

## WILLISTON BIBB BARRETT, THE LAST GENTLEMAN

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My name is Williston Bibb Barret, he said aloud, consulting his wallet to make sure, and I am returning to the South to seek my fortune and restore the good name of my family, perhaps even recover Hampton plantation from the canebracks and live out my days as a just man and little father to the faithful Negroes working on the fields. Moreover, I am in love with a certain someone. Or I shall marry me a wife and live me a life in the lovely green environs of Atlanta or Memphis or even Birmingham, which, despite its bad name, is known to have lovely people.

Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*.

Nothing is so sad as defeat, except victory.

William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee*.

*Who is the last gentleman?*

It has been suggested that Williston Bibb Barret, the main character in *The Last Gentleman*, is not the person to whom the title refers, but rather his father, Ed Barrett. This line of argument has it that it was he, more than his son, who lived in accordance with the ethical values of the Old South.<sup>1</sup> This holds true if the phrase «last gentleman» is used to describe someone who upheld the conventions of his declining social class throughout his life. For Will's father, the concepts of honor and «noblesse oblige» were the hallowed values on which his entire identity depended, the very foundations on which his world rested. So much so that when he saw this code of honor being undermined and his values crumbling, he felt he had no alternative but to take his own

1.- Norman Brown maintained this opinion in a round table discussion about Twentieth Century Southern Literature. For him «in a sense the last gentleman of the novel is not Bibb Barrett, it's his father, because his father tried however imperfectly, to live by the code. But Barrett [the son] can't understand the code. He can't even begin to live with it, because he doesn't understand it». See Louis D. Rubin Jr., ed., *Southern Literature Study: Problems and Possibilities*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1975, p.139.

life. Ed Barrett is representative of those Southerners who reacted strongly to the populist politics that predominated in the South during the first two decades of the twentieth century. Little by little they felt their sense of responsibility, honor and respectability giving way to prejudice, unscrupulousness and racial hatred.

Furthermore, as a consequence of the First World War, the South underwent major social and economic changes. In the aftermath of World War II these changes were consolidated, but the ethical values of an entire period had already suffered a radical shake-up. The terms «paternalism» and «noblesse oblige» took on a decidedly negative connotation. The concept of honor, closely related to that of breeding, had already become a relic of the past. Williston Bibb Barret was born into a society that was undergoing these ethical and social transformations. Unfortunately for him, however, there still remained some staunch upholders of the old values who proudly refused to admit defeat. His father's suicide was one result of such an attitude. Ed Barrett was unable to make a space for himself where he could go on living with his own notion of dignity in the new order. As the years went by, Ed Barrett's tragic end came more and more to resemble a singularly sterile act in the eyes of his son, whose overwhelming crisis of identity has its origin in this early loss.

Walker Percy makes the generation gap between Will Barrett and his father the fulcrum of his story. He establishes a dialogue between past and present in which Will's romantic illusions, his conflicts and doubts about his place in modern society, are thrown into relief. The young Will Barrett is swept along on a desperate pilgrimage in search of a peaceful harbor where past and present might finally be reconciled. But in his attempts to free himself Will also resembles a survivor of the outmoded principles so dear to his father. He is often left bewildered by a reality he finds incomprehensible. His inability to find himself, coupled with his clumsiness in practical matters, render him ill-suited for life in the rapidly changing, pragmatic society of modern America. He is a misfit, a true descendant of the definitive last gentleman of Western literature: the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance, a comic and ridiculous figure, the parody of a fantastic prototype. If we now reconsider our opening remarks in this light, we may well affirm that the eponymous hero of Walker Percy's «Last Gentleman» is indeed the young Will Barrett, a gentleman in spite of himself as he comes to life under the author's ironic vision.

### *Will Barrett: Traces of Identity*

Will Barrett is depicted as a psychologically fragile young man. He has serious personality problems and, as a result, he finds it difficult to relate to people, and to find any meaning in his life. At the same time, he is sensitive, generous and morally upright. Other relevant features of his character are his lack of experience and confused feeling in sexual matters, and his obsession with the heroic legend of the Civil War —characteristics that are compatible with his romantic temperament. Will's problems, in the first case, arise from his inability to reconcile romantic love with carnal love. His romantic notion of love is made up of images from the past in which young men fresh from battle attend balls and receptions, and they fall in love

without experiencing the need to express their affection through physical love. In Will's grandfather's day young men satisfied the demands of the flesh by a visit to a bordello, but for Will, the affair seems highly confused and complicated. «Go to whores if you have to», his father had told him once, «but always remember the difference. Don't treat a lady like a whore or a whore like a lady.»<sup>2</sup> These two concepts seemed irreconcilable and contradictory to Will. As a lover he invariably relies on abstract principles, but reality always overturns his abstractions, making him seem inept and comical even to himself:

But what am I, he wondered: neither Christian nor pagan nor proper lusty gentleman, for I've never really got the straight of this lady-and-whore business. And that is all I want and it does not seem too much to ask: for once and all to get the straight of it.[157]

As for his romantic vision of the past, his obsession with the Confederate cause leads him to blow up a Union monument in Princeton, when he was a student there, or to wonder about the old battlefields of North Virginia, when suffering from one of his bouts of amnesia, not to mention his fixation with the character of Rooney Lee, or his reading of Freeman's biography throughout the novel.

