

Walker Percy and Charles S. Peirce: Abduction and Language

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Permit me on this occasion a somewhat personal introduction¹. The origins of this paper which I present today go back to what was for me an illuminating experience: my reading of the wonderful Jefferson Lecture given by the American novelist Walker Percy (1916-90). In the summer of 1992 I found myself as a Visiting Scholar at Harvard University trying to write an introduction to contemporary philosophy of language which show how a historical understanding of analytic philosophy enabled one to predict that this philosophical tradition would undergo a renovation of a markedly pragmatic nature. At the same time, given that I found myself in the homeland of the founder of semiotics, Charles S. Peirce (1839-1914), I was hoping to familiarize myself with his thought, his writings and with the scholarship that had recently sprung up around him. One day a lawyer friend of mine suggested that I read Walker Percy's lecture "The Fateful Rift: The San Andreas Fault in the Modern Mind" which appears in the posthumous volume of his essays published in 1991 under the general title *Signposts in a*

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*Strange Land*². That reading had an effect on me very similar to Helen Keller's remarkable experience with the water from the fountain, referred to so many times by Percy³.

In the reading of that text—which can be considered the intellectual last will and testament of Percy, at that time already very ill—I discovered the unification of my diverse intellectual interests that had long been pursued separately⁴. For some time I had been interested in seemingly disparate segments of our culture such as the philosophy of language, semiotics and the theory of communication, the argument concerning the limits of artificial intelligence, the possibility and limitations of mechanically processing human language, the attempts to teach language to primates, feral children and their linguistic capacities, the language of the deaf-mute, the creativity of language and even the revolution in linguistics provoked by Chomsky's generative grammar. My reading of that text by Walker Percy, physician and humanist, astonished me as it revealed as clear as day both the diagnosis of the most serious disease afflicting our present-day culture, and its cure.

Percy was suggesting that the unifying element in all those topics that had attracted me so much was to be found in the insufficiency of the scientist narrative that, permeated with a simplified Darwinism, had dominated the Anglo-American academic scene during the second half of this century with the aim of explaining the most characteristic behaviours of human beings such as language and communication. The cure—in Percy's judgement—ought to be looked for in Charles Peirce and his discovery of the irreducibly triadic nature characteristic of all linguistic behaviour: the remedy to overcome the San Andreas Fault, the gap that divides our culture between natural sciences and humanities, making an integrated understanding of human beings and their activity impossible, was to be found in "the work of a human scientist

² That conference was given by Percy the 3rd of May, 1989 as the *18th Jefferson Lecture* in the *National Endowment for the Humanities* (Washington D.C.). It was published with the title "The Divided Creature" in *The Wilson Quarterly* 13 (1989), pp. 77-87, and included by Patrick Samway in the posthumous book *Signposts in a Strange Land* (Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1991, 271-291), which collects Percy's philosophical and literary essays not published in his books while he was alive, as well as other texts of his of a biographical nature.

³ W. Percy, *The Message in the Bottle*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1976, pp. 34-36 and in many other places.

⁴ K. L. Ketner, "'That Mysterious Phenomenon': The Affect of Percy's Works upon Readers", Percy Symposium, 20 April 1996, Covington, La.

who, I believe, laid the groundwork for a coherent science of man, and did so a hundred years ago"⁵.

Scientism, held by the Vienna Circle and its positivist heirs, became the dominant culture from the 1950s onwards, converting itself into materialist realism which sought to explain everything *right now*, or which trusted blindly in the progress of human reason and its ability to explain all problems definitively and in the immediate future. In contrast with scientificist optimism, post-modern thought, widespread in the last decade, has oscillated between the presentation of science as a mere power structure or as just another form of literature. This skeptical attitude can also be understood as a sophisticated form of the scientificist dogmatism of the Vienna Circle. The presence of both approaches is detected clearly in many broad areas of our culture that present a curious amalgam of vulgar pragmatism, scientificist foundationalism, and literary skepticism.

