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OWENS, PHILLIP LAMAR

TIME IN THE NOVELS OF EUDORA WELTY

The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

PH.D.

1980

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TIME IN THE NOVELS OF EUDORA WELTY

by .

Phillip Lamar Owens

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of the Graduate School at
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in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
1980

Approved by



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APPROVAL PAGE

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ABSTRACT

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In her essays and stories, and particularly in her novels, Eudora Welty examines how human beings relate to time. Miss Welty's concern with time is reflected in the imagery, structure, and theme of her novels, and indeed should be viewed as crucial to her artistic vision.

To Miss Welty, time is quite different from chronology--man's rather futile attempts to measure and control time. Although her novels are filled with references to clocks, watches, pendulums, and other such devices, Welty always endeavors to demonstrate the inaccuracy and perversity of these contrivances. She portrays time as often dilated or compressed, and she regards the past, present, and future as one continuous flux. Her characters, however, usually fragment time and become preoccupied with the past, or with the present, or with the future. Consequently, Welty's characters seldom live in harmony with the world around them.

Because human beings cannot, or will not, reconcile their subjective conceptions of chronology with the external flow of time, they tend to perceive time as their enemy. Hence, Lorenzo Dow in "A Still Moment" blames time

for what he calls Separateness, the isolation of one person from another and from the rest of the world. Other characters, like Clement Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom, rant at time because it accentuates human transience and mortality; still others, like most of the Fairchilds in Delta Wedding, lament the passing away of a golden era of innocence and abundance. Indeed, Miss Welty frequently depicts her characters as being at war with time, a metaphor which culminates in Losing Battles.

Generally, these characters separate into three categories according to the tactics they employ against time. The largest group retreat, either by withdrawing into the past--as do the older Fairchilds in Delta Wedding and Granny Beecham in Losing Battles--or by isolating themselves in the present. Many of these characters, like Edna Earle Ponder in The Ponder Heart and Katie Rainey in The Golden Apples, erect a ceaseless wall of chatter to protect their fragile illusion that time can be stopped or controlled.

A second group of characters, including King MacLain in The Golden Apples and Becky Thurston McKelva in The Optimist's Daughter, struggle valiantly but unsuccessfully against time. These combatants "butt their heads against the wall" only to become even more isolated from the world around them. Their frustration eventually changes to cynicism, and they remain casualties in a battle they had instigated.

A third group, however, learn to compromise with time and to accept its passing. George Fairchild in Delta Wedding and Jack Renfro in Losing Battles, for example, no longer struggle against time. Of all Welty's characters, though, Laurel McKelva Hand in The Optimist's Daughter is best able to understand the vicissitudes of time. Laurel discovers, during a long night of introspection, that time is an enemy only if she believes it to be. Thus she confronts her opponent and transforms it into an ally.

Eudora Welty would seem to recommend Laurel's response to time as the most tenable strategy in a world that is, at best, perplexing. Although the author sympathizes with her characters, she does not hesitate to laugh at their petty efforts to defy time. In the final analysis, Welty seems to feel, mankind takes all its struggles too seriously. A better way might be to laugh at the human predicament, and, with laughter, rejoin the universal design.

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I dedicate this work to my wife, June, who understood.

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CHAPTER I

PLACE AND TIME: THE COORDINATES OF WELTY'S FICTION

Eudora Welty has repeatedly emphasized the special role that locale performs in her art. In "Place In Fiction," for example, Miss Welty describes a sense of place as the primary agent of "goodness" in fiction:

First, with the goodness--validity--in the raw material of writing. Second, with the goodness in the writing itself--the achieved world of appearance, through which the novelist has his whole say Third, with the goodness--the worth--in the writer himself: place is where he sees his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes it provides the base of reference, in his work the point of view.¹

To Miss Welty, then, "fiction is all bound up in the local" because "feelings are bound up in place," and she compares the writer to an explorer who charts out a "tentative map of the known world." The writer utilizes as the chief coordinate of the fictional grid, then, Place: what Welty defines as the "named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting, and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel's progress."²

Although many critics have recognized the significance of Place in Miss Welty's fiction, very few have noticed the degree in which Time suffuses her artistic theory and the

fiction itself. In the passage just quoted, for example, Welty stresses that Place is concrete and credible because it becomes a touchstone for all of the experiences of the past, present, and future. Without the passage of Time, Place remains like an undeveloped piece of film--unresponsive to the writer's creative talents. With Time as a catalyst, though, Place develops into "a picture of what man has done and imagined, it is his visible past, result." Hence, in "How I Write" Welty admits that, although she is "touched off by place," it is Place modified by Time--"according to present mood, intensification of feeling, beat of memory, accretion of idea"--which stirs her to complete her journey into imaginative realms.³

If Place is the first coordinate of Miss Welty's fiction, then, Time marks a second coordinate--one which both limits the focus of her fictional world and expands her explorations into hitherto uncharted regions of human endeavor. According to Welty, Place and Time function as the "two bases of reference" on which fiction depends "in seeking to come to grips with human experience."⁴ All art, in a sense, results from what Wallace Stevens calls a "rage for order," and for Miss Welty Place acts to focus the writer's "voracious eye of genius"--leading to "awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight."⁵ But Time, the second coordinate of Welty's art, provides a counter thrust: since it is "like the wind of the abstract," Time

contributes motion to the "frame" of Place and renders the act of focusing more difficult, if not impossible ("Some Notes on Time," p. 482). Ultimately, it would seem, Time is the more crucial of the coordinates because Place depends on it to facilitate the act of focusing and to generate living emotions and characters. As Lucinda MacKethan concludes about Welty's fiction:

Place yields to time; it cannot, therefore, be used to fix identity but exists as a mechanism of insight available to those who can "stand still" to catch the fleeting moment when place reveals its mysteries.⁶