To a considerable extent Will Barrett is a character who resembles Quentin Compson, although there is one fundamental trait that sets them apart. Will does try to settle his debts with the past and rebuild his life, thus avoiding Quentin's tragic fate. The essential difference is made clear from the start in «The Last Gentleman» by the way the author stands back from his main character and casts a wry comic eye on his tribulations. Quentin Compson is in fact closer to the character of Will's father, Ed Barrett, insofar as he, Quentin, is incapable of adapting to the changes of a society in a state of flux and can find no way out of his moral confusion except by suicide. Ed Barrett also chooses suicide because he cannot escape the decline of his class. He believes that the South, formerly so proud of its moral code, is slipping away fast and there is nothing he can do but stand by helplessly and watch its final collapse. Thus, on the fatful summer night when Ed is restlessly strolling up and down and the police drive up to tell him that the Klan have left town and his life is no longer under threat, Ed tells Will that this is not a victory but really a defeat. Meanwhile, away in the distance, above the noise of the cottonseed-oil mill, the sounds of the negroes going about their lives in the background, Ed tries to explain to his son why he cannot go on living: «Once they were the fornicators and the bribers and the takers of bribes and we were not and that was why they hated us. Now we are like them, so why should they stay? They know they don't have to kill me»(285). But even though all seems lost he still has his dignity, and nobody can take it away from him. «They may have won», his father laconically concludes, «but I don't have to choose that»(285).

2.- Walker Percy, *The Last Gentleman*, London, Panther Granada Publishing, 1985, p.90. Subsequent references to this edition will be made in the text.

During the course of an interview, Walker Percy once said:

A great deal of «The Moviegoer» and «The Last Gentleman» have to do with the difference between me and my uncle. The whole thing is a dialectic between his attitude, which was a Southern patrician paternalism, and the attitude of the two young men in these novels, a more detached, alienated point of view.<sup>3</sup>

Behind the character of Ed Barrett in «The Last Gentleman» one can detect the presence of William Alexander Percy, first cousin of Walker Percy's father, a cultured, refined, cosmopolitan man and a distinguished Southerner. It is in fact from William Alexander Percy's book «Lanterns on the Levee» that Will's father's philosophy on the fate of the South and its finest men is taken. In «Lanterns on the Levee» a book which is at once a beautiful memoir and an eloquent account of the aristocratic concept of life, the author's tone is one of nostalgia for the breed of men for whom the South was renowned up to that time; men like his father, for whom membership of the ruling class meant above all the duty of serving the community. Now these men had lost their political power to demagogues and riffraff. «The years father served in the Senate were not dramatic or crucial years in the history of our country», says Alexander Percy when his father beats Verdaman in the 1910 elections for Senator for the State of Mississippi; «but they were the end of a period in which great men represented our people.»<sup>4</sup> He is forced to admit that «the bottom rail was on top, not only in Mississippi, but from Los Angeles to New York, from London to Moscow,»<sup>5</sup> and that there is no hope of stemming the tide: «We of my generation have lost one line of fortifications after another, the old South, the old ideals, the old strengths.»<sup>6</sup> Deeply disillusioned, he manages to hold out by falling back on stoicism. This is an attitude that Will's father in «The Last Gentleman» cannot share, as his suicide fully bears out.

Heir to a generation that witnessed the rapid downfall of its own codes and ideals, while at the same time a child of a new era, Will Barrett struggles without success to find a niche for himself and forge an identity. Will's struggle becomes doubly difficult when, in order to silence his confused feelings, he falls back on an idealization of the past. His romantic illusions, instead of providing him with a pattern of conduct to follow, actually hinder his progress. Such a profile makes him a true descendant of Don Quixote Knight of La Mancha, the reversing figure of the egregious and triumphant hero, the representative of the unsettled, comic hero of the modern times.

3.- Quoted by Barbara King in conversation with Walker Percy: «Walker Percy Prevails» (1974), in Peggy Whitman Prensau ed., *Conversations with Walker Percy*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 1985, p. 91.

4.- William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee: Recollections of a Planter's Son*, Baton Rouge and London, Louisiana State University Press, 1988, p. 146.

5.- Ibid., p. 312.

6.- Ibid., p. 313.

In the novel there is a reference to Will that makes this decline evident: «Over the years his family had turned ironical and lost its gift for action. It was an honorable and violent family, but gradually the violence had been deflected and turned inward.» [12-13]

Will, the last in the line, sees only one course of action open to him —by becoming «a watcher and a listener and a wanderer»(11). The decline and fall of the South is the touchstone of William Faulkner's tragic vision. Some years later Walker Percy takes up this theme again from an ironical standpoint. He focuses it through the comic, troubled character of Will, of whom the author says, «he was trying to "engineer" his own life, an impossible task.»<sup>7</sup>

With this purpose in mind, Will sets out on a tortuous quest in search of the truth; or, what amounts to the same for him, the simplicity of life as represented by the character of Rooney Lee, for whom action and conviction formed a unified whole. Will expects to find this truth somewhere outside of himself. He searches, listens, observes, but time after time comes up against a hostile reality. His way of thinking is repeatedly shown to be outdated and his behaviour out of place. His honesty and sensitivity are constantly getting him into difficulties, and prevent him from making any headway. He has been compared to Prince Mishkin<sup>8</sup> whose extreme kindness earned him the nickname of «the idiot». A comparison has also been drawn with Candide, another character with a pronounced philanthropic trait. But Will Barrett can better be compared with Don Quixote for one significant reason: his desire to transcend his distressing condition by holding fast to the idea that there is a definitive way of comprehending the world, a final understanding that will provide him with the key to his own existence:

...he wishes to cling to his transcendence and to locate a fellow transcender (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. [303]

These words that belong to Sutter —a character whom the author endows with a large dose of scepticism— pinpoint the futility of Will's quest. Walker Percy describes

7.- Quoted by Zoltan Abàday Nagy in conversation with Walker Percy: «A Talk with Walker Percy» (1973), in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, op.cit., p.83.

