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A Narrative Room of One's Own: Eudora Welty's *The Robber Bridegroom* and European Fairy Tale

In one of his essays, the poet Joseph Brodsky challenged Harold Bloom's proposition that influence is a source of anxiety. As Brodsky saw it, the acknowledgement of influence does not involve a doomed wrestling match with literary precursors but a recognition of kinship, intimacy and affinity. "A true poet," Brodsky argues,

does not avoid influence or continuity but frequently nurtures them, and emphasises them in every possible way. There is nothing more pleasant physically (even physiologically) than repeating someone else's lines – whether to oneself or out loud. Fear of influence, fear of dependence, is the fear – the affliction – of a savage, but not of culture, which is all continuity, all echo.¹

For Brodsky, this influence, this echoing of one text in another, is not a source of angst but an anchor to secure the poet, or any writer, against the current. Another poet, of Russian origin like Brodsky, Osip Mandelstam, has in turn echoed this perception. In his essay, "On the Nature of the Word," Mandelstam argues that "a word is not a thing" but an image: "The most appropriate and, in scientific terms, the most correct approach," he suggests, "is to regard a word as an image, that is, as a composite of verbal representation." And, "a verbal representation is a complex composite of phenomena, it is a connection, a 'system.'" This idea of a system that Mandelstam proposes is an open one, an open field freed from conventional temporal restraints, that allows for the synchronic presence of all poets and all poetry. Future and past are inverted as Mandelstam awaits the arrival of Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus as "that which must be, not that which has already been." "One often hears," Mandelstam says,

that is good but it belongs to yesterday. But I say: yesterday has not yet been born. It has not really existed. I want Ovid, Pushkin, and Catullus to live once more, and I am not satisfied with the historical Ovid, Pushkin and Catullus.²

An open field, a series of concentric circles: to switch metaphors, another spatial image for the great dialogue of regional literature is one that sees the openness of that dialogue in terms of what Wendell Berry would call “a system of nested systems,” the individual text within the local within the regional within the national within the international. The work, any work, exists as it were at the centre of a series of gradually extending and often overlapping possibilities, the ripples going out from the ‘smaller system’ of the particular poem, piece of prose fiction or nonfiction or play to those larger ones within which it is enclosed and to which it is connected by complex patterns of interdependence. Existing at the confluence of other echoing and perhaps extending those texts, the vocal space it occupies resonates with the voices, the sounds of other writing from near and from far. So Wendell Berry himself echoes Allen Tate and Henry David Thoreau, Andrew Marvell and Virgil: not because he is trying to imitate any of these writers but because he is intimately aware that he is in discussion with them and that discussion forms a vital subtext – or series of subtexts – in his work. “All good human work remembers its history,” Berry has said (*What Are People For?* 1990),

The best writing, even when printed, is full of intimations that it is the present version of earlier versions of itself, and that its maker inherited the work and the ways of earlier makers. It thus keeps, even in print, a suggestion of the quality of the handwritten page; it is a palimpsest.³

What the reader catches, as she or he peers through this palimpsest (to continue this analogy), is a series of traces of other writings that radiate out from the immediate to the regional to the national and the international. What we find in any text (to return to Berry’s other figure of ‘a system of nested systems’) is a series of different circles of conversation, different ranges of dialogue with other texts radiating out from the local. It is these circles or levels of dialogue that add depth, a sense of echoing and subtextual significance, to the text. And, while the prime and immediate ones for most Southern writers might be Southern, they are not always or simply so. Writers are part of multiple imagined communities. Southern writers talk to many writers outside the South; many writers outside the South, in turn, talk to them. In the process, they turn the intertextual space of Southern writing into a liminal one, a border territory. One way of mapping that liminal, international territory would be to look at what writers and peoples coming into the South from elsewhere (from Latin America, say, or South East Asia) have added to the regional dialogue. How

writers as otherwise different as Roberto Fernandez, Christina Garcia, Christine Bell, Susan Choi and Lan Cao have produced work that deterritorializes the South by offering a lexical equivalent of the immigrant encounter. Another way of dealing with transnationalism and its consequences would be to look at intertextual practice that clearly cuts across regional or national boundaries: in the sense of Southern texts echoing, talking to, talking with and talking against texts from outside the South or the United States. As at a least a gesture in that direction, I would like to look, briefly, at the work of a writer who is herself indisputably inside the space of Southern writing, Eudora Welty.

