*ATLANTIS*
*Journal of the Spanish Association of Anglo-American Studies*
37.2 (December 2015): 81-98
ISSN 0210-6124

# The Clash Between Memory and the Self in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis and Magdalena Budzyńska
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin and Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin
ulanief@kul.lublin.pl, m.budzynska.umcs@gmail.com

The aim of our article is to analyze how the processes of remembering relate to a sense of self. We assume that both phenomena, memory and the self, are not only closely related, but can also be in conflict. Metaphors may be the most effective way to capture this conflict. The life of Williston Bibb Barrett, the main character in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* and *The Second Coming*, will serve as an illustration of our hypothesis. His life is a record of the dynamics of memory influenced by attacks of amnesia, fugue states and *déjà vu*. A modern semiotic model of cultural memory, theories of the self, Bartlett's modern schema theory and the relationships and conflicts between them will provide entry points for our analysis of Walker Percy's eponymous last gentleman.

Keywords: memory; the self; the gentleman; schema theory; conceptual metaphors; self-transformation

. . .

# El choque entre la memoria y el ser en las obras de Walker Percy *The Last Gentleman* y *The Second Coming*

El propósito de este artículo es analizar cómo el acto de hacer memoria está relacionado con el concepto de identidad individual. Partimos de la premisa de que ambos fenómenos, la memoria y el yo, no sólo están íntimamente relacionados, sino que, también, pueden entrar en conflicto. La metáfora puede que sea la manera más efectiva de representar este choque. La vida de Williston Bibb Barrett, el personaje principal de las obras de Walker Percy *The Last Gentleman* y *The Second Coming*, servirá como ejemplo ilustrativo de nuestra hipótesis. Su vida es un registro del dinamismo de la memoria, influida por ataques de amnesia, fugas disociativas y momentos de *déjà vu*. Un modelo semiótico de

memoria cultural moderno, teorías del ser, los esquemas teóricos modernos de Bartlett, y las relaciones y conflictos entre ellos aportarán los puntos de partida para nuestro análisis del último caballero epónimo de Walker Percy.

Palabras clave: memoria; el yo; identidad; el caballero; teoría del esquema; metáforas conceptuales; transformación del ser

"If a man cannot forget, he will never amount to much."
Søren Kierkegaard *Either/Or* (1843)

Memory and the self are usually analyzed as being mutually dependent, rarely as contradictory or in conflict. Until recently, the self was partially, if not wholly, defined in terms of memory (Grice 1941, 340). It was also perceived as not logically independent (Shoemaker 1959, 869). Recent research devoted to personal identity has paid much more attention to the self than previously. It shows that a sense of self depends not only on the ability to access the memory of past events and recognize one's participation in them, but that it also depends, and indeed, most of all, on experiencing personal recollections as one's own. It has been proven that it is possible to have "factual self-knowledge, trait self-knowledge, and knowledge of episodes," but not have any sense of ownership of autobiographical memories (Klein and Nichols 2012, 689).

Two main types of memory—episodic and semantic—were identified by Tulving (1972). The former registers events in a person's life, and can be called autobiographical memory, while the latter, according to Jean Mandler (1984, 1-30), contains patterns of behavior, space scripts and scenarios of events that are created, strengthened but, ultimately, forgotten. In contradistinction to memory, which is centered on preserving experiences, the self is focused on revising and ordering them. Processes that constitute memory and the self do not always work in a harmonious way, even sometimes colliding with each other. The aim of our article is to analyze how the processes of remembering relate implicitly to the self. We assume that these phenomena, memory and the self, are not only closely related but can also be in conflict. Metaphors may be the most effective way to capture this conflict. The life of Williston Bibb Barrett, the main character in Walker Percy's *The Last Gentleman* (1966) and *The Second Coming* (1980), will serve as an illustration of our hypothesis. His life is a record of the dynamics of memory influenced by attacks of amnesia, fugue states and *déjà vu*. A modern semiotic model of cultural memory, theories of the self, and the relationships and conflicts between them will provide entry points for our analysis of Walker Percy's eponymous last gentleman.

Memory and the self have a common characteristic—namely the fact that they are both processes, not stable constructs, and both are conceptualized through the use of metaphors. The process of creating metaphors correlates significantly with the creation of schemas that help us understand abstract domains of experiences (Allbritton 1995, 33). Draaisma expounds that metaphors create "their own perspective of memory" (2000, 3). Many researchers adopt a similar theoretical angle while analyzing the concepts of selfhood (Smith 1985, 74) or self-transformation (Metzner 1980, 49-61). In order to analyze concepts such as memory and the self, we have to make use of metaphors whose ability to project what is known onto the unknown allows us to visualize these abstract categories. That is why literature seems the most suitable material for studying these two concepts.