Indeed, to Welty, the novelist "lives on closer terms with time than he does with place." Primarily because of the intimate relationship between Time and plot, then, "The novel is time's child" ("Some Notes on Time," p. 483). In her interview with Charles Bunting, Welty offers her criteria to distinguish the short story from the novel, and not surprisingly she stresses development through Time as the critical difference:

In the case of the short story, you can't ever let the tautness of the line relax. It has to be all strung very tight upon its single thread usually, and everything is subordinated to the theme of the story: characters and mood and place and time; and none of those things are as important as the development itself. Whereas in the novel you have time to shade a character, allow him his growth⁷

Clearly such distinctions do not originate with Miss Welty; nevertheless, that she is so emphatic in her exegesis of

the role of Time in the novel might yield a key to understanding her other techniques as an artist. In "Some Notes on Time in Fiction" she declaims:

While place lies passive time moves and is a mover. Time is the bringer-on of action, the instrument of change. If time should break down, the novel itself would lie in collapse, its meaning gone. ("Some Notes on Time," p. 484)

Several critics have noted the importance of Time in Miss Welty's fiction. Louis Rubin, Jr., for instance, contrasts Faulkner's "larger than life" characters who "do battle with their enemy time," with Welty's "other Mississippi" where the characters "do not contend with time . . . [but] pretend that it does not exist."⁸ Of course Rubin's generalization does not apply to all or even most of Welty's characters, for indeed contention with Time becomes the central conflict in each of Welty's novels, with the possible exception of The Ponder Heart. In his study of "Eudora Welty's Art of Naming," for example, Charles Davis observes that "Beneath the humor of Miss Welty's fiction is the persistent theme of the disappearance of the old South." Davis concludes that Welty's characters are "constantly threatened and at times already destroyed by the slow but inevitable progress of the twentieth century"; these people "may attempt to ignore the change or they may consciously

strive to avoid it, but the South . . . is by no means static."⁹ Hence it would seem that Time is at the center of Welty's fiction even though there is critical disagreement as to exactly how her characters react to its passing.

Perhaps the most pertinent study here is James Neault's "Time in the Fiction of Eudora Welty."¹⁰ Neault provides an overview of Time in Welty's stories and novels, but he does not analyze any of the works in detail--nor does he attempt to synthesize a comprehensive explanation of how Time functions throughout the novels. In fact, although there are a few perceptive studies of Time in specific stories or novels, no one has yet endeavored to determine just how pervasive Miss Welty's preoccupation with Time might be.¹¹ Therefore, the purpose of this study will be to examine closely each novel with the following questions in mind: 1) How do the various characters respond to the passing of Time? 2) What do these responses suggest about the characters' world view, and about Miss Welty's vision of life? 3) How does Welty's concern for Time affect her novels' artistic design? 4) Is there a pattern to Welty's development as a novelist, or is each work an isolated experiment in content and technique?

But before any attempt to understand how Time functions as a coordinate in Welty's novels, it would be felicitous to know precisely what she means by the term. Unfortunately, as James Neault points out, Miss Welty does not provide an

explicit definition of "Time" anywhere in her writings.¹² Evidently Welty is like most other human beings in that she succumbs to using the word in an imprecise and variable way; as J. T. Fraser observes, the "concept of time is curiously evasive" and actually speaks with many different "voices."¹³ What is apparent, however, is that Miss Welty usually thinks of Time in fiction as something quite dissimilar to chronology:

Thus time is not a simple length, on which to string bead-like the novel's episodes. Though it does join acts and events in a row, it's truer to say that it leads them in a direction, it induces each one out of the one before and into the one next. ("Some Notes on Time," p. 485)

Chronology--man's rather pathetic effort to measure and arrange the events of Time in sequence--does prevail over Welty's fictional world in the sense that her plots are superficially quantifiable in terms of hours or days, and in the sense that Welty's characters are often preoccupied with clocks and watches. However, as is usually the case in Faulkner's fiction, Miss Welty distorts the normal flow of chronology such that the effect is to create a space-time setting that escapes the finite world and enters the infinite or timeless. Welty's most remarkable creation of this seemingly timeless realm occurs in The Robber Bridegroom, where the reader glimpses what Charles Davis describes as "the tremendous gap between his own time and that of an

innocent, fabulous world that, if indeed it ever existed, is forever lost to him."¹⁴ Similarly, Time would appear to be irrelevant in the pastoral splendor of Delta Wedding: in the enclosed world of Shellmound Plantation, clocks mark the incorrect Time and no one cares; characters lose track of the day of the week; even the Yazoo River flows more slowly here than in other sections of the delta. Of all of Welty's novels, perhaps only Losing Battles maintains any real semblance of accurate chronology: mainly because most of the action of the novel transpires between sunrise and sunset on a Sunday when the Renfros' preparation for the family reunion depends on punctuality. Even here, though, the never-ending talk and the constant allusions to the characters' past immerse the reader in a space-time that appears eternal and static. One can quite easily visualize the Renfros and Beechams still gathered around their reunion table, still talking--forever.

