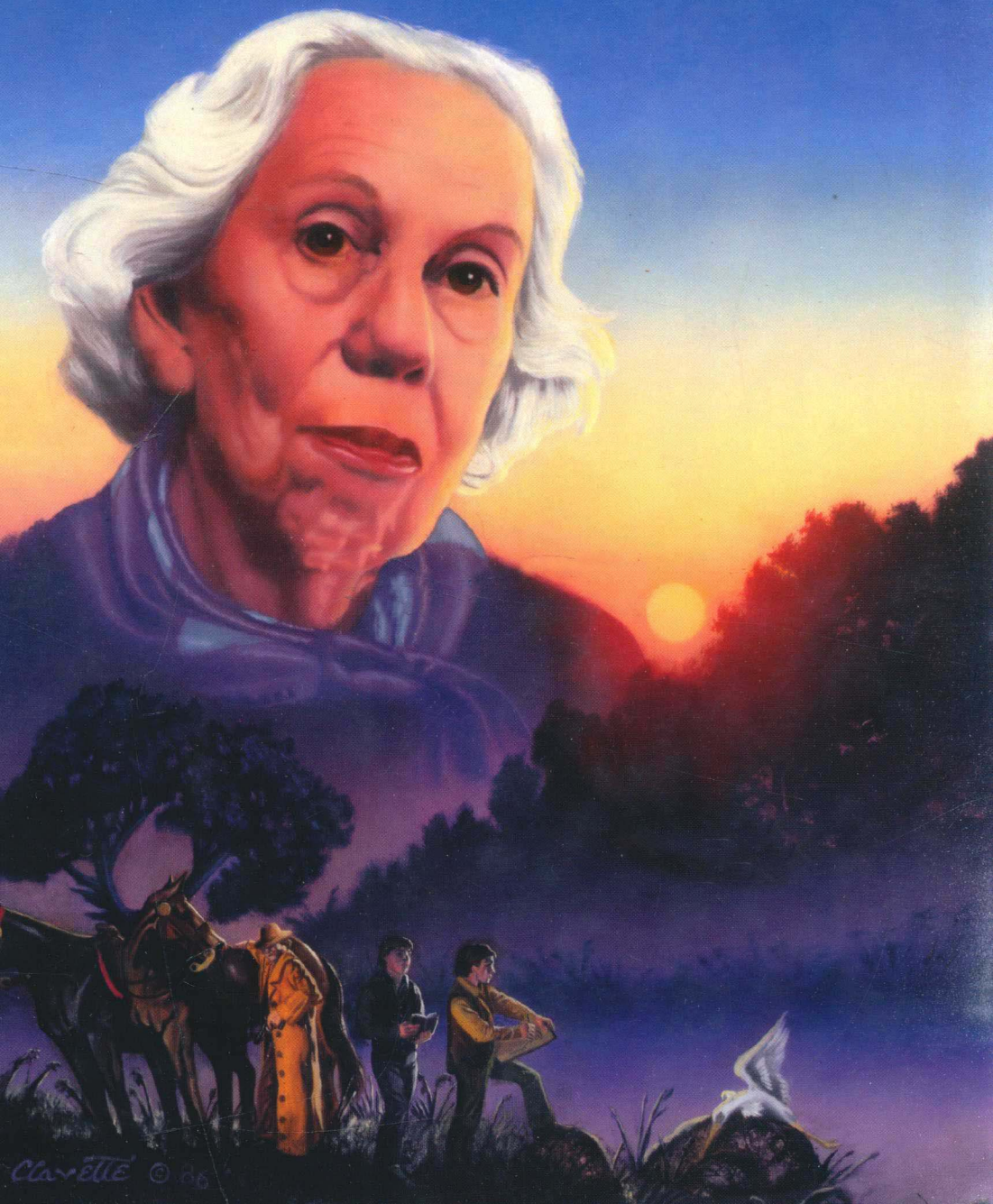


Modern Critical Views

EUDORA WELTY

Edited and with an Introduction by
HAROLD BLOOM



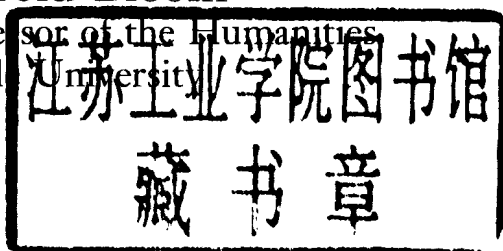
Modern Critical Views

EUDORA WELTY

Edited and with an introduction by

Harold Bloom

Sterling Professor of the Humanities
Yale University



CHELSEA HOUSE PUBLISHERS ◇ 1986
New York ◇ New Haven ◇ Philadelphia

© 1986 by Chelsea House Publishers, a division of Chelsea House Educational Communications, Inc.

