

'A diagnostician is a person who stands toward another person in the relation of one who knows that something has gone wrong with the other. He, the physician-novelist, has a nose for pathology.'

Walker Percy's Fateful Rift

By PATRICK H. SAMWAY

DURING the last year and a half of his life, Walker Percy, M.D., felt more and more the effects of prostate cancer. Like many men of his age, he was quite aware that cancer of the prostate could occur in his own body. He underwent surgery in 1988 in Covington, La., his hometown, and subsequently, since the cancer continued to metastasize, sought treatment outside Louisiana. At that point, after a complete work-up, his primary physician recommended a treatment that would be experimental in nature. As a physician himself, Dr. Percy understood what was being required of him: repeated visits, evaluations, consultations and drugs that, at times, would have undesirable side-effects. And for Percy, it was a moment of decision: Should he submit himself to such therapeutic treatment or should he allow the cancer to take its natural course? Though the final decision would be an extremely personal one, he realized, as he told me, that seeing various children who likewise had cancer prompted him to continue the recommended treatment with the hope that, if it did not ultimately help him, the doctors might learn something from his case that would benefit a child at some future date. Thus, Percy stayed with each stage of the treatment even though he gradually knew that his own days were numbered.

This biographical situation tells us something crucial about Percy's views on science. The decision he made to continue treatment, it could be argued, was based on good common sense, and one any reasonable and compassionate person would make. Yet the point is that he chose a specific course based on the wisdom he had accumulated through years of experience and reflection and writing, much of which dealt with the world of sci-

PATRICK H. SAMWAY, S.J., literary editor of *AMERICA*, recently edited a volume of Walker Percy's essays and talks entitled *Signposts in a Strange Land* (Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1991).

ence. The full significance of this decision, however, must be appreciated, not only in light of his final months on this earth, but, to a great extent, in terms of his non-fiction and fiction.

Let me jump backward in time and try to characterize briefly how Percy regarded science. When Willard Rappleye, M.D., assumed the deanship of the College of Physicians and Surgeons (P & S) of Columbia University in New York City in 1930, a post he held until 1958, he began a program that expanded and deepened P & S's educational concepts and practice, hospital administration and delivery of health care. He was noted, in particular, for improving graduate and postgraduate medical education by giving more consideration to social, economic and political ramifications. By the time Walker Percy and his 98 fellow students received their medical degrees in June 1941, Dean Rappleye's various programs were in full-swing. Walker Percy would always be proud of the demanding, well-rounded medical education he received at P & S, and judging from a form he filled out just before graduation, he had every intention of continuing his career as a medical doctor, first as an intern at Bellevue Hospital and then as an Army doctor beginning in January 1944. And, who knows, after that perhaps some research in pathology, since he was an excellent student in both his undergraduate and graduate days.

PERCY'S CAREER as a medical doctor came to an end in the early months of 1942, when he contracted tuberculosis and subsequently was sent to Trudeau Sanatorium in Saranac Lake, N.Y. Percy often returned to this *Zauberberg* experience in the Adirondacks, which consisted mostly of sitting outdoors summer, fall, winter and spring and reading novels and many of the great works of philosophy and theology. In fact, this period was so etched in Percy's life that he wrote a novel about it, never published and most likely it never will be, called *The Gramercy Winner*. In a 1976 interview with Marcus Smith, Percy explained that during these two years he

read Dostoevsky through Kierkegaard, and from there through to Sartre and Marcel: "I found myself in this very strange dilemma of still subscribing to the method of science, what science could explain, man and the world as explainable phenomena. On the other hand, over 100 years of novel-writing and philosophizing had to do with man as someone alienated. The whole modern novel is a novel of alienation, is about man as dislocated, disoriented, uprooted, not at home—which seemed absolutely the exact opposite of the thrust of the education that I had, where the whole burden of point-of-view was to fit man into a body of phenomena. So I was confronted with these two diametrically opposed views of man." It is significant, I believe, that the features of the modern novel that Percy isolates—dislocation, disorientation and uprootedness—were the very problems Percy faced at that time in his life. One could well question whether or not alienation is the fundamental experience that energizes the modern novel. Faulkner, for example, seemed to think that his novels and stories were a way of saying "No" to death.