To Miss Welty Time is an eternal flux which denies man's feeble attempts to order, count, or otherwise establish control over it; the primeval exists simultaneously with the contemporary, at least in the subjective perceptions of many of her characters. Zelma Howard Turner explains that Welty, in order to capture the essence of Time, employs several rhetorical "devices"--including the "Proustian bringing of the past into the present by association of the present with the past through the stimulation of a specific

sense and the Bergsonian continuous flowing of the past into the present, the present into the future, and the future into the all-time."¹⁵ James Neault, on the other hand, demonstrates that Welty's "concept of time more closely resembles the 'eternal now' of Tillich than la durée intérieure of Bergson." Neault adds that, whatever the philosophical antecedents of Welty's conception, "The question of temporal time comprehended in eternity still leaves the nature of time shrouded in mystery." This mystery, Neault concludes, "is not disquieting to Miss Welty, for it is in his confrontation with the 'still moment' that man experiences the mystical revelation of truth and beauty."¹⁶

Rather than try to define precisely Welty's conception of Time--which the author herself refuses to do--perhaps we should examine instead the influence of Time on her craft and on her characters. Above all else, Welty always concentrates on the living of life, or on the dying--not on the synthesis of an ontology. To her, philosophy "has its own very great place," but in fiction it is "irrelevant and intrusive."¹⁷ Her concern is the fate of human beings, and her characters' fate is to struggle continuously against inexorable Time. Welty very well might be describing her own stories and novels, instead of Katherine Anne Porter's, when she writes, "Time permeates them. It is a grave and formidable force."¹⁸

Welty makes what is probably the most explicit statement about Time in her fiction in the magnificent vignette "A Still Moment," which Alfred Appel calls Welty's "most probingly metaphysical story."¹⁹ While many of her stories--like "A Memory," "Flowers for Marjorie," "Clytie," "A Curtain of Green," "Asphodel," "Livvie"--have as their central conflict the human response to Time, "A Still Moment" conveys the crux of Miss Welty's insights. Equally important, this story offers a clue to her literary technique, for although Welty usually describes surface reality with delicate accuracy and copious detail, her "special achievement"--as Ruth Vande Kieft observes--is "her projection of the hidden inner life." Vande Kieft compares this quality in Welty to the similar method of Henry James, Proust, Joyce, and Virginia Woolf, in that these writers all remained "faithful to the essential nature" of life by showing "time as it is actually experienced." Instead of yielding to the dictates of chronology, these writers, and Eudora Welty, dare to portray Time as "radically compressed or protracted, or meaningless either as a concept or a sensation; the past as caught in the present, the moments of stasis; the passage of flux."²⁰

In "A Still Moment" Welty probes the effects of a "moment of stasis" on the lives of three men. Although it would be misleading to suggest that "A Still Moment" is in

any way typical of Welty's other stories--for indeed the supreme quality of her fiction is its diversity--this story should be viewed as crucial to an understanding of her concern for Time. Similarly--I feel--the sections of The Golden Apples which deal with the painting of Perseus slaying Medusa, another "moment of stasis," make that novel the fulcrum on which to balance and weigh Welty's longer fiction. Taken together, "A Still Moment" and The Golden Apples provide a necessary gloss on the role of Time in all of Miss Welty's works.

"A Still Moment" has been analyzed in detail elsewhere,²¹ but a cursory glance at its plot is prerequisite to the point here. Three men, each with his own peculiar obsession, meet at sunset along the Old Natchez Trace. Lorenzo Dow, a traveling missionary with a compulsion to save souls, ignores the temporal world, including his wife Peggy, in order to earn his entry into Paradise: "He was close to death, closer than any animal or bird."²² To Dow, his fellow human beings are contemptible sinners, chiefly because they exist in and for a time-bound world rather than postponing their lives until they reach heaven and eternity; Dow shouts to the universe, "Inhabitants of Time! The wilderness is your souls on earth!" (p. 78). James Murrell is a renegade who is convinced he can "solve his mystery of being" by murdering every man he sees: "It was as if other men, all but himself, would lighten their hold on the secret, upon assault, and let

it fly free at death" (p. 80). Whereas Dow eschews the temporal for the eternal, Murrell lives only for the present moment, and he believes that the lives of other men interfere with his capacity to continue. Hence his battle plan:

"Destroy the present!--that must have been the first thing that was whispered in Murrell's heart--the living moment and the man that lives in it must die before you can go on"

(p. 79). A third man, John James Audubon, searches through the wilderness for beauty, beauty which he hopes to commit to memory and art and thereby create experiences which, like the figures on Keats' urn, will never fade but remain

"Forever warm and still to be enjoyed." Like the other two men, Audubon searches for the clue to living in a time-bound world of experience:

O secret life, he thought--is it true that the secret is withdrawn from the true disclosure, that man is a cave man, and that the openness I see . . . the wide arches where the birds fly, are dreams of freedom? If my origin is withheld from me, is my end to be unknown too? Is the radiance I see closed into an interval between two darks? (p. 86)

As the three men gaze off into the sunset, in "that quiet moment" a solitary heron lights and begins to feed beside the marsh water. For "a still moment" the three are transfixed, and sharing the special timelessness, and yet each is locked into his own isolated interpretation of the miraculous event. To Dow the heron is a sign from God. Murrell sees "only whiteness ensconced in darkness," but

the darkness prevails and he envisions his future as a leader of outlaws and rebels. Audubon realizes that the "bird was defenseless in the world except for the intensity of its life" (p. 87). Then--while dreaming of how he must paint the scene and thus make it permanent--he pulls the trigger of his gun and kills the heron.

Each of the three men receives a revelation as they ride off on their separate journeys; ironically, the three are finally joined in that they all reach the identical conclusion: the nature of existence is such that man must inevitably live in separation from his fellow human beings. The outlaw is proud that his ethics have been confirmed, "as if he had always known that three men in simply being together and doing a thing can, by their obstinacy, take the pride out of one another." He is glad that "Each must go away alone, each send the others away alone" (p. 91). Audubon laments his frailty as an artist, and as a human being:

He knew that the best he could make would be, after it was apart from his hand, a dead thing and not a live thing, never the essence, only a sum of parts; and that it would always meet with a stranger's sight, and never be one with the beauty in any other man's head in the world. (p. 92)

But it is Lorenzo Dow who is most severely shaken and whose epiphany becomes most vital in understanding Miss Welty's fiction. Hair standing on end and hands

shaking with numbness, Dow's faith--in God and in the eternity he has pledged his life to--begins to crumble. Suddenly he realizes that only God could have thought of the "Idea of Separateness":