## 1. Memory

In *Forgetting: Myths, Perils and Compensations* Douwe Draaisma claims that novels are seldom used as historical sources, even though some of them are a reservoir of significant data concerning fascinating aspects of social life: "the implicit codes of daily interaction, the unspoken rules of behavior, all those protocols that set out what was proper or improper yet are not themselves set down anywhere" (2015, 179). English psychologist Frederic C. Bartlett points out that sociocultural contexts have a constitutive meaning for individual memory. In *Remembering* (1932), his classic study, which combines elements of both experimental and social psychology, Bartlett proposes that memory is shaped by distortions, leveling, accentuation and assimilation. According to Astrid Erll, "Bartlett's most important contribution to cultural memory studies is his popularization of the notion of 'schemata.' Schemata are patterns and structures of knowledge on the basis of which presuppositions regarding specific objects, people, and situations as well as regarding the nature of their relationship can be made. They reduce complexity and guide perception and remembering. Schemata are acquired through socialization. They are thus not universal, but culture specific" (2011, 83). An important property of the schemata is that it is an abstract organization of experience. Schemata enhance the effectiveness of the retrieval of memories and recollections. That is why the theory of schemata seems most appropriate to illustrate the relationship between memory and the self in literary works in which the cultural context plays a crucial role. Every schema serves as a model in the sense that it is a representation of some category of events. Walker Percy employs many cultural models in his novels. The titular last gentleman is the most important of them all. The conflict between the assumptions of Williston (Will) Bibb Barrett's aristocratic heritage and the moral disarray of the modern times makes it difficult for our hero to adopt the model of a gentleman. His life is fragmented by amnesia and *déjà vu*, both caused by traumatic events from his adolescent years. In order to reintegrate his life, Will has to decode, and then discard, his memories of the old scripts of behavior: "The sometime amnesiac must live in the present as if it were the past that pursues and claims him throughout the book in sudden flashes of imaginative memory" (Ciuba 1991, 102-103).

Will Barrett's quest for an authentic and integrated selfhood involves confronting the schema of the gentleman as a paragon of virtue, embodied by his deceased father, Ed Barrett. The prescription of ideal manhood involves gallant and impeccable manners, refinement and eloquence, along with self-discipline and moral integrity. A gentleman is marked by "strict honour, self-possession, forbearance, generous as well as refined feelings, and polished deportment, . . . scrupulous veracity, essential truthfulness, courage, both moral and physical, dignity, self-respect" (Lieber 1864, 18-19). The endorsement of such values by gentlemen validated their superior character and noble status, and "supersed[ed] rank, office, or title" (Lieber 1864, 23). Such glamorization of the figure of the gentleman was used to create a distinct national type, set apart from the Northerner: "the legendary Southern gentleman . . . seemed to possess every

quality which the Yankee lacked: honor and integrity, indifference to money and business, a decorous concern for the amenities, and a high sense of civic and social responsibility" (Taylor 1963, 96). Thus, the Southern gentleman became a cultural referent symbolizing "the self-discipline of tender-minded persons for the furthering of social and cultural 'values'" (Cady 1949, 211). With reference to such an idealized image, Gary Ciuba perceptively notes that "[l]iving as a gentleman . . . demands an underlying manner that supports all of these social virtues, and integrity characterized by clarity of vision, decisiveness, and self-determination" (1991, 102).

In the Preface to his *The American Gentleman* Charles Butler mentions four "traits which all will unite in ascribing to the genuine character" of a gentleman of the nineteenth century (1836, vi): the sense of dignity of a human being (186), a constancy of principles and manners (17), integrity and benevolence (35), and respect for the past (27, 187). Of them all, the first seems the most indispensable, as this feature of character is revealed, Butler affirms, in the gentleman's trust in Providence and praise for Divine assistance (15), his awareness of his own imperfections (56), his avoiding of all affections of either body or mind (181), and his making time for serious meditation (264). The lack of these traits, which would otherwise lead to self-awareness (17), not surprisingly causes the emotional dislocation and loss of balance of Percy's protagonist. Recognizing Will as a spiritually displaced person, Joyce Carol Oates diagnoses him as "a man without a soul, without an essence because he is without a sensible environment or past" (1989, 39). Will's emotional homelessness results from a discontinued ancestral legacy, which should provide guidance through the schemata of a gentleman: "Will progresses from being outdated to being apocalyptic, from the last upholder of past ideals to a seeker of the time to come. By the end of his journey he acts not so much of noble obligation and dutiful courtesy as out of an urgent love for those lost near the ends of their worlds" (Ciuba 1991, 96-97).

The dominant feature of the image of the twentieth-century gentleman in Percy's novels is the repetition of the rules and principles that are to be followed. It can be observed in the scenarios of events, the schemata of behaviors, space scripts and the ways the characters conceptualize themselves and others. The life of Will Barrett unfolds according to an all-too-familiar script. Born into a respected and influential family of lawyers, he attends Princeton as did his father and grandfather. Will later joins the military and serves for a while in the army, but is discharged due to health problems. During his youthful detour into becoming a humidification engineer at Macy's in New York, he falls in love with Kitty, a *nouveau riche* girl from the South. Her family hires Will to take care of Jamie, Kitty's dying brother, while they travel to the South. After his charge's demise, Williston builds a career as a lawyer, marries Marion, the richest woman in North Carolina, and engages in charitable work after he retires early. Our hero becomes an upstanding member of the community in Linville, North Carolina. At first, Will accepts the way of life that is imposed on him due to his social circumstances: "[w]hen he was a youth he had lived his life in a state of the liveliest

expectation, thinking to himself: what a fine thing it will be to become a man and to know what to do" (Percy [1966] 1972, 11).[1] He is also gifted with features of character that befit a gentleman: he always honored his obligations (*LG* 158) and told the truth (*LG* 165). It is only over time that he notices: "I was trying too hard to adapt myself to my environment and to score on interpersonal relationships" (*LG* 284). Despite the fact that Will seems to have it all, he senses that something is wrong with the inauthentic and aesthetic everydayness he is enmeshed in: he "forgets the past, is victorious in the secular city, but wants to blow his head off" (Rudnicki 1999, 34).