Eudora Welty never hid her willingness to take up and work with various literary forms. "I have used not only Mississippi folklore but Greek and Roman myths," she said once, "or anything else, Irish stories, anything else that happens to come in handy that I think is an expression of something that I see around me in life."⁴ As one critic, Louise Westling, has put it, Welty "takes a long view of literary culture which assumes the validity of very old imaginative forms." So, several of the stories in her first collection, *A Curtain of Green* (1941) involve experiments with situations drawn from fairy tale. Stories in *The Wide Net* (1943) inject Greek and Celtic myths into the contemporary landscapes. And *The Golden Apples* (1949) uses a catholic mixture of folklore and mythological materials, as critics like Thomas L. McHaney have noted, "to underscore the principal concerns of the book." What is remarkable about Welty's conversations with texts ranging from Greek myth to Virginia Woolf, folk tale to Elizabeth Bowen is their critical bite, I think. In *Delta Wedding* (1946), for example, she does not just use the pastoral traditions and the masculine epic traditions of warfare. She interrogates them, or as Westling puts it, she enters into "a dialogic relationship with them:" in the first instance, by choosing to set the novel in a year, as she put it, "in which all the men could be home and uninvolved" and then centring the narrative on the consciousnesses and experience of women.

Welty shuddered at the idea of being called a feminist. "I'm not interested in any kind of feminine repartee," she told an interviewer in 1972. "All that talk of women's lib doesn't apply *at all* to women writers." Still, her inclination was to place her female characters at the centre and imaginatively in control. "In the Delta it's very much a matriarchy," she once claimed, when asked to comment on her focussing on female experience in *Delta Wedding*,

especially in those years in the twenties that I was writing about, and really ever since the civil War when the men were all gone and the women began to take over everything. You know, they really did. I've met families up there where the women just ruled the roost, and I've made that happen in the book because I thought that's the way it was in those days in the South.⁵

"A sheltered life can be a daring life as well," Welty declared in *One Writer's Beginnings* (1984). "For all serious daring starts from within." She was talking of her own life here, of course. But the remark could equally well apply to the lives of her female characters: who, time after time, are called out of their shelters to confront and cope with a joyous but ultimately male energy – men who, for all their Dionysian qualities, are ultimately dependent upon their connection with women. And it could equally well apply to her own practice as a writer, as she rewrites some often ancient male-centred narratives from a determinately female point of view.

"Fiction amalgamates with all kinds of other things," Welty once said. That amalgamation can be a collaborative one: something which, unsurprisingly, tends to be the case when Welty takes up and talks with other women writers. But it becomes more rebarbative, the conversation assumes a more critical edge when a more specifically male tradition is at stake. Patricia Yaeger has argued that Welty's relation to classic male narratives can be illuminated by Bakhtin's view of language as "a dynamic conversation" or corrective dialogue between the individual writer and inherited literary forms and texts. And I tend to agree. Phallic energy and male versions of heroism certainly appear in her fiction, but they are displaced from their traditionally central positions. The power of the mother is celebrated, strong women abound. Headstrong girls are given their space, and sometimes allowed to express their sexuality. In short, female centred narratives are placed in dialogue, and even dispute, with those of patriarchy. "I've lived with mythology all my life," Welty confessed. "It is just as close to me as the landscape. It *naturally* occurs to me when I am writing fiction."⁶ She learned it, as a young woman, from sources as various as Brewster's *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* and James Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. What she did with what she learned was to reimagine and rewrite: to shift the centre of attention, to alter the discourse, sometimes even to push back to patterns of myth that derive from pre-patriarchal culture and are concerned with feminine power – myths like that of Demeter and Kore, which Welty used or invoked on several occasions. The pattern here was one of divergence; the male

narrative was contested, not because Welty was, in any deliberate sense, a feminist – she once said that she hated “the grotesque quality” of the women’s movement – but because that was her view, her position personally and historically. That was how she chose and perhaps even had to conduct her conversation.

