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Race, Rights, and Resistance in Southern Literature in the Age of Obama

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“Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (Eudora Welty), “Nineteen Fifty-Five” (Alice Walker), “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (Flannery O’Connor), and “Negro Progress” (Tony Grooms) are fictional evocations of realistic places, people, and events in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, that are especially appropriate in the Age of Obama for discussion of the roles of the public artist and the private human regarding race, rights, and resistance.

In a 1977 interview, Toni Morrison named Eudora Welty as a fearless writer, explaining that Welty writes “about black people in a way that few white men have ever been able to write. It’s not patronizing, not romanticizing—it’s the way they should be written about.” (47) Alice Walker is of the generation after Welty. Walker’s novel *Meridian* offers the point of view of a civil rights worker before and during the movement, but almost uniquely in the canon of literature about the movement, after the movement has waned. *Meridian* asks, How does one make the past work for the present and yet acknowledge grief and loss? Walker treats her subjects with a seemingly insistent determination to tell truths that have consistently evoked contradictory feelings in her readers. Flannery O’Connor whose writing career falls between Welty and Walker also insists upon uneasy truths. Tony Grooms, a contemporary writer from Atlanta, whose story collection *Trouble No More* was the Georgia Center for the Book’s 2006 Book All Georgia Reads, writes, “We are all redemptioners, for we owe someone our lives, as wonderful or as miserable as they might be” (Preface xxvi). “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (Welty), “Nineteen Fifty-Five” (Walker), “Everything that Rises Must Converge” (O’Connor), and “Negro Progress” (Grooms) are four fictional evocations of realistic places, people, and events in Georgia, Alabama, and Mississippi, especially appropriate in the Age of Obama for discussion of the roles of the public artist and the private human regarding race, rights, and resistance. Each of these stories is a narrative emanating from history, in direct, daring response to watershed events as with “Where Is the Voice Coming From?” (the murder of Medgar Evers in Jackson, Mississippi, June 1963) and “Negro Progress” (police assault at Kelly Ingram Park in Birmingham, Alabama, May 1963) or as conceptual considerations of racism and resistance as in “Nineteen Fifty-Five” and “Everything That Rises Must Converge.”

Central to this study is the interplay between literature and history. For some, these two disciplines seem at cross-purposes with one another, although this is less and less the case. Traditionally, history attempts to provide a stable accounting of the past, while literature, with its emphasis on multiple viewpoints, highlights the ambiguity of reality instead. Judith Langer points out in *Envisioning Literature*, that the experience of reading literature is essentially one of exploration, “where uncertainty, and hence openness, is a normal part of the response, and newfound possibilities provoke other possibilities” (26). Langer contrasts literary experience with the discursive experience of exploring language for the purpose of gaining information and argues that while discursive reading moves towards closure and thesis building, the literary experience is constantly in flux, leaving room for alternative interpretations, critical readings, changing perspectives, complex characters, and, especially in the stories named above, unresolved questions. Post-colonial theorist Homi Bhabha also articulates a tension between literature and history when he argues that because literature details the daily lives of people in struggle, it illuminates the translational moments that happen between the spaces of historically recognized transformative events. The translational is often featured in women’s and African Americans’ writing since their stories have been traditionally on the margins of history. In recent decades and now in the Age of Obama, this is perhaps less so.

By interweaving the discursive with the literary and the transformative with the translational, we realize ways in which history and literature complement one another. The history confirms the key events and grounds the specific people, legislation, and occurrences out of which the narrative responses arise. Literature is especially authenticated when it is recognized as wholly realistic; emotive issues are regarded as legitimate rather than as

sentimental. Thus, readers approach literature that re-presents history from an intimate, everyday person's point of view with a seriousness not as readily granted to less historically-based texts. Additionally, literature enhances an historical perspective by asking questions for which no easy or straightforward answers can be found.

Telling a story through a literary narrative offers other opportunities also. Fiction can more readily access the tales and strategies of oral traditions. And using folklore passed down through generations adds an authority of legend with the impact of historical importance. Fiction can also rely on multiple genres—I'm thinking especially of music, the blues—and genres of pop culture. In narrative, time can be telescoped, events in time can be rearranged; stories are not confined to move toward an inevitable end. Thus fiction need not be teleological, need not achieve unity, show consensus, present cause and effect. Literature also affords multiple points of view so that many versions, many truths can be explored. With access to figurative language, metaphor and symbol, literature invites connotation, allusion, and comparison and offers a large canvas for understanding of realistic and psychological complexities without the insistence of fact and reality.[1]

