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A newspaper account in Eudora Welty's "The Demonstrators"

Clément Massé

- 1 Towards the end of Eudora Welty's "The Demonstrators", the reader comes across a newspaper article which offers an account of the double murder that happened over the weekend in Holden, Mississippi, where the story takes place. Ruby Gaddy, a maid, was stabbed with an ice pick as she was leaving a church gathering and apparently had the time to stab back her assailant, a man named Dove Collins. In the story, Richard Strickland, Holden's doctor, is asked to come and heal the girl's wound. A few days after the facts, as he's having coffee, he reads *The Sentinel*, his weekly newspaper, where the article appears. It aims at being purely factual, as any good reporter's job can be expected to be. What is interesting in my view, and which I would like to address here, is that by including a piece of news in this specific short story, Eudora Welty introduces a different narrative. I will look at how the newspaper narrative has a different story to tell and how it brings into perspective other narratives within the short story. I will also consider how such conflicting narratives can be seen as a tool working to give readers a broader understanding of inner conflicts within a community, such as Holden, on the verge of change.
- 2 "The Demonstrators" remains one of Eudora Welty's rare stories (with "Where Is the Voice Coming From?") written about a historical event as it was still unfolding: the Civil Rights movement. In a 1978 interview with Tom Royals and John Little, Welty described the story as "a reflection of society at the time": "I wanted to show the complexity of it all¹." Beyond the tragedy depicted in the short story, it becomes clear that Welty is probably making a political point about the treatment of the movement by the press. A newspaper article has the power to report on the lives of people at one time in history. The facts and quotes reported in *The Sentinel* reaffirm views that appear to be generally spread at the time among Southern whites. One may consider that they embody the representation people had of their community and moreover of the way they chose to see the movement. Indeed, such an argument was brought up to the public eye in newspaper articles in the United States a few years ago, such as one published by *The*

New York Times, "40 Years Later, Civil Rights Makes Page One" by James Dao. It tells about how a Kentucky daily decided to print on July 4, 2004, articles and a full page of unpublished photographs of peaceful sit-ins in Lexington which date back from the Civil Rights movement. Dao reports that, at the time, "(t)he poor coverage was not a result of mistakes or oversights [...] but a conscious strategy by the papers' former managers 'to play down the movement' in hopes that it would wither away²." The fact that the "poor coverage" was "a conscious strategy" suggests another process at work in *The Sentinel* article, that of "a narrative construction of white identity," as described by Suzan Harrison in "Racial Content Espied." Harrison argues that "[i]n its evident desire to depoliticize the violence of Ruby and Dove's relationship, the article reveals the operation of politics in the official construction of events³."

- 3 The article offers an official version of the events that unfolded over the weekend in Holden. It also sheds light on the rhetoric of a local white society as it tries to impose its own narrative over the rest of the community, using a very efficient medium: the press. As the article reads, "it warrants no stir⁴." Male authority says there is no need to worry over what happened during the weekend. What appears to be a community's tragedy (the violent deaths of two young people and the doctor's inability to save both of them) is turned into a simple case of a private matter. As stated above, the treatment of the story in the paper aims at being purely factual, as in the opening paragraph: "An employee of the Fairbrothers Cotton Seed Mill and a Holden maid, both Negroes, were stabbed with a sharp instrument." (CS, 619) When comments occur, they are either factual again, as in "'He offered no statement,' Dr. Strickland said in response to a query," or meant to calm things down, as Mayor Fairbrothers's statement seems to suggest ("We are not trying to ruin our good reputation") or to enforce a traditional point of view of superiority as that of Rev. Alonzo Duckett, pastor of the Holden First Baptist Church ("And yet they expect to be seated in our churches.") (CS, 620-621) The racist and therefore oriented content of the article is obvious. Had the "employee" and the "maid" been white, there probably would have been no reference to their race in *The Sentinel*. Suzan Harrison argues that the article is "a highly politicized parody of the white press's construction of race and racial unrest during the civil rights era." The article, she adds, "dramatizes the white town's resistance⁵." And of course, the article lacks one perspective: that of the black community.
- 4 So, significantly in the story, when the doctor enters the house near the black church, he follows "a path of newspapers" to the bed where Ruby is lying. The path seems to entrap the girl on the bed. Yet symbolically, Welty may be suggesting here that the doctor is literally stepping over spurious accounts and walking on the words and the logic from the press reports which led to the tragic death of Ruby and Dove. One may also notice that in the newspaper account, Dove's name has become Dave, most probably his official birth name yet not the name for which he is known in the community, hence suggesting that the newspaper account is a blindfold to the truth. In not mentioning the name for which Dave is known, meaning has been lost or ignored on the way: mostly the idea that the death of these two young people is in fact a tragic event, in the sense that the community has literally lost a "ruby" and a "dove," Ruby then being the incarnation of the precious jewel a ruby may represent and Dave, the incarnation of a dove, maybe "evoking the dove of Noah's ark and the doves of the annunciation and baptism of Christ." The article then reveals numerous misreadings about the way facts are interpreted. Suzan Harrison argues that such design is meant

