

DEAN FLOWER

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## Eudora Welty and Racism

It's only interesting, only worthy,  
to try for the fiercest secrets.

—*The Golden Apples*

WHEN EUDORA WELTY REVIEWED WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *Intruder in the Dust* in the pages of this magazine in 1949, she sidestepped the novel's central racial issues.<sup>1</sup> She called it "a story of the proving of innocence," but she meant the innocence of its white characters, who are driven to dig up a grave in order to save a black man from being lynched for murdering a white man. She calls the accused man, stubborn old Lucas Beauchamp—an ex-slave fathered by the white patriarch Lucius Quintus Carothers McCaslin, as told in "The Bear," 1942—merely a "technical innocent" and "gorgeously irritating." Viewed simply as a plot device, Lucas may be an effective "irritant." But isn't that what a black man wrongfully accused too often represented in the Southern conscience, merely an annoying irritation? Welty's terms have more than a hint of condescension. Savoring the humor of the situation, she describes Lucas as "a lightless character, high-and-mighty," who "condescends to be saved." But what does "lightless" mean if not (a) deficient in understanding or (b) opaque, hard to decipher? Either way the term suggests racism. One could easily construe Welty's subtextual message to be that the poor beleaguered innocent white folks of Faulkner's novel once again have to do something, irritating though it may be, to help "technically innocent" black folks who have become so "high-and-mighty" they condescend to their betters.

Faulkner sends no such message. His protagonist, the sixteen-year-old Chick Mallison, struggles to figure out why Lucas Beauchamp has always refused to behave like other blacks. Chick knows what his white society demands (it's even put in italics): "*We got to make him be a nigger first. He's got to admit he's a nigger. Then maybe we will accept him as he seems to intend to be accepted.*" But Lucas will never be a nigger first. Admitting racial difference is not even a question for him. Pointedly, his skin is not black, "it had no pigment at all, not even the white man's lack of it, [and he was] not arrogant, not even scornful: just intractable and composed." He claims only the right to be himself, and the rest of the novel swirls in the dust around him. Welty seems to understand this racial

<sup>1</sup> "In Yoknapatawpha," *The Hudson Review*, Vol. I, No. 4 (Winter 1949). Reprinted in Welty's *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York, 1978).

crux for a moment in her review, speaking of a future when Lucas' life "will be secure not despite the fact that he is Lucas Beauchamp but because he is." But her point, left so cryptic, gets lost in excess enthusiasm for the novel's humor, which she sees as its saving asset, making bearable things that are "too terrifying, too probable, and too symbolic . . . to bear." She even mistakes the law-unto-themselves Gowries, who live in the hills of Yoknapatawpha's "Beat Four," for a "vaudeville team that follows behind" the protagonists "with its hilarious, mechanical parody." Again this refuses the novel's moral and social depth. The Gowries deserve respect despite their flagrant "worthlessness," as Chick discovers. Even despicable old Gowrie, "a violent foulmouthed godless old man who had happened to lose one of the six lazy idle violent more or less lawless a good deal more than just more or less worthless sons," still feels grief and is worthy of compassion. This is not the sort of Faulknerian lesson—heightened by its sardonic wrappings—that a writer like Welty would fail to appreciate. So why did she?

One answer is that she was mad at Edmund Wilson. He had just reviewed *Intruder in the Dust* and taken a very hard look at its politics—specifically, what Wilson saw as the novel's antagonism to the growing civil rights movement.<sup>2</sup> Unlike Welty, he had no trouble assessing its moral weight. Faulkner's "chivalry, which constitutes his morality," Wilson writes, is "a force more humane and more positive than almost anything one can find in the work of [others] . . . who have set out to defend human rights." But Wilson goes on to a shrewd paraphrase of the novel's overt politics, as voiced by Gavin Stevens, the boy-narrator's uncle, who increasingly takes over the story—and spoils it with his rant. Stevens, like his author, wants to protect the "homogeneity" of the South and fears the injustice, grief, agony, and violence that will come "by forcing on us laws based on the idea that man's injustice to man can be abolished overnight by police." To that Wilson rightly asks, "But is pressure from outside worth nothing? Has it had no moral effect on the South?" He also points out that Faulkner-Stevens' contempt for "the coastal spew of Europe," i.e., immigrant laborers in the industrial North, suggests more than a bit of hypocrisy, "as if [Wilson writes] the Italians, Greeks, Hungarians, Poles and Czechs had not shown as much tenacity as the Negroes." Nevertheless the review ends with praise for Faulkner's "genius," his "polychromatic vitality," and the novel's "poetic truth to experience."

