

SYMBOL AND EXISTENCE

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SYMBOL AND EXISTENCE

A Study in Meaning

Explorations of Human Nature

by

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FOREWORD

Hello

As a greeting, it's plain and common, and the elements of it are simple: it requires at least two persons. One person says hello to another person.

What's happening here? Is it a clue? Is it concealing and revealing something significant?

Walker Percy says, "Yes!"

Such events are both basic and essential for human experience. Perhaps that claim surprises you. After all, a simple "hello" is just another everyday activity. But when the interaction succeeds, when one person *gives* the greeting and another person *receives* it, Percy sees two persons "co-celebrating" in life. The same celebration occurs in every act of naming our world, whether we name Fred or a lupin or Tay-Sachs disease.

Percy's exploration of this—our asserting, naming, co-celebration of life through language—gave him an important key in his lifelong search to understand symbol, existence, and meaning. This book records his exploration.

Perhaps you also are searching for meaning, for insights into what it is to *be* human. Many of Percy's readers share that quality with him, and through his novels, we often experience a joyful charge of recognition: "Oh! I'm a searcher too." That satisfaction often occurs when the conclusion is reached, and the protagonist is better off than before; the person who may have been in despair at the beginning of the novel, is, at the end, surrounded by a community and has learned to live through four o'clock on an ordinary Wednesday afternoon.

But what happened to the protagonist and to us, Percy's readers, in this experience? How is meaning found?

Percy's answer—or at least his search, which is moving him closer to answers—is here in *Symbol and Existence*. To encounter this

book is to encounter a vigorous intelligence at work, pulling strands from the breadth of western thought into a new tapestry.

What is revealing in this encounter is his method of discovery, a scientific examination of life that requires neither laboratory building nor instrumental gadgetry. To learn Percy's method of conducting science is to learn how to examine humanity and our individual lives.

Such a possibility may be needed more today than when Percy first wrote (and revised and revised and revised) this volume; for, if we as a human species were in trouble in 1950, we are in even more danger now. In the shifting landscape of truth and reality as momentary whims of personal preference, Percy offers us an alternative: an objective open-minded scientific attitude equips us for our own search for understanding human life.

Again... Hello.

To continue the conversation about *Symbol and Existence*, other Percy projects, and Walker Percy himself, consult www.pragmatism.net/Percy.

EDITORS' PREFACE

Search for a Radical Anthropology

Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning (S&E) is the foundation for the majority of Percy's writing, both fiction and nonfiction. It cogently assembles his answers to some of contemporary civilization's great unsettled questions regarding human nature. As the only systematic representation of Percy's general working theory, *S&E* gives an important framework for his diverse intellectual background—such as philosophy and psychology, medicine and anthropology, semiotic and zoology—creating what Percy calls his “radical anthropology,” a well-rooted account of human nature.

Believing philosophical writing was his destiny, Percy invested serious and continuing efforts in this project early in his career. *S&E* is his original manuscript of that approach, his “radical anthropology.” It was written and revised during the 1950s, then donated, along with hundreds of other Percy papers, to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill archives in four different drafts. The first two completed drafts were given by Percy himself in 1983. The third and fourth versions were added in 1994 and 2007 by the Percy estate after his death.

These multiple drafts and his 1950s correspondence with editors reveal his decade-long intent and attempt to publish *S&E*, but to no avail.¹ In the meantime, he was also writing novels, and eventually his third attempt, *The Moviegoer*, was published and won the National Book Award in 1962. Percy then deduced that his fortunes lay in fiction. His unpublished manuscript was fated to find its resting place

¹ See correspondence in UNC-Chapel Hill archives as well as Jay Tolson, *Pilgrim in the Ruins: A Life of Walker Percy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1992) and Patrick Samway, *Walker Percy: A Life* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1997).

buried in the Chapel Hill archives.

But Percy never abandoned philosophy itself, still considering at various times throughout his life that it was his true calling, even his identity. When asked what her father did, six-year-old Mary Pratt proclaimed: My daddy is a “silosopher.”² While he never created another systematic book of philosophy like *S&E* again (though he many times expressed his intent to do so), he did publish philosophical essays. As early as the 1950s, Percy had already submitted some *S&E* chapters as stand-alone articles to various academic journals.³ In 1975, *The Message in the Bottle (MB)*, Percy’s first published book length philosophical work, included some isolated chapters from *S&E*, but the book itself was quite different from *S&E*. Why? By that time, a discouraged Percy had come to the conclusion that few people were interested in or really wanted to read his philosophy.⁴ *MB*, although a full book of Percy’s philosophy, was hastily assembled and half-hearted as a result. No discernible pattern seems apparent to the arrangement of the *MB* chapters, some of which were merely photocopied from previous journal articles.⁵ They were not in the order of their original source and in fact didn’t seem to be in any order at all. These former *S&E* chapters were often substantially altered. Some fell victim to editorial intrusion; all were devoid of the context of his whole manuscript. All essays lost at least some of their original meaning. Some critics have said the piecemeal presentation in *MB* makes it more a collection of insights than a coherent theory.⁶

² Tolson, *Pilgrim*, 234.