It is also significant that these writers are of the culture that they fictionally depict in narrative fashion. They are, so to speak, insiders, giving us, the outsiders (of time, place, and often race) a fresh understanding. When Welty was asked about her stories narrating the 1960s in the South, she responded that they "reflect the unease of the time, people's attitude toward change, . . . [and] not wanting to [change]" ("The Lady" 294). She continued, "There were a whole lot of stories being written all over the country about Southerners as seen from the outside. They were all absolutely typecast and not written by people who knew." (294)

The South proudly claims Eudora Welty as one of its treasures, but few of either the general public or her readers realize how actively she crusaded for Human Rights. Welty would not have chosen the title of Crusader. In fact, she wrote in her essay, "Must the Novelist Crusade?" that no, the novelist must not crusade. She was equating crusading with politicians and editorialists, those who wrote in a hurry, for a particular moment in time to persuade their audiences to join up, get on the bandwagon, accept their arguments, their logical, convincing agendas. Fiction, Welty said, was just the opposite and therefore a fiction writer wrote much differently than the crusader. Fiction is chaotic, messy, filled with passion rather than logic. Good fiction had to last more than one moment or one campaign, one season. It needed to be universal and have truths for all time, for any time. Welty was not a crusader in her fiction, but in her actions, her living example. She wrote only two "Civil Rights" stories, labeled such because of when they were published, 1963 and 1966, and because of the subject matter: "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" about the assassination of an N.A.A.C.P. leader and the title of the second, "The Demonstrators." In "The Demonstrators," we see no Civil Rights demonstrations *per se*, no outsider-agitators sitting at lunch counters, although there are a few subtle references to such. The demonstrators in the story are much like Welty and her fellow Mississippians—either acting individually or not acting at all and thereby demonstrating complicity with the racist society.

Welty was upbraided for being silent, for not using her "public voice" of an accomplished and highly regarded writer. She received threatening phone calls in the dark of night and feared, not for her own life, but for her elderly mother's well-being. This fear for her mother led to Welty canceling an interview scheduled for national television, an interview with African American writer Ralph Ellison, author of *Invisible Man*. The demands for her to use her public position to "crusade" for Civil Rights led to that essay "Must the Novelist Crusade?" and to the answer, no.

Previously, I have spoken of Welty's photographs in comparison with those by outsiders to the south, professional photographers Walker Evans, Dorothea Lange, Marion Post Wolcott, and Ben Shahn, taken for the Farm Security Administration in 1936.[2] Welty said, "I stumbled into making pictures with a camera. Frame, proportion, perspective, the values of light and shade, all are determined by the distance of the observing eye" (*One* 21). In this rather haphazard, non-propagandist method of taking photographs of people who "captured her imagination," Welty demonstrates her subtle crusade for human rights.

Eudora Welty published forty-nine stories in all, showing us, she said, the "invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight" (*One Time* 8). Many of her stories as I think of them from the point of view of Welty as crusader for human rights strive to show that those who are trapped ask for our understanding, that we must recognize the need for individual

expression and for acceptance of our differences and our similarities.

In the nineteen thirties, Welty wrote a story that had its genesis in something she overheard while working for the WPA, while setting up the county fairs. She took note of the story of a club-footed African American man being taken away by the fair crew and made into a side show. The man, Lee Roy (*Le Roi*, the King), was re-named, re-gendered, and re-raced. He became Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden, a geek who ate the heads off of live chickens. Welty describes the act after Lee Roy has been returned home. On his own turf, his own porch as a matter of fact, Lee Roy is visited by the carnival barker who searches out "Keela" in order to make a confession and request absolution for his part in the awful dehumanization of Lee Roy.

In another story from the thirties, a young woman, Lily Daw, who is without parents or siblings, has a six-inch knife scar on her throat from when her father tried to kill her. Three well-meaning ladies of the community seek to "protect" Lily Daw from herself, from men, from scandal by giving her "asylum" in the state mental institution. Although Lily says very little, she manages to free herself from the ladies' skewed good will, to go off with the xylophone man from the traveling show, a man who apparently cares for her. In a third story from the first collection *A Curtain of Green and Other Stories*, another grown woman, Clytie, is trapped by the loss of her mother, her dying father, a profligate violent brother, and a bitter sister. Clytie escapes the prison-like house and her sister's screamed orders, and runs through the town, runs in the rain, searching, searching, for something, for a face, for familiarity, for consolation, for belonging, for love. Welty's characters are assaulted by hope; are knocked unconscious by the realization that they are alone, unconnected to any other human being, unloved; are desperate for recognition, for naming, for belonging.

