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COVER ART

Photograph of Flannery O'Connor as a teenager
 Courtesy of Andalusia: The Home of Flannery O'Connor
 donated by Louise Florencourt, 2019

GARY M. CIUBA

Walker Percy. *Symbol and Existence: A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature*. Edited by Kenneth Laine Ketner, Karey Lea Perkins, Rhonda Renee McDonnell, and Scott Ross Cunningham. Macon, Georgia: Mercer University Press, 2019. xviii + 271 pp. \$29.00 cloth.

The truer the symbol, the deeper it leads you,
the more meaning it opens up. (MM 72)

Flannery O'Connor brought more wisdom to understanding symbols than did many of her literal-minded or self-confidently smart characters. When the foolish Enoch Emory in *Wise Blood* buries his clothes before putting on the gorilla costume, the narrator explains that it "was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn't need them any more" (CW 111). And a seemingly superior Julian in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" smiles when the seating on a bus makes it seem as if his proud White mother and a proud Black mother with a child have exchanged sons: "Though his mother would not realize the symbolic significance of this, she would feel it" (495-96). O'Connor knew that symbols were not matters of the intellect but "details that, while having their essential place in the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction." She rejected the practice of reading literature as if it were an algebraic exercise in finding the symbol and solving for its "x" value (MM 71). In post-war America, such a problem-and-solution approach might have been the legacy of popularizers of Freud who found symbols in the condensed texts of dreams and of formalist critics who focused on symbols as part of the technical workings of literary texts. O'Connor dismissed those who ". . . try to make everything a symbol. It kills me" (10 Feb. 1962, HB 465). Far more selective and evocative in her approach to symbols, she viewed them much as did Paul Tillich, whose *Dynamics of Faith* argued that symbols disclose levels of reality and ultimacy that would otherwise be inaccessible (Harper and Row, 1957, 42).

Whereas O'Connor understood the symbol as a literary device that opened the text toward mystery, Walker Percy approached symbolization through his very different interests in anthropology and semiotics. His starting point was closer to Ernst Cassirer's definition of the human being as "*animal symbolicum*" (qtd. 65). During the 1950s, when Percy worked on two novels that would never be published, he detailed a theory about symbols in a book that he never saw published as well. Percy, whom O'Connor described to correspondents as "our mutual admiration" or "our friend Walker" (24 Aug. 1957, HB 238; 21 Mar. 1964, HB 570), eventually found more acclaim as one of O'Connor's contemporaries in modern southern fiction than as a philosopher, but he made this early exploration of symbols into a lifelong passion. He published parts of

his book as various journal articles and as chapters in his 1975 *The Message in the Bottle* (Farrar). Neither format did justice to its source. The journal articles were piecemeal and limited in length, and the excerpts in the somewhat diffuse *The Message in the Bottle* were devoid of their order or context in Percy's book-length manuscript. The successful novelist seems to have eventually given up hope that his major work as a self-taught semiotician would be published during his lifetime. However, Percy continued to develop his understanding of the symbol, especially by way of Charles Sanders Peirce's pragmatism, in his pop-semiotic *Lost in the Cosmos: The Last Self-Help Book* (Farrar, 1983), in other essays that Patrick Samway collected in *Signposts in a Strange Land* (Farrar, 1991), and in correspondence with Kenneth Laine Ketner, the director of the Institute for Studies in Pragmatism at Texas Tech University (edited by Samway and published as *A Thief of Peirce* [UP of Mississippi, 1995]). Now, more than a half century after Percy wrote what he subtitled *A Study in Meaning: Explorations of Human Nature*, Ketner as well as Karey Lea Perkins, Rhonda Renee McDonnell, and Scott Ross Cunningham have edited and finally brought into welcome print Percy's *Symbol and Existence*.

That *Symbol and Existence* exists now in this well-prepared edition from Mercer UP is itself a symbol of how its editorial team has worked for years with care and passion to publish this major contribution to Percy studies. Percy donated two different drafts of this book to the library at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and his estate added two additional versions after his death. As the editors of *Symbol and Existence* documented in response to an e-mail inquiry from me, deciding upon the final text for publication was a literary detective story, complete with occasional red herrings. They meticulously compared and contrasted the four drafts and were finally able to identify the most recent one, which was used for the current volume. They have provided a congenial "Foreword" that draws even the non-specialist into the book and then an "Editors' Preface" that situates the book in the context of Percy's literary career and semiotic explorations. They have also provided a comprehensive index of over twenty-five pages that makes finding a particular topic or favorite passage easier than thumbing through the unindexed pages of *The Message in the Bottle* or Percy's journal articles. Although *Symbol and Existence* still has some of the repetitiousness of *The Message in the Bottle*, it gives readers a more sustained and systematic account of Percy's thought than has previously been available in his articles and book chapters.