"to reinforce myth of blacks as meaninglessly violent and whites as confused and blameless⁶."

- 5 It is not the first time that Eudora Welty introduces a piece of news within a short story. In "A Piece of News," published in *A Curtain of Green*, a woman also named Ruby (Ruby Fisher) reads in a newspaper used for wrapping a pack of coffee that another Ruby Fisher was shot by her husband in the leg. In the story, she first fails "to see herself differently from the story in the newspaper⁷." Suzan Harrison adds that "Ruby Fisher's discovery of her name in a newspaper serves as a metaphor for the possibilities and dangers of a woman's relationship to language⁸." In "The Demonstrators," Ruby Gaddy who is surrounded by newspapers, on the walls and on the floor of the room where she is dying, is instead resisting "inscription into the white fictions⁹," which sets this particular story into a different perspective, though again, it deals with similar issues: for example, the reading of the female body.
- 6 Interestingly, in French, a short story and a piece of news can be referred to by the same word: "nouvelle¹⁰." In "La nouvelle littéraire et le fait-divers," Daniel Grojnowski offers a reading guideline for both pieces. He describes the first (*la nouvelle littéraire* or short piece of fiction) as "invested by imagination, the reader feels the pleasure of fiction" when the latter (*la nouvelle de presse* or *fait-divers*) is "filled with reality: the reader experiences events which could happen to him." He notes that "in the 19th century, both genres appear on the same medium, the pages of a newspaper or of a magazine." But most importantly, Grojnowski argues that "whether it belongs to news or to fiction, 'la nouvelle' defines a specific fact which imposes strict limits to it. Its object is to report on what happened to a specific person under specific circumstances¹¹." "The Demonstrators," as a 'nouvelle,' reports on what happened to Ruby and Dove, but also on what happened to Dr. Strickland and the entire Holden community.
- 7 In "The Demonstrators," the piece of news is included into the frame of the short fiction. On the one hand, it takes the form of a newspaper article, but on the other, it remains the work of the imagination of the writer, just like the rest of the short story. But how does each text interact with the other? At the end of the article, the double murder of Ruby Gaddy and Dove Collins remains a mystery. There apparently is no explanation to it. In "Structure of the *fait-divers*," Roland Barthes argues that "a crime without a cause is a crime which is forgotten: the *fait-divers* then vanishes, precisely because in reality its fundamental relation is exhausted¹²." Daniel Grojnowski notes that in Barthes's view, this "type of events develops outside of history and of political life; it favors all deviations and relations which reveal an absurd or unhinged causality." Barthes "opposes the *fait-divers* to other news." Grojnowski adds that in Barthes's view, "the *fait-divers* is an autonomous news item which he refers to as 'immanent¹³.'" In his conclusion, Grojnowski argues that a *fait-divers* and a short story are similar in terms of "stories," yet, they "differ in terms of narrative." Grojnowski adds that "as a journalistic genre, 'nouvelles' take root in the ground of facts and hold the seal of authenticity. As art, they show the work of a writer." To him, a "kinship" exists between *fait-divers* and short pieces of fiction. He argues that "the kinship between both genres is rarely questioned, for the border between utilitarian writing and esthetic writing is felt impassable." (my translation) But, he notes that "the piece of fiction differentiates itself from the *fait-divers* by its use of minimal facts. However short it may be, it presents itself as an expansion of a narrative core." In the light of

