

DAWN TROUARD

The Promiscuous Joy of Eudora Welty: Missing Bowen in Mississippi

I take to her most immensely . . . She's very un-writerish and *bien élevée*. A Southern girl from the State of Mississippi; quiet, self-contained, easy, outwardly old-fashioned, very funny indeed, when she starts talking . . . She's reserved (in itself, I think, a good point these days) so although we have chatted away a good deal, I really know little about her life, nor she about mine. I think she's like me in preferring places to people; and any unexpected sight or view while we are driving about the country makes her start up in the car with a smothered cry as though she had been stung by a wasp . . . No one would pick her out on sight as "an interesting woman". Actually I think she's a genius rather than an interesting woman, which I am glad of as I prefer the former.¹

So Elizabeth Bowen described Eudora Welty in a letter she wrote shortly after Welty's first visit to Bowen's Court in 1950. Her invitation to Welty, a not atypical gesture of Bowen's graciousness and hospitality, would serve as a literary welcome for Welty. But as the Mississippi visitor had just written in her new story revisioning the Circe myth, "welcome" can be "the most dangerous word in the world."² For Welty, not averse to risks and particularly eager for discovery, she would find in the ferment of the early fifties, especially in the timing of her connection with Bowen, the critical support for the sea change she was already confronting.

Almost two decades later, Welty would still recall that kismet first encounter with Bowen, its liminality. Trying to extend her 1949-50 Guggenheim travels, she, uncharacteristically, had written Bowen and asked if she might have a chance to "pay a call": "Well, I had never in my life looked up anybody I didn't know."³ Welty characterized the compulsion to connect with Bowen as "a fantasy almost." An admirer of Bowen's writing, she had resonated to Glenway Westcott's praise of Bowen's ability to withhold revelation to the right moment.⁴ But not until 1951 would Welty read Bowen's 1947 review praising *Delta Wedding*⁵ and be able to fully appreciate how much inevitability, neces-

sity, and accord were immanent in her request to drop by Bowen's Court. Fresh from her travel and adventures on the continent, it would be delightful to think her brazenness had been fueled by her evening with Stephen Tennant, a friend of Bowen's, at the Folies Bergère, or as he summed it up: "'Darling, I'd forgotten how ravishing blue ostrich can be.'"⁶ She was ready for more – and that more was Bowen.

Since Bowen had a "passion" for Welty's work,⁷ she telegraphed her to come. What Welty recalls on first seeing Bowen's Court and the environs in "the South of Ireland, the real South," was that it was lush with palms and fuchsia hedges; it conjured for Welty New Orleans and Savannah. Even more significant in this recollection is her claim that "Elizabeth is a *Southerner*" [emphasis Welty's] who believed that "wherever she went in the whole world almost, the Southerners were always different from the Northerners. She [Elizabeth] always felt the congeniality."⁸

Everything about the visit was to prove magical. Bowen's Court had been the basis for some settings in Bowen's fiction and so, Welty, in some ways, was aware that she had stepped into Bowen's creative territory. When Bowen sends her *The Last September* in 1951, Welty will recall identifying "the lamb's drawing room" from her visits. Michael Kreyling stresses the further intensification of this visit since its Celtic attractions deepened her connections to Yeats and "the traditions represented in Russell [Diarmuid, her beloved agent] and his father, the Irish poet and painter A. E." As a serendipitous bonus, even an editor from the *Atlantic Monthly* where her work had been published could be observed fishing in the river on the Bowen estate. She was at home.⁹ Evenings at Bowen's Court provided guests and card games; Welty reports being especially taken with a children's game they played much like "Go Fish." But at Bowen's Court her playmate could even be Eddy Sackville-West. Welty recalling such evenings reveled in the details of their courtly play: "'May I have Mrs. Bones, the butcher's wife?' which might be greeted with 'Sorry, she isn't at home.'" She reported that she would "get the giggles to see Elizabeth and Eddy being so unfailingly *courteous* to each other . . . sit[ting] around the fire in the evenings, drinking whiskey and playing 'Happy Families.'"¹⁰ The sense of shared 'global' Southern heritages was not confined merely to the gardens and the hospitality, however. It would be a part of the thread that connected their visits and informed their friendship. Bowen's identity, her very subject matter, was heightened by her acute and defining sense of place – "Nothing happens nowhere." Her writing

was embedded in and indebted to her Irish heritage, the conflict and pain of its history. Raised on defeated soil (Anglo-Irish and Mississippi), both women viewed ruins as part of the daily landscape. Bowen immortalized the ruins and the wars in her writings: not just by England's Civil War in a work like *Bowen's Court*, but by her own experiences of both World Wars, especially the bombings of London during World War II and preserved in works like *The Heat of the Day*. Welty, equally rooted, responded to Mississippi's haunted past differently and was at pains to point out that she hated the Civil War and had never read *Gone with the Wind*.