He could understand God's giving Separateness first and then giving Love to follow and heal in its wonder; but God had reversed this, and given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first. Perhaps it was that God never counted the moments of Time; Lorenzo did that, among his tasks of love. Time did not occur to God. Therefore--did He even know of it? How to explain Time and Separateness back to God, Who had never thought of them, Who could let the whole world come to grief in a scattering moment? (p. 93)

Miss Welty's word choice here is uncanny. Lorenzo Dow's speech is riddled with Time words like "first," "then," "follow," "before"--everyday words which emphasize man's inability to conceptualize anything except in terms of Time. Time causes Separateness, as Jean-Paul Sartre points out in his discussion of Faulkner and Proust,²³ and Time is man's invention. To God, Dow finally comprehends, Love and Separateness occur simultaneously; or, since here the Time-burdened language breaks down, they merely are-- in all-Time. Miss Welty's grasp of man's predicament here is firm and all-embracing, and her message is clear: as long as man exists in Time, Separateness is inevitable and must be accepted. Those characters who, like Clement Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom, rant the most vehemently against man's plight in a Time-bound universe are, in the

final analysis, merely voicing man's eternal rage at his own mortality. This rage, or butting "like a goat against the wall" as King MacLain and Virgie Rainey exercise it in The Golden Apples, is one of the vital signs of life in Welty's fiction. Nevertheless, since man must exist in Time, he must also learn to live with Separateness and mortality; only then can he erect a present life which neither ignores nor dwells on the past and which accepts the uncertainty of the future.

Very few of the characters in Welty's novels manage to acclimate themselves to life in a Time-burdened world. In The Robber Bridegroom, only Jamie Lockhart and Rosamond Musgrove adjust to the transition of America from a primitive wilderness to a more materialistic, "civilized" society; because of Welty's commingling of realistic and fairy tale elements, however, Jamie and Rosamond never quite crystallize as human characters with whom the reader can identify. All of the characters in Delta Wedding live, to varying degrees, in the isolation of Shellmound Plantation where they can limit Time's encroachments to small doses and therefore avoid succumbing to the metaphysical malaise which so enervated Clement Musgrove of The Robber Bridegroom. But as Charles Davis observes, by shutting themselves in at Shellmound these characters could create only the "illusion of timelessness and agelessness";²⁴ although Welty is charitable in her descriptions of

the Fairchilds, most of whom dwell on their glorious past, she most certainly does not extol the virtues of seeking to hide from Time. Only George Fairchild, and perhaps some of the younger generation Fairchilds, have any real hope of discovering that Time will not stand still just because we wish it to: in Delta Wedding Miss Welty does not so much lament the passing of the golden age as she demonstrates the naiveté of characters who believe they can recapture the innocence and timelessness of the past.

In The Golden Apples some few characters, like Ran MacLain and perhaps Mrs. Morrison, still endeavor to recapture the past, but now Miss Welty emphasizes the race to keep up with Time and the search to find meaning in the present. As Katie Rainey announces early in the novel, "Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run," and for the characters here--like King MacLain, Loch Morrison, and Virgie Rainey--running with Time becomes an end in itself. For King MacLain, running with Time becomes a selfish hedonism that allows him no thoughts for anyone other than himself, and no time for anything else but the pursuing of "The silver apples of the moon,/the golden apples of the sun." Although here again Welty portrays her characters sympathetically, she seems to reject King MacLain's egocentric compulsion for the present just as she rejects the Fairchilds' obsession with the past in Delta Wedding. Both of these methods are artificial because they

seek to refute one fundamental principle: Time flows ceaselessly from past to present to future. It cannot be stopped by racing it in the present any more than it can be frozen in the past. In this sense The Golden Apples marks the end of a cycle in Welty's novels, a cycle that will be essentially repeated in the next three novels: from The Robber Bridegroom to Delta Wedding to The Golden Apples there is an increasing sense of the urgency of man's struggles with Time and an expanding awareness on the part of the characters of the necessity to deal with the past, the present, and the future together. Virgie Rainey--at the conclusion of The Golden Apples--has ceased to fight her past and no longer runs a race with the present. Instead, for her the past and present have coalesced; as she stands in the rain, "listening to the magical percussion, the world beating in . . . [her] ears," Virgie is prepared to live in harmony with the universe and with her future.

The Ponder Heart is much like The Robber Bridegroom in that Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel Ponder appear to be relatively unaware of their struggles with Time. There is little urgency to act here, although The Ponder Heart delineates the passing from existence of the Ponder family and of the local customs around Clay, Mississippi: these characters talk and drink instead of struggling against Time. Miss Welty is here more concerned with comedy and with story-telling than with man's travail, almost as if

she wanted a brief respite for herself and for her characters. But with Losing Battles the theme of man's conflict with Time is examined with new intensity. In many ways, Losing Battles is a later version of Delta Wedding: the setting is shifted from the Delta region to the hill country of northeast Mississippi, and the affluence of the Fairchilds gives way to the poverty of the Great Depression, but the Renfro-Beecham clan here seeks to isolate itself from the present world much as do the Fairchilds at Shellmound. Again the focus is on family unity and pride in the past, and on how these virtues often become exaggerated to the point that they prevent life in the present and future. Outsiders-- in the form of Jack Renfro's wife Gloria, the schoolteacher Miss Julia Mortimer, and Judge Oscar Moody--assail the values of the Renfros and Beechams, and again Miss Welty finds all of these characters lacking in any true capability to withstand the erosions of Time. Whereas in Delta Wedding the Fairchilds could temporarily ignore the passing of Time, in Losing Battles the Renfros' predicament is exacerbated because of their economic deprivation. Hence there is more sense of urgency in the latter novel. Although Miss Welty concludes both novels on an optimistic note, in Losing Battles an opponent has been met and, if not defeated, at least challenged with all the resources the Renfros and Beechams can muster. Doing battle--against

Time--remains ancillary to living a bounteous life in Delta Wedding, but with the abundance and insulation of Shellmound Plantation taken away, the struggle against Time becomes primary in Losing Battles. When Gloria Renfro exclaims "I don't see our future" near the end of the novel, Jack's retort captures the spirit of Losing Battles and of Welty's advice to all human kind. Jack's answer to Gloria--"Keep looking, sweetheart"--is so simple that it appears naive, yet it contains the essence of man's only hope to prevail.