Grojnowski's analysis, it is interesting to see that Eudora Welty, too, most probably sees the "minimal facts" of the piece of news (*fait-divers*) as a means to "expand" its "narrative core" into the broader frame of her short fiction. The piece of news (*fait-divers*) allows her to let the piece of fiction take root in a historical reality with which she is familiar but also, as Grojnowski suggests when analyzing the material for *fait-divers*, to "address problematic events¹⁴," what Welty refers to as the "complexity of it all¹⁵."

- 8 It seems to me that Roland Barthes's analysis also finds an echo in what is at work in the narrative process of the piece of news in *The Sentinel*. As we have seen, the white town's resistance is dramatized and the fact that the reporter in *The Sentinel* gives no cause to explain the double murder appears quite convenient to the white community, because then, it can serve their attempt to impose their version of events, and therefore their narrative. It implies that what happened over the weekend will be "exhausted" and forgotten, as it "warrants no stir¹⁶." Holden's white population would want the piece of news (*fait-divers*) to remain strictly a newspaper article, in order to let the "reality of its fundamental relation [be] exhausted." Yet, as a writer, Welty can see the piece of news (*fait-divers*) as a means to serve her fiction. The piece of news also being a piece of fiction then allows the complex narratives she's putting into perspective in the short story to reveal and address history and politics. Therefore, readers too are made to consider such wider perspectives. And she, through the means of fiction, may also have found a way to resist such exhaustion of a crime's relation to reality, as described by Barthes, the reason being that the issues in the story she is telling are significant to her writer's eye.
- 9 In Holden, Mississippi, one notices that inhabitants all share common bounds. The doctor for example, "inherited" Oree, the black legless woman, who was a patient of his father's. But most importantly, it appears that the Fairbrothers (Hermann Fairbrothers is the Mayor) seem to own everything in town from the mill to the city hall. The newspaper owner is named Duckett, just like the Baptist reverend and Herman Fairbrothers's wife. Power then appears to lie in the hands of just a select few who represent authority in the community, all white and male. Eudora Welty says that she was making a point in showing that the characters were all related. "It was an observation of the way a small town society in the South is often in the control or the grip, whether benevolent or malevolent, of the solid, powerful family. It makes it all the harder for any change to penetrate a town like that¹⁷." Yet, since the beginning of the story, the voices heard have been those of female characters (Miss Marcia Pope, her lady companion, the Negro child, the ladies who have gathered in the room where Ruby Gaddy is dying...). What the newspaper article suddenly brings to the forefront of the story is the voice of the majority in power (which had not yet been heard in the short story): men and their masculine perspective, that is to say male authority of the time, an inherited cultural tradition, and what is left of the way the paternalistic South used to function. The reader will also note that Dr. Strickland, too, represents such traditional male authority though he cures everyone in the community whether black or white, male or female. Yet, his encounter with the other voices of the story puts him in a situation where he will be challenged to comprehend all views.
- 10 Though there seems to be no confusion in the minds of those who are given a chance to speak their mind in the newspaper narrative, their speech is challenged by female voices throughout the story. The reader might wonder who the demonstrators are. In

