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“We need to write with love”: Welty’s Political View during the Civil Rights Years

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Reconciliation does not mean to sign an agreement with duplicity and cruelty. Reconciliation opposes all forms of ambition, without taking sides. Most of us want to take sides in each encounter or conflict. We distinguish right from wrong based on partial evidence gathered directly or by propaganda and hearsay. We need indignation in order to act, but indignation alone is not enough, even righteous, legitimate indignation. Our world does not lack people willing to throw themselves into action. What we need are people who are capable of loving, of not taking sides so that they can embrace the whole of reality. (Hanh, *The Sun My Heart*, 128-129)

Eudora Welty wrote the essay “Must the Novelist Crusade?” in 1965, at the height of the Civil Rights movement, just two years after publishing “The Demonstrators,” a short story that also dealt with its contemporary context of production, something highly unusual in the writer’s canon. To characterize Welty’s stance in the historical moment under consideration I will focus on both texts, relating them to other sources whenever I find it productive and mutually illuminating. Taking into account that the author’s theoretical remarks emphasize the equivalence of the writing and reading processes, I will apply the motto cited in the title of this essay to my exegetic endeavors and read with love, highlighting the affirmative quality of this short story and the compassionate political view expressed in this essay.

“Must the Novelist Crusade?” propounds empathy as the mode for producing and deciphering fiction, endowing the creative process with ontological, gnosiological, and moral implications. As a Southern writer facing the anger of both the white supremacists and the Northern self-conscious integrationists, Welty was deeply affected by the destructiveness of the ideological war that tore the country apart. In this seminal essay the author

maintains that even if the novelist and the crusader share the same instrument, language, their functions are radically different. Adopting a gentle irony, the writer starts by circumscribing the radical differences between literary and interventionist texts. On the one hand, fiction reveals the universal beauty and mystery of the human heart, it springs from courage and imagination, it portrays the individual integrated in a community, molded by an organic relation to the whole cosmos and it is an act of love. On the other hand, the crusading novel is bound to a very particular historical moment, it erases ambiguity, for it obeys a restrictive ideological agenda, it fosters divisionism, dealing with “people not like us” (806) and it follows a Manichean logic, devoid of “inward emotion” (807).

Ultimately, the rhetoric of political correctness would lead to a totalitarian text, since the moral principles governing the righteous are similar:

And what, then, is to keep all novels by right-thinking persons from being pretty much alike? Or exactly alike? There would be little reason for present writers to keep on, no reason for the new writers to start... we might guess the reason the young write no fiction behind the Iron Curtain is the obvious fact that to be acceptable there, all novels must conform, and so must be alike, hence valueless. If the personal vision can be made to order, then we should lose, writer and reader alike, our own gift for perceiving, seeing through the fabric of everyday to what to each pair of eyes on earth is a unique thing... We should not even miss our vanished novelists. And if ever life became not worth writing fiction about, that... would be the first sign that it wasn't worth living. (807-808)

In the Cold War period, Welty deliberately politicizes her argument, speculating about the creative conditions in the socialist regimes and implicitly comparing the mid-sixties coercive interventionism in the USA to the censorship experienced by artists in totalitarian states. She then enumerates the consequences of the demagogical imperative: it fractures the generational dynamics of artistic creativity, it violates individual freedom and the right to self-expression, it poses a threat to the vital impulse that feeds imagination, making life “[un]worth living.” In the excerpt “vision” refers to the individual’s “unique” perspective and also to the community of “visions,” to the relational process of artistic communication, deriving from love, “the *source* of... understanding”

(812) that inspires the writer to create out of “abundance” (813), in “sympathy for the human condition” (812).ⁱ

Welty’s empathy informs both her writing and her photographs and it presupposes a humanitarian ethics of compassion, encompassing all human beings in their utter singularity. Moreover, her fictional universe is grounded on a holistic philosophy, akin to Buddhism, that “intimates the essential wholeness, not just of art, but of life, even while recognizing that her characters usually see only fragments” (Carson xiii).ⁱⁱ The creative mind will be the tool to apprehend totality because it is able to perceive both union and distinction, making “traditional opposites exist in polar unity” (Carson viii) and subverting the dualist paradigm prevalent in Western thought since the Greek atomists. In reality, this other way of knowing does not come from detached analysis but stems from comprehension, in its etymological sense of “*tak*[ing] something and *join*[ing] *together* with it” (Hanh 34), thus abolishing the barriers between subject and object and conceiving knowledge as a process of participation (not mere codification) and an ultimate encounter with mystery.ⁱⁱⁱ The notion of interconnectedness extends to the entire cosmos, where “every part belongs inseparably to a larger whole” (Carson xi), disturbing the boundaries between static categories, such as the human and the natural realms, and introducing a complex non-linear temporality.^{iv}

