

SEMIOTIC AND EPISTEMOLOGY: SOME ASPECTS OF WALKER PERCY'S THEORY OF LANGUAGE

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Throughout his linguistic and philosophical essays¹, Walker Percy has strongly remarked the incoherence of current theories of man. There does not presently exist a unified perspective on man such as existed in other ages. The conventional wisdom of this century considers man as a highly developed organism with power over his environment and at the same time as a creature who possesses certain properties, certain «values» such as a soul, freedom, dignity, which no other creature is endowed with. Nonetheless, and that is precisely Percy's point of departure, man suffers from a kind of deprivation, a certain devaluation as individual, man lives «incommunicado» (MB, 26) and isolated in the best of all possible worlds.

Walker Percy suggests as explanation for man's predicament that the modern age has come to an end, and that, while current theories of man no longer work, the possible future ones are still unknown to us. Something similar states Robert Coover when talking about postmodern fiction. According to him, «we have come to the end of a tradition... our ways of looking at the world and adjusting to it through fictions are changing»².

Where then can one start if the traditional theories of man are now called into question? The only possibility left to the writer is to focus insistently on the creative process itself; following Percy, on man's singularity which cannot be questioned. That singularity is *language*.

¹ Most of them collected in his book, *The Message in the Bottle* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1975). Subsequent references to this edition will appear in the text within parentheses with the abbreviation MB and number of page quoted.

² Frank Gado, *First Person: Conversations on Writers and Writing* (Schenectady, N. Y.: Union College Press, 1973), p. 142.

The new epistemological orientation undertaken by postmodern writers is therefore directed towards the creation of new systems to deal with reality, of new fictional forms concerned with the effects which language has on man's relationship to the world. Language, then, as the basic symbolic response to reality assumes preeminence in the works of these authors. As William Gass puts it,

Language... is more powerful as an experience of things than the experience of things. Signs are more patent experiences than anything else, so when one is dealing with the things that really count, then you deal with words. They have a reality far exceeding the things they name... the very experience of symbols is now the important experience. When we think about our own life, it's surrounded by symbols. That's what we experience day and night³.

This notion of the symbolic character of our awareness started with the Scholastics. It was St. Thomas who observed that symbols come to contain within themselves the thing symbolized («in alio esse»), that is, in another mode of existence. Subsequently, Kant picks up this idea and affirms that all knowledge is mediated through symbolic media, not derived from experience, since subjective elements enter into all human operations and even our sense data are primarily symbols. Much the same is claimed by Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer, for whom symbols are the vehicles of meaning⁴.

In this respect, Walker Percy acknowledges his debt to these philosophers for the concept of symbolization. The study of their works led him to assert that we cannot know anything at all unless we symbolize it. We approach the thing not directly, but by pairing, by apposing symbol and thing. «Homo loquens», asserts Percy, cannot be explained by the LAD device of Noam Chomsky, or by the stimulus-response mechanism of behavioristic approaches to language. Symbolization must be distinguished from a more conventional behavioristic approach to meaning, which Percy labels signification; «A symbol does not direct our attention to something else, as a sign does. It does not direct at all. It *means* something else» (MB, 153).

This valuable distinction between sign and symbol is precisely the fulcrum of Percy's argument. A symbol, according to him, is not a sign, and modern semioticians who overlook this fact are missing the most important thing of all, *id est*, the relation of denotation. Percy insists on this point throughout his articles.

In his latest book on semiotics, nevertheless, Walker Percy has changed his previous terminology and substituted the terms *sign* and *symbol* for the less ambiguous *signal* and *sign*, respectively. This usage has seemed to him advisable for two reasons⁵. One is to avoid the emblematic connotations which for most people has the term *symbol*, normally identified with emblems like the flag or the

³ «A Symposium on Fiction: Donald Barthelme, William Gass, Grace Paley, Walker Percy», *Shenandoah* 27, no. 2 (Winter 1976), p. 22.

⁴ See in this respect the works of Ernst Cassirer, *Essay of Man* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1944), and Susanne Langer, *Philosophy in a New Key* (New York: New American Library, 1951).

⁵ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1984), p. 88.

cross and not understood in the radical sense in which it is used by Peirce, Cassirer, and Langer. The other reason is Walker Percy's desire to reconcile this latter usage with Saussure's valuable dissection of the sign into its two elements, signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*). In this article, nonetheless, we will preserve the former terminology not to increase the already existing confusion among these terms.

Therefore, and going back to this distinction between sign and symbol, or between signal and sign, as this author would put it now, Walker Percy affirms that the thing that distinguishes man's behaviour from that of animals is precisely «his ability to symbolize experience rather than simply respond to it» (MB, 153). Naming is mainly a pairing, a coupling of word and thing, an «affirming of the thing to be what it is for both of us», (MB, 156) in Percy's words.

