

Jan Nordby Gretlund. *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place*. Odense University Press/Delaware University Press, 1994. Dkr. 250)

In her famous essay "Place in Fiction" Eudora Welty begins by seeing "place" as one of "the lesser angels" attending the writer of fiction, but ends by seeing it as the "gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced.... Location pertains to feeling, feeling profoundly pertains to place, place in history partakes of feeling as feeling about history partakes of place." Jan Gretlund's book moves in the opposite direction, using "place" as a point of departure for exploring some of the central aspects of Welty's fictional world: character, family, community, history, story-telling. Which is not to say that Gretlund is inattentive to the physical (or metaphysical) nature of the locations of Welty's novels, short stories and photograph—or to the "local color" of her life, whether "locally underfoot" (as she herself put it) in her native Jackson, Mississippi, or "wandering" in the great cities of the American imagination, New York, Chicago, New Orleans, San Francisco, "wanderings" to which Gretlund gives much fruitful attention in chapter 3.

It is rather that Gretlund's book also has a broader strategic aim, acknowledged by all the eminent literary Southerners who endorse the book on the blurb. It brings Welty criticism back from its (long) excursions into mythological parallels and (briefer) excursions to the fields of feminism and racial relations, back to Welty's writing itself.

*Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place* is an exercise in "close reading", even of a "New Critical" kind. Not that it follows the decontextualized interpretative schema now often associated with that label, but rather the actual contextual reading practices of, say, Cleanth Brooks in his books on Faulkner. "Contextual close reading" is obviously appropriate to the topic of place and similarly the invocation of the "New Critics" is appropriate to the main thesis of the book: that Welty's work belongs squarely in the traditions of the Southern Literary Renaissance, even takes its point of departure in the preoccupations of the Nashville "Agrarians", who overlap so strangely (almost alchemically) with the "New Critics".

This (one might as well face it head-on) sounds just about as "politically incorrect" as you can get in an American context (at least as political correctness is currently conceived, before Gingrichian neo-McCarthyism pushes conformism to the opposite side of the ideological "bell curve"). But in fact it isn't. Gretlund's is an eminently sensible book, a coherent assessment of Welty's work by a genuinely engaged reader, who has lived intimately with it

over a long period. It is probably one of the best introductions for students to her work, partly because it is written in such a jargon—and assumption free language, partly because it "familiarizes" her vision, making it less strange than students often find it (and, I think, less strange than it really is!) Gretlund's readings of characters and place are tempered by a sensitivity to the fact that Welty is a writer with a deep awareness of her feminine perspective on the world—and the fact that the issue of race pervades every aspect of Southern society, especially in the period Welty wrote about and in which she was writing. The book places Welty in the historical movement she has witnessed: from the Depression through the War years and the 1950s (where she was actively involved in the Adlai Stevenson presidential campaigns) to the virtual Civil War over Civil Rights in the 1960s South and the period after when she wrote some of her major novels.

Welty was formed as a writer during (and by) the Depression, working for the W.P.A. in rural Mississippi. Her photographs collected in *One Time One Place: Mississippi in the Depression* bear testimony to the compassion she developed for the poorest in "the poorest state of the Union". Gretlund attributes these concerns to a direct influence of the Agrarians on Welty's thinking, which may well be true, but surely they also derive from personal observation. All through the book Gretlund refers to Welty's abiding commitment to "Agrarian ideals", so that these almost become the ideological underpinnings of her "aesthetics of place". These "Agrarian ideals," when they are defined (as for instance in the discussion of *Losing Battles*) seem to boil down to the importance of family, community, communal memory, rural and small-town tradition, all that for which "place" is (or was?) the intimately known and loved repository—as against the "placelessness" of so much modern life. I do not for a moment doubt that this is not only what Welty would see as ideal, but as real (in both a modern and a medieval sense). But is this exclusively Agrarian, and were the Agrarians coherent enough as a group to speak of definite "ideals" except in a negative sense? *I'll Take My Stand* was united in its critique of what (Northern) industrial capitalism was doing to the South in the 1920s, but the "Agrarians'" combination of acuity in observing the cultural and environmental depredation (which they rightly saw as as much an ideology as a fact) with hereditary White Southern blindness to the race issue did not last. So which Agrarian's ideals does Welty uphold: Crowe Ransom's, Donald Davidson's, Allen Tate's, or Robert Penn Warren's? And what separates Welty's description of the conditions in the South from people notoriously not influenced by the Agrarians, like William Faulkner or Zora

Neale Hurston. Or indeed from a great number of not only conservative, but anarchist, socialist and liberal observers of the traumas of urbanization and industrialization in, say, post-War Southern Europe or contemporary Africa?

The problem (and my main criticism of the book) arises because Gretlund insists on seeing Welty as a realist moralist—in the tradition of Brooks' treatment of Faulkner, or much criticism of Flannery O'Connor and Walker Percy. Thus the discussion of *Delta Wedding* concentrates on "finding the flaw", and though I agree with Gretlund's diagnosis of the underlying blindness of the Fairchilds to racial realities, I wonder whether moral judgment is the main purpose of Welty's writing—as it is, almost to excess, in O'Connor's or Percy's. Isn't Welty much more of a writer of shifting perspectives, experimentally concerned with exploring as many different ways of looking at the world as she can imagine? Doesn't *The Optimist's Daughter*, in some ways her fictional testament, turn on an eye disease, which makes Judge McKelva see behind him, just as she entitled her collected essays *The Eye of the Story* and her memoirs *One Writer's Beginnings* as an indication of her uniqueness and idiosyncrasy as well as her modesty? Isn't "place" in her work, then, an infinitely faceted prism in which to see the world, rather than a yardstick by which to judge it?

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