The Optimist's Daughter describes the efforts of one woman, Laurel McKelva Hand, to do just that--to "keep looking" until she can perceive her past, present, and future in one harmonious vision. As John F. Desmond points out, this novel's "clarity" stems from Welty's choice of subject: "vision itself--the whole range of perception and blindness, feeling and insensitivity" Of paramount concern here is Laurel's need to construct a meaningful vision of Time, of what Desmond calls the "mysterious relationship between memory and experience."²⁵ Laurel ultimately achieves such a vision of Time, but not until she has endured an agonizing night of self-doubt and intense questioning of the values of her father, mother, husband, and step-mother. Gathering the best of her memories of the past--and rejecting a large portion of her family's values--Laurel builds for herself a vision of Time which will allow her to face the future. Much like Virgie

Rainey at the end of The Golden Apples, Laurel accepts Separateness as part of her human inheritance and, because she does accept it, can--paradoxically--join the race of human kind who live in harmony with the cosmos and with Time.

The Optimist's Daughter brings to a dramatic end a second cycle of Welty's novels which begins with The Ponder Heart and Losing Battles, much as The Golden Apples climactically ends the first cycle of three novels. Both The Golden Apples and The Optimist's Daughter turn on acts of violence. Near the conclusion of the latter novel, Laurel raises a treasured breadboard of her mother's and, with the breadboard poised as a weapon, considers crushing it down on the head of Fay Chisolm McKelva, Laurel's stepmother. Time seems to stop momentarily: Laurel contemplates Fay as an anathema because Fay represents all the loveless, selfish materialism of the future. But in that "still moment" Laurel comes to realize that hurting Fay would not help anyone; more importantly, Laurel realizes that Fay poses no threat to the past, nor to the future. This incident bears a striking resemblance to the picture of Perseus slaying Medusa in The Golden Apples: Virgie Rainey frequently recalls the painting which shows Perseus holding the head of the Medusa, but what she remembers most vividly is the "vaunting." What Virgie learns from the painting is that Perseus and the Medusa--hero and victim--

must share their fate, for one is incomplete without the other. Therefore, as Alfred Appel summarizes, violence here merely emphasizes the inter-dependence and Separateness of human existence:

The transcending or destructive act--"the sword's stroke"--makes visible the hero's "separateness," as well as the victim's, for the sensitive "hero" recoils at seeing the cost of his success--"the horror in life" that is the victim's suffering. But from Virgie's new perspective she sees beyond the "hurt" to the "third moment" of "the sword's stroke"--a timeless realm in which both "the heroic act" and the pain of human separateness have been absorbed and transmuted into art²⁶

Virgie Rainey, through her contemplation of an act of violence in art, and Laurel McKelva Hand, through her realization of her own potential for violence, enter a timeless world where Separateness and dependency become identical. And although they must continue their lives in the Time-bound world, they can do so with the knowledge that, even though Time causes Separateness, the condition is universal: therefore no man need live alone.

Eudora Welty paints with variegated detail the manifold responses of her characters to Time. Each of her novels can be read as an experiment which subjects the characters to different environments and special obstacles to determine their reactions. In all six novels, however, two questions remain central: How do groups of people--like conjugal families, extended families, or small towns--act when confronted with changes in their cultural and

economic patterns of existence? Also, how do individuals perform when facing radical changes in personal fortune-- like marriage, the death of a loved one, or simply growing old? Basically, her characters divide into three categories according to their response to Time. Some merely ignore its passing, either by living in the past as do the older Fairchilds in Delta Wedding and Granny Beecham of Losing Battles, or by creating an isolated world of retreat in the present. These characters, like Edna Earle Ponder in The Ponder Heart, Beulah Renfro of Losing Battles, or Katie Rainey of The Golden Apples, generally strive to erect a ceaseless wall of chatter to protect their fragile illusion that Time can be stopped or controlled.

A second group of characters, including perhaps Clement Musgrove of The Robber Bridegroom, King MacLain and his offspring in The Golden Apples, Miss Julia Mortimer of Losing Battles, and Becky Thurston McKelva (Laurel's mother) in The Optimist's Daughter, fight valiantly but rather unsuccessfully against change. These characters, for various reasons, become so involved in their personal campaigns that they fail to become fully aware of friends and fellow combatants; they "butt their heads against the wall," as does King MacLain, only to discover that the wall cannot be penetrated. The one exception here might be Miss Julia Mortimer of Losing Battles, who obviously does affect and care for those surrounding her, but even in her

case Miss Julia's efforts are only partially successful at best.

A third group, however, learn to accept Time's passing and to move with it. They learn that human Separateness is a fact of life and that therefore their only hope is to move with Time: thus Separateness, paradoxically, becomes the one common human bond. The sophistication of response here varies remarkably, from that of the Proteus-like Jamie Lockhart in The Robber Bridegroom to that of Virgie Rainey in The Golden Apples; whereas Jamie seems to have no philosophy of life, and indeed can adapt to anything, Virgie develops a metaphysics that brings her into accord with the universe. Between these two extremes, Welty portrays several levels of the sober acceptance of Time, including characters such as George Fairchild in Delta Wedding, Gloria and Jack Renfro, and Judge Oscar Moody of Losing Battles. Beyond all of these, though, or at least certainly equal to Virgie Rainey in quality of inner vision, is Laurel McKelva Hand of The Optimist's Daughter. Of all Miss Welty's characters--it seems to me--no one achieves a finer balance of love and selflessness with yet a quiet realization that there comes a moment, in everyone's life, when the rage to live and defeat Time surpasses all other considerations. The true strength of Eudora Welty's novels lies in their never straying from an examination of real people, of their emotions and

behavior; in The Optimist's Daughter all that is good--and bad--in the human dilemma over Time comes together in Laurel McKelva Hand.