³ See pragmatism.net/Percy for a chronology of publication and for *S&E* correlations to other published work.

⁴ Jay Tolson, ed., *The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1998) 213; Walker Percy, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1975) 10; Samway, *Walker Percy*, 206; Tolson, *Pilgrim*, 262.

⁵ Samway, *Walker Percy*, 313.

⁶ William H. Poteat, “Reflections on Walker Percy’s Theory of Language,” in *The Art of Walker Percy: Strategems for Being*, ed. Panthea Reid Broughton (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1999) 193; Kieran Quinlan, *Walker*

Another book of Percy's essays appeared posthumously in 1991: *Signposts in a Strange Land*, a collection of independent essays divided into three general categories (life in the south; morality and religion; science, language and literature). Only one essay, "Naming and Being," is derived from his original *S&E* manuscript. A third non-fiction book, *Lost in the Cosmos*, contains a semiotic primer inside its self-help quiz, echoing many of the ideas in *S&E*, but without the full development of his philosophy seen here. *S&E* includes the original draft of these journal articles and book chapters that appear separately and randomly elsewhere throughout Percy's career, yet their later publication lacks the context and the coherent organization of Percy's philosophy that *S&E* has.

S&E corrects these problems. As a complete book of philosophy, *S&E* is methodical and systematic, something Percy critics had never attributed to his philosophy as presented in *MB*, nor to his more entertaining, less serious, later non-fiction works. *S&E* is the foundation for all of Percy's thinking, and without this foundation, his later philosophical works appear disconnected and fragmented. A study of *S&E* will prove fascinating to Percy scholars who wish to decipher Percy's authentic philosophical stance, as his thoughts are clarified in their original context; Percy's message can be re-viewed, re-imagined, and re-thought through *S&E*.

Moreover, because much of *S&E* is unique, it offers previously unknown insights from Percy. Well over half of this work is material never before seen or published. Of the 302 typewritten pages in the original *S&E* manuscript, 166 are new. The other 136 pages, published in 1950s journals or later books, are often third iterations of their original source in *S&E* and much revised by editors from Percy's original drafts.

Perhaps more surprisingly, although written over half a century ago, *S&E* is a prescient work that is relevant to philosophical trends

Percy: The Last Catholic Novelist (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1996) 147-151; Tolson, *Walker Percy*, 400-401. The "unsystematic" accusation has been unwisely advanced against a number of great thinkers: for example, one who influenced Percy, namely C. S. Peirce.

today. This work bristles with references encompassing a several hundred-year time span and a wide range of intellectual disciplines, including but not limited to philosophy, medicine, literature, anthropology, psychology, semiotic, biology, and sociology. Percy's use of these interdisciplinary sources contributes to his grand project of creating a new model for understanding humans, consciousness, language, and the meaning of life—one that resolves the dilemma between scientism and existentialism. Percy was influenced by the works of perennial scholars as well as leading academics in the mid-twentieth century, yet his studies are crucial for the twenty-first century.

During the time Percy wrote, rigid, cause-effect, hard determinist models were being revealed as inadequate. These models were slowly replaced by postmodernism in the latter part of that century, which embraced relativism, self-referentiality, and the conditionality of permanent values. The new paradigm rightly rejected the old modernist positivism, with its presumption to capture and summarize all of existence in grand narratives and theories. But the postmodern critique of modernism's flaws had its own problems. Anti-theorist philosophies don't create new theories. We see this in theoretical shortcomings in current semiotics.⁷ The inadequacies of postmodernism's attempted correction of the positivist, determinist paradigm is evidenced in the fact that it essentially failed—as seen in the striking number of philosophical departments in universities today that have retreated into the strict analytical project, embracing the early twentieth century's tendency to accept that scientific experiments will answer the great philosophical questions, such as what it is to be a human being in the world. For Percy, it doesn't work. It didn't work then and it doesn't work now—and *SE&E* explains why.

The chasm still exists between scientism, or the scientific method erroneously elevated to a worldview, and existentialism,

⁷ Rhonda McDonnell, "Walker Percy's Intersubjectivity: An Existential Semiotic or $3 + 3 = 4$," in *Walker Percy, Philosopher*, ed. Leslie Marsh (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018).

which gets at human consciousness that the scientific method cannot explain. Alone, each theory is incomplete. One claims unbiased external objectivity without being able to account for human consciousness, and the other considers human consciousness yet wallows in an unverifiable and subjective solipsism. For Percy, both failed to adequately describe human beings and human consciousness. In contrast Percy acknowledges the chasm. He first rescues scientific method from the clutches of scientism, then presents a hypothesis that constructs a “tenuous bridge” between these two competing and ostensibly conflicting worldviews: it is in both symbol and existence, the human use of language, that the answer is found.