None the less, the recent revival of pragmatism⁶ also draws attention to the growing of a new sensibility disillusioned with the vain promises of scientificist progressivism but anxious at the same time, in accordance with the best philosophical tradition, to forge a future which will be different from the past⁷. The celebration of this Congress of the IASS-AIS with the theme "Semiotics Bridging Nature and Culture" can be considered a significant landmark in this process of the transformation of our culture at the conclusion of the twentieth century. In fact, a feature of this new sensibility is the preferential treatment it gives to our communicative practices, to the human ability to build bridges between both individual and cultural differences. Walker Percy, who considered himself a "thief of Peirce"⁸, discovered in the thought of this American philosopher some decisive keys that—in contrast to contemporary scientificist reductionism and literary deconstructionism— allow a better understanding of the peculiar nature of our linguistic activity.

⁵ W. Percy, "The Divided Creature", p. 80.

⁶ R. Bernstein, "The Resurgence of Pragmatism", *Social Research* 59 (1992), pp. 813-840.

⁷ R. Rorty, "Philosophy & The Future", in H. J. Saatkamp, (ed.), *Rorty and Pragmatism*, Vanderbilt University Press, Nashville, 1995, p. 198.

⁸ Letter of W. Percy to K. Ketner, 27 February 1989, in P. H. Samway, (ed.), *A Thief of Peirce. The Letters of Kenneth Laine Ketner and Walker Percy*, University Press of Mississippi, Jackson, 1995, p. 130.

After this broad introduction, my paper seeks to account for something which Percy found in Peirce in his attempt to explain human linguistic behaviour reasonably. I will divide my exposition into three parts, which I will have to deal with in a very concise manner: 1) abduction; 2) the articulation of personal creativity and community tradition; and finally, 3) the nature of communicative spaces.

1. Abduction

Percy wrote that Charles Peirce's theory of abduction is a "valid and possibly useful strategy in approaching language as a phenomenon"⁹. In fact, one of Peirce's most original contributions —as emphasized by Gonzalo Génova¹⁰— was the discovery that besides the traditional methods of inference, deduction and induction, there is a third method, or better, a *first* method, which he called *abduction* or *retroduction*. Abduction is the process with which we engender new ideas, explanatory hypotheses and theories, both in the field of science and in everyday life. "Abduction", writes Sara Barrena, "is a reasoning by hypothesis, that is, a reasoning by means of an explanation which arises spontaneously upon considering that which in each circumstance has surprised us"¹¹. The abductive inference converts what may be a surprising fact into something plausible upon considering it hypothetically as the result of applying a certain rule to a concrete case¹². Deduction explores the logical consequences of propositions, induction is the experimental testing, but, Peirce writes, "neither Deduction nor Induction contribute the smallest positive item to the final conclusion of the inquiry"¹³. It is abduction which introduces innovation, which starting from facts, broadens our knowledge by means of explanatory theories.

⁹ W. Percy, "A Theory of Language", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 320.

¹⁰ G. Génova, *Charles S. Peirce: La lógica del descubrimiento*, Cuadernos Anuario Filosófico, n° 45, Pamplona, 1997.

¹¹ S. F. Barrena, "Introducción", in Charles S. Peirce, *Un argumento olvidado en favor de la realidad de Dios*, Cuadernos de Anuario Filosófico, n° 34, Pamplona, 1996, p. 33.

¹² W. Castañares, *De la interpretación a la lectura*, Iberediciones, Madrid, 1994, p. 146.

¹³ C. S. Peirce, CP 6.475, 1908. [CP refers to *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, C. Hartshorne, P. Weiss and A. W. Burks, eds., Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass, 1931-58; the first refers to the volum, the number after the dot to the paragraph, and the last number to the year of the text].

Abduction is not merely a "logical operation", but it is rather, from a semiotic point of view, that spontaneous activity of the mind which makes the strange familiar, making sense of what has surprised us. Of the different kinds of abduction, Percy is interested in explaining the phenomenon of language in the abduction that makes sense of facts by means of the simplicity and economy of the explanatory model¹⁴. For Percy, the conduct of giving names, habitual both in children and in adults, by means of which we familiarize ourselves with people and with things, no matter how complicated they may be, is human conduct *par excellence*. This behaviour can be understood as a habitual abductive inference through which we existentially unite experiences and meaning in names.

