The Jewel in the River: Symbolic Vision in *Delta Wedding*

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> "Not her young life with her serene mother, with Battle, but her middle life—knowing all Fairchilds better and seeing George single himself from them—had shown her how deep were the complexities of the everyday, of the family, what caves were in the mountains, what blocked chambers, and what crystal rivers that had not yet seen light."[1]

According to Allen Tate, "the symbolic imagination takes its rise from a definite limitation of human rationality . . . recognized in the West until the seventeenth century; in this view the intellect cannot have direct knowledge of essences."[2] Symbolic imagination then, acknowledges limits to human understanding; it approaches the essences of things indirectly, through images; it explores truths implicit in human actions, passions, and situations by means of the partial and open-ended, yet at times penetrating logic of "prolonged analogy."[3] The symbolic poet possesses the "power to start [and continue] with the common thing, . . . the concrete experience."[4] Nevertheless, though never leaving behind the plane of experience from which it begins, symbolic poetry reaches imaginatively towards a deeper and "higher synthesis," folding out of the common world coherent fields of analogy that communicate the world of spiritual essences enfolded within it.[5] Gestures and events take on significance, revealing the spirit's invisible movements.

Not only poems or works of fiction, but also cultural and social forms—institutions, rituals, and human relationships of every kind—can be seen as analogues (created in part by human courage and imagination) that offer indirect but vital knowledge of spiritual realities.

1 Welty, *Delta Wedding*, 206 (hereafter cited in text).
2 Tate, "The Symbolic Imagination," 428.
3 Ibid., 430.
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.

In *The New Science of Politics*, Eric Voegelin writes:

> [Society] as a whole is a little cosmion, illuminated by meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it as the mode and condition of their self-realization. It is illuminated through an elaborate symbolism . . . —from rite, through myth, to theory—and this symbolism illuminates it with meaning in so far as the symbols make the internal structure of such a cosmion, the relations between its members and groups of members, as well as existence as a whole, transparent for the mystery of human experience.[6]

Symbolic forms, then, dispose in society a space where the mysteries of persons and the divine may reveal themselves, ringing changes and transformations in an already dense but twinkling field of analogy. But when a culture comes to regard its forms—be they ritual, mythic, or theoretical—as ultimate rather than symbolic, as seizing upon the essence of things rather than rendering "existence . . . transparent for the mystery of human experience," such forms become a falsifying substitute for the real risks and joys of life. Tate denounces a poet's attempt to "disintegrate or circumvent the image" in an assault on the essence of things as an act of the "angelic imagination," and such an attempt on the part of a society would be, in Voegelin's words, to "immanentize the eschaton" prematurely.[7] Genuine poetic works, whether literary or cultural forms, touch upon the heart of our experience precisely by accepting and internalizing the basic limitations of our vision, teaching us to see our lives symbolically.

Delta Wedding explores the life of the Fairchild family in its little Delta world and shows, by analogy, fundamental aspects of what it means to be part of the human family. In her poetic engagement with the richly realized and intricately (sometimes painfully) articulated cosmion of the Mississippi Delta, Welty steadily acknowledges the limits of her own vision, as well as that of the society she explores. Like every human community, this society possesses an *outside*. Throughout the novel, the human world is seen to be surrounded by threatening possibilities, by an external reality that may in itself be indifferent, or even inimical to it—with its floods, wars, and the often unsettling, always uncertain progress of its history. This world of forces must be recognized, confronted, and questioned, even though its ultimate meaning may remain opaque. But genuine human societies also possess an *inside*, a something like a soul, that resides in the inward life of its members and the relations between

