge the gap between the behavioristics of Mead and the existentialia of Marcel. (MB 272)

* * *

What's in a name? For Walker Percy (1916-1990) – American scientist, philosopher, novelist, and medical doctor – naming was the secret to unlocking the mystery of human beings. Arising from the uniquely human capacity for “symbol-mongering,” naming is the crossing of the symbolic threshold from animal to human. Naming is a joyful, powerful event – from our first naming to every symbolic activity thereafter. Naming is an encounter and affirmation of the named, of the “other.” For Percy, naming is magical and even divine.

While Percy would agree with Shakespeare that a rose may smell as sweet no matter what it is named, he believed that, unless it has a name, it can never be known, never experienced. Naming (specifically) and symbolization (more generally) make us qualitatively different from our animal cousins. It is the doorway to our humanity.

Walker Percy wanted to find a cohesive and decisive explanatory theory for humans. He observed that our culture is riddled with conflicting and competing theories resonating through our social fabric and our confused and divided American consciousness – both individual and group. We no longer have an accepted coherent or adequate view of humankind or the universe. Percy found human language ability to be the key to his search:

...time ran out and the old modern world ended and the old monster theory no longer works. Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the “something more” is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea.... When man doesn’t know whether he is an organism or a soul or both, and if both how he can be both, it is good to start with what he does know. This book [*The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, Percy’s study of language] is about two things, man’s strange behavior and man’s strange gift of language, and about how understanding the latter might help understanding the former. (MB 9)

Percy felt current anthropological theories had failed, and so he sought to create a “radical anthropology,” based on human capacity for language, and beginning with the magical act of naming.

He had twin kings to depose – kings that had ruled over Western culture since the Enlightenment – Newtonian science and Cartesian dualism. In Percy’s academic world, the scientific paradigm took precedence over Descartes’ “ghost in a machine” and certainly over the conservative Christian view. But it was inadequate when it came to describing human beings, Percy discovered. The cause-and-effect model of an organism responding to stimuli is linear and dyadic. While dyadic science had dominated the world view of Western culture since the medieval church and was certainly competent for describing the rest of the world, Percy realized that this kind of science alone could not fully explain many characteristics of humans, especially those described by the existentialists, including consciousness, symbolic capacity (language, art, culture), and the human need for meaning.

Yet as a scientist himself, he was skeptical of how well pure philosophy and art could explain human beings, and so he found himself reluctant to abandon entirely the *scientific method* as a tool for investigation, even though he now found *scientism*¹ an inadequate philosophy to explain the nature of humanity. He sought a new science – one that could provide an explanation for human behavior

¹ “Scientism” refers not to the method of science – testing an hypothesis to determine if evidence supports it – but to science as a worldview – in which any theory or view outside the realm of dyadic science is considered irrelevant or inaccurate. In this case, science functions as a philosophy or religion would. Or, as Percy says in the preface to *Symbol and Existence*, his unpublished manuscript and sequel to his first book on language: scientism is “the conscious or unconscious elevation of the scientific method to a total all-construing worldview, the tacit conviction that all reality is an expression of certain underlying principles and relationships which are discoverable by the scientific method and that there is no remainder” (7-8). Peirce scholar Kenneth Laine Ketner says scientism is not only “an inadequate philosophy, but most importantly, it is an inadequate and misguided SCIENCE. It works in neither place” (KK).

through the method of science, yet one that, ironically, disproved scientism as the singular explanation for the nature of man. “A theory of man must account for the alienation of man. The modern age began to come to an end when men discovered that they could no longer understand themselves by the theory professed by the age.... The scientists and humanists were saying one thing, but the artists and poets were saying something else.... Someone was wrong” (MB 23, 25). Dyadic science could not account for humans when it came to such things as existential alienation. Bodily processes, brain chemicals, yes; consciousness, existential longings, no. The existential dilemma had no satisfactory answer.

In mid-life, Percy found an answer, a quite traditional one; he returned to the old reigning paradigm of thousands of years – Catholicism – as the best for understanding and describing human beings, as the best guide by which to live life.

Still he wanted some kind of science involved. He became an apologist for the faith – he wanted a rational and intellectual defense of his solid religious faith, of his observation that humans were more than biological creatures; they were creatures that sought meaning, a search manifested in language, art, and culture, but ultimately satisfied by God. And he wanted it through the scientific method. It was his admiration of science as well as the dominance of science in the mid-twentieth century that compelled him to seek to understand humans through an at least partially scientific means – language theory – rather than a purely philosophical or religious means, even as he rejected scientism and the solely dyadic cause-effect principles of behaviorism to describe humans.

