

PROSPECTUS
for
An Arithmecrit:
Walker Percy's Cenopythagoreanism and the Semiotic Fabric of Life

by

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A Description Of The Subject,
Including A Statement Of The Way The Proposed Approach To The Subject
Differs From, Contributes To, Or Modifies The Existing Scholarship On The Subject

I believe that an impartial empirical analysis of the extraordinary act of symbolization will bridge the gap between the behavioristics of Mead and the existentialia of Marcel. (MB 272)

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Raised and educated in the heyday of the Vienna Circle's logical positivism, Walker Percy (1916-1990) – American scientist, philosopher, novelist, and medical doctor – wished to diagnose the “modern malaise” of humankind, especially that of modern America. But first it was necessary to obtain a foundational “theory of man,”¹ one that transcended an outdated mechanical Newtonian science, but did not contradict this science to which he had so completely and loyally adhered. He still respected it as an adequate method for discovering most of the physical and biological world, but he had experienced a profound and highly personal philosophical evolution in 1942 when, as a young resident at Columbia University medical school, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis, a not-uncommon risk for medical students of that day. Percy's recuperation from this nearly fatal illness led to an extended convalescence spent in reading and meditation during which he became acutely aware of mortality and the transience of life in the physical world.

He began to realize that science alone could not fully explain many characteristics of humans, especially those described by the existentialists, including consciousness, symbolic capacity (language, art, culture), or the human need for meaning. As a scientist, he was skeptical of how well pure philosophy and art could explain human beings, and so he found himself reluctant to abandon entirely the scientific method as a tool for investigation, even though he now found “scientism”² just as inadequate a philosophy to explain the nature of humanity. He sought an explanation that could be derived through the method of science, yet one that, ironically, disproved scientism as the singular explanation for the nature of man. “A theory of man must account for the alienation of man. The modern age began to come to an end when men discovered that they could no longer understand themselves by the theory professed by the age.... The scientists and humanists were saying one thing, but the artists and poets were saying something else.... Someone was wrong” (MB 23, 25). Percy felt a “radical anthropology” was needed, one that was entirely different from any heretofore proposed, one that took into

¹ Percy writes in the 1950s and gender neutral language had not become the status quo at the time. He begins using “man” for the whole of the human race, including women, and “mankind” for all of humanity – and keeps these terms throughout his writing career. When quoting him, I keep his terminology; when paraphrasing, I use the gender neutral term.

² “Scientism” refers not to the method of science – testing an hypothesis to determine if evidence supports it – but to science as a worldview – in which any theory or view outside the realm of science is considered irrelevant or inaccurate. In this case, science functions as a philosophy or religion, would. Or, as Percy says in the preface to *Symbol and Existence*: “the conscious or unconscious elevation of the scientific method to a total all-construing worldview, the tacit conviction that all reality is an expression of certain underlying principles and relationships which are discoverable by the scientific method and that there is no remainder” (7-8).

account characteristics of humanity that neither science, nor existentialism, nor Christianity could entirely encompass.

Secularly, Percy had twin kings to depose – kings that had ruled over Western culture since the Enlightenment – Newtonian science and Cartesian dualism. In Percy's academic world, the scientific paradigm took precedence over Descartes' "ghost in a machine" and certainly over the conservative Christian view. But it was inadequate, Percy discovered. So, having dominated the world view of Western culture since the medieval church, it was science's turn to be ousted. (Not entirely though – as a medical doctor and scientist, Percy did not mean to criticize or do away with science entirely.) Percy also believed Descartes' philosophy had to go - having created a spiritual, philosophical, and scientific split which led to numerous other schisms, including the psychological, political, and social split in America today.

Nor could the "anthropology" offered by long outdated religious paradigms of Western culture suffice in a modern scientific era. The era has lost its reigning paradigm. The most prevalent ones – traditional Christianity and traditional science – battled for supremacy ideologically, politically, socially, morally, scientifically. Neither could claim to dominate the world view as universally and summarily as the Catholic Church did in the first millennium after Christ. Neither had full explanatory power to describe humans or the universe, and the two conflict to boot.

Percy's *Love in the Ruins* characterizes the present-day conflicts in America presciently: "The scientists, who are mostly liberals and unbelievers, and the businessmen, who are mostly conservative and Christian... make much of their differences – one speaking of outworn dogmas and creeds, the other of atheism and immorality, etcetera etcetera – to tell the truth, I do not notice a great deal of difference between the two" (LR 15). The paradigm indecision is mirrored in present-day political partisanship – which Percy predicts in the 1970s with his Knothead and Leftpapas parties. Respective believers adhere belligerently to their chosen paradigm, each blindly ignoring the anomalies that are clearly present in each. Religious beliefs run the gamut, even within denominations, as Percy parodies with his three branches of the Catholic Church in *Love in the Ruins*. In addition, dozens of other competing worldviews vie for attention. The paradigm vacuum has allowed all kinds of competing theories, religions, splits, and philosophies to surface, which Percy illustrates throughout his novels, especially in this third novel, which ends in an out-and-out civil war between cultural groups and ideologies.