8.- Walker Percy himself has said of Will Barretts in *The Last Gentleman*: «He bears a conscious kinship to Prince Myskin», when referring to his use of Will's psychiatric problems for dramatic ends. «I wanted a young man who could see things afresh, both the Northern and Southern culture. A slightly addled young man. His amnesia allows him to be a blank tablet, and that is what I mean by putting it to dramatic use.» (See Ashley Brown, «An Interview with Walker Percy», in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, op.cit., p.12-13) Prince Myskin has often been compared with Don Quixote. Dostoyevsky states that he thought of this character when preparing a piece about «a positively good man». However, detractors of the romantic interpretation of Don Quixote have attributed this literary kinship purely to the romantic leanings that many authors display towards the knight of La Mancha.

Will as «a voracious and enraged pilgrim... an absolute seeker —a seeker and a demander. He insists on finding what he calls truth; and it's either this or death.»<sup>9</sup>

Will's search is well summed up by what Louis D. Rubin calls a «quixotic journey»: that which is undertaken by «a man escaping from a version of reality that is not of his liking and going forth as an outsider in society, in search of another version that perhaps can be.» Furthermore, for Rubin, «Quixote's quest represents another powerful modern urge: the effort to will oneself back into a Golden Age that has departed, through an effort of the moral intellect...»<sup>10</sup> Both these aspects, interwoven together, are at the heart of Will's pilgrimage: flight from an unsatisfactory present, and the search for a higher truth. This search is delineated by an idealization of the past and nostalgia for a world in which standards were certain and unshifting. Will Barrett thereby fulfills the role of comic hero, the disinherited nobleman from a former Golden Age, representing, according to Lucinda H. MacKethan, «the problems of lost community and isolation as he struggles against the disintegration of communication in a traditionless society».<sup>11</sup>

The humor in Walker Percy's novel derives from the clash between the central character, a frenzied and somewhat farcical dreamer, and the prevailing social conventions of the sixties. From that clash there results an unmistakable satire on the American scene at that time. Will Barrett suffers from amnesia and states of «déjà vu», and as a result his notion of reality is seriously disturbed, which makes him incapable of leading a «normal» life or of establishing relationships. But in spite of his deep psychological disorder, and even though the author leaves us in no doubt as to his sickness, Will possesses a number of praiseworthy qualities which make us sympathetic towards him both as a human figure and as a singular type of misfit. So it is that what in the beginning appear to be personal problems of forming relationships, eventually seems to be a deficiency in society itself. In Walker Percy's estimation, «the reader is free to see him as a sick man among healthy businessmen or as a sane pilgrim in a mad world.»<sup>12</sup> There is no doubt, however, with whom the author's sympathies lie. If, on the one hand, his irony is directed towards Will's idealization of the past and his identification with a culture in decline, on the other he feels deeply for his character's sense of alienation in modern society. In Louis P. Simpson's opinion, «Percy's description of the cultural trauma, which is the psychic heritage of the educated Southern youth like Will, derives from Percy's own descent into the self.»<sup>13</sup> Will's search

9.- Quoted by James Atlas in conversation with Walker Percy: «An Interview with Walker Percy», in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, op.cit., p.184.

10.- Louis D. Rubin Jr., «Don Quixote and Selected Progeny or the Journey-man as Outsider», *The Southern Review*, 10 (January 1974), p.35-36.

11.- Lucinda Hardwick Mackethan, *The Dream of Arcady: Place and Time in Southern Literature*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Press, 1980, p.217.

12.- Quoted by Ashley Brown in *Conversation with Walker Percy*: «An Interview with Walker Percy» (1967), in *Conversations with Walker Percy*, op.cit., p.13.

13.- Louis P. Simpson, «Southern Fiction», in Hoffman, Daniel (ed.), *Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing*, Cambridge, Mass, The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1979, p.182.

in «The Last Gentleman» is an existential search, applicable to a modern hero, but it is also the search of a dislocated Southerner, a man brought up according to traditional values who must now make a fresh place for himself in a society without a fixed identity, a society that is undergoing a process of growing uniformity. The author himself experienced a similar upheaval, the same one that profoundly influenced the work of many authors of the Southern Renaissance.