Percy furthermore explained in this interview that his collection of essays entitled *The Message in the Bottle*, as seen most cogently in his essay "Culture: The Antinomy of the Scientific Method," represented a 20-year struggle to reconcile these two divergent views. He attempted to bridge this gap mostly from a behavioral point of view. And in doing so, he gradually shifted his argument—and this is a critical moment in his thinking—from what we normally consider the basic sciences (biology, chemistry, physics, etc.) and began to focus on the problem of language, initially on the basis of insights gained in the works of Ernst Cassirer and Susanne Langer. In probing into semiotics and language theory, Percy found that Leonard Bloomfield, Zellig Harris and Noam Chomsky had not been able to bridge this gap either, especially as these men tended to erect formal systems that only paid lip service to the behaviorists.

In his 1988 acceptance speech for the T. S. Eliot Award, Percy explained that he initially dealt with the problem in his portrayal of Binx Bolling in *The Moviegoer*; to the anxious Binx a search is possible, one that is altogether different from the explorations of scientists or psychoanalysts. Almost by chance, this novel became, from one perspective, a narrative concerning quest or search. "Indeed," Percy notes, "the character creates within himself and within the confines of a single weekend in New Orleans a microcosm of the spiritual history of the West, from the Roman patrician reading his Greek philosophers to the 13th century pilgrim who leaves home and takes to the road." Percy defines himself as a diagnostician of representative individuals in modern society. "A diagnostician is a person who stands toward another person in the relation of one who knows that something has gone wrong with the other. He, the physician-novelist, has a nose for pathology."

What Percy as diagnostician discovers is that the

pathological anomalies of Binx have afflicted the society he lives in. Relying on Whitehead's concept of the "misplaced concrete," Percy identifies this pathological situation as "a certain abstractedness and disorientation that follows upon the elevation of science to an all-enveloping ideology." Yet, a fictional character can discover in his search that there are ways of knowing that are as valid as scientific propositions and that are far more significant in one's personal life, since they deal with his or her uniqueness as a human specimen. As Percy notes in his essay "The State of the Novel: Dying Art or New Science?," "art is cognitive, as cognitive and affirmable in its own way as science, and that in the case of the current novel [Sartre's *Nausea*], it cognizes, discerns, knows and tells of a unique order which cannot be grasped by the scientific method. The scientist is only interested in a molecule of sodium chloride or a supernova or an amoeba or even a patient only insofar as it resembles other molecules, other supernova, other amoebae and even other patients sharing the same disorder. But the peculiar fate of the human being is that he is stuck with the consciousness of himself as a self, as a unique individual, or at least with the possibility of becoming a self." The physician-novelist's task is not to write edifying tales; he or she is in the business of diagnosing, not of engaging in therapy.

IN HIS LAST formal presentation, "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind," delivered in Washington, D.C., as the 18th Annual Jefferson Lecture for the National Endowment for the Humanities on May 3, 1989, Percy summarized many of his scientific, literary, philosophical and semiotic preoccupations. This talk can well serve as Percy's final attempt to call attention to his belief that the view of the world that we are consciously or unconsciously obtaining from modern science is radically incoherent. For Percy, a corollary to this proposition is that modern science is itself incoherent when it tries to evaluate man as a total human being. The source of such incoherence lies within science itself as it is presently practiced; the solution is not to be found in something extra-scientific, like New Age religion, but more within science itself.

In this talk, Percy is doing more than raising the standard humanistic objection to science, that it is too impersonal, detached and abstracted, and that accordingly it does not meet the human need to take into account such experience as emotions, art and faith. Percy's purpose, he says, is rather to challenge science in the very name of science. Yet one could ask at this point a key question: On what grounds does Percy, a doctor who really never practiced medicine for all practical purposes and who was not a research scientist as such, claim the authority to challenge science in the name of science? Most likely, by using this prestigious forum in the nation's capital, Percy wanted to remind scientists in particular of the intellectual validity of the artistic enterprise,

demonstrated in Percy's own works. He stresses, from an epistemological point of view, literature's thoughtfulness not as an aberration, but as something normal.