The Table of Contents illustrates this focus, rigor, and lucidity. Divided into five major parts and subdivided into numerous sections and subsections, all with their own titles, it has the methodical design of a well-crafted treatise. Readers of Percy's previously published nonfiction will recognize familiar semiotic themes in the ensuing chapters, but since 166 of the 302 pages in the typed manuscript (according to the editors) have not been published before, *Symbol and Existence* gives Percy the space to argue and inquire without being bound by the strictures of the stand-alone essay. Percy may have lacked the extensive formal training in philosophy that might be expected in a writer on symbols or on existence, but his status as a layperson often keeps him from getting lost in arcana and obscurity while he takes a semiotic approach to human nature. Moreover, he was a well-read student in many intellectual disciplines, as his book demonstrates in its concluding six pages of "References." Percy's "Preface" credits two of these books with having especially shaped his thought in *Symbol and Existence*, and each might be regarded as having contributed to its title. Its first word is indebted to Susanne Langer's focus on the symbol in *Philosophy in a New Key* (Harvard UP, 1942), and its

final word owes to James Collins' chapters on Sartre, Jaspers, Marcel, Heidegger, and other thinkers in *The Existentialists* (Regnery, 1952). Percy's challenge in the pages that follow his preface is to define the easily overlooked "and," to describe what connects existence with the symbol. In pursuing this goal, Percy's probing tone is the curious one of his fictional narrators who are, as Binx Bolling observes in *The Moviegoer*, "onto something" (Knopf, 1961, 6). He ponders, clarifies, summarizes, exemplifies, questions, objects, and answers as he seeks to show how a proper understanding of symbolization might provide a solution to the rift in existence often traced to Cartesian dualism.

Writing out of such a philosophical chasm, Percy continually contrasts the emphasis on the mind, the subject, and consciousness in idealists, existentialists, and phenomenologists with the competing focus on the body, the physical world, and the object in scientists, empiricists, and behavioral psychologists. Percy does not mention how that gap became a personal crisis for him. Trained as a physician, he confronted the limits of medicine after he contracted tuberculosis in 1942. While undergoing a prolonged rest cure during which he read extensively in existential philosophy and fiction, Percy realized that science could explain the world in terms of actions and reactions, but it overlooked the detached observer, who "stood out" according to the radical meaning of *existence*. *Symbol and Existence* records the philosophical implications of this private coming to consciousness. Percy argues, "As it happens, it is existence in *all* its manifestations which the objective worldview misses, but the oversight only becomes noticeable when it is one's own existence which is overlooked" (7). Influenced by Marcel and Buber, Percy understood that the existence of the other is also overlooked, especially by thinkers who cannot get beyond the solitary self. For Percy, the symbol is the point of intersection of self and other as well as of signifier and signified. Unlike the sign that relies on a learned association between a stimulus and response (for example, thunder indicating rain), the symbol unites at least two people in a joint affirmation of being.

The form of symbolization that Percy considers most often is the act of naming. And it is typical of his own symbolic imagination that he makes this profound encounter into an enacted and particular moment of being. Percy imagines the pleasure of a birdwatcher who asks, "What is that?" and is told by a friend that it is a "towhee" (101-02). He recalls the boyhood thrill when he learned from a Black guide that the particularly swift bird he had seen while hunting in the Alabama woods was a "Blue Dollar Hawk"—a title that seemed more expressive than the "correct" label that his father later gave him, a "Blue Darter Hawk." Perhaps O'Connor's deaf Lucynell in "The Life You Save May Be Your Own" came close to discovering the pleasures of such symbolization when she clapped her hands and repeated the word that Mr. Shiftlet taught her to say: "bird." Indeed, Percy's most frequently used example of this linguistic epiphany is the moment at the well pump when the deaf and blind Helen Keller learned that the cool liquid flowing over one hand was named by the W-A-T-E-R that Anne Sullivan fingerspelled into her other hand. As Percy explains, the copula in such a sentence as "This is water" is "nothing less than the means for grasping the very act by which the world has come into being and endures: existence" (237). Percy might have been especially attracted to Helen Keller's discovery of symbolization because his second daughter was deaf as well. While writing *Symbol and Existence*, he was regularly involved in teaching young Ann to read and speak so that the wellspring of Helen's language might have seemed right in front of him every day.

Percy's frequent citing of Helen at the well pump leads to a crux in *Symbol and Existence* that would also get written into his fiction. Helen's entry into the symbolic realm of language was not through hearing but through touching the shapes of the manual alphabet made by her teacher. And Percy rightly recognizes that a symbol can be "the sound, the gesture, the icon" (236). In one of his book's most intriguing sections, much of which was not published before, he explores how various totemistic practices that identify a person with a parakeet or a pole with a tree are linked by the principle of symbolic transformation to the way that language participates in what it names. Knowing that the symbol is not limited to what is spoken, Percy observes that to consider language as "a sequence of events in space-time: muscular events in the mouth, wave events in the air, electro-colloidal events in the nerve and brain" is a partial and simplistic approach (42). At his most abstract, Percy asserts that the symbol joins two organisms in a relationship of quasi-identity and intersubjectivity (63). However, Percy often narrows this communication to a communion of sound. He lets the particular take the place of the paradigmatic and writes as if the symbol were purely oral and aural. As he repeatedly claims in *Symbol and Existence*, it joins a Namer and a Hearer in a celebration of existence (180-81). The articulated word is so significant that Percy claims, "the first man who spoke" should be considered "almost by minimal empirical definition, the first man" (58). Although such an ear-centered approach may voice Percy's own preference that his daughter be educated through speaking and speech-reading rather than through American Sign Language, it risks confining to an oralist framework his understanding of symbolization in *Symbol and Existence* and in his subsequent fiction.