The fact that both Welty’s writing and her photographs reflect the same philosophical perspective demands for an inclusive methodological approach to her legacy, considering this “complex system” of verbal and visual texts in their dynamics of “reciprocal intelligibility” (Chouard “Retina of Time” 19). In fact, the artist’s photographic practice had a considerable impact on her fiction because it influenced its narrative strategies and it revealed its major thematic strands, helping the writer to understand the compassionate nature of her artistic purpose. In the preface to *One Time, One Place* (OTOP), a volume of photographs first published in 1971 that Pitavy-Souques considers to be the author’s answer to the Northern militants’ criticism of her apparently apolitical posture (41), Welty confides that her camera made her realize that her life mission “would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other’s presence, each other’s wonder, each other’s human plight” (12). Welty’s

photographs (yet to be studied in their totality) may thus be considered a “sketchbook” (Pitavy-Souques 34, Kempf 37) illustrating the development of the author’s mature vision and accounting for some of the distinctive traits of her fiction, namely: i) the use of epiphany and the careful framing of precise visual scenes in a narrative structured by a cumulative effect; ii) the lively Southern individuals and communities portrayed in her texts; iii) the author’s empathy towards all her characters, revealing their uniqueness and celebrating human connectedness.

Most of the pictures included in *OTOP, Photographs* (Ph, 1989) and (to a lesser extent) *Eudora Welty as Photographer* (EWP, 2009) are centered on the Mississippian black community and were taken between 1929-1936, the period when Welty started her career as a fiction writer. These images constitute a clear political statement because they thematize racial (di)vision framing the black population, paradoxically invisible in the Jim Crow era, i.e. unrepresentable except by stereotypes (Pollack “Round Table” 49). Though apparently inscribed in the grammar of racial imagery informing the FSA typology, defined by specific thematic approaches (“laboring bodies... poverty of the wounded proletarian... the noble agrarian” [*idem*]), Welty’s photographs transcend this script, for they “[bring] African American beauty and imaginative play into focus... [as sites of] resistance to racial degradation” (Pollack “Round Table” 50). Having been captured from the privileged position of a white viewer in the Southern historical context during the 1930s, these images nonetheless confer agency to the subjects portrayed, suggesting a partnership in composition.^v In stark contrast with the FSA anthropological and mostly demagogical parameters, Welty’s presence is not intrusive and she chose not to decontextualize neither universalize her subjects, individuals immersed in their daily context. In general, these photographs: i) show oblique (not frontal) perspectives and are unposed; ii) have met with the subjects’ explicit or implicit consent (Welty “Preface” 9);^{vi} iii) value individual stamina and joy in the face of adversity.

We may thus see these African American individuals “looking through... Welty’s lens into the ‘60s and ‘70s” (MacNeil 11), since they are represented with the proud dignity that their descendants reclaimed a few decades later. The artist’s deliberate “resistance to racial degradation” is especially clear in the

couple of short stories written during the Civil Rights period and published by *The New Yorker* in 1963 and 1966— “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” and “The Demonstrators.” The first text was composed at one sitting on the night of the black Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers’ assassination in Jackson and came (exceptionally) out of “anger,” but it hyperbolizes Welty’s empathy, her capacity of “entering into the mind and inside the skin of [her] character[s],” since she chose to incarnate the assassin telling his own version of the event.^{vii} “The Demonstrators,” in contrast, “[seems] more a response to the general tenor of the times than to a specific inciting event” (Pingatore 406) though it also alludes to contemporary political facts, such as the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement.^{viii} Set in Holden, Mississippi, a small-town marked by violence and stricture, as its toponomy indicates, it describes a middle-aged white doctor’s Saturday night tending to an old schoolteacher and to a black woman mortally wounded by her lover, who ends up dying in the protagonist’s presence too. The last section of the text foregrounds the racial prejudices inherent in the hegemonic discursive configurations, contrasting a reportorial biased newspaper account with the main narrative’s telling of the same story, an option that accentuates the text’s self-reflexivity.

