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the helen keller phenomenon

as an experiment in radical anthropology

New insights into the helen keller phenomenon

by

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Early in the discussions within *Symbol and Existence* (abbreviated *SE*),[[1]](#footnote-1) Walker Percy M.D. introduced an account of Helen Keller's formative experiences with her teacher Miss Johanna Mansfield Sullivan. This event was recounted often in Percy's theoretical essays, and the principles he discerned there were sometimes deployed in his novels. Why was this particular event important for Percy? Can we take his hint and extend his insights?

Readers of *SE* soon understand that therein Percy was developing a scientific hypothesis about human nature that he entitled *Radical Anthropology*, radical in the sense of "well-rooted" or "well-founded," but not in the sense of "politically extreme." Such a task would be second nature for a talented and thoughtful recent graduate of the College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University. Nurses and physicians traditionally are deep students of human nature. His first attempt at that hypothesis occurred in the 1950s by way of writing, then trying to publish *SE;* later in writing novels he found another way to deploy experiments[[2]](#footnote-2) leading to the same goal.

Here is Percy's outline of the "Helen Keller Phenomenon" in *SE:*

When Miss Sullivan ... tried to teach her pupil words by spelling them into her hand, she encountered a characteristic difficulty. Helen "learned" the word d-o-l-l quickly enough, but as a trick to show off to her mother—"I didn't know that I was spelling a word or even that words existed".... But the great moment did at last come. As ... water flowed over one hand Miss Sullivan spelled w-a-t-e-r into the other, first slowly, then rapidly. "I stood still, my whole attention fixed upon the motions of her fingers. Suddenly I felt a misty consciousness as of something forgotten—a thrill of returning thought, and somehow the mystery of language was revealed to me. I knew then that 'w-a-t-e-r' meant the wonderful cool something that was flowing over my hand. That living word awakened my soul, gave it light, ... set it free![[3]](#footnote-3)

The phenomenon that deeply interested Percy here is constituted by transition from Helen's initial state as contrasted with her later condition when she was aware of the *meaning* of w‑a‑t‑e‑r.

We note that prior to the "phenomenon" Helen was a creature of stimulus and response. If she was provided a particular stimulus, then she would perform a particular action, not backed up with any understanding. Percy compared such events at this point in her life to the actions of Pavlov's dog that would—at the end of the experiment—salivate when stimulated by the sound of a bell. Initially, as Helen experienced the finger‑tappings Miss Sullivan performed in her hand, they only served as a stimulus that produced some definite response from her. At that stage Keller was functioning as a creature behaving according to dyadic relations, or functional relations, as Percy would designate them later in *SE*. Or he would comment that Helen was then in an *environment*, consisting of cause-effect or stimulus-response relations, instead of a *world* that is unified with additional relations involving meanings and understandings. Percy's scrutiny focused on this question: What changed for her between the early stimulus‑response modality and the later acquisition of a life that included meaning events and relational connections?

Some assistance for dealing with that issue arrived in 1947 shortly after the Percys rented Professor Julius Friend's house in New Orleans: Percy gained access to Friend's library and began reading about Charles Peirce.[[4]](#footnote-4) That interest continued into the 1950s and began to bear fruit in 1959, near the time of the last draft of *SE*, in an essay entitled "Peirce and Modern Semiotic"[[5]](#footnote-5) that unfortunately he did not publish at that time, maybe because he was then busily focused on *The Moviegoer*, his first published.

As a physician and chemist, Percy was quite aware of the value of exact terminology. While working to re-examine the "Keller Phenomenon," I had a hunch that some of the terms he used in his discussion were not as exact as they eventually could be, so here are some suggestions for sharpening those tools[[6]](#footnote-6) that might add support to Percy's insights into this important phenomenon. The first consideration should be the word "sign" because it is clearly important and it has multiple senses that can encourage confusion if undelineated.

The "theory of signs" is an ancient phrase that was an important component in the writings of Percy's famous medical/philosophical/literary predecessor Galen (Aelius Galenus of Pergamon, born 129 CE) who regarded observable disease symptoms as "signs" of underlying illness. In contemporary practice if a physician spots a patient's skin rash having a bull's-eye pattern then, according to a well‑established relation, that indicates (is an Index of) the presence of Lyme Disease. Such indications are often described as "natural signs." Likewise, the approach of a large dark cloud is a natural sign of impending rain for an observer who understands the patterns of local weather activity; an uncomprehending observer merely perceives a large moving dark cloud.