But Eudora Welty saw nothing of that. She wrote an angry letter to *The New Yorker*,<sup>3</sup> complaining that Wilson's review "begrudges" Faulkner his greatness and treats him as a mere provincial, choosing to live in darkest Mississippi. Welty had a right to complain. Wilson was indeed arrogant in saying that the "antiquated community" Faulkner inhabited prevented him from mastering "the discipline of the Joyces, Prousts,

<sup>2</sup> "William Faulkner's Reply to the Civil-Rights Program," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 23, 1948. Reprinted in Wilson's *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties* (New York, 1950).

<sup>3</sup> "Department of Amplification," *The New Yorker*, Jan. 1, 1949.

and Conrads . . .” and led him into “slipshod” habits. Wilson is even more irritating in presuming to lecture Faulkner on the “technical efficiency” of the modern novel, with “its specialization of means for ends,” the form having “grown up in the industrial age.” Welty leaps gleefully on this preposterous claim and tears it to bits. She seems unaware that Wilson always chastises writers this way (“Proust had his solecisms”), no matter how great they may be. Hence the well-known parody in which Wilson offers to tell Shakespeare “how the flaws in his psychology could be put right.” But the troubling question about Welty remains, why did she again say nothing about *Intruder in the Dust* and its racial issues? Was Wilson wrong in the way he paraphrased Faulkner’s position? Or could Welty have been angry because, at some level, she knew he was right?

These questions bring up biographical issues that have generated a good deal of disagreement in recent years. When Welty published *The Golden Apples* in 1949, nobody called attention to the embedded racism of its fictive community in Morgana, Mississippi. Diana Trilling had attacked *Delta Wedding* in 1946 for its failure to register the exploitation of blacks, past and present, on which the novel’s Fairchild family depends, but Robert Penn Warren rose to its defense. In the 1950s, Welty campaigned vigorously for Adlai Stevenson, which did not sit well with her neighbors in Jackson, Mississippi, but she had risked such antagonism before, writing angry letters to the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* denouncing the state’s anti-Semitic and fascist demagogues. It was not until June 12, 1963, almost a decade after the Supreme Court ordered the South to desegregate, that things changed violently for Welty and others in Jackson and far beyond. Medgar Evers, a young black man working for the NAACP, was assassinated. Almost immediately Welty wrote, apparently at one sitting, “Where Is the Voice Coming From?,” which quickly appeared in *The New Yorker*. The story adopts the point of view of Evers’ killer and unforgettably exposes his vicious racist mentality. He is surely the nastiest character Welty ever invented:

There was one way left, for me to be ahead of you and stay ahead of you, by Dad, and I just taken it. Now I’m alive and you ain’t. We ain’t never now, never going to be equals and you know why? One of us is dead.

It seemed that Welty’s fiction had at last found a way to voice things she had kept silent about before. Had she, in a sense, come out of the closet? She seems to have wondered herself where this voice was coming from. Curiously, although she wrote another story in a similar vein (“The Demonstrators,” 1966), Welty’s fiction did not change. These were her last two short stories. Her long novel *Losing Battles* in 1970 and her short novel *The Optimist’s Daughter* in 1972 went back to the same non-disruptive familial themes that had generated *Delta Wedding*. What changed was that she became defensive about race and resentful of the pressure on her to address it. “Must the Novelist Crusade?” she asks, in

an essay of 1965, and her answer is a resounding no. She laments the present fate of Southern writers, whose history has already been “wrenchingly painful and humiliating” and now insult is added to injury: “We in the South are a hated people,” she says, and unfortunately “we hate back”:

Fury at ourselves and hurt pride, anger aroused too often, outrage at being hated need not obscure forever the sore spots we Southerners know better than our detractors . . . we are locally blessed with an understanding and intimate knowledge of our faults that our worst detractors cannot match, and [we] have been in a less relentless day far more relentless, more eloquent, too, than they have yet learned to be.

