**"That Mysterious Phenomenon":**

**The Affect of Percy's Works upon Readers**

KENNETH LAINE KETNER[[1]](#footnote-1)

© 2023

In the letters gathered by Father Samway as *A Thief of Peirce*, on page seventy-five you will find me saying, "I'm not kidding about that 'mysterious phenomenon'."

What was I not kidding about?

Seventeen days earlier in my letter of 12 October 1988, one finds this paragraph.

I have to confess that all my plots to figure a way to meet you at a conference have failed. Now I got to play my hole card. If I were to get in my wife's sturdy little car and drive over to Covington one of these days, would it be possible to enjoy the pleasure of your conversation and company in some manner or form? I'm busting with things to discuss, and corresponding about philosophy and literature and such is like trying to drink a cherry phosphate through a broken paper straw. Besides I want to see your face and shake your hand, and particularly to thank you directly for what you gave me. (I'm referring to that mysterious phenomenon: Read Walker's books and fasten your seat belt, *cause you gone on a ride, son*.)

Elsewhere I described this affect as "Read Walker's books then levitate above your old ways" (*A Thief of Peirce*, page 133). In language not involving flowery Choctaw speech, this phenomenon could simply be seen as a transformation. Others—for instance Coles and Tolson—have shown that the syndrome is widespread among Percy's readers.

I want to try to show a way, at least in outline, for understanding this mystery. Sometimes mysteries are paradoxical because the means available for understanding them are inadequate, but we aren't aware of the inadequacy—perhaps pride keeps us from a proper viewpoint. Maybe we need to look at the problem in one of those double mirrors that tailors use. Or maybe we need to walk home through a swamp. And sometimes when there is an improvement in our understanding, what was previously a mystery becomes a familiar friend.

Because of the brevity of our time together, I perpetrate an impropriety by appealing to an authority. Actually, I should say, this is not so much an *argumentum ad verecundiam* as it is expert testimony which is a somewhat more respectable mode of pleading. The expert is Walker Percy. And in place of a long defense of my points, as a temporary stopgap to show that they are at least plausible points, from an appendix of *A Thief of Peirce* (page 167; in the same work compare also the last few lines of WP-KLK 25 July 1989 and WP-KLK 15 June 1989) I cite Mrs. Percy's note to me:

I remember Walker greeting you in a little park across from the hotel in Washington and how pleased Walker was. He had on several occasions told me, "Bunt, this man knows what I am getting at."

By the way, I still haven't gotten over the experience of having my private correspondence splattered all over a book. I wonder when those odd feelings will pass.

In his *Jefferson Lecture* and in prior works, Percy argued that contemporary science has a self‑understanding that is much too narrow. In effect science has limited its inquiry to certain kinds of phenomena, typically those associated with closed systems of dyadic relations. Percy was a magnificent artist. However, he was certainly also a scientist, but one who operated with a much wider view of the kinds of phenomena science can study. On the other hand, main-stream literary scholars have not understood Percy, for they are also, by and large, blinded by a kind of mirror-reversed image of the view that troubles main-stream contemporary science. Naturally, my own vision is limited, so I can only report that these matters appear to me as I have described. But I do think one can defend well the claim that Percy stood between these two groups.

He knew he had discovered a vision that could unite the two camps. He tried to talk to both of them, most clearly in his *Jefferson Lecture*.[[2]](#footnote-2) And he had good reason, because the findings from his studies constitute a bundle of ideas and principles that had the capacity to mediate between these differences. But those practicing conventional science could not see the scientific phenomena he held up for attention. Indeed, persons from that side of the line who might read him would be likely to write him off as just a novelist with some entertaining stories who in his spare time wrote a few confused essays about science. The literary party, on the other hand, seemed incapable to appreciate—or were uninterested in—his strong background as a scientist, and when he announced findings from his exploration of a new way of doing science, they misunderstood it because the received literary worldview does not include a category for literature as science. (But there are a few exceptions—see Weinsheimer's article for instance). Also, on the whole, literary scholars are unaware of the work of Percy's fellow scientist, Charles Peirce, who, as it can easily be demonstrated, inspired him continually since the 1950's. So, they sought instead to understand Percy in terms of existentialism which, while clearly relevant, is not enough by a long shot to form the complete picture.

Why am I mentioning this? Because I guess that the clues to understanding "that mysterious phenomenon" lie in this paradoxical zone which contains items discovered by those two exploring scientists, Peirce and Percy.[[3]](#footnote-3) Of course, the regular scientists don't acknowledge that there are such zones. And the regular literary folks know that such zones exist but are offended at the prospect that there could be any scientific understanding of the matter, which they gleefully celebrate as an impenetrable mystery. For myself, I want to chip away at understanding it using Walker's advice. I will speak metaphorically and in a summary style. But I think that most if not all the outline can be defended in boring detail.

