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Preface *The Optimist's Daughter*¹

Jacques Cabau

Emmeline GROS

The Optimist's Daughter, for which Eudora Welty received the Pulitzer Prize—the highest American literary distinction—in 1973, reads like a short story. It is, however, a great novel which features a unique combination of **conciseness, subtlety, and implicitness/ concise, subtle, and implicit writing**. If critics praised the author's qualities in the writing, the psychology, and the composition of the plot, they also admired the fine density of the story's meditation on life and death, its focus on intergenerational conflict, on the crisis of civilization, and, more broadly, its exploration of the mystery of fate and of human relations.

Conveyed with a profound subtlety and reading like a poem, symbols and mythological references weave through this work, which is as complex and subtle (**unassuming**) as its author. On the surface, the plot of *The Optimist's Daughter* is a fairly simple one, because contrained in time and space. Falling under the heading of the daily crises of life, *The Optimist's Daughter* is one of those micro-tragedies that may well have been written by Maupassant, Chekhov, or Katherine Mansfield, for Eudora Welty does belong to this breed of authors.

She is first and foremost a writer of short stories and works with millimeter accuracy, mastering the art of the understatement, a craft which originates in her own modesty/**the privacy (or intimacy) of her own life/her own humble ways**. On Welty's daily menu feature the mystery of life, the enigma of human beings and of their relationship to each other and to the world. Certainly, Welty published other novels: *The Robber Bridegroom* (1942) which is a kind of fairy tale, *Delta Wedding* (1946) comparable in analysis to *The Optimist's Daughter*, the only difference being that a wedding, not a funeral, structures the plot. But it is the art of the short story that Welty excels at ; an art she started to practise as early as 1936. *A Curtain of Green* (1941) is her first collection of short stories and the essence of this meticulously-written volume is to be found in three great compilations of short stories : « The Wide Net » (1943), « The Golden Apples » (1949), and « The Bride of the Innisfallen » (1955). In all these stories, Welty combines realism, characterised by minute description, with what could be described as an almost magnificent sense of the supernatural and of the allegory. This blend of realism and fantasy has been used by authors ranging from Poe to Hawthorne and is part of a longstanding American literary tradition culminating in the works of Henry James, of whom Eudora Welty is obviously the follower.

In this magic realism of everyday reality, Welty seeks to uncover a mystery. "I do not wish to pass for a mystic," she writes, "but for a mysterious woman from time to time." Her discreetly enigmatic art strives, like that of Henry James, to decode a secret that is never entirely easily explained, one that always points, like in a game of mirrors, to another secret: "A human relationship," she writes in *How I Write*, "is an eternal and changing mystery that, in life, is not made up of words, but that, in a story, words need to render (**translate**)". Thus defined, her problem as an artist takes on the appearance of a charismatic vocation. The art of the short story here is to suggest how a brutal event (**the brutal reality of an event**) comes to tear for a moment (**momentarily**) the veil of everyday life so as to illuminate a mystery that closes (**disappears**) afterwards. In this sense, in its mixture of tragedy and social comedy, of daily

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realism and allegory, the argument presented in *The Optimist's Daughter* resembles (is similar to), that of Katherine Mansfield in her famous *Garden Party*. Death, there, is a sudden catalyst that, for a moment, tears to pieces the **graciously preserved illusions of life**. In the South of the United States, an old prominent citizen, a former judge - the “optimist” – is hospitalized for retinal detachment and dies unexpectedly. Two women are fighting around (over) the body and the inheritance: Laurel, his daughter from a previous marriage, and Fay, the Judge’s second wife, almost as young as Laurel.

The opposition between these two women reveals a deeper conflict: that of two contradictory tempers, two social classes, two conceptions of the world. Consequently, this tiny tragedy of the death of an old man takes the magnitude of a myth in which Electra and Clytemnestra confront each other in this modernized version of the ancient tragedy. The South of the United States takes on Greek proportions here, namely because the South is less a place than a state of mind. If Eudora Welty possesses an extraordinary sense of the local color, it is not merely for the sake of the picturesque. She asserts in an essay that “it is the sense of a place that gives one person the roots that shall nourish the human spirit.” (could not find the original quote, no reference given). It is as unthinkable to envision the world of Welty in San Francisco as it is unimaginable to locate *Swann’s Way* in Auvergne. The focal point of Eudora Welty's work is the American South, specifically the state of Mississippi. She is like Faulkner, for whom she does not hide her admiration, like Carson McCullers, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Pen Warren, Katherine Anne Porter ... she belongs to these Southern writers who do not form a “school” but who, for the last forty years or so, have given to Southern literature a new lease on life, a new tone, a new significance.