6 Voegelin, *The New Science of Politics*, 27.
7 Tate, "The Symbolic Imagination," 429; Voegelin, *New Science*, 120.

and among them. This inner essence of a community cannot be grasped immediately and unequivocally but must be approached with indirection, care, and the steady questioning of love in order to be known. Taking just such an approach, Welty reveals the Delta-community of her novel as "illuminated by meaning from within by the human beings who continuously create and bear it," as vital and capable of self-renewal.[8] In one of many moments that offer a glimpse of this renewing power, Laura approaches her cousin Dabney's best friend, whose continuous piano-playing is almost the fluid element in which life at Shellmound happens, and asks, "Mary Lamar—what are you playing?" To which the girl rejoins quietly, "It's not always anything, . . . I'm improvising" (268). To improvise, to give back unforeseen yet musical responses to one's world, illuminates and recreates it from within, showing it to possess a wholeness and depth beyond what can be seen. In the figure of Ellen Fairchild, who freely accepts and inwardly transforms the limits intrinsic to her life—what she can be, what she cannot—Welty shows how playing or dancing gracefully and gratefully at the limits of one's knowing and being that human experience is rendered radiant, symbolic. Ellen herself is a symbol of what it means to love symbolically and to communicate that life to others. At the center of the novel and her community, she illuminates both these little worlds from within.

In the novel's meandering sequence of minor epiphanies, Welty shows Ellen deepening in the beauty and knowledge of her destiny. Ellen's special capacity to lose (and find again) the things and persons that touch her life becomes a motif whose many modulations reveal and concretely develop a basic spiritual movement of self-loss and renewal, death and resurrection. Because she experiences the full weight and beauty of her own life's commitments and losses *indirectly* and self-forgetfully, through half-recognized, half-hidden tokens, her experience of life can be said to be symbolic. Through these same tokens, what is crucially particular to her life's story is intuited and shared by others, Laura in particular. Ellen, in her capacity to lose and find, forget and recall what is needful moment by moment, is thus herself symbolic of the peculiar freedom and assurance won in a life given to the care of souls and also renews the symbolic value and "deep . . . complexities of the everyday" world around her (206).

The reader of *Delta Wedding* must maintain a certain expansive interest and attention to gather the full implication of its narrative. For the novel does not proceed linearly but probingly, with a circuitous accumulation and recapitulation of suggestive incidents whose formal unity remains

8 Voegelin, *New Science*, 27.

submerged. As John Alexander Allen writes, "[Welty's] work abounds in Delphic passages that, even when regarded with the care that love inspires, not only resist analysis but resolve themselves into further riddles without end."[9] And Robert Penn Warren advises us that, in Welty's stories, "The logic of things . . . is not quite the logic by which we live, or think we live, our ordinary daylight lives."[10] Rather, as in dreams, small events or tokens that have unaccountably taken on a weight of meaning gradually yield up, through a sequence of symbolic substitutions, some central riddle or mystery which one can indeed become more and more fruitfully aware of, but which finally resists exposure. The highest achievement of Welty's art is to disentangle, without violating, the folds of concealment and substitution where the essential meaning or gift of a dedicated life is embedded, hiding even from itself. That her "riddles resolve . . . into further riddles without end" does not mean readers will make no progress in understanding but indicates Welty's essentially figurative approach to experiences whose logic resists the "ordinary daylight." She herself writes,

> The events in our lives happen in a sequence in time, but in their significance to ourselves they find their own order. . . . The time as we know it subjectively is often the chronology that stories and novels follow: it is the continuous thread of revelation.[11]

Indeed, not things in themselves interest us in the end, but the way in which they weave a "continuous thread of revelation" into the fabric of our private and communal lives.

Reading Welty may have more in common with reading Dante's *Paradiso* than a novel of Jane Austen, with whom she is sometimes compared. Certainly what Allen Tate writes of Dante's "symbolic imagination" is also true of the poetry of *Delta Wedding*:

> [Dante] not only begins with a common thing; he continues with it, until at the end we come by disarming stages to a scene that no man has looked upon before. Every detail of Paradise is a common thing; it is the cumulative combination and recombination of natural objects beyond their 'natural' relations which staggers the imagination.[12]

In *Delta Wedding* also this bewildering reconfiguration of the common into symbolic combinations is at work. As John Edward Hardy writes,

9 Allen, "The Other Way to Live: Demigods in Eudora Welty's Fiction," 26.
10 Warren, "Love and Separateness in Eudora Welty's Fiction," 20.
11 Welty, *One Writer's Beginnings*, 914.
12 Tate, "The Symbolic Imagination," 444.