It's something that Elizabeth Bowen understood too, because she said in Ireland scenes of Cromwell's destruction, the burned churches and abbeys, are still standing, and people look at them all day long. They can be in your yard. And it's the same way in the South. You still have the physical memories of things that happened on your property, in your homeplace. That's one reason why it's so hard to forget.¹¹

Welty's own least favorite story, what she called "a bad story,"¹² and her only venture into the remote historical southern past, is "The Burning." For critics, "The Burning" ranks as one of Welty's most vexed and disconcerting stories. Its inclusion in *The Bride* collection complicates its thematic importance. Rape, double suicide, miscegenation, and a twice-burnt, utterly devastated Jackson are the story's markers. The story reads like a hallucination of genteel horror. Ironically, it will be the first of *The Bride* stories to fully emerge from her meeting with Bowen.¹³ Welty's own professed disgruntlement with "The Burning" has rendered it a critical orphan of sorts, but given her fresh proximity to Bowen, Welty, I would venture, is engaged in a veiled response to Bowen's war story, "Mysterious Kôr," published in 1944. In Welty's retrospective review of Bowen's stories, she describes "Mysterious Kôr" as "unsurpassable" and regarded it as the "most extraordinary story" of those set in wartime London.¹⁴ (Kôr itself is the city in Rider Haggard's *She*, the book Bowen claimed as the favorite book of her youth.) However, Welty remained dissatisfied with the draft of "The Burning" she had sent to Russell, and she reworked it through the fall (and again before it appeared in the 1955 collection), while anticipating the double pleasure of reconnecting with Bowen in New York and of hosting Bowen in Jackson for Thanksgiving.¹⁵ During Bowen's visit to Jackson, Welty had the chance to reciprocate for tours of the Irish countryside with excursions through the Louisiana terrain and over many of the same sites she mapped in

her Natchez Trace essay, “Notes on River Country.”¹⁶ Welty knew the South could hold its own against Irish ruins.

By the time she met Bowen, Welty had published her first two collections of stories, *The Robber Bridegroom*, *Delta Wedding*, and *The Golden Apples*. She was certainly launched, but she had not quite arrived. Bowen, every inch the established British literary diva, was to Welty – only just coming into her own – a figure. Everything conspired to make Bowen the jumping off point from which Welty could navigate to artistic freedom. But because of a confluence of events at this juncture in Welty’s life – the pending clarification of her relationship with John Robinson, friend and ‘intended’; and her growing assurance that her work should not be second-guessed by editors who wanted to confine her style and subject – Welty was ripe to learn from Bowen. And by ‘learn’, I do not mean to suggest mere literary influence, since Welty was adamant in her insistence that “as far as the act of writing goes, I have never felt the touch of any other imagination on mine as I write.”¹⁷ What Welty secured from Bowen was a glimpse at “the other way to live.”¹⁸ As Welty was later to put it: “What writer now coming after her could fail to be nourished by her work, exhilarated by her example?”¹⁹

Until Suzanne Marrs’s 2005 biography of Welty made so many details of Welty’s personal life more available, Peggy Whitman Prenshaw’s 1986 study offered the most sustained examination of the two women; it was based on the serendipitous points of contact illuminated by their autobiographies – Welty’s *One Writer’s Beginnings* and Bowen’s posthumous *Pictures and Conversations*. Tracking their many commonalities, Prenshaw, sensitive to a shared desire for privacy in both authors, identifies them as “reluctant autobiographers,” and that not surprisingly, both women delayed these volumes until their early seventies. Further, Prenshaw finds in each a telling early passion for reading, along with a bifurcated sense of origins. For both, the importance of place in fiction was paramount. Bowen identifies Rider Haggard’s *She*, at the age of twelve, as her imprinting work of fiction and her geographic attachments oscillated between Ireland and England. For Welty, “A Sweet Devouring” had already revealed her literary loves from *The Five Little Peppers* through Twain to Dickens;²⁰ in *One Writer’s Beginnings* she extended her connection to books, words, and writers – especially Yeats. Her “sense of doubleness,”²¹ drew from her mother’s longing for West Virginia and her father’s connection to Ohio, luring her away from and back to Mississippi and the Natchez Trace.

There are other, less documentable, aspects of doubleness in the lives of Welty and Bowen. And before pursuing Bowen's connections to several stories in *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, it will be useful to pursue some collateral developments that have bearing on how I believe Bowen became so central to this particular collection. These include both Welty's final realization that she would not have a future with John Robinson, her erstwhile intended, along with her induction, during this critical emotional period, into Bowen's galvanizing view of the artistic uses of intimacy and the erotics of friendship. I offer the latter possibility only speculatively since Welty was adamant about her privacy and her circle of confidantes has honored her preferences: "your private life should be kept private. My own [life] I don't think would particularly interest anybody, for that matter. But I'd guard it: I feel strongly about that. They'd have a hard time trying to find something about me. I think I'd better burn everything up."²² Vigilant in her position about what was restricted – correspondence with her mother, for example, is sealed until 2021 – the complete story will likely never be known. Or as she wrote in "The Wanderers," a story that owes much to the Robinson relationship: "Eugene, for a long interval, had lived in another part of the world, learning while he was away that people don't have to be answered just because they want to know."²³ Bowen's admiration for Welty's 'reserve' is on record and her biography provides various examples of banished confidantes and admirers who failed to play by Bowen's rules of discretion.