Laurel McKelva Hand succeeds in discovering a harmonious living relationship with the universe: in essence, Laurel makes the enemy a friend and learns to accept Time's idiosyncracies. Many of Miss Welty's other characters, however, continue to strive--and to fail--to find a way to conquer their enemy. Beginning with Clement and Salome Musgrove in The Robber Bridegroom, Miss Welty records in novel after novel a casuality list of those who are foolish enough to believe they can defeat Time. Although each novel portrays a distinct set of human gladiators, each with his or her different tactics, the message is inevitably the same: learn to acknowledge man's Separateness and futility or succumb to Time's paralyzing and destructive omnipotence. For Miss Welty, these would seem to be the only alternatives.

On the other hand, such a dichotomy of man's responses suggests that Miss Welty views the problem simplistically--and she most certainly does not. Her first novel, The Robber Bridegroom, captures immediately the splendid complexity of her vision of the human predicament: Clement Musgrove rants at his fate while Time passes him by, while Jamie Lockhart and Rosamond Musgrove appear hardly capable of any conception of Time as either a philosophical or

practical problem. Nevertheless, Jamie and Rosamond manage to change almost effortlessly, as if Welty were intimating that perhaps naiveté is the best defense of all. Of course The Robber Bridegroom is such a rich little novel that any generalization is dangerous, but Marilyn Arnold is probably accurate when she writes that here Welty "scatters asunder the fairy tale's sacrosanct notions about the agenda for happily-ever-after living." To Arnold, The Robber Bridegroom represents "the warmest and most loving parody ever written,"²⁷ and to a large extent the tone of this novel sets the trend for Miss Welty's later works: in the final analysis, mankind takes all its struggles--especially its contention against Time--too seriously. A better way, Welty seems to imply, might be to laugh at the cosmic joke Time has played on humanity, and, with laughter, to rejoin the universal design.

CHAPTER II

THE FALL INTO TIME: THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

Eudora Welty's first long piece of fiction, The Robber Bridegroom (1942),¹ remains one of the most marvelous creations of the twentieth century. So different is this cunning little novel that it still exists as an enigma as far as its "place" in the development of Welty's technique or her world view, and certainly there are few authors, if any, whose works are of comparable idiosyncrasy. Perhaps the most certain comment one could make about this novel is that it is fascinating.

The novel begins at the "close of day when a boat touched Rodney's Landing on the Mississippi River and Clement Musgrove, an innocent planter, with a bag of gold and many presents, disembarked" (p. 1). Thus the setting of The Robber Bridegroom is realistic and specific: the area that around the Old Natchez Trace between Rodney's Landing and New Orleans, the time the first years of the nineteenth century. After this, however, very little can be presumed as realistic. Clement searches for an inn to sleep and makes his choice according to the physical appearance of the innkeeper. He finally shares a room with the legendary Mike Fink and with an unidentified dandy from New Orleans who turns out to be Jamie Lockhart, a

bandit. (The identity of almost everyone in the novel is unknown, dual, or questionable--the reader must constantly ask, along with the characters, who is this?) Jamie saves Clement's life by tricking the violent Mike Fink; as a result, Clement unburdens his soul to Jamie, speaking of how Indians had murdered his first wife, Amalie, and son. Clement had then married the ugly Salome who becomes the wicked stepmother for his surviving twin, Rosamond. Together the three live a fairy-tale existence on Clement's plantation.

Salome pesters the beautiful Rosamond with the conventional fairy-tale tests and hires Goat, a mercenary boy from close by, to follow and try to kill her stepdaughter. On one of her tests in the wilderness Rosamond is surprised by the disguised bandit Jamie who strips her of her valuable clothing; she returns home "naked as a jay bird" (p. 51). On another such trip, Rosamond is robbed of her virginity by Jamie; the unsuspecting Clement invites his friend Jamie to dinner (of course Jamie and Rosamond do not recognize each other) and challenges the bandit to avenge Rosamond's loss of innocence.

Rosamond runs away to the wilderness where she discovers the bandits' cabin. She and Jamie live together, neither recognizing the other, like Psyche and Cupid--but finally Rosamond concocts a potion (from Salome's recipe) and washes the berry stains from her bandit-lover's face. He

flees out the window to the wilderness where he encounters another bandit, Little Harp, who follows Jamie around trying to cut off his head. Finally Clement, Salome, Rosamond, and the entire group end up captured by Indians: Salome is killed, but Jamie and Rosamond eventually make it to New Orleans where they have twins and settle down to live.

A fairy tale? Yes, but what is not apparent in such a cursory outline of the plot is Miss Welty's subtle commingling of realism and fantasy, of comedy and violence, of light-hearted action and quite serious meditation on the plight of man. Such vehicles as Clement Musgrove's soliloquies and the authorial intrusions, such as when Jamie and Rosamond finally get married, "and indeed it was in time's nick" (p. 181)--force us to read The Robber Bridegroom as an allegory of an era in American history. Miss Welty, among other things, is here portraying the transition from an essentially innocent, timeless world, to a modern, civilized America--a fall into time.