The schemata of Will's reactions, which he consolidates in what Connerton identifies as "bodily social memory" (1989, 71), allow him to attempt to comprehend reality: for instance, when "Kitty touched him, he felt showers of gooseflesh" (*SC* 131). There is a close affinity between Will's reactions to physical stimuli and how sudden reminiscences from the past are revived. Upon Will's return to his childhood home, after many years of sojourn in the North, Will knows how to get in the house without a key (*LG* 333). He also remembers his father's "old Princeton style of sauntering, right side turning forward with right leg" (*LG* 329) and characteristic way of holding a steering wheel while driving a car (*LG* 408-409). Will does not always recognize the schematic character of his own reactions but he can easily recognize it in others. Indeed he is especially sensitive to the needs and expectations of others: "they greeted you, they fell forward and laid hands on you" (*SC* 131), "they move closer, heads weaving like a boxer's, looking for an opening" (*SC* 140). Will's manner of walking (*LG* 98) imitates the Princetonianism of his father, who "used to stroll of a summer night, hands in pockets and head down" (*LG* 328-329). Clearly, such a subconscious empathetic identification with Ed signals Will's desire to understand the situation which led his father to take his own life. Paradoxically, while Will does not want to walk in his father's footsteps (that is, commit suicide), he wants to trace his life choices and internal conflicts.

Will's concept of others and himself is rarely derived from physical traits. Instead, he pays a lot of attention to smell and the manner of talking. Voice and articulation are identifying factors in the case of Will's psychoanalyst, Dr. Garmow (*LG* 33), Chandler Vaught, a millionaire who hired Will to accompany his dying son (*LG* 51), Kitty Vaught (*SC* 131) and Allison, the love of his life whom he meets as a widower (*SC* 76). Will's awareness of, and attention paid to, the proper articulation of, and stress in, words suggest he developed his linguistic competence with particular care. Will often conceives of others using metaphors. The concepts generating the source domain of the metaphors belong to the realm of flora and fauna, rather than to that of humans. Will identifies himself with predatory animals—a cat (*SC* 173) and a tiger (*SC* 221)—and with insects—a cicada and a bug in a cocoon (*SC* 222)—as well as with birds—a falcon

[1] All references to the quotes from the primary sources, *The Last Gentleman* (Percy [1966] 1972) and *The Second Coming* (Percy 1980), will be made parenthetically in the text with respective abbreviations *LG* and *SC*.

(*LG* 5) and a hawk (*SC* 47). The latter ones are associated by cultural anthropologists with transformation or metamorphosis, often a spiritual one (Roque 2010, 99). It also seems interesting that Will perceives girls and women as camellias (*LG* 167) and mermaids (*LG* 61), such metaphors clearly reveal a romantic side to his nature. The fact that Will identifies his beloved Allison with a blackbird (*SC* 76) and a bat (*SC* 339) proves his unconventional attitude to her.

Will desires to engineer and order his life (*LG* 42), however the sudden remembrances of his traumatic past tend to disorient and alienate him from his present environment. Sometimes he even seems to be unable to recognize himself in the mirror (*SC* 13, 289). In such moments "[h]e heard himself speak without consulting his memory. His voice had a memory of its own" (*LG* 154). When memory fails him, the sound of his voice reminds Will who he is. Even a cursory analysis of the content of Will's memory reveals that his recollections center around the figure of Ed Barrett, his father, whom Will considered a perfect gentleman (*LG* 221). These recollections include conversations, observations, feelings and speculations about his father. Their conversations focused on moral imperatives about the proper conduct towards women and priests (*LG* 100, 223-224), while the observations concerned patterns of behavior (*LG* 329). Depression and sentimentalism resonated in Ed Barrett's artistic interests: he admired Arnold's poetry, read Montaigne's writings, and listened to Brahms' music. Lawyer Barrett also liked nocturnal strolls with his son, during which he convinced the boy to use his trust selectively in the future. The father based the advice on his own unpleasant experiences from his own youth (*LG* 178-179), which made him a target of hatred for treating African-Americans, Jews and Catholics well (*LG* 237). These recollections reveal the feelings of the last gentleman towards his father. Apart from respect and admiration, these memories revive the fear of the possible loss of his father Will felt as a boy years ago (*LG* 238, 330). The fear turns out not to be baseless. After an attempted suicide and murder of his twelve-year old son during a hunting trip, Ed Barrett dies of a self-inflicted gunshot wound. As the schemata of the perfect gentleman becomes refined in his adulthood with the recovered knowledge about his father's suicide, Will tries to learn the true reason behind this tragic event. The breach in Ed's idealized image will haunt Will even in his maturity. The memories of his father from early childhood will be partially forgotten and overprinted with those connected with Ed's suicide.

Will gains access to some recollections during his *déjà vu*, a state in which one relives experiences from the past in altogether new circumstances. *Déjà vu* is a state of disagreeable familiarity, which has a procedural character, and which in Will's case is very much akin to watching a film (*LG* 45) or listening to music (*LG* 100-101). In *déjà vu* memories are often brought back in different scenery, the remembered objects overlapping with the present ones, which disturbs Will's sense of time (*LG* 44-45). Thus, "[l]acking secure memory, he cannot make logical and temporal connections" (Luschei 1972, 112). Such moments lead not only to Will's feeling of dislocation and displacement (*LG* 98-99) but also to his loss of credibility as a gentleman (*LG* 295-296).

Following Percy's observation that we "must know one thing through the mirror of another" (1975a, 82), all that Will "saw became a sign of something else" (*SC* 51), or, as Kennedy puts it, became "the emblem of an object in past experience" (1989, 210). Will's *déjà vu* recollections are accompanied by sensory evocations, the narrator reveals: "The brain registers and records every sensation, sight and sound and smell, it has ever received. If the neurons where such information is stored happen to be stimulated, jostled, pressed upon, any memory can be recaptured" (*SC* 6). The sensory evocations are not only connected with the sense of hearing but also with the sense of smell. Smells can produce evocative memories, thus reference to "a smell of cottonseed-oil" reappears in the narrative multiple times, often with reference to repeated sounds (*LG* 99, 223, 237, 329, 330).