Interestingly enough, some of the characters, sceneries, and situations in “The Demonstrators” were probably inspired by earlier encounters registered in Welty’s photographs. The story describes the black neighborhood of a Southern small-town and the domestic intimacy of one of its families in a tragic moment. It details the architecture of the houses, documented in several pictures taken in Jackson (Ph 61, 85), describes the synergy between neighbors and family members, testified by several photographs that show the affinity between siblings (Ph 49, 50, 53), the mother-child bonds (Ph 37, 43), and the lively interactions taking place on the porches (Ph 38, 39, 40 and EWP 36) or on the front yards (Ph 59). The narrative also highlights the importance of the local church in the segregated society, comparing it to “a bedroom” (742), a space of introspection and peace amidst the tumultuous political context, and referring to “the sounds of music and dancing [coming from it] habitually” (*idem*), which brings to mind Welty’s series about the Holiness Church, portraying its members proudly posing for the camera or performing a ritualistic ceremony (Ph 104, 106, 107, 105). Indeed, religious institutions and its leaders played an

instrumental role in the black community's cohesion, a fact again emphasized when one of the character's impending death is described, in opposition to the sick white characters' isolation, as a shared passage accompanied by the preacher of the Holy Gospel Tabernacle, a "small black man... wearing heeltaps on his shoes" (741) that could be associated with yet another of Welty's photographs (Ph 29). To conclude the dialogue between the artist's visual legacy and this short story, I would like to quote two other photographs referring to specific details in the narrative—the pet guinea pigs (Ph 18), and the ice pick turned into a potential weapon (Ph 12), humorously brandished by a bootlegger in this particular photograph (Welty "Preface" 9 and "Welty and Photography" xxv).

Notwithstanding that "The Demonstrators" won the O. Henry Prize for 1968, it has not received much critical attention, and so far its readings have mainly explored the narrative's tension, bleakness and despair (Harrison, Mark, Romines, Yaeger). Accepting Welty's challenge to read with love, I aim to point out the affirmative quality of this story, simultaneously opening it up to an intertextual dialogue with some of the author's texts. I will highlight the story's politics of empathy and develop Ferguson's argument that the text's "play of cognitive dissonances" (45), diction and imagery connote love and hope, not only despair and bitterness.^{ix}

Set in a referentially bounded context, a stylistic marker with deliberate political intentions, as we have seen, the story opens with the third person narrator presenting the protagonist through his professional title. Significantly, it is going to be Miss Marcia Pope, his old schoolteacher now bedridden, that names him: "Richard Strickland? I have it on my report that Irene Roberts is not where she belongs. Now which of you wants the whipping?" (733);^x the impotent call to authority by someone who "had a seizure every morning before breakfast" (idem) in the narrator's humorous tone, makes this character somehow pathetic. But I believe we should read Miss Pope in the light of other heroic teacher figures in the author's fiction, namely Miss Julia Mortimer in *Losing Battles* and Miss Eckhart in the *Golden Apples*. Besides, it is striking that the excerpt describing the old lady closely resembles the passage in *One Writer's Beginnings* that refers to Mrs. Welty's last years, when confined to bed she still recited poetry: "Reciting her voice took on resonance and firmness, it

rang with the old fervor, with ferocity even. She was teaching me one more, almost her last, lesson: emotions do not grow old.” (894). Miss Pope had also “retained her memory” (608) and “The more forcefully [she] declaimed, the more innocent grew her old face—the lines went right out” (*idem*). In both extracts the passion for literature is associated with strength in the face of adversity, with the impulse towards vitality that Welty praises in her preface to *OTOP*—“Trouble, even to the point of disaster, has its pale, and these defiant things of the spirit repeatedly go beyond it, joy the same as courage” (10). Furthermore, Miss Marcia Pope is said to “ [have] carried, for forty years, a leather satchel bigger than the doctor’s bag” (733), a detail that asserts the teacher’s heavier professional responsibilities, subtly dislocating the site of power from the medical (mostly male) to the pedagogical (mostly female) realm.

So far the doctor seems to be shielded by routine, dealing with familiar situations in a somewhat detached (if diligent) manner, but soon he will begin a journey into the Underworld, guided by an unknown child into the black neighborhood, lying in complete darkness due to a power failure, the only light coming from the hell-like “vast shrouded cavern of the gin” (734). Unable to elicit any answers from the child, he drives through a surrealistic landscape where even the relative weight of the elements seems inverted: “His car lights threw into relief the dead goldenrod that stood along the road and made it look heavier than the bridge across the creek” (*idem*). The mystical quality of this midnight encounter is accentuated through the *chiaroscuro*, a technique borrowed from the visual arts that establishes an extreme contrast between dark and light areas in order to create a dramatic effect, which Welty appreciated in Goya’s oeuvre.^{xi} While it provides a visually accurate narrative surface, the *chiaroscuro* also plays a symbolic function, underlining the racial and economic boundaries that separate the doctor from his patient. This strategy is foregrounded when the protagonist self-consciously contrasts his white hand with the prevailing black skin that surrounds him, once he is inside the dying woman’s house: “The nipples of her breasts cast shadows that looked like figs... Sweat in the airless room... glazed his own white hand, his tapping fingers... The women’s faces coming nearer were streaked in the hot lamplight” (735).

