

emerges as a genial man, without a bad word said by him or by others. His biographer's effortless prose encourages us to like the man, which we do. Yet, by doing so, it feels as though we put our delight in peril in two respects.

Firstly, the awareness of craft comes close to exposing the secret of Wodehouse's comedy. It is like seeing the effort below decks on one of those Roman galleons: sweating slaves, the beat of the drum, Kirk Douglas in *Spartacus* or Jim Dale in *Carry on Cleo*. To the biographer, such things impel the biography forward, but for us languid souls riding along, we may not want our delight spoiled by the sight of the lash, or here, the sight of Wodehouse's isolation within his toil.

Secondly, Wodehouse was an intensely private man, and the same defence that Orwell used to protect his hero from the real world can be made to say that sometimes you want to retain the proper distance between the author and the reader. Wodehouse's private life was more private than most, and there is something distasteful about invading that privacy. When McCrum discusses Wodehouse's sex life (even writing that phrase feels somehow wrong), you sense that McCrum himself is uncomfortable acknowledging this compulsory requirement of modern biography. For much of the time, sex appears like a contracted player with no part to play; as, too, does the issue of the psychological depth of character in Wodehouse's novels, or the search for tender personal expression in his lyrics.

Wodehouse was uniquely Wodehouse, and sometimes the type of details we expect from a biography fit this book like John McCririck's deerstalker would suit Caprice. This said, McCrum manages to retain a respect for his subject that is apparent on every page. What makes this biography succeed so well is that it is not directed by what we expect. McCrum allows Wodehouse to guide the tale, and the result is a unique biography for a unique man.

## Eudora Welty Come Stand In Her Heart

Ann Stapleton

Eudora Welty, a notorious evader of biographers who, in reference to her own work, sometimes noted that W.C. Fields, after reading 'an analysis of how he juggled,' 'couldn't juggle for six years,' would probably agree that the best way to discover her stories (among the finest in the English language) is simply to open the Library of America's *Eudora Welty: Stories, Essays, & Memoir* and begin.

'A Still Moment,' Welty's personal favorite, describes the convergence of three eccentric, visionary minds (the itinerant soul saver Lorenzo Dow, the outlaw murderer James Murrell, and the naturalist painter John James Audubon) in the heavily wooded river country of Mississippi's Old Natchez Trace. Each man is possessed of a monomaniacal disposition, with appetites reality can never fully appease. Dow searches the countryside for God's lost lambs ("I must have souls! And souls I must have!" rang in his own windy ears'). Murrell seeks solitary travelers to murder and rob ('Destroy the present! – that must have been the first thing that was whispered in Murrell's heart'). And Audubon wants birds to paint ('Not one was enough; he looked deeper and deeper, on and on').

But in this curious trinity, the usual designations of good and evil are of little use. For Welty, who (like Audubon) is on her own artist's quest, means (like Murrell) to make use of whatever happens across her line of vision, to save (like Dow) whatever of this world she can. Fearless (she has said that 'all serious daring starts from within'), she focuses on how perception creates our experience, and on the ungraspable nature of life itself. While it is never Audubon's intention to take the heron alive in all its complexity and loveliness and beckoning insularity (Audubon has to kill the bird in order to paint it), it is Welty's.

In her emphasis on love as our truest way of seeing, she brings us very close, indeed, to the heron, though she knows how far away from perfection the living must always stand. Paradoxically, it is by



way of our horror at Audubon's action that Welty somehow makes possible the bird's escape into our imaginations. What is most (thrillingly) real is the moment of arrival when 'one snowy, shy bird in the marshes' and its watchers stand still in a world moving relentlessly onward through light and time:

It was as if three whirlwinds had drawn together at some center, to find there feeding in peace a snowy heron. Its own slow spiral of flight could take it away in its own time, but for a little it held them still, it laid quiet over them, and they stood for a moment unburdened.

And this is Welty's genius: without sacrificing either, both the joy and the loss we feel as the heron stands in 'pure white profile,' 'defenseless in the world except for the intensity of its life,' and how Audubon's capture of the dull trophy of its body is transformed by Welty into our memory of its brightest being.

The ineffable is Eudora Welty's specialty, as evidenced in 'At the Landing,' ostensibly the tale of a young woman's seduction and abandonment, but really an expression of the power of love to bring transcendence even to the most ordinary among us. Jenny's grandfather, on the night of his death, dreams of flood waters closing over the town and all its inhabitants: 'Like a head and arm. Like a horse. A mane of cedar trees tossing over the top.' And so, too, love, in the shape of the fisherman Billy Floyd, 'the rude, wild Floyd,' comes even for Jenny, a girl 'too shy of the world,' who 'never performed any act, even a small act, for herself,' and in whose heart 'it might seem that nothing began.'

One day, while visiting her mother's grave, Jenny, for whom light has been filtered through the prisms 'hung everywhere' around her grandfather's house, sees 'Floyd, standing still in a sunny pasture.' The rest is life, an old story. But Welty makes such familiar ground grow up in language wild and undiscovered enough to encompass the real oddity of human attachment. 'Life is strange,' Welty has insisted, and 'At the Landing' is remarkable for its true-life unfamiliarity and its excruciating beauty, for the impossibly achieved commingling of Jenny's earthly 'ruin' at the hands of sailors as she searches for Billy, with her paradise found, her fully realised love for another human being:

The sun was going down when she went. The red eyes of the altheas were closing, and the lizards ran on the wall. The last lily buds hung green and glittering, pendulant in the heat. The crape-myrtle trees were beginning to fill

with light for they drank the last of it every day, and gave off their white and flame in the evening that filled with the throb of cicadas. There was an old mimosa closing in the ravine—the ancient fern, as old as life, the tree that shrank from the touch, grotesque in its tenderness. All nearness and darkness affected it, even clouds going by, but for Jenny that left it no tree ever gave such allurements of fragrance anywhere.