In this concern, and after the work of A. D. Ritchie⁶, Percy indicates that this naming process is the one by which man «creates» the world around him. Not only that, every symbolic assertion involves a triadic relation based on two different and simultaneous aspects.

First, this assertory act carried out by the symbol, as we have seen, implies a mysterious relationship between thing and word, by which the former (object) becomes the latter (symbol); in other words, the symbol contains the object «in alio esse». This is the interpretation given by Ferdinand de Saussure of the verbal sign, that is, as a union of signifier (the sound-image of a word) and signified (the concept of an object, action, quality). This interpretation, on the other hand, is not new, as Jakobson explains, but was probably taken from the stoic theory, later adapted and developed by St. Augustine⁷.

Whatever the origins of this idea, the fact is that Walker Percy reaffirms its importance in the study of human language, as the characteristic feature which differentiates it from other kinds of animal communication, «In a sign, the signifier and the signified are interpenetrated so that the signifier becomes, in a sense, transformed by the signified»⁸.

Second, drawing the concept of intersubjectivity and of the «I-Thou» relationship from Marcel and Buber, respectively, Percy states,

Every symbolic formulation, whether it be language, art, or even thought, requires a real or posited someone else for whom the symbol is intended as meaningful. Denotation is an exercise in intersubjectivity. The two are no longer related as organisms in a nexus of interaction but as namer and hearer of a name, an I and a Thou, co-conceivers and co-celebrants of the object beheld in common under the auspices of a common symbol. (MB, 271)

This notion of intersubjectivity as the implicit basis for all human communication is closely connected with Hölderlin's theory of language magnificently expressed in one of his poems and superbly commented by Martin Heidegger, if

⁶ A. D. Ritchie, *The Natural History of the Mind* (Longmans, Green & Co., 1936).

⁷ Roman Jakobson, «Quest for the Essence of Language», *Diógenes*, 12, 1965, p. 21.

⁸ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, p. 104.

possible; «Wir —die Menschen— sind ein Gespräch. Das Sein des Menschen gründet in der Sprache; aber diese geschieht erst eigentlich im Gespräch... als Gespräch nur ist die Sprache wesentlich»⁹.

But where does Percy take his concept of the triadic nature of language? According to the American philosopher Charles Sanders Peirce, the very nature of a triadic relationship or «semiosis» resides in «a cooperation of three subjects, such as signs, its object, and its interpretant». Signs are something which stand «to somebody for something else in some respect or capacity». Peirce also states that a sign is a «Representamen with a mental interpretant»¹⁰. Therefore signification is essentially triadic and a sign cannot be explained except by other sign.

Following Peirce, Walker Percy reaffirms the symbolic and therefore triadic nature of the naming activity and criticizes the two major components of semiotic that have tried to explain this mysterious relationship between thing and symbol. These two main theories are symbolic logic and behavioristics.

Symbolic logic has restricted itself to an abstract theory of the logic of language, ruling the problem of knowing out of court and ignoring consequently the triadic relation involved. Semantics abstracts from the user of language and analyzes only the expressions and their designata. In this sense, Percy criticizes Korzybsky's lack of interest in the extraordinary act of naming while his main interest lies in our inclination to use words incorrectly. Nor have behavioristics taken us an inch closer to the problem since they assume that the meaning relation, regardless of whether it occurs among human or subhuman beings, is always a causal-effect mechanism. As Percy points out, even Ogden and Richards state that «between a thought and a symbol causal relations hold» (MB, 252). No matter if signification is described as a triadic relation by these authors, the error lies in its subsequent analysis into three dyadic relations¹¹.

Moreover, while the relation between sign and organism and organism and object is a real causal relation, the one holding between sign and object, according to Lyons, is «purely derivative»¹². No real relation of cause holds, but only what they consider an «imputed» relation, the semantical relation of designation, in Percy's terminology. This one assures that this approach is also unsatisfactory since its formulations and concepts have proved ambiguous. One simply shifts from «responses» to «unreal imputed relations» between concepts without more ado. On the other hand, Percy emphasizes that this approach has left something out. This is precisely the relation of *denotation*.

⁹ Martin Heidegger, «Hölderlin und das Wesen der Dichtung», *Erläuterungen zu Hölderlins Dichtung*, ed. Vittorio Klostermann, 5th ed. (Frankfurt am Main: 1981), p. 38.

¹⁰ Charles Sanders Peirce, *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1931-1935), II, p. 135-155. Note that this philosopher, the founder of semiotic theory, uses the concept of *sign* in a rather general and comprehensive way, which includes the symbol as one important type within his second trichotomy.

¹¹ C. K. Ogden & I. A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1923), p. 11.

¹² John Lyons, *Semantics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), I, p. 97.

What is then the nature of this extraordinary relation which other theories have failed to explain and which Percy calls *denotation*?

Percy points out that its very essence is the *imputed, not real, intentional* identity between word and thing. When we talk about *imputed* relation, we mean the coupling, the apposing of the two real entities by a coupler. On the other hand, this triadic relation of denotation is *not real* since the two terms are related in some sense of identification, yet not holding a real identity. And finally, the word is to some degree *intentionally* identified with the thing. Or rather, «the thing is intended by the symbol», (MB, 261) as Percy would say.

Moreover, this relation is not only intentional but «cointentional», after this author; «the thing is intended through its symbol which you can say and I can repeat and it is only through this quasi identification that it can be conceived at all» (MB, 263). This is highly important in Percy's epistemology since when we name something, the thing denoted is not the word, but unless it *becomes* the word, we will never be able to know the thing; «the signifier serves as the discovery vehicle through which the signified is known», states this author¹³.

In this sense Percy criticizes the usual overlooking of the cognitive dimension of metaphor. «Analogy, the mode of poetic knowing is also cognitive» (MB, 77), affirms Percy, and therefore metaphor is «the true maker of language» (MB, 79), it is «man's fundamental symbolic orientation in the world» (MB, 81).

Philip Wheelwright also reaffirms the importance of metaphor as the fundamental way in which language normally works. For him, language «...is employed to mean, to intend, to stand proxy for something beyond itself»¹⁴. And one of the most important linguists of our time, Roman Jakobson, has considered the metaphorical process as one of vital importance both in linguistic investigation and in literary criticism. Such assertion is mainly based on his study of the two main types of aphasic disturbances, namely, the similarity disorder and the contiguity disorder. According to his observations, both aphasic disturbances seem closely connected with metaphor and metonymy respectively, to such an extent that patients whose selective capacity was strongly impaired, that is, suffering from similarity disorder, grasped the words in their literal meaning but could not understand their metaphoric character. On the other hand, patients whose combinative or syntagmatic abilities were desintegrated could deal perfectly with similarities but could not combine words, for example, into higher units. In short, Jakobson concluded, «In aphasia one or the other of these two processes (metaphoric or metonymic) is restricted or totally blocked... which makes the study of aphasia particularly illuminating for the linguist»¹⁵.

So far the importance given to metaphor as a basic function of language. Nevertheless Percy goes a step further. As we have seen, Percy has remarked the epistemological aspect of metaphor to such a degree that, for him, its very essence,

¹³ Walker Percy, *Lost in the Cosmos*, p. 105.

¹⁴ Philip Wheelwright, *Metaphor and Reality* (Indiana: 1962), p. 29.

¹⁵ Roman Jakobson, «Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances», *Fundamentals of Language* (The Hague: Mouton & Co., 1956), p. 76.

that by which it has been considered as a vagary of poets, that is, its «wrongness», appears as the main condition of our knowing anything at all. This wrongness of metaphor is at the heart of any naming act, of any symbolic formulation. «The aboriginal naming act is the most obscure and the most creative of metaphors» (MB, 78), declares Percy. But this wrongness and obscurity disappears as soon as we perceive its intentional character.

In one of his interviews Percy has acknowledged the value of the scientific method as a way to know reality but he has also declared that serious art can be just as important and as cognitive. The underlying common principle is that both scientific change and the humanities are founded on the way new metaphors grasp experience. Through the creation of new metaphors we are able to apprehend reality in the shock of recognition provoked by these metaphors. Moreover, according to Percy, the function of all art is to explore reality, to discover things that the reader or listener already knows but «which he doesn't quite know that he knows, so that in the action of communication he experiences a feeling that he has been there before, a shock of recognition»¹⁶.

At the heart of this assumption lies the implicit thesis that the main task of language is to understand man, to illuminate his metaphysical plight through his symbolic dimension. An awareness of the nature of language must have a direct consequence for our concept of man. In fact, Percy's theory of language can be best considered as an anthropology since it studies language not as an isolated activity but insofar as it may shed some light on man's strange behaviour. Walker Percy's semiotic is therefore concerned with man, that unique creature who, unlike others, possesses the capacity for «symbolmongering» (MB, 17), and who uses his language as a basic tool for an understanding of himself and his world: «...we do know, not as angels know and not as dogs know but as men, who must know one thing through the mirror of another» (MB, 82).



¹⁶ Carlton Cremeens, «Walker Percy, the Man and the Novelist: An Interview», *The Southern Review*, NS 4 (Spring (1968), p. 279.