### *Will Barrett's Pilgrimage*

Will Barrett, «a young man of pleasant appearance», comes from the Mississippi Delta Region. «The strangest of planters, proprietor of 200 acres of blackberries and canebrakes», he is now living a quiet and uneventful life in New York City, thinking that perhaps

after twenty-three years he could retire and go home, where, if the ranks of the old ladies had thinned out, he could let out rooms and live like a king. The dream even came to him, that he might restore Hampton plantation to its former splendor.[21]

His time is largely taken up by his job in the Maintenance Department at Macy's, where he works the night shift, and his visits to Dr. Gamow, who treats him for his psychological disorders. The root of the problem, which Will believes he understands better than his analyst, is not so much that he is distressed by «the prospect of the Last Day» but rather by «the prospect of living through an ordinary Wednesday morning»(23). We are told from the start that he has a serious identity problem, and he is wont to assume different roles according to the circumstances:

When he was with the Ohioans he found himself talking an Ohioan and moving his shoulders around and under his coat. When he was with the Princetonians, he settled his chin in his throat and stuck his hands in his pockets in a certain way. Sometimes too he fell in with fellow Southerners and in an instant took on the amiable and slightly ironic air which Southerners found natural away home.[23]

Will is an expert at playing different characters precisely because he has only the haziest notion of his own. He is socially inept and his many blunders get him into compromising situations. One of such situations occurs when he invites an acquaintance of his to the «Siberian Gentlemen's Club... a nostalgic supper club of expatriate Southerners»(21). His friend is also a Southerner, and together they frequent the racially mixed intellectual groups in the Village. The friend, however, was the «unpolished» type of Southerner «who had not yet mastered group skills and did not know the difference between cursing the governor of Virginia, who was a gentleman, and cursing the governor of Alabama, who was not»(21). Needless to say, Will's initiative is not well received by the members of the club; «the Siberians grew cool to him and he dropped out»(21). In addition to his awkwardness in social relations and

his many faux pas, he is ignorant of Yankee manners. In a very ironical passage we witness Will's reaction when somebody he has just been introduced to in Princeton walks by a short time later and fails to recognize him. Although he «was not nearly as tense and honorable as his father»(176), the narrator explains, nevertheless he «was still fairly tense and honorable and unused to slights, and after all his grandfather had been a great one for face-to-face showdowns in the street»(176). To the man's astonishment, Will walks straight up to him and lets fly with the following rhetorical reproach:

¡Excuse me!, said the courteous engineer, but I was introduced to you not thirty minutes ago and just now I spoke to you and furthermore I saw that you saw me speak to you and that you chose not to acknowledge my greeting. I suggest now that you do so acknowledge it.[176]

Stung by this incident, Will decides from now on to resume the time-honored family custom of challenging every snob who crosses his path. He takes up boxing, since «what a sad business that would be to challenge some fellow and then get the living hell beat out of you»(176). The narrator provides us with more encounters of this type in which Will's dealings with other people, his good faith and his ingenuous nature so often turn out to be his worst enemies.

But one day Will's life takes an unexpected turn. He has set up his recently acquired telescope in his apartment and is trying to focus on a peregrine falcon which he has often seen on the buildings bordering the south side of Central Park. Suddenly, by chance, he spots the girl of his dreams. «His heart gave a leap. He fell in love at first sight and a distance of 2.000 feet»(10). The girl's name is Kitty, and she turns out to be one of the Vaught family from Alabama, that happens to be in New York because one of the Vaught's sons, Jamie, is sick. It does not take Will long to recognize the Vaughts as «the Yankee sort of Southerners», or «the rich, Texas type of Southerners». It transpires that the Vaughts ask Will to be Jamie's tutor and companion. When the two of them set out on the journey back to the South, Jamie has only a short time to live.

Until now, Will has lived «in a state of pure possibility, not knowing what sort of man he was or what he must do, and supposing therefore that he must be all men and must do everything»(7). He now thinks that maybe «it mightn't be a bad idea to return to the South and discover his identity»(71). An enthusiastic devotee of mapping out his course of action, Will draws in his mind's eye a picture of what his immediate future will be. His roots are in the South. There, he will be able to lead the kind of life that suits him —simple, familiar, understandable; he will marry Kitty and she will be the mother of his children. After all:

what was wrong with a good little house in a pretty green suburb in Atlanta or Birmingham or Memphis and a pretty little wife in a brand new kitchen with a red dress on at nine o'clock in the morning and a sweet good-mornings kiss and the little ones off to school and a good old mammy to take care of them? [80]



So when Chandler Vaught invites him to accompany his sick son back to the South, Will accepts without hesitation. But the Vaughnts fail to show up on time and Will boards a Greyhound to cover the first stage of the journey alone. He soon finds himself short of money (after purchasing the telescope and paying Dr. Gamow's fees he has only a few dollars left), therefore on arriving in New Jersey he decides to hitchhike the rest of the way. He writes out a sign which reads PRINCETON STUDENT SEEKS RIDE SOUTH, props it up against his telescope at the side of the road and patiently waits for someone to stop and pick him up.

The trip is punctuated by a series of encounters which the author uses to highlight Will's confusion and his precarious hold on reality. Walker Percy has compared Will's return to the South with Huckleberry Finn's journey along the Mississippi. A definite parallel is found in the fact that as long as Will does not feel under pressure from the people with whom he comes into contact he feels free to enjoy the trip and the beauty of the surrounding landscape. But whenever he is obliged to enter into direct contact with the world, things turn out to be very different from the pleasurable experiences he had so fondly imagined.