Very few critics make more than a passing reference to time as a theme in The Robber Bridegroom. Alfred Appel, for example, feels that there is a digression on time here but that it is "not successfully integrated with the identity question that is central to the book." Appel continues, "Writing out of a joy in the epoch she has created, Miss Welty succeeds in capturing the lost fabulous innocence of the American frontier, its poetry and comedy." Perhaps

Appel, like many other critics, succumbs to a tantalizing temptation to read The Robber Bridegroom as a simple celebration of life: for Appel the novel marks Welty's turning to "more exuberant, joyful, and 'open' forms of comedy--a freer laughter asserting itself in comic modes seldom qualified by irony."²

Charles C. Clark objects to Appel's appraisal, however, and demonstrates that "what appears to be an amusing fictional amalgam of history, frontier humor, folklore, and fairy tale is actually a statement of the predicament of man, a creature both blessed and cursed with a dual nature."³ Although Clark is not concerned with time in the novel, he provides what is the best insight into the sources of The Robber Bridegroom. Unlike Appel, Clark stresses the novel's complexity and unique flavor:

Perhaps all we can say of The Robber Bridegroom is that it is sui generis: that the fairy-tale and folklore and mythic aspects of the novella and the tongue-in-cheek humor of the narration combine to create a fiction unlike anything else in literature.⁴

Another piece of interesting criticism which, rather surprisingly, does not refer to the time theme in The Robber Bridegroom is Ashley Brown's "Eudora Welty and the Mythos of Summer." Brown "make[s] an interesting case" for the novel as worthy of comparison with Welty's stories and proclaims the longer work "is a beautiful example of romance in Professor Frye's sense." While Brown does offer

several insights into the characters and action of the novel, he admits that Frye's "scheme has its limitations." Nevertheless, Brown tries to force The Robber Bridegroom into the mold of Frye's conception of romance, finding they mesh "almost perfectly." To Brown the "primary subject" here is the traditional romantic plot involving hero and heroine; Jamie Lockhart, the "hero," is "wonderfully brave and adept . . . and he seems to come out of a springtime world of eternal youth."⁵

Although Brown does not do so, to view The Robber Bridegroom as romance should lead directly to a consideration of the role time plays in the novel. To view a work as romance in Frye's sense is to place it in a larger perspective, within the cyclical framework of the seasons and of the passing of time. Quite often the romance records a never-never world suspended between a dying past and a future waiting to be born. Hence the romance portrays a blending of times, of past and future, which seems almost timeless. As Frye describes it, "The perennially childlike quality of romance is marked by its extraordinary persistent nostalgia, its search for some kind of imaginative golden age in time or space."⁶ This would seem to be one of the preoccupations of The Robber Bridegroom.

Only two critics perceive the complexity of this novel and its emphasis on time as man's antagonist. Gordon E. Slethaug claims that the four major characters--Clement

and Salome Musgrove, their daughter Rosamond, and the robber bridegroom Jamie Lockhart--must be understood in terms of their notions of good and evil. Of these four all change except Salome, who is not "initiated into the complexities or joys of life" because she isolates "herself outside normal human relationships and the natural rhythms of life." Clement, Rosamond, and Jamie are initiated to the degree that they accept the "inextricability of good and evil." Slethaug's most pertinent comments about time are in an addendum which he does not try to support; nevertheless, they do invite further investigation:

Since Welty has created characters who are equally at home on the frontier Natchez Trace, in Grimm's fairy tales, or Medieval ballads, her world is a complex and timeless one. Indeed, by depicting man in such a way, Welty appears to compare human behavior now and in the past⁷ All time is one, and all space is one

Charles E. Davis would seem to concur with Slethaug's reading. Davis is more specific, however, in demonstrating how time is a serious consideration for Welty. To Davis, The Robber Bridegroom projects a "comic and serious perspective" which is one of the several traits Welty shares with the Old Southwest humorists:

While one of the purposes of these humorists was quite simply to provide comic entertainment for themselves and for their audience, they were also attempting to capture a short-lived period in the history of the Southern United States and its people--a period whose time and character were rapidly passing out of existence.⁸

Davis concentrates on how Welty's comic-serious tone produces a tension reflecting "her concept of the duality of all things--man, the wilderness, time, history, and reality." Since time is only one of these dualities, Davis does not focus on it; he still presents ample evidence for his belief that "perhaps the most persistent theme in the book . . . [is] the relationship between the past, the present, and the future."⁹

What exactly is the "relationship between the past, the present, and the future" as Welty describes it in The Robber Bridegroom? Is it true as Slethaug intimates, for example, that only the accouterments of human existence change from generation to generation--with the "quality of human behavior" remaining essentially static and timeless? How do individuals react to the passing of time and to the vanishing of a distinct way of life? Although Welty poses these and other questions in The Robber Bridegroom, she almost never provides any pat answers. Each of the major characters represents a different reaction to time and its passing, and even within each character there are usually a variety of responses. Instead of easy answers Welty seems to reiterate the multifariousness of the human response to time and to suggest the complexity of time itself.

This variety is perhaps most obviously represented by Jamie Lockhart, who wears the skin of a chameleon and can adapt quickly and painlessly to any of the vicissitudes

of time. (His name might suggest he "locks" his true self within his heart and underneath his changing exterior.) Unlike anyone else in the novel, Jamie undergoes what would appear to be a radical transformation. Miss Welty describes it, however, as hardly a change at all:

And as for him, the outward transfer from bandit to merchant had been almost too easy to count it a change at all, and he was enjoying all the same success he ever had. But now, in his heart Jamie knew that he was a hero and had always been one, only with the power to look both ways and to see a thing from all sides. (p. 185)

This not only epitomizes Jamie's flexibility but also suggests the kind of social changes taking place around the turn of the nineteenth century, changes which the novel portrays as leaving many--those without Jamie's adaptability--behind in the past. The rough and tumble frontier gradually becomes civilized, but many are not prepared for the transition.

