

Ann H. Marshall

The Wit of a Lesser Angel: Welty's Preference for Polite Letters Over Academic Prose

In her essays, Welty balances instruction with encouragement, criticism with a generous wit. Her skill in establishing such kindly authority derives, at least in part, from her experience as a reader of other writers of polite letters, including works on gardening which flatter the literate reader as they instruct the avid gardener. I will consider the garden writing of Welty's time and Welty's own style as columnist, cookbook editor, and essayist with an eye to their common strategies for enlisting and encouraging readers.

Even an essay with clear academic import like "Place in Fiction" will not be mistaken for run-of-the-mill literary criticism. Her argument for the importance of literature's "lesser angel" is far too personable. The essay is not so much humble as decorous, projecting a bemused voice rather than a straightforward didactic one. She considers systematically the role of "place," yet her presentation keeps the interest of her audience foremost. The authority of the piece rests in its logic and in appreciation of the reader's literacy. Its central thesis--that writers and readers neglect setting at their peril--delights by dodging the obvious and finding virtue in the necessity of place. Surely, every narrative needs a particular setting, but the argument implies more. The essay counters those who may belittle a sense of place as regionalism by showing that all good narrative is ultimately regional.

Welty's confidence in her role as a woman of letters frees her from the more pedantic features of academic writing. Others armor themselves with footnotes while she is free to regard her sources as she might flowers in the garden. She focuses on enlivening her argument with metaphor and occasional salient quotations from memory. In her life she may have regarded her mother's gardening mania with some skepticism, but the attention that she paid to her mother's projects immersed her in a world which was both cerebral and practical, and she may have found in garden writing a paradigm for the practical consideration of texts as well as the desired sympathy for places.

Works to Read:

Lawrence Elizabeth. *A Garden of One's Own: The Writing of Elizabeth Lawrence*. Ed. Barbara Scott and Bobby J. Wade; *The Southern Garden*; Letters of Welty and Lawrence in the Mississippi Archives.

Marrs, Suzanne. *Eudora Welty: A Biography*.

Sackville West, Vita. *A Joy of Gardening*.

Eudora Welty. *The Contemporary Reviews*. Ed. Pearl A. McHaney
Norton Book of Friendship. "Introduction."
Southern Sideboards: The Flavor of Jackson.
Stories, Essays, Memoir. Library of America.