The irony with which the author treats Will's ordeals reaches at times a very high pitch, but the humor is never entirely at the hero's expense. Most of the time it goes hand in hand with a subtle social criticism facilitated by the situations Will gets mixed up in along the way. One of the situations involves a journalist called Fomey Aiken who picks Will up in New Jersey, and whom Will refers to ironically as the pseudo-Negro. (He has darkened his skin artificially to experience the black ordeal more vividly). Aiken happens to be traveling to the South with his writer friend Mort Prince. They have the idea that they might be able to lend a hand in the Civil Rights movement. Both men are presented as a parody of the sixties progressive American intellectual, supposedly free of bourgeois, racial and sexual prejudices, and they form a striking contrast to Will, as we later discover. Their destination is Ithaca, Will's home town. This seems like too much of a coincidence to Aiken, and so he offers Will a job as driver-companion on his trip to the South. But Will is not about to be deflected from the purpose of his journey. Besides, Aiken's familiar manner and free and easy ways put him ill at ease. He turns Aiken down and tries to get rid of him. Before this takes place, however, Will gets involved in a couple of embarrassing situations from which, no thanks to his own efforts, he manages to extricate himself, but not before he is made to look somewhat ridiculous.

In the first one, we witness Will, courteous and ashamed, apologizing to Aiken's daughter for having made advances to her. The girl does not seem particularly offended, and her father advises Will that he ought to read «Love», Mort Prince's latest novel, «about as pornographic as Chaucer», he explains, a book whose moral consists, according to Aiken in «saying Yes to Life wherever it is found»(120). In the second situation we find Will in Pennsylvania. He has already agreed to go with Aiken as far as Virginia. Both men are in Pennsylvania to pick up the author of «Love». Close to the novelist's house, Will is assaulted by a group of angry neighbors who mistake him for a «blockbroker», an unscrupulous real estate agent who does not hesitate to sell houses in the neighborhood to the first Negro who comes along. When Will protests his innocence he gets a punch on the nose for his pains.

After this unfortunate incident, Will resumes his journey to Virginia alone. As he gets closer to Richmond and the landscape becomes more familiar, he tries to imagine what things would have been like had the war been won by the South: «Perhaps Main Street would be the Wall Street of the South, and Broad might vie with New Orleans for opera and theater». Maybe «Richmond would have 5 million souls by now», and «William and Mary would be as good as Harvard and less subverted»(132). Then he is given a lift by someone driving a car just like his father used to have, «a noble black Buick, a venerable four-holer». The images from the past seem so vivid that for a moment he imagines he has been picked up by «a bevy of Virginian noblewomen», whereas in fact the noisy group of women in the Buick «turned out to be Texans, golfers from a Fort Worth club, fortyish and firm as India rubber and fairly bursting their seersuckers»(133).

The closer Will gets to home the more past and present get confused in his troubled mind. His attacks of amnesia get worse and his states of «*déjà vu*» more frequent. Things come to a head when he finally resumes contact with his old family circle. But before we see what repercussions this has on Will's life, let us consider a relevant aspect of Will's quixotic journey, that which has to do with the journey as an end in itself. Quite by chance, he runs into the Vaughts at a motel on the outskirts of Williamsburg. Throughout the rest of the trip, Will and Jamie travel together in the Trav-L-Aire camper. This proves to be the decisive stage of the journey for Will, a rustic idyll that puts us in mind of Huck and Jim's raft journey on the Mississippi. As they make their way down the old Tidewater, stopping off at historic places such as Wilmington or Charleston, Will has an intensely agreeable feeling of freedom:

The camper was everything he had hoped for and more. Mornings on the road, the two young men sat together in the cab; afternoons the engineer usually drove alone... They stopped early in the evening and went fishing or set up the telescope on a lonesome savanna and focused on the faraway hummocks where jewel-like warblers swarmed about the misty oaks. Nights were best. Then as the thick singing darkness settled about the little caboose which shed its cheerful square or light on the dark soil of old Carolina, they might debark and, with the pleasantest sense of stepping from the zone of the possible to the zone of the realized, stroll to a service station or fishing camp or grocery store, where they'd have a beer or fill the tank with spring water or lay in eggs and country butter and grits and slab bacon.[141]

This feeling of freedom, and the vividness with which Will experiences everything, make him momentarily forget his destination and the purpose of his journey. The journey has become an end in itself. The goals he had set for himself as the motive for his return —going back to his roots, getting married, finding his identity— are now revealed for what they are, abstract aims, self-imposed, having little to do with the mainsprings of true conviction. Repeatedly Will is forced to ask himself: «What is wrong with Mr. & Mrs. Williston Bibb Barrett living in a brand new house in a brand new suburb with a proper address: 2041 Country Club Drive, Druid

Hills, Atlanta Georgia?» The narrator provides the reply: «Nothing was wrong, but he got worse anyway. The happiness of the South drove him wild with despair»(162).