the Sixties, they were most commonly those protesting against the war in Vietnam or those marching for the Civil Rights movement. Here, there's the young man burning his draft card as shown on the photograph in the paper at the beginning of the story. Eudora Welty explained that, in her view, "every character in [the story] is a demonstrator. In fact, I wanted to suggest that. Even the birds at the end [...], the flickers that showed the red seal on the back of their heads. Everything was showing themselves. Everybody was showing themselves"¹⁸. One will remember that as the story opens, the doctor is taken from a town filled with city lights at night (and from the refined world of Miss Pope) to a tunnel of darkness and eventually stops in a dark yard where he can only discern white figures – "chicken roosting in a tree." (CS, 609) And then inside the house, he finds another dark atmosphere made of another row of figures, set as in a circle, poorly illuminated by the light of one kerosene lamp held out for the doctor. Via such darkness, mixed with a bit of moonlight and "light bulbs unscrewed from the sign that spelled out in empty sockets 'BROADWAY.'" (CS, 618), Welty conveys the most powerful of sensations, one that sets the atmosphere for the entire short story: the confusion in people's minds – therefore a very different ambiance from the one presented in the newspaper account. The contrast is radical. There appear to be two worlds apart, separated by a railroad track. Later on, the confusion is presented through "the pillow-shaped glow of a grass fire" which the doctor faces "far down the railroad track." (CS, 616) Welty, then, discreetly unveils a bit more about who the real demonstrators of the story are, most certainly black people and females, resisting the white community's reading of them.

- 11 As Dr Strickland enters and then leaves the house near the church, he clearly represents male authority over women. Yet, the atmospheric opacity and the doctor's groping allow Welty to question, symbolically, the established social order; and it's the women who question it the most. In the midst of the description of male power, comes an image which seems to remind the doctor of a kind of female watchfulness over his (and the community's) well being. For what is at stake as he walks back to his car is a return of the character towards a mother figure¹⁹. The doctor experiences "a moment of vertigo." (CS, 615) The skirts described as flying around the house seem to set the doctor into a space where he has no known markers. The skirts seem to show him a way to a place beyond the point where he is standing, that is "on the edge of Holden," to "a dimmed-out milky way," across "the Delta" and "the cotton fields." He then recognizes the dresses as those of the women who have shared his life: "his mother's gardening dress," "his sister Annie's golf dress, his wife's favorite duster." He is drawn towards women who have left his life. All white. His sister got married, his wife chose to leave him for a while and his mother and daughter have died. "[T]hese flying dresses form a ring of disembodied white images, a reversal of the doctor's earlier perspective of Ruby as a black satellite to his own white community"²⁰. He later on associates the memory of women to the china in which he was offered a drink. In this mental journey, Welty takes the doctor to face his own past (and loss and death). But most of all, what this part of the story tends to unveil, is that women may have been the real – yet hidden – pillars of the community, in the same way "the old woman in the boiled white apron [...] used to be the sole factotum at the Holden depot," (CS, 614) thus suddenly bringing black females to the forefront of life as it was organized in Holden. Nothing would have worked in the past without them. This, of course, challenges the official account of events as published in the newspaper article.