345 Whitney Avenue, New Haven, CT 06511
5068B West Chester Pike, Edgemont, PA 19028
95 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Introduction © 1986 by Harold Bloom.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means without the written permission of the publisher.

Printed and bound in the United States of America

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

∞ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of the American National Standard for Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, Z39.48-1984.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Eudora Welty.

(Modern critical views)

Bibliography: p.

Includes index.

1. Welty, Eudora, 1909— —Criticism and interpretation—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Bloom, Harold. II. Series.

PS3545.E6Z657 1986 813'.52

86-2582

ISBN 0-87754-718-1 (alk. paper)

EUDORA WELTY

Modern Critical Views

- | | | |
|----------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|
| Chinua Achebe | Geoffrey Chaucer | Oliver Goldsmith |
| Henry Adams | John Cheever | Mary Gordon |
| Aeschylus | Anton Chekhov | Günther Grass |
| S. Y. Agnon | Kate Chopin | Robert Graves |
| Edward Albee | Chrétien de Troyes | Graham Greene |
| Raphael Alberti | Agatha Christie | Thomas Hardy |
| Louisa May Alcott | Samuel Taylor Coleridge | Nathaniel Hawthorne |
| A. R. Ammons | Colette | William Hazlitt |
| Sherwood Anderson | William Congreve & the | H. D. |
| Aristophanes | Restoration Dramatists | Seamus Heaney |
| Matthew Arnold | Joseph Conrad | Lillian Hellman |
| Antonin Artaud | Contemporary Poets | Ernest Hemingway |
| John Ashbery | James Fenimore Cooper | Hermann Hesse |
| Margaret Atwood | Pierre Corneille | Geoffrey Hill |
| W. H. Auden | Julio Cortázar | Friedrich Hölderlin |
| Jane Austen | Hart Crane | Homer |
| Isaac Babel | Stephen Crane | A. D. Hope |
| Sir Francis Bacon | e. e. cummings | Gerard Manley Hopkins |
| James Baldwin | Dante | Horace |
| Honoré de Balzac | Robertson Davies | A. E. Housman |
| John Barth | Daniel Defoe | William Dean Howells |
| Donald Barthelme | Philip K. Dick | Langston Hughes |
| Charles Baudelaire | Charles Dickens | Ted Hughes |
| Simone de Beauvoir | James Dickey | Victor Hugo |
| Samuel Beckett | Emily Dickinson | Zora Neale Hurston |
| Saul Bellow | Denis Diderot | Aldous Huxley |
| Thomas Berger | Isak Dinesen | Henrik Ibsen |
| John Berryman | E. L. Doctorow | Eugene Ionesco |
| The Bible | John Donne & the | Washington Irving |
| Elizabeth Bishop | Seventeenth-Century | Henry James |
| William Blake | Metaphysical Poets | Dr. Samuel Johnson and |
| Giovanni Boccaccio | John Dos Passos | James Boswell |
| Heinrich Böll | Fyodor Dostoevsky | Ben Jonson |
| Jorge Luis Borges | Frederick Douglass | James Joyce |
| Elizabeth Bowen | Theodore Dreiser | Carl Gustav Jung |
| Bertolt Brecht | John Dryden | Franz Kafka |
| The Brontës | W. E. B. Du Bois | Yasunari Kawabata |
| Charles Brockden Brown | Lawrence Durrell | John Keats |
| Sterling Brown | George Eliot | Søren Kierkegaard |
| Robert Browning | T. S. Eliot | Rudyard Kipling |
| Martin Buber | Elizabethan Dramatists | Melanie Klein |
| John Bunyan | Ralph Ellison | Heinrich von Kleist |
| Anthony Burgess | Ralph Waldo Emerson | Philip Larkin |
| Kenneth Burke | Euripides | D. H. Lawrence |
| Robert Burns | William Faulkner | John le Carré |
| William Burroughs | Henry Fielding | Ursula K. Le Guin |
| George Gordon, Lord | F. Scott Fitzgerald | Giacomo Leopardi |
| Byron | Gustave Flaubert | Doris Lessing |
| Pedro Calderón de la Barca | E. M. Forster | Sinclair Lewis |
| Italo Calvino | John Fowles | Jack London |
| Albert Camus | Sigmund Freud | Frederico García Lorca |
| Canadian Poetry: Modern | Robert Frost | Robert Lowell |
| and Contemporary | Northrop Frye | Malcolm Lowry |
| Canadian Poetry through | Carlos Fuentes | Norman Mailer |
| E. J. Pratt | William Gaddis | Bernard Malamud |
| Thomas Carlyle | André Gide | Stéphane Mallarmé |
| Alejo Carpentier | W. S. Gilbert | Thomas Malory |
| Lewis Carroll | Allen Ginsberg | André Malraux |
| Willa Cather | J. W. von Goethe | Thomas Mann |
| Louis-Ferdinand Céline | Nikolai Gogol | Katherine Mansfield |
| Miguel de Cervantes | William Golding | Christopher Marlowe |

Continued at back of book

Editor's Note

This book gathers together a representative selection of the most helpful criticism devoted to the fiction of Eudora Welty, arranged in the chronological order of its original publication. I am grateful to Nancy Sales for her aid in researching this volume.

The introduction centers upon two of Welty's stories, "A Still Moment" and "The Burning," in an attempt to isolate aspects of her rhetorical stance as a narrator. Katherine Anne Porter's tribute to the early stories in *A Curtain of Green* begins the chronological sequence, which continues with Robert Penn Warren's remarkable analysis of Welty's narrative vision, and with John Edward Hardy's reading of *Delta Wedding's* regional symbolism. In some sense, Ruth M. Vande Kieft sums up the early critical approach to Welty by emphasizing how open the fiction holds itself to the mysteries and terrors of mere chance and oblivion, almost as though Welty maintains her humane stance gratuitously in a cosmos she knows might warrant only a nihilistic response.

Two distinguished novelists, Joyce Carol Oates and Reynolds Price, follow with accounts that confirm and extend this early judgment of Welty's art. Oates shrewdly compares Welty to Kafka as a writer who insists upon baffling our expectations, while Price gives a reading of the novella *The Optimist's Daughter*, in which we are made to see that Welty's first narrative stance, that of the onlooker, has been developed into a mode that now can conclude with a solitary joy.

Three gracious tributes—by Malcolm Cowley, Walker Percy, and Robert Penn Warren—are followed here by Cleanth Brooks's distinguished essay on the relation between Welty and the diverse Southern traditions, written and oral, that her best work mediates. A close analysis of *The Golden Apples* by Daniele Pitavy-Souques demonstrates how the book is structured according to three aspects of the myth of Perseus. Even subtler ingenuities of

technique are explored in a reading of *Losing Battles* by Seymour Gross and in Michael Kreyling's account of pastoral symbolism in *The Robber Bridegroom*.

An interview with Welty conducted by Raad Cawthon provides an overview of the storyteller's indomitable humor and authentic cultural pride in her region's traditions. The final critical selection, by Patricia Meyer Spacks, adroitly balances the negative and positive uses of gossip in Welty's *Collected Stories* so as to leave us with another vision of Welty's heightened sense of community.

Contents

Editor's Note	vii
Introduction	1
<i>Harold Bloom</i>	
<i>A Curtain of Green</i>	11
<i>Katherine Anne Porter</i>	
Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty	19
<i>Robert Penn Warren</i>	
<i>Delta Wedding</i> as Region and Symbol	29
<i>John Edward Hardy</i>	
✓ The Mysteries of Eudora Welty	45
<i>Ruth M. Vande Kieft</i>	
The Art of Eudora Welty	71
<i>Joyce Carol Oates</i>	
The Onlooker, Smiling: An Early Reading of <i>The Optimist's Daughter</i>	75
<i>Reynolds Price</i>	
Three Tributes	89
<i>Malcolm Cowley</i>	
<i>Walker Percy</i>	
<i>Robert Penn Warren</i>	
✓ Eudora Welty and the Southern Idiom	93
<i>Cleanth Brooks</i>	
✓ Technique as Myth: The Structure of <i>The Golden Apples</i>	109
<i>Daniele Pitavy-Souques</i>	

A Long Day's Living: The Angelic Ingenuities of <i>Losing Battles</i>	119
<i>Seymour Gross</i>	
<i>The Robber Bridegroom</i> and the Pastoral Dream	135
<i>Michael Kreyling</i>	
Eudora Welty's South Disdains Air Conditioning: An Interview	149
<i>Raad Cawthon</i>	
Gossip and Community in Eudora Welty	155
<i>Patricia Meyer Spacks</i>	
Chronology	163
Contributors	167
Bibliography	169
Acknowledgments	171
Index	173

Introduction

I

Eudora Welty divides her remarkable brief autobiography, *One Writer's Beginnings*, into three parts: "Listening," "Learning to See," "Finding A Voice." Gentle yet admonitory, these titles instruct us in how to read her stories and novels, a reading that necessarily involves further growth in our sense of inwardness. Certain of her stories never cease their process of journeying deep into interior regions we generally reserve only for personal and experiential memories. Doubtless they differ from reader to reader; for me they include "A Still Moment" and "The Burning."

Mark Twain has had so varied a progeny among American writers that we hardly feel surprise when we reflect that Welty and Hemingway both emerge from *Huckleberry Finn*. All that Welty and Hemingway share as storytellers is Twain's example. Their obsessive American concern is Huck's: the freedom of a solitary joy, intimately allied to a superstitious fear of solitude. Welty's people, like Hemingway's, and like the self-representations of our major poets—Whitman, Dickinson, Stevens, Frost, Eliot, Hart Crane, R. P. Warren, Roethke, Elizabeth Bishop, Ashbery, Merrill, and Ammons—all secretly believe themselves to be no part of the creation and all feel free only when they are quite alone.

In *One Writer's Beginnings*, Welty comments upon "A Still Moment":

"A Still Moment"—another early story—was a fantasy, in which the separate interior visions guiding three highly individual and widely differing men marvelously meet and converge upon the same single exterior object. All my characters were actual persons who had lived at the same time, who would have been strangers to one another, but whose lives had actually taken them at some point to the same neighborhood. The scene was in the Mississippi wilderness in the historic year 1811—"anno mirabilis," the year

the stars fell on Alabama and lemmings, or squirrels perhaps, rushed straight down the continent and plunged into the Gulf of Mexico, and an earthquake made the Mississippi River run backwards and New Madrid, Missouri, tumbled in and disappeared. My real characters were Lorenzo Dow the New England evangelist, Murrell the outlaw bandit and murderer on the Natchez Trace, and Audubon the painter; and the exterior object on which they all at the same moment set their eyes is a small heron, feeding.

Welty's choices—Lorenzo Dow, James Murrell, Audubon—are all obsessed solitaries. Dow, the circuit rider, presumably ought to be the least solipsistic of the three, yet his fierce cry as he rides on at top speed—"I must have souls! And souls I must have!"—is evidence of an emptiness that never can be filled:

It was the hour of sunset. All the souls that he had saved and all those he had not took dusky shapes in the mist that hung between the high banks, and seemed by their great number and density to block his way, and showed no signs of melting or changing back into mist, so that he feared his passage was to be difficult forever. The poor souls that were not saved were darker and more pitiful than those that were, and still there was not any of the radiance he would have hoped to see in such a congregation.

As Dow himself observes, his eyes are in a "failing proportion to my loving heart always," which makes us doubt his heart. He loves his wife, Peggy, effortlessly since she is in Massachusetts and he is galloping along on the Old Natchez Trace. Indeed, their love can be altogether effortless, consisting as it does of a marriage proposal, accepted as his first words to her, a few hours of union, and his rapid departure south for evangelical purposes, pursued by her first letter declaring that she, like her husband, fears only death, but never mere separation.

This remarkable hunter of souls, intrepid at evading rapacious Indians or Irish Catholics, can be regarded as a sublime lunatic, or merely as a pure product of America:

Soon night would descend, and a camp-meeting ground ahead would fill with its sinners like the sky with its stars. How he hungered for them! He looked in prescience with a longing of love over the throng that waited while the flames of the torches threw change, change, change over their faces. How could he

bring them enough, if it were not divine love and sufficient warning of all that could threaten them? He rode on faster. He was a filler of appointments, and he filled more and more, until his journeys up and down creation were nothing but a shuttle, driving back and forth upon the rich expanse of his vision. He was homeless by his own choice, he must be everywhere at some time, and somewhere soon. There hastening in the wilderness on his flying horse he gave the night's torch-lit crowd a premature benediction, he could not wait. He spread his arms out, one at a time for safety, and he wished, when they would all be gathered in by his tin horn blasts and the inspired words would go out over their heads, to brood above the entire and passionate life of the wide world, to become its rightful part.

He peered ahead. "Inhabitants of Time! The wilderness is your souls on earth!" he shouted ahead into the treetops. "Look about you, if you would view the conditions of your spirit, put here by the good Lord to show you and afright you. These wild places and these trails of awesome loneliness lie nowhere, nowhere, but in your heart."

Dow is his own congregation, and his heart indeed contains the wild places and awesomely lonesome trails through which he endlessly rushes. His antithesis is provided by the murderous James Murrell, who suddenly rides at Dow's side, without bothering to look at him. If Dow is a mad angel, Murrell is a scarcely sane devil, talking to slow the evangelist down, without realizing that the sublimely crazy Lorenzo listens only to the voice of God:

Murrell riding along with his victim-to-be, Murrell, riding, was Murrell talking. He told away at his long tales, with always a distance and a long length of time flowing through them, and all centered about a silent man. In each the silent man would have done a piece of evil, a robbery or a murder, in a place of long ago, and it was all made for the revelation in the end that the silent man was Murrell himself, and the long story had happened yesterday, and the place *bere*—the Natchez Trace. It would only take one dawning look for the victim to see that all of this was another story and he himself had listened his way into it, and that he too was about to recede in time (to where the dread was forgotten) for some listener and to live for a listener in the long ago. Destroy the present!—that must have been the first thing that was whispered in Murrell's heart—the living moment and

the man that lives in it must die before you can go on. It was his habit to bring the journey—which might even take days—to a close with a kind of ceremony. Turning his face at last into the face of the victim, for he had never seen him before now, he would tower up with the sudden height of a man no longer the tale teller but the speechless protagonist, silent at last, one degree nearer the hero. Then he would murder the man.

Since Murrell is capable of observing nothing whatsoever, he does not know what the reader knows, which is that Lorenzo is not a potential victim for this self-dramatizing Satanist. Whatever the confrontation between angel and devil might have brought (and one's surmise is that Murrell might not have survived), the crucial moment is disturbed by the arrival of a third, the even weirder Audubon:

Audubon said nothing because he had gone without speaking a word for days. He did not regard his thoughts for the birds and animals as susceptible, in their first change, to words. His long playing on the flute was not in its origin a talking to himself. Rather than speak to order or describe, he would always draw a deer with a stroke across it to communicate his need of venison to an Indian. He had only found words when he discovered that there is much otherwise lost that can be noted down each item in its own day, and he wrote often now in a journal, not wanting anything to be lost the way it had been, all the past, and he would write about a day, "Only sorry that the Sun Sets."

These three extraordinarily diverse-obsessives share a still moment, in which "a solitary snowy heron flew down not far away and began to feed beside the marsh water." To Lorenzo, the heron's epiphany is God's love become visible. To Murrell, it is "only whiteness ensconced in darkness," a prophecy of the slave, brigand, and outcast rebellion he hopes to lead in the Natchez country. To Audubon it is precisely what it is, a white heron he must slay if he is to be able to paint, a model that must die in order to become a model. Welty gives us no preference among these three:

What each of them had wanted was simply *all*. To save all souls, to destroy all men, to see and record all life that filled this world—all, all—but now a single frail yearning seemed to go out of the three of them for a moment and to stretch toward this one snowy, shy bird in the marshes. It was as if three whirlwinds had drawn together at some center, to find there feeding in peace a snowy

heron. Its own slow spiral of flight could take it away in its own time, but for a little it held them still, it laid quiet over them, and they stood for a moment unburdened. . . .

To quest for *all* is to know anything but peace, and “a still moment” is only shared by these three questers in a phantasmagoria. When the moment ends with Audubon’s killing of the bird, only Lorenzo’s horrified reaction is of deep import or interest. Murrell is content to lie back in ambush and await travelers more innocent, who will suit his Satanic destiny as Lorenzo and Audubon could not. Audubon is also content to go on, to fulfill his vast design. But Lorenzo’s epiphany has turned into a negative moment and though he will go on to gather in the multitudes, he has been darkened:

In the woods that echoed yet in his ears, Lorenzo riding slowly looked back. The hair rose on his head and his hands began to shake with cold, and suddenly it seemed to him that God Himself, just now, thought of the Idea of Separateness. For surely He had never thought of it before, when the little white heron was flying down to feed. He could understand God’s giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time; Lorenzo did that, among his tasks of love. Time did not occur to God. Therefore—did He even know of it? How to explain Time and Separateness back to God, Who had never thought of them, Who could let the whole world come to grief in a scattering moment?

This is a meditation on the verge of heresy, presumably Gnostic, rather than on the border of unbelief. Robert Penn Warren, in a classical early essay on “Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty” (1944), reads the dialectic of Love and Separateness here as the perhaps Blakean contraries of Innocence and Experience. On this reading, Welty is an ironist of limits and of contamination, for whom knowledge destroys love, almost as though love could survive only upon enchanted ground. That may underestimate both Lorenzo and Welty. Pragmatically, Lorenzo has been unchanged by the still moment of love and its shattering into separateness; indeed he is as unchanged as Murrell or Audubon. But only Lorenzo remains haunted by a vision, by a *particular* beauty greater than he can account for, and yet never can deny. He *will* change some day, though Welty does not pursue that change.

II

The truth of Welty's fictive cosmos, for all her preternatural gentleness, is that love always does come first, and always does yield to an irreparable separateness. Like her true mentor, Twain, she triumphs in comedy because her deepest awareness is of a nihilistic "unground" beyond consciousness or metaphysics, and comedy is the only graceful defense against that cosmological emptiness. Unlike Faulkner and Flannery O'Connor, she is, by design, a genial writer, but the design is a subtler version of Twain's more urgent desperation. "A Still Moment," despite its implications, remains a fantasy of the continuities of quest. Rather than discuss one of her many masterpieces of humorous storytelling, I choose instead "The Burning," which flamboyantly displays her gift for a certain grim sublimity, and which represents her upon her heights, as a stylist and narrator who can rival Hemingway in representing the discontinuities of war and disaster.

"The Burning" belongs to the dark genre of Southern Gothic, akin to Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" and O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find." Welty, as historical a storyteller as Robert Penn Warren, imagines an incident from Sherman's destructive march through Georgia. The imagining is almost unrealistic in its complexity of tone and indirect representation, so that "The Burning" is perhaps the most formidable of all Welty's stories, with the kind of rhetorical and allusive difficulties we expect to encounter more frequently in modern poetry than in modern short stories. Writing on form in D. H. Lawrence's stories, Welty remarked on "the unmitigated shapelessness of Lawrence's narrative" and sharply noted that his characters would only appear deranged if they began to speak on the streets as they do in the stories:

For the truth seems to be that Lawrence's characters don't really speak their words—not conversationally, not to one another—they are *not* speaking on the street, but are playing like fountains or radiating like the moon or storming like the sea, or their silence is the silence of wicked rocks. It is borne home to us that Lawrence is writing of our human relationships on earth in terms of eternity, and these terms set Lawrence's form. The author himself appears in authorship in places like the moon, and sometimes smites us while we stand there under him.

The characters of Welty's "The Burning" fit her description of Lawrence's men and women; their silence too is the silence of wicked rocks. Essentially they are only three: two mad sisters, Miss Theo and Miss Myra,

and their slave, called Florabel in the story's first published version (*Harper's Bazaar*, March, 1951). The two demented high-born ladies are very different; Miss Theo is deep-voiced and domineering, Miss Myra gentler and dependent. But little of the story is seen through their eyes or refracted through either's consciousness. Florabel, an immensely passive being, sees and reacts, in a mode not summarized until nearly the end of the story, in its first printed form:

Florabel, with no last name, was a slave. By the time of that moment on the hill, her kind had been slaves in a dozen countries and that of their origin for thousands of years. She let everything be itself according to its nature—the animate, the inanimate, the symbol. She did not move to alter any of it, not unless she was told to and shown how. And so she saw what happened, the creation and the destruction. She waited on either one and served it, not expecting anything of it but what she got; only sooner or later she would seek protection somewhere. Herself was an unknown, like a queen, somebody she had heard called, even cried for. As a slave she was earth's most detached visitor. The world had not touched her—only possessed and hurt her, like a man; taken away from her, like a man; turned another way from her and left her, like a man. Her vision was clear. She saw what was there and had not sought it, did not seek it yet. (It was *her* eyes that were in the back of her head, her vision that met itself coming the long way back, unimpeded, like the light of stars.) The command to loot was one more fading memory. Many commands had been given her, some even held over from before she was born; delayed and miscarried and interrupted, they could yet be fulfilled, though it was safer for one once a slave to hear things a second time, a third, fourth, hundredth, thousandth, if they were to be carried out to the letter. In that noon quiet after conflict there might have been only the two triumphant, the mirror which was a symbol in the world and Florabel who was standing there; it was the rest that had died of it.

The mirror, "a symbol in the world," is in this first version of "The Burning" a synecdoche for the fragmented vision of both mad sisters and their slave. In rewriting the story, Welty uses the mirror more subtly. Delilah (as Florabel is now named) sees Sherman's soldiers and their apocalyptic white horse directly as they enter the house, and she runs to tell Miss Theo and Miss Myra. They deign to look up and observe the intruders in the

mirror over the fireplace. Throughout the rest of the catastrophic narrative, the sisters behold everything that transpires as though in a mirror. Clearly they have spent their lives estranging reality as though looking in a mirror, and they move to their self-destruction as though they saw themselves only as images. The violence that prepares for the burning is thus rendered as phantasmagoria:

The sisters showed no surprise to see soldiers and Negroes alike (old Ophelia in the way, talking, talking) strike into and out of the doors of the house, the front now the same as the back, to carry off beds, tables, candlesticks, washstands, cedar buckets, china pitchers, with their backs bent double; or the horses ready to go; or the food of the kitchen bolted down—and so much of it thrown away, this must be a second dinner; or the unsilenceable dogs, the old pack mixed with the strangers and fighting with all their hearts over bones. The last skinny sacks were thrown on the wagons—the last flour, the last scraping and clearing from Ophelia's shelves, even her pepper-grinder. The silver Delilah could count was counted on strange blankets and then, knocking against the teapot, rolled together, tied up like a bag of bones. A drummer boy with his drum around his neck caught both Miss Theo's peacocks, Marco and Polo, and wrung their necks in the yard. Nobody could look at those bird-corpses; nobody did.

The strangling of the peacocks is a presage of the weirdest sequence in "The Burning," in which Miss Theo and Miss Myra hang themselves from a tree, with Delilah assisting as ordered. It is only when the sisters are dead that we begin to understand that "The Burning" is more Delilah's story than it ever could have been theirs. A baby, Phinny, who had been allowed to perish in the fire (Welty does not allow us to know why), turns out to have been begotten by Miss Theo's and Miss Myra's brother Benton upon Delilah:

The mirror's cloudy bottom sent up minnows of light to the brim where now a face pure as a water-lily shadow was floating. Almost too small and deep down to see, they were quivering, leaping to life, fighting, aping old things Delilah had seen done in this world already, sometimes what men had done to Miss Theo and Miss Myra and the peacocks and to slaves, and sometimes what a slave had done and what anybody now could do to anybody. Under the flicker of the sun's licks, then under its whole blow and blare, like an unheard scream, like an act of mercy gone, as the wall-