However, Percy’s philosophy remains here, as later, a “thief” of his many diverse sources—he takes from them what he wants and lets the rest go.⁸ With his language theory, he IS doing semiotic—yes—but it’s not a Saussurean semiology or Morrisean semiotic, nor wholly Peircean semeiotic, nor does his triangle convey the same meaning as that of Ogden and Richards. Herein lies Percy’s unique semiotic.⁹ He’s doing philosophy—yes—but not the kind of narrow analytic philosophy found in most American universities and modern academia today that lapses into the scientism of the past. His much broader philosophy—both existential, pragmatic, as well as scientific without being scientific, without ill-founded and long disproven positivist flaws—resolves the paradigmatic dichotomy and void of philosophy today.

⁸ Patrick Samway, ed., *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1995) 131.

⁹ “Semeiotic” is the term Peirce used first for his nineteenth century studies as a continuation of the same terminology employed by earlier scientists such as Locke or even earlier physicians such as Galen; “semiotics” is a twentieth-century movement, quite eclectic with a flexible terminology, associated with behaviorists such as Morris, Saussure, and others; the term “semiotic” appears to be the label Percy preferred for his work because he wanted to separate his “improved” account of it from the account given by Morris and associates.

Percy uses the pragmatists as resources to reconcile these confusions and difficulties. Not only had postmodernism's critique of positivist flaws already been accomplished by the pragmatists, postmodernism's two great difficulties—finding objectivism in an epistemologically relative universe and ending the infinite loop of self-referentiality—had also already been solved by the pragmatists. Pragmatism undercuts cognitive relativism with a theory of truth and objectivity grounded in observation, experimental work, testing, and experience in a real world. Pragmatism kept the scientific method for inquiry, providing an objectivity Percy sought, without making the mistake of elevating it to an all-encompassing worldview that ignored some of the most important questions of philosophy: “who am I?” and “why am I here?” Richard Rorty says the pragmatists “were not only waiting at the end of the dialectical road which analytic philosophy traveled, but are waiting at the end of the road which, for example, Foucault and Deleuze are currently traveling.”¹⁰ At the end of that road, “pragmatism claims to discover a strain of human commonality that trumps the postmodern emphasis on difference and discontinuity.”¹¹ Pragmatism had already advanced beyond the postmodernists, had already resolved problems they left unresolved—offering a postmodernism without the problems, or a post-postmodernism.

And it is to the pragmatists that Percy turns to support his philosophical hypothesis, his “radical anthropology.” Pragmatism does not dismiss the existentialists' claim about empiricism's limitations when applied to human consciousness. *S&E* begins with the existentialists (Kierkegaard, Marcel, Heidegger) to note the flaws of the modernists, hard empiricists, and the first generation of semioticians—the structuralists. Then the pragmatists complete his system,

¹⁰ Richard Rorty, *Consequences of Pragmatism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982) xviii.

¹¹ Larry A. Hickman, *Pragmatism as Post-Postmodernism: Lessons from John Dewey* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007) 2.

specifically Charles Sanders Peirce,¹² by solving the problems of the second generation of semioticians—the relativists. Peirce's philosophy provided a source for the objectivity Percy sought that neither existentialism alone nor postmodernism offered. In fact, it has been argued that "pragmatism¹³ is an existentialism."¹⁴

S&E is a visionary and systemized response to the problems of the previous century's modernism and today's postmodernism (beginning to surface at the time Percy wrote) to propose a worldview that works, especially when it comes to the problem of human consciousness and the search for meaning. Percy's manuscript, written decades before postmodernism's dominion in philosophy and before its recognized problems, is a testament to his foresight. Current semiotics is just now beginning to discover the path that Percy laid out decades before. Recent studies present a new approach to semiotics, studying human behavior just as Percy did half a century earlier, using "a combination of Peircean semeiotic and existentialism, along with an eclectic mix of theorists from other disciplines... all of which ultimately concern how a person might live in the world."¹⁵ Percy's philosophy echoes pragmatist claims and is an unnoticed forerunner of the emerging existential semiotics—or, more accurately, today's theories stand in Percy's tradition, correcting outdated ones and joining the

¹² Percy's employment of Peirce's research begins to appear near the conclusion of *S&E*. However that influence had entered Percy's thinking as early as 1947 (see Samway, *A Thief of Peirce*, x-xix). A manuscript essay *circa* 1959, entitled "Peirce and Modern Semiotic" probably is part of the intellectual nimbus of *S&E*. That essay has been published in Marsh, *Walker Percy, Philosopher*; reading it alongside the closing chapters of this volume is useful. Marsh's project also contains chapters by Cunningham, McDonnell, and Perkins that are relevant to this topic.

¹³ "Pragmatism" refers to Peirce's philosophy as distinguished from William James's "pragmatism."

¹⁴ Kenneth Laine Ketner, "Pragmatism Is an Existentialism?" in *Frontiers in American Philosophy* (Volume 2) ed. Robert W. Burch and Herman J. Saatkamp, Jr. (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1996), 105-110.

¹⁵ McDonnell, "Walker Percy's Intersubjectivity," 115-132.

visionary 1950s Percy as part of a needed sea change for a new semiotic philosophy, for a twenty-first century post-postmodernism.

Few know that Percy said it first.

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