However, the most significant stimuli are auditory and tactile. An involuntary recollection of one particular event inscribed in memory is aided by the sense of touch. While standing in front of his family home, the young man "touched the tiny iron horsehead of the hitching post. . . . 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" (*LG* 332). The metallic coldness of the hitching post reminds Will of another piece of cold metal—of the gun his father used to kill himself. Will realizes "that his father's despairing, stoical, self-indulgent philosophy had finally killed him, and that the answer to existence for which he was seeking was somehow at his fingertips, in the concreteness of things" (Allen 1986, 70). The answer to despair and everydayness was not in Brahms, or old sad poetry, in other words in "false abstractions he [Ed] became locked in" (Dowie 1989, 160), but rather in "appreciating common objects for what they are in themselves," objects which "have no pretense to autonomy or completeness" (Dowie 1989, 160).

Years later, Will proves he is "a big forgetter" (Schwartz 1987, 112)—the lesson about his father's morbid life and death has been lost on him. When on a golf course, the memory of the despairing gentleman will be aroused by a combination of auditory and tactile stimuli. Will slowly recovers the repressed memory "of an event that had happened a long time ago. It was the most important event in his life, yet he had managed until that moment to forget it" (*SC* 3). Holding his golf club like the big double-barreled twelve-gauge English Greener his father killed himself with "as if he were reenacting an event not quite remembered, as if he had forgotten something which his muscles and arms and hands might remember, he swung the shaft of the iron to and fro like the barrel of a shotgun" (*SC* 51). The touch of the metallic object, coupled with the sound of a fence wire stretching, are "discrete, static memory-signs which contain in coded form the signification of the moment" (Kennedy 1989, 212). They make repressed memories resurface: "Only one event had ever happened to him in his life. Everything else that had happened afterwards was a non-event. . . . Suddenly it crossed his mind that nothing else had ever happened to him" (*SC* 52). What he recovers through an associative response to tactile and audio stimuli is his father's decision to end his son's and his own life.

Will's memories (a)maze him and function in contradictory ways; they influence his system of values, shape his attitudes towards faith and force his patterns of behavior, and allow self-improvement through the re-living and understanding of things that were beyond comprehension before. Thanks to recovered memories, the past becomes present and Will can make a change in his life. A maze seems to be the most appropriate metaphor for memory as it allows the conceptualization of difficult experiences. The source of this metaphor is traced by Draaisma to the German psychologist Carl Gustav Carus (1789-1869), who believed that the diversity and changeability of processes taking place in memory make it impossible to formulate laws that would apply to it ([1995] 2000, 75). The German Romantic philosopher points to the maze-like structure of the memory due to its impenetrability, while Walker Percy focuses on the ambiguity of memory's operations.

## 2. The Self

The relationship between memory and the self is the focus of attention of not only psychologists and sociologists but also of philosophers such as Shoemaker (1963), Perry (1972), Wollheim (1979) and Emmet (1985). They are often interested in how past and present experiences impact on one's self, and such a perception of the relationship between memories and the self suggests that memory provides an adequate criterion of personal identity. Richard Wollheim has supported his claim by identifying two aspects of memory—its capacity and causation (1979, 191). Acknowledging the latter aspect has, in turn, led Dorothy Emmet to identify the procedural character of our experiences. This philosopher claims that "present experience not only comes as arising out of the immediate past, but it also points forward in anticipation of the immediate future" (1985, 95). Thus, our understanding of our own experiences acquires the characteristics of a process encompassing a multiplicity of denotative referents covertly modifying their respective impact.

The self is typically defined as "a locus of experience, including experience of that human's own someoneness" (Harris 1989, 601). Percy's titular gentleman defines it is as "the quiet center of himself" (*SC* 123). In the course of his life, Will's understanding of himself undergoes change; he perceptively captures the essence of the metamorphosis, saying that he has found his center (*SC* 58). The figurative meaning of 'the center' points to what Smith identified as the metaphorical character of identity (1985, 65-69). Hence, the conceptual metaphors of self-transformation elucidated by Ralph Metzner (1980, 49-61) will be instructive in our analysis of the processes of Will Barrett's formation and negotiation of his identity. "From dream sleep to awakening" is the first conceptual metaphor identified by Metzner. Will muses whether his life (between the novels) has been "a long night's dream" (*SC* 73); later on, he admits that his life has passed as if it were a dream (*SC* 124). Such a metaphor alludes to the symbolical and dramatic character of Will's existence, which is characterized by the internal conflict

concerning the schema of a gentleman's behavior. Ed's suicide distorted the image of the gentleman as a paragon of virtue. Because ending one's own life connotes cowardice, Will could neither revise nor imitate the schema of a proper gentleman. Will's life may be likened to a dream, whose processual character lends it to rational analysis. Only such a conscious analysis can afford Will the opportunity to awaken from his dreamlike life. Concentrating on present experiences, rather than on the past, would imply such an awakening.

The literary trope of a journey is one of the ways of conceptualizing dreams, therefore "from being on a journey to arriving at the destination" is another metaphor explaining the processes occurring in self-formation. People encountered in a dream-like state are retrieved from our memory. In order to deal with the conflict between his self and memory, Will has to recover his repressed or seemingly lost memory. A journey back home, to the Southern states, affords such an occasion. His geographical journey acquires the characteristics of a spiritual pilgrimage, as Will has to recover his lost self through retrieving and coming to terms with the memories of what really happened in the past.