To achieve her revelation of what humanly matters in *The Robber Bridegroom*, Welty drew, of course, on a Brothers Grimm fairytale as well as stories circulating in the Natchez Trace region. The attraction of the genre of fairy tale for Welty, as a series of *ur*-texts to be invoked and reinvented, is not difficult to fathom. As one authority on the genre, Marina Warner, has pointed out, fairy tales have a “double vision.” On the one hand, they chart “perennial drives and terrors, both conscious and unconscious;” on the other, they map “actual, volatile experience.” They may, in the process of mapping that experience, show a blithe disregard for logic, and be rife with narrative non-sequiturs and improbable reversals, but, as Warner puts it, “the emotional conflicts” they dramatise, “hatred, jealousy, kindness, cherishing retain an intense integrity throughout.” For a writer who saw all things as double, and habitually represented her vision through a mix of fact and fantasy, emotional truth and narrative playfulness, this must have exercised an enormous appeal. What also must have exercised appeal was a further determining characteristic of fairy tale that Warner notes. These tales, she points out, have a particular “slant towards the tribulations of women, and especially young women of a marriageable age.” Not only that, they were traditionally told by women. They were a way of finding a voice, achieving some kind of narrative authority and making a space for the female in a male dominated society. As Warner puts it:

Fairy tale offers a case where the very contempt for women opened an opportunity for them to exercise their wit and communicate their ideas: women’s care for children, the prevailing disregard for both groups, and their presumed identity with the simple folk, the common people, handed them fairy tales as a different kind of nursery, where they might set their own seedlings and plant their own flowers.⁷

Warner makes a distinction that is worth bearing in mind, between successive phases and tellings of classic fairy tales. In earlier forms of these tales, when women tell them, the tale-tellers undertake what Warner calls the “central narrative concern of the genre – they contest fear.” They do so by turning their eyes on “the phantasm of the male Other;” they then render it “transparent and safe, the self reflected

as good,” or rid themselves of it “by destruction and transformation.” So, different early forms of the “Beauty and the Beast” story work out this basic plot, moving from the terrifying encounter with Otherness, to its acceptance, or, in some versions of the story, its annihilation. The Beast is tamed, or he is destroyed; in either case, the threat of the male Other has been met, dealt with and exorcised by the end of the fairy tale. The “negatively charged protagonist has proved golden,”⁸ as in so many tales where a bear or a loathsome toad turns out to be a Prince Charming; the terror has been faced, seen and seen off, and “the light shines in dark places.” In later, published versions of these tales, however, this narrative concern tends to be blunted. Notions of female decorum intervene. Warner and other scholars have pointed out the process by which the Grimms gradually made their heroines more polite, well-spoken or even silent, from one edition of their tales to the next, while their wicked female characters became more vituperative and articulate. This was replicated in mass children’s publishing of the nineteenth century, as the narrative space cleared earlier by women was slowly but systematically narrowed by predominantly male editors. One thing, Welty did, as she entered into dialogue with the traditional tale of the robber bridegroom (as I hope to show), was rewrite, reinvent it, certainly – but, in the process, loop back to earlier versions when women were in narrative control.

Even so, the Grimm version of “The Robber Bridegroom” – which is the one with which, like Welty, most modern readers are familiar – does anticipate the Welty novella to some extent. The relation between the two texts is dialogic, not simply oppositional. The Grimm version also presents life as narrativity, storytelling as coextensive with life, just as Welty’s version of the story – and, in fact, all her work – does. The Grimm version also suggests, even plays with the permeable, and perhaps invisible boundaries that separate fact from dream, the sleeping life from the waking: mixing beans and peas and millers with a singing bird, talk of love and marriage with casual violence. Also, even in this version, the story Welty drew on for her narrative frame does what Marina Warner argues so many fairy tales do. It contests fear: the fear, that is, of male sexuality among young over-protected women living in societies dominated by patriarchal traditions. The bride in the Grimm fairy tale is a helpless pawn. The story weaves together intimations of sex and death, meetings with the bridegroom and the decimation of the body, withdrawal and the witnessing of the terrible fate of a substitute ‘bride.’ Until she finally tells

her story – which is, of course, the story about her that we have just read as well as the story by her that she now tells – the girl at the centre of the fairy tale is consistently, acutely vulnerable: unable to resist the demands of her father and her would-be husband, forced to hide in what seems like the most transparent and easily penetrated of hiding places, dependent on the wiles of someone else much older and cannier than herself for her survival and escape. The fear of male power and male sexuality is only matched in this tale by the feeling of ignorance. The fears of young women of the kind the bride in the tale represents were, after all, complicated and compounded by their lack of knowledge of the men to whom they were given in marriage. Who was to say, after all, who was a robber and who was not: since the whole purpose of the marriage contract presented to such young women was to rob the bride of her rights to herself, her own property and her own body? She and her body were, in fact, indistinguishable and inseparable from all other property: simply to be handed at the appointed time from one man, her father, to another. In such circumstances, the conceit of men coming like thieves in the night, to cut up and consume the bodies they have taken – and over which they assume absolute power – seems an entirely appropriate, if appropriately bizarre, turning of fact into fantasy.