Thirty years after these stories were written, James Meredith tried to enroll at the University of Mississippi in autumn 1962 and black boycotts of downtown Jackson, Mississippi, where Welty lived, had begun in December of 1962. Now on April 18, 1963, just six days after Martin Luther King, Jr., was arrested and put in jail in Birmingham, Alabama, Eudora Welty requested that her scheduled talk and reading at the Southern Literary Festival at Millsaps College, Jackson, Mississippi, be open to all or she would not participate. Thus Millsaps College had its first integrated audience. In her lecture, Welty said,

> To a large extent, a writer cannot help the material of his fiction. That is, he cannot help where and when he happened to be born. That is, … he has to live somewhere and somehow and with others, and survive through some history or other if he is here to write at all. But it is not to escape his life but more to pin it down that he writes fiction (though by pinning it down he no doubt does escape it a little.) And so certainly he does choose his subject. [And] . . . a writer's subject, in due time, chooses the writer—not of course as a writer, but as the man or woman who comes across it by living and has it to struggle with. ("Words" 141)

Welty then read what has been called one of the best American jazz stories "Powerhouse"—a brilliant jazz, blues, performance full of riffs, and improvisations of a musician admittedly the persona of Fats Waller—a good story to read alongside Walker's "Nineteen Fifty-Five."

In December of 1964—after the murder of Medgar Evers, after Reverend King's march on Washington, after the bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, after President Kennedy's assassination, after the disappearance of Michael *Schwerner*, James *Chaney*, and Andrew *Goodman*—Welty was to speak at Millsaps again. This time she read the essay I introduced earlier, "Must the Novelist Crusade?", then titled "The Southern Writer Today: An Interior Affair," in which she defined the artist's role as distinct from her civic duty, but as equally passionate and honest. And she read the story "Keela, the Outcast Indian Maiden"—a story of white guilt that cannot be assuaged merely for the asking.

In her famous essay, but often misread essay, "Place in Fiction," Welty said,

> Mutual understanding in the world being nearly always, as now, at low ebb, it is comforting to

> remember that it is through art that one country can nearly always speak reliably to another, if the other can hear at all. Art, though, is never the voice of a country; it is an even more precious thing, the voice of the individual, doing its best to speak, not comfort of any sort, indeed, but truth. And the art that speaks it most unmistakably, most directly, most variously, most fully, is fiction; in particular, the novel. Why? Because the novel from the start has been bound up in the local, the "real," the present, the ordinary day-to-day of human experience. Where the imagination comes in is in directing the use of all this. (782)

To illustrate how art, imagination, and fiction can translate transformative history, we look at Welty's penultimate short story: "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" The story is told in first person, a dramatic monologue, wherein Welty's speaker/narrator unconsciously reveals his subconscious to the reader. Welty, as author, does not judge the speaker of "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" The title poses a question to the reader: Where is the voice coming from? Here's where, the story seems to answer, from the interior mind of a white, racist assassin. The prototype of this supremacist is Byron de la Beckwith III, and the murdered man is N.A.A.C.P. field secretary Medgar Evers, [3] fictionalized only by his name: Roland Summers.

It is the story's speaker, the assassin who is trapped by his environment: by the physicalheat in Thermopylae[4]—"'Because I'm so tired of ever'thing in the world being just that hot to the touch! The keys to the truck, the doorknob, the bedsheet, ever'thing, it's all like a stove lid. There just ain't much going that's worth holding onto it no more,' I says, 'when it's a hundred and two in the shade by day and by night not too much difference'" (730); by his economic situation—he has to borrow his brother's truck, parks not on a paved driveway, but pulls the "'truck up safe in [his] front yard'" (730); he has no "mighty green . . . nice grass" (729); by his wife—he complains, "'You didn't even leave a light burning when you went to bed. So how was I supposed to even get me home?'" (729–30); by local and national politics, the Kennedys, including Caroline who plans to marry James Meredith (729, 730); by the media: "On TV and in the paper, they don't know but half of it. They know who Roland Summers was without knowing who I am. His face was in front of the public before I got rid of him, and after I got rid of him there it is again—the same picture. And none of me. I ain't ever had one made. Not ever!" (730); by his loneliness/aloneness:

> Once, I run away from my home. And there was an ad for me,come to be printed in our county weekly. My mother paid for it. It was from her. It says: "SON: You are not being hunted for anything but to find you." That time, I come on back home. But people are dead now. (732)