On his arrival, Richard Strickland moved through a crowd of man getting bigger as “more people seemed to be moving from the nearby churchyard” (734), a growing community presence that testifies to solidarity and impotent voyeurism.^{xii} After crossing the threshold marked by a lamp “being held for him” (*idem*), the protagonist steps into a female universe, in a darkened room punctuated by the theatrical illumination of this single source of light. Unable to distinguish any faces, he “experience[s] a radical otherness” (Harrison 94), since he occupies the paradoxical position of the observer being observed, a role reversal that will deconstruct his authoritarian position. Moreover, framed by newspapers (on the floor, in a path leading to the bed, and covering the walls) the body of the wounded woman resists the doctor’s effort to classify and appropriate it, foregrounding textuality, as Harrison cogently proves (96-99). Since he recurs to the wrong interpretative frame, the practitioner seems to miss “the right question” (736) for a while, and is mercilessly scorned by the disembodied voices in the dark room, a tragic chorus that watches and comments his actions. Even though he repeatedly tries to isolate Ruby from her family and neighbors (735), his interaction with her is mediated by several community members who instigate him to engage into a more participative observation, till he finally manages to recognize the apparently anonymous patient as his maid at the office.

The epistemological nature of the doctor’s quest is highlighted by the semantic field of vision (especially dense from page 737 to 740) and by his own perplexed question—“Am I supposed just to know?” (736). Nonetheless, this protest signals a progressive movement towards understanding, as the character starts following a deductive approach to the events which makes him guess the instrument used for the assault on Ruby and the name of her aggressor. Therefore the physician’s attitude evolves from an initial paternalistic position to an appeal to a communication pact, on the basis of trust and shared knowledge. He evokes the stories that Ruby’s family and neighbors know about his relationship with some of their own community’s most violent members, and the presumption that he would be able to recognize his interlocutors’ individual identities: “‘Dove Collins? I believe you. I’ve had to sew him up enough times on Sunday morning, you all know that,’ said the doctor. ‘I know Ruby, I know Dove, and if the lights would come back on I can tell you the names of the rest of you

and you know it” (737). Richard Strickland’s compassion will manifest when he carefully washes Ruby’s hand, a Christic gesture that may be read as a modest tribute to the embodied black subject, pointing towards the protagonist’s later reconnection with his own body: “while he stood there watching her, he lifted her hand and washed it—the wrist, horny palm, blood-caked fingers one by one” (739).

At this point in the narrative, the pathos of Ruby’s impending death will be increased by several disparate references to motherhood that seem to question the limits of love, its protective excesses verging on authority and its impotency in the face of loss. The practitioner recognizes his “anger as a mother’s” (738), when the lamp is brought too close, seeming to “devour” (*idem*) his patient; the dying woman’s baby is put near her, in an effort to stimulate her resistance, her “fight” (*idem*) for life, but she has slipped into unconsciousness; Ruby’s mother resists acknowledging the gravity of the situation, insinuating that her daughter will still be able to rise her own child (739). The moribund woman’s eyes accentuate the tragic nature of the human condition, since they are “filled with the unresponding gaze of ownership. She knew what she had” (*idem*), which suggests her attachment to the material bonds that will soon cease to define her identity, bringing to mind Miss Katie’s exhaustive enumeration of her belongings at the moment of her death in “The Wanderers” (519-520). Alternatively, Ruby’s look may stem from a positive reckoning of her life, from the certainty of belonging to a community, of being integrated in a generational continuum (in opposition with the doctor’s sterile family). On the other hand, her helpless condition—“bleeding inside” (*idem*)—obliquely refers to the South’s political state during the Civil Rights Years, here characterized by fractures at the individual and social levels.

Despite the fact that he is conscious of the futility of his efforts to save Ruby and that he keeps being bullied by the women who refuse to recognize his competence, Richard Strickland dismisses his own physical exhaustion and persists in fulfilling his mission as the sole physician in town, offering to come back if the anesthesia fails, though apparently unpaid for this work. His generosity will be rewarded because, at a time when even “the water supply... had been a source of trouble” (746), the female group accedes to quench his thirst—“Dr. Strickland drank with a thirst they all could and did follow” (740)—

symbolically reconnecting him with vital sources. Then, just before leaving the claustrophobic room, he recognizes a figure from his youth, the “Angel of Departure,” as Welty describes this character (OWB, 937-938), who seems to propitiate the development of his internal journey.