Eudora Welty was born in the South, in 1909 in Jackson, Mississippi, where she spent such a disarmingly simple and discrete life. When asked about her life, this great blue-eyed lady would answer with modesty, “there is so little to say”. She might well be “the optimist’s daughter”, for, like her, she descends from an old family of great leaders: professors, preachers, lawyers. Her father, the President of an insurance company, might as well be the judge, like the “optimist,” who makes his way between the Baptist temple and the colonnades of the courthouse, protected by his white panama hat from the pitiless sun of a Faulknerian ‘huis clos’. Eudora Welty knows the South—her place of birth and the place she chose to write about—very well. After studying advertising, Welty worked for the Mississippi Advertising Commission and as she toured Mississippi, taking its dusty roads among the cotton fields, meeting with farmers and merchants, blacks and whites, she became impregnated with the spirit of the place. This school of reporting sharpened her gifts of observation. She was initially attracted by painting and photography. In 1936, she organized a photographic exhibit in a gallery about the daily life of the simple people in the South.

That same year, she published in the magazine "Manuscript" her first short stories: “Death of a Traveling Salesman”. Investigation and photographic reporting taught her realism. From this experience, Eudora Welty gained a steady eye and a perfect ear. The funeral scenes in “The Optimist’s Daughter” are the masterpieces of a great observer. With a few lines, she draws every typical gesture, renders all differences in accents and idioms, especially the collision between the Texans and the people in Mississippi. But her realistic portrayal hides subtle symbolic overtones. In the manner of an impressionist, she captures reality only to bring out the mystery behind appearances. She identifies the shape of objects only to suggest their mystery and inner light. She is a regionalist writer, but only in appearance. In fact, she traces and uncovers the mythical aspect of the most ordinary things, the exotic face of everyday life. Like Faulkner, if Eudora Welty sets her work in the South, it is because she perceives the region’s extreme complexity: myth and reality co-exist.

The South, this "mezzogiorno" of the United States, this deep wound in the stomach of the Colossus, has stood still since the Civil War, struck by the double curse of slavery and defeat, petrified like a cursed place. Unchanged, frozen in time, the South of Eudora Welty, like that of Faulkner, is the scene of eternal human passions. It is because the reality of the South has taken this mythical aspect that Eudora Welty can, like Faulkner, make it a theater of timeless beauty, where the reality takes on the fantastic quality of the dream. In her essay "Place in Fiction," Miss Welty points out that "Fantasy must touch ground with at least one toe, and ghost stories must have one foot, so to speak, in the grave". She never fails at it (**disappoints**). Like Joyce's portrayal of Ireland or Walter Scott's capture of Scotland, Welty's South, like Faulkner's, feeds on the marvelous blend of realism and myth. It is there, in the South, that she has planted the seeds of her passion plays (**those mysteries of passion**).

Her brief and relentless (**implacable**) story appears like an "auto sacramental" one, one that is set under the burning fires of an impartial noon, yet frozen in a divine indifference that has reached its zenith. This South without mercy and without God embodies the ambiguity of the human condition, torn between the illusion of an idyllic past and the reality of the Fall. This optimist's daughter who ultimately renounces her inheritance and leaves the South for a life of exile in the North, embodies this resigned and lucid love for a dying world. Following her father, indeed, a whole world dies. The optimist's daughter is both a fallen aristocrat who keeps bringing up the past and a satirist who denounces without illusion the end of a century. The South is no longer here a reliquary of the good old days. Gone with the wind are the large plantations, the white mansions with colonnades, the friendly slaves, the ladies in crinoline under the magnolias, the fine cavaliers with sabers in their belts. The Sartoris are dead, ruined; The Snopes have taken their place. The South, here, has become a decadent and reclusive (**inward-looking**) universe, caught in illusions and rituals; a world of unimportant citizens who incurably cultivate the nostalgia for a dead culture and past.