The word "assassin" comes from medieval Latin and from Arabic meaning "hashish user," but Roland Summers/Medgar Evers' assassin wasn't high on drugs; he was low on self-esteem, power, and a sense of justice. He kills, he says "for my own pure-D satisfaction" (729). Welty wrote the story with a similar rush of passion, on the day of Evers' assassination. She says, "I live down here where this happened and I believe I must know what a person like that felt like—this murderer. There had been so many stories about such a character in the stock manner, written by people who didn't know the South, so I wrote about the murderer intimately—in first person, which was a very daring thing to do." ("Eudora Welty: A Writer's" 183).It was daring for Welty for other reasons: She had previously stated, "I never write about real people. . . . [H]uman beings are incapable of being made into characters, as is . . . I think that what I put into a short story in the form of characters might be called certain *qualities* of people in certain situations ("Eudora Welty"137). No one knew who had killed Medgar Evers, but Welty was so prescient in her intimate understanding of the psychological motivations of such an assassin, that she had to make changes before the *New Yorker* published the story on June 26 in order not to risk the prosecution ofde la Beckwith who had been arrested on June 23rd and charged on the 24th.

Numerous typescripts of the story demonstrate the difficulty Welty had in settling on a title: It Ain't Even July Yet, Voice from an Unknown Interior, or From the Unknown, or A Voice from a Jackson Interior. On another typescript above the story and in the left margin: From My Room, Ask Me What Is My Name, It Was Me, Ask Me My

Daddy's Name, Try Finding Who You Heard, Try and Find Who You Heard (circled), Try and Find, Find Me, You Didn't Know the One, Where Is the Racket Coming From? And finally, typed on the second revision: Where Is the Voice Coming from? (Welty Collection).

A manuscript note (by someone other than Welty) on the first page, first version, says "real names and real people type written here, changed to fictitious." Welty subsequently changed Five Points to Four Corners, Delta Drive to Due West Road, Sister Roberts to Sister Peebles, Big Red Hydrick to Goat Dykeman, Evers to Summers. On the second version, another manuscript note not by Welty reads "Medgar Evers, a real victim of a crime like this," and Medgar is changed to Roland, Capital to Main, Farish Street to Deacon, Jackson to Thermopylae. Welty had typed, "I might sneak Old Ross out of the mansion, in to be my lawyer, if ever should come a little trouble. How about that, Ross? I sure as hell voted for you." But a penciled note on the second version of the story reads, "This was deleted from final version because Ross Barnett's firm did represent Beckwith, who turned out to be the accused killer of Medgar Evers" (Welty Collection).

To the third version of her story, Welty adds the lines that give the assassin a degree of humanity: Her marginal emendation, already cited to the final story, reads: "Once I run away from my home. And there was an ad for me come to be printed in the Jackson paper." In the third version, "Jackson paper" is crossed out and replaced by "county weekly." She changes "My mother paid for it. It says: EDGAR" to read, "My mother paid for it. It was from her. It said: 'SON EDGAR: you are not being hunted for expect to find you.' That time, I come on back home." On the final setting copy, EDGAR is crossed off and SON retained; in the passage, "And it's so hot. Without it even being July yet," July is changed to August (Welty Collection).

Despite these authorial and editorial changes to preserve the prosecution's case against de la Beckwith, he escaped. Not until the third trial, in 1994, was he convicted of the murder of Medgar Evers.

Let's leave Welty for a moment and look at Tony Grooms, author of a novel *Bombingham* and the short story collection *Trouble No More* that includes "Negro Progress." Grooms' characters talk about the unfairness, the yearning, if not to be white, then, to enjoy the life perceived as the white life with its advertised ease and wealth, glamour and beauty. Fiction, Grooms says, is not for the mechanics of working out these frictions, but for exploring reconciliation and redemption through stories of "ordinary people in ordinary language" ("Keynote").

The *Trouble No More*[5]stories are primarily about love and not-love between the races. They tell us abouta past that shows evidence of the strife, hatred, blatant unfairness, or fear that makes white humans act like numb, unthinking beasts.[6] There's no Uncle Tom-ing by the black characters, no altruism by the white characters. The black characters speak their minds and we hear their thoughts, hear how the black world of the 1950s, 60s, and 70s suffers what W. E. B. DuBois called the "Veil of Two-ness."

The stories are about families, most of them intact, a few estranged: husbands and wives, children, aunts and uncles, grandparents, nieces and nephews and cousins. And it is clear that whether blessing or curse, families are what one has, what is constant and inescapable. Family has to be lived with, regardless of the government policies or white reactions. The stories take place in small towns and rural areas outside Charlottesville and Richmond, Virginia, in Georgia or in Birmingham. The cultural and historical settings root the stories to the particular catalysts for the conflicts shown in the stories, but the actions could take place anywhere in the Jim Crow South as we know they did.