Victoria Glendinning's stimulating biography of Bowen amply demonstrates the pure vitality of Bowen's whole life. In many ways, Bowen, a genius at coping, triumphing over family deaths, financial exigencies, and the likely asexual but happy, fulfilling marriage to Alan Cameron, was the ideal haven for Welty. As midwife to Welty's personal and professional coming of age, Bowen will provide finishing touches. For my purposes, I would like to offer at least a glance at those dimensions of Bowen's impact, that is, the effect she likely had on Welty. The Bowen Welty calls on in 1950 is being translated, reprinted, honored, appointed, broadcast, and called on to lecture everywhere. Her literary prowess would have been a given, but it will be her ability as a "magical listener" and her reflex to charm nearly anyone she encountered that will provide the lenses Welty, fine listener and quite the charmer in her own right already, needs.²⁴ Even a compressed record of the hospitality and the obligations Bowen took on

with Bowen's Court and her London world proves nothing short of dazzling. There were lots of opportunities for visits and Welty was only one of many to be hosted. Bowen was particularly fond of Welty's compatible work habits – staying in her room and writing and confining “visiting” till afternoon rides through the countryside. She paid her high praise in noticing how “self-contained” Welty was and she surmised that they were alike in “preferring places to people.” It is impossible to do justice to the full range and diversity of Bowen's friendships and conquests, but her connection with May Sarton and Carson McCullers suggests instructive permutations in Bowen's approach to connections with women.

Bowen, according to Glendinning, believed passionately in the artist's “impulse and wish for everyone to live at full height” and so friendships and affairs were often a means by which “she was gaining experience, tapping sources within herself crucial for her as a writer.”²⁵ In a 1934 letter to one of Bowen's first lovers, she writes:

Remember that you had Elizabeth Bowen to contend with – I mean, a confirmed writer . . . Because it is hard for me (being a writer before I am a woman) to realize that anything – Friendship or love especially – in which I participate imaginatively isn't a book too . . . One may – I may – easily forget that a relationship with a person isn't a book, created out of, protected by, one's own imagination and will. That it is not, in fact, a one-man show.²⁶

Both Carson McCullers and May Sarton will fall under Bowen's spell at different times. McCullers will be jettisoned for bad houseguest behavior compounded by too much drink and lust. Sarton, however, fared better. At age 25, she became besotted with Bowen when she met her during a visit in London (not Bowen's Court); and Bowen revealed to her that she had loved “at least one woman,” but now her love affairs were with men. In no case did any of these relationships touch her love for her husband.²⁷ Sarton reports one night with Bowen at Jeakes House in Rye where Bowen “responded to my passionate feelings for her.” Sarton distinguishes its meaning for her from how Bowen experienced it: “a moment of beauty, of release from tension, when she was in a state herself of emotional precipitation that had nothing to do with me.”²⁸ Sarton turns her affection and memory into literature and puts Bowen in a novel. Bowen's own fiction is rich in homoerotic situations and, by all accounts, she cultivated her allure and indulged in many other complicated flirtations with lesbians and bisexuals. She was matter-of-fact as to the right of the writer to do all and to do all without “squalid” guilt.²⁹ Her practice with these intense

relationships was to invite a heightened intimacy, explore the closeness, and then abort it “with a display of queenly formality.”³⁰

Welty’s reserve made her the consummate houseguest for Bowen, and time and oceans and a shared vision of art made the relationship an enduring one. It is not hard to detect the emotional teetering in “No Place for You, My Love” as founded on the intimacy with Bowen: “They were what their separate hearts desired that day, for themselves and each other.”³¹ That story set “south of the South,” so erotically charged yet so restrained, owes as much to Bowen as to her disappointment with the end of the Robinson romance.

Bowen’s readiness to be “curious and fascinated by the people she met,” according to Welty, “made her an intaker”³² and likely made her the ideal auditor and bridge to support Welty’s transition out of the collapsing relationship with Robinson. Although John Robinson is justifiably in the category of long-time friend, and her novel, *Delta Wedding*, is dedicated to Robinson and recognizes a debt to his family’s letters for its development, he would require no special comment here had not the final throes of the relationship been so instrumental in Welty’s fortuitous arrival at Bowen’s Court.³³ Having ignored a variety of signs over a protracted period that marriage to Robinson was not on the cards, Welty had maintained and intensified their long-standing friendship by proposing various literary projects for collaboration. Knowing Robinson had literary aspirations, she shared the best of her new fame and its opportunities with him. She took him to meet with Faulkner and, at one time, even speculated about co-writing with Robinson a play based on Faulkner’s *Sanctuary*.³⁴ Robinson in turn vacillated, at times inviting her to join him on travels and arranging long visits, and then withdrawing without explanation in an extended game of come-close-don’t. Plans to see him in Europe were part of her excitement over the Guggenheim opportunity. A dedicated and generous correspondent, she routinely sent him accounts of her travels and work, the same kinds of accounts she will share with Bowen as the stories in *The Bride of the Innisfallen* take shape. Further, during her 1951 visit to Bowen’s Court she reports to Robinson that in a discussion of his work with Bowen (intimating as well that Bowen initiated the subject of his writing) she had suggested that “perhaps” he had yet to find his subject.³⁵