"One feels from the beginning that . . . incidents are important mainly as points of refraction, from which light is cast back upon various moments of symbolic perception in the minds of several characters."[13] The wedding itself functions in the novel as just such an intense "point of refraction," lighting up and deepening the individual lives of the Fairchilds. Precisely that Dantean image of multiplied, refracted light occurs to Ellen as she watches her daughters dancing afterward: "As if a bar of light had broken a glass into a rainbow, she saw . . . each different face bright and burning as sparks of fire to her now, more different and further apart than the stars" (291). Dabney and Troy's wedding, simply by being a wedding, is an event of enough significance to shed light on the entire community of lives in which it occurs. And, though it is the one real "event" of the novel (called after all *Delta Wedding*), there is nothing particularly remarkable about *this* wedding. It is the supremely ordinary event of a young man and woman "leaving father and mother" to join with each other, giving up the specific trials and beauties of one phase of life for another. But this moment of transition lights up, by means of the novel's field of analogies, a metaphysical economy of loss and gain at work in the wider community, and in Ellen's life in particular. For though this is Dabney's wedding, and she will no doubt grow into its meaning throughout her life, Ellen's experience of the light-refracting event is the more profound. In the "loss" of her daughter to Troy, Ellen confronts the before-unfathomed losses and renunciations intrinsic to her own life and marriage, experiencing them as, paradoxically, the source of her freedom and peace—as, ultimately, no loss at all, but the transformation of dream and passion into something of incalculably greater, metaphysical value. Welty shows that whatever Ellen's life has deferred is somehow preserved in the dark treasury of being and is already giving itself back, in myriad half-recognized echoes, upon herself and her family. For, as Robbie wonderingly recognizes, "Things almost never happened, almost never could be, for one time only! They went back again . . . started over . . . " (322).

From the beginning of the novel, Ellen has some affinity for lost and forgotten things. And, though a little lost herself in her multitude of duties, she has also a special appreciation (sometimes an unaccountable foreknowledge) of the gentle surprise of their return. About to enter Shellmound, Laura, dizzy with anticipation, is flooded by returning memories of her previous visits there; among them, she recalls "Aunt Ellen slipping by in the hall looking for something or someone"(9). "She was often a little confused about her keys, and sometimes would ask Dabney,

13 Hardy, "*Delta Wedding* as Region and Symbol," 33.

'What was I going for?' 'Why am I here?' " (25). She is characterized by a certain self-forgetfulness: "She never cared how she dressed any more than a child" (25). The sight of the family whose happiness her own labor has prepared for takes her by surprise, as though she had had nothing to do with it:

> Sometimes, as when now she stood for a moment in a room full of talking people, an unaccountable rosiness would jump into her cheeks and a look of merriment would make her eyes grow wide. . . . It would be as if she had never before seen anything at all of this room, . . . had never watered the plants in the window, or encountered till now these absorbed, intent people. (25-26)

This same paradoxical quality in her is beautifully indicated by the author's gentle suggestion that the child that Ellen is carrying will soon surprise her by reflecting her own features, remembering them to her: "She had never had a child take after herself and would be as astonished as Battle now to see her own ways and looks dominant, a blue-eyed, dark-haired, small-boned baby lying in her arms" (27).

Ellen's ability to lose herself in familial duties and her special readiness to be surprised by realities she has not foreseen becomes a kind of clairvoyance when forgotten objects surface in her dreams:

> She dreamed of things the children and Negroes lost and of where they were, and often when she looked she did find them, or parts of them, in the dreamed-of places. She was too busy when she was awake to know if a thing was lost or not—she had to dream it. (84)