"Optimistic", the term here is obviously used with irony. This "optimist" is a blind man, and dies of blindness, in the literal and figurative meaning of the word. He has failed to see the South being disposed of, his lands being invaded, his power being curtailed. He failed to see the grief of his first wife nor the vulgar cupidity of his second wife. He married the young Fay only to deceive himself, to forget about his age and the wreck of a man that is also that of a world. Isn't the very name of Fay, borne by his young wife, the symbol of the fairy's evil spells? The optimism of the judge is nothing but the blindness of those who are hostages to the South. His optimism is a bluff, a pose that conceals disability. "He was a man," concludes his daughter, "who needed guidance in order to see the tragic". "He had a wonderful sense of humor," repeat his friends as they follow the burial.

But, as his daughter reflects, there are moments in life when humor is not enough and where laughter becomes hysterical. Lucid but faithful, the daughter of the optimist knows her father's weaknesses. She supports him however, with unfaltering allegiance, against Fay, the vulgar little white goose who accuses the judge of having purposely died in the middle of the carnival and on her birthday. Between Fay and Laurel, between the unworthy wife and the guardian of the dead, the conflict is as inevitable as between Clytemnestra and Electra. And the death of the father is only the catalyst of a conflict that goes beyond the father figure into the oldest myths. The burial is here "comedy" in the etymological sense of the term: an "ode" of "komon" that is to say, banquet.

It is, of course, a funeral banquet; yet, humor breaks out and it is cathartic like this carnival filled up with laughter surrounding the dead. The funeral is a Dionysian comedy, where the living beings gather in order to comfort themselves by talking, drinking, and eating. A chorus (**a choir**) of comedians surrounds the half-open coffin: the Chisom family, the prominent

citizens, and the town gossipers. Even before the death of the judge, in the hospital, the senile Mr. Dalzell was accompanying the judge's agony with an erratic monologue. Humor and funeral arrangements, comic and tragic, unite in a version of the art of the absurd that is best embodied in this child, all dressed up, leaning on the coffin, a lollipop in hand, not knowing whether he should laugh or cry. The comedy knocks on the drama's back door.

The two families' blind confrontation takes place between the flowers and the buffet, before a made-up dead body. As always, the flowers hide some horrible and obscene mystery, marriage, or funeral. And this confrontation recalls that of the Sartoris and the Snopes in Faulkner's stories. If Fay and Chisom were Faulkner's creations, they would be the Snopes, the carpet baggers who invade and ravage the South like a swarm of locusts. Fay seizes the ancestral home, the Southern heritage, and expels the daughter, shouting: "The past does not count for me, I belong to the future."

Beneath this comedy of manners, one finds both a political and moral meditation upon the South. The judge and his daughter represent the good manners of the South, an ancient civilization, an aristocratic and fragile culture that is brutally invaded by the barbarians. Through the struggle of these two women, one finds the eternal conflict between Sparta and Athens, Macedonia and Greece - the conflict of culture and strength, idealism and realism. Like Electra, Laurel wants to be the guardian of the dead. She gives herself to the past, or rather to what should be called the "perpetual," that unchanging time in which the past absorbs the present and fixes it in a myth. Eudora Welty refuses to give to this conflict of civilizations a political or historical dimension. Left-wing criticism blamed her for neglecting social criticism. She was accused, like Faulkner and so many other Southern writers, of an archaism which would easily pass as reactionary. Welty does not talk about blacks, poor white people, racism or the agricultural crisis. She does this on purpose. She justified her position when her great novel, *Delta Wedding* was deemed to be that of a right-wing writer. She does not seek to make a historical fresco, but a sketch. By getting rid of social and political contingencies, she gives up history and chooses the myth instead, and this choice gives a permanent and metaphysical dimension to the psychological conflict.