Such efforts to soothe and share with Robinson her escalating literary privilege continued until, during that same summer, she is forced to accept that Robinson’s friend, Enzo Roccigiani, is in fact his part-

ner.³⁶ Though reluctant to give up on the idea of a life with him, she does. Freed from the long-scripted relationship, she is compensated for the loss by liberation from the debilitating and inexplicable turmoil triggered by his intermittent hesitations and mixed messages. Many of the dreams she had with Robinson – projects, plans for visits, literary critique, and emotional longing – found new expression and outlet with Bowen. The distinct difference was that with Bowen collaboration came with all the benefits of freedom and none of the rivalry or anxiety over success.³⁷ The fact that her relationship with Robinson unravels at the peak of the friendship with Bowen I believe had much to do not just with her literary development, but with how she would learn, like her character Gabriella Serto in “Going to Naples,” to be “happy all by herself.”³⁸ Bowen’s object lessons would authorize her to go beyond the territories assigned to her by Robert Penn Warren and those who would confine her in any way.

Welty’s metamorphosis occurs in tandem with her various trips during this period – transatlantic, as well as to New York, New Orleans, Chicago and elsewhere to see Bowen and a bevy of other friends. She would be out of Mississippi. Her restlessness is a symptom of these changes and she even begins to pave the way to move out of the orbit of her mother – or, rather, at least into her own home. Though it does not come to fruition, she writes to Bowen that she is planning to buy a house of her own where she will be able to host her for writing in repayment for all the work Bowen has cultivated in Welty by her hospitality: “Oh, *when* again? Will you let me know . . . I shall have a place of my own next time you come, absolutely, all being well & god willing, mine & with a place always for you you could work in or whatever you like. I’ll write you my first finding.”³⁹ The work emerging from this fecund confluence, specifically the seven stories that came to make up *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, marked Welty’s voyage out of the South in a variety of ways. Though she would eventually publish *Losing Battles*, *The Optimist’s Daughter*, and myriad essays and reviews, she was, in most ways, never to leave home again with the same responsiveness or wildness.

Shortly before she set sail for Italy – the voyage which would provide the materials to create the last story in the published collection, “Going to Naples” – she had mailed her Circe story, “Put Me in the Sky!” to Russell.⁴⁰ One of the three non-Southern stories in the collection, it was published under its original title but subsequently revised with Bowen’s advice to become the Circe familiar to readers of *The*

Bride collection. Bowen's remarks on the story elicit the following response from Welty:

I was proud because you liked that little me about Circe, it had already been such a piece of arrogance too, my way – If I set out trying to put something nobody could know the feeling into physical, & psychic, I don't know who could tell me how near I came or how far I fell except you, by terms I'd know. So it goes straight to my head that you liked it. I didn't know it was "the 3rd draft" (well, it is about the 3rd draft of the 3rd draft of the 3rd draft) but I think I'll leave it like this on the strength of your thinking it will do. It was lovely to have you read it – ⁴¹

Her work on what would become the collection's title story also relies on Welty's venture into Bowen's country: "The Bride of the Innisfallen," composed and revised at Bowen's Court, is always cited as Welty's own favorite of her stories. This is particularly in evidence when "The Bride of the Innisfallen" was returned to Russell for Welty from the *New Yorker* "not exactly rejected, but covered with the 'annotations,'" the notorious trademark of a reading by *enfant terrible* Ross; both her protectiveness of this story and her gathering independence rallied. Tempted by the large fee for *New Yorker* publication, she writes Russell about the conflict of making changes for the sale, feeling as she does that *New Yorker* stories "stink so." A week later, in another letter written to Russell from Bowen's Court, she details her emotional attachment to this story: "He [Harold Ross] is coming up extra hard against something he couldn't know, wouldn't care about either – that it's my favorite story I ever happened to write so I am specially sensitive and tender on the subject."⁴² The story eventually will be published by the *New Yorker* and spared the highhanded editorial makeover. It will bring Welty \$2,760. She will subsequently urge Bowen to publish with the *New Yorker* since their plush fees will help her finances. Further, she will offer the money to Bowen to help underwrite her expenses.⁴³ The story's charmed life was to continue since it will be published in the *New Yorker* on December 1, 1951, just after Bowen's Thanksgiving with Welty in Jackson and in the midst of Welty's travels with Bowen to New Orleans and Chicago as the lecture tour resumes.