It is here, however, in the emphasis on the passivity of the heroine, that the two texts begin to diverge; Welty's heroine is very different from the heroine of the Grimm fairy tale. So are many of the terms of the world, the society in which she is situated. Welty was aware, to take the second point first, that a pioneer society like the one in and around Natchez Trace might preserve certain conventions, but that it would admit a certain acceptance, even encouragement of motives and impulses outside the social norm. "Life was so full, so excessively charged with energy in those days, when nothing seemed impossible in the Natchez country," Welty said in a talk to the Mississippi Historical Society, "that leading one life hardly provided scope enough for it all." That encouraged her, she explained, to think in terms of "doubleness in respect to identity." "In the doubleness," Welty said, "there was narrative truth that I felt the times themselves had justified."⁹ That doubleness, the motif of leading a double life, was, of course, ingrained in the original tale. But, in order to capture what she saw as the fullness of experience in pioneer Mississippi, Welty pushed it much further. "There's a doubleness in respect to identity that runs in a strong thread through all the wild happenings," Welty declared

of her version of the tale; “– indeed (she went on), this thread is their connection, and everything that happens hangs upon it.” And, I would add, it is an *inclusive* doubleness, not an oppositional one: a rejection of the tired dualisms of fact and feeling, history and fantasy, matter and mind, actuality and imagination – and, what is most pertinent here, body and spirit. This leads me back to my other point about Welty’s rewriting of the tale: her representation of the heroine. For what is most notable here, I think, is that Rosamund Musgrove offers a much more active, adventuring version of womanhood than the ‘young bride’ of the Grimm version. In particular, she alerts the reader to the existence, and the necessity, of desire within a woman. In talking to previous textualisations of the tale, it is almost as if, as I said earlier, Welty were turning back, if not to older, oral versions of this particular story – I doubt that she knew of them – then to the voice and spirit that animated them: a voice and spirit that allowed a larger, freer narrative space to women.

Where this leads us, in the novella, is acutely interesting. Jamie Lockhart is, certainly, a robber bridegroom, just as in the Grimm tale. And, just as in that tale as well, Rosamund’s father is ignorant of this: seeing in the young man an eminently suitable match for his daughter. It is, however, precisely the robber side of Jamie that attracts Rosamund. As the polite family guest, he bores her; as such, she finds him tiresome and unattractive. What she finds attractive on the other hand is her imaginings of the “attempts” (as they are called) that Jamie the robber makes on her. And what she finds even more attractive, and positively pleasurable, is her experience of sexuality with Jamie after she goes to live with him in the woods. Living with Jamie, the reader is told, “the day was hard” for Rosamund, “but the night canceled out the day.” The forest in the Welty story functions very much as it does in, say, Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* (1850). It is the place of freedom, where the lovers are able to enjoy one another – and where, in particular, a young woman is able to come to fulfilment in body as well as in spirit. “If Jamie was a thief after Rosamund’s love,” the reader learns, “she was his first assistant in the deed, and rejoiced equally in his good success.”¹⁰ And the lush portraits of “the deepest woods” become an outward and visible emblem of Rosamund’s own abundant flowering.

It is worth dwelling for a moment, I think, on how Welty’s dialogic relation with the tale of the robber bridegroom leads to a re-valuation of the title character and his relationship to the heroine.