When Williston Bibb Barrett arrives in the South he feels greatly confused. He had always imagined his return would be like Rooney Lee's after a brief sojourn in the North. Instead, he finds the South brimming with cheerfulness and well-being: «The South he came to was different from the South he had left. It was victorious, Christian, rich, patriotic and Republican»(161). The cars all carried Confederate plates. There were plastic crucifixes on the dashboards. Several times a day on the radio you could listen to a patriotic program «which praised God, attacked the United States Government, and advertised beans and corn»(162). The South Will Barrett had come back to in order to find his identity was a society more in accord with Mr. Vaught, whose talent «as the engineer divined it, was the knack of getting into the rhythm of things, of knowing when to buy and when to sell»(164). Will is completely unprepared for this state of things, and it makes him feel awkward and out of place. In the North he had often felt rootless, but now «his homelessness was much worse in the South because he had expected to find himself at home there»(161). Walker Percy views Will's efforts to adapt to this new South of geniality and native ease with even greater humor and irony. And these efforts will have calamitous consequences:

By now it was he who had learned Yankee ways. He took to eyeing people on the path to see when they would speak. He judged the distance badly and said his 'hi' and 'what say' too soon. His faced ached from grinning. There was something to be said after all for the cool Yankee style of going our own way and paying no attention to anyone.[177]

Will cannot help but feel envious of his fellow Southerners. There is one particular group from the Delta to which the obtuse Son Thigpen, acquaintance of the Vaught family, belongs; all of whom, in their self-complacency, are so diametrically opposed to him:

Sewanee Episcopal types, good soft-spoken, hard-drinking graceful youths, gentle with women and very much themselves with themselves, set, that is for the next fifty years, in the actuality of themselves and their own good name. They knew what they were, how things were and how things should be. As for the engineer, he didn't know. I'm from the Delta, too, he thought, sticking his hands down to his pocket, and I'm Episcopal: why ain't I like them, easy and actual? Oh to be like Rooney Lee.[230]

There is something paradoxical about this lament. Rooney Lee is the very epitome of the balance between action and conviction in Will's estimation, the hero of a Golden Age in which man's estrangement from the world was unknown. Yet in Will's meditations he appears completely at home with these people from the Delta, the same people with whom Will feels so uncomfortable. The art of «savorir vivre» which Will pursues so fruitlessly is second nature to them and to Rooney Lee. The kind of conviction Will longs for can be summed up by these words from Senator

Oscar Underwood: «When you grow up, decide what you want to do according to your lights. Then do it. That's all there is to it»(299). Will can no longer remember whether it was to him or to his father that these words were addressed, but now they come back to him with redoubled significance and clarity.

Little by little Will loses touch with reality. Past and present become increasingly mingled and immersed in his confusion the violent events of racial confrontation that shook the South during the sixties pass Will by. Like Don Quixote, who in his delirium mistook harlots for maidens and wayside inns for castles, this latterday gentleman, who follows Rooney Lee's footsteps back to the South, consistently jumps to the wrong conclusions and is constantly mocked by reality.

We are furnished with a good example of this state of mind during the violent disturbances at the University. Will and Kitty arrange to meet on the campus to look for Jamie, who, they believe, has gone to join his brother Sutter in New Mexico. As Will waits for Kitty to show up, the protest march is already in progress. In an encounter not unworthy of the Knight of La Mancha, Will, unaware of what is going on, tries to start up a conversation with a group of demonstrators:

'What yall say', said the engineer amiably and stepped nimbly at the side thinking they meant to go past him and down the path whence he came. But when they came abreast of the Confederate monument, they turned towards the lights and the noise. They cleared him easily but what he did not see and they did not care about was the dark flagstaff behind them, which as they turned swept out in a wider arc and yet which he nevertheless saw a split second before the brass butt caught him at the belt buckle. 'Of', he grunted, not hurt much and even smiling. He would have sat down but for the wire fencelet, which took him by the heel and whipped him backward. He was felled, levered over, and would have killed himself if his head had struck the corner of the monument base but it struck instead the slanting face of the old pocked Vermont marble and he was sent spinning into the soft earth under an arborvitae.[250]

A similar incident takes places when Will runs into the pseudo-Negro, Forney Aiken, again. Will's short-sightedness as far as reality is concerned involves him in a comedy of errors in which he comes off badly once more.

When he regains consciousness after the blow received during the demonstration, Will forgets about his rendezvous with Kitty and drives the Trav-L-Aire across the Delta to his home town of Ithaca. Here he sees Aiken's green Chevrolet «filled with Negroes and what appeared to be a couple of Syrians»(263). One of the people in the car waves to Will and calls his name. Both the car and the driver — «a stately, bun-headed preacher-type Negro» — seem familiar to Will but he fails to recognize Aiken right away. As he becomes aware of pickets in the vicinity, he prudently decides to make himself scarce before things get out of hand, «having had enough of ruckuses and police sirens and specially of this carload of importuning Negroes»(264). Unfortunately, he comes across Aiken again. This time they meet at the Dew Drop Inn, a bar belonging to a long-standing acquaintance of Will's, a rather effeminate black man called Sweet Evening Breeze. Aiken believes that Barrett has been trying to avoid him in order to keep

out of trouble. Nevertheless, he lets Will know that he finds his reaction understandable: «Good knows you have to be careful!»(274), he says in a conspiratorial tone. Will misses the point of the remark and starts apologizing and trying to explain his behavior:

‘Please allow me to explain... The truth is that when I saw you yesterday I did not place you. As you may recall, I spoke to you last summer of my nervous condition and its accompanying symptom of amnesia. The yesterday, or the day before, I received a blow on the head..[273]

But Aiken extremely pleased with this fortuitous encounter he believes will be of benefit to himself and his colleagues, pays little attention to Will’s explanation and tries to convince his friends that Will is a trustworthy character. «We went through the Philadelphia thing together, didn’t we?» he boasts, referring to something the memory of which Will does not find flattering:

It seemed to the engineer that the pseudo-Negro said ‘Philadelphia’ as if it were a trophy, though to the best of the engineer’s recollection the only campaign which had occurred was his getting hit on the nose by an irate housewife from Haddon Heights, New Jersey.[276].