Welty's streak with the *New Yorker* continued. The next two stories also destined for inclusion in *The Bride of the Innisfallen* and bearing on the Bowen connection were also published there. "No Place for You, My Love," a story set in New Orleans, was based on events occurring just after Welty returned from a visit to Bowen's Court. Though the story relies specifically on an excursion she took with Carvel Collins, it features the landscapes south of New Orleans that Welty shared

with Bowen.⁴⁴ The story figures prominently in Welty criticism since she used it for an analysis of how short stories are written in her essay, "Writing and Analyzing a Story."⁴⁵ Critics have fastened on the evocative location in the story, specifically Venice, Louisiana, the place Welty enigmatically refers to as "south of the South." In one of Welty's letters to Robinson from Bowen's Court, she remarked on Bowen's acute awareness of "the south-ness of the South," and added parenthetically "only she said it better."⁴⁶

By publishing *The Bride of the Innisfallen* and defying her official Southern brand, she did provoke some of her critics. Though not all reviews of the collection would prove to be negative, she did take more than one thrashing. Angus Wilson, for example, observed that Welty's "sharp ears and eyes seem to have fail[ed] so far from home."⁴⁷ But for sheer comprehensive meanness (and for joining Bowen, Welty, and for good measure, Faulkner, in literary hell posterity), no one beats Orville Prescott:

Unfortunately, with exasperating determination Miss Welty persists in denying her own best gifts and damages her work by imitating the faults, rather than the virtues of two other novelists.

From Elizabeth Bowen she seems to have acquired her taste for ambiguity, her way of hinting evasively while withholding essential information, her habit of circling around the point of a story without bothering to reveal it. From William Faulkner she seems to have learned the questionable device of narrating a story from the point of view of a mentally incompetent observer and to have derived her pleasure in grotesque horrors. There are seven stories in *The Bride of the Innisfallen*. Three of them are wanly Bowenesque and one is gruesomely Faulknerian. That leaves three that seem to be undiluted Eudora Welty.⁴⁸

In "Place in Fiction," based on lectures she had given in Cambridge in 1954, Welty had already mounted her own clarifying resistance to such establishment provincialism. Or like her Circe, she had the last word. Not surprisingly, the Cambridge lectures were followed by another two-week stay at Bowen's Court. In "Place in Fiction," Welty subverts the designation of "regional" as "a careless term, as well as a condescending one":

"Regional" is an outsider's term; it has no meaning for the insider who is doing the writing, because as far as he knows he is simply writing about life. Jane Austen, Emily Bronte, Thomas Hardy, Cervantes, Turgenev, the authors of the books of the Old Testament, all confined themselves to regions, great or small, but are they regional? Then who from the start of time has not been so?⁴⁹

Note that her constellation of fellow "regionalists" puts her in the literary firmament with Europe's best. Bowen, in her review of *The*

Golden Apples' publication, and on the heels of Welty's first visit, was to make a similarly preemptive claim: "American, deliberately regional in her settings, [Welty] 'belongs,' in a narrow sense, to no particular nation or continent, having found a communication which spans oceans."⁵⁰

The Bride of the Innisfallen, spanning oceans, was dedicated to Bowen. And it is an article of faith that Welty admired Bowen – or as she variously described it in interviews and reviews: "there was an affinity between us," "she was very helpful to me," "I loved her." Too often, however, when Bowen's name appears in studies of Welty her impact is reduced to that first meeting in 1950 and the privileged place "The Bride of the Innisfallen" story holds in Welty's rankings of her own work. Note is usually taken of the fact that this story was written and then revised while visiting Bowen's Court. It is also *de rigueur* in Welty scholarship to reprise Welty's vigilance in affirming Bowen as one of her cherished major writers, usually along with Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen, Henry Green, and Chekov.⁵¹ But Welty's public devotion to Bowen's art never abated and, even 20 years after their first meeting, Welty was scrupulous to protect and honor Bowen:

I love E. M. Forester and Elizabeth Bowen very much. I revere Virginia Woolf but I don't want her preeminence now – everyone reading and writing about her – accidentally to put Elizabeth in any kind of shadow because I think she was fully as good. And, in a rewarding way, more robust, human, and rounded. I'm not dreaming of trying to see them as competitors, which they never were. You can't look at writing like that. But Elizabeth died recently, and I don't want her books suddenly for that reason to drop behind, even briefly.⁵²

One of Welty's final commemorations of Bowen is preserved in *The Norton Book of Friendship* (1991), an unchronological, somewhat eccentrically-arranged volume that Welty developed with Ronald Sharpe. Welty pays homage to Bowen in the great tradition of friendship correspondence by placing several of her letters in a final "letters" section. A 1941 letter written after Bowen visits Virginia Woolf at Monks House is the one Welty chose to be the last letter for the volume. In the convention of such notes, it extols the pleasures of the visit, the sadness at the leave taking, brings chatty news of Bowen's return to London (work on Bowen's Court continues; Stephen Spender has a boil on his knee; and promises to back Virginia's superior omelette against Alan's should they ever have the great competition). It ends with Bowen's confession that she has left behind a "squalid" green hand mirror and two near-empty jars of cold cream. In pure Bowen

fashion, she implores Woolf: “May I make them an excuse to come back to you before I go back to Ireland?”⁵³ As a sample of Bowen’s prose, it is not extraordinary. As an indicator, and a triangulated one to be sure, of admiration and intimacy, it is perfection. By making it the final letter in the *Norton* collection, Welty makes it clear not just how present Bowen remained in her memory, she also pays tribute to a great line of female geniuses who write, visit, and remember. The connection is intimate. Welty’s conscious efforts to connect to a lineage, especially as a way to see her South from all angles and through all kinds of apertures, is manifest in the very composition of *The Bride of the Innisfallen*. As Pascale Casanova has claimed, discovery of such context is a necessity for both author and reader:

A literary work can be deciphered only on the basis of the whole of the composition, for its rediscovered coherence stands revealed only in relation to the entire literary universe of which it is a part. The singularity of individual literary works therefore becomes manifest only against the background of the overall structure in which they take their place. Each work that is declared to be literary is a minute part of the immense ‘combination’ constituted by the literary world as a whole . . . It is the global configuration, or composition, of the carpet – that is, the domain of letters, the totality of what I call world literary space – that alone is capable of giving meaning and coherence to the very form of individual texts. This space is not an abstract and theoretical construction, but an actual – albeit unseen – world made up by lands of literature . . .⁵⁴

If Welty was telling the truth in “Moon Lake,” and it *is* “only interesting, only worthy, to try for the fiercest secrets,”⁵⁵ perhaps the final consideration should be, how much did Chloe like Olivia? Eudora love Elizabeth? The letters in the Bowen Collection brim with Welty’s excitement, anticipation, and longing for, if not Bowen *qua* Bowen, certainly Bowen’s world: “For myself, I feel there’s no telling what I might not write under that roof, I think I’ll bring all these little pieces of paper I’ve done . . . It was such a joy to meet – and so fortunate – Wasn’t it lovely? And the luxury of meeting twice, so neither time had to be the only – I believe we did somehow catch up, maybe because of not ever really falling behind – ”⁵⁶

After her second trip to Bowen’s Court, Welty writes:

I loved it – every moment so and I can get back so quickly to it in imagination – the shortest route of anything – Now the best time to think of it is very early in the morning when the others are still asleep but there will be many times in Mississippi – You were sweet – you are – beyond any saying, all you thought & did & knew & brought about – you did so much – but I let you, loved it & took my pleasure. I let you as I love you – and I could imagine how I would like doing so much for you. Thank you for all that “thank you” can be said for. I’ll never,

never forget any of those days & nights – when I am on the deck of this ship I once or twice could feel the rhythm of trees passing overhead as we would drive down the avenue – I wish I'd known all my life . . .⁵⁷

Marrs cautions against reading this letter as an erotic testament: “Ar-dent as these two letters to Bowen are [see the second letter below], neither of them, nor any of Eudora’s other letters to Bowen, suggest real intimacy.” But, the volume, the frequency, the yearning, the sheer need to connect expressed in the letters from this period make it hard to follow Marrs’s advice. Drawing from various other letters, Welty’s desire is palpable: “I wish so much I could see you sooner than I can – but when I can will be so nice that life will seem beautiful as can be, I know. I wish you were here this morning though, it’s so fine . . .”; preparing for Bowen’s visit she writes: “I went down & gave New Orleans a squint the other day to see if it was looking right for you. I’ve missed you so. Will you have time & opportunity to see about the book you might do on the South? Then maybe you could extend the time?”; after the visit, she writes: “It was so lovely to have you. I wish you could be near & stay near, a long time.”⁵⁸ Yes, the letters are full of queries about Alan Cameron’s health. And news about books, friends, and the weather. But they are letters that, regardless of whether the eyes or ears are contemporary or not, go beyond grateful guest or exuberant host.

Many of the letters to Bowen, such as we have access to, reverberate with the intensity of the friendship; and, the other ‘smoking gun’ of ardency letter declares the following:

I do thank you for all my time I had with you. Each day followed out to long distances & ends of its own, all lovely & each itself almost mysteriously like points on a star – I can’t thank you for a star – only see it still, & love it – All the delights & one minute after the other, though, so nice, delicious, sunny, luxurious, [daily], whizzing, comforting, filling, funny, beautiful indelible things going by, hours of the day, all we did and all we saw. If I could thank you by the way I miss it, you’d know how much – Do you think I’ll ever come back again, & be in the green room? But that is wishing for too much, it’s greedy – But I hate it all to be so countable, 3 times, 4 times, maybe 5 to meet in our lives, I wish we had been born related – Oh Elizabeth I didn’t mean to sound as if I didn’t love it all exactly the way it was – nothing ought to intrude on such lovely visits, not a wish that runs back in time for 40 years – It’s just that I miss and will miss & have missed you, but knowing that doesn’t take away, it adds to. But it’s so strange, isn’t it, the criss-crossing of where & when we are with all we love & must love – The deepest thing in the world I think – I feel it in what you write so –⁵⁹

This letter captures both Welty’s desire and her anxiety about desire for that something more with Bowen and for a way to sustain it.