This clairvoyant feeling for the missing thing seems part of how she "knows everybody from the inside, hop[ing] for everybody," how she addresses their needs with "exquisitely gentle tact."[14] For the situations and relationships to which she has given herself over speak to her subrationally. When Troy tells her where he is from, his home and mother, "Why had [she] wondered?" Ellen thinks, "she could have seen the little perched cabin in her mind any time, by just not trying" (124). Laura's expectation, indicated in the novel's opening paragraph—"When she got there, 'Poor Laura little motherless girl,' they would all run out and say"—is delayed and disappointed in the disorienting whirl of her cousins' obscure rituals and games (1). But Ellen, "late for everything,"

14 Kieft, *Eudora Welty*, 100.

hurries to where the lost cousin "waited, like a little dog," and without thinking conjures up, as if from her name and nearness, the efficacious words: "Now she knelt and held Laura very firmly. 'Laura—poor little motherless girl,' she said" (11-2).

Allen provides a good focus for this whole motif of lost and forgotten things (which will be picked up and carried to the end of the novel by Ellen's dream of her lost pin) as well as some of the substitutions at play in it:

> [Ellen's] role . . . gains dramatic force from her rediscovery of [*her lost*] *self*, the inner equivalent of Dabney, whom she is about to lose to Troy Flavin. One result of the magical presence of her brother-in-law George at this critical time in her life is her growing awareness of a depth of passion in herself.[15]

It is not that George tempts her (though he does once untie her apron in a gesture whose implication, like nearly everything he does, remains deeply ambiguous). Rather, his penetrating tenderness and his own helpless situation appeal, on the one hand, to the girl-self of her courting days and, on the other, to the instincts of the steady and compassionate motherhood she has attained. The self-recollection that George inspires in her ultimately means, on her part, the deepening and renewal of her life's essential commitment. Ellen experiences this rediscovery of herself—what she was, what she is—through the actual loss and dreamed recovery of the garnet brooch of her courting days. The symbolic dream in which she finds this token of her lost identity will be fulfilled and its ambivalent meanings explored, first, by Ellen's unsettling encounter with a mysterious girl in the very place where the dreamed pin had appeared and, finally, by Laura's finding the actual jewel—only to lose it for her aunt once again. Indeed, from the beginning this brooch of her lost girl-hood that, dreaming—"she took . . . back, pinned . . . to her breast and wore . . . away—away"—seems both to want to be found and want *not* to be found, for Ellen's dream "had been in the form of a warning" (84, 85).

The ambivalent mode in which Ellen's lost jewel—symbolic of powers she has half consciously surrendered in becoming a mother and wife—both can and cannot return to her is explored by a haunting episode in which a fugitive girl appears as if in its place. For where Ellen, guided by the pattern of her dream, half expects to find her pin, she instead encounters a strange, beautiful girl who will "stand still" for her

15 Allen, "The Other Way to Live," 41 (emphasis added).

to gaze at, allow her to take her hand, but will accept no help or counsel: " 'You couldn't stop me,' the girl said . . . and a half-smile, sweet and incredibly maternal passed over her face . . . teasing and sad, final and familiar, like the advice a mother is bound to give her girls" (92-3). In part, this strange being is telling Ellen of her own passage into age—that some shy, wild, vital aspect of her self is imperiously set on departure. The girl who "shed[s] beauty" like the dream's pin "shining in the leaves like fire" seems to demand, just by being what she is, to be looked at, but ultimately wants to be lost, let go (92, 83). And when Ellen does release her hand, "in the stillness a muscadine fell from a high place into the leaves under their feet, burying itself, and like the falling grape the moment of comfort seemed visible to them and dividing them, and to be then, itself, lost. . . . They took a step apart" (93). This moment seems to represent something in a destiny that divides from itself, a memory that disclaims the mind, or some part of life that, possessing its own too vital intensity, must fall, "burying itself," if life is to continue true to itself. Perhaps it is enough to say that, in the stillest moment of a life, shadowy possibility and clear actuality look each other calmly in the eye and then part company.