Welty’s anger is palpable here, and so is her nostalgia for “a less relentless day.” But her position is clear: we Southerners know our faults far better than uncomprehending outsiders who presume to judge us. That was just about what Faulkner had said in *Intruder in the Dust*.

Recent biography has given us a fuller picture of Welty’s attitudes toward the civil rights movement, race, and politics in general. But critics are still arguing about what she *really* thought and whether her fiction did not evade the more difficult issues of race. Ann Waldron, in the first chapter of her unauthorized biography of 1998, threw down the gauntlet by declaring that, “Nothing could illuminate the horror and stupidity of the segregated South more vividly than the fact that Richard Wright and Eudora Welty never met, although they were the same age, had similar interests, and lived in the same town for several years.”<sup>4</sup> In fact, they attended high schools only a few miles apart. Waldron points out that 43 percent of Jackson was black in 1923, but white people usually knew only two or three of them—their servants. That was precisely the case in Welty’s own family. Working against the author’s wishes—friends were asked *not* to grant Waldron any interviews—the biographer managed to piece together a remarkably full account. But she constantly felt resistance, she says in her preface, from potential informants: Welty was cordoned off by her loving, fiercely protective admirers.

Waldron is a more sympathetic and fair-minded biographer than this may suggest. She refuses to say that *Delta Wedding* ignores discrimination or fails to report the abuse of blacks in the Delta region which Richard Wright had done so explicitly, depicting that same place in *Black Boy* (1945):

But Eudora by no means ignored them [Waldron writes]. She showed them to us without editorializing. You can’t read *Delta Wedding* without seeing that the black servants and field hands are treated like children, deprived of basic rights, and living in poverty.

<sup>4</sup> Ann Waldron, *Eudora Welty: A Writer’s Life* (New York, 1998).

Eudora, however, directs our gaze elsewhere. She . . . let others write political tracts.

This argument echoes Welty's own in "Must the Novelist Crusade?": the novelist "works neither to correct nor to condone, not at all to comfort, but to make what's told alive." Also, "A plot is a thousand times more unsettling than an argument, which may be answered." These are very good points. Yet might one still ask whether the author's gaze, directed so scrupulously "elsewhere" in *Delta Wedding*, may have failed to see some things? Why didn't her plot in this novel—or in *The Optimist's Daughter* or *Losing Battles*—involve something as unsettling as the racial themes of, say, *A Passage to India* or *The Sound and the Fury*—both works she cites as exemplary in her essay?

Waldron's biography provoked one critic to a memorable attack. Claudia Roth Pierpont, in a scathing *New Yorker* article, took to heart Waldron's messages about Richard Wright and about Welty's over-protective admirers.<sup>5</sup> Pierpont surveys the whole career and concludes that a once "intrepid explorer," whose best stories in the 1930s and 1940s "split wide open" her pseudo-polite "world of hate," had allowed herself to become, under the pressure of her "stifling, hypocritical, yet tantalizingly charming society" little more than "a perfect lady." At the expense of her art, Pierpont declares, this "was a hard bargain."

Blinkered, unfair, and insulting as it was, the essay raised serious questions: if Welty had not sold out her art, how should it be defended? Was Welty's fiction really apolitical, as she seemed to argue the best fiction had to be in "Must the Novel Crusade?" Was her life of "sheltered daring" (as she put it in *One Writer's Beginnings*) merely sheltered, all daring spent? And again, was she unwilling, for whatever reasons, to criticize the racism of her time and place? A group of Welty defenders, who had just begun addressing the problem of "Welty and Politics" at a 1997 conference in Jackson, were clearly stung by Pierpont's attack. Their book-length rebuttal ensued in 2001, ten essays detailing Welty's active involvement in politics both in her life and in her writing.<sup>6</sup> Some of the essays make much of slight references, like the reading of *The Ponder Heart* as a reflection of the Rosenberg trials or the sleuthing out of civil rights issues in *Losing Battles*. I was disappointed that no wide-ranging discussion of race was attempted, only a close analysis of one story, "The Demonstrators," and a biographical account of her liberal politics in the 1950s and 1960s. Yet everyone seems to agree that the treatment of race in her fiction is deeper and far more defensible than the "Welty-bashing" critics think.

Suzanne Marrs, one of the book's editors and contributors, who had become a trusted friend of the author in the 1980s, published a biographical-critical study the year after Welty's death in 2001, and has now

<sup>5</sup> "A Perfect Lady," *The New Yorker*, Oct. 5, 1998.

<sup>6</sup> *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*, ed. by Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs (Baton Rouge, 2001).

issued an authorized biography.<sup>7</sup> In her last years, Welty reversed herself completely about keeping her private life private. Marrs continues the defense against both Pierpont and Waldron; indeed, it is a defense against any condescending reader, friend or foe, who thinks Welty stayed safely at home all her life. Marrs details how frequently Welty left home, on short trips and long—not just two years at the University of Wisconsin and almost two in New York at the Columbia University School of Business—but also her later residences in San Francisco (1946–47), in New York again (1944) working for the *Times Book Review*, and more briefly in New Orleans and abroad—Italy, France, Ireland. Many of these trips were not mere sojourns but prolonged efforts to escape Jackson and define herself elsewhere. After business school she came back home because she couldn't find a job in New York and her father was dying. She worked for local newspapers and radio stations, taught herself photography, learned to drive, and traveled for the WPA, getting to know her region as she never had before. But she also went back to New York and pounded the pavement looking for work in publishing. In 1935 she applied (unsuccessfully) to study photography with Bernice Abbot at the New School for Social Research, explaining that she had “lately made particular studies of negroes, with an idea of making a book” of them. Marrs mentions at every opportunity Welty's curiosity about blacks, her early trips to the famous jazz clubs of Harlem, her venturing into Jackson's black district to hear blues and jazz, her learning on a WPA trip “about a little Negro man in a carnival who was made to eat live chickens,” the source for her 1940 story, “Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden.” Then there was Welty's trip to a rural black church in 1942, her visit to a black street dance in Jackson, and her outrage at the racism of Mississippi's Senator Bilbo in 1945. Soon you begin to feel the strain of Marrs's argument. Earnestly she will explain that Welty's visits to Harlem “would enlarge her sense of African American culture, its richness and vitality.” About Welty's fine photographs of blacks Marrs must say, “*Never* are the pictures patronizing; *never* do they deny the subject's dignity” (italics mine). Surely this protests too much. “In the massive correspondence available for research [Marrs writes], Eudora used the word *nigger* four times as a descriptor.” Note the term “massive”: why, Eudora is hardly guilty of racism at all.

If Marrs disimproves her case by direct methods, she succeeds by indirection. She makes clear that Welty's society was not just Jackson, not just the South. Her correspondence and frequent trips to New York connected her with Dairmuid Russell, her agent and the son of Irish poet AE, with William Maxwell, her champion at *The New Yorker*, and with a host of others with whom she could attend plays and concerts, go to parties and nightclubs, drink and talk late into the night. As everyone knows who has met her, Welty made friends wherever she went. In more senses than one, she traveled well. Among her famous literary friends abroad were V. S. Pritchett, E. M. Forster, Mary Lavin, and—they

<sup>7</sup> EUDORA WELTY: A Biography, by *Suzanne Marrs*. Harcourt. \$28.00; \$16.00. Marrs's critical study is *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge, 2002).

became virtually soulmates in the 1950s—Elizabeth Bowen. Indeed, Irish writers and landscape seemed to evoke something of her parents' origins for Welty: her father came from southern Ohio and her mother from West Virginia. Stories like "The Bride of the Innisfallen" could almost have been written by Bowen—or even Frank O'Connor. Happy as she was to be "locally underfoot" in Jackson, Welty was not born into the South the way that, say, Faulkner was. She knew no "stubborn, backward-looking ghosts" as he did, nor did she have Flannery O'Connor's sense that Southern writers shared "a vision of Moses' face as he pulverized our idols." Like some of her characters in *The Golden Apples*, Welty was independent, not rootless but a spiritual wanderer, with a Yeatsian "fire in her head."

Marrs's central argument in fact dramatizes how quickly this independence emerged and how strong it became. When Randolph-Macon Women's College in Virginia refused to accept all her transfer credits, Welty took the train to Madison, Wisconsin, and enrolled there. Vacationing in Montana with a college classmate, she got a job writing for the local paper. It seemed that Welty could be at home anywhere. What drew her to San Francisco in the later 1940s was the pursuit of a romantic relationship with John Robinson, a would-be writer whom she agonized over during the war, and who could not admit he was gay. But she lived independently in San Francisco, honoring his need for privacy yet still thriving in the city while poor confused Robinson lurked unhappily in Berkeley. Reading *The Golden Apples* after Marrs's biography brings out the author's personal stake in its many celebrations of sojourning, wandering, and—with Virgie Rainy and the old black thief at the end—finding her freedom.

It's no wonder that Welty felt ambivalent about racism. She did not feel either the importance of racial difference or the historic guilt that she was supposed to feel. She knew of course that her stories were already the best defense against any such charge. "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden" is a meticulous analysis of neurotic white guilt (Steve) and dim-witted white complacency (Max), staged for the ignored and belittled black man (Leroy), who watches their antics with puzzled amusement. "Powerhouse" takes a journey into the racist mentality of a white audience that is embarrassed and fascinated by this demonic black performer, then follows Powerhouse convincingly into his own racial community to show a knowledge and moral authority beyond theirs—an identity unrestricted by race, gender or class. "A Worn Path" says everything about an old woman's capacity for love and endurance in a white world that Faulkner had said about Dilsey in *The Sound and the Fury*. "Livvie" dramatizes a young black woman freed from the tyranny of her traditionalist husband, now vulnerable to the sleazy freedoms of a man her own age—the story did not even need to be about racism.

What Welty did not expect, probably, was the extent to which she would be asked to represent the South. In her early fiction she felt free to attack it satirically in stories like "Petrified Man" and "Why I Live at the P. O." or to celebrate it lyrically as in "The Wide Net" or "A Still

Moment” or to adopt an Agrarian critique of its modernity, as in “Death of a Traveling Salesman” or “The Hitch-Hikers.” But she was shocked and distressed to hear, when she lived elsewhere in the 1940s, criticism of the South coming from prejudiced and ignorant outsiders. While Mississippi politics enraged and sickened her, so did New Yorkers who assumed all Southerners were racists. As her fame increased so did the expectation that she represent the South. Clearly she hated the politics of that, but the deeper pressures were social and they required loyalty to her place. Welty’s 1956 essay on “Place in Fiction” can in fact be read as a personal exploration of how far she could wander yet still be loyally Southern:

Sense of place gives equilibrium; extended, it is a sense of direction too. Carried off we might be in spirit, and should be, . . . but it is the sense of place going with us still that is the ball of golden thread to carry us there and back and in every sense of the word to bring us home.

Welty liked to keep hidden her deep resistance to the South and its relentless social pressures. And her fiction sometimes keeps that well hidden too, as in the affectionate surface comedy of *The Ponder Heart* where “tickled to death” in fact means murder. Similarly, she would have scorned the efforts of well-meaning biographers to defend her against charges of racism. What she cared about most, and sought out in her fiction, was the deeper mystery of individuals. Alice Walker once asked her whether she ever “really knew” any black people, unaware of Welty’s essay about Ida M’Toy, a former midwife in Jackson who ran a used clothing business. The essay says nothing about Ida’s race but simply shows how deeply Welty knew this woman who was so “full of all the wild humors and extravagances of the godlike.” That was what Welty tried for in her fiction—the fiercest secrets—in characters like the German piano teacher Miss Eckhart, say, who did not have to be black to be humiliated, exploited, racially categorized, and driven mad by her society. Toni Morrison once noted that certain “fearless” women who have lived in segregated societies like Nadine Gordimer and Eudora Welty are able to “write about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write . . . not patronizing, not romanticizing.” But let the author have the last word on how to write this way. Here in a 1941 letter she looks back on her days in Wisconsin, reading the poetry of Yeats and AE and discovering what it really meant:

What you look for in the world is not simply for what you want to know, and more than you can know, better than you had wished for, and sometimes something draws you to a discovery and there is no other happiness quite the same.

That was Welty’s way of going beyond racism.