Percy's novels often depict how searchers who seem estranged from their very existence come to themselves and to others through speech, but only in his valedictory *The Thanatos Syndrome* (Farrar, 1987) does he consider the possibility that ASL might be so vitalizing a form of symbolization. Toward the end of the novel, Van Dorn, who has helped to spread the titular plague, becomes its victim and loses his ability to speak. However, he recovers his humanity and his facility with language after he undergoes a novel form of therapy: he lives with and learns from a gorilla who has been supposedly taught to sign. Despite this attention to sign language, *The Thanatos Syndrome* ends with a literal benediction of the word. A convalescing Mickey LaFaye tentatively recovers her once-deadened self by engaging in salutary conversation with Dr. Tom More. "She opens her mouth to speak," More observes, and Percy's final published novel concludes by repeating its key word, "Well well well" (372). In *Symbol and Existence* Percy seems most well attuned to the verbal symbol. He can be so transported by the utter act of spoken language that he becomes a twentieth-century Adamic namer, who hears his way towards Gerard Manley Hopkins's inscape: "What I perceive in all its intricate and iridescent reality is the thing itself as it has formed itself within the web of sound" (227). Percy delights so much in the physical properties of the name that he ponders the correlation between the sense and sound of a word. He relishes, for example, "a texture, slickness-over-plumpness, a color, a convexity, etc." that he hears in "plum," as if he were already feasting on the fruit in language (97).

Yet for all of his pleasure in the semiotics of the word, Percy recognizes how such symbols can become banal counters that no longer flash with meaning. Like plums, words can get consumed—by overuse, misuse, and abuse, as the title

character of Percy's *Lancelot* (Farrar, 1977) would spectacularly demonstrate through his virulent and violent logorrhea. Percy also recognizes how the very principle of symbolic transformation—what enables words to abound with meaning—can lead to misinterpretation. It can result in the crass fetishization of goods and the idolization of science, technology, and professional competency. It can also result in errors about sacramental theology that neither he nor O'Connor could accept as Catholics. O'Connor famously objected to Mary McCarthy's statement, one late evening after dinner, that the Host used in the Eucharist was a symbol. "Well, if it's a symbol," O'Connor spoke up for the first time at the gathering, "to hell with it" (16 December, 1955, *HB* 125). Percy is less blunt in *Symbol and Existence* but no less certain. Like O'Connor in being influenced by Jacques Maritain, he asserts what the Catholic theologian had written in his 1937 essay "Sign and Symbol" (*Journal of the Warburg Institute*). In the Eucharist, the bread is not just identified with the body of Christ but actually transformed into the substance of that flesh (121). Years later in a letter to Kenneth Laine Ketner, Percy would repeat with approval the fierce dinner-party statement about the Eucharist and symbols made by "my friend, Flannery O'Connor" (*A Thief of Peirce* 25-26).

As Percy explores "Symbol and Art" toward the end of the book, he gets even closer to O'Connor's awareness of how art, like the symbol, functions at the intersection of immanence and transcendence. Percy's initial point of inquiry is cultural, not literary or religious, but his focus on the human as symbol-user finally leads to an unexpected quasi-theological ultimacy. A sacrament may be different from a symbol, as he argues, but a symbol is definitely sacramental for Percy: "Like a religious sacrament, it is a sensuous thing that mediates a higher operation. It is both analogical and anagogic: analogical in that it must bear a resemblance to the meaning that it mediates, anagogic because the meaning that it mediates is higher than the symbol itself" (234). By the time that Percy wrote *Lost in the Cosmos* more than two decades later, he almost turned O'Connor herself into a symbol of all that symbols meant to them both when he celebrated her as one of the few artists who saw "both creation and art as the Chartres sculptor did, as both dense and mysterious, gratuitous, anagogic, and sacramental" (157). Percy was then an established writer of fiction who had earned the right to pay such a tribute to O'Connor's significance. Indeed, his novels were symbols of the very process of symbolization that his fictional characters explore. *Symbol and Existence* takes readers of Percy back to a much earlier stage in his career. Like O'Connor's late-published *A Prayer Journal* (Farrar, 2013), it documents an aspiring author in the process of searching out selfhood, although on a philosophical rather than on a personal and spiritual level. In its pages the writer with his own very distinctive name, one that hovered between southern patrician and universal wayfarer, has not suffered the calcification that he knew might always result from being named and over-known. Walker Percy is not yet "Walker Percy." Rather, he is in the process of becoming the writer as namer. If art names and celebrates "something which we secretly and privately know but have not named" (196), *Symbol and Existence* shows Percy engaged in such mutuality even as he carefully thinks his way beyond the symbol and toward the fiction that would yet be written. ◉