George's disturbing admission that he "took [the same girl] over to the old Argyle gin and slept with her" casts the entire incident in another light (103). The factual reality of this "girl" (probably older than she first seems) with her unearthly beauty is suddenly forced upon us. We see her now as a self-endangering woman whose strange girl-like quality is one aspect of a reckless flight from human certainties—perhaps far more the mirror image of George's dangerous demands on life than Ellen's own past as "a town-loving, book-loving young lady . . . belong[ing] to a little choral society of unmarried girls" (286). Ellen must have already sensed something of this, since she says to the girl, "I wasn't speaking about any little possession to you. I suppose I was speaking about good and bad, maybe. I was speaking about men—men, our lives" (92). At the wedding reception, Ellen learns that the girl has been crushed by the Yazoo Delta train. The "vision of fate" that this news precipitates in her corresponds to her acknowledgment that, at its heart, true care for one's children and men must include the acceptance-in-advance of the unknown hazard they will run in seeking to forge or find their fate (287).

Such an acknowledgment is central to the nature of Ellen's particular care for George. The moment in the novel at which Ellen most deeply enters George's predicament—the "fight" that is "*in* people on this earth . . . [and with particular, desperate intensity] in Georgie too"—and seems briefly to sustain the full burden of his "heart's overflow" is experienced

by her as an apocalypse, a revelation of the radical contingency of the Delta world (214, 293). As he approaches, she is unaccountably reminded of the chaos that threatened years ago when the cotton gin burned:

> Another near flutter of wings, a beating on walls, was in the air [and "Bird de house mean death!" (209)]; but the throbbing softly insinuated in a strange yet familiar manner the sound of the plantation bells being struck and the school bell and the Methodist church bell ringing, and cries from the scene of the fire they all ran to, cries somehow more joyous than commiserating, though it threatened their ruin. (214)

During this event, whose recollection here returns unbidden, she had lost the baby she was carrying, as we later learn from Roxie: "Miss Ellen fainted away when everybody went off and left her—it was when the gin caught fire—and she had lost that little baby" (220). She has been overwhelmed by maternal anxiety for George (whose doubtful happiness in marriage she connects to Dabney's) and has just now spoken wisely and clearly on his behalf to Robbie, his wife. But now she must give him up (like her lost child, like Dabney) to the uncertain fate his life has chosen to embrace. When George bursts into the room, her recollection of the burning gin's minor apocalypse merges with his appearance: " 'Is it out? Is the fire out?' she asked" (218). Her own physical being, the child she is now carrying, the unborn child she lost, all inwardly protect her from being overwhelmed in the magnetic field of his fate—and, like before, she faints: "Giving George an imploring look in which she seemed to commit herself even further to him and even more deeply by wishing worse predicaments, darker passion, upon all their lives, Ellen fell to the floor" (219). George, who (is it cruelly? nobly? despairingly? recklessly? conceitedly?) desires to force crises, moments of decision on those he loves, who is energized by the experience of his own contingency, of physical danger, has chosen to stand visibly, insistently outside the protection of the familial space. And Ellen recognizes that George's intensity of passion is ultimately tragic: "She was never surer that all [of them] loving Georgie was not the end of it; but to hold back hurt and trouble, shouldn't it just now be enough?" (213). Nevertheless, in her sympathy for George, Ellen experiences her own central paradox that, hidden in her care for her family and their world, there is a nascent longing for apocalypse—for some radical, liberating transformation of their shared existence that can only be imagined in the medium of destruction: "wishing worse predicaments, darker passions, on all their lives. . . . [P]lantation bells, . . . school bell, the Methodist church bell ringing, and cries from the scene of the fire . . . somehow more joyous

than commiserating, though it threatened their ruin" (219, 214). Just who and what George is in himself, where he is ultimately headed, may be unknowable, but for the family he is a sign of the apocalypse who reveals and intensifies the precious contingency, ultimately the metaphysical gravity of the "charmed life" they share. Even as she recognizes and sustains his vital intensity with a depth of passionate, physical sympathy, Ellen is compelled to acknowledge that (like the girl in the forest) she cannot stop him; she must give him to his own fate.