- 12 Then, if the article represents the "construction of a white narrative" of the events of the time, the "construction of the black Other" is also at work in this story. As Dr. Strickland tries to heal Ruby, he finds it hard to gather information on what happened. He, too, misreads. To him, she "was the maid." Even when he tends to ask the right question, that is when he "resorts to the 'who, what, when, where' of a news reporter," he still only defines her "in terms of her position among Holden's white populace." (Harrison, 97) Whenever Ruby covers her wound, Suzan Harrison argues that she's "unwilling to expose herself to the doctor's scientific authority and objectifying gaze. She resists interpretation into the white fictions that inform the doctor's reading of her and insists on her position as an embodied black subject." She argues that Ruby's textuality is "obstructionist." She's covering the wound. Very convincingly, Harrison then argues that "[i]n Ruby's obstructionist textuality, Welty rejects and rewrites the patriarchal reduction of the feminine to a blank page passively awaiting the mark of the masculine pen. Textuality is not passive for Welty; instead, it is a site of potential resistance to privileged male – and, in this case, white – versions of story and history." But at the same time, as she moves to resist and cover the wound, isn't Ruby Gaddy also suggesting the doctor where to look for answers, that is to say, through the wound, in her heart? As Harrison also argues "[t]he many obstructions Dr. Strickland encounters move him to revise his reading of Ruby²¹." As Ruby is threatened by the devouring glow of "the lamp [...] brought down closer and closer," she quickly faces the "valentine tacked on the wall [and its] radiat[ing] color." (CS, 612) Ruby then seems to be also threatened by the emptiness which arises out of the lack of love, incarnated by the valentine and the fact that her husband stabbed her, but at the same time, she is also experiencing her craving for love. Ruby has been stabbed near the heart but, she, too, has stabbed Dove back. Collins apparently also died of "chest wounds." However, *The Sentinel* also reports that "the pick while in the woman's hand had been seen to drive in and pierce either his ear or his eye, either of which is in close approximation to the brain." (CS, 620) The episode of Ruby threatened by the lamp is then echoed by Lucille resisting and affirming her voice, body and existence as she "stuck the lamp hot into [the doctor's] own face," (CS, 613) as if he was never going to see for himself.
- 13 Dr. Strickland is unable to heal Ruby. But, as she "was drifting into unconsciousness, [...] the doctor inspected the puncture once more." The reader will notice that it "was as clean as the eye of a needle," (CS, 613) thus drawing a parallel between the wound and the possibility of a vision. If we consider Eudora Welty's taste for mythology and of the way it has shaped the form of her fiction, one may have noticed a circularity of looks in this passage, which could echo an episode from the myth of Perseus killing the Medusa²². Perseus has to bring back the head of one of the Gorgons. To be able to see the path that leads to the Gorgons' land, he has to catch the eye which the Gorgon's elder sisters share. In this passage of "The Demonstrators," it seems to me that the doctor is also symbolically catching an eye. He witnesses the exchange of looks between Ruby and her younger sister – "I bid that," says the young girl as if suggesting that it was her turn to symbolically hold on to the eye – the necklace is hanging just above the chest wound –, and then with Ruby's baby ("The baby opened one of his mother's eyes with his fingers. When she shut it on him he cried, as if he knew it to be deliberate of her." (CS, 612)) The doctor witnesses such moves and symbolically catches *the* eye when it shifts from Ruby to the younger sister and to the baby. So, when he "inspect[s] the puncture once more," he symbolically has the means to see with the medium through which Ruby experiences life, her heart.

- 14 As I was reading "The Demonstrators," I was reminded of a section from another book: *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Zora Neale Hurston's autobiography published in 1941. Towards the beginning of the book, Hurston writes about the last moment she spent with her dying mother. What she most strongly remembers are her mother's eyes on herself, trying to pass something on to her. The passage reads as follows:

"Papa was standing at the foot of the bed looking down on my mother, who was breathing hard. As I crowded in, they lifted up the bed and turned it around so that Mama's eyes would face the east. I thought that she looked to me as the head of the bed was reversed. Her mouth was slightly open, but her breathing took up so much of her strength that she could not talk. But she looked at me, or so I felt, to speak for her. She depended on me for a voice²³."