Marina Warner, among others, draws our attention to what she calls “the attraction of the wild and of the wild brother” in twentieth-century versions of fairy tales. “Beauty stands in need of the Beast” in more recent tellings of “Beauty and the Beast,” she points out, “and the Beast’s beastliness is good, even adorable.” “He no longer stands outside her, the threat of male sexuality in bodily form . . . but he holds up a mirror to the forces of nature within her, which she is invited to accept and allow to grow.”¹¹ In one sense, Warner points on, the Beast has returned in these feminist revisions of ancient stories to the early medieval versions that at least allowed a space for female desire. But desire in these early medieval versions tended to be stigmatised as lust. In the feminist revisions, as in Welty’s story, the stigma has been lifted. “The Beast as beast has become the object of desire” (as Warner puts it); he, and his equivalents in other tales, becomes “the wild brother” in whose waywardness the heroine can find signs of kinship, sometimes teasing, sometimes tender or terrifying – at any rate, testaments to a bond written in flesh and blood. Welty turns the robber bridegroom, Jamie Lockhart, into exactly that: a wild brother: someone to whom, in all his wildness, Rosamond is drawn, in whom she sees a reflection of, as well a stimulus for, her own desire. Welty’s novella is, in that sense, a talking with the tale that voices connections with the most contemporary, as well as the most ancient, versions of fairy tales. It dips back into the past, certainly, to a time when women told tales about themselves. But it also makes contact with much more recent retellings of old stories: retellings like those, say, of Angela Carter, in which the old tales are turned upside down and inside out. In the spirit of mischief, the author seizes the chance to mawl notions of the ladylike mostly invented by men. She deliberately draws the classic motifs of the genre out of their set shapes, out of their assigned spaces and into a world of change; the characters lose their places in the old script and begin to cross forbidden boundary lines.

A particularly powerful episode that registers just how those lines are crossed, and just how Welty’s heroine differs from the young woman of the Grimm tale, occurs in the second chapter of *The Robber Bridegroom*, when Jamie Lockhart, in his ‘robber’s rags,’ comes upon Rosamond in the ‘wild woods’ carrying a pail of milk in her hand. The initial meeting recalls numerous folk tales and ballads in which a wild young rover, often with aristocratic connections, meets and abducts a country girl or milkmaid. It also carries faint echoes of the most no-

table literary representation of that situation, in Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). Here, however, there is little sense of fear or incipient tragedy. On the contrary, the description is a rapt measure of Rosamond's feelings of release and gathering excitement. "He rode right up to her, and reached down his arms and lifted her up, pail of milk and all, into the saddle with scarcely a pause in his speed," the episode begins:

Up the ridge they went, and a stream of mist made a circle around them. Then it unwound and floated below in the hollows. The dark cedars sprang from the black ravine, the hanging fruit trees shone ahead on their crests and were hidden by the cedars. The morning sky rolled slowly like a dark wave they were overtaking, but it had the sound of thunder. Over and under was another sound, like horses following – was it her father, or an echo? – faster and faster, as they rode faster.¹²

In this magical forest, everything is strange but sensuous, fluid and mysterious; above all, everything is on the move and freighted with as yet undisclosed sources of excitement. All this is an apt figuring of Rosamond's own evident feelings, as she is taken – and, it seems, liberated – from the house of her father (who, she senses, is there in spirit in pursuit of her, trying to take her back) and drawn into a realm of the senses that is all the more thrilling for being as yet unencountered and unknown.

"Rosamond's hair lay behind her," the narrator discloses, as the ride into Rosamond's new home in the woods continues,

and Jamie's was flying too. The horse . . . went like an arrow with the distance behind him and the dark wood closing together. On Rosamund's arm was the pail of milk, and yet so smoothly did they travel that not a single drop was spilled. Rosamund's cloak filled with wind, and then in the one still moment in the middle of a leap, it broke from her shoulder like a big bird, and dropped away below. Red as blood the horse rode the ridge, his mane and tail straight out in the wind, and it was the fastest kidnaping that had ever been in that part of the country.¹³

The sensuous, implicitly erotic details of this passage transform a kidnaping into a kind of emotional rescue. Rosamund is being carried off, in a motion that is simultaneously rapt and relaxed, into a dark wood that clearly speaks to – and, in fact, reflects – the more sensual side of her own nature. This is not some vulnerable victim of a rigid patriarchal order we are witnessing, but a heroine who has become complicit in, even an agent of, her own liberation. She is responding, not just to the robber bridegroom and the deep woods he inhabits, but to her own needs and desires – and to her own nature, "so full," as Welty would have it, "so excessively charged with energy." It is no

surprise, then, that the passage ends with Jamie laying Rosamond on the ground where, for the first time, they make love. Everything here is charged with a sense of their imminent union; the entire passage is a powerfully physical representation of Rosamond's eager embrace of Jamie and, along with him, a new world and a new dawn ("the sun mounted the morning cloud," we are told, as the wild ride through the woods concludes) of erotic escape and sexual adventure.

