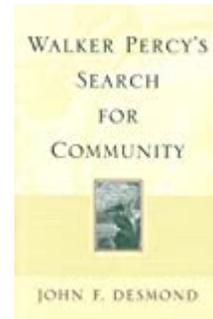




**John F. Desmond.** *Walker Percy's Search for Community.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2004. 271 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-2588-0.



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## Semiotics and Synthesis in Walker Percy

Among Walker Percy's many strengths as a writer of fiction and nonfiction stands his impulse toward synthesis. A committed convert to Catholicism, one who remarked frequently in essays and interviews that his religious beliefs informed and shaped his aesthetic and intellectual pursuits, Percy nevertheless sought to integrate the ideas of authors and philosophers outside of traditional Catholicism—including Albert Camus, Søren Kierkegaard, and Jean Paul Sartre—with his faith. Of special interest to Percy were the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce. As demonstrated in *A Thief of Peirce: The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy* (1995), edited by Patrick Samway, Percy spent the better part of his adult life exploring Peirce's ideas, through his own reading and through extended discussion with Ketner, Peirce Professor of Philosophy at Texas Tech. Focusing on Percy's enduring desire to counter human alienation and loneliness in the modern world by cultivating a vision of real community, John F. Desmond's study underscores both Percy's considerable success in his attempts at integrating Peirce's theories

with his own Catholic beliefs, and also, though perhaps unwittingly, the limits of those attempts.

Desmond's observation early in the study that "human language—the possibilities of communication between humans and between humans and God, through signs ... became the focal point of his search for community" is not new; much ink has been spilled on this aspect of Percy's writing (p. 6). Somewhat more fresh, however, is Desmond's detailed exploration of Percy's engagement with Peirce, the most sustained treatment of the subject to date in Percy scholarship. While some readers may find Desmond's framework building in the introduction to be tough going—Kieran Quinlan, in his review of the book in *Southern Literary Journal*, complains that "the author's presentation [of Peirce] here makes for excruciating reading"—this reader found that material to be the most compelling in the book, ultimately more satisfying, in fact, than some of the readings of Percy's novels that comprise the rest of the volume.[1] The opening essay covers the requisite philosophical, theological, and aesthetic foundations of Percy's thought: his rejec-

tion of a pervasive scientism in Western culture that reduces the mystery and the sacredness of human existence to a collection of totalizing abstractions, a scientism based in the nominalism and skepticism of Enlightenment thought; his sustained attack on Cartesianism; his faith in the twin Catholic doctrines of the Christian Incarnation and the Eucharist as the best defense against the alienation, solipsism, and despair wrought by post-Enlightenment thought; his awareness that, deep into the twentieth century, Christendom had failed to heal the rift in modern man and that the language of the church had become impotent through meaningless repetition; and his conviction that even in the face of such dire circumstances, the novel stands as a special kind of discourse, capable of articulating the power inherent in the man-word-God triad, and therefore, of dramatizing in a nuanced but effective way the vitality of community.

As Desmond makes clear, Percy was actually interested less in the semiotic than in the “theosemiotic,” a term that Peirce employed in his writing. Desmond succinctly explains how Peirce’s philosophical realism and his concept of “thirdness,” as fleshed out by Percy in his famous “Delta Factor” essay, created a hospitable framework for Percy’s own theories. Like Percy, Peirce rejected Cartesian thought as abstract and dyadic, and he understood the semiotic community to be a nonmaterial web of intelligible sign relations that is open ended, unlimited, and evolving in meaning as the human race grows in knowledge throughout history (p. 20). The readings of Percy’s novels featured in the rest of the book develop this point of agreement between Percy and Peirce. But interestingly, Peirce is rarely mentioned in those chapters. One gets the sense that Desmond has taken what he needs from Peirce and feels justified in largely dispensing with him once it is time to interpret the fiction. Such a methodology is perhaps defensible, in part because it mirrors Percy’s own use of Peirce, for while the two thinkers apparently shared some important common ground, Percy parted ways with Peirce when it came to the substantial “idealist element” in Peirce’s thought, which “inclined [Peirce] to affirm that ultimately ‘mind is all’ and that matter is, as he called it, ‘effete mind’” (p. 24). Percy queried Ketner about this matter in their correspondence and received an answer that he found ultimately unsatisfying, so he largely disregarded this point of disagreement—just as Desmond does in his readings. The interpretations of the novels, however, may have been more compelling had Desmond explored the tensions inherent in Percy’s engagement with Peirce; after all, Desmond opens his study by not-

