CONCEALING AND REVEALING THE INDEX

IN WALKER PERCY'S SYMBOL AND EXISTENCE

or

Percy's Interest in Neuroscience

and

His Search for *The Coupler* Continued

By Kenneth Laine Ketner © 2017

../../../Desktop/ISPnewLogoFolder/send/color/Institute%20logo%20color.pdf

For SAMLA Conference

November 2017

Atlanta, Georgia

Literature is a fantastically important aspect of human life. It is not an educational “frill” nor merely a means for entertainment to pass some time. But what is it, and how does it arise in a talented author? Walker Percy’s life and work provides an excellent focus for study of this issue. Today I shall attempt just one small aspect of that topic.

Percy was a very well-educated scientist/physician, who attended a distinguished university at Chapel Hill, and graduated from a top medical school—the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. His bout with tuberculosis gave occasion for a two-decade self-guided education in the humanities—roughly 1940-1960. He emerged at the end of that period with an award-winning novel, *The Moviegoer*. Critics wisely noted that Kierkegaard and other existentialist thinkers influenced that effort. Of this there is no doubt, but it wasn't the sole factor. During those twenty years, these additional interests,

• solid preparation in science,

• deepening religion, and

• growing study of Charles Peirce's hypotheses about

interpretation and meaning,

also became well established in Percy's "search" to understand human nature.

These four focal points continued throughout his career as a writer. There is a tendency for students of his work to think that literature was the heart of his later career, while scientific studies were a feature only in early times: There is growing evidence now that this is not accurate. I want to consider an example from the later period—roughly 1980s—showing how expanding research in neuroscience reached Percy's worktable and from which he drew some encouragement for support of his hope to identify a "coupler." Then I will propose some testable hypotheses about the nature of Percy’s “coupler.” There is an excellent review of Percy’s thoughts about the coupling agency in human consciousness—what unites “body” with “mind”—in Perkins (2011, 178 f.). Her research shows that Percy sought a piece of matter—some brain tissue—to perform the requisite coupling.

Percy stayed informed on developing research in neuroscience. For example, in *The Message in the Bottle* (1975) he mentioned Geschwind’s study (year, page) related to the issue. He also tracked some of the seminal articles of Nobel Laureate Eric Kandel—also from Columbia University—on the “Biology of Mind” as we can see from his annotated copies of those studies (Kandel refs). Thus, one cannot infer that Percy was seeking a coupling factor only as a writer without being aware of important developments in neuroscience.

What is the question for which Percy’s “coupler” hypothesis is an answer? It is roughly this: What connects bodily sensations, perceptions, neurological processes so that mental phenomena appear?

I propose that coupling does occur, but it is not between two different kinds of items—body and mind: rather, (1) such coupling occurs between two or more items of the same kind, and (2) the coupling is of the same kind. Whatever form it takes, Mind/Body dualism requires a dichotomy of two differing kinds; in the classic case of Descartes’s thinking, it is *res extensa* (material substance) and *res cogitans* (thinking substance). If one takes this dualism as a given, then one has to answer how a human being can be a combination—or coupling—of those two radically different items.

If Percy’s proposed *material* coupling entity is to perform appropriately, it will, by hypothesis, have to be, in turn, coupled to the two (or more) items it is to couple. The problem is, then, that any given material coupler proposed will, when put in action, require at least two more material couplers, and each of those additional couplers, will in turn require two more such coupling features, and so on *ad infinitum*. So, it appears that finding another hunk of matter to be a Percy coupler does not solve the problem but instead compounds it. Does this mean that Percy’s search for a proper coupler is to be unsuccessful? << above detail: If thing A needs a coupler to connect to thing C, one proposes thing W as the coupler between A and C; now we have A coupled to W coupled to C; but now instead of needing one thing coupler to connect A and C, we now need two additional material coupling things M and N to create A\*W\*C, namely A M W N C, which creates a new need for four coupling thing components to couple A with M/ & M with W/ & W with N/ & N with C; This strange result is due to the demand that each coupler be only a physical item.>>

While the above factor seems discouraging, we can take heart because while pondering the above features, one is led to another point in Percy’s writing wherein perhaps he *did* solve the issue, but—one might propose—maybe he did not categorize that particular point as the “coupler solution.” I am referring to section 15 of “The Delta Factor” (Percy 1975, 39). Here is his statement, including his important footnote:

A NONLINEAR NONENERGIC

NATURAL PHENOMENON

(that is to say, a natural

phenomenon in which energy exchanges

account for some but not all

of what happens) [\*]

\*I am aware of course that other phenomena can be described in a sense as nonlinear, e.g., action of a force field, gestalt perception, transactions in a neural net, etc. Yet these events lend themselves to formulations by equation and to explanatory models which discern this or that causal or statistical relationship within a structure.

The utterance or understanding of a sentence does not so lend itself.

That is a claim that there are natural phenomena that are not exclusively causal nor material in nature. As Percy noted in the same page, Charles Peirce agreed and described this additional relational reality as *Semeiosis* (*sign* in the broad sense, that is, a triadic *sign relation*), which is a natural phenomenon possessing triadic relational features. For an example, consider:

A functioning weather vane (**Representamen**: a narrow-sense *sign*) indicates the direction of the wind (**Object**, within the semeiosis) to an observer (**Interpretant** within the semeiosis)—this is an example of an Indexical Semeiosis.