- 15 Interestingly, Ruby has not spoken a word since the beginning of the story. But as she's dying, she, too, seems to depend on someone for a voice, to tell her tragedy which is the entire community's. As the doctor reflects on what happened during the night, he feels the "bitterness, [the] intractability that divided everybody and everything," (CS, 617) but he is also reminded of a presence, "as though someone had stopped him on the street and offered to carry his load for a while [...]" and he wonders: "Was it the sensation, now returning, that there was still allowed to everybody on earth a *self* — savage, death-defying, private?" (CS, 618) Perseus seems implicit in the description: he represents the self within man which defies death, and gathers its strength and courage to dare surpass himself. Similarly, when Miss Marcia Pope alludes to *The Aeneid*, she may also be suggesting a specific reading of the doctor's journey, which could help reveal the roots for a new land, a new South, the same way Aeneas, in *The Aeneid*, was destined to take his people from Troy to the shores of Italy where a great city will be founded: Rome. The *Aeneid*'s narrative of "a man at war" and who "sing[s] of warfare" would then give resonance to the doctor's questioning and journey. As Harrison argues, it "invites multiple interpretations, [...] the *Aeneid* [being] an epic myth of national identity, calling our attention to the relationship between nation and text [...]"²⁴.
- 16 As Harrison writes, "The Demonstrators' is a story about the power of stories to shape our interaction with the world, about the stories we construct to define national, cultural, and racial identities²⁵." Dr. Strickland appears to be witnessing the feuding of various narratives, whether the white community's as printed in the newspaper, or the black community's through female bodies as they resist the white people's reading of them, or even the narratives offered by myths as taught to him as a child by Miss Pope. In the end, when the doctor thinks "that in all Holden, as of now, only Miss Marcia Pope was still quite able to take care of herself — or such was her own opinion," he shows that he is refusing to take any narrative for granted. As a result, I would conclude that, in the story, it is him who appears to have done the most out of the means offered by reporting. For through his journey, he was able to witness human life as experienced by everyone in his community, thus enabling the reader to consider all views.

NOTES

1. Tom Royals and John Little, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," in *Conversations with Eudora Welty*, ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 259.
 2. James Dao, "40 years later, Civil Rights Makes Page One," *The New York Times*, 13 July 2004: A1., <http://www.nytimes.com/2004/07/13/us/40-years-later-civil-rights-makes-page-one.html>
 3. Suzan Harrison, "Racial Content Espied," in *Eudora Welty and Politics: Did the Writer Crusade?*, ed. Harriet Pollack and Suzanne Marrs (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 107.
 4. Eudora Welty, (1980). *The Collected Stories*, (New York: Harvest Brace & Company, 1982), 619. Hereafter cited parenthetically by page number in the text.
 5. Harrison, "Racial Content Espied," 106.
 6. Ibid., 105-106.
 7. Carol Ann Johnston, "Revisions of Milton's Eve: The Polar Opposites in 'A Curtain of Green,'" in *Eudora Welty - A Study of the Short Fiction*, (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1997), 69.
 8. Harrison, "Racial Content Espied," 96.
 9. Ibid., 99.
 10. The "nouvelle de presse" refers to a piece of news whereas the "nouvelle littéraire" refers to a short story of fiction. Yet, a piece of news is now most commonly referred to as *fait-divers*.
 11. Grojnowski, *Lire la nouvelle*, 44-46 (my translation).
 12. Roland Barthes, "Structure of the fait-divers," in *Critical Essays*, tr. by Richard Howard (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University, 1972), 190.
 13. Grojnowski, *Lire la nouvelle*, 51 (my translation).
 14. Ibid., 52-56.
 15. Royals and Little, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," 259.
 16. One will note that Barthes's essay "Structure of the fait-divers" was first published in 1964 in France, two years before the first publication of "The Demonstrators" in *The New Yorker*. However, Barthes's essay was only translated in 1972 in the United States.
 17. Royals and Little, "A Conversation with Eudora Welty," 260.
 18. Ibid., 262-63.
 19. This figure was described by Danièle Pitavy-Souques in Danièle Pitavy-Souques (1992), *La Mort de Méduse, L'art de la nouvelle chez Eudora Welty*. (Lyon: Presse universitaire de Lyon), 87-91.
 20. Harrison, "Racial Content Espied," 100.
 21. Ibid., 97-101.
 22. Virgil's poem *The Aeneid* is alluded to at the beginning of the story when Miss Marcia Popes quotes its opening line, *Arma virumque cano*.
 23. Zora Neal Hurston, (1942). *Dust Tracks on a Road*, (New York: Harper Perennial, 1991), 63.
 24. Harrison, "Racial Content Espied," 95.
 25. Ibid., 94.
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