Knowing the premium Bowen put on work, and knowing Bowen found Welty to be a kindred spirit in the ways of work, it is not surprising that Welty identifies this feeling in Bowen's writing. Even the metaphor of the star is erotically charged, and Welty will invoke a comparable metaphor in a passionate letter she will write to Ken Millar nearly two decades later: "When I got your letter today, something went through me like a vibration of light, as if I had had a responsive echo from a distant star. As if a half-imagined relationship to the great past had come real in my life before my life ended."⁶⁰

In accordance with Bowen's laws of work and discretion, Welty ultimately found a way to make public all that she felt. Though other stories in the collection have more traceable provenances to her affiliation with Bowen, "Kin" perhaps reveals the most about why *The Bride of the Innisfallen* was dedicated to her. "Kin" tells the story of an engaged woman, Dicey, on a visit to see relatives in Mingo, Mississippi: "The name sounded . . . like *something* instead of *somewhere*."⁶¹ During her antic visit, she will learn that her bedridden Uncle Felix had had a secret love and simultaneously intensify her sense of belonging. She sees a portrait of her great-grandmother and acknowledges a potent connection:

And I remembered – rather, more warmly, *knew*, like a secret of the family – that the head of this black-haired, black-eyed lady who always looked the right, mysterious age to be my sister, had been fitted to the ready-made portrait by the painter who had called at the door – he had taken the family off guard, I was sure of it, and spoken to their pride. The yellow skirt spread fanlike, straw hat held ribbon-in-hand, orange beads big as peach pits (to conceal the joining at the neck) – none of that, any more than the forest scene so unlike the Mississippi wilderness (that enormity she had been carried to as a bride . . . And still those eyes, opaque, all pupil, belonged to Evelina – I knew, because they saw out, as mine did; weren't warned, as mine weren't, and never shut before the end, as mine would not. I her divided sister, knew who had felt the wildness of the world behind the ladies' view. We were homesick for somewhere that was the same place.⁶²

Evelina – fearless, inscrutable, with penetrating vision, divided between home and the wilderness for all the world – resembles Elizabeth Bowen herself. Evelina is even photographed with huge, fake, orange beads, in the spirit of Bowen's legendary penchant for gaudy, excessive jewelry.⁶³ By dedicating this liberated and liberating collection to Bowen, Welty found the way to say thank you.

Notes

- ¹ Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1977; reprint, New York: Avon, 1979) 238-39 (page citations are to the reprint edition).
- ² Eudora Welty, "Circe," *The Collected Stories of Eudora Welty* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1980) 531.
- ³ Albert J. Devlin and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," *More Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996) 102.
- ⁴ Eudora Welty, quoted in Suzanne Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination: The Fiction of Eudora Welty* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 149.
- ⁵ Marrs, *One Writer's Imagination* 149-50.
- ⁶ Suzanne Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt, 2005) 182.
- ⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, quoted in Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* 238.
- ⁸ Albert J. Devlin and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," *More Conversations with Eudora Welty* 103.
- ⁹ Michael Kreyling, *Understanding Eudora Welty* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) 174-75.
- ¹⁰ Albert J. Devlin and Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty" 102-03.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.* 113-14.
- ¹² Jan Nordby Gretlund, "An Interview with Eudora Welty," *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984) 221.
- ¹³ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 190.
- ¹⁴ Eudora Welty, rev. of *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen*, by Elizabeth Bowen, *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews*, ed. Pearl McHaney (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994) 235.
- ¹⁵ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 190-91. Note "The Burning" was originally to be titled "The Ghosts."
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.* 191-92.
- ¹⁷ Jan Nordby Gretlund, *Eudora Welty's Aesthetics of Place* (Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1994) 376. In an earlier interview, she told Gretlund she "would hate to be assigned" to "try to write something influenced by Faulkner," *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 221.
- ¹⁸ This provocative statement comes from "Moon Lake" and is part of a discussion about the heightened opportunities available to the orphan. Welty, "Moon Lake," *Collected Stories* 361.
- ¹⁹ Eudora Welty, rev. of *The Collected Stories of Elizabeth Bowen* 231.
- ²⁰ Eudora Welty, "A Sweet Devouring," *Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews* (New York: Vintage, 1990) 279-86.
- ²¹ Peggy Whitman Prenshaw, "The Antiphonies of Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* and Elizabeth Bowen's *Pictures and Conversations*," *Mississippi Quarterly* 39.4 (1986): 647.
- ²² Linda Kuehl, "The Art of Fiction XLVII: Eudora Welty," *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 81.