Percy was inclined to dismiss Peirce’s hypothesis on this point as “metaphysics”; however, that is a misreading. Peirce was a scientist who proposed as a laboratory hypothesis that semeioses were real features of the world that are open to experimental study. That is, Peirce proposed that the world was composed of *existing* items such as pencils and propellers *as well as* *relational realities* such as one finds in a fire-tower occupant’s call that “There is smoke at grid 13—check for a fire!” or the successful understanding of a communicated sentence.

Maybe the key here is that Peirce’s relational realities, particularly as they can be found in semeioses, are exactly the NONLINEAR NONENERGIC NATURAL PHENOMENON (***NP***) Percy discussed, *and* ***NP*** also provides us with an answer to the question about the nature of the coupler. If so, the answer for “What is the coupler?” is:

The “What” is not an existent item such as bodily tissue; but the “What” is a Natural Phenomenon ***NP***, specifically one or another semeiosis relation.

Why might Percy have not come to think of ***NP*** as a resource for solving the coupler question? The footnote as cited above is revealing: He stated that actions of a field or of a neural net are nonlinear—meaning “are noncausal.” Thus he pointed to exactly the appropriate examples. A *field* is a law-like relational phenomenon such that items within the field relate according to the field laws. Consider the classic magnetism experiment with a bar magnet covered by a sheet of paper sprinkled with iron filings. The magnetic field is the zone around that magnet wherein the relations of the field laws control orientation of the iron particles. We have the magnet, a given particle, and field laws. Thus, the orientation of particles is a fact about those three items: magnet, iron particle(s), law. And remember that a law is more than a list of previous observations. Its *generality* provides reliable *expectations* for the future. So, a magnetic field—a relational reality—is precisely an instance of ***NP*** and is also a semeiosis in a manner analogous to weathervanes that are capable detectors of a field known as *wind*. This shows that physical science, both physics and biology, contain natural relational phenomena that Percy described as ***NP***, or that Peirce described as semeioses.

The difference between the two researchers, as we find in *Symbol and Existence* (*S&E*), is that Percy wants standard science to always be concerned with linearities, or dyadic relations only (such as causes or stimuli); so, if one finds a natural phenomenon such as semeiosis that is not completely causal—as indeed it isn’t—then for Percy it is not a part of science. A dyadic/material science was appropriate and acceptable for him. If, however, such an understanding of science were elevated to an all‑encompassing worldview that denied phenomena such as semeiosis, he regarded that elevation as inappropriate.

Percy’s strategy here was to deny the elevation of causal/material science, and then to seek a way to understand ***NP*** outside of the only kind of science he accepted: namely the kind that only dealt with causes and materials. (klk ref in Thief)

But Percy has overlooked one of his own accomplishments. Suppose there are other objective natural phenomena in science besides causes and stimuli and materials. Peirce argued that science is about whatever is found to be really the case independently of arbitrary and egocentric desires. If one follows that guidance, one finds that relations of any valency are really to be found in scientific study, and that they can be studied objectively. So, science can study relations of valency one (“That object is black”), of valency two (“Fire causes smoke”), of valency three (“An electron was raised to the next energy level by an incoming photon”), of valency four (“John sold his car to the junk dealer for $5)” and so forth. It does not matter that the results of science are expressed in everyday language or in the language of mathematics and carefully drawn special terminology, nor does a mode of expression force one to think that scientific phenomena are exclusively valency two expressions.

If this hypothesis is correct, that the coupler Percy sought is more than only a physical entity, but has also relational features that often are triadic semeioses, then what relevance might there be for literary studies? Although there is no time for it at the moment, perhaps we can foresee that poets, essayists, novelists also deal in real relations. Moreover, a successful literary art event in which a reader “takes the writer’s meaning” is also an instance of semeiosis (klk Marsh article). Because semeioses are observable realities (WP, obs a sign, MB, 192-8) then literary semeioses may also be objectively studied. In Percy's studies of Natural Phenomena as outside of his understanding of science considered only as causal/material, he did objectively discover valuable scientific features of semeioses (refs – sections in lost in c, MB, etc.)

Thus we may conclude that there is no need to look for a special coupler that is *only material* located in a special kind of place. Semeioses are objectively observable in everyday life, in physics, in the biology of neurons, in social activity. Semeiosis is everywhere there is intelligibility. With a slight adjustment to Percy’s general understanding of science, by admitting real relations such as semeioses as matters for scientific study, one can relieve a paradox in his research approach. The clarifying step he needed was to admit real natural semeioses into the scope of science, as Peirce did. Percy’s study of symbols and his semiotic were objectively scientific in that expanded sense, so it will stand as an example of pioneering results of the science of semeiotic.

Scientism—the elevation of exclusively causal/material science to be an emperor of all knowledge and comprehension—dies hard. Percy knew this well (KLK article on WP/scientism). Yet we can see that there is a broader sense of science, as the objective approach to realities no matter of which kind. Percy was not the first to comprehend this. Peirce was soaked in the topic. From the literary side, there have been many similar voices that could sing in Percy’s choir. One such fascinating figure is D. H. Lawrence (DHL, Why novel matters). Another possibly similar perpetrator is Edgar Allen Poe in his *Sonnet to Science* and his late book *Eureka* (Poe refs). It appears that there might be a tradition for this sort of thing that has survived *sub rosa* over the ages.

REFERENCES

Perkins, Karey Lea. 2011. *Walker Percy and the Magic of Naming: The Semeiotic Fabric of Life*. Atlanta: Georgia State University.

MB, Lost in c, Geschwind, Kandel, thief.

Lawrence, D. H. 1936. “Why the Novel Maters.” In *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence*, 533-538. Edited by Edward D. McDonald. London: William Heinemann Ltd. Accessed at: https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.77133