The problem has only become worse in the 21st century. Today, court cases are tried over whether to teach "creationism" or evolution in the schools – with each side equally adamant that the other side is in grave error. Gay marriage is in the courts, with conservative Christians finding the idea immoral and abhorrent, and liberal scientists espousing civil liberties and freedoms. Conservatives would like to ignore global warming rather than challenge established business practices; however, scientists are sure the world is in imminent danger. Our culture no longer offers an accepted or agreed upon coherent or adequate explanatory view of humankind or the universe.³ Percy wanted to find one:

...time ran out and the old modern world ended and the old monster theory no longer works. Man knows he is something more than an organism in an environment, because for one thing he acts like anything but an organism in an environment. Yet he no longer has the means of understanding the traditional Judeo-Christian teaching that the "something more" is a soul somehow locked in the organism like a ghost in a machine. What is he then? He has not the faintest idea.... When man doesn't know whether he is an organism or a soul or both, and if both how he can be both, it is good to start with what he does know. This book [*The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One has to*

³ Today, the paradigm absence is no longer national but global. The United States' most important international problem is an attack against Western culture by adherents to fundamentalist religious values who use terrorism - fighting due to paradigm conflict and for paradigm supremacy. As American capitalism and pop culture infiltrates their traditions, they seek to assert, through power and force, their paradigm on the rest of the world. Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way.

do with the Other, Percy's study of language] is about two things, man's strange behavior and man's strange gift of language, and about how understanding the latter might help understanding the former. (MB 9)

Percy sees the solution in semiotics, a study of the uniquely human capacity for language and “symbol-mongering.” Percy’s goal was to combine a philosophical investigation with a scientific one and do what both the scientists and existentialists had not – unite these two apparently disparate disciplines into a more accurate, and a quite radical, new kind of anthropology. As his career progressed and as he immersed himself more and more in his studies of language, he began to move from pure existentialism to the science-philosophy hybrid of language theory. From these new intellectual investigations, Percy found the “tweaking” which was lacking in all the previous paradigms.

Percy’s search, which began in existential philosophy, eventually led him, by way of semiotics, to new insights into the meaning and purpose for human existence and even to see a metaphysical web of life – patterns in the structure of the universe, patterns classified using a theory of numbers, as did 19th century American pragmatist Charles Sanders Peirce, echoing the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Percy became a “new Pythagoras” or “Cenopythagorean,” as Peirce coined it and Ken Ketner dubbed him – using number as a model for understanding the whole universe. Percy’s language theory was a classification system, with geometric shapes and their corresponding numbers as his means of categorization. Drawing on Peirce’s philosophy, he uses the Peircean dyad, triad, and Percy’s own later addition of the tetrad, as recurring symbols, dominating the latter half of his fiction.

He began his career writing three novels heavily influenced by existential philosophy, especially that of Soren Kierkegaard and Gabriel Marcel, as has often been noted. These first three novels occasionally had the symbolism of the triad, though it was more reflective of the Catholic symbolism of the trinity and sacrament. But what has not been noted is that, as his writing career continued and as he became more immersed in language theory, his latter three novels reflected this transformation, profoundly affected by his simultaneous obsession with his semiotic search. These novels came after the publication of his collection of essays on semiotics, *The Message in the Bottle*, and with that, his philosophical emphasis veered into this new direction in both his fiction as well as non-fiction, inspiring his last series of novels with semiotics now as his primary philosophy for understanding human beings. Language became a better paradigm for him than the abstractions of existentialists for describing his “radical anthropology.” This radical anthropology, seen through the lens of semiotics, then supplanted Kierkegaard’s existential stage theory as Percy’s primary description of his protagonists and characters.

Percy’s fiction reveals his number symbolism was unique, intricate, and closely linked to his language theory. These numbers and geometric shapes permeate his writing, not just his non-fiction, but even his fiction, in subtle and not-so-subtle ways, in ways rarely written about or commented on. The term “ArithmeCrit” is descriptive of a critical theory that views the text through its use of number, mathematics, or geometric shapes. An “arithmecritical” examination of Percy’s fiction shows that he consciously used these numbers and geometry that corresponded to his semiotics, though he rarely mentions this prevalent intertwining of fiction and non-fiction.

A different number is emphasized in each novel to correspond with differing themes. For Percy, **twos** represent a physicalist, materialist, or behaviorist approach to the world; **threes** represent the presence of a mysterious third element, a spiritual element, that separates humans from animals or mere physical entities; **fours** represent the community of humans which must exist for language and symbol to occur, and for faith in God to be manifested. Each number was predominant in a different novel, with the particular number used revealing the novel’s theme. *Lancelot’s* threes and triangles correspond to Lancelot’s attempt to find some higher element to human beings than mere physical impulses; *The Second Coming’s* fours, squares, and diamonds correspond with the love story (a small community, later to become a larger community), and the theme of community in general, of humans needing each other; *The Thanatos Syndrome’s* twos (and sixes) correspond to humans receiving chemical or

physical solutions to spiritual problems or dilemmas, essentially transforming into “beasts” and losing important elements of their humanity, including their capacity for language.

I also explore discoveries and theories in the new physics, in addition to semiotics, as a clue to Percy’s search that Percy overlooked. Percy hoped his study of humankind’s unique capacity to use language, in particular the symbolic act of the naming event, would hold the key to his search for a radical anthropology. In fact, he was partially right. He started out on the right path, but never finished the search, never solved the mystery. Language is the clue; but the new metaphysics found in the new physics is the key. It holds the answer to both the mysteries of human beings and the mystery of symbolism. Even better, it does so by use of the scientific method – an inclusion that would have made the scientist in Percy content.

This dissertation will first look at Percy’s semiotics, including the meaning of the numbers and shapes, his view of the world and human beings and their symbolic capacity as they are portrayed through the number paradigm, as well as discussing possible solutions to Percy’s unsolved philosophical dilemma of the metaphysical properties of the “coupler” and the first language act of naming.

Then I use “ArithmeCrit” to examine Percy’s use of numbers and geometric symbols, their occurrence and significance, in his last three novels.

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- V. *The Second Coming*: The Treasure Hunt for Diamonds: Community in Eden
- VI. *The Thanatos Syndrome*: Dyadic Solutions and the Mark of the Beast: A Brave New World

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