

Ann Wheeler

Eudora Welty's Secret Sharer: The Outside World and the Writer's Imagination

Landmarks of American History and Culture Workshop

Suzanne Marrs and Peggy Prenshaw

July 25, 2008

### Welty, Woolf, Bowen: Preliminary Thoughts

Critics and scholars are always curious about a writer's literary influences: we seek to pin down literary forebears in the same way that someone might research genealogy and draw a family tree. Writers are rarely equally enthusiastic about this enterprise: the business of identifying each gene in their literary DNA is unlikely to be useful or rewarding to them as they engender their new texts. Eudora Welty, when asked about her literary influences, tended to give polite but nebulous responses. For instance, in a 1965 interview with *Comment Magazine*, she had this to say when asked what writers she "[found] helpful when [she] first started writing short stories:

Nobody really helps you when you work, as you know. There are a lot of people that I admire and always will. But I think any influence would have to be indirect. I should say this would be true of most writers. While I'm really in the process of working, I am not thinking about how anyone else does it or even how I ought to do it. I'm thinking about the story itself in its own terms. But, of course, there are many writers who have influenced my feeling about the short story: Chekhov, William Faulkner, for instance. But I have to answer vaguely about influences. It

would be a good thing if you could just go and influence yourself by the right person each time you found something wrong. But that's not the way it's done!

(Prenshaw, *Conversations*, 19)

When Linda Kuehl, interviewing her for the *Paris Review* in 1972, asked Welty about her relationships with contemporary southern women writers, she replied:

I'm not sure there's any dotted line connecting us up, though all of us knew about each other and all of us, I think, respected and read each other's work and understood it. And some of us are friends of long standing. I don't think there was any passing about of influences, but there's a lot of pleasure in thinking in whose lifetimes your own lifetime has happened to come along. (Prenshaw, *Conversations*, 80)

And yet, readers often intuitively sense connections between writers; scholars and critics, by their nature, wish to go beyond intuition toward specific definition.

No one doubts that Welty read the novels of both Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, or that she valued the friendship of Elizabeth Bowen. Suzanne Marrs provides a helpful account of the friendship between Welty and Bowen in her *Eudora Welty: A Biography*<sup>1</sup>. Welty herself has spoken of her response to both writers' work. In the same 1972 interview with Linda Kuehl mentioned above, she says that Woolf "opened the door" (Prenshaw, *Conversations*, 75); in a 1986 interview with Peggy Prenshaw and Alfred J. Devlin, Welty talks at length about her friendship with Bowen, calling Bowen a "Southerner" (because she comes from the south of

---

<sup>1</sup>See especially Chapter 4: Love First and then Separateness, pp. 194-202 and Chapter 5: Finding a Way Out, pp. 211-214.

Ireland, but surely also suggesting some kinship with Welty's own southernness) and saying "I've learned from her." (Prenshaw, *More Conversations*, 102, 103). In addition, Welty reviewed about the work of both Woolf and Bowen: Woolf's *The Haunted House and Other Stories*, her essay collection *Granite and Rainbow*, and the second volume of her collected letters; Bowen's *Pictures and Conversations* and her *Collected Stories*.<sup>2</sup> For a 1981 paperback edition of *To the Lighthouse*, she wrote a preface describing her own response to the novel—an short essay that, because of its place of publication, must surely be one of the literary responses to Woolf most frequently encountered by high school students and undergraduates. In *The Norton Book of Friendship*, a 1991 anthology that she edited with Ronald A. Sharp, Welty includes selections from the letters of both Woolf and Bowen. The selections are back-to-back with each other (Woolf's letters on pp. 574-581, Bowen's on pp. 581-587); two of the four letters from Bowen are addressed to Woolf while a third includes Bowen's recollections of Woolf.

Accordingly, many Welty scholars acknowledge briefly the "influence" (for lack of a better word) of Woolf and Bowen on Welty's work, without saying much about it (a critical choice which perhaps all three writers would appreciate). A few brave scholars have attempted to compare a pair of specific texts, more often than not comparing Welty's work to one of Woolf's novels. Suzan Harrison in her book length study *Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf: Gender, Genre and Influence* (1997) provides the most fully developed analysis of Woolf's influence on Welty, with chapters comparing *Delta Wedding* and *To the Lighthouse*, *The Robber Bridegroom* and *Orlando*, *Losing Battles* and *The Waves*, and finally *The Optimist's Daughter* and *To the*

---

<sup>2</sup>These reviews, and many others, can be found Pearl McHaney's collection of Welty's reviews, *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews*.

*Lighthouse*. Louise Westerling briefly compares *Delta Wedding* and *To the Lighthouse* in her *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor* (1985). Ann Romines, in *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual* (1992) compares *Delta Wedding* and *To the Lighthouse* at greater length, drawing parallels between Ellen Fairchild's preparing the traditional Fairchild wedding cake and Mrs. Ramsay's dinner party. In *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order* (1980), Michael Kreyling chooses another of Welty's novels, *The Optimist's Daughter*, for comparison with *To the Lighthouse*.