Will is unaware of the fact that this group of eccentrics are here in his home town «to assist in the present drive», as Aiken puts it. He still believes that Aiken’s motive for being in the South is purely artistic, just as Aiken told him when they were driving down from New Jersey. He thinks that Aiken’s sole purpose is to attend a festival in which a «morality play» will be staged. Once again Walker Percy uses his protagonist’s mistaken interpretation of reality to create a comic situation. Nevertheless, he is careful to draw our attention to the way Will maintains his composure at all times, particularly when his sense of honor, duty and chivalry are at stake, even when those to whom he disinterestedly offers his help are persons of little moral fibre. This is not the case in «Don Quixote», where Cervantes suggests no aversion towards those characters who in one way or another get involved in Don Quixote’s follies —take the case of the scholar Sanson Carrasco, or the Duke and Duchess, for example. In Walker Percy’s novel the secondary characters either invariably bring troubles in their wake or they are not particularly virtuous, and by and large the author does not show them in a sympathetic light. Aiken and his friends are no exception. Percy depicts them as mere dilettantes of the Negro cause in the sixties. Their attitude clichéd and paternalistic proves to be incapable of providing any solutions to the grave problems confronting the South during those turbulent times. Will’s conversation with them serves to illustrate this point.

During their talk Will learns that one of the group, a certain Bugs Flieger, has been arrested and thrown into jail. It is clear from what follows that this time it is not Will’s bewilderment and naivety that are being held up to ridicule but the pretensions of Aiken and his entourage:

‘Bugs Flieger’, mused the engineer.

The actor and the white girl looked at each other, the former popping his jaw muscles like Spencer Tracy.

'Tell —ah— Merle here', said the actor, hollowing out this throat, 'that Bugs Flieger plays the guitar a little'.  
 'Merle?' asked the mystified engineer, looking around at the others. 'Is he talking to me? Why does he call me Merle?'  
 'You really never heard of Flieger, have you?' asked the playwright.  
 'No. I have been quite preoccupied lately. I never watch television', said the engineer.  
 'Television', said the girl. 'Jesus Christ'. 'What have you been preoccupied with?' the playwright asked him.  
 'I have recently returned to the South from New York, where I felt quite dislocated as a consequence of a nervous condition', replied the engineer who always told the truth. 'Only to find upon my return that I was no less dislocated here'.[276]

In the passage following this exchange, Percy, often critically indulgent towards his protagonist, focuses on the absurdity of Will's quixotism. Sweet Evening Breeze warns the fugitives that a police patrol car is on the way. Will notices how delighted the playwright is to receive the news. He reflects that «the playwright's joy... came from seeing life unfold in the same absurd dramatic way as a Broadway play»(278). But this could also be said of Will himself; he demands something of the same from life, particularly when he cannot make any sense of experiences that lack any dramatic or higher purpose. The narrator's sympathies do not lie with Aiken and his friends, but he draws our attention to the similarity between Will's attitude and that of the playwright when he says: «it was incredible that the one should be like the other after all»(278).

When Will helps them to escape it is not because of any ideological affinity, nor because he has any great liking for them. It is rather because of a natural generosity of character, which Sweet Evening Breeze ascribes to his background: «This here's Will Barrett, Lawyer Barrett's boy. Lawyer Barrett help many a one»(277). When the police burst into the bar the pseudo-Negro and his friends have already fled through the back door. Will has lent them the camper and remains behind to stall the police. One of the policemen is Beans Ross, a tough man. Without waiting for explanations, he lays Breeze out with a single blow. Will rebukes him for his brutality, but Ross bears down scornfully on Will and smacks him in the groin. Managing to overcome the pain, and aware that Ross is out to humiliate him, Will at last finds an opportunity to act:

The engineer had time to straighten himself and to brace his foot in the corner of the jam and sill of the front door. For once in his life he had time and position and a good shot, and for once things became as clear as they used to be in the old honorable days. He hit Beans in the root of his neck as hard as he ever hit the sandbag in the West Side YMCA. Beans's cap and glasses flew off and he sat down on the floor.[280]

A gentleman to the last, Will delays his escape long enough to give Bean's sidekick, Ellis Gover, some assurance. Gover, confused and frightened, has not forgotten that Will Barrett «is a real good old boy». «You bring charges against me to clear yourself», Will tells him, «do you understand? Tell Beans the others got in behind

you. You got it?»(280) Later on, when the police arrest Aiken and his band, Will gives them a helping hand by corroborating their story that he had indeed lent them the camper they were traveling in. It is Will's testimony that saves them from being locked up in Fort Ste. Marie, the prison for Negroes and agitators.

After the Beans Ross episode and having lost track of Aiken's bunch and the Trav-L-Aire, Will walks to the house where he used to live before moving to New York. Will's visit to the old family setting marks the key point in his return to the South. As he approaches, his nostrils pick up a dark, ancient, unmistakeable odor: «the ham-heavy smell of the cottonseed oil mill»(283). This is the same smell that hung on the air the night his father died. The memory of that night comes back to him clearly in every detail:

'Don't leave'

'I 'm just going to the corner'

But there was a dread about this night, the night of victory. (Victory is the saddest thing of all, said his father). The mellowness of Brahms had gone overripe, the victorious serenity of the Great Horn Theme was false, oh fake, fake. Underneath, all was unwell.

