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Elmer H. Duncan

PERCY, John Walker (1916–90)

Walker Percy was born on 28 May 1916 in Birmingham, Alabama, and died on 10 May 1990 in Covington, Louisiana. In 1929 his father lost a long struggle with serious depression and committed suicide. Walker later remembered his reaction to that news: "I didn't feel guilty or responsible the way some children of suicides do. I was angry. And I was determined not only to find out why he did it but also to make damn sure that it didn't happen to me." At fourteen, Percy began a lifelong philosophical project, or search, as he would later name it. By the time he entered the University of North Carolina for a premedical program, he was convinced science could solve every problem. Still he had read George SANTAYANA's *The Last Puritan*, Leo Tolstoy, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Shakespeare. After receiving his BS in chemistry in 1937, Percy began medical studies at the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University in New York City. There he also entered psychiatric analysis with Dr Janet Rioch. He interned in pathology at Bellevue Hospital where he contracted tuberculosis, as did several other class members. He spent the next few years in sanitariums in upstate New York, where he voraciously read literature and philosophy, especially Søren Kierkegaard. It was at Saranac Sanitarium that, as Percy recalled, "I gradually began to realize that as a scientist – a doctor, a pathologist – I knew so very much about man, but had little idea what man is." His search was to focus upon the mystery that surrounds an individual life.

In 1946 his illness under some control, Percy resolved to become a writer, to live around New Orleans, and to marry Mary Bernice Townsend. In a short while, the couple converted to the Roman Catholic Church; Walker took *John* as his baptismal name. By this time, four of the five major conceptual influences on his career had appeared: literature, science, existentialism,

and Catholicism. The fifth one arrived in 1947 when he rented a home near Loyola University in New Orleans owned by Julius Friend, a philosophy professor and co-author with James FEIBLEMAN for a book that caught Percy's attention, *The Unlimited Community*, in which pragmatism was a prominent feature. Friend left his library in the rental house, and Walker soon devoured major parts of it under Friend's guidance, including various works related to Charles PEIRCE – the fifth major influence on Percy.

In 1948, in order to provide a quiet place for pursuit of his chosen vocation of writing, the Percys moved to Covington, a short drive north of New Orleans. There he lived for the rest of his life, producing a steady stream of essays and novels. While he did occasionally teach a class at a nearby university after his first published novel, *The Moviegoer*, won the National Book Award for 1960, principally he stayed home to study and write.

In 1963 he returned to science for a few years after Gentry Harris M.D. invited him to be an associate in a National Institute of Mental Health team research project on clinical processes in the treatment of schizophrenia. Harris, the team leader, was also a scholar of Peirce's work and was impressed with Walker's recent publications in philosophical and psychiatric journals dealing with aspects of Peirce's semeiotic. Percy was an early defender of semeiotic, Peirce's theory of signs, against its corrupters and misusers such as Charles MORRIS or Thomas SEBEOK. This is a disposition Percy shared with John DEWEY, who in a well-known series of journal discussions had assailed Morris in defense of Peirce. Peirce was neither a practitioner nor a founder of semiotics; it is a terminological confusion to regard his semeiotic as contemporary semiotics (or vice versa), just as physics is not physics. As an admirer of Percy's understanding of Peirce, Harris wanted Percy as a member of his interdisciplinary research team (which also included the anthropologist Stanley Diamond and other psychiatrists).

Harris made tapes of clinical sessions involving family schizophrenia, then sent them to Covington where both Percys listened carefully with Walker writing long reports on his ideas and impressions, particularly relating to aspects of clinical communication and semeiosis. These experiences in psychiatric research clearly impacted Percy's later writing.

During his career, Percy received many awards and accolades. His last major honor was being selected by the National Endowment for the Humanities to present the Jefferson Lecture which he delivered in 1989. He focused principally upon his affinity with Peirce and his vigorous lifelong insistence upon the importance of individual human existence. He argued that the sciences of mankind are fundamentally incoherent, and that this fact is persistently avoided by practitioners of such sciences who appear to prefer a form of scientism which systematically overlooks important basic features of human science. Percy reasoned that semeiotic was a means for healing this incoherence, and for evolving the narrow scientism into a full-fledged healthy science of mankind.