However, a journey made in a dream-like state is just an illusion, thus "from illusion to realization" is another metaphor for the formation of self-hood. Barrett feels that the secret of his life has been eluding him (*LG* 11). While he was a boy, he saw his neighbor go insane. Looking back at this event, Will realizes that, had he known what was wrong with his neighbor's life, he would have discovered the truth about human existence (*LG* 10). Years later, upon hearing Sutter tell him a story about a man suffering from a mental breakdown, Will has a similar impression (*LG* 268-269). Will believes in an unwritten law which would explain and regulate human behavior under emotional pressure. The discovery of such a law would allow him to get his life in order. Only after many years, once he contemplates committing suicide, does Will come to the realization that the law is an illusion, and as a consequence people do not know how to be themselves (*SC* 16).

Will's realization of 'the center' can only be achieved through retrieving memories, which leads us to another metaphor, "from fragmentation to wholeness." Retrieving memory does not necessarily mean its complete understanding. Will's recognizing and consequent rejection of the schema of the gentleman leads to the adoption of another schema. Will does not intend to meet the same fate as his father, therefore he decides to marry and make a successful career; in other words, he becomes the very opposite of his father—a Yankee: "I went as far as I could go, married a rich hardheaded plain decent crippled pious upstate Utica, New York, woman, practiced Trusts and Estates law in a paneled office on Wall Street" (*SC* 72-73). Unfortunately, a simple schema-switch does not bring about lasting satisfaction; on the contrary, it leads to resentment and suicidal thoughts. Exchanging this schema for yet another one is not an option, as it would be a case of rotation. Understanding the past, not only retrieving it, can only bring lasting satisfaction. Embodying various schemata oversimplifies and impoverishes life.

The disproportion between expectations and the outcome of role-playing results in cognitive dissonance. Will comes to believe that only the traumatic nature of disasters and catastrophes can restore the life he has missed. The nearness of death enables Will to shed the role-playing and recover his lost self—"It no longer mattered that he couldn't remember everything" (*SC* 321).

The metaphor "from darkness to enlightenment" captures the essence of the metamorphosis of Will's consciousness. Darkness, which connotes feelings of loneliness and isolation, seems to be an apt metaphor for Will's existence shaped by his fear of people (*LG* 112). His aloofness may result from his childhood experiences: Will cannot recollect his father ever kissing him (*SC* 54). By virtue of contrast, Ed Barrett's only attempt to display affection to his son—by hugging him in a swamp while hunting (*SC* 53-54)—seems to prove his emotional unavailability. What makes the gesture even more awkward and poignant is that it was made during Ed's pursuance of his own suicide and at the same time his son's murder. The repressed memory of the incident would later on be revealed in Will's aversion to kissing his father and the general avoidance of physical contact (*SC* 54).

After Marion's death, the eponymous last gentleman will gain the experience of being loved during an eschatological experiment in a cave. Will wants to see if his life has meaning, and in order to do this he has to believe in God. In the Lost Cove Cave experiment Will challenges God to give a sign of his divine presence (*SC* 193). Otherwise, he will die of starvation and thus disprove His existence. Will can see nothing in the cave; apart from the literal meaning, the darkness also has a figurative one for Will. The resonance with Plato's cave symbolizing internal metamorphosis and cognition is obvious here. Thus, the darkness signifies Will's distance from God, lack of self-awareness and potential descent into death. The metaphor "from separation to oneness" defines the process of overcoming the darkness in the cave. The process itself is based on the recovery of the self through reconstructing one's memories and self-knowledge. One cannot be whole without love. Emotional distance, which leads to reserve, if not coldness, is a prison according to Will (*SC* 59). Denying the possibility that one can form true bonds with others, Will robs his soul of inner freedom. He frankly admits that he has lived his life in a prison cell (*SC* 70). Such an observation directs us to yet another metaphor—"from imprisonment to liberation." Only awareness of the self makes the latter possible. Inner strength depends on such an awareness which transcends schemata. In a Hamlet-like fashion, Will confronts the specter of his father: "All I knew for sure then and now was that after what happened to me nothing could ever defeat me, no matter what else happened in this bloody century. If you didn't defeat me, old mole, loving father and death-dealer, nothing can" (*SC* 270). Searching for God and his self in the cave, Will overcomes the darkness. Stumbling out of the cave, Will falls off the cliff right into Allison's greenhouse. At this moment Will is reborn as he discovers the light of his life—a woman. Allowing his affection towards Allison to grow, Will discovers

pleasure in quotidian activities (*SC* 330) and thereby begins a new life. This life will not though be schemata-free. Yet, Will is not terrified; enriched by past experiences, he knows he can revise them.

The final metaphor—"from death to rebirth"—comprises all the afore-analyzed metaphors; it signifies the titular Second Coming. Ed Barrett preferred death; through committing suicide he wanted to escape "a death in life" (*SC* 126). His son, through searching and questioning, rejected both of them—death and "a death in life" (*SC* 131-132, 186, 274). Will's rebirth into authentic existence resembles the "initiatory schema" elucidated by Mircea Eliade (1987). Falling into Allie's greenhouse comprises all the elements of this ritual process that Eliade enumerated (1987, 196)—suffering (the toothache which drove Will out of the cave and the existential nausea), death (Will's "suicide ideation" [Kennedy 1989, 211]) and resurrection (rebirth)—"Allie is Will's second coming" (Ciuba 1991, 218). It would be difficult to disagree with Ciuba's observation that "Percy makes the girl in the greenhouse Barrett's virtual double, for in coming to her Will comes fully to himself and finally to his clearest imitation of God's entry into his life" (1989, 403). After the battle of influences of *thanatos* and *eros*—his father's death wish versus the love and life associated with Allie (Allen 1986, 136-137)—Will is reborn in the greenhouse as he gravitates towards "human love [which] serves as a sign for the divine love at its source. Having rejected various misreadings of the Apocalypse, Will Barrett comes to Allison and in the end to the God whose gradual coming into his own life he almost overlooked" (Ciuba 1989, 399).