"At home in the woods," Rosamond lives a life that knits together strangeness and sensuality. "Jamie was only with her in the hours of the night," the reader learns, "and rode away before the dawn." However, "he spoke as kind and sweet words as anyone ever could between the hours of sunset and sunrise." With night cancelling out the day here, all the traditional intimations of darkness are washed away. Night is the moment of sexual rapture, intimacy; it is also, and paradoxically (until we remember that "all things are double"), the moment of mystery, cloaking all things in shadows, the excitement of the unknown. "The only thing that could possibly keep her from being totally happy," we are told of Rosamond, "was that she had never seen her lover's face;" it is hidden from her, not just by the darkness, but by the juice of berries that he habitually wears as a robber's mask. "She begged him every night to wash off the stains from his face so that she could see just once what he really looked like, and she swore that she believed he would be handsome, but he would never do it."¹⁴ "But then the heart cannot live without something to sorrow and be curious over," the narrator confides to the reader; love, it seems, finds its source in separateness, the sensuous is in league with the strange. Rosamond may lie awake beside by the robber bridegroom, "and study his sleeping face," but (we are told) she cannot "know the language it was written in." The contours of his appearance are like the words of a book that are captivating precisely because they are elusive, sensually appealing because they are fluid, evading the fixities and definites of the mind. Like the words of *The Robber Bridegroom*, in fact: although Welty would probably have been one of the last to accept the notion of a specifically feminine practice of writing, the language of her story clearly corresponds, not just to the sensuous mysteries of the face of the beloved, but to the idea of *écriture féminine*, pursued by Helene Cixous among others, the inscription of the female body and female difference in language and in text. The narrative and idiom of her story quietly resist the authoritativeness of the singular text, the straightforward linear narrative, any monolithic

or unitary form of discourse. Everything here is shifting, marked by echo, intimation, and repetition; the stuff of this story is both material and magical, of the earth, earthy and thoroughly rich and strange. In short, the story Rosamond inhabits subverts patriarchal forms of discourse just as Rosamond herself resists and rebels against patriarchal authority. This is a rewriting that, in every sense, places what Cixous calls *jouissance* – an intense, rapturous and determinately female pleasure – at its centre.¹⁵ In the process, it defies any system that seeks to organize experience into irreconcilable oppositions, or any habits of being or writing that would reduce what the narrative calls “the dream of time passing” to static, monolithic forms of knowledge.

Ironically, it is Rosamond who succumbs for a while to those forms, when she wipes away the juice of the berry stains from Jamie’s face while he is sleeping. In the light of her candle, two become one or four become two, as the robber bridegroom and his beloved recognise each other:

“You are Jamie Lockhart!” she said.

“And you are Clement Musgrove’s silly daughter,” said he.¹⁶

The recognition leads to rupture, an end to their idyll in the wilderness. Jamie bids goodbye to the woman with whom he has been “at home in the woods.” “You did not trust me and did not love me,” he tells her, “for you wanted only to know who I am. Now I cannot stay in the house with you.” But the subsequent wanderings of the lovers eventually bring them back together again in another realm that is simultaneously earthy and magical, sensual but with intimations of mystery: New Orleans. “The very atmosphere was nothing but aerial spice” there, the reader learns, “the very walls were sugar cane, the very clouds hung as golden bananas in the sky.” In this exotic setting, a city with many of the strange, exciting qualities of the wild woods where they first met, Jamie and Rosamond are reunited. The conclusion is teasingly abrupt and inconclusive – in this story, nothing is fixed, everything remains mobile, open, even at the end – but it seems the lovers have recovered and recaptured their ability to inhabit different realms of love and strangeness, intimacy and distance. Inhabiting a place of trade and witchcraft, Rosamond takes up again her habit of telling stories that slyly subvert the need to distinguish fact from fiction, history from legend, living from dreaming. “Is all this true,” Clement Musgrove asks his daughter, in some confusion, after

she has told him the story of what happened to her and Jamie after they left the woods, "or is it a lie?" "It is the truth," Rosamond tells him: but she, and the reader, know by now that there is the truth of the father and the truth of the daughter, the truth of patriarchal authority and truth of another kind – and it is the latter kind, the truth of adventure, of the imagination and the body, that Rosamond inhabits and has embraced. Jamie, too, has learned the beauty of being an amphibian, capable of living in different realms. "Now, in his heart," the narrator says of him, "Jamie knew that he was a hero and had always been one, only with the power to look both ways and to see a thing from all sides." Appropriately, for lovers who have returned to their wilderness mode of living with duality, Rosamond and Jamie have also become the parents of twins. Nothing is certain, as Rosamond says goodbye to her father (and the reader): except, perhaps, the sense that uncertainty, risk is indelibly etched into life, nature and human nature are in a condition of constant change, and that (as this version of the robber bridegroom story figures it) the adventuring spirit is the one that responds most fully and honestly to the energy at the heart of things – whether that spirit belongs to the heroine of *The Robber Bridegroom* or its author.