Grooms' stories thus provide the opportunity to learn history: Bull Connor's fire hoses and attack dogs in Birmingham, the four girls killed in the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church bombing, the disappearances and murders of Schwerner, Cheney, and Goodman, the Ku Klux Klan night raids, the ever-present, abnormal fear of trouble. We read of the drinking culture well-illustrated by white fiction writers John Cheever and John Updike, of the "colored act" on the Ed Sullivan Show, of Marilyn Monroe, Jackie Kennedy, James Brown, Diana Ross and the Supremes, of the stars and bars of the Confederate flag, and of nuclear power plants and their recreational lakes.[7] Throughout the stories, the popular culture of the nineteen sixties illustrates the ordinariness of the lives of the characters living in such extraordinary times.

Grooms' fiction depicts a time when African Americans could enjoy their accomplishments in the safety of their

homes, but in society were subjugated by racist oppression. Grooms insists, however, that “The center of my writing . . . is neither history nor didacticism, but story; and, the center of story is conflict. Thus my writing often features characters who struggle with the uncertainty of their commitment to social change” (“Tony Grooms”).

How did children, including Grooms himself, learn segregation? Grooms answers that he learned it from blacks teaching the limitations. His paternal grandmother served as the family worrier and warned of the dangers outside of her world. Children were taught which white people could be trusted: the Watkins man who sold vanilla, tea, tonic, and other sundries, the postman who was known by name, and the forest ranger who came to the school. Boundaries were clearly marked (Preface).

“Negro Progress” sets the story specifically at Kelly Ingram Park during Bull Connor’s fire hosing of children before bystanders demonstrating only curiosity. The story resolves itself, or doesn’t resolve itself, around problems of individual versus collective progress and the age-old question of whether, in order to reach one’s goals, one should proceed slowly and peacefully or quickly with the necessary violent action, the dichotomy illustrated by Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. DuBois. Although many of the men, women, boys, and girls of Grooms’ stories sing the blues, effectively stompin’ the blues in the process, many do not succeed in telling their stories fully enough to escape to a place of comfort or rest. Carlton Wilkes is a young man caught between his uncle who has been successful through assimilation and his fiancée who is one of the first “Negro” nurses at the city hospital, her family, her neighbors who porch sit with guns through the night during the Birmingham demonstrations. Rather than choose between the two, Carlton wants to run away to Paris. “Uncle Booker was right. He had nothing to lose if he played it smart. Money gave him options. He could invest and become very rich. The boycotts wouldn’t hurt him. Or he could go to Europe. He couldn’t live like a king in Europe, but he could live well for a long time” (“Negro Progress” 59).

The seriousness, the harshness, and grotesqueness of American life and of white racist behaviors depicted in Grooms’ stories are relieved humor and by historical and cultural moments that help us to see some grounded facts and familiar names. Thinking of and seeing, before our mind’s eye, Walter Cronkite, Jackie Kennedy, Bull Connor, Martin Luther King, Jr., Fred Shuttlesworth, James Brown, Ed Sullivan, Beehive and Cleopatra hairstyles, Ponce de Leon Avenue, and Kelly Ingram Park give a realistic background that prepares us to accept the hard truths of the lives and the fears of those people confronted by the KKK, the Colored signs, and the pernicious denial of social and educational equality. One reviewer notes that Grooms “never allows the potentially combustible materials that define the Black existence and quest for self-realization in America to degenerate into pamphleteering” (Pattanaik 193). Grooms is ambitious, believing that writing “does do something useful.” He acknowledges his desire “to make an impact through literature,” but he says, “how I treat people is more important than writing” (“Interview” 91–2). In *Trouble No More*, the people Grooms cares about are his everyday, ordinary characters. Allowing the human situations to evolve as the characters come alive, Grooms lets the fiction do its work. That work, Grooms says, is to “render concrete, complex emotional truths” from history, to tell such truths in “accessible and human terms” (Keynote).

Alice Walker’s story “Nineteen Ninety-Five,” first published in 1981 in *Ms.* magazine as “1955,” is not so optimistic. Could this be because Walker’s characters are personas of historical figures rather than everyday people? Gracie Mae is Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton of Montgomery, Alabama; the bought-for-a song tune, the stolen, appropriated song written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller that Thornton recorded in 1952 for Peacock-Duke Records in New York that sold almost two million copies is “Hound Dog”; the “boy,” “Dear Son,” “*Fool*,” Traynor, of course is Elvis Presley, who made the song a hit. Thornton earned only $500 from her recording. Five other singers recorded versions of Hound Dog right after its 1953 release, but it was Elvis and Elvis’ version that are most memorable.

On an Alice Walker website, Alison Joy Burroughs contends that the song in the story is pure fiction, that Walker “identifies her main characters with real celebrities but transports them from historical reality into a fictional world illuminated by the values they have come to represent as cultural icons.” Sam Phillips of Sun Records who recorded Elvis is quoted as saying, “If I could find a white man who had the Negro sound and feel, I could make a million dollars” (Burroughs).