After the cave experiment, Will is still struggling with schemata; however, he comes to believe that suicide should not serve as an exemplary model of facing reality. He will finally be able to confront Ed Barrett's love of death. The struggle is most visible in Will's inner monologue: "Come, it's the only way . . . Come, believe me, it's the ultimate come . . . the second, last and ultimate come to end all comes" (*SC* 336-337). He will not embrace the faithful reenactment of schemata, as it leads to the death-in-life with all its concomitant problems of memory and the loss of internal freedom. Whenever Will tries to adopt his father's script of a gentleman, he is either seriously dislocated, as when at university (*LG* 202), or "feels progressively disorientated in the South" (Ciuba 1991, 109). "An alienated homelessness" so characteristic of Percy's characters (Johnson 1989, 139) is part of both Will's experience in the secular North and in the *nouveau riche* South.

"Will's private crisis occurs within the context of an apocalyptic anxiety; he feels oppressed not only by the phantasm of his father's suicide but by an acute, sense of the death-in-life of the twentieth century" (Kennedy 1989, 217). Percy's eschatological orientation infuses the eponymous Second Coming with meaning from the Christian tradition. Percy argues that if "we are living in eschatological times, times of enormous danger and commensurate hope, of possible end and possible renewal, the prophetic-eschatological character of Christianity is no doubt peculiarly apposite" (1975b, 111). Thus, the Second Coming refers to the coming of Christ during the Apocalypse as the

Judge of the world who will establish His reign of justice and peace on Earth. "From the first page, Will Barrett, a naïve apocalyptist, believes that he sees a sign of the last things" (Ciuba 1989, 400). When Will calls his times "the Century of the Love of Death . . . the apocalypse seems less a personal crisis and more a steadily growing but unrecognized national emergency" (Ciuba 1991, 103). The exodus of Jews to the Holy Land is, for Will, an alarming sign of the end of the world (*SC* 11, 133-134, 190). Apocalyptic expectations betray Will's other reason for venturing into the cave: Will was also waiting for the eschaton in Lost Cove (*SC* 212-213). The moral decline of humanity and the loss of faith have shaped Will's expectation of the Last Judgment. Will's vision of the Apocalypse, which is deprived of its theological sense, is yet another schema. In a processual interpretation of the Second Coming, Jesus' return completes our existence. Created in the image of God, human beings will be able to transcend the limitations of our cognition. From a metaphorical perspective, the Second Coming means regained self-consciousness and rebirth.

## 3. The Clash Between Memory and the Self

While memory retains recollections and schemata, the self manages cognition and strives for the development of the consciousness. The processes making up both phenomena aim at retaining and maintaining the continuity of one's self. Memory works by updating the schemata and recollections by deleting and overwriting information; the self, on the other hand, works by retrieving, ordering and transforming experiences. Conflicts between them arise in three instances. Firstly, when the schemata are unrealized, and thus cannot be recognized and revised. Secondly, when the schemata are distorted by unclear experiences and cannot be recorded properly. And finally, when the schemata are replaced by other, opposing schemata. William Barrett's existence exemplifies all these conflicts. A contradiction between memory and the self manifests itself in Will's psychogenic amnesia (Baddeley 1997, 279) associated with fugue states. The narrator reveals early on in *The Last Gentleman*: "Most of this young man's life was a gap. The summer before, he had fallen into a fugue state and wandered around northern Virginia for three weeks, where he sat sunk in thought on old battlegrounds, hardly aware of his own name" (*LG* 12).

Expressions describing *déjà vu* are different from those connected with a fugue state. *Déjà vu* comes over, assaults or haunts the last gentleman (*LG* 11, 14, 90), while Will falls into, lapses into or goes into the state of fugue (*LG* 12, 22, 270). This state lasts much longer than *déjà vu*, and is connected with a partial loss of consciousness, while a person undergoing it feels like a sailor after a long journey (*LG* 355). Analogously to a musical fugue which repeats its motif by the successive addition of new elements that imitate the subject, a psychic fugue state makes a person look at a familiar place in detail from a different perspective. Will frankly admits that in a fugue state "everything looked strange" (*LG* 11). It is often followed by an attack of amnesia, during which

there is a struggle going on in the mind. Such an attack is not untypical for Will: "There was something that had to be attended to RIGHT NOW. But what? He knocked his poor throbbing head on the steering wheel, but it was no use. The thing was too much in the front of his mind to be remembered, too close to be taken hold of, like the last wrenching moment of a dream" (*LG* 294). In such an attack the process of perceiving reality runs smoothly. Registering information from reality and the ability to react accordingly are, however, impaired. The protagonist is like a person fast asleep, he wants to wake up but is unable to. Sleep is an attempt to solve the conflict experienced in reality, which is expressed through the processes of displacement, symbolization, dramatization and secondary elaboration (Rivers 1923, 17, 19-21). Amnesia, like a dream, is an attempt to resolve a past conflict. It is the result of attempts to forget the past and separate oneself from it. However, by running away from the memories of his father's suicide, Will Barrett separates his self from the ideal of the gentleman he inherited from his father. The need to forget the trauma distorts other recollections and leads to forgetting them: Barrett "remembered nothing more than he had forgotten," there was "the nameless tug pulling him back" (*LG* 294).[2]