All this was put, of course, with far more precision by Eudora Welty herself. When she was asked once if there was, perhaps, "a single source" in herself from which her stories emanated, she responded that it was probably "a lyrical impulse" for which the word '*praise*' might – or might not – be right. "I imagine again," she added "that must be the common impulse that most of us do share, and I think it's a good one to share . . . I think it presumes that you will be *attentive* to life."¹⁷ Praise, attentiveness to life, care for the wonder, the tangible mystery of the body and the world it occupies: these are all ways, it may be, of explaining why Welty chose to turn a sinister fairy tale into a celebration of the fullness of things. Talking to and retelling that fairy tale, she refocused and reemphasised its concern with females making a narrative space for themselves, and confronting the challenges offered by male authority and desire. Looping back to the earliest periods of fairy tale telling, she also ventured forward, breaking up the old script, crossing the narrative boundaries in ways that anticipated later, specifically feminist retellings of these tales. *The Robber Bridegroom* is not only deeply attentive to life; it is equally, deeply attentive to those textualisations through which we know life and, with the help of which, we cope with living. It also makes its

point by reinserting the tale of the robber bridegroom in a specifically female tradition, and even redefining its given title. The real robbers, it turns out in Welty's story, are not those of the Grimm version of the story, least of all Jamie Lockhart. They are those who would deny the possibilities of the adventuring mind – and, in particular, those who would take from women like Rosamund their natural instincts and only return them, reluctantly, when those women have been made the property of a man.

Appendix

THE BROTHERS GRIMM VERSION OF THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM: A SUMMARY OF THE PLOT

A miller wants his daughter to make a good marriage. He finds a suitably rich and evidently attractive husband for her. But the daughter does not love the young man. Not only that, she finds herself strangely repelled by him. She tries to avoid going to see him in his house – which, he says, stands in the middle of the forest. The young man insists, however. And, when she claims that she cannot come because she will not be able to find her way, he tells her that she must go to his house every Sunday to meet guests he has invited. To make her journey easier, he will scatter ashes along the forest path. The girl, however, is not reassured, even though she bows to his wishes. She fills her pockets with beans and peas before making her journey; and she throws these down as she makes her way through the wild. After walking for a whole day, she comes across the house belonging to the young man her father has chosen for her. It is in the depths of the forest. It appears deserted. And above the door hangs a cage in which a little bird is sitting. The bird sings out a warning: “Turn back, turn back, young bride!/ The den belongs to murderers./ Who’ll soon be at your side!”¹⁸

The “beautiful bride,” as she is now called, nevertheless enters the house: which appears to be empty until, in one room, she finds an “exceedingly old woman:” who informs her that this is, indeed, a murderer’s den. “You think you’re a bride soon to be celebrating your wedding,” the old woman tells her, “but the only marriage you’ll celebrate will be with death.” Warning the bride that, if the robbers get her, they will chop her into pieces and eat her – “because they’re cannibals” – the old woman hides her behind a large barrel. Eventually the robbers, who include her bridegroom, come back to the house,

bringing another girl with them. They are drunk, and give this other young girl wine to drink until, we are told, "her heart burst in two." They then tear off her fine clothes, chop her body into pieces, and sprinkle all the pieces with salt. The bride behind the barrel is naturally very frightened, as she watches all this in hiding. She becomes even more frightened when one of the robbers tries to get a ring off the dead girl's finger. When he cannot slip it off, he simply chops off the finger: which flies into the air and falls behind the barrel right into the bride's lap. The robbers search all over for it. But the old woman distracts them from looking behind the barrel by calling them to supper. The old woman also slips a sleeping potion into the robbers' wine, allowing the bride to escape – and, indeed, accompanying her in her flight back to her father's mill. The bride immediately tells her father what has happened. Despite that, the miller allows the wedding to go ahead. But, on the day of the wedding celebrations, the guests are all encouraged to tell stories. The bride is asked for her story by the groom himself. "Can't you think of anything," he asks her. "Tell us a good story." She responds by saying, "I'll tell you a dream." She then proceeds to describe what happened to her during her walk through the woods and her sojourn in the robbers' den: punctuating her story with the deceptively reassuring refrain, "My dear, it was only a dream." And so she recounts and relives the whole terrifying episode. At the conclusion, by way of showing that the "dream" is, in fact, the truth, she suddenly declares, "And here's the finger with the ring!" The evidence is enough for the assembled wedding guests: who seize the robber bridegroom and turn him over to the magistrate's. "Then," the story ends, "he and his whole band were executed for their shameful crimes."¹⁹