In the field of psychology—to cite but one scientific field, Percy notes that neurons can be measured as the transmission of energy along a nerve fiber, whereas words such as “self,” “ego” and “consciousness” cannot be seen or measured, thus setting up one of the tradi-

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tional dichotomies between mind and matter, mental and physical, *res cogitans* and *res extensa*. Is the gap here, in principle, “closable”? No, according to Percy, not by the present regnant principles. Certainly, for Percy, Neil R. Carlson's explanation falls far short of providing an answer: “What can a physiological psychologist say about human self-awareness?” Carlson asks. “We know that it is altered by changes in the structure or chemistry of the brain. We conclude that consciousness is a physiological function, just like behavior.” Either this Cartesian dualism is insurmountable, and thus can be treated with a quick Alice-in-Wonderland semantic fix, or we ignore it and proceed with the discussion. Can the brain-scientists dig their tunnel and the mind-scientists dig their own tunnel, and really hope that these two tunnels will eventually meet somewhere underneath the middle of a flowing river? In the field of linguistics—and this is the “scientific” area where Percy feels most comfortable—he says it is possible to draw a picture of an organism responding to a stimulus, but can one draw a picture of an organism asserting a sentence? Or to change the perspective, how does Darwin account for the peculiar behavior of a variant in its own species? And if Freud's psyche is like ours, how did he ever arrive at the truth about his own psyche?

Characteristically, Percy lays claim neither to the originality of the diagnosis nor the remedy he proposes. He acknowledges, as he did for many years, his indebtedness to Charles Sanders Peirce, who preserved what was valuable from the philosophical ideas of Aristotle up to late Scholastics and recast these ideas in a way that is universally accessible. Unfortunately, few scientists, according to Percy, have said much about this jump from the science of neurology to the science of the psyche. Can we really extrapolate from the indeterminacy of subatomic particles to the freedom of the will?

“At the statistical level large numbers of atoms behave lawfully,” Percy observes. “Boyle's law still obtains. If the will is free, it is no thanks to Heisenberg. As for chaos theory, it has been well described not as a repudiation of Newtonian determinism but as its enrichment.” Percy knew that the world he lived in was dynamic, and he insisted that philosophy, theology and science account for the interrelatedness he experienced.

In Peircian theory, a sign (a red stop sign, for example), an object (a law that requires a person to stop) and an interpretant (the action of stopping) are evidence that the dynamic world we live in is composed of relationships. For Peirce, a “sign or representamen is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of the person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. That sign which it creates I call the interpretant of the first sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea, which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen.” Often called by Percy the Delta Factor in several essays in *The Message in the Bottle*, because a person has the capacity of uniting through a form of the verb “to be” a subject with an object, Peirce's triadic theory accounts for something that is not material, though it is as “real” as a cabbage or a king or a neuron. In brief, for Peirce and Percy, no material substance can name or assert a proposition. In his admirable book, *A Peircean Reduction Thesis* (Texas Tech Univ. Press, 1991), Robert W. Burch exhaustively explains both the foundations of a topological logic and its correlation with the reduction thesis of Charles Sanders Peirce. Through what Burch calls Peircean Algebraic Logic, he builds on the work of Hans G. Herzberger and Kenneth L. Ketner in analyzing the irreducibility of what Peirce and Percy knew as triadic relationships. Burch's work could well provide a basis for looking anew at Percy's insistence on Peirce's logic and “semiotics.” Above all, Burch's work explains, in part, why Percy demanded of scientists that they draw a picture or diagram of the principal relationships of what they were investigating.

FOR WALKER PERCY, Peirce's “thirdness” brings good news: The language of art, poetry and fiction can now be taken as seriously as one takes the language of science. “Rather are the humanities the elder brother of the sciences,” Percy wrote, “who sees how the new scientist got his tail in a crack when he takes on the human subject as object and who even shows him the shape of a new science.” Percy's challenge to science is one that appeals to certain paleontologists, anthropologists and psychiatrists, especially those who ponder the notion of belief in the works of Michael Polanyi or the Omega Point of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, S.J. For myriad reasons, it is not the type of challenge other scientists feel the need to respond to; they have set out on other quests for humanity's sake.