Amnesia causes an identity crisis, moral uncertainty and a feeling of being lost. The loss of recollections prevents full self-identification. The protagonist, like a chameleon, always assumes the characteristics of the environment. He plays new roles, tries to find a social group he can belong to. He also undertakes other attempts to deal with the disease: he reads books about mental hygiene, savors art, helps the lonely and the suffering, devotes himself to work (*LG* 11-12). But apart from the negative consequences, amnesia also has a positive dimension. It makes the last gentleman see events anew, his life is not based on schemata only. Prior to the tragic events, Will's memory was built upon schemata—that of a good student, of a prospective Ivy League graduate (Princeton), of somebody on the fast track to a successful career, of an heir to a fortune and a member of the landed class, etc. Were it not for the traumatic experience, Will would lead his life like others—without reflection, superficially and fast-paced. The sudden loss of his father, causing a temporary loss of memories, prevented him from falling into a routine, conventional existence. Deprived of a steady identity he could settle into, Will could not be effective in his endeavors—he could not plan, decide or know what to expect. Aware of his condition, Will made an effort to recover his own identity.

The first stage in his identity-recovery process is using others as a yardstick to discover who he is. Will observes the patterns and schemata of those around him, hoping that they will give a whole new meaning to his existence. Will constantly

[2] After researching the effects of extreme trauma on memory recall, Draaisma (2015) has come to the conclusion that memories of a traumatic incident, such as a near-death experience, may become something else. A deformed memory is still a memory, but a memory of not what was originally recorded, and that is why it is also a form of oblivion (2015, 192).

searches for somebody to direct his life. Once identification with groups proves ineffectual, Will "undertakes a moral odyssey across America, he confronts and rejects various codes of gentility until he, at last, discovers how to live as the end and epitome of his life by a daring reinterpretation of his family's tradition" (Ciuba 1991, 96). The pilgrimage to the Southern states and, more importantly, to his childhood home are to bring back the memories of the repressed past. However, these memories do not converge with those prior to the incident, mainly because his experiences in life and his new goal have changed Will. The last gentleman's life stands in contradiction to the conventional life. His contemporaries choose a life without reflection, a life which is founded upon the blind fulfilment of social schemata. The superficial security of a stable identity offered by the unquestioning adaptation of schemata actually proves that their condition is much worse than Will's. His affliction pushes Will and, at the same time, allows him to search for and create his own life-pattern, a schema which completes, but does not confine, his identity. While others' schemata seem to be imprinted, Will's is acquired.

Amnesia, which initially seems a curse—"Will's protective amnesia had prevented him from seeing, until late in the book, how he projected his fears of suicide onto society" (Allen 1986, 133)—turns out to be a blessing in disguise because it makes it impossible for the protagonist to look at reality in a conventional or stereotypical way. Amnesia shows alternative paths which are invisible for a man limited by preconceived notions of the world: "possessing acute sensibility, he [Will] cannot perceive the sense of a situation through all the nonsense of its words. He thus serves the author as in instrument for taking a fresh look at the American scene" (Luschei 1972, 112). As Will's case demonstrates, Walker Percy's stance on amnesia, memory and the self is equivocal. In his letter to Shelby Foote, Percy (1971) betrays his fascination with amnesia for its ability to defamiliarize the commonplace and worn out which pollute our perception of ourselves and the world around us. Thus, Will's amnesia is not "simply an inauthentic defense that he must abandon," as Allen suggests (1986, 57). Neither is it "meant as nothing more than a device to underline his identity crisis" (Crews 1989, 42).

A clash between memory and the self indicates a cognitive-processual vision of human beings which emerges from Walker Percy's novels. Williston Barrett both makes his ambient culture and is its final product. He absorbs the schemata of a gentleman and scripts of behavior characteristic of Southern culture and, simultaneously, his behavior is conditioned by cultural and social determinants (such as bodily social memory). The eponymous last gentleman is a creator of his culture as he makes an effort to overcome and revise the schemata. The protagonist's motifs and actions are best analyzed through the prism of metaphors, which reflect the complexity of the processes occurring in his memory and the self. It seems that anamorphosis best illustrates Will's life—his existence is like a distorted image, which can be reconstituted only when one adopts an unconventional perspective.

## Works Cited

Allbritton, David W. 1995. "When Metaphors Function as Schemas: Some Cognitive Effects of Conceptual Metaphors." *Metaphor and Symbolic Activity* 10 (1): 33-46.

Allen, William Rodney. 1986. *Walker Percy: A Southern Wayfarer.* Jackson: UP of Mississippi.

Baddeley, Alan. 1997. *Human Memory. Theory and Practice.* Hove: Psychology P.

Bartlett, Frederic C. 1932. *Remembering. A Study in the Experimental and Social Psychology.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Butler, Charles. 1836. *The American Gentleman*. Philadelphia: Hogan & Thompson.

Cady, Edwin. 1949. *The Gentleman in America: A Literary Study in American Culture.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP.

Ciuba, Gary M. 1989. "*The Second Coming*: Percy's Romance at the End of the World." *Thought* 64 (255): 399-410.

—. 1991. *Walker Percy. Books of Revelations.* Athens: The U of Georgia P.