'Father'.

'What?'

'Why do you like to be alone?' He turned into the darkness of the oaks.

'Don't leave'. The terror of the beautiful victorious music pierced his very soul.[285]

For Louis D. Rubin the sense of decline and fall implicit in Ed Barrett's self-sacrifice for his ideals

...necessarily presupposed a former time in which men were better and wiser, more disinterested and virtuous than humans could ever be, as well as a society that had been more nearly free from all temptations to covetousness, avarice, lust and cruelty than had ever existed on earth. Thus any change in circumstances and conduct would have to constitute a falling away from perfection, and to the extent that the change continued in time, the arrival of crass days, a moral and social wasteland, the death of the gods.<sup>14</sup>

As we have seen, Ed Barrett's death had unfortunate consequences for his son, and was the most palpable demonstration of the great human cost occasioned by the quixotic act. Just like his father, Will has been deeply influenced by nostalgia for the past

14.- Louis D. Rubin Jr., «The Boll Weevil, The Iron Horse, and the End of the Line: Thoughts on the South, in Ben Forkner and Patrick Samway, S.J., eds., *A Modern Southern Reader*, Atlanta, Georgia, Peachtree Publishers Ltd. 1986, p. 631.

and the inability to adapt to the present. Now, many years later, he finally comes to understand the distorted truth underlying the worldview that drove his father to his death:

*Wait.* While his fingers explored the juncture of iron and bark, his eyes narrowed as if he caught a glimmer of light on the cold iron skull. *Wait.* I think he was wrong and that he was looking in the wrong place. No, not he but the times. The times were wrong and one looked in the wrong place. It wasn't even his fault because that was no other place a man could look. It was the worst of times, a time of fake beauty and fake victory. [286]

As he stands among the water oaks close to the house, the scene Will contemplates contrasts vividly with his father's suicide as he relives it in his memory. It is proof of the mockery that history often makes of the nostalgic or apocalyptic attitude. From his vantage point, Will can see his aunts sitting peacefully on the porch watching T.V., reading «'Race and Reason' and eating Whitman's Sampler»; all of them «Christian ladies...four Protestant, Presbyterian, and Scotch-Irish, two Catholic and Creole, but long since reconciled, ecumenized, by bon appetit and laughter and good hearty hatred» (283). In Shut-Off, Louisiana, Will once again sees illusions shattered by reality, as he watches Uncle Fannin and his black Servant Merriam heartily enjoying Captain Kangaroo's gags:

...the engineer wondered, how is it that uncle and servant, who were solid 3-D persons, true denizens of this misty Natchez Trace country, should be transported by these sad gags from Madison Avenue?. But they were transported. They were as merry as could be, and he, the engineer, guessed that was all right; more power to Captain K. [298]

As events both past and present rise up to meet him, Will is at last able to see what lies behind his notion of heroism —the great falsehood concealed by an apocalyptic concept of the world, the selfsame falsehood that led to his father's death and provided the basis for Will's own romantic vision of the past. Louis D. Rubin views the protagonist of Percy's novel at the end of his journey confronted by an inescapable truth: «that no man may impose his heart's desire view of reality upon the world without isolating himself from that world.»<sup>15</sup> An opinion that coincides with Cervantes' own regarding Don Quixote's impossible quest.

It is not easy to imagine what course Will Barrett's life will take from now on:

Love pangs entered his heart and melted his loin, and his life seemed simple. The thing to do—why couldn't he remember it?—was to marry Kitty and get a job and live an ordinary life, playing golf like other people. [302]

15.- Louis D. Rubin Jr., «The Boll Weevil, The Iron Horse, and the End of the Line: Thoughts on the South», op.cit., p. 634.



But how is he going to embark on what he calls «an ordinary life» when his heart is not really in it, when his heart has led him along pathways akin to those of Don Quixote of La Mancha? Louis D. Rubin provides a convincing answer when he states: «What he realizes, finally, is his absolute need for what goes on and is involved in that life—for what is ultimately outside of and unknown to him.»<sup>16</sup> The world of certainty and absolute truth gives way to the world of multiple interpretations, the world which Ed Barrett could never accept.

Mark Twain could not allow Tom Sawyer to grow up, and William Faulkner could not change Quentin Compson's tragic fate. Walker Percy who stems from both these authors but belongs to a world that has changed fundamentally from the one they knew, does seem to suggest that there might indeed be a place for his protagonist in the new order. Will Barrett finally comes to understand life as a continuous pilgrimage in which truth does not appear as abstract, absolute and definitive but concrete and individual, and can only be perceived through contact with the real world. The lesson he learns does not differ from the one Don Quixote learnt at the end of his life, and brings to a close the chimerical phase of his own journey. Will's departure for the Southwest to meet up with Sutter again implies that his search is not over, but there can be no doubt that it now has a different character.

Leaving aside further speculation about his possible future, the character of Will Barrett—undoubtedly the author's finest achievement in this novel—is primarily a remarkable combination of the celebrated, self-deluding Knight of La Mancha and the Chaplinesque modern hero at the mercy of a world he fails to comprehend. A conjunction of idealism, nobility, clumsiness and failure, Will Barrett is the last gentleman, and also a quixote of our times.

16.- Ibid., p. 637.