Peirce described such processes as Indexical Semeioses (or Indexes); but let us regress a bit to build up from the basics he developed. The details go this way: a Semeiosis—in the most general form—is some kind of triadic relation that relates some kind of *Object* (what the semeiosis is "about") with some kind of *Representamen* or representation of the Object, to some *Interpretant* (an interpreting factor). Note that there are four components: a (1) *Triadic relation* involving an (2) *Object*, a (3) *Representamen*, and an (4) *Interpretant*. If one specifies the various components details of that general structure, one obtains different specific sub‑types of semeiosis. Consider the overall structural situation this way: We can recognize and describe the generalized pattern of games, and we are aware that there are specific games that are sub‑type instances of that overall structure—Baseball, Chess. A similar structural situation applies for semeioses: there is a general semeiosis pattern (compare general form of games) and there are specific forms of that general pattern such as Indexical Semeioses or Symbolic Semeioses (compare specific games like Backgammon or Jai‑Alai).

Natural signs are instances of the specific semeiosis subtype known as Indexes (Indexical Semeioses). In the case of diagnosing Lyme Disease, (1) the Object is the disease active in the patient, (2) the Representamen is the distinctive bull's-eye rash, and (3) the Interpretant is the physician's *understanding* that "Lyme Disease produces that unique rash," so the rash symptom *means* the patient has that disease. It is instructive to imagine the situation *without* the Interpretant component. For instance, a person, perhaps the patient with no medical understanding or ability, feels a bit unwell and observes an unusual skin rash, but thinks nothing of it. That state of affairs can be considered to be what is left when the Interpretant is subtracted from an Indexical Semeiosis—it would no longer be a semeiosis, being just a dyadic juxtaposition of two experiences in time sequence. There is an underlying cause, but the patient has no conception of it and only has the two experiences. Pavlov's dog is structurally similar, being two experiences (hear bell/salivate) in time sequence with no additional understanding other than temporal succession. Such are stimulus/response relations; they can never be semeioses. That is an important principle.[[7]](#footnote-7) Two experiences in time sequence do not constitute a semeiosis—nor would a concatenation of any number of such dyadic sequences produce a triadic semeiosis relation; only a more lengthy compounded dyad would result. So now we have an insight into Helen's condition *prior* to her epiphany: she was a stimulus/response creature.

To grasp her insightful discovery, we need additional terminological efforts. A Symbolic Semeiosis (or Symbol) is one in which there is a triadic relation linking an Object, a Representamen, and an Interpretant, the last being constituted by some cultural or habitual relation between the Object and Representamen. Thus, in the United States, if a licensed driver comes to an intersection with a blinking red traffic light, by previously established cultural habit the driver understands the meaning of the light is "stop, then proceed with caution." The Object is "stop at this blinking red light," the Representamen is "blinking red traffic light at present intersection," and the Interpretant is understanding that there is a cultural habit such that the Representamen means the Object. This is not an Index because the cultural habit is not a cause‑and‑effect matter. It is a Symbolical Semeiosis.

Helen transitioned from state (I), stimulus/response dyadic temporal sequence, to state (II) acquisition of the Symbol with its additional Interpretant cultural habit. While in state (I), she experienced hand‑tapping for w‑a‑t‑e‑r and she experienced water flowing on her other hand. They are just two temporally‑related but otherwise distinct experiences. Somehow, with Miss Sullivan's assistance, she moved from state (I) to state (II) wherein she gained an understanding, by way of comprehending the habit that a particular finger‑tapping *means* (symbolizes) the flowing water. Thus she transitioned from a *stimulus/response* environment into a world of *semeioses*. Initially she experienced a symbolic semeiosis, but then she quickly became capable of comprehending additional semeiosis types such as Indexes and Icons, plus various other types not mentioned here. Percy described Helen's insight under the heading of *naming*: finger‑tapping w‑a‑t‑e‑r names actual water. But readers of *SE* will quickly observe that Percy regarded *naming* as an important subset of *Symbolical Semeiosis processes*.

Students of Percy's writing will acknowledge that he was an opponent of *Nominalism* who favored *Realism*. Helen's transition to symbols and semeioses provides additional means for grasping that important distinction. As a stimulus/response creature in stage (I) Helen was only remembering *past* occasions of finger‑tapping and flowing water. Such is nominalism: one remembers the limited list of past events of that sort, but that is the end of it. It is in the past. When stage (II) arrived, and the habit shared with Sullivan that "w‑a‑t‑e‑r *means* water" was somehow acquired, the past was still as remembered, but the future became available, because (as Peirce had demonstrated) the Symbol Interpretant habit is *general*[[8]](#footnote-8)—that is, it will govern as yet unrealized future identical finger‑tappings among persons who share in common the appropriate Symbolic Interpretant cultural habit. Thereby, with this symbol acquisition, Helen's future actions and *expectations* with water became predictable and communicable. Anticipation and planning—and eventually self‑control—also became possible for her. Moreover, she guessed (performed an Abduction, as Peirce analyzed it) that there might be other symbols. That guessing operation quickly produced a hypothesis that she and Miss Sullivan soon confirmed by getting many other symbols. Thus did Helen transition from a stimulus/response *environment* to a *world* of semeioses. And, for a bonus, Helen also learned that Miss Sullivan, and other persons, knew those same predictables about water, and that the two of them *together*, or even with other persons or other agencies capable of engaging in semeioses, in the *future*, could *expect* water, *ask* for water, *swim* in water, *drink* water, *get* water for the dog, *give* another person a drink of water, irrigate water for drying crops, and so on. In state (I) Helen was probably close to philosophical solipsism, which is a condition of entrapment, whereas in stage (II) she became a person and entered a world of dialogue between persons—in *SE* Percy liked to describe that condition as *co‑celebration*.

This business about the Interpretant of Symbolical Semeioses being a cultural or conventional habit is a superbly excellent item. A new-born child has few of them, but possesses a strong ability to learn them. Under such headings we could reflect on enculturation, socialization, schooling, indoctrination, or similar processes. Saving that for later, here is the appropriate topic to conclude this effort.

I suspect one reason Percy was impressed by these events is that Keller's account almost reads like a laboratory report about an experiment in Radical Anthropology.

Finally, a complete anthropology would include understanding the nature and processes of novel-writing, poeticizing, essay composition—literature, to be abrupt. Percy proposed, in *SE*, to show that his Radical Anthropology would indeed be able to include literature within such a science (science considered broadly, along the lines of an objective *Kulturwissenschaft[[9]](#footnote-9)*).

To give some plausibility to the idea, consider an example of a dialogue between two persons (***Percy*** and ***Reader***) along these lines. (Imagining Percy's novel *The Second Coming* is the context underlying this mini-drama.)

***Percy****:* I have been imagining a person (***Will***) so trapped within himself that he has poor social relations and a troubled life. (Many other details about ***Will*** are elaborated by ***Percy***). Also I imagine another person (***Allie***) who, by some inappropriate medical procedures, has been almost reduced to the condition of being a non‑person, but who (like a little child) still has the courage and capacity to learn (recover) a full personhood, and has resolved to do so. Then I have considered, within my imagination, what would happen if such rather polar opposites were to meet, converse, interact.

***Reader****:* I am attracted to the possibility. How would they get along? It is a tantalizing issue. Could you describe your imagination for me? Writing it out would give me access.

***Percy****:* Very well. I will do that and send you a copy.

[time passes .... ]

***Reader****:* I read your account. While doing so, I recognized similarities within the imagined actions of your characters to some previously unconscious issues that have concerned me about my situation in life. The recognition was a helpful life‑changing experience for me. I learned from that.

Here some broadly scientific aspects (in the frame of Radical Anthropology) of novel-writing and novel-reading are displayed. ***Percy*** is manufacturing some imaginary habits as Interpretants to create symbols. ***Reader*** is receptively accepting those Interpretants/habits/symbols and working through ***Percy's*** imaginings and eventually comparing them analogically (structurally) with ***Reader's*** own set of cultural and personal Interpretants/habits/symbols. From that process, ***Reader*** discerns a component missing (or inappropriately present) in ***Reader's*** personal system of habits (world), but it is present in what ***Percy*** described of his imagination. ***Reader*** then considers how adapting the analogous element from ***Percy's*** imaginings to ***Reader's*** personhood might function—would it produce a personal improvement or the opposite?

***Reader's*** exploration of the analogies between ***Percy's*** imagined world and ***Reader's*** own world is a fine example of Iconic Semeiosis. The Interpretant of an Icon is an understood relation of analogy or similarity between Object and Representamen. This kind of thought‑experiment suggests that Percy's hypothesis can indeed show that literature is objectively encompassed within a science of Radical Anthropology. (Aren't we saying here that a proper kind of literature can operate as a virtual lapsometer—see Percy's *Love in the Ruins*—for a properly receptive and thoughtful reader?)

So maybe Percy's novels are experiments in Radical Anthropology. Yet there is a big *however*—Percy is not experimenting *on* the reader. Pavlov experimented *on* his unwitting dog or as Helen's family might have experimented *on* her prior to her break‑through. (Prior to Miss Sullivan's arrival, some members of Helen's family thought she would not be capable of rising above the level of a pet dog.) A novel *sets* the experiment. The experimenter *is the reader* who explores the semeioses between the world of the novel and the prior world of the reader. This factor might explain why it is often said that a work is genuine literature if, after seriously reading it, the reader is a different person.

I venture that in *SE*—and his other writings—Percy, aided by the tools provided by Peirce's semeiotic, the objective study of semeioses with help from the logic of relations, is finger‑tapping *our* hands hoping that we will realize the fruitful potentialities of an expanded, more basic, but still objective Radical Anthropology.

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1. Walker Percy, *Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning, Explorations of Human Nature*. Macon: Mercer University Press (2019), 54-55. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Kenneth Laine Ketner, "Novel Science: or, How contemporary social science is not well and why literature and semeiotic provide a cure," in *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy* (abbreviated *TOP*), edited by Patrick Samway S.J., Jackson: University Press of Mississippi (1995), 256-284. See also Interdisciplinary Seminar on Peirce, "Toward Understanding the 'Biology of Mind' Hypothesis," *Applied Interdisciplinary Peirce Studies*. Edited by Elize Bisanz. *Peirce Studies* number 10. Berlin: Peter Lang (2019), 17-57. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. *SE* 55. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Patrick H. Samway, S. J. editor. *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*. University Press of Mississippi (1995): Jackson. x-xii. Julius Friend and James Feibleman were both early scholars of Peirce's works: see Friend and Feibleman, *The Unlimited Community*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1936; also by the same authors, *What Science Really Means*, London: Allen and Unwin, 1937. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. "Peirce and Modern Semiotic" has been published in *Walker Percy, Philosopher*, edited by Leslie Marsh, Cham: Palgrave Macmillan (2018), 133-150. In many ways, this essay could be read as a near-to-end chapter of *SE*. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Kenneth Laine Ketner, "Peirce's Ethics of Terminology," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, volume 17 (1981), 327-347. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. That a triadic relation cannot be composed exclusively from only dyadic relational resources has come to be known as the "Peirce-Percy Principle," see *TOP* and *SE*. Note also *Interdisciplinary Seminar on Peirce*, "Peirce's NonReduction and Relational Completeness Claims in the Context of First-Order Predicate Logic," *KODIKAS* (2011): 3-14. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The Interpretant of any particular sub-type of semeiosis will also be general, will cover the past as well as the future. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Take note of Elize Bisanz, "Peirce’s Semeiotic and its Relevance for a Science of Culture." *KODIKAS*. Tübingen: Günter Narr Verlag, 2021. See also Ernst Cassirer, The Logic of the Humanities. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1960. (It is interesting that the original title of this volume was *Zur Logik Der Kulturwissenschaften: fünf Studien*.) John Michael Krois provided a fine overview in Cassirer: Symbolic Forms and History. Yale University Press: New Haven, 1987. WP was aware of connecting threads between RA and the prior work of Cassirer as in *SE*. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)