Percy was not just disillusioned with scientism as a world view (one of any numbers of world-views and one usually mistaken for the more accurate, self-correcting method of science), he also concluded Descartes’ philosophy had to go – Descartes separated mind from body, creating a rift inside of the individual, who is now a “mind” in a “body” or a ghost in a machine. Individuals become too abstracted or too materialistic, and ultimately, solipsistic, isolating their consciousness from the rest of

the world. The Cartesian individual is an overly rational, overly independent being, rather than a communal being. The Cartesian rift also is a social rift, having created a spiritual, philosophical, and scientific split which led to numerous other schisms, including, according to Percy, the psychological, political, and social split in America today. In fact, no paradigm for understanding humans escapes his criticism, especially the newer ones; the new psychology of self-actualization as well as new age philosophies are also rejected by Percy. Even the new physics, quantum mechanics (which is *not* a dyadic science), is questioned by traditional Percy, who was skeptical of using quantum findings as a new paradigm for understanding humans. Science, psychology, *and* anthropology all fail to construct a competent modern theory of humankind. The era has lost its reigning paradigm. Catholicism has lost its supremacy while its successor, the dyadic scientific worldview, proves inadequate to understand human consciousness.

These two most prevalent paradigms – traditional Christianity and traditional science – battle for power ideologically, politically, socially, morally, scientifically. Neither can claim to dominate the world view as universally and summarily as the Catholic Church did in the first millennium after Christ. Neither have full explanatory power to describe humans or the universe, and the two conflict to boot.

Percy's third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, presciently characterizes these conflicts in America: "The scientists, who are mostly liberals and unbelievers, and the businessmen, who are mostly conservative and Christian... make much of their differences – one speaking of outworn dogmas and creeds, the other of atheism and immorality, etcetera etcetera – to tell the truth, I do not notice a great deal of difference between the two" (LR 15). The paradigm indecision is mirrored in present-day political partisanship – which Percy predicted in the 1970s with his Knothead and Leftpapas parties in *Love in the Ruins*.²

Respective believers adhere belligerently to their chosen view, each blindly ignoring the anomalies that

² Today, the paradigm absence is no longer national but global. The United States' most important international problem is an attack against Western culture by adherents to fundamentalist religious values who use terrorism - fighting due to paradigm conflict and for paradigm supremacy. As American capitalism and pop culture infiltrate their traditions, they seek to assert, through power and force, their paradigm on the rest of the world. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

are clearly present in each. Religious beliefs run the gamut, even within denominations, as Percy parodies with his three branches of the Catholic Church. In addition, dozens of other competing worldviews vie for attention. The paradigm vacuum has allowed all kinds of competing theories, religions, splits, and philosophies to surface, which Percy illustrates throughout his novels, especially in this third novel, *Love in the Ruins*, that ends in an out-and-out civil war between cultural groups and ideologies.

The problem has only become worse in the 21st century, though Percy would hardly have been surprised. Today, court cases are tried over whether to teach “creationism” or evolution in the schools – with each side equally adamant that the other side is in grave error. Gay marriage is repeatedly debated in the courts, with conservative Christians finding the idea immoral and abhorrent, and liberal scientists espousing civil liberties and individual freedoms. Conservatives would like to dismiss global warming dangers rather than challenge established business practices; however, scientists are sure the world is in imminent danger. (Republicans have even sprouted an off-shoot - “tea partiers” - more outlandish than even Percy imagined with his fictional Knotheads in his third novel.)

Percy felt a new kind of anthropology was needed, one that was entirely different from any heretofore proposed, one that took into account characteristics of humanity that no current view could entirely encompass.

Percy’s search for a paradigm to replace the void created by the incompleteness of scientism and outdatedness of religious views began in existential philosophy and eventually led him to “semeiotic” – the original version of the more well known and popular “semiotics” of his day. Percy sees answers in a study of language and “symbol-mongering,” especially as illuminated by 19th century scientist, semeiotician, and founder of pragmatism, Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Percy’s novels began to move from pure existentialism to his unique science-philosophy hybrid of language theory as he immersed himself more and more in his studies of language.

