

To Take the Writer's Meaning

Walker Percy gave much thought to Charles Sanders Peirce's theory of signs.

BY KENNETH LAINE KETNER



I REALLY MISS WALKER PERCY. I BECAME ACCUSTOMED to anticipating another novel from his hand, or essay, or self-help book, or another surprising insight into human nature. But there will be no more. So we must make the most of what we have.

He has been studied under several labels: Southern writer, Catholic intellectual, existentialist. He was openly hostile about the first, although some critics persist in using it; he seemed ambivalent about the second, yet he didn't reject it; he agreed the third was important.

But there are two more factors which commentators have neglected, costing serious loss of understanding Percy: the strong influence of Charles Sanders Peirce (1839–1914), plus Percy's deep familiarity with laboratory science. "Peirce and Modern Semiotic," appearing here for the first time, demonstrates that the influence of Peirce on Percy's work was as strong as any other.

This essay from 1959, early in Percy's writing career, clearly shows he ably understood and defended Peirce's theory of signs. Although he didn't possess the explosively expanded Peirce scholarship of the next forty years, nevertheless his discussion stands, precisely because he was correct.

Percy was focused upon the difference between contemporary semiotics ("semi-AH-ticks") and semiotic (pronounced "see-my-OH-tick"), which is Peirce's theory of signs—they aren't equivalent. Some regard Peirce as an early postmodernist, but he wasn't. As a career physicist for the U.S. government and member of the National Academy of Sciences since 1876, Peirce held firmly to the role of reality and discoverable objective

truth. Nor was Peirce located in the other extreme: scientism. This also Percy saw clearly. In Peirce's work, the middle held—another reason Percy admired him.

As a scientist, Percy knew avoiding ambiguity was a vital virtue. Ponder the careful terminology of medicine and the disasters that ambiguity can unleash there. Here is the basis of Percy's central claim: Charles M. Morris (1903–79) misused Peirce's carefully selected term *semiotic*. Hence Percy's need for qualifiers, such as "modern" or "current" or "behavioral" for semiotic, as ways of indicating contemporary non-Peircean semiotics.

Then there is interpretation: in Percy's robust phrase, we *take the meaning* of another person. He argued this was an event a scientist could observe. His patient devastation here of behavioristic reductions of such events foreshadows later discussions—most notably in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975). The principal flaw of Morris and friends then—and now in semiotics—is their assumption that dyadic relations will accomplish all tasks within a theory of signs or an account of human nature. Independent and dependent variables, cause and effect, stimulus and response, are basically dyadic relations. Using Peirce's tools, Percy demonstrated the impossibility of dealing with meaning using only dyadic resources. No one denies the importance of causes or stimuli or reflexes. The trouble comes if, as Morris and B. F. Skinner and their contemporary friends propose, an explainer self-limits explanatory resources to dyadic items only. Percy argued successfully that triadic relations, meaning-events, or semioses (sign actions), are equally as real and observable as causal relations (dy-

namic actions). In effect, said Percy the Peirce expert, Morris violated a basic principle of logic by attempting to reduce triadic relations to only dyadic relations. Morris committed a logical faux pas (the nuts and bolts are summarized in *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy* [1995] and *His Glassy Essence: An Autobiography of Charles Sanders Peirce* [1998]). This is the hard fact of life, Percy's magnificently ironic description of a shortcoming of Morris, aspiring arch-scientist who looked right past a profound and ubiquitous laboratory truth because his neopositivist ideology (and perhaps his wish to be accepted by like-minded colleagues) gained improper control of his judgment as a working scientist. Percy's last major comment, his 1989 Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities (reprinted in the 1991 collection *Signposts in a Strange Land*, edited by Patrick Samway), returned to Peirce and this same theme, but now with a lifetime of consideration to add to the evidence. A few months after that lecture, and thirty years after writing "Peirce and Modern Semiotic," Percy commented, in a letter to me, about Milton Singer's *Peircean Anthropology*: "P.S. Only place Singer is wrong is listing Charles Morris as a proper heir of CSP. Morris is a dyadic subverter of CSP." Details of the subversion are given in Eugene Rochberg-Halton's *Meaning and Modernity: Social Theory in the Pragmatic Attitude* (1986), but Percy knew the main result in 1959.

Is all this nothing but a quibble among theorists, this talk of meaning and triadic relations? The answer is a strong "No!" It is an important part of the battle for the human soul in our age. If human nature in its most sensitive area of meaning can be fully captured and explained through dyadic—or robotic—relationships, what is left besides material items and their wiggles or causal interbumpings? The physicalist says nothing is left over. But if we look around with an open mind, there is plenty of scientific evidence that physicalists are wrong. Reality is more than mere clunks of stuff and their mutual thumpings or zappings. Indeed, today's quantum physicists are on the verge of showing just how essential triadic relations are at the subatomic level.

Percy had a remarkable talent for showing a nonspecialist audience what was important about the works of

deep specialists. He performed that magic with Kierkegaard (notably in his 1961 novel, *The Moviegoer*), Heidegger, Buber, Marcel. (There may be an important connection between existentialism and pragmatism, as I noted in *A Thief of Peirce*.) He applied the same talent to Charley Peirce. Perhaps you agree in regard to Percy's essays. Is it also true within his fiction? Here are two examples.

The general theme of Percy's *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987) is announced when Dr. More, the outstanding diagnostician, detects robotic hyperdyadic behavior in his wife and other citizens. (Remember, a prominent ancient name for medical diagnosis was semiotic—medical symptoms are subtypes of semiosis.) He discovers that social-engineering physicians have doctored the regional water supply. A shoot-out ensues, supervised by the local sheriff, depicted as a war between the dyadists and More's Peircean patrol. The latter win, and the region returns to normality with people once again acting in unpredictable triadic fashion. One character is lampooned as a professor of Morrisean semiotics. This novel is also a study in Peircean ethics of science: the deficient social engineers—whose practices cause harm—are at war with Dr. More's small community functioning as Peircean Scientific Intelligences who are striving to diagnose and restore health.

The character of Allie in *The Second Coming* (1980) is a classic study in Peirce's semiotic. Her slow recovery of language constitutes a fictionalized transcendental deduction of essential components of language and communication (a prominent form of semiosis). Another Peircean theme, arising from his "Questions Concerning Certain Faculties Claimed for Man": the reconstruction of Allie's very self, following Peirce's analysis of human self-formation at an early age through processes of semiosis.

Examples from Percy's other fiction could be multiplied, but I leave the fun to you, good reader.

As we Choctaw Taoists say in Oklahoma, "Ol' Walker was one of a kind." I think his work can only increase in worth over the years as more people learn to think as he and Peirce did, in a nonreductive manner giving full value to observable real relations that constitute the inner heart of our lives as meaning-mongering creatures.

And do enjoy Walker's unique voice one more time. ■

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