In Walker’s story, the complications of fiction, history, culture, and popular memory are described. Walker’s

Traynor is pathetic and grotesque. Gracie Mae, the only one who sympathizes, tells the story. On the Johnny Carson show, Gracie Mae and Traynor sing "*our* song," and Gracie Mae tells us she sounds "wonderful. . . . I give it all I got and enjoy every minute of it" (18). Traynor by contrast "look[s] whipped" when he sits down although the crowd is

> "squeal[ing]. . . . It don't matter, Son, I say, patting his hand.You don't even know those people. Try to make the people you know happy."Is that in the song? He asks.
>
> "Maybe. I say" (18–19). But Traynor nevers gets any meaning out of the song—and already he gets no joy from the performance. Gracie Mae dreams that Traynor is in trouble. In fact, he has given up, died. Her husband tells her, "You always said he looked asleep. You can't sleep through life if you wants to live it" (19). As the "dumb fans" cry for Traynor, Gracie Mae ends her story: "They . . . didn't' even know what they was crying for. One day this is going to be a pitiful country, I thought" (20).

In O'Connor's story "Everything That Rises Must Converge" that day has perhaps arrived. In 1965, reviewing the collection *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, Guy Davenport concluded, "It is wrong to place Miss O'Connor (or Faulkner or Eudora Welty) in the Gothic School, however freakish and shocking her themes. The astounding surface of her stories, as wildly grotesques as the best Gothic, is but the visual equivalent of the outrage she feels before a world stupid with selfishness" (272).

And in 1955, when O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find* and Welty's *The Bride of the Innisfallen* were published, in response to Welty's William Dean Howell Medal for fiction, the reviewer for the *New York Post*, wrote, "Miss Welty, in spite of her rewards, must feel an injustice in being labeled 'Southern writer,' for she had no part in the creation of the new fiction [of] South, that South of balmy nymphs, sensitive perverts, lonely sadists and kindly lunatics. . . . In fact, the veteran reader may cry out on first reading Welty, 'Can this be the real South? What's this normal little boy doing here" (Powell 124).

O'Connor explained her fiction thusly: "In these grotesque works . . . the writer has made alive some experience which we are not accustomed to observe everyday, or which the ordinary man may never experience in his ordinary life." The characters' "fictional qualities lean away from typical social patterns, toward mystery and unexpected" ("Some Aspects" 40). (It is only on a cursory reading that Julian and his mother in "Everything That Rises Must Converge" may seem among the less grotesque of O'Connor's characters.) Welty on this subject says, "In those early stories, I'm sure I needed the device of what you call the Grotesque. That is, I hoped to differentiate characters by their physical qualities as a way of showing what they were like inside—it seemed to me then the most direct way to do it. This is an afterthought, though. I don't suppose I did it as consciously as all that, and I didn't know it was the easiest way. But it is easier to show somebody as lonely if you make him deaf and dumb than if you go feeling your way into his mind ("The Art" 84). Goya, she says, "trained himself as an artist to see action." See "his falling horse. People said it was 'grotesque'" but, "Goya's eyes saw everything absolutely right. The way a falling horse looked in mid air" ("A Conversation"263).

O'Connor explains, "The experience of mystery itself . . . pushing . . . toward the limits of mystery." Meaning is "in possibility rather than in probability" ("Some Aspects" 41, 42). "Fiction begins where human knowledge begins—with the senses—and every fiction writer is bound by this fundamental aspect of his medium" (42). The writer of the grotesque uses "the concrete in a more drastic way. His way will much more obviously be the way of distortion. . . . He's looking for one image that will connect or combine or embody two points; one is a point in the concrete, and the other is a point not visible to the naked eye, but believed in by him firmly, just as real to him, really as the one that everybody sees" (42). O'Connor's characters, and her readers, are distracted, and confused, by what they can see, and blind, perhaps, to that second point "that is not visible to the naked eye." O'Connor is right when she says that Welty writes with more subtlety; readers have not even the absurd, the grotesqueries to guide them.

In her essay on "The Teaching of Literature," O'Connor warns that "attempts to separate mystery from manners

in fiction” most often “eliminate” that mystery (130). “The storyteller must render what he sees and not what he thinks he ought to see, but this doesn’t mean that he can’t be or that he isn’t, a moralist in the sense proper to him” (“The Teaching” 131). “The basis of art is truth, both in matter and in mode,” states O’Connor; “The writer should never be ashamed of staring. There is nothing that does not require his attention” (“The Nature” 65, 84).

To her friend, Ashley Brown, O’Connor, wrote, “Thanks a lot for the story of Eudora Welty’s [“Where Is the Voice Coming From?”] Nobody else could have got away with it or made it work but her I think. I want to read it again” (13 August 1963, *Habits* 533). O’Connor apparently did reread it and wrote in response to Betty Hester’s reading,

> You are right about the Welty story. It’s the kind of story that the more you think about it the less satisfactory it gets. What I hate most is its being in the New Yorker and all the stupid Yankee liberals smacking their lips over the typical life in the dear old dirty Southland. The topical is poison. I got away with it in “Everything that Rises” but only because I say a plague on everybody’s house as far as the race business goes. (Habits 537).

Welty would agree in principle: “However modest, [the] discovery of the writer’s own heart . . . is the best hope of the ordinary novelist,” says Welty, “and to make it he begins not with the generality but with the particular in front of his eyes, which he is able to examine” (“Must” 805).

Taking a particular situation existing in his world, and what he feels about it in his own breast and what he can make of it in his own head, he constructs on paper, little by little, an equivalent of it. Literally it may correspond to a high degree or to none at all; emotionally it corresponds as closely as he can make it. Observation and the inner truth of that observation as he perceives it, the two being tested one against the other: to him this is what the writing of a novel is. (“Must” 805)

O’Connor says, “All my stories are about the action of grace on a character who is not very willing to support it, but most people think of these stories as hard, hopeless and brutal” (*Habits* 275). Welty writes, “morality as shown through human relationships is the whole heart of fiction, and the serious writer has never lived who dealt with anything else.” (“Must” 804)

Welty is explicit in her 1964 speech and essay, “Must the Novelist Crusade?” about the southern writer’s, all writers’, responsibilities:

> No matter how fast society around us changes, what remains is that there is a relationship in progress between ourselves and other people; this was the case when the world seemed stable, too. There are relationships of the blood, of the passions and the affections, of thought and spirit and deed. There is the relationship between the races. How can one kind of relationship be set apart from the others? Like the great root system of an old and long-established growing plant, they are all tangled up together; to separate them you would have to cleave the plant itself from top to bottom….I would like to point something out: in the rest of the country people seem suddenly aware now of what Southern fiction writers have been writing about in various ways for a great long time. We do not need reminding of what our subject is. It is humankind, and we are all part of it. When we write about people, black or white, in the South or anywhere, if our stories are worth the reading, we are writing about everybody.
>
> In the South, we who are now at work may not learn to write it before we learn, or learn again, to live it—our full life in the South within its context, in its relation to the rest of the world. “Only connect,” [EM.] Forster’s ever wise and gentle and daring words, could be said to us in our homeland quite literally at this moment. And while the Southern writer goes on portraying his South, which I think nobody else can do and which I believe he must do, then if his work is done well enough, it will reflect a larger mankind as it has done before. . . .

> [O]ut of love you can write with straight fury. It is the—source—of the understanding that I speak of; it's this that determines its nature and its reach. (810–12)

After Welty went public with this manifesto "Must the Novelist Crusade" in 1965, she wrote only one more story that directly addressed the issues. A decade earlier, O'Connor, writing to her friend Betty Hester, not in response to specific acts of racism, but to the general tenor of fear in the country, expressed concerns and solutions similar to those that Welty suggested:

> I wish St. Thomas were handy to consult about the fascist business. Of course the word doesn't really exist uncapitalized, so in making it that way you have the advantage of using a word with a private meaning and a public odor; which you must not do. But if it does mean a doubt of the efficacy of love and if this is to be observed in my fiction, then it has to be explained or partly explained by what happens to conviction (I believe love to be efficacious in the loooong run) when it is translated into fiction designed for a public with a predisposition to believe the opposite. (Habits 97).

O'Connor had another ten years of writing ahead of her to translate her observations of human nature into fiction. These statements illustrate that writers of note write simultaneously of the moment and for us now and always.

More and more it becomes evident to me that Welty, Grooms, Walker, and O'Connor are made of the same stuff, giving readers the same hard truths but in different ways. The stories touched on here, all written before the Age of Obama, narrate translational experiences of ordinary Southerners. To bring us to the present, the twenty-first century, I conclude with a few words about Toni Morrison's 2008 novel *A Mercy* set in the late seventeenth century when America was "fluid, ad hoc," Morrison says, in order "to separate race from slavery," to show "how race had to be constructed, planted, institutionalized," for "no civilization" has existed "in which there was not some form of enslavement" ("Interview"). Morrison alludes to Bacon's Rebellion in Virginia in 1673 in which whites, blacks, rich, poor, slave, free, and indentured together revolted against the government. Their actions "resulted" in a new law that stated that "any white could maim or kill any black for any reason and not be prosecuted" thus creating "a construction in order to divide," particularly poor people, and as Morrison argues, creating racial power ("An Interview"). *A Mercy*, Morrison summarizes, tells a story of the "earliest version of American individuality and self-sufficiency," but the novel is a collection of orphans for whom the tension is the struggle to be "an individual" who "adores privacy" and at the same time needs, wants, "to belong" ("An Interview").