Connerton, Paul. 1989. *How Societies Remember.* Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

Crews, Frederick C. 1989. "The Hero as 'Case'." In *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, edited by J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley, 40-3. Boston: Hall.

Dowie, William. 1989. "Walker Percy: Sensualist Thinker." In *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, edited by J. Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley, 157-70. Boston: Hall.

Draaisma, Douwe. (1995) 2000. *Metaphors of Memory. A History of Ideas about the Mind.* Translated by Paul Vincent. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.

—. (2010) 2015. *Forgetting: Myths, Perils and Compensations*. Translated by Liz Waters. New Haven, CT: Yale UP.

Eliade, Mircea. 1987. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion.* Translated by Williard R. Trask. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.

Emmet, Dorothy M. 1985. *The Effectiveness of Causes.* Albany, NY: State U of New York P.

Erll, Astrid. 2011. *Memory in Culture.* Translated by Sara B. Young. New York: Palgrave.

Grice, Paul. 1941. "Personal Identity." *Mind* 50: 330-50.

Harris, Grace. 1989. "Concepts of Individual, Self, and Person in Description and Analysis." *American Anthropologist* 9 (3): 599-612.

Johnson, Mark. 1989. "The Search for Place in Walker Percy's Novels." In *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, edited by Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley, 138-56. Boston: G. K. Hall.

Kennedy, J. Gerald. 1989. "The Semiotics of Memory: Suicide in *The Second Coming*." In *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, edited by Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley, 208-24. Boston: G. K. Hall.

Klein, Stanley and Shaun Nichols. 2012. "Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity." *Mind* 121 (483): 677-702.

Lieber, Francis. 1864. *The Character of the Gentleman.* Philadelphia: Lippincott.

Luschei, Martin. 1972. *The Sovereign Wayfarer: Walker Percy's Diagnosis of the Malaise.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.

Mandler, Jean. 1984. *Stories, Scripts, and Scenes: Aspects of Schema Theory.* Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Metzner, Ralph. 1980. "Ten Classical Metaphors of Self-Transformation." *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 12 (1): 47-62.

Oates, Joyce Carol. 1989. "Gentleman Without a Past." In *Critical Essays on Walker Percy*, edited by Donald Crowley and Sue Mitchell Crowley, 38-40. Boston: G. K. Hall.

Percy, Walker. (1966) 1972. *The Last Gentleman*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

— 1971. A Letter to Shelby Foote, February 3, 1971. Series 3—Correspondence, Folder 26. *Walker Percy Papers* #4294, Southern Historical Collection, Louis Round Wilson Special Collections Library, UNC.

—. 1975a. "Metaphor as Mistake." In *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, edited by Walker Percy, 64-82. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

—. 1975b. "Notes for a Novel About the End of the World." In *The Message in the Bottle: How Queer Man Is, How Queer Language Is, and What One Has to Do with the Other*, edited by Walker Percy, 101-18. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

—. 1980. *The Second Coming*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

Perry, John. 1972. "Can the Self Divide?" *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (16): 463-88.

Roque, Maria-Àngels. 2010. "Birds: Metaphor of the Soul." *Quaderns de la Mediterrània* 12: 96-108.

Rudnicki, Robert W. 1999. *Percyscapes: The Fugue State in Twentieth-Century Southern Fiction.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP.

Rivers, William H. R. 1923. *Conflict and Dream*. New York: Hartcourt, Brace.

Schwartz, Joseph. 1987. "Life and Death in *The Last Gentleman*." *Renascence* 40 (2): 112-28.

Shoemaker, Sydney S. 1959. "Personal Identity and Memory." *The Journal of Philosophy* 56 (22): 868-82.

—. 1963. *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity.* Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP.

Smith, M. Brewster. 1985. "The Metaphorical Basis of Selfhood." In *Culture and Self. Asian and Western Perspectives*, edited by Anthony J. Marsella, George DeVos and Francis L. K. Hsu, 56-88. New York and London: Tavistock.

Taylor, William R. 1963. *Cavalier and Yankee: The Old South and American National Character*. New York: Doubleday Anchor.

Tulving, Endel. 1972. "Episodic and Semantic Memory." In *Organization of Memory*, edited by Endel Tulving and Wayne Donaldson, 381-403. New York: Academic Press.

Wollheim, Richard. 1979. "Memory, Experiential Memory, and Personal Identity." In *Perception and Identity. Essays Presented to A. J. Ayer with his Replies to Them*, edited by Graham F. Macdonald, 186-234. London: Macmillan.

Received 3 January 2015 Accepted 29 May 2015

Urszula Niewiadomska-Flis teaches American literature at The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland). Her areas of research include fiction of the American South and representations of foodways in American literature. Her most recent publications are *The Southern Mystique: Food, Gender and Houses in Southern Fiction and Films* (Publicacions de la Universitat de València, 2012) and an edited volume *Dixie Matters: New Perspectives on Southern Femininities and Masculinities* (Wydawnictwo KUL, 2013).

Address: Department of American Literature and Culture. The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin. Al. Racławickie, 14. 20-950, Lublin, Poland. Tel.: +48 81-445-39-42.

Magdalena Budzyńska graduated in Polish from Maria Curie-Skłodowska University in Lublin in 2005. In 2012 she was awarded a PhD in Polish literature. Since 2011 she has been lecturing on the depiction of visual arts in literature at Maria Curie-Skłodowska University. Her areas of research include visual anthropology, especially the process of creating metaphor.

Address: Department of Social Anthropology. Maria Curie-Skłodowska University of Lublin. Ul. pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, 4. 20-031, Lublin, Poland. Tel.: +48 81-537-27-73.