ing Percy’s awareness of the tension between solitude and community inherent in the human condition, and by claiming that he uses the word “Search” in his title to emphasize the evolutionary character of Percy’s thinking about and representation of the idea of community (pp. 2, 4). Yet the novels, seen through Desmond’s eyes, appear somewhat static in their orthodoxy.

Each chapter (except for a brief epilogue) covers one of Percy’s six novels, and unfolds in basically the same way. After briefly establishing the consonance of form and theme (e.g., *The Moviegoer* [1961] “recreates the real semiotic community that Peirce described in his concept of triadicity, with asynchronic overlapping of signs from past, present, and anticipated future, and a flow of triadic interactions between these signs” [p. 43]), Desmond turns his attention to the search for community conducted by Percy’s protagonist, which involves the tortuous process of reading the signs available in the world around him, such as those contained in Sutter Vaught’s notebooks in *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and Lance Lamar’s collection of written and videotaped evidence of marital infidelity in *Lancelot* (1977). Percy’s wayfarers all travel a trajectory from solitariness toward community, from despair toward hope, and achieve considerable success that varies only slightly, in Desmond’s eyes, from novel to novel, with *Lancelot* featuring the least hopeful resolution and its follow-up, *The Second Coming* (1980), offering the most hopeful. Desmond builds expertly on what previous Percy commentators have established, but avoids inundating the reader with rehashes of that commentary; he clearly envisions his audience as Percy specialists. Still, the readings do not generally shy away from careful attention to the details of each novel, and this is one of the book’s most enjoyable attributes. Desmond’s conclusion about each novel’s conclusion, though, is pretty much the same: amid a society saturated by scientific abstraction, each protagonist has recognized at least some sign of God’s real presence in human history and contemporary society, and has developed a critical relationship with another person—Desmond calls this relationship a *solitude À deux*—on which the protagonist can expand to include other people. Each ending is actually a beginning; each “unending ending” is a powerful affirmation of the theosemiotic vision (p. 209). This is the orthodox reading of Percy’s fiction, but does not always feel earned in the context of Desmond’s argument.

Percy’s fourth novel, *Lancelot*, provides a case in point. Desmond calls it the author’s “most dangerous novel,” largely, he notes, because it focuses on the “dire

condition of [American] culture in the post-Richard Nixon era (p. 148). But my guess is that Desmond also considers it "dangerous" because it is most susceptible to misreading, that is, to interpretation that does not square with Percy's theosemiotic project. Indeed, the novel fascinates critics who approach Percy from less doctrinaire perspectives, probably because, as Desmond observes, Percy treats the Peircian concept of triadicity with a more devastating brand of irony than in his other works. The signs of community in *Lancelot* are presented with such a severe sense of provisionality that many a reader has been left wondering how optimistic a scene Percy ultimately paints. In one of his essays from the 1970s, Percy comments that "the community of discourse in the current novel might be likened to two prisoners who find themselves in adjoining cells who hold 'quasiconversations or nonconversations [of the sort that] might be found in novels and plays from [Franz] Kafka to [Jean-Paul] Sartre to [Samuel] Beckett to [Harold] Pinter to Joseph McElroy [2]. This is the type of noncommunication that occurs in *Lancelot*, and one could argue that its presentation shares aesthetic ground not only with the secular, postmodern writers that Percy names, but also with Flannery O'Connor, whose name arises in connection with Percy's so often these days that the two writers almost form their own *solitude À deux*. The final "Yes" uttered by Father John/Percival, given what has transpired previously in the novel, reads as potentially ironic, whatever Percy actually intended. Desmond argues that "Father John as silent witness becomes the mysterious copula in the triad of meaning the novel creates between the text and reader—a transformation that smacks not so much of the *solitude À deux* as the *deus ex machina* (p. 178). In observing the way "Percy gambled that the reality of [the] community would, in however muted a fashion, shine through in the novel," Desmond employs a strangely imprecise, mixed metaphor which suggests that he is less than convinced by his own reading (p. 178).

Desmond argues more persuasively that *The Second Coming* represents a "breakthrough" for Percy in terms of imagining an enduring community, largely because he addresses more effectively the questions that critics have raised about Percy's seemingly contrived, "serendipitous" ending (pp. 180, 209). In contrast to Lamar's "relationships" with his fellow inmate, Anna, and Father John, Will Barrett's connection with his wife, Allie, and with the old priest Weatherbee demonstrate authentically and vividly Barrett's burgeoning sense of community. What Desmond never really explores, though, is what made this breakthrough possible. Why and how was Percy

able to employ Peircian theory to do what he could not do in *Lancelot*? Perhaps an even more intriguing question has to do with Percy's final novel, *The Thanatos Syndrome* (1987), which represents a "broadening, intensifying, and darkening of vision from his earlier novels," and which stands as the only one of Percy's books that Desmond seems willing to question in terms of execution (p. 217). Desmond seems to concede that the ending of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, in contrast with that of *The Second Coming*, is arrestingly provisional. He tries to make the case that it is "atypical of Percy's endings," but his discussion unmistakably accents not so much the novel's hopefulness as its "somber" meditation on contemporary culture (p. 244). What caused Percy to retreat from his "breakthrough" in *The Second Coming*?

The question is especially intriguing, since it reminds one of Desmond's discussion, in the introduction, of Percy's search for the "coupler," the element of thirdness in Peirce's theory that makes meaning, and ultimately community, possible. Percy had been frustrated in his attempts to reconcile his notion of the coupler with Peirce's, but more interestingly, in a 1976 interview, he had been unwilling to identify God as the coupler, noting to Marcus Smith, "I say if there are elements of a sentence and if they are coupled, therefore there is a coupler. So I stop there. I say: 'There is a coupler'" (quoted on 26). But in 1988, just after the publication of *The Thanatos Syndrome*, he had been willing to identify explicitly "the mysterious coupler [as] God" (p. 26). What changed in the twenty-two-year period between the interviews? Clearly his devotion to Catholicism was as strong at the time of the first interview as it was at the time of the second, but why was he only willing to name God as the coupler in the latter instance? Perhaps more significantly, what accounts for the discrepancy in tone between his 1987 novel and his 1988 interview? While any serious work of scholarship will provoke questions to spur further thought and, ideally, further research and writing, I wish Desmond had raised such queries explicitly and at least attempted to answer them. I also get the sense that Desmond is sometimes too willing to accept Percy's intentions and his readings of his own works, and the traditional critical interpretations on which those readings are based, as gospel. The book, ultimately, has much to recommend it to any reader interested in Percy. Those who are comfortable with such an orthodox approach will likely find this study wholly satisfying, but those who tend to seek out readings that "problematize" texts may be a bit less satisfied.

Notes

- [1]. Kieran Quinlan, "Connor, Percy, and Orthodoxy," review of *Walker Percy's Search for Community*, by John F. Desmond, *Southern Literary Journal* 38, no. 2 (Spring 2006): 150-152.
- [2]. Walker Percy, "Diagnosing the Modern Malaise," *Signposts in a Strange Land* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1991), 217.

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