EUDORA WELTY

The Necessary Optimist

Eudora Welty's hard-earned comic vision makes her a rare and valuable presence in the American literary procession. Yet her standing as a modern classic should not divert us from the rewards of reading her closely.

by Jay Tolson

Last year was in many ways the best and worst of years for Eudora Welty. Not only did more than the usual number of tributes come her way, all richly deserved for a career of astonishing literary achievement; more pointedly, proof of her achievement—five novels, four collections of short stories (and two previously uncollected stories), nine essays, and a memoir—was brought together in two handsome volumes in the Library of America series, an honor tantamount to canonization and so far accorded no other living American writer.

But the year also had its lows, not the least being the poor health that has kept the 87-year-old writer less "locally underfoot" in her native Jackson, Mississippi, than she ever imagined being. For someone who has derived so much inspiration from the lifeline of gossip, house-bound immobility resulting from advanced arthritis and osteoporosis has been a hard blow—almost as hard as the abandonment of writing gradually forced upon her by those same afflictions.

There were blows of a literary nature as well. Almost inexplicably, none of Welty's works appeared on a curiously assembled (but widely discussed) list of the 100 best English-language novels of the 20th century drawn up last summer by the board of the Modern Library. Although the list was conspicuously short on women writers in general, the omission of Welty prompted at least a few howls of protest and even a defensive explanation from one of the panelists: Welty was more a short story writer than a novelist. That defense might have seemed plausible if such mediocre works as James Dickey's *Deliverance* and Carson McCullers's *Heart is a Lonely Hunter* hadn't edged out any one of at least three novels by Welty that can more legitimately lay claim to distinction: *Delta Wedding* (1946), *Losing Battles* (1970), and *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972).

Lit biz is not literature, of course, but even accounting for lit biz standards and the chromosomal bias of the mostly male panel, the slight seemed to hint at troubles ahead as far as Welty's literary reputation is concerned. A recent *New Yorker* article by Claudia Roth Pierpont suggests that Welty has already "entered the national pantheon as a kind of favorite literary aunt—a living exemplar of the best that a quaint and disappearing Southern society still has to offer." If this deftly condescending characterization is true, Welty is likely to be remembered as the endearing, widely loved spinster writer of Jackson, who,

Eudora Welty *(1988), by Mildred Nungester Wolfe*

remaining in her mother's house, turned out a few remarkable stories, rich in regional dialect and freakish characters, but never attained her artistic majority. Pierpont even goes so far as to conclude that Welty ceased being an "intrepid explorer" and became "a perfect lady—a nearly Petrified Woman—with eyes averted and mouth set in a smile."

Yes, to be sure, there were those novels. But isn't there something a little daunting and unapproachable about them, something decidedly literary in an almost Jamesian sense? Such demurrals are increasingly common, even among some of Welty's admirers. And there we have it: on one hand, cuddly and dear, virtually a state monument, with libraries named after her and even a Mississippi state holiday declared in her honor in 1973; on the other hand, too difficult, too obscure, too literary. It would be hard to concoct a better recipe for oblivion.

This is an odd fate, to say the least, for a writer who was until recently a lively presence on the American literary scene. Though never "easy" and sometimes risk-

ing inclusion in that faintly damning category of "writer's writer," Welty, in her long creative run—roughly from the late 1930s through the early 1970s—acquired a sizable and devoted following. Published in such popular magazines as *Harper's Bazaar*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, and the *New Yorker*, her stories won several successive O. Henry prizes and were included, with almost metronomic regularity, in annual *Best Short Story* collections. The novels didn't exactly fall into black holes either. Even the lesser *Ponder Heart* (1954) was taken as a Book-of-the-Month Club selection, as certain a seal of middle-brow approval as America has. Lacking that promotional boost, the finer, later novel *Losing Battles* outsold *The Ponder Heart* and all of her other fiction. Perhaps most astonishing, her literary curtain call—the beautifully rendered memoir of her writerly stirrings in the bosom of a close and adoring family, *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984)—not only made it to the *New York Times* bestseller list but stayed there for almost a year. Not a bad run for what began as a series of lectures at Harvard University.

The big literary prizes came as relatively late icing on the cake—the Pulitzer, the Gold Medal of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the National Medal for Literature, the American Book Award (twice), the National Book Critics Circle award, and the presidential Medal of Freedom. Even the French got in on the show, first making her a knight in the Ordre des Arts et Lettres and then inducting her into the Legion d'honneur. *Pas mal*, as they say in Paris.

Yet for all that, Welty's reputation is anything but secure. The two-part formula for oblivion is not easy to counter, and though Welty has tried to discourage critics and biographers from making it too easy to see her work as the charming artifact of an endearing personality, one of last year's setbacks was the publication of a biography that comes close to doing just that. Welty could not have made her misgivings any more plain to the would-be biographer, Ann Waldron, when she came through Jackson on the first of several visits. "I want my work to stand on its own," Welty said. In addition to refusing to cooperate, she let her friends know that she disapproved of the project, and none of those friends, laments Waldron in her preface, wanted "to hurt or displease her by talking to her biographer."

The least that can be said of a biography completed under such circumstances is that it is a triumph of determination over formidable odds. It is also, in fairness, a useful book, fleshing out many of the known facts and rendering them in an affectionately respectful way. Yet, despite the book's virtues, there is something frequently flat-footed about Waldron's probing of the motives, feelings, and experiences of her myriad-minded subject, and the result sometimes verges on the kind of reductiveness that Welty feared.

This is nowhere more obvious than in Waldron's handling of what might be called the "ugly duckling" question. Simply put—and it *is* simply put—Waldron reports the testimony of several Jackson contemporaries to the effect that Welty was no beauty, was in fact quite the opposite. "She was ugly to the point of being grotesque," says one anonymous informant, no doubt a former belle. Other informants say similar things, though most are quick to add that Welty charmed everybody despite her looks—after all, she was voted "Best All Round Girl" by her high school senior class.

This is an important matter. Properly explored, it would help explain how Welty became both an insider and an outsider in her native Jackson—both attached to and alienated from a world that could be almost savage in its superficial complacency. But Waldron is reluctant to probe the facts, and that reluctance ends up being as reductive as it is misleading. For though Welty's looks might not have conformed to local debutante standards of beauty—she was tall and ungainly—she

>Jay Tolson, *the editor of the* Wilson Quarterly, *is the author of* Pilgrim in the Ruins *(1992) and also edited* The Correspondence of Shelby Foote and Walker Percy *(1997).*

was anything but ugly, and her wit and humor made her a vivid, attractive presence. Yet Welty knew what she was up against. She felt the verdict of the belles, felt it confirmed in the stinging absence of dates, and to win some share of the popularity that the class beauties enjoyed as their birthright, Welty had to stretch herself, cultivating not only her intelligence and imagination but her quite considerable charm. She was successful, too. But having to earn the regard of her peers this way—and no doubt sometimes sensing a measure of condescension in their affection—must have brought pain. And that raises an obvious question. Why didn't Welty turn bitter and resentful, or at least get out of Jackson and leave it permanently behind? That question may be the central mystery of her life, and the answers lie scattered throughout her work.

Those answers have to do with such qualities as acceptance, forgiveness, and a knowing self-possession, qualities nurtured from Welty's earliest years by loving parents but maintained and refined in the making of her art. This is not to say that Welty's art is in any ultimate, or even important, sense a therapeutic exercise. But it is, among others things, a delicately gentle means of settling scores, of forgiving while rebuking.

Waldron sheds some helpful light on that crucially important family background, but no account is more intimately revealing than Welty's own in *One Writer's Beginnings*. There we learn that her parents were themselves both outsiders and insiders in their community, having settled in Jackson shortly after their marriage in 1904. Eudora's mother, Chestina, was a West Virginia schoolteacher, and her father, Christian, was an Ohio farm boy who had brought his new bride to Jackson so that he could take up a career in the insurance business. By the time Eudora, born in 1909, reached high school, her parents were local pillars. Her father had climbed to the position of vice president and general manager of the Lamar Life Insurance Company, whose new 13-story headquarters seemed to command a view over the whole of Mississippi, and her mother had become a civic dynamo who seemingly chaired every service and arts organization within the city limits.

Utica, Mississippi (this photograph and subsequent ones taken by Eudora Welty)

Yet more valuable to Eudora and her two younger brothers than their parents' worldly standing was the close home life they created—close not only because of the love between them but also because of a shared sense of life's precariousness. Both had lost parents when young,

Christian nearly lost Chestina to an infection following the stillbirth of their first child, and Chestina would lose Christian to leukemia in 1931. Amid the currents of love and protectiveness—Christian even scored the soles of his daughter's new shoes to prevent her from slipping on the hardwood floors—Eudora felt that she lived a charmed childhood, complete with an endless supply of books and enchanted trips to both ancestral homes. Those trips, she writes in *Beginnings*, were "wholes unto themselves"—and, more important, clues to her future vocation:

> They were stories. Not only in form, in their taking on direction, movement, development, change. They changed something in my life: each trip made its particular revelation, though I could not have found words for it. But with the passage of time, I could look back on them and see them bringing me news, discoveries, premonitions, promise—I still can; they still do.

The attention and love of doting parents, particularly those of a strong-willed mother, were not unmixed blessings. Welty sensed early on what a struggle it would be to find and maintain some measure of independence. "It took me a long time to manage . . . for I loved those who protected me—and I wanted inevitably to protect them back. I have never quite managed to handle the guilt. In the act and course of writing stories, these are two of the springs, one bright, one dark, that feed the stream."

Welty did find her way into the larger world, even in high school, where her artistic gifts, quick wit, and charm made her particularly popular among a gaggle of literary types, including a future editor of the *New York Times Book Review*. Welty continued to widen the distance from home, heading off at age 16 to the Mississippi State College for Women, where she studied for two years before transferring to the University of Wisconsin for her last two undergraduate years.

Wisconsin, as well as giving her an excellent grounding in literature, made her mindful of how different the part of the world she came from was. The relative coolness and taciturnity of the midwesterners brought on nostalgia for the gabby sociability of Jacksonians, however small-minded they might be. Though she never took to Madison, Welty clearly found a spiritual home in New York City, where in 1930, determined to write but not to be a teacher, she enrolled in a yearlong advertising program at Columbia Business School. The city was then alive with theater and music, some of the best of the latter being played in the jazz clubs of Harlem, and Welty felt energized. But this liberating interlude did not last. Her father's fatal illness pulled her back to Jackson, and though she tried to return to New York after his death, career uncertainties—it was the Depression, after all—and her mother's need brought her back home for good. In that trajectory of thwarted escape, it is hard not to see the fate of another southern writer, Flannery O'Connor, whose struggle with lupus forced her to return to her home in Milledgeville, Georgia, not long after she had broken away from it. For both writers, personal disappointment proved to be literature's gain, forcing them to come to terms with the worlds they knew best.

If Welty sometimes chafed under the restrictive regime of her domineering mother—who, among other imperious gestures, refused to allow the writer Henry Miller into the house during his pass through Jackson in 1941—she did not sit around moping. Working briefly for a local radio station and then a newspaper, she was soon hired as a publicist for the Works Progress Administration, a job that for two years (1935–36) took her throughout the state interviewing and reporting on people from all walks and stations. It was in many ways an invaluable experience, perhaps the most important of her life. "I realized later what a protected life I'd led," she told an interviewer in 1977. "You know, I thought I'd been so sophisticated in New York, and I didn't know a thing. I didn't know what people were really like until then."

Long an avid photographer, she began to train her camera on those Missis-

"Midway Attractions," Jackson, Mississippi

sippians she had previously barely noticed, poor white hill farmers, black Delta farm workers, touring carny folk, and indigent houseboat dwellers passing their days on the Pearl River. What is remarkable about these pictures—many of which are collected in *Eudora Welty Photographs* (1989)—is not so much the artfulness of composition but the unobtrusive way in which she captures people going about their business, visiting with friends, or idling about their homes. Walker Evans and Dorothea Lange also explored this world of the poor and hard-bitten, but their photographs had a way of transforming their subjects into political and social icons—plain-folk heroes struggling against the conditions of wretched poverty and hardship. One can see signs of that struggle in Welty's photographs as well, but they emerge less forcedly amid the dailiness of her subjects' comings and goings. What one finds in these photographs is a respectful tact, a refusal to presume to say more, or less, about what these lives mean than what the totality of the facts allows. Yes, we see a black man dressed up in his finest clothes, buying a ticket at the "colored entrance" of a downtown Jackson movie theater, but we know what is wrong with this picture without having to be told, because the picture at the same time allows us to see a man who is on his way to a couple of hours of blissful, well-deserved escape.

It is hard to overstate the importance of such tact to Welty's work. It is virtually the hallmark of her fiction. And it certainly characterized the first of her published stories, "Death of a Traveling Salesman," which appeared in the highly regarded magazine *Manuscript* in 1936. Drawing on what she had witnessed in the hard-scrabble hill country, she evokes a sad yet revelatory encounter between a salesman, desperately ill with a fever, and a poor but generous couple who take him in for the evening after his car gets stuck in a ditch. The magic of the story is the way in which Welty allows us inside the mind of the salesman as the scales fall from his eyes and he discovers what he has before him: a man and a woman in love and expecting their first child, a scene of such mutual tenderness and solicitude that the dying salesman cannot fail to see what has eluded him all his life. "Bowman could not speak. He was shocked with knowing what was really in this house. A marriage, a fruit-

ful marriage. That simple thing. Anyone could have had that." The poignant last line captures the salesman's final effort to defuse the power of the revelation, but the truth won't let go of him. He must acknowledge it, as well as his envy and his gratitude, and does so later that evening, not only leaving the last of his money with the couple but, in a final, pathetic gesture of consideration, muffling the sound of his failing heart as he falls to the ground on his attempted return to the car.

Welty's first published stories—some of which were shepherded along by Robert Penn Warren at the newly founded *Southern Review*—quickly drew the attention of New York publishers, who begged Welty to write a novel. Welty, however, was too caught up in the current of story writing to break away from the form, and her newly acquired agent, Diarmuid Russell (son of the Irish poet "A. E."), started placing her work in some of the better-paying magazines. By 1941 she had completed the 14 stories that would appear in *A Curtain of Green*, stories in modes as various as the dramatic repertoire of the touring players in *Hamlet*. Even the brilliant comic monologue, "Why I Live at the P.O.," has a subtle, almost tragic undercurrent, suggestive of the biblical accounts of the petty jealousy and envy that divide the human family, and human families.

For some readers, that first collection marked Welty's artistic high point. In the *New Yorker* essay, for example, Pierpont argues that Welty began her turn toward evasive obscurity after *A Curtain of Green*, not only in the fablelike novella *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) but in her second short story collection *The Wide Net and Other Stories* (1943) and the novel *Delta Wedding* (1946). Drawing on Waldron's research, Pierpont finds a partial explanation for this turn in the relationship between Welty and a man named John Robinson. A long-time friend, the handsome insurance claims adjuster lived and worked in New Orleans while he and Welty embarked upon what appears to have been a purely platonic romance—platonic because, as it turned out, Robinson was homosexual. Both Waldron and Pierpont find evidence of frustration's toll in the peculiar representation of sex in Welty's work: when not altogether missing, it tends to find expression in furtive seduction or outright rape, typically presented in tortured language.

Frustrating as it might have been, the relationship with Robinson went on for many years, and with Welty he shared his fascination with his Delta planter ancestors. Taking her to old family haunts, he even let her read his great-great-grandmother's diary, a reading that directly inspired *Delta Wedding*. It was this aspect of their relationship that Pierpont finds even more destructive of the writer, turning her, Pierpont asserts, into a southern sentimentalist who "spread fairy dust over the cotton fields" and looked away from the "lies and fears" of a corrupt and exploitative system.

What is astonishing about this reading is how closely it echoes the careless assessments of such early, influential critics as Isaac Rosenfield and Diana Trilling, the second of whom found *Delta Wedding* deficient in "moral discrimination." Yet much has intervened since those first profoundly indiscriminate readings, including Welty's own patient attempts to explain the indirect ways of her art (not to mention, in her 1965 essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?," the dangers of overt moralizing). One would think that a critic today would enter Welty's fiction more alert to her subtle but devastating indictments of the ills of southern society—not only the racism and exploitation bound up with slavery and its long aftermath but the class viciousness and snobbery among whites, the disfigurement and rage resulting from so much repressed sexual energy, and the ostentatious cultivation of manners and gentility to muffle many of those darker aspects of life in Dixie. The problem—at least for readers such as Rosenfield, Trilling, and Pierpont—is that Welty refuses to depict these ills in isolation from the rest of the picture, which includes real heroism, beauty, humor, and even the binding power of

enmity and hatred.

So with such elusive works as *The Robber Bridegroom*, one must attend closely to matters of tone or else risk not seeing how this beguiling little fable allegorizes the real (and grim) romance of the rise of the southern gentry just as surely as William Faulkner does, though in a different mode, in *Absalom, Absalom*. The tone is set in the first line: "It was the close of day when a boat touched Rodney's Landing on the Mississippi River and Clement Musgrove, an innocent planter, with a bag of gold and many presents, disembarked." The single adjective of the sentence says it all, and layer upon layer of irony builds out from it. For there is nothing innocent in this world. Everything is taken, stolen, plundered. It is a world of envy, greed, and violation. The novella's "hero," Jamie Lockhart, forcefully deflowers Musgrove's daughter (whom a wicked and envious stepmother has tried to destroy in her own way) long before he marries her and makes himself into a New Orleans gentleman, whose property and house on Lake Ponchartrain are maintained by an army of slaves—thereby learning better than anyone, as the narrator slyly concludes, "that the outward transfer from bandit to merchant had been almost too easy to count it a change at all."

The moral discriminations that Trilling and others found lacking in *Delta Wedding* are, if anything, even sharper in that novel than in *Robber*, though the reader who blinks or turns deaf ears at crucial junctures may miss them. If the novel appears to be an adulatory portrait of the quaint and lovable ways of the "aristocratic" Fairchild family of Shellmound Plantation, it is because the dominant (though not exclusive) narrative perspective is that of the nine-year-old Laura McRaven, who (her mother, a Fairchild, recently deceased) has come to the Delta for the wedding of her cousin Dabney. For Laura, the place and the family have a mythical grandeur, sprinkled quite liberally with fairy dust. Not that she isn't a perceptive girl in many ways. She notes with some astonishment the little cruelties that the Fairchild children insouciantly inflict upon others. But much flies past her, including the fact that her cousin's intended is completely unsuitable in the eyes of most of the Fairchilds.

Of course, it is never explicitly stated that this man, Troy Flavin, the plantation overseer who comes from dirt-poor hill country, is of the wrong class, but the Fairchilds express their disapproval in countless ways—all of which Welty deftly dramatizes without ever putting the point on a placard. For the truth behind the truth is that the Fairchilds know that they need Flavin, and the Flavins of the world, to keep things running and under control, even as they disdain them. Flavin's role is nowhere more dramatically underscored than in the account of his dealings with a black field hand who has slashed two other workers with an icepick and is threatening to hurl his weapon at Flavin:

> "You start to throw at me, I'll shoot you," Troy said.
>
> Root vibrated his arm, aiming, Troy shot the finger of his hand, and Root fell back, crying out and waving at him.
>
> "Get the nigger out of here. I don't want to lay eyes on him."

Witnessing this scene is one of the Fairchild sisters, Shelley, who is afraid to leave through the manager's door now that there's blood on it. "As though the sky had opened and shown her, she could see the reason why Dabney's wedding should be prevented. Nobody could marry a man with blood on his door." But running back to the house along the bayou, Shelley is besieged by dark, conflicting thoughts:

> Shelly could only think in anger of the convincing performance Troy had given as an overseer born and bred. Suppose a real Deltan, a planter, were no more real than that. Suppose a real Deltan only imitated another Deltan. Suppose the behavior of all *men* were actually no more than this—imitation of other men. But it had previously occurred to her that Troy was trying to imitate her father. (Suppose her *father* imitated . . . oh, not he!) Then all men could not know any too well what they were doing.

In scores of other ways, Welty suggests that the world of the planters is seething with discontent, barely suppressed violence, and unnameable passions (Flavin, it is strongly hinted, has impregnated a black servant named Pinchy). More devastating, Welty gives us the spectacle of the endless, delusional preening and self-worship of the Fairchilds themselves. Their fecklessness and vanity are so comically inflated, so elaborately played out in their mannered existence, that they almost endear, as, in similar ways, Chekhov's gentry do. But only almost. To the Fairchilds, other people—and particularly blacks—exist only in terms of what, and how, they do *for* the Fairchilds. There is no more powerful rebuke to their vanity and heedlessness than a character named Aunt Studney, a wizened, half-mad crone—thought to be a witch—who wanders the plantation, carrying a large, mysterious sack and cadging food wherever she can. Encountering a Fairchild, or any other white person, Aunt Studney has only one thing to say: "Ain't studyin' you." There's far more than the fool's brilliance in that line. It sums up her blunt refusal to render the service that the Fairchilds and their ilk demand incessantly of their retainers: their full, undying attention. "Ain't studyin' you" is an emancipation proclamation as powerful as Lincoln's, and the spirit of refusal behind it was spreading rapidly among blacks throughout the Delta during the decade, the 1920s, in which Welty set her novel.

"Tomato-Packers' Recess," Crystal Springs, Mississippi

But is there something about the fiction of Welty that too easily invites the charge of fine writing? Is it an art too much enamored of indirection and poetic implication, and lacking in moral heft or philosophical or spiritual vision?

It is tempting to say no and leave it at that, perhaps adding that Welty's fiction, like all great literature, more truly reads the reader than vice versa. However accurate that may be, it does not forestall a more polite dismissal of Welty's work, one which calls it "classic" and places it on such a lofty pedestal that it becomes, like the work of Henry James, almost unread.

Welty might seem to have made herself a candidate for that dubious honor by hewing so strictly to the exacting procedures of her art, and, above all, by being responsive to what the story, each new story, requires. For Welty, this has consisted of many things. It has always meant that she has had to discover the proper "voice" for each story. Trusting the authority of voice is the lesson she

learned reading and listening to stories in her childhood. "The sound of what falls on the page," she explains in *One Writer's Beginnings*, "begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. . . . When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice." For that reason, among others, her art steadily evolved and changed, never resting with one particular manner or mode.

Another requirement is distance. Finding it, for her, "is a prerequisite of my understanding of human events, is the way I begin work. Just as, of course, it was an initial step when, in my first journalism job, I stumbled into making pictures with a camera. Frame, proportion, perspective, the values of light and shade, all are determined by the distance of the observing eye."

Welty is not a writer who sets out with a clear or fully developed sense of where she is going with a story. She often discovers what she is up to only when she is far along—and sometimes only when others point it out to her. (Her agent, Diarmuid Russell, told her that one of her stories was really the early part of a novel, and indeed it went on to become *Delta Wedding*.) Nor has Welty been one to write about actual people, others or herself, or other people's stories—at least not in any direct, journalistic way. But she is clearly a master at transforming experience into fictional material that is distinctively her own.

What gives her stories their force is her ability to evoke some essential mystery at the heart of her characters' being—a mystery that presents itself through its connections and resonances with other elements of the story, including other characters, action, details of place or atmosphere, certain phrases of dialogue. Talking about one of her own stories in the essay "Writing and Analyzing a Story," she observes, "Above all, I had no wish to sound mystical, but I admit that I did expect to sound mysterious now and then, if I could: this was a circumstantial, realistic story in which the reality *was* mystery. . . . Relationship *is* a pervading and changing mystery; it is not words that make it so in life, but words have to make it so in a story. Brutal or lovely, the mystery waits for people wherever they go, whatever extreme they run to."

Devotion to such a goal in writing may seem like a formula for preciousness or formalism, but it's not. Nor is it subjectivism, in the worst, tirelessly self-regarding sense (which may be considered a shortcoming in an age that worships tell-all memoirs or thinly veiled autobiographical fictions). If Welty believes emotion is the source of a story—whether it be love, pity, or terror—she also holds that each story is instigated "not in subjective country but in the world itself," in "some certain irresistible, alarming (pleasurable or disturbing), magnetic person, place, or thing." For Welty, the instigating elements have been not only the physical places of her home and region but their very specific social realities, and her stories grow out of her characters' varied responses to these circumstantial realities. If there was ever a considerable weakening of her fiction, it was in those stories of *The Bride of Innisfallen* (1955) that are set in foreign locales rather than in the circumstantial reality she knows best. They tend to lack a crucial electrical charge.

Welty did lose some creative propulsion between the mid-1950s and the mid-1960s, largely because of her mother's incapacitation after cataract surgery and illnesses that led to the deaths of her two brothers. But the anguish of the civil rights struggle prompted her to write two of the most directly occasioned stories of her career, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" and "The Demonstrators." The first, written in a furious outpouring right after the killing of civil rights leader Medgar Evers, was an attempt to imagine the mind of the assassin, and it was so uncannily close to the facts that certain details had to be altered in galleys before the story came out in the *New Yorker*. The voice of the imagined killer is hatred pure:

> Then the first thing I hear 'em say was the N. double A. C. P. done it themselves, killed Roland Summers, and proved it by saying the shooting was done by a expert (I hope to tell you it was!) and at just the right hour and minute to get the whites in trouble.
>
> You can't win.

This, you might say, was Welty confronting her beloved, maddening South at its lethal, beastly worst. It is also Welty at her most unflinchingly honest. But the triumph of the totality of her work—and what makes her hard to place in American literature—is a credible optimism that prevails despite her refusal to ignore what is horrible and deadly.

This optimism, this ruthless serenity, is rare in our literature, where Calvinist uncertainty continues to drive brooding and seemingly endless self-scrutiny—a solipsistic exercise that too often ends in tragic hopelessness and despair. Not so with Welty or her work. Though no formal churchgoer (like her parents, who sent their children to Methodist Sunday school but seldom attended services themselves), Welty writes out of a vision that is as firmly comic as that of the great religious writers, including Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy—or, for that matter, Chaucer and Dante. She writes out of a sense of the highest love, of charity, perhaps even to preserve that sense of ultimate hope in the face of so much that would defy it. Even her depiction of the fallen world of the plantation society in *Delta Wedding* moves toward a cautious optimism. Because Dabney Fairchild does finally marry Troy Flavin, there is hope that this working man, so vitally connected to the realities of the world, may finally bring the Fairchilds to recognize the human cost behind the system that supports their idyllic ease.

For Welty, the maintenance of hope has involved repeated reckonings with the circumstantial reality of her life, nowhere more directly than in her novel *The Optimist's Daughter* (1972). Welty's close friend, the novelist Reynolds Price, takes the latter to be her "strongest, richest work," and it is not hard to see why. Finished under the draft title "Poor Eyes" only five months after the deaths of her mother and brother in January 1966 and published first in the *New Yorker* in 1969, the novel is a work of pristine spareness but endlessly ramifying implication. "If the early work is classic," Price says, "this might be medieval—in its fullness of vision, depth of field, range of ear. Jesus *and* goblins. Macbeth *and* the porter. There is no sense however of straining for wholeness, of a will to 'ripeness,' no visible girding for a major attempt."

What we have is the story of Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow living in Chicago who has come south to New Orleans to be with her father, Judge McKelva, as he prepares to undergo an operation on one of his eyes. Laurel's mother having died a few years earlier, the Judge has taken a new bride, a woman named Fay. Of distinctly lower-class origins and younger even than Laurel, she is crude, overbearing, almost savage in her insistence upon *her* needs, *her* rights. As the Judge's recovery from the seemingly successful retina surgery goes from bad to worse, Fay's nerves and patience fray—until, on her birthday, in a desperate moment at the hospital, she shakes her prostrate husband, shouting "I tell you, enough is enough!" A nurse pulls her away, but soon after the incident the Judge dies.

The aftermath of the death—Laurel and Fay's return to the family home in Mount Salus, Mississippi, for the funeral and the ordering of affairs—is the novel's core, as Laurel attempts to make sense not only of her father and his second wife but of her complicated mother (the details of whose West Virginia childhood and early adult years are patterned almost exactly after those of Welty's mother) and, ultimately, herself. Going through letters and photograph albums, Laurel comes to see more clearly the complexity of her mother's loving demands on her husband, and how the painfulness of her dying could have led him to seek the animal vitality of his second wife Fay. Laurel even finds a way of accepting, if not liking, Fay.

This happens after they almost come to blows over a breadboard that Laurel's husband, Philip (killed in World War II), had made for her mother, and

which Laurel finds in badly abused condition. As they argue over the board, all of Laurel's resentments of Fay come tumbling forth. "My mother . . . predicted you," Laurel says. "But your mother, she died a crazy!" Fay retorts. Laurel then lets loose with the strongest charge, that Fay killed her father, but Fay, a force as insistent as the weather, comes back, "I was trying to scare him into living!"—and even more viciously counterattacks, "I was being a wife to him! Have you clean forgotten by this time what being a wife is?"

Laurel explains that it was Philip who had made the breadboard and that she wants to take it back to Chicago to try her mother's bread recipes on it. "And then who'd eat it with you?" Fay asks. Laurel starts to talk wistfully about how Philip used to love bread, but Fay interrupts most savagely, "Your husband? What's he got to do with it? He's dead, isn't he?"

Laurel, at the height of her vulnerability, suddenly sees how much more vulnerable Fay is, how she is no more than a child. Lacking memory or imagination, she is truly incapable of fighting back. Laurel could prevail easily at this moment, because she senses her antagonist's fear, but somehow the memory of one of Fay's nephews, a sweet boy named Wendell who had come to the funeral with the rest of Fay's Texas family, brings her up short. Memory, vulnerable as it is to assault, becomes an active force of forgiveness. And the fact that Laurel's precious memory of her long-deceased Philip—which she cannot deny has removed her too much from life—can be so vulnerable to attack is paradoxically strengthening: "The memory can be hurt," Laurel reflects, "time and again—but in that may lie its final mercy. As long as it's vulnerable to the living moment, it lives for us, and while it lives, and while we are able, we can give it up its due."

The fact that Welty's biographer deems this "not a joyous story" and says that to read it, as she does, "as a reflection of Eudora's life is to be moved to despair," shows just how easily Welty's optimism can be mistaken for its opposite. Waldron fails to see that Laurel prevails precisely because she has the imagination to understand, and thus to accept, even life's unthinking, raw brutality. This is not prettying things over. Welty did not win the regard of her admirers, not even her fellow Mississippians, by behaving nicely and producing reassuring pictures. She is admired for seeing justly. And to see justly is to put in perspective. This is the formula of Welty's hard-earned optimism, and also the reason for its necessity.