This acknowledgment shapes her final attitude towards George: "Suddenly she wished she might talk to George. It was the wrong time—she never actually had time to sit down and fill her eyes with people and hear what they said, in any civilized way. Now he was dancing, even a little drunk, she believed—this was a time for celebration, or regret, not for talk, not ever for talk" (291). When she dances with him, she does not pretend to understand him, but affirms what she hopes and takes to be his essential purity: "She pressed his arms tenderly a moment, as if she could express it, that he had not been harmed after all and had been ready for anything all the time. She loved what was pure at its heart, better than what was understood" (293). Everything, in fact, that she surmises about him she knows to be a question that she will never be permitted or required now to ask. She nevertheless shows the generosity of a total willingness to offer her own friendship, even love, to the separateness that, perhaps by some pure Dionysian law of his being, he has chosen to maintain: "I would always dance with you as quick as anything" (293). Her whole attitude is delicately poised between alternate worlds, the world of possibilities renounced in her life but nonetheless significant, and the actual world to which she will be unwaveringly true. Thus, she silently fosters her generosity and care for her husband's brother on the possibility (simultaneously recognized and renounced with a release of joy and spiritual independence) that, though she is "without one regret for her life with Battle," she might have been singularly capable of "reliev[ing] the heart's overflow" for George (294, 293).

Dancing in intersecting worlds, then, she affirms what good this earth can produce and guards the possibility of a deeper world where what a clear and dedicated life renounces is stored away for the whole community as an invisible source of blessing. Over her dancing, "There was mistletoe in the tree. It was like a tree, too—a tree within a tree" (294). Peggy W. Prenshaw writes: "After Dabney's wedding, [Ellen] waltz[es] past a tree hung with a golden lantern and mistletoe—a golden bough. . . . She has reached beyond the merely human and held a dream, but . . . she

has lovingly sacrificed it to be Ellen Fairchild, to be part of the repeating cycles of this earth."[16] Ellen's little lost pin, lost baby, lost Dabney, the lost possibilities of her being, herself, become, like the golden bough, tokens of life's essential desire to sink inward, downward, to disappear and return transfigured.

Laura intuitively recognizes this mystery in her when, after finding Ellen's brooch and losing it again in the river, she wonders, "staring at her, . . . where, truly where, the rosy pin was. She got to her feet and backed away from her aunt slowly—she wanted to know in what wave. Now it would be in the Yazoo River, then it would be carried down to the Mississippi, then . . . " (240). Moments afterward, Ellen, as if in response to Laura's wonderings, hands her keys to Shelley ("the heaviest and most keys in the world!" says Shelley) and says simply, "Some of them are to things I'll never be able to think of or never will see again" (240). The treasures of a life generously lived will tend to lose themselves in the dark river of life itself, but these very losses open doorways to life's symbolic dimensions. With her ring of keys to forgotten doors, Ellen is a warden of the underworld, of life's mysteries, of the "deep . . . complexities of the everyday" (206).

Early in the novel Laura perceives the decided generosity of Ellen's love, the calm freedom and insight that stem from a psychic recess opened by her life's intrinsic losses: "Even some unused love seemed to Laura to be in Aunt Ellen's eyes when she gazed, after supper, at her own family. Could she get it? Laura's heart pounded" (26). For Laura, to lose Ellen's jewel in the Yazoo (and she is literally plunged with it into the "whale's mouth [of the river] . . . [full of] dark water and fearful fishes" (234-5)) becomes her own treasure. To keep the secret of the loss becomes to Laura a thing more precious than the jewel itself, since to return it she must somehow remake it from within. She does so (or promises to) at the end of the novel, restoring her aunt's rosy pin to her in 'three, anxious, repaying kisses' (326). And this may be what the novel most fundamentally represents: how the mysterious streams and eddies of love's symbolic transitions and substitutions, like the dark swirls and wrinkles of the Yazoo, catch and carry life's lost treasures, rendering them back unaccountably transformed and multiplied. Certainly, one secret of Welty's own art is that, by giving herself over to the distinct lives of her characters and seeing them through with steadily observant love, by veritably plunging herself into the current of their story, she conjures more drowned shades of our human experience than one could ever account for up into the sparkling particularity of

16 Prenshaw, "Woman's World, Man's Place," 72.

poetry's transformed life.

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