Another interesting characteristic of abduction is its creative nature. "Abduction concedes to the subject a maximum of freedom to explain the inexplicable credibly"¹⁵. Perhaps this is more easily perceived by paying attention to *musement*, the peculiar experience in which human creativity has its source. Peirce characterizes *musement* as a pure and disinterested game which has no objectives, and that "involves no purpose save that of casting aside all serious purpose". It has no rules, "except this very law of liberty"¹⁶. *Musement* is a setting free of the mind, which goes from one thing to another:

"Enter your skiff of *Musement*, push off into the lake of thought, and leave the breath of heaven to swell your sail. With your eyes open, awake to what is about or within you, and open conversation with yourself; for such is all meditation"¹⁷.

For all who are listening to me, the connection between scientific abduction and literary creativity perhaps seems obvious; this connection has been accurately studied by D. Anderson¹⁸. But what I would like to emphasize on this occasion is the connection between abduction and ordinary linguistic activity, with speaking, writing and our communication. Common and vulgar speech or writing are almost always forms or processes of abduction:

¹⁴ W. Percy, "A Theory of Language", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 321.

¹⁵ W. Castañares, *De la interpretación a la lectura*, pp. 153-154.

¹⁶ C. S. Peirce, *CP* 6.458, 1908.

¹⁷ C. S. Peirce, *CP* 6.461, 1908.

¹⁸ D. R. Anderson, *Creativity and the Philosophy of C. S. Peirce*, Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1987.

"Looking out of my window this lovely spring morning I see" —Peirce wrote in 1901— "an azalea in full bloom. No, no! I do not see that; though that is the only way I can describe what I see. That is a proposition, a sentence, a fact; but what I perceive is not proposition, sentence, fact, but only an image, which I make intelligible in part by means of a statement of fact. This statement is abstract; but what I see is concrete. I perform an abduction when I do so much as express in a sentence anything I see. The truth is that the whole fabric of our knowledge is one matted felt of pure hypothesis that is confirmed and refined by induction. Not the smallest advance in knowledge can be made beyond the stage of vacant staring, without making an abduction at every step"¹⁹.

It is true that upon speaking or writing we are not aware that we abduct, but it is also true that "it is not necessary, in order to talk, to understand the theory of the formation of vowel sounds"²⁰, and that the users of language are usually ignorant of the linguistic and physiological laws laboriously discovered by specialists in diverse fields. The abductive inference is for us so transparent, so simple and inherent, that it goes unnoticed.

2. The articulation in language of personal creativity and community tradition.

For Percy, one of the most characteristic differences between human beings and other animals is that a human being "not only has an environment, as do all creatures. It has a *world*. Its world is the totality of that which is named. This is different from its environment. An environment has gaps. There are no gaps in a world. Nectar is part of the environment of a bee, cabbages and kings and Buicks are not. There are no gaps in the world of this new creature, because the gaps are called that, *gaps*, or *the unknown* or *out there*, or *don't know*"²¹. For Percy, it is through words that we are able to give form to the world, making it different from an environment (*Umwelt*). In a world there is space for meanings, about which we can think,

¹⁹ C. S. Peirce, *MS 692*, 1901. [*MS* refers to the manuscripts of Charles S. Peirce kept in the Houghton Library, Harvard University].

²⁰ C. S. Peirce, *CP 4.242*, c.1902.

²¹ W. Percy, "The Divided Creature", p. 87.

deliberate, talk and argue. In an environment there are only dyadic events, causes and effects: such are experiences for the rest of the animals²². But naming is an activity entirely different from those activities reducible to cause and effect: "Naming is unique in natural history because for the first time a being in the universe stands apart from the universe and affirms some other being to be what it is"²³; "no other species on earth ever names anything at all, much less goes about naming everything under the sun or asking its name"²⁴.