Once outdoors, the protagonist gets immersed in a phantasmagoric scenery, a liminal space where the familiar landscape seems to dissolve into the vast cosmos:

When he stepped outside onto the porch, he saw that there was moonlight everywhere. Uninterrupted by any lights from Holden, it filled the whole country lying out there in the haze of the long rainless fall. He himself stood on the edge of Holden. Just one house and one church farther, the Delta began, and the cotton fields ran into the scattered paleness of a dimmed-out Milky Way. (741)

Richard Strickland is going to experience his first vision now, when he transfigures “a row of dresses hung up across the front of the house” (*idem*) into angelic presences that connect him with the most important female figures in his life. This image is ambivalent, though, since on the one hand the clothes appear to block the protagonist’s path, obstructing his movement and binding him to past mores (“they were hung again between him and the road,” *idem*); on the other hand they connect him with his familiar lineage, providing some peace in the midst of turmoil.

Referring to the white community’s recycled clothing and household items, Welty uses a surface detail to highlight the power structures inherent in the segregated Southern society, conferring a political valence to the domestic universe (Romines 116). Likewise, it is significant that the writer criticizes capitalistic rapacity referring to the mill’s pollution on culinary terms as a “cooking smell, like a dish ordered by a man with endless appetite” (742). In addition, the white detritus filling the landscape—“The telephone wires along the road were hung with white shreds of cotton, the sides of the road were strewn with them too... Pipes hung with streamers of lint fed into the moonlit gin” (*idem*)—serve as indexes of the economic system responsible for the social and racial inequalities pervasive in the Southern states.^{xiii} Still the text inflects towards subjectivity, centering on the protagonist’s imaginative approach to the industrial scene, when he associates the wagons and trucks outside the mill

with “the gypsy caravans and circus wagons of his father’s, or even his grandfather’s stories” (*idem*).

Rooted in a male lineage of storytellers and connected with the astral body connoting female intuition—“From the road, he saw the moon itself” (741)—Richard Strickland will recover a memory of love. During a brief moment of suspended action, the protagonist gets in touch with his emotional landscape, while a long train passing by seems to confer a “solid” quality to light, making it capable of physically moving objects—“a long beam of electric light came solid as a board from behind him to move forward along the long loading platform, to some bales of cotton standing on it, some of them tumbled against the others as if pushed by the light” (742). These are the signs of a deep internal movement that definitely shatters the physician’s professional persona, the numbness concealing his emotions under the imperative of duty. It is worth noting that the character’s heightened state of consciousness is first experienced on a physical level, through auditory and sensory perceptions, as he surrenders to a regressive state:

Presently the regular, slow creaking [of the train passing by] reminded the doctor of an old-fashioned porch swing holding lovers in the dark.

He had been carried a cup tonight that might have been his mother’s china or his wife’s mother... a thin, porcelain cup his lips and his fingers had recognized. In that house of murder, comfort had been brought to him at his request. After drinking from it he had all but reeled into a flock of dresses stretched wide-sleeved across the porch of that house like a child’s drawing of angels.

Faintly rocked by the passing train, he sat bent at the wheel of the car, and the feeling of well-being persisted. It increased, until he had come to the point of tears. (742-743)

Only now does the text provide some information about Dr. Strickland, through an analepsis condensing the desolation of his personal life, devoid of emotional ties now that his parents are dead and his wife has left him after their only daughter’s death, a few months before.

This deluge of memories includes yet another political reference to the Civil Rights Years, questioning the validity of the crusader’s approach, with its Machiavellian manipulation of facts for the sake of persuasion at the service of

an ideological cause. Highlighting the ethical complexity underlying the judgment of truth, the text again parallels the public and private realms, when Irene disparagingly compares the activist's strategy with her husband's option to withhold medical information in terminal cases. The incident of the broken glass "spread the length and breadth of [the Stricklands'] driveway" (744) denounces the violent methods used by both factions involved in the conflict, since this unclaimed retaliation could have been performed by either the white supremacists criticizing the doctor for having hosted a Northern agitator, or by the civil-rights activists blaming him for his condemnation of their actions. This threat to individual tranquility characterizes the social tension at the time^{xiv} and echoes Welty's references to the accusatory long distance calls that "have waked most writers in the South from time to time" throughout the 1960s ("Must" 804). Violence leads to polarization and generates a destructive cycle that encompasses every American citizen, across geographical and racial borders, threatening individual autonomy. In her couple of uncollected stories dealing with the Civil Rights Years, the author depicts the pernicious effects of separation emphasizing both her male protagonists' oppressive sense of loneliness, lack of vitality and hopelessness.^{xv}