- ²³ Welty, "The Wanderers," *Collected Stories* 458. Katherine Anne Porter underlined this same sentence in her copy of *The Golden Apples*. See Gretlund, *Aesthetics of Place* 96.
- ²⁴ Victoria Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* 218.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.* 98.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.* 99.
- ²⁷ May Sarton, "Elizabeth Bowen," *A World of Light: Portraits and Celebrations* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1976) 195.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.* 197.
- ²⁹ Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* 98.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.* 214-18.
- ³¹ Welty, "No Place for You, My Love," *Collected Stories* 478.
- ³² Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* 200. Welty's version of magic listener.
- ³³ See Pollack and Marrs for invaluable insights into the Robinson-Welty relationship. It is also essential to honor Mark's pioneering queer readings of Welty's fiction which paved the way for expanding our ability to read Welty.
- ³⁴ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 173, 167.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.* 196.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.* 202.
- ³⁷ Katherine Anne Porter is another example of a vexed friendship/mentor. *The Robber Bridegroom* was dedicated to Porter, an early sponsor of Welty and author of the introduction to *A Curtain of Green*. Welty's stories about Porter are always marked by high spirits, generosity, and careful indulgence of her charming unreliability. However, even extracting the introduction to the first collection was torture for Welty and her publishers. Porter was more often than not an ever-demanding, if infrequent, presence in Welty's life. For details, see Michael Kreyling, *Author and Agent* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1991) 74. Further, Porter never forgave Welty for leaving her out of her now-famous treatment of the short story: "My dear friend and admired colleague Eudora Welty once performed the astonishing feat of writing a three-part essay on the short story without mentioning my name." Bringing their relationship full circle, Givner reports that "Porter was jealous of the influence of Bowen, saying that she was Lesbian and Welty had at last gotten into very bad company." For more on the Porter-Welty friendship, see Joan Givner, *Katherine Anne Porter: A Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 372.
- ³⁸ Welty, "Going to Naples," *Collected Stories* 587. See Polk and Trouard on this story, as well as Kreyling's treatment of the collection in *Understanding Eudora Welty*.
- ³⁹ Eudora Welty to Elizabeth Bowen, n.d., Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas, Austin. A succession of family demands, her mother's health and her brother's death, will thwart her escape, and she will ultimately not be able, as Elizabeth Evans diagnosed so brilliantly, to escape her role as dutiful daughter.
- ⁴⁰ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 173-74.
- ⁴¹ Welty to Bowen, n.d., Bowen Collection. For scope of changes, see Catherine Chengges, "Textual Variants in 'Put Me in the Sky!' and 'Circe,'" *Eudora Welty Newsletter* 23.2 (1999): 11.
- ⁴² Kreyling, *Author and Agent* 155-56.

- ⁴³ Welty to Bowen, n.d., Bowen Collection.
- ⁴⁴ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 203.
- ⁴⁵ Welty, "Writing and Analyzing a Story," *Eye of the Story* 107-15.
- ⁴⁶ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 195.
- ⁴⁷ Angus Wilson, "New Short Stories," rev. of *The Bride of the Innisfallen*, by Eudora Welty. *New Statesman & Nation* 19 Nov. 1955: 679-80.
- ⁴⁸ Orville Prescott, "Books of the Times," *New York Times* 8 Apr. 1955: 19. Welty will recall this review many years after Bowen's death when Ken Millar (Ross MacDonald) receives a particularly hostile review for his novel, *Sleeping Beauty*, dedicated to Welty. (Welty was to dedicate her essay collection, *Eye of the Story* to him.) Slammed by a critic, Welty's name is invoked and Millar is accused of "writing in the shadow of a self-regard that tends to play his talent false." In sympathy for what she called "a shameful piece of work," Welty writes to console Millar, recalling the hostile review that greeted *The Bride of the Innisfallen*. See Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 389. Since Millar was married, their intense friendship was carried out primarily through letters and rare meetings. From their first exchange through his slow mental disintegration with Alzheimer's, Millar is, in Marrs's assessment, fully Welty's final romantic passion. That his wounding review prompts Welty to recall that her work was faulted for its connection to Bowen seems to corroborate how sustaining her memory was. Welty writes Millar: "If it is any comfort to you in companionship . . . I have had the exact same charge made against me, of trying to do something out of my bent, because of a dedication, which was to Elizabeth Bowen – It was a book of stories laid in Ireland, Italy, etc., and I was advised to keep to something I know and not try to be so pretentious as [to] write about anything outside Miss., and Elizabeth's name was used against me, just as mine was against you, and just as without reason."
- ⁴⁹ Welty, "Place in Fiction," *Eye of the Story* 132.
- ⁵⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, rev. of *The Golden Apples*, by Eudora Welty, *Seven Winters: Memories of a Dublin Childhood and Afterthoughts: Pieces on Writing* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962) 218.
- ⁵¹ Shrewd critics like Ruth Vande Kieft and Elizabeth Evans have certainly marked Bowen's lyric and stylistic influence on Welty. Ruth Weston has noted their Gothic tendencies; Gretlund has written extensively on Welty's debts to Chekhov; and Kreyling has made sure that the Celtic chain binding Welty and Bowen is not forgotten in *Understanding Eudora Welty*.
- ⁵² Jane Todd Freeman, "An Interview with Eudora Welty," *Conversations with Eudora Welty* 196.
- ⁵³ Eudora Welty and Ronald A. Sharpe, eds., *The Norton Book of Friendship* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991) 587.
- ⁵⁴ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004) 3.
- ⁵⁵ Welty, "Moon Lake," *Collected Stories* 361.
- ⁵⁶ Welty to Bowen, n.d., Bowen Collection.
- ⁵⁷ Welty to Bowen, n.d., Bowen Collection.
- ⁵⁸ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 201. Selections from Welty's letter are drawn from the Bowen Collection.
- ⁵⁹ Welty to Bowen, n.d., Bowen Collection.

- ⁶⁰ Marrs, *Eudora Welty: A Biography* 358.
- ⁶¹ Welty, "Kin," *Collected Stories* 538. Recall Bowen's edict – "nothing happens nowhere" – and hear the echo in Welty's prose.
- ⁶² Welty, "Kin," *Collected Stories* 561.
- ⁶³ Glendinning, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Biography* 42, 237. Bowen "always had a penchant for large earrings, necklaces of false pearls or great glass bobbles, and flashy fake jewellery that on her looked neither flashy nor fake."

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