During Percy's lifetime, his challenge to science had what I believe to be a boomerang effect: It landed back at his own feet as he posed to himself an important literary question. Can fiction portray the uniqueness of an individual, especially someone involved in science, and reveal his or her elusive, mysterious, immaterial nature? In my opinion, Percy was relentless in responding to his own challenge. His first protagonist, Binx Bolling, quester par excellence, spent part of his four years in a laboratory dissecting frogs as an undergraduate at Tulane; we are told in Percy's story "Carnival in Gentilly" that Binx has a future in medical school. Percy's last protagonist in *The Thanatos Syndrome*, Dr. Tom More, is a full-fledged doctor who has, with the help of Father Smith, peered into the scientific diorama of Nazi horror and uses his investigative talents to resolve the medical and moral problems facing Feliciana Parish and the Lower Mississippi Basin. In a sense, Dr. More probes the question Binx writes in his notebook: "Does a scientifically minded person become a romantic because he is a left-over from his own science?"

THE RELATIONSHIP between Dr. More and the zany Father Smith can be seen, too, in the person of Father John, a reticent priest-psychiatrist in *Lancelot* who brings the good news in his final twelve "yeses" and one "no," which evoke, as no other passage in Percy's works, I believe, the fruits of a scientific person probing and revealing the realm of the Other. In this novel, Father John's friend-patient, Lance, wants palpable proof of the existence of God, as did Will Barrett in the cave in *The Second Coming*. Yet, a truth remains constant: If the Divine wishes to communicate with us, it will be done in a time and place and way of the Divine's choosing. We need to wait and discern the code—the tapping on the wall, for example—and see if indeed it does have a meaning. *Lancelot* ends asymptotically as the vibrato of the final "yes" becomes dimmer and dimmer but never reaches a closure.

More than anyone else in the Percy canon, I think, Will Barrett in *The Last Gentleman* embodies the desire of the rational mind to seek ultimate answers in the scientific world for the problems related to sex and suicide in particular. As Dr. Sutter Vaught writes in his notebook: "[Barrett] wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcended (e.g., me) who will tell him how to traffic with immanence (e.g., 'environment,' 'groups,' 'experience,' etc.) in such a way that he will be happy. Therefore I will tell him nothing. For even if I were 'right,' his posture is self-defeating." Will Barrett does come up with a final question, one that the critic John Edward Hardy suggests Barrett might be muddled about, but certainly one that will be as complicated or as simple as are the variables of the text—and Sutter, the physician, does wait. As with the conclusion of *Lancelot*, the moment of discovery is about to begin.

TOWARD THE END of his life, Walker Percy maintained a belief that science, one day, might find a cure for cancer. He was willing to be part of an experiment that might advance the frontiers of medicine. In his own way, he might have switched camps and entered Faulkner's and, through his decision about his treatment for cancer, said "No" to death. Throughout his adult life, Percy challenged science continually to speak of an individual molecule, thing or creature, not insofar as it is like other individuals but insofar as it is an individual in itself. In different ways, Binx Bolling, Will Barrett, Father John, Dr. Tom More, Father Smith, to name but a few, have looked at the scientific world to make that ontological breakthrough that will deal with mysterious individuals as individuals with their mysteriousness intact. But as with love between individuals, even a 73-year-old physician-novelist and a child as yet unborn, who might develop cancer and be helped by the experimental treatment Percy had undergone, the more Walker Percy approached the horizon of being, the more he realized that it receded, alas, before his very eyes. ■

What the Child Knows

"Everydayness is the enemy."

—Walker Percy

*Kaleidoscope light spirals through the tube
And strikes the nerve; colors burst as crystals
Shift; the brain wakes, imagination kicks in.*

*Such symmetry cannot be fixed, must flux,
Must run to find new form, each beauty
Fugitive as before, patterns on the ocean*

*Floor; impossible plants blossom and diminish
With each twist; brittle flora blooms fragile
Emblems beyond all gathering or grief.*

*We see simplicity seeing itself,
Momentary rose windows in miniature,
Too close, too mechanical for worship,*

*Almost; Copernican and unpredictable
Reflections reflect themselves to alter
So much of what the child knows, her mind*

Fertilized by kaleidoscope meiosis.

MICHAEL F. SUAREZ