Nonetheless, in "The Demonstrators" Richard Strickland briefly recovers a lost sense of identity in a world desacralized by spectacle, as the "sign that spelled out in empty sockets 'BROADWAY'" in the façade of the "shut-down movie house" (745) testifies:

And suddenly, tonight, things had seemed just the way they used to seem. He had felt as though someone had stopped him on the street and offered to carry his load for a while—had insisted on it—some old, trusted, half-forgotten family friend that he had lost sight of since youth. Was it the sensation, now returning, that there was still allowed to everybody on earth a *self*—savage, death-defying, private? The pounding of his heart was like the assault of hope, throwing itself against him without a stop, merciless. (744-745)

This passage has to be situated in the tradition of the lyrical short story—from Anton Chekhov to Kate Chopin, Katherine Mansfield, Isak Dinesen or Elizabeth Bowen, to name just a few storytellers that Welty admired—continued on in the magical realist approach in the later decades of the 20th century. Thus the

protagonist experiences a revelatory moment that heals his fractured sense of self, integrating past and present. Epiphany here does not necessarily serve to “[reveal] the dangers inherent in the centralizing impulse of modernist nostalgia” (Harrison 102), but stems instead from Welty’s spiritual perspective.^{xvi} Addressing the modernist anxieties about the solitude of the individual lost in a cruel world ruled by the survival of the fittest, the author proposes the possibility of human cooperation in a community of mutually responsible human beings. As Prenshaw so eloquently maintained in “Eudora Welty’s Language of the Spirit,” throughout her fiction the writer proposes a revisionary theology, creating moments of disrupted self-consciousness filled with enlarged possibilities of mystical regeneration. Thus, this passage indicates the prospect of a symbolic rebirth, which is accentuated by an altered sense of temporality (“It seemed a long time that he had sat there,” [745]) and reinforced by the adjectives chosen to qualify this sense of selfhood: “savage,” or creative, as opposed to tamed, ordered by ideological imperatives; “death-defying,” or vital, as opposed to sick and destructive; “private,” or intimate, as opposed to centered on external principles.

The protagonist experiences the physical impact of his epiphany as nausea, though, and he seems unable to fully integrate this revelation. Not wanting to go back to the old routine represented by his house, he succumbs to escapism, initiating a circular movement through his neighborhood, now also affected by the power failure. Engulfed in darkness, the small-town ceases to be a familiar place, and the doctor becomes a stranger moving through a miniaturized scenery reduced to façades, reminiscent of Virgie’s description of MacLain when she last visits it on the verge of traveling, in “The Wanderers” (552-553). The *chiaroscuro* effect plays an important part in denaturalizing the description of the buildings and in transfiguring Dove Collins into a golden apparition, an image that has motivated radically different interpretations.^{xvii} After all, the protagonist’s ramble had a purpose that he had already intuitively guessed—“What was there, who was there, to keep him from going home?” (745)—for the mortally wounded man was looking for him. It is noteworthy, of course, that this utterly vulnerable figure seeks refuge near the physician’s office and trusts him enough to ask for help. But tragic irony emerges once again and the text resounds in a larger dimension—the South, indeed the whole

country, is trapped in a net of blood (paraphrasing Dove's physical description) and there is no hiding place for the violence ravaging its society.

Dr. Strickland epitomizes the American restlessness during the Civil Rights Years epoch for he spends "the other half of the night" (746) answering phone calls from his patients; his abrupt answer to Eva Duckett Fairbrother's concerns about her chronically ill husband may be read as a result of physical exhaustion or as the end of his duplicity, for "he is showing the vulnerability of all of them" (Welty "A Conversation" 260). This character's presentation with a full name illustrates the plutocracy of the Southern small-town, "often in the control or the grip... of a solid, powerful family... [which] makes it all the harder for any change to penetrate [a place] like that," as Welty remarked (*idem*). This oblique comment upon the prevalent power structures in Holden, Mississippi, creates a suggestive context for the newspaper report with the local authorities' version of the events related beforehand in the story. This text's incoherence, with its poor syntax and the apparently irrelevant details interspersing the racially tinged account of the lovers' deaths, bluntly shows "the eagerness of the white official population to disown any responsibility for the black community and its individual members" (Ferguson 53).

Having read the newspaper, oblivious of the cook who "had refilled his cup without him noticing" (749), another hint at the privileged white population's need to expand their perception in order to include the so far invisible African American community, the doctor "[carries] his coffee out onto the little [back] porch" (749). This old habit points out the character's emotional ties with his disabled child, whom he "had loved... and mourned... all her life" (743), and whose daybed used to be there. Richard Strickland's last act of love will lie in his ability to imaginatively connect with his daughter and share her vision, when he contemplates a pair of flickers: "He was pretty sure that Sylvia had known the birds were there. Her eyes would follow birds when they flew across the garden" (749). After this brief poetic suspension, the doctor resumes his routine, expecting yet another difficult day ahead. The story closes with the protagonist's reflections about the old schoolteacher's resiliency, contrasted with the despondency affecting the rest of the town's population, which may be read as a thematic resolution (Ferguson 54), in particular because Welty deliberately chose to use this tenacious figure to frame the narrative ("A Conversation,"

261). Furthermore, Miss Marcia Pope is associated to her fragrant “sweet-olive tree, solid as the bank building” (745), in a curious simile that equates the resistance of a plant with the supporting institution of American materialism; curiously, this reference also echoes the opening section of “The Wanderers,” where a blooming sweet-olive in Mrs. Stark’s front yard represents the continuity of Morgana’s matriarchal lineage (515).

Once again Welty dislocates the political to the private realm, a strategy not only due to the historical context that mediated her biographic experience and defined its potential models for action,^{xviii} but also informed by her spiritual beliefs, as I hope to have persuasively argued. Indeed, the artist defends that all meaning is private, requiring silence, concentration and commitment, the willingness to engage in a process of self-discovery beyond the security of dogma, “for life is *lived* in a private place; where it means anything is inside the mind and heart” (“Must” 809). Welty’s fictional universe derives from a holistic perspective that correlates micro and macrocosm, the private and the political, and suggests that to be human is to recognize that each one of us exists in a complex and dynamic system of interconnections. She thus refuses to take sides, since her ultimate artistic purpose is reconciliation, love not judgment, a position of non-aggressiveness well expressed by the Buddhist philosopher Thich Nhat Han’s considerations in the epigraph. “Must the Novelist Crusade?” alerts to the impending perils of alienation if the individual opinion gets submerged by “the voice of the crowd” (*idem*) and becomes instrumental to propaganda, ceasing to communicate in its zeal to convince, because the source of true understanding is love:

I think we need to write with love. Not in self-defense, not in hate, not in the mood of instruction, not in rebuttal, in any kind of militance, or in apology, but with love. Not in exorcisement, either, for this is to make the reader bear a thing for you.

Neither do I speak of writing forgivingly; out of love you can write with straight fury. It is the *source* of the understanding that I speak of; it’s this that determines its nature and its reach. (812)

ⁱ Welty also describes the writing and reading processes as acts of love in the essays “Place in Fiction” (787) and “Words into Fiction” (137).

ⁱⁱ Barbara Carson argues that there may have been several sources for Welty’s holistic vision, namely: i) the constitutive nature of creativity itself; ii) on a psychological level, the more inclusive feminine perspective, tending to consider identity as a continuum; iii) biographical elements, such as the Southern character and her upbringing; iv) her contemporary intellectual milieu, from the Theory of Relativity to Quantum Physics; v) possible influences from Eastern mysticism (xiv-xxii).

ⁱⁱⁱ Mortimer declares that in her fiction “Welty does not intend to *solve* the mystery but to *reveal* it” (107).

^{iv} Mortimer considers that Welty’s fictional perspective shares some similarities with the medieval worldview, and her “fictive [universe] (...) suggests a meaningful, cosmic interdependence among all things. She portrays this as a multilayered universe of coexisting realms in which patterns of significance are echoed regularly from one dimension of experience to the other” (39). Chouard makes a similar point when she alleges that in Welty’s oeuvre the body is the center of multiple conjunctions, a space “where aesthetics interact with ethics as physicality often assumes a metaphysical dimension... [besides the fact that the human body] may also be metaphorically identified with the geographical body, the cosmic body or even the body politic” (“The Body” 9).

^v Welty’s extraordinary attention to the potential relationship of power involved in the act of photographing is also underlined by the fact that she turned many of her subjects into viewers, sending them prints of their own photographs (Ladd 163-64).

^{vi} In reality, Welty says that “the majority of... [her pictures] were snapped without the awareness of the subjects or with only their peripheral awareness... [and] the snapshots made with people’s awareness are, for the most part, just as unposed” (“Preface” 9).

^{vii} In *One Writer’s Beginnings*, Welty comments upon the motif behind the composition of the story: “all that absorbed me, though it started as outrage, was the necessity I felt for entering into the mind and inside the skin of a character who could hardly have been more alien or repugnant to me... and I don’t believe that my anger showed me anything about human character that my sympathy and rapport never had” (882-883).

^{viii} This situatedness is further underlined in *The Collected Stories*, where the title of the story is followed by its publication date, absent in the Library of America edition.

^{ix} The critic maintains that though the story oscillates between positive and negative poles, it is mainly hopeful in tone: “Imagery of natural death and natural renewal, images of community, order, and affection, of the joys of children in toys and celebrations, of color and light, determination and restfulness break through the darkness and sickness of the community, lifting the spirit from conflict and contempt into equilibrium and acceptance” (45).

^x As always in Welty’s fiction, names have symbolic resonances: Marcia is phonetically close to “martial,” connoting the character’s resilience; her family name denotes authority; the doctor’s last name points towards the devastation that affects the community and the country.

^{xi} Speaking about Hemingway’s stories, Welty praises his obstructionist methods and compares them to “a painting by Goya, who himself used light, action and morality dramatically... the bullring and the great wall of spectators are cut in diagonal halves by a great shadow of afternoon (unless you see it as the dark sliced away by the clear, golden light): half the action revealed and half hidden in dense, clotting shade,”

(“Looking at Short Stories” 89-90). The author may have been referring to *Bullfight in a Divided Ring*, belonging to the Metropolitan Museum of Art collection, and whose authorship is nowadays contested (“Bullfight in a Divided Ring”).

^{xii} The already packed room itself will receive more spectators as the narrative progresses: “While he was preparing the hypodermic, he was aware that more watchers, a row of them dressed in white with red banners like Ruby’s, were coming in to fill up the corners” (738).

^{xiii} I am extrapolating an argument used by Yaeger in *Dirt and Desire*: “literature by southern women explores a radically dislocated surface landscape filled with jagged white signifiers and pallid detritus that bespeaks a constant uneasiness about the meaning of whiteness” (20).

^{xiv} For the sake of historical memory, and because racial and ethnic inequalities still affect minority groups in the US nowadays, it is worth consulting the comprehensive “Timeline of the African American Civil Rights Movement,” which begins in the late 16th century up to the contemporary context.

^{xv} In “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” the narrator confesses: “I’m so tired of ever’thing in the world being just that hot to the touch!... There just ain’t much going that’s worth holding onto it no more” (730). In “The Demonstrators” Richard Strickland “thought he had been patient, but patience had made him tired. He was so increasingly tired, so sick and even bored with the bitterness, intractability that divided everybody and everything” (744).

^{xvi} Indeed, Welty repeatedly defines herself on spiritual terms, beyond the limits of institutionalized religion; interviewed by Wheatley, for example, she avers: “I have a reverence toward, well, you can call it God, or something over and above—but I don’t like to be preached to any more than I like to be editorialized at” (“Writer’s Beginnings”

130). Moreover, in “Place in Fiction” she declares that “From the dawn of man’s imagination, place has enshrined the spirit” (787) being a “spiritual [home]” (794) that “heals” (795), and she also ascribes a spiritual quality to literary creativity—“when we think in terms of the spirit, which are the terms of writing” (793), “For the spirit of things is what is sought” (789).

^{xvii} Ferguson considers that Dove is “associated with elemental vitality,” representing a mythic “flower-god” and the folk “seal-lover” (51); Harrison disputes this reading, suggesting that this brutalized black body is perceived by the focalizing white character according to racist myths (105); Yaeger argues that the lyrically charged description of this figure questions the political basis of infrastructures (“Women Trashing”).

^{xviii} The particular circumstances of the writer’s life were indeed significant in shaping her civic perspective, as Prenshaw details: “In the 1920s and 1930s authentic public political exchange was largely unavailable to Mississippians, especially to white women and blacks who were constrained by their ‘place’ in the social hierarchy... [The fact that Welty witnessed] a World War in the 1940s, McCarthyism in the 1950s, and the violent resistance to the civil rights movement... [throughout the] 1960s all greatly lessened whatever trust she had in the political macrocosm and bolstered her belief in the microcosm as the only efficacious, viable sphere of human understanding and negotiation” (“Transformation” 38).

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