Kreyling is one of the few critics to provide more extended comparison of Welty and Bowen. Also in *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*, he writes about the way a specific passage in Bowen's *Death of the Heart* reflects themes and images similar to those found in *Delta Wedding*, noting that Bowen and Welty share a concern with "the world of the human heart and its tangled relationship with others" (55). In a 1965 doctoral dissertation at the University of Michigan, Rebecca Smith Wild compares short stories by Eudora Welty and Elizabeth Bowen, specifically eschewing claims of influence and examining instead "the alliance of the kind of stories they write... with the kind of poetry written under the impetus of symbolism and expressionism" (2). Peggy Prenshaw, in the *Mississippi Quarterly's* Fall 1986 special issue on Eudora Welty, has written a sharply focused essay noting the way that the life-writing of the two women (Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* and Elizabeth Bowen's *Pictures and Conversations*) leads to "the discovery that they locate the origins of their art, their literary creativity, in similar perceptions of childhood and youth" (649), that for both "the writing of fiction also turns out to be the chief way of maintaining the past, the family, one's youth" (650).

All three writers are centrally concerned with what Welty calls "the inward journey that

leads us through time” (*One Writer’s Beginnings* in *Stories, Essays, Memoir*, 946); the work of all three questions the way that “all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying” (“The Wanderers,” *Stories, Essays, Memoir*, 546) and explores the mystery of “human beings terribly at large, roaming on the face of the earth” (“June Recital,” *Stories, Essays, Memoir*, 399). Yet, although they have left us their words, the mysterious process by which those words rose out of their individual psyches is something which must inevitably remain private, closed to us—a “fragile mystery” (“At the Landing,” *Stories, Essays, Memoir*, 297). The conventions of critical writing are illustrative here: we use the present tense in writing of the texts, yet we must use the past tense in writing of the absent individuals who at specific, lost moments in time composed those texts and who have now been themselves transformed into “texts” on which we exercise our critical imaginations.

And yet, as we read these texts—the novels, the stories, the essays, the life-writings, the biographies—it is hard not to imagine the conversations that the real women may have had with one another; it is hard not to think of the ways that the words, written and spoken, published and private, that they shared with each other may have affected the new texts each individual would compose. In the letters quoted in Welty’s anthology on friendship, Bowen mentions both Woolf’s writing and her own, responding to one of Woolf’s essays and describing a particular difficulty she is having with *Bowen’s Court*. Bowen’s letters to Welty frequently refer briefly to their common craft. In one ebullient note, scrawled in the margins of a finished letter, Bowen writes, “I have finished the novel!” (27<sup>th</sup> July, 1954). Thanking Welty for the gift of a book about Mississippi, Bowen mentions the reproduction of a Currier and Ives print in that book, saying

I wish, Eudora, you would write a story about that picture—have you got another copy of the Mississippi book you sent me? What impertinence, to suggest a story; it’s an interfering thing to do. But I keep dreaming about that particular picture and I can’t write the story. (25 January 1951)<sup>3</sup>

In several letters, she mentions her admiration of stories in *The Golden Apples*, in one recounting a dinner conversation with T.S. Eliot (“dear beautiful kind good Tom Eliot”) about Welty’s work and expressing her intention of sending him *The Golden Apples*. Even if we can never define, with scientific precision, the ways that the words of one writer echo and resonate in the words of another, we still hear these echoes.

In her book on Welty and Woolf, Suzan Harrison identifies a useful theoretical framework for thinking of these echoes. She quotes Bakhtin’s *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* where he writes, “When such an influence is deep and productive, there is no external imitation, no simple act of reproduction, but rather a further creative development of another’s (more precisely, half-other) discourse in a new context and under new conditions” (quoted in Harrison, 9). While the conversations between the individual women may be lost to us, work remains to be done in so that we can hear the discourse between their texts.

---

<sup>3</sup>The reader who knows that Welty once planned a book of short stories and associated photographs may wonder whether Welty had discussed the relationship between her photography and her fiction with Bowen during one of their visits.

## Works Cited

### Primary Sources

Bowen, Elizabeth. Letters to Eudora Welty. January 25, 1951 and July 27, 1954. Eudora Welty Papers. Mississippi Department of Archives and History. Jackson, Mississippi.

Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman, ed. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984.

---. *More Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1996

Welty, Eudora. *A Writer's Eye: Collected Book Reviews*. Ed. Pearl Amelia McHaney. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1994.

---. Foreword. *To the Lighthouse*. By Virginia Woolf. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 1981

---. *Stories, Essays & Memoir*. New York: The Library of America, 1998.

--- and Ronald A. Sharp, eds. *The Norton Book of Friendship*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991.

### Secondary Sources

Harrison, Suzan. *Eudora Welty and Virginia Woolf: Gender, Genre and Influence*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997.

Kreyling, Michael. *Eudora Welty's Achievement of Order*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980.

Marrs, Suzanne. *Eudora Welty: A Biography*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005.

Prenshaw, Peggy Whitman. "The Antiphonies of Eudora Welty's *One Writer's Beginnings* and Elizabeth Bowen's *Pictures and Conversations*." 39.4 (1986), 639-650.

Romines, Ann. *The Home Plot: Women, Writing and Domestic Ritual*. Amhearst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1992.

Westerling, Louise. *Sacred Groves and Ravaged Gardens: The Fiction of Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers and Flannery O'Connor*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985.

Wild, Rebecca Smith. "Studies in the Shorter Fiction of Elizabeth Bowen and Eudora Welty." Diss. University of Michigan, 1965.