The spaces which naming creates are common spaces and not environments of private consumption, of sensations reducible to dyadic processes. "Helen Keller's memorable revelation was the affirmation of the water as being what it is. But an affirmation requires two persons, the namer and the hearer. This is water, means that this is water *for you and for me*. Only a person may say yes, and he may say it only to another person"²⁵. For Percy, intersubjectivity is "that meeting of minds by which two selves take each other's meaning with reference to the same object beheld in common"²⁶. We humans recognize other humans as interlocutors, as beings capable of sharing our understanding. "Every sentence is uttered in a community. The community of discourse is a necessary and nontrivial parameter of triadic behaviour"²⁷. We who constitute a community share abductive habits —some habits which enable us to recreate abductively the rules that permit the understanding of what we say to each other²⁸.

Intersubjectivity is the communicative space in which that peculiar articulation of personal creativity and tradition is produced. On the one hand, intersubjectivity guarantees the objectivity of the truth. If it is accepted that language is the vehicle of thought and if one agrees

²² H. P. Mills, "Walker Percy's Philosophy of Language", 1993, p. 3. <http://sunsite.unc.edu/wpercy/hpm.html>.

²³ W. Percy, "The Mystery of Language", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 155.

²⁴ W. Percy, "A Theory of Language", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 309; "Naming and Being", in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, pp. 131-138.

²⁵ W. Percy, "Naming and Being", in *Signposts in a Strange Land*, p. 133.

²⁶ W. Percy, "Symbol, Consciousness, and Intersubjectivity", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 265.

²⁷ W. Percy, "A Triadic Theory of Meaning", in *The Message in the Bottle*, p. 172.

²⁸ W. Castañares, "Lógica, semiótica y hermenéutica: El pensamiento abductivo", II Simposio Internacional de Semiótica, Universidad de Oviedo, 1988, vol. 1, p. 146.

with Wittgenstein that there cannot be a private language, and that it is only communication with others that provides us with the correct use of words²⁹, then, in the same way and with the same conviction, it ought to be affirmed, as opposed to the individualist cartesianism still in vogue, that it is interpersonal communication which provides the guideline for objectivity in the cognitive sphere. But on the other hand, words which are learned communally are those that allow us to master our biographical experience and to exercise, through their use, our personal creativity: we do so through abductive inferences that obtain from old words unexpected splendour, granting them new uses and new senses, or through our assertions, with the affirmations through which we express our histories and our arguments.

3. The nature of communicative spaces.

Walker Percy's most important legacy is the affirmation that an adequate theory of language following the lines sketched by Peirce is capable of bridging the gap that exists between biology and grammar, between scientific studies and literary studies, so as to gain a united and integrated understanding of what we human beings are. The key is to be found in a proper understanding of the articulation of thought and world which genuinely occurs in language, since the three elements —thought, language and world— confer meaning respectively in their interrelation. When a two-year-old child looks at a flower and babbles "flo-wa", he is coupling in his conduct the flower, the sound, his mother as the addressee of the expression, and himself as the builder of the coupling. The whole of this habitual communicative process cannot be explained dyadically, or if it is so explained, it is entirely denaturalized, making its real understanding impossible: "The triadic creature is nothing if not social. Indeed he can be understood as a construct of his relations with others"³⁰.

The articulation of personal creativity and communal traditions occurs in language; the intertwining of emotional spontaneity and the cultural encyclopaedia of meanings also occurs in language. The example of the interaction between the child and his or her mother suggests also that we succeed in creating genuinely communicative spaces when we personally join creativity and tradition in our relations with others. That is why the truth is what is most communicable,

²⁹ D. Davidson, "Three Varieties of Knowledge", in A. Phillips Griffiths, (ed.): *A. J. Ayer Memorial Essays*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp. 159-160.

³⁰ W. Percy, "The Divided Creature", p. 86.

why the truth is liberating, why the truth is that which we surrender one to another so as to forge meaningful relationships between us.

It is the special concern of those who devote themselves to semiotics to extend new bridges between traditions, cultures, fields of knowledge and those people that may regenerate those common spaces so as to make them truly communicative. Walker Percy declared of Peirce: "Most people have never heard of him, but they will"³¹. I would be pleased if after having heard me speak this afternoon my listeners understood a little better the reason for that prophetic statement and why some believe that Peirce's thought can help us to establish those eagerly awaited bridges.

³¹ W. Percy, "The Divided Creature", p. 80.