Through the mysteries of the South, she explores the enigma of human relations, of this world without God, where only love and art can make sense, at least temporarily. Who is Fay in reality? Who is Laurel? Eudora Welty asks questions that she leaves unanswered, for every solution leads to another mystery. The cosmos itself is only a cluster of mysteries like Russian dolls. If Fay appears as a monster, it is because the book is written from the point of view of Laurel. In this perspective, Fay, the second wife, acquires, in the daughter's eyes, the mythical dimension of the "stepmother": the intruder of low birth, the ugly mother-in-law found in fairy tales.

Things are more complex. The daughter is, like her father, a prisoner of the past. Yet, she is not blind. The death and the comic ballet that surround the funeral scene have opened her eyes. She appears as the "daughter of the optimist" and leaves as the daughter-in-law of the cynical mother-in-law. She demolishes optimistic illusions and discovers instead the coarse, selfish energy embodied by Fay. And the daughter of the optimist also makes the choice of living, cheated and stripped of her inheritance, yet courageous and enriched by the farewell she gives to the dead and the past. Electra has left the past. She has given up on her "house", on her "genos", a term dating back from ancient Greece, which means family, abode, and tomb. Eudora Welty has condensed in a few pages all the subtlety of this wake-up call: Laurel embodies a culture invaded by force that resigns itself to being no more than wisdom. In spite of the shortness of the story, this awareness grows because the author expands it in time—through a system of backtracking—and through space through a network of symbols. For the

first time in her life, Laurel, the prisoner, looks at her past and questions what she believes in. In confronting Fay, she revives her father, her dead mother, and even her own husband who disappeared during the war. She understands that Fay is both what her father wanted and what her mother feared: life to the full. She realizes that she too has missed out on life, and that her desire for purity has led even her husband to death.

Fay is bad but she is not Evil. She is only the model of those people who are harder, more voracious, less cultivated, but more adapted to life. Laurel cannot love Fay, but she cannot resist or annihilate her. She can only understand that they cannot understand each other and that they are strangely alike in their differences: both also alone, widows, and without children. The final scene, in its raw symbolism, exacerbates these paradoxes (**makes these paradoxes even more explicit**). Laurel takes possession of the bread tray that her father had made for her mother and that Fay has soiled. She raises it up to Fay. But at the moment of striking her, she understands that winning this battle would ruin her. Fay, after all, cannot know why she fights. Fay, also, has taken possession of the mansion without understanding the meaning of the civilization this represents.

Other symbols give cosmic resonances to Laurel's story. A stray bird enters through an open window, flies aimlessly through the funeral home. It becomes a prisoner in the house, just like Laurel is a prisoner of the past. The intruding bird, that can neither stay nor go out, soils the sacred place. The symbolism of the voracious pigeons that Laurel feared when she was a child is equally explicit. Also explicit is the symbolism of Fay's nail polish, which contaminates the paternal office, or that of the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio rivers, which symbolizes marriage. Added to this symbolism of things and beasts is a symbolism of the proper names through which the myth becomes visible. In *Losing Battles*, Eudora Welty had already used the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. Here, she brings the myth of Psyche back, under the traits of Laurel whose husband bears the symbolic name of Phil, Love.

Fay, the evil fairy, then becomes the detested and murderous sister, in a new version of Psyche and Love. And like Psyche, Laurel, through suffering, finds redemption in her lucidity. The art of Eudora Welty merges, to a large extent, with that of the short story. But Welty gives it an exceptional significance by assigning deep meaning to the most humble objects, by weaving her story like a net of correspondences around the mystery of things. In this sense, she is a poet and her charismatic art demands the reader's intensive participation. Welty's intimate and subtle art has reached a climax with "The Optimist's daughter". Here, her talent excels at seizing epiphanies, at grasping, in the privileged moments of everyday life, the meaning that arises from an external event and that crystallizes into a provisional truth. Of all the writers, it is perhaps with Chekhov that she bears the most resemblance.

One day someone told her so. And this modest woman overturned her cup of coffee. Yet she shares with Chekhov a fundamental spiritual affinity: despite her utter skepticism, she does not reject tolerance, compassion, nor that laconic and discreet lucidity with which the survivors of a lost civilization welcome death. Contrary to the optimistic myths of the "American dream," Eudora Welty's story reveals the "Russian soul" at the heart of America.