What elements, then, can be assembled toward that end?

Let us begin in the pre-transformation mode. It is the first turn. What can be said? It is ordinary, it is everyday routine, it is consistent with the worldview of the age which in our case is a metaphysics of mechanicalism and physicalism and efficient causation in an environment. These are the philosophical positions that say that humankind and indeed each of us is a machine which "behaves" or reacts chemically or physically with our environment. It is interesting in this regard to note that René Descartes, the seventeenth century patron saint of contemporary behaviorism, was impressed by a set of statues in a royal garden which for the amusement of the prince had been fitted with early hydraulic devices so that they actually moved when the water pressure was up. This was Descartes's model for the human creature. While our hydraulic insight is much better than that of seventeenth century speculators, our society at large is still stuck within the same logic that brought Descartes to this result. Another feature of this worldview is the strong trust in efficient causation as the master explanation strategy, and in the individual intellect as the whole of a person's being. I hope it is clear that I am starting with the condition of the reader as reading begins. It is obvious that there are a great many differences among readers, but aren't there some similarities, at least among many readers, and especially among those who eventually experience the mysterious phenomenon?

In this context I will ask you to consider two remarks by Peirce. The first gives us a useful clue; it is from Peirce's heretofore lost *Reasoning and the Logic of Things: Cambridge Conferences Lectures of 1898* (pages 121-122) in the Harvard University Press edition dedicated to Walker Percy, Doctor Humanitatis

Here we are in this workaday world, little creatures, mere cells in a social organism ... and we must look to see what little and definite task circumstances have set before our little strength to do. The performance of that task will require us to draw upon all our powers, reason included. And in the doing of it we should chiefly depend not upon that department of the soul which is most superficial and fallible,—I mean our reason,—but upon that department that is deep and sure,—which is instinct. Instinct is capable of development and growth,—though by a movement which is slow ... ; and this development takes place upon lines which are altogether parallel to those of reasoning. And just as reasoning springs from experience, so the development of [instinct] arises from the soul's Inward and Outward Experiences [such as meditation, on the one hand, and adversity on the other]. Not only is it of the same nature as the development of cognition; but it chiefly takes place through the instrumentality of cognition. The soul's deeper parts can only be reached through its surface.

Within the hard outer intellectual shell of the soul are many of the items Walker noted: the worldview of the old modern age, allegiance to experts, devotion to being a good consumer, Cartesian mind-body dualism, immersion in materialism and reliance upon causal, dyadic modes of thought, the Freudian theory of soul mechanics, self-deceptions, hypocrisies, Peirce's notion that many persons often think "I am not capable of a mistake in my logic" which might in other words be called our congenital logical hubris, and of course good old-fashioned general lack of self‑knowledge—all this detritus and more in varying combinations and mixtures often provides materiel for the hard outer shell of the soul as one sits down for the first time to read one's first Percy novel. As in all phases of my outline, more detail can be added. But we must save that task for another day. For now, on with the outline.

The second turn is what I call "building the reader's mental diagram." I discussed that and the rest of the transformation process in my letter to Walker of 17 September 1987 (which I quote from *A Thief of Peirce* pages 15-16). I am pleased to note that Walker replied in his next letter (20 October 1987, *A Thief of Peirce*, page 17): "Yes, you are quite right in your 'triadic' analysis of the work of the novelist."

Recently I have been reading some from that book of conversations with Walker Percy.... In one of those you reported on the extraordinary phenomenon of people out of the blue writing you in the most personal ways. I can surely say that after reading your novels, I have felt the same urge.... I suspect this is a record of a genuine, almost scientific (broad sense) phenomenon.... A novel can be a tremendous tool of analysis, both in the sense Freud meant it, and in the sense I mean it (explaining less well knowns with better knowns). And how does a novel do that (and yours are particularly strong at this)? The novelist constructs a triadic world, a relational world, which literally unfolds in the mind of a reader as a mental diagram, a picture. The novelist sets up certain relationships as the background, assumed, taken for granted parts of the fictional world.

Just how does the novelist set up this fictional world? This question can be answered by considerations about the craft of writing, and I must pass over them for now.

The next turn is what a Cajun or an Okie might call "setting the hook." I continue my account from *A Thief of Peirce*.

Then parallels between the fictional world and the personal world now inhabited by the reader are drawn forth or are encouraged for creation.

In other words, at this stage in reading the novel, through their joint efforts, the reader and the novelist have succeeded in creating a fictional world which the reader is in some sense aware of as paralleling relations in the reader's own internal world or actual self-image.

Now comes the fourth turn, what I call the "Ya-Haa." The novelist, with a good strong bite and a set hook now yanks hard on the line. Again, back to my account in *A Thief of Peirce*:

Next, the known relations of the fictional world point to some unknown relation in the actual world. The new fictional relation now points to a possible parallel relation in the reader's personal world.