'She's waiting for Billy Floyd.' With these words, Welty places her faith in the heart's ineradicably personal vision, accepting the enigma of what attracts us and gives meaning. She knows what strange soils love takes root in, and the stubbornness of the human imagination in growing toward whatever constitutes its light and air. That we all yearn toward some impossibly far-off brightness, and that even our inability to reach it can sometimes give us our very lives, is what she perceives and preserves. For Welty, love is never failure.

In 'Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden,' the eponymous Keela is not Indian, or maiden, or even, as Welty encourages us to see, an outcast. Steve, guilt-ridden former sideshow barker searching for the 'freak' he wronged, and Max, his guide up the mountain, come searching for 'Keela,' really Little Lee Roy, clubfooted black father of sons and daughters, kidnapped by a circus and forced to eat live chickens as a sideshow exhibit:

It was supposed to be a Indian woman, see, in this red dress an' stockin's. It didn't have on no shoes, so when it drug its foot ever'body could see... When it come to the chicken's heart, it would eat that too, real fast, and the heart would still be jumpin'.

Welty is drawn to the outcast ('How much the eccentric has to tell us of what is central!' she has written) – and who could be more cast out than 'Keela,' taken from his home, inducted into a bizarre world of beatings and enforced silence, his very life turned into a performance other humans pay money to see? But Welty only begins here; for her, we are all (merely and marvelously) human beings, each with our own portion of good luck or bad, grotesquerie and grace. And she steadfastly refuses to treat her characters reductively. Her interest is always in 'a single, entire human being, who will never be confined to any frame.'

In the first sentence we learn that Little Lee Roy is a father; Welty intensifies our distress by placing him within the context of a family and all that such a web of connection (and its tearing)



implies. A less able writer would stop there, making him a figure of pathos only. But Welty complicates the matter as Little Lee Roy tries to describe for his children the visit of the two white men: 'Wouldn't come in. But talks to me about de ole times when I use to be wid de circus —' When he tries to speak of that unspeakable time, his children, whether in regret or lack of interest, silence him with a 'Hush up, Pappy.' Even among family, we are, in essential ways, sometimes alone.

And with Little Lee Roy's laughter and his reference to 'de ole times,' Welty reminds us that life, even in horrific circumstances, is never one thing. Experience and memory cannot be caged as easily as poor Keela. No doubt at some time during his ordeal, Little Lee Roy watched a sunrise, ate a sandwich, or otherwise spent an ordinary hour, and his inner life and the flow of memory, impinged upon as they were, continued unabated. Life is a live act. With Welty, so is fiction.

In 'Death of a Traveling Salesman,' R.J. Bowman, a man without home or family, finds himself on a 'road without signposts,' on a 'petering-out path.' In the 'desolate hill country' landscape, the people are 'too far away' to call out to, as in his loneliness they have always seemed, and appear inhuman, like 'leaning sticks or weeds.' Of women, he can 'only remember little rooms within little rooms, like a nest of Chinese paper boxes,' empty inside. And in his vision of himself in his wide-brimmed black hat, glimpsed in 'wavy hotel mirrors' as he pauses 'for that inevitable instant on the landing, walking downstairs to supper' (suspended between being alone and the loneliness of being among strangers), he reminds himself of 'a bullfighter,' a stranger who speaks another language, faintly ridiculous where he finds himself now, something massive and dark and half-seen rushing toward him.

His car, going over the cliff without even the loud crash he listens for, falls into 'a tangle of immense grapevines' and swings there, rocked 'like a grotesque child in a dark cradle,' Welty's striking metaphor for the grave. But there is a house, a woman, and 'Sonny' (perhaps a pun on the idea of the savior) will be coming soon (Welty's terrifying salvation in reverse: the vehicle's retrieval can only revive the momentum propelling Bowman out of this life).

All of his days come down to this 'deepening postponement' of his journey, both the delay of Sonny's help and the deepening (into the permanence of death) postponement of the life he might have lived. The woman's lamp is half cleaned, half dark. But we can only see by the light of what little we have what we might have found, by

the light of what little we are what we might have become.

Attempting to keep up his salesman's patter, Bowman twice answers, 'Fine!', also Italian for 'the end', and thus Welty contains within outward forms his alarming inner desolation, all the more pitiable because no one can hear it. Reduced by recent illness to an 'almost inaudible life of heartbeats and dreams,' his soul leaps wildly, 'like a little colt invited out of a pen.'

In a surreal scene, Sonny goes to 'borry some fire,' and Bowman watches the far-off blaze zigzag toward him over the dark hill. The room, like his mind in its final realisation, fills with light. But it's only borrowed. He cannot partake of it. The little house containing its 'simple thing' that 'anyone could have had,' 'a fruitful marriage,' becomes both the salesman's vision of heaven and, because it will remain, for him, unattainable, his clear view of his own damnation.

Bowman cannot say aloud, 'how lonely I am. [...] Come stand in my heart.' But that is the cry from her characters that Eudora Welty always answers, and in this way she makes love the only door by which we can enter these remarkable stories. At the core of Welty's fiction is the knowledge that we all live and die by the light of what we love – or fail to. 'Do you wanta get out of this place, whoever you are?' asks the man who rescues Keela from his cage, and thus Welty holds 'her hand out open' to invite us in from our common loneliness, to remind us of what Jenny knew and never lost sight of, and what R.J. Bowman learned too late: that we are here to love and be loved, in whatever way we can. That we are all in the right world.

## Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*

Ede Harter

The quietest great novel in the language but also one of the most ruthlessly honest about what monsters children can be and how destructive for a third party is the pride of parents in their offspring.