One cannot grasp Percy only through his essays without experiencing his novels: strategies such as memorization, note-taking, summary, secondhand description are inadequate. Like Wittgenstein, Percy was a "show-er," one who tried to show a phenomenon so others could experience it and draw its meaning for themselves. Attempting to grasp his philosophy without reading his art would be like counting the number of punctuation marks in a summary of a screenplay as a substitute for seeing (being shown) the finished movie. Moviegoers attend for a showing; novels are do-it-yourself movies.

Percy's philosophical contributions do not fit standard contemporary classification schemes, nor did he set out to design a grand approach. Rather he wrestled with a particular set of problems using the resources he could obtain. He is principally an explorer or

a pioneer, or (as he often said) a searcher. He drew inspiration for his tools from the combination of literature, Roman Catholic thought, pragmatism, science, and existentialism. To date, only his Catholicism and existentialism have been adequately discussed by critics and commentators.

The unique individual human self is Percy's focus. His body of work can be profitably compared to Plato's blend of literary brilliance, penetrating self-exploration, and methodological emphasis. He viewed the novel as a diagnostic device, but only in the hands of each reader. Percy manufactured the diagnostic tool, but only each individual reader can apply the instrument.

Percy considered his fiction (supplemented by his other works) as inquiry for *life encounter*, a handy label we can coin here for problem solving or inquiry one conducts in personal life activities or situations, the kind of inquiry an individual does concretely. Science as usually understood is inquiry done collectively on classes. Both life encounter and typical science use similar logic. Proponents of scientism advocate science as inquiry aiming at truths about classes, while denying any other source for useful human knowledge. Percy regarded scientism as inadequate, narrow, and self-defeating. His aim was to broaden the scope of science and to acknowledge other areas of life as amenable to inquiry. Life encounter acknowledges physical and social science but adds that there also is a kind of inquiry undertaken by individuals, concerning their personal place in the world, an inquiry that uses a logic similar to that of sciences such as chemistry or physics or mathematics or psychology. However, life encounter proposes that while an individual is indeed a member of this or that class of entities, an individual person is also more than just a member of some class or other, is more than a collection of matter and chemicals – each person has meaning, uses meaning, is meaningful. Moreover, conclusions reached by one unique individual

about life are not automatically transferable to others, as are the results of typical science.

Another chief point concerns the phenomenon of interpreting: in Percy's robust phrase, we *take the meaning* of another person. He saw that this was an event one could observe as a scientist, as real as any other event in a laboratory. His patient devastation of crude behavioristic reductions of such phenomena is found throughout his career – most notably in *Message in the Bottle*. It is also clear that he regarded Peirce's semeiotic as the antidote to the behavioral reductionist extremism of Charles Morris or B. F. SKINNER or contemporary semiotics.

Although Percy proposed a few technical philosophical doctrines and ideas, his principal ability and tool involved exercising a method of semeiosis by which he created great and artful living examples (his novels), living diagrams, through the medium of which each of us can conduct our own unique exploratory search of discovery. Details of this method are explicated in Percy's correspondence in *A Thief of Peirce* (1995, pp. 15–18, 256–84). Percy was one of the latest distinguished literary practitioners of the ancient Socratic tradition of therapeutic philosophy. Because the search of self-examination is implicit in every life within every eon, Percy's literary masterpieces of self-discovery will be perennially relevant because the way of the individual search is a permanent human requirement. While none of us can by convenient recipe replicate Percy's own search to grasp the meaning of individual life, one can receive aid and comfort in the undertaking through the tools he provided.

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First published in 2005 by

Thoemmes Continuum
11 Great George Street
Bristol BS1 5RR, England

<http://www.thoemmes.com>

The Dictionary of Modern American Philosophers
4 Volumes : ISBN 1 84371 037 4

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A CIP record of this title is available from the British Library