Percy's language theory, derived from Peirce's science and philosophy, was radically different from the language theorists of his day who based their views in cause-effect science. Dyadic traditional science and its psychological cousin, behaviorism, could not comprehend triadic organisms – human beings – who do not operate solely by cause and effect. Language, a uniquely human activity, is a triadic event, and could not be understood by dyadic semiotic theory, which Percy rejected. For Percy, the naming event entails three elements, an object to be named (referent or signified) and the name (signifier), as well as a third element, a coupler for those two entities, for which Percy had a variety of terms: interpretant, organism, namer. Percy and Peirce have a triadic "semeiotic," while most language theorists espouse a "semiotics," which omits the integral and important coupler, keeping the naming event at a dyadic level, never rising above behaviorism or scientism. Nor can a Percy-Peirce triad be reduced to a series of dyadic interactions; it is a qualitatively different phenomenon than a cause-effect event.

Much of Percy's non-fiction writing was focused on discovering and conveying just what this phenomenon was. His fiction portrays humans entirely indecipherable by behaviorist theory, and his latter fiction includes symbols from his triadic theory of language as the primary symbols in each novel. For Percy, as one "comes face to face with the nature of language, one also finds himself face to face with the nature of man" (MB 150). His language theory was one of the most formative influences on his novels and his creation of fictional characters, especially in his last three novels.

For Percy, language also solves the Cartesian rift inside the individual. Language enables consciousness. Consciousness is not simply a state of being alive, but it is an awareness, a consciousness *of* something. We must have a word to name something to be conscious of it. For Percy, unlike Descartes, both language and consciousness are communal entities, for language does not occur in isolation and is always an agreed-upon event. Our name for something is because an "other" told us it was so, and this meaning-agreement enables others to understand us. Percy says, "The triadic creature

is nothing if not social. Indeed, he can be understood as a construct of his relations with others” (SSL 289). The individual self is not primary; the community is, and relations are – just as they are for Percy’s mentor, Peirce. And ultimately all is related, all is connected. All of Percy’s novels reflect the importance – in fact, the salvation – of intersubjective community. At the beginning of each of his novels, his characters are alone and wandering; by the end of each novel, they settle down into a marriage and start building a community. They become wayfarers.

Not only did Percy find insights into meaning and purpose unique to humans in his study of language and symbol, he saw a metaphysical fabric of life – connectedness and patterns and relationships in the structure of the universe, patterns classified using a theory of numbers. Peirce called this “Cenopythagoreanism,” from the root “Cenopythagorean,” meaning a “new Pythagoras,” as Pythagoras also saw number as the basis of the universe. Percy’s language theory was a classification system, with geometric shapes and their corresponding numbers as his means of categorization. These permeate his writing, not just his non-fiction, but also his fiction, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, in ways rarely noticed. He uses the dyad and triad originating from Peirce’s theories, and adds his own tetrad, as recurring symbols dominating his latter three novels, intertwining his fiction and non-fiction.

Percy’s first three novels were heavily influenced by existential philosophy, especially that of Søren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, and occasionally by exhibited triad symbolism. Even then, the triads were not semeiotic ones, but more reflective of the Catholic symbolism of the divine trinity and of sacrament. His last three novels were written after the publication of his collection of essays on language, *The Message in the Bottle*, and with that, his philosophical emphasis veered into this new direction in both his fiction as well as non-fiction, reflecting a transformation now profoundly affected by his obsession with his semeiotic search. The semeiotic lens had become a better paradigm than the abstractions of existentialists for describing his “radical anthropology.”

A different number, each with semeiotic roots, is emphasized in each of these novels to correspond with differing themes. For Percy, **twos** represent a dyadic, cause-effect worldview – a physicalist, materialist, or behaviorist approach to the world; **threes** represent the presence of a mysterious third element, a spiritual element, that separates humans from animals or mere physical entities; **fours** represent the community of humans which must exist for language and symbol to occur, and for faith in God to be manifested. In Percy's fourth novel, *Lancelot*, threes and triangles correspond to protagonist Lancelot Andrewes Lamar's attempt to find some higher element to human beings than mere physical impulses. Next, *The Second Coming's* fours, squares, and diamonds correspond with the love story, and the theme of community in general, of humans needing each other. And finally, *The Thanatos Syndrome's* twos (and sixes) correspond to humans receiving chemical or physical solutions to spiritual problems or dilemmas, essentially transforming into "beasts" and losing important elements of their humanity, including their capacity for language, a result both behavioristic and diabolic.

Percy hoped his study of humankind's unique language capacity, in particular the naming event and the symbolic act, would hold the key to his search for a radical anthropology. While he never solved some aspects of the mystery of naming and symbol, such as the coupler, he did find a coherent theory of who human beings are and how they should live their lives.