During three important national interviews about her novel, for National Public Radio, *Time* magazine, and the *New York Times*, Morrison was asked about her endorsement of Barack Obama. This gives witness to the power of Morrison's voice. "This," meaning Obama's platform and election, "is visionary," Morrison said. "He's talking about not just routine change. . . . He has wisdom. You can't learn that just because you are old or you went to some school. . . . That was the rare thing. Wisdom. . . . I don't care that Hilary Clinton is a woman. Her gender is of no interest to me as his race wasn't. I don't want him up there because he's black. It was his wisdom which I thought the country needed and needs" (*Time*). After Obama's election, Morrison said, "so much has been damaged . . . partly because old divisions have surfaced again and they are almost as violent. It's not the majority of what's going on in this country which is why *I think*, this election, this moment, is brave, in a sense. It's like a reclamation of the promise of what America believed about itself, in spite of some disappointments" ("A Conversation"). Truthful, mindful fiction, whether written in the seventeenth, twentieth, or twenty-first century, can speak to us wherever and whenever we listen.

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Notes

1 My ideas regarding the interplay of history and literature are informed by my colleague Renee Schatteman

with whom I co-directed a 2002 National Endowment for Humanities Summer Institute on literature by women in the American South and South Africa and by Margaret Daymond, especially her commentary on Lauretta Ngcobo's novel *And They Didn't Die*.

2 Tri-national Summer Seminar, Mainz, Germany, July 2009.

3 Evers was murdered on June 12, 1963, shortly after midnight.

4 A narrow pass of east-central Greece. It was the site of an unsuccessful Spartan stand against the Persians in 480 B.C.

5 The title comes from a Muddy Waters song:
Can't tell how long you're gone, can't tell how long you stay
It's good country fun, it's your home some day
Someday baby, ain't no trouble for me, anymore
Ah keep on dancin' baby, let me dance one dance
Well I know when I go, I'm livin' too fast. Someday
I'll tell him about it, in my neighborhood
Gonna tell that little woman, that she don't do me no good. Someday
I know you're leaving, and your comin' back home
Oh, without my lovin lady, I can't stay long. Someday
Good Bye baby, ah take my hand
Don't want no woman no, which ain't have no man
Someday baby, you ain't gonna trouble poor me, anymore

6 Speaking of race and bigotry at the Georgia Literary Festival in Elberton, Georgia, August 13, 2005, Jeff Fields said that the evident message of his novel *A Cry of Angels* (1974) is that if someone is overly proud of his or her race or social class, then that person has not fully reached his or her human potential. *Trouble No More* illustrates this idea also.

7 1830s–1850s: Thomas D. Rice's minstrel song and dance "Jump Jim Crow" came to symbolize the ignorant, happy slave type, then gave the label Jim Crow Laws to legalized segregation in every aspect of life. 1866–1870s, 1915–present: Ku Klux Klan. 1942: Congress on Racial Equality (CORE) is founded. February 5, 1960: The Greensboro-Four sit down at a Woolworth's white-only lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina, in protest of many Jim Crow laws across the South. February 20, 1960: 34 Virginia Union University students sit at Woolworth's lunch counter in Richmond. The manager closes the store. May 1963: Police Commissioner Theophilus Eugene "Bull" Connor orders the use of attack dogs, clubs, high pressure fire-hose "guns" against the protestors. Thousands of young people are jailed for demonstrating in Birmingham. June 21, 1964: Civil Rights activists Michael Schwerner, James Cheney, and Andrew Goodman disappear. January 6, 2005: The State of Mississippi charges 79-year-old former Klan preacher Edgar Ray Killen with murder in connection with the slayings of Chaney, Goodman, and Schwerner. October 30, 1966: James Brown performs a medley of hits: "I Got You (I Feel good)," "Papa's Got a Brand New Bag," "Prisoner of Love," "Please, Please, Please," "Night Train," on the Ed Sullivan show. Brown's performance can be seen on *Ed Sullivan's Classics Collections: The Sweet Sounds of Soul*, a Time-Life Video. Grooms happened to see Brown's performance on TV about the time he was working on "Hollow and Far Away."

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