THE COLLECTED POEMS OF
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Foreword

An introduction to the poetry of William Alexander Percy necessarily implies an introduction to the poet himself. I know of no other writer whose work so perceptively expresses his own personality. In his remarkable autobiography, "Lanterns on the Levee," a tour de force written against time and a fatal illness, Will Percy has these cogent words to say of his poetry:

"Since much of my life has gone into the making of verse which I hope is poetry, I may as well state now and as briefly as I can how and why I wrote.

"What I wrote seemed to me more essentially myself than anything I did or said. It often gushed up almost involuntarily like automatic writing, and the difficulty lay in keeping the hot gush continuous and unselfconscious while at the same time directing it with cold intellect into form. I could never write in cold blood. The results were intensely personal, whatever their other defects. . . .

"When you feel something intensely, you want to write it down — if anguish, to stanch the bleeding; if delight, to prolong the moment. When . . . you feel you have discovered a new truth or an old one which suddenly for you has the excitement of a new one, you write a poem. To keep it free from irrelevant photographic details you set it in some long-ago time, one, of course, you love and perhaps once lived in.

"That is how I wrote and why I wrote."

For the last twelve years of his life it was my privilege to know this excellent man. He was physically frail but not weak; he was gentle but not soft. He loved gracious living, beauty, Greece, the song of bird, the smell of rose and the peaceful solitude of his oak-paneled
study. Yet he never side-stepped, intellectually or physically, to avoid a fight.

Even before his too-soon death last year, legends began to spread throughout the Mississippi Delta about this small slender man with the shock of gray hair and gray-blue eyes that could warm the spirit of friend or chill the heart of foe. Medals and citations from the Allied governments attest his personal heroism in war. The legends tell of a deadlier kind of bravery from this gentle peaceloving man: Will once sat in the front row at a hostile Ku Klux Klan political meeting where the speaker was scheduled to attack a friend. “The speaker didn’t make the attack,” the story ends, “so Mr. Will didn’t kill him.” Countless are the tales of how he bearded local officials, single-handed, and forced them to deal justly with Negroes — neither a trivial nor a popular thing to do in some sections of the State of Mississippi.

Yet this man who walked among the dead and dying in Flanders, and who quenched the fires of fanatical oratory by his mere presence, wrote after a brief visit to New York:

I have need of silence and of stars.
Too much is said too loudly; I am dazed.
The silken sound of whirled infinity
Is lost in voices shouting to be heard.
I once knew men as earnest and less shrill.

He was not alien to his homeland, in spite of seeming always to hold apart from run-of-the-creek Delta cotton and small town lawyer. He had a genuine love of people and the happy genius of attracting loyal friends to himself. Even Mississippi's poor whites, that embittered, underfed, hook-worm-ridden race that thrives on hate and prejudice, regarded him with something between esteem and tolerance. “For a rich man's son, Mr. Will is a right clever man.”

Reciprocally, Mr. Will did what he could to understand and to help these people. They represented things he most abhorred — hate, prejudice, disease, shiftlessness, and he strove mightily to bring about an improvement of these people without once deviating from his own high principles.
It is not my purpose to estimate the place in letters Will’s poetry occupies. Critics have done that, variously. The only generalities I can apply to it all is that it is beautiful, charming and a delight to read. As the poet’s character was complex and seemingly at variance with itself, at times, yet always a pleasure to his friends, always warm with a love for truth and beauty, so is his poetry always warm and honest and lyrical. As he himself was, so is his poetry ever sensitive to though never hysterical about life and death. Often Will withdrew himself from life, not to an ivory tower where the living and the dying world could not touch him, but rather to an Olympus of his own where he could observe with truer perspective and sharper clarity the realities below. What he saw from his Olympus he set down in song.

In “St. Francis to the Birds” we hear the good saint chiding both himself and his winged congregation, though not too seriously:

Was ever such a sermon?
I, no text; no morals, you!

The spirit of the poem is a kind of sly connivance between a not too holy saint and not too evil sinners.

But there is neither tolerance nor gentleness in “An Epistle from Corinth” wherein a Corinthian replies to the letters of St. Paul. Here there are bitter denunciation and blame for the Apostle’s failure to comprehend that which he sought to teach:

Paul, Paul, I’d give
My Greek inheritance, my wealth and youth
To speak one evening with the Christ you love
And never saw and cannot understand!

Throughout the entire length of “Sappho in Levkas” there is a high lyrical nervous tension—a woman’s confession of carnal sin—a sin which she has once enjoyed and which she enjoys again in the telling. It is a complete and detailed confession, but there is no repentance:
To think nobility like mine could be
Flawed — shattered utterly — and by —
This, this the shame, O Zeus, that Thou must hear —
A slim, brown shepherd boy with windy eyes
And spring upon his mouth!

If one must have a label for Will's poetry, "lyrical in the classic
tradition" would serve as well as another, perhaps. Still, not only did
the imagined memories of the Golden Age of Greece, or the simple
miracles of medieval times strike chords on his lyre; he also sings of
the Mississippi River and the rich soil of the Delta and of the people
who live upon it. In a sonnet to the River he captures its spirit:

Imperial indolence is thine and pleasure
Of hot, long listlessness and moody course.

On the death of a well-loved dog gone mad, he inspires not pity,
not regret but the solacing hope of a friend in Eternity:

But as my prow scapes on the marl,
One watcher faithful, quaint,
Will dash to meet me who am still
His master, friend, and saint.

Beginning in 1911, Will wrote poetry for twenty-five years. During
this time he met and talked with world citizens. Athens, Paris, Italy,
the South Seas were hosts to him. In between he managed to fight
a war with his small furious body and burning mind. He was scared,
he hated war — "It is the wickedest, most hateful thing man was
ever guilty of" — yet he had to work like hell even to get in the Army:
in the end he had to depend on the usual bananas and water to get by
on weight. And when he came home he was a Captain, wearing a
Croix de Guerre with a gold and a silver star. Feeling dead inside
and incapable of emotion he was, nevertheless, able to write:

There never was a cause
So worthy to be won!
If France and England die,
Freedom and faith are dead —
Give them, O God, not heroes' hearts, but brains!

During the twenty-five years of his creative work, he met with and talked to poets here and abroad. This was, it will be recalled, the era of revolt, the hoop-la era. Poets turned peddlers and proved more ingenious in advertising their wares than in perfecting their art. Groups and cults gathered in great numbers to quaff at the algæ of public esteem like so many schools of minnows. Will Percy shunned all of these movements. He did not cry out in verse or before lecture audiences for an understanding of his genius. He made no struggle to lib-erate poetry from the older forms. Of his technique Will wrote:

"I tried to make it sound as beautiful and as fitting as I could. Old patterns helped, but if rhyme seemed out of place, the choruses of Samson Agonistes, some of Matthew Arnold’s unrhymed cadences, and Shakespeare’s later run-on pentameters suggested freer and less accepted modes of communication. As far as I can make out, the towering bulk of English poetry influenced me tremendously, but not any one poet, though I hope I learned as much as I think I owe to Browning’s monologues and to Gilbert Murray’s translations of Eu-ripides."

He wrote a good deal and I find no evidence of any struggle either to conform or not to conform. He wrote gracefully, with ease, with beauty, with honesty and dignity. This seems to me important because it seems typical of the man as well as the poet.

Whether he was in Greece on the shores of the Aegean, or in Greenville on the banks of the Mississippi, Will Percy plucked his own lyre and sang his own songs to the stars and to the wind and to the dawn.

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