Jamie's dual personality insures that he will not be passed by, however. He is both robber and merchant on one hand, and lover and bridegroom on the other. For Jamie, Welty writes, "it was either love or business that traveled on his mind, never both at once" (p. 69). As a romantic Jamie "carried nothing less than a dream of true love--something of gossamer and roses" (p. 74), but he realizes that his "dream on earth" must be postponed "until the last" after he has accomplished his more practical goals (p. 74).

For Jamie is also a pragmatic realist whose motto, "Take first and ask afterward," sets him apart from the other characters in the novel; unlike Clement whose values seem outdated and naive, Jamie is clearly "a man of the times" (p. 27).

When Jamie continues to insult the boasting Mike Fink (in their room at the inn at Rodney's Landing), for example, he already plans to hoodwink both Fink and the naive Clement. Ironically, Mike Fink realizes Jamie's plans for Clement's gold: Fink tells Jamie, "I know who you are, that followed this rich planter to his bed" (p. 13). But the boisterous and simple Fink does not apprehend Jamie's cunning scheme to get all the money--Fink's and Clement's. Mike Fink's bluster and strength are the weapons of the past; they clearly are no match for the subtle trickery of Jamie and the newer ways. As a "man of the times" Jamie depends on brainpower rather than brawn. When Clement relates the tragic story of his past, for instance, Jamie seems already familiar with most of the details and is really concerned with only the monetary gain he might make. Jamie continually interrupts Clement's story with comments like "They [the Indians] took all your money, of course . . . and you have prospered, have you not" (p. 24). Jamie expands Clement's story, "and you turned into a planter on the spot . . . and I wonder how much you are worth now!" (p. 25). This banter is lightly handled by Miss Welty and exposes Clement's

naiveté as much as Jamie's greed, but it does begin a pattern of Jamie's money-induced myopia that might ask us to compare him to T. S. Eliot's one-eyed merchant or to Faulkner's Jason Compson.

Even when "love or business" offer themselves together, Jamie is not greatly tempted by romance as long as there is any possibility of its interfering with his grabbing of plunder. In his first encounter with Rosamond in the forest, Jamie's eye is turned not by beauty or passion, but by Rosamond's "grand dress" (p. 46). He realizes, as does the brutish Goat, "that the clothes had cost money and Rosamond had not" (p. 56). Later, when he visits Clement in order to decide if he will become Rosamond's avenger, Jamie becomes very upset when instead of money the daughter is offered as a reward (p. 72). Jamie may dream about the future but his most pressing concerns are practical and immediate: he thinks, "Perhaps . . . I should marry her [the daughter], for she is rich and will be richer and then die, and all things come to him who waits, but that is not my motto" (p. 73). Jamie will postpone romance "until the last," but not business.

Eventually Jamie does discover a method of mixing business with romance, and thus fusing his obsession of the present with his dream of the future. Or at least he makes the attempt. Jamie steals money, and thus for him it makes sense to steal love. With Rosamond as his "first

assistant in the deed" of thievery (p. 84) Jamie indeed does manage to create, temporarily, a moment of bliss in which time seems to stand still:

The trees were golden under the sky. The sky was soft as a dream and the wind blew like the long rising breath of Summer when she has just fallen asleep. One day Jamie did not ride away with the other, and then the day was night and the woods were the roof over their heads In the radiant noon they found the shade, and ate the grapes from the muscadine vines. The spice-dreams rising from the fallen brown pine needles floated through their heads when they stretched their limbs and slept in the woods. The stream lay still in the golden ravine, the water glowing darkly. (p. 86)

For Jamie, when day becomes night and future dreams become present reality, even nature seems to cooperate. Time seems to stop for the lovers here in one of the few places in the novel when man and nature are in total harmony. But it cannot last.

Jamie feels he cannot fail, in business or in romance; he thinks he finally is in control of both his present and his future: "For he thought he had it all divisioned off into time and place, and that many things were for later and for further away, and that now the world had just begun" (p. 87). But man cannot control time, nor his fate. The cause of Jamie's and Rosamond's separation is already present--"the raiding and the robbing that he did" (p. 85)-- and will require only the passing of time before Rosamond must surrender to her temptation to see his face. After all, as Welty writes, "the heart cannot live without something to sorrow and be curious over" (p. 88).

If Jamie has difficulty reconciling his present and future desires, the one for wealth and the other for love, he also must learn to control and finally change his past life style to a more civilized, more acceptable behavior. Unlike Clement, who must continually buy Salome and Rosamond gifts to assuage his guilt over the past (p. 27), Jamie feels that "Guilt is a burdensome thing to carry about in the heart" and vows he will "never bother with it" (p. 27). In the past Jamie has managed to rationalize his plundering as necessary to his "business": his ethic excuses any action that results in profit for Jamie Lockhart. But Jamie has never condoned wanton murder, an attitude that better allows him to move with the times into a more civilized society. This facet of Jamie's personality is revealed to us by means of a foil--the vicious outlaw Little Harp.

When Little Harp tortures and starts to kill Goat's sister (whom Jamie believes to be "Clement's dim-witted daughter"), Jamie becomes enraged and "jumped with all his might on the Little Harp" (p. 111). He warns Harp to "get out of the country . . . for I have heard of the Harps, that ran about leaving dead bodies over the countryside as thick as flies on the dumpling" (p. 112). But Harp recognizes Jamie's double identity and will not leave, forcing Jamie to pull his dirk, which "not unstained with blood, held back and would not touch the feeble creature."

Welty continues, "Something seemed to speak to Jamie that said, 'This is to be your burden, and so you might as well take it'" (p. 112). Thus begins a strange relationship in which Jamie can never quite seem to shake himself loose from the murderous Harp.

Miss Welty modeled the Harps on the notorious Harpe brothers who terrorized Kentucky and the Natchez Trace area around the turn of the nineteenth century. Judge James Hall explains their behavