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**“Intertextuality and Female Identity in Eudora Welty’s *The Golden Apples*”**

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This essay aims at analyzing the strategies Welty draws upon to structure *The Golden Apples* as a short-story cycle. In the tradition of the local color writing, the seven short stories relate the fate of the inhabitants of a small town, Morgana, over the span of a few decades. Numerous echoes permeate this work, which quotes and rewrites several canonical texts, questioning gender roles and suggesting new models of female agency.

Welty responds to classical sources, including the myths of Atalanta and the golden apples, Perseus and Medusa (a recurring reference), and Zeus’ adventurous rapes (Danae and Leda), Celtic myths (namely the topographic reference to Fata Morgana), and Christian themes. Besides, some paradigmatic modernist texts are revised, such as T.S.Eliot’s *The Waste Land*, James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, and William Faulkner *The Sound and the Fury*. W.B. Yeats’ poem “The Song of the Wandering Aengus” provides the motif of the journey that leads both female and male protagonists to move through memories and communal stories — thematizing the art of storytelling —, in a quest rooted in the geographical and literary landscapes evoked.

In *One Writer’s Beginning* (OWB, 1984), her autobiography, Welty refers to the composition of *The Golden Apples* (1949) as a revelation of common threads that united apparently independent stories. Not only were characters the same but they shared similar motives and aspirations, which prompted her to place them in one location—Morgana—and to further these ties by mythological references to “gods and heroes that wander in various guises, at various times,

in and out, emblems of the characters' heady dreams" (Eudora Welty, OWB, 108). The topographic allusion to *Fata Morgana* underlines the illusory nature of experience and the tenuous boundaries between fantasy and reality, pointing to the author's lyrical impulse and to her organic use of myth. On the other hand, the title *The Golden Apples* refers to the myth of Atalanta and (through Yeats) to the Celtic god of love, Aengus, symbolizing the distractions that may keep us from our goals and the unending human quest for inspiration.

In several interviews, Welty recognizes the important role played by myth and fairy tales in her writing and stresses her effort to integrate these elements in the texture of daily life, making sure they fit the realistic surface of the narrative while opening the possibility of metaphorical readings (Peggy Prenshaw, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, CON, 189, 224, 313). *The Golden Apples* is the author's work that more evidently effects the temporalization of myth, especially through the strategy of storytelling, associated with the female linguistic community and with the oral traditions of black culture.<sup>i</sup> Indeed, this book establishes a dialogue that interweaves Celtic, Greco-Roman and Christian myths, fairy tales, musical themes, silent movies and canonical texts from Yeats, Faulkner, and Joyce, among other sources. Furthermore, intertextuality is one of the main connective devices drawn upon to structure *The Golden Apples* as a short-story cycle and it constitutes the basis for a revision of the prerogative of male heroism, exposing the cultural nature of gender identity and the problematic position of the female artist.<sup>ii</sup>

In "Shower of Gold," the opening story, the first-person narrator Katie elaborates upon the mythic status of King MacLain, the community's prince charming and official wanderer, turned into the muse of her tale, in a reversal of the role traditionally reserved for female subjects. In the continuity of the local color writing of women authors such as Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman, Welty recurs to vernacular dialect and contextualizes the narrative by referring to the daily chores performed by Katie as she weaves her story.<sup>iii</sup> "Sure I can churn and talk," she confides to the narratee, identified as a passer-by in a metaliterary reference which equates the reader with a traveler and the exegetic process with

a journey, a metaphor Welty extends to the process of writing itself (Eudora Welty, *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty*, CS, 263).

From the beginning the question of authorship is thematized, as Katie combines and rephrases several voices into a polyphonic texture that celebrates the matriarchal power in the small town and simultaneously betrays its limitations, since she is confined to Morgana and must rely on the information transmitted by several male characters concerning King's whereabouts. As the female author surrogate, Katie is acutely aware that narratives are shaped by the particular circumstances of the verbal interactions in which they occur (namely the status of the speakers) and need to be questioned, for "Everybody [has] their own visioning" (CS, 268).

In fact, "Shower of Gold," does propose a different "vision" of the Danäe myth evoked by its title, offering a variant of the traditional rape plot, since Snowdie (a modern albino version of Snow White who parodies the rhetorical strategies of fairy tales) is empowered by her pregnancy, which occurs after an encounter with her husband King under a certain tree familiar to many women in town (an allusion to sacred trees connected to Celtic fertility rites). Enraging the other women who expected her to protest (could this be a playful reference to Welty's refusal to engage openly in the feminist political agenda?) Snowdie seems to become self-contained, concentrated on her domestic domain and on a different kind of waiting, related to gestation.

This change can be read in her physical frame, in the subtle difference that marks her daily gestures, which introduces a fundamental motif in *The Golden Apples*—the concept of body as text shaped by mundane occurrences and potentially deciphered by attentive readers, in antithesis to the grandiose actions of the heroic male, whose body becomes reduced to an abstraction of those qualities it represents. For instance, the last scene of "Moon Lake" portrays the stereotyped postures of male vaunting (implicitly associated with Perseus), when Loch, the Boy Scout who acts as life saver, is stripped by the gaze of two of the girls attending Summer Camp. Although Welty modalizes the girls' point of view, their suppositions deflate the male heroic stature, as the following excerpt shows:

“Hadn’t he surely, just before they caught him, been pounding his chest with his fists? Bragging of himself? It seemed to them they could still hear in the beating air of night the wild tattoo of pride he must have struck off” (CS, 373).

Curiously, Loch was introduced in “June Recital” as a voyeur who presents the actions observed in the now vacant MacLain house, using the narrative frames of cowboy adventures and silent movies; his imaginative perspective transfigures reality and contrasts with his sister Cassie’s point of view. This one allows the reader to identify the old woman busy decorating the empty front room as Miss Eckhart, the German piano teacher who had long ago been ostracized by the town, since she did not match any of the expectations defined by the local female community, evoked throughout the cycle as a Greek Chorus. Miss Eckhart (presented by Welty in OWB as her authorial voice) is the archetypal artist, whose androgynous nature emerges in a special occasion when she plays so passionately that her features change, crossing the boundaries between the human and the natural worlds: “Miss Eckhart assumed an entirely different face (...) The face could have belonged to someone else—not even a woman, necessarily. It was the face a mountain could have, or what might be seen behind the veil of a waterfall. (...) it was a sightless face, one for music only” (CS, 300-301).

Now deranged, Miss Eckhart prepares a last recital, but while trying to burn down the stage of her past glories (the house where she used to have her studio), her hair catches fire, a literalization that parodies Yeats’ “The Song of the Wandering Aengus,” evoked in fragments throughout the story and recollected by the female focalizer in the liminal stage that precedes sleep: “Into her head flowed the whole of the poem (...) All of it passed through her head, through her body. She slept, but sat up in bed once and said aloud, “*Because a fire was in my head.*” Then she fell back unresisting” (CS, 330). According to several critics, who base their interpretation mainly on Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*, the recital alluded to in the title of this story corresponds to a ritual celebration of the Summer solstice common in several mythologies, and its apocalyptic repetition underlines the paradoxical position of the woman artist, here associated with a silenced Sybil

and with a Gorgon humiliated and defeated by two men who seem to come from a slapstick comedy (Patricia Yager, "Because a Fire Was in My Head": Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination," 577-585; Rebecca Mark, *The Dragon's Blood. Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples*, DB, 51-94). Apparently undefeated by convention is Virgie, Miss Eckhart's most gifted student, whose last performance in the June recital is symbolically associated with blood. Yet Virgie's inferior social status and her independent spirit make her an outsider, which leads the other Morganan adolescents to add in mockery the teacher's words of praise to her first name, turning it into "Virgie *Danke schoen*" and thus reinforcing her bond with the excluded foreign artist. Welty recognizes the centrality of this pair of characters in her work and considers that "Virgie, at her moments, might have always been my subject," implying that she sought to develop in her fiction a strong female figure, capable of inheriting both King's vitality and Miss Eckhart's artistic temperament (OWB, 111).

In fact, Virgie experiences the focal epiphany of *The Golden Apples* at the end of "The Wanderers," perceiving the doubleness of reality and the nature of time—at once repetitive in its patterns and continuous in what would be best represented by a spiral movement.<sup>iv</sup> After having fulfilled her duty of devotion towards her mother (Elizabeth Evans, 60-63), whose funeral congregates the Morganans allowing Welty to summarize the characters' lives, Virgie decides to leave, realizes that her identity may be defined through movement—"Could she ever be, would she be, where she was going?" (CS, 459). Then she evokes a picture from Europe kept in Miss Eckhart's studio "over the dictionary, dark as that book"—Perseus holding the head of Medusa, an illustration of the misogynistic myth that intertwines the various stories in the cycle (CS, *idem*).

What Virgie understands is the equivalence between the hero and the victim, their interchangeable roles revealing the confluence of all opposites. Besides, she is able to recognize the repetitive pattern of this situation and to place it in the temporal flux, stressing the universal validity of the mythic narrative, beyond historical contingency. On a metaliterary level, Welty refers to the writer's stance towards tradition, it being significant that the aforementioned image came from

the Old Continent and happens to be associated with the dictionary, a prescriptive linguistic instrument. In other words, the woman artist needs to acknowledge the authority of the creators preceding her, in order to be able to integrate and rephrase her inheritance, which accounts for the fact that Miss Eckhart “had hung the picture on the wall for herself. She had absorbed the hero and the victim and then, stoutly, could sit down to the piano with all Beethoven ahead of her” (CS, 460).

This is precisely what Welty does with the texts of her male precursors, establishing intertextual links that pay homage to and simultaneously rephrase their works. Such is the case with “Sir Rabbit,” another revision of the rape plot that integrates textual fragments from Yeats’ “Leda and the Swan,” while associating King/Zeus with the folk ballad referred to in the title of the story. The female character Mattie Will Sojourner seeks an encounter with the town’s mythic seducer and “embarks on a journey” against the conventions of marriage. Thus she acquires a renewed agency by sharing the heroic male’s attributes, for she manages to “put on his knowledge with his power,” quoting Yeats, that Welty echoes in the following excerpt—“She had to put on what he knew with what he did (...) Like submitting to another way to talk, she could answer to his burden now”(CS, 338).<sup>v</sup>

“The Whole World Knows” also deals with notions of (in)fidelity, in a first-person monologue by Ran MacLain (one of King’s sons) who mentions the town’s gossip without being able to integrate it in his own discourse, in clear contrast to Katie’s posture in the first story. This story effects a parody of the Quentin section of Faulkner’s *The Sound and the Fury*, since in both texts the male protagonists address their father confessing their inability to control a woman’s body (Rebecca Mark, DB, 145-174). Commenting on the double moral standards applied to male and female behavior and alluding to the Southern man’s emasculation provoked by the Civil War, Welty builds up a liberal and pragmatic female Chorus that advises Ran not to dramatize his wife’s infidelity, admonishing him to forgive her (following his mother Snowdie’s example towards his father) and move on with life.

The next story, “Music from Spain,” portrays a marital crisis, too; it focuses on Ran’s twin, Eugene, who spends a day wandering through the streets of San Francisco in the company of a foreign artist that will guide him to Land’s End, a journey into the Underworld. Set in the densely textual world of urban popular culture, the story is permeated with several intertextual links, namely the references to Madame Blavatsky (Yeats’ mentor and founder of the theosophy movement), Fritz Lang’s *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, and the myth of Atalanta; but mostly, this short story has been compared to the *Odyssey* and to Joyce’s *Ulysses*. In fact, the action of moving itself seems to generate meaning, even though the chaos that Eugene faces is mainly connected to his rigid conceptions of race and gender, which will be unsettled by some chance encounters in the multi-ethnic crowd and by the homoerotic nature of his relationship with the Spaniard artist, in a landscape that mirrors T.S.Eliot’s wasteland.

To conclude, I would like to focus on two Biblical allusions, among many others, concerning the figure of Christ, twice associated with female characters: Easter and Virgie. In “Moon Lake,” the orphan Easter, addressing an incredulous audience of girls proud of their inherited names, proclaims to have had the power to name herself—“And I named myself / ‘How could you? Who let you?’ / ‘I let myself name myself’” (CS, 357). Ironically, she falls into the maternal waters of the lake and is resurrected by the (overtly sexual) life-saving maneuvers of the Boy Scout Loch, as if to prove that self-genesis is impossible and that any initiation ritual must be rooted in the flesh.<sup>vi</sup>

In “The Wanderers” Virgie’s identity is also at stake, for not only is she compared to her dead mother (deified in the storytelling that takes place during the wake), but she is confronted with the female community’s expectations about the domestic roles she should play. Virgie is indirectly associated with Christ the moment before she is cornered by one of the women, “grimacing out of the iron mask of the married lady,” and hastily entreated to stop wasting time and marry soon, when the narrator comments that “the burns and scars on Virgie’s hands (...) [were made] *stigmata* of something at odds with her womanhood,” implying

that the community crucifies the female protagonist for her audacity (CS: 444-445 and 444, respectively, my italics).

Going back to the metaliterary level makes us wonder whether Welty is not underscoring the resistance to female heroism so pervasive in Western culture. Still, we last see the female protagonist, at the end of *The Golden Apples*, on the verge of moving, under the tree of life in the company of a black vagrant, in communion with the universe: "Then she and the old beggar woman, the old black thief, were there alone together in the shelter of the big public tree, listening to the magical percussion. The world beating in their ears. They heard through the falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon's crusty slither, and the glimmer and trumpet of the swan" (CS, 461).

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<sup>i</sup> In “Recovering Otherness in *The Golden Apples*,” Susan V. Donaldson points out that storytelling defines the configuration of power and the boundaries between same and other in a given community, arguing that *The Golden Apples* resorts to carnival elements (in the Bakhtinian sense) in order to subvert traditional hierarchies: 489-506.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomas L. MacHaney maintains that *The Golden Apples* is structured as a short-story cycle on a formal and thematic level, listing all the devices that Welty uses for that purpose, such as recurrent imagery, dream patterns, daily rhythms, songs, natural cycles and the topic of the journey, “Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples”: 589-624, and “Falling into Cycles: *The Golden Apples*”: 173-189.

<sup>iii</sup> In *The Heart of the Story. Eudora Welty’s Short Fiction*, Peter Schmidt points out several other features that unite Welty to the tradition of American women’s literature, such as the parody of the conventions of the sentimental romance and its definition of womanhood, and the recurrence of the Sybil and the Medusa motives: 204-265.

<sup>iv</sup> In “Morgana’s Apples and Pears,” Merrill Maguire Skaggs suggests that Virgie’s conception of time is rooted in the notion of everyday heroism, antithetical to the male isolated heroic act: 220-241.

<sup>v</sup> For a summary of the criticism concerning the real or imaginary status of Mattie’s narratives see “Realities in “Sir Rabbit”: A Frame Analysis,” by Daun Kending, 119-132.

<sup>vi</sup> In *Eudora Welty: A Study of the Short Fiction*, Carol Ann Johnston points out the complementary nature of gender identity in “Moon Lake”: 74-105. Based on the scene of Easter misspelling her name, Rebecca Mark, DB, proposes a parallelism between Easter and “the Queen Esther in the Old Testament, the strong woman who had no mother and no father. (...) Easter/Esther’s spelling reveals the woman’s story [absent from] the New Testament”: 125.