Now that the reader is surfing the relational internet in the condition of the process last described, the reader is in an interesting state. Peirce has described it well in one of his most fascinating, but most overlooked, paragraphs (*Collected Papers of Peirce*, volume 6, paragraph 493).

Where would such an idea, say as that of God, come from, if not from direct experience? Would you make it a result of some kind of reasoning, good or bad? Why, reasoning can supply the mind with nothing in the world except an estimate of the value of a statistical ratio.... And scepticism, in the sense of doubt of the validity of elementary ideas—which is really a proposal to turn an idea out of court and permit no inquiry into its applicability—is doubly condemned by the fundamental principle of scientific method—condemned first as obstructing inquiry, and condemned second because it is treating some other than a statistical ratio as a thing to be argued about. No: as to God, open your eyes—and your heart, which is also a perceptive organ—and you see him.

One is inclined to regard the sense of “see” mentioned as “comprehend,” which is, of course, a direct experience.

This state, which I shall call the condition of open heart, is a very interesting one. First of all, you will notice that widespread ordinary experience quite readily recognizes the reality of such a state or condition, because all kinds of persons speak about and understand such phrases as "open your heart," or "I have lost heart about the matter," or "Don't be so heartless." This is a condition in which the ego has fallen away or is reduced to a state of scientific disinterestedness, and hypotheses, observations, perceptions, ideas, inspirations, interpretations, and guesses are admitted and sorted out in an unselfish—which is to say scientific—manner. This is the condition Buber speaks about in his classic *Ich und Du*. He calls it the *I-Thou* condition, Walker called it in *Lost in the Cosmos* the *Edenic state* (or in *The Message in the Bottle* he associated it with the *Cardenas syndrome*: you know, the Spanish explorer who saw the Grand Canyon for the first time). I have referred to it as the *condition of relational purity*. This is the same, or a similar or a related state, as that described in the works or portrayed in the actions of St. Theresa of Jesus, Father Louis also known as Thomas Merton, St. John of the Cross, Buddha, St. Aelred of Riveaulx, Walt Whitman, Simone Weil, my saintly aunts, your saintly cousin Vinnie, Walker's Uncle Louie, and so on and so forth—it is an exceedingly long list.

Finally comes the last turn, the transform. When the novelist's unique internal diagram or the reader's fictional world is active, and the heart is open, Walker Percy, the open-heart surgeon, adds a revealing new relation in the fictional world, and the reader immediately is aware of the parallel relation in their own personal internal world; and so (to conclude my description from *A Thief of Peirce*):

Thereby, the reader gains self-knowledge. And since the themes of your novels are universal ones, philosophical, religious, social ones even, one new relation discovered at that level in a reader and BY a reader, can be a whammy. No wonder people want to thank Percy. Behold—the reason I call him a psychiatrist, even though he "just writes novels."

I want to conclude with a review of our discussion thus far, but let us come at it from another perspective, like the contemporary successful Grand Canyon visitor must do today, by exiting the tour bus and coming at the matter from the side, from another aspect.

When successfully executed this entire transform sequence is a species of a particular kind of dialogue.

There is rhetorical dialogue (*A* persuades *B*);  
There is entertaining dialogue (cocktail party chit-chat);  
There is dutiful dialogue (kow-towing to the boss);  
There is authoritative dialogue (indoctrinating the masses).  
 ...One sees that a long list can be generated here.

Then there is Vigorous Truthful Dialogue, or VTD. Let me tell you about it, while giving a concluding review of the whole process we have been examining. Its purpose and hope is to prepare the intellect to open to allow contact with the soul. Here is a zone in which serious and crippling philosophical mistakes are made. One can easily become hypnotized by the shear fun of intellectual engagement, so that it becomes like a game, and if so the opening to the soul will not become available. One can become trapped in an entertaining traversing of the shell, like a compulsive traveler of the earth's globe who must constantly be in a new locale periodically. An alternative version is perhaps the elitist professor or Fail-a-holic, whose life consists in repetitious intellectual one-upping of students. Or one can become frightened by the vigor of the dialogue—after all one's cherished beliefs are being brought forth to consciousness. Many persons have been taught to fear or run from doubt; perhaps their childhood included considerable indoctrination, which is a mirror opposite of VTD. A feature of successful VTD is that one learns to love doubt, for doubt is a friend. Another trap is the fact that great results pertaining to applied science can be obtained by a well-executed VTD, but one can become so mesmerized by the power that can be derived from such technological results that one overlooks the possibility for sideling or sneaking around the corner into the soul's domain. Dr. Disney (in *Fantasia*) discovered this and named it the "Sorcerer's Apprentice Syndrome"—all of us got the point when we rejoiced about the Sorcerer's return.

With all these ways things can go wrong, how then is VTD to serve as entrance to the soul? VTD introduces one to the method of truth for truth's sake, as opposed to reliance on arbitrary egocentric methods. VTD creates a community of persons subservient to truth. When such a community is functioning under VTD, the various non-ego phenomena emerge irresistibly: Spontaneity, Grace, Inspiration, Joy, Justice—all those I mentioned earlier and more. All of this has the general tone of an allowing, as opposed to that of a willful bringing-to-pass-because-I-want-it. "***I*** want it" means I know the outcome and will enforce it upon the situation. The allowing is: "***I*** don't know what is going to come of this—won't it be interesting to see what arises?" As Buber observed with his marvelous scientific eye, the "***I***"s of the last two sentences are literally two different words, even two different creatures.

This state, as I have mentioned, can readily and successfully be described as "opening one's heart." We all acknowledge that we have such a heart. Again, remember all the times you employ the concept "heart" in this sense. That is, I am not talking about the organ that pumps blood, but that which is addressed when someone says, "Have a heart," or "Pharoah hardened his heart." And many youngsters know that such heart problems have serious consequences: recall why the Grinch stole Christmas. I should mention that it is quite likely that the open-heart condition is a nonthreatening aspect of the same reality that Simone Weil was describing within the context of threats, I mean the condition she called "the cry of the soul" (Panichas, page 317).

The heart, the soul, the spirit, then can be described as that state or condition of personal being in which one is most alive and ready for new ideas, sensations, observations, hypotheses, or interpretations to arise. To be in this state, and fully conscious of so being, is to learn a new *WAY* of being, and once one has entered this condition, even slightly, one is transformed. In such a condition one experiences true science, true philosophy, true literature, true life. This is most clearly expressed, by D. H. Lawrence, as “being alive.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

Percy's novels lead us to this condition, and this is a mark of his high standing in a new kind of vocation which stands between arrogant standard scientism and nonnoticing standard literary theory, a vocation I call being a novel scientist (see Samway, 256 ff.).

At each key juncture in this matter, we can use the ideas of Peirce's and Percy's semeiotic to gain insight into what is happening in boring technical detail. But let us save that for another day. Now is the time to change the subject and start thinking about putting our heart into having a good Cajun meal.

**References**

* Buber, Martin. *Ich und Du*. Translated by Ronald Gregor Smith. New York: Scribner's, 1958.
* Coles, Robert. *Walker Percy: An American Search*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1978.
* Ketner, Kenneth Laine. “Semeiotic.” In *Das Bild zwischen Kognition und Kreativität*. Edited by E. Bisanz. Transcript Verlag, Bielefeld, 2011.
* \_\_\_\_\_. “The Emergence of Walker Percy’s Radical Anthropology.” *South Atlantic Review*, volume 87, number 4: 98-114, winter 2022.
* Ketner, K., K. Perkins, R. McDonnell, S. Cunningham, editors. *Symbol and Existence, A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature by Walker Percy*. Mercer University Press. Macon, Georgia, 2019.
* Lawrence, D. H. “Why the Novel Matters.” In *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence.* Edited by E. D. McDonald. London: William Heinemann Ltd., 1936.
* Peirce, Charles Sanders. *Reasoning and the Logic of Things*. Edited by Kenneth Laine Ketner, with an introduction by K.L. Ketner and Hilary Putnam. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992.
* \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*. Eight volumes. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931- . (This set is no longer in print as bound volumes, but can be obtained on CD-ROM from Intelex Inc., Charlottesville, VA.)
* Percy, Walker. Jefferson Lecture: “The Divided Creature,” *The Wilson Quarterly*, Volume 13: 77-87, 1989.
* Samway, Patrick H., S.J., editor. *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1995.
* Tolson, Jay. *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Biography of Walker Percy*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992.
* Weil, Simone. *The Simone Weil Reader*. Edited by George A. Panichas. New York: David McKay Company, 1977.
* Weinsheimer, Joel. "The Realism of C.S. Peirce, or How Homer and Nature Can Be the Same," *American Journal of Semiotics* 2 (1983): 225-263.

1. This essay was presented at the Fifth Annual Walker Percy Symposium, April 20, 1996, St. Tammany Parish Public Library, Covington, La. The collection of correspondence between Ketner and Percy, *A Thief of Peirce*, was published in late 1995 by University Press of Mississippi, edited by Patrick Samway, S.J. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Percy’s Jefferson Lecture bears strong echoes from his earlier book of the 1950s, *Symbol and Existence*. Compare Ketner *Emergence*, 2022. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Compare *Symbol and Existence*. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lawrence, “Why the Novel Matters.” [↑](#footnote-ref-4)