Notes

- ¹ Joseph Brodsky, "A Footnote to a Commentary," trans. Jeremy Gambrell and Alexander Sumerkin, *Rereading Russian Poetry*, ed. Stephanie Sandler (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale UP, 1999) 184. I am grateful to my colleague, Dr Leon Burnett, for drawing my attention to the essays by Brodsky and Mandelstam.
- ² Osip Mandelstam, "On the Nature of the Word," trans. Jane Gary Harris, *Mandelstam: The Complete Critical Prose and Letters* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Ardis, 1979) 113. See also 129.
- ³ Wendell Berry, *What Are People For?* (New York: North Point, 1990) 192.
- ⁴ Eudora Welty, *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1984) 103-108. See also, Louise Westling, *Women Writers: Eudora Welty* (London: MacMillan & Co. Limited, 1989) 73, 86; Thomas L.

- McHaney, "Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples," *Mississippi Quarterly* 26 (Fall 1973): 590.
- ⁵ *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 304. See also 54; Eudora Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard UP, 1984) 104.
- ⁶ *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 224. See also, Bill Ferris, introduction, *Images of the South: Visits with Eudora Welty and Walker Evans*, Southern Folklore Reports 1 (Memphis, Tennessee: Center for Southern Folklore, 1977) 6; Patricia Yaeger, "'Because a Fire Was in My Head': Eudora Welty and the Dialogic Imagination," *PMLA* 99 (October 1984): 955-73. For some other interesting feminist readings of Welty see, for example, Betina Entzminger, *The Belle Gone Bad: White Southern Women Writers and the Dark Seductress* (Baton Rouge, Louisiana: Louisiana State UP, 2002); Franziska Gygax, *Serious Daring from Within: Female Narrative Strategies in Eudora Welty's Novels* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990); Rebecca Mark, *The Dragon's Blood: Feminist Intertextuality in Eudora Welty's 'The Golden Apples'* (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1994); Gail Mortimer, *Daughter of the Swan: Love and Knowledge in Eudora Welty's Fiction* (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1994); *The Late Novels of Eudora Welty*, ed. Jan Nordby Gretlund (Columbia, South Carolina: U of South Carolina P, 1998); *Haunted Bodies: Gender and Southern Texts*, ed. Anne Goodwyn Jones and Susan Donaldson (Charlottesville, Virginia: UP of Virginia, 1997); *The Female Tradition in Southern Literature*, ed. Carol S. Manning (Urbana, Illinois: U of Illinois P, 1993); *Eudora Welty: Critical Essays*, ed. Peggy W. Prenshaw (Jackson, Mississippi: UP of Mississippi, 1979); *Eudora Welty: Eye of the Storyteller*, ed. Dawn Trouard (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 1989); Louise Westling, *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, and Flannery O'Connor* (Athens, Georgia: U of Georgia P, 1985); Patricia Yaeger, *Dirt and Desire: Reconstructing Southern Women's Writing 1930-1990* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2000).
- ⁷ Marina Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and Their Tellers* (London: Vintage Books, 1995) xix. See also xvii.
- ⁸ *Ibid.* 276-77.
- ⁹ Binding, introduction, Eudora Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* (London: Virago, 1982) xiii-xiv.
- ¹⁰ Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* 84. See also 83.
- ¹¹ Warner, *From the Beast to the Blonde* 307.
- ¹² Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* 63-64.
- ¹³ *Ibid.* 64.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.* 88. See also 82, 84.
- ¹⁵ Helene Cixous and Catherine Clement, *La jeune née* (Paris: Union Generale d'Ed., 1975).
- ¹⁶ Welty, *The Robber Bridegroom* 134. See also 135, 182, 184, 185.
- ¹⁷ Binding, introduction xiv.
- ¹⁸ *The Complete Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm*, trans. Jack Zipes (New York: Bantam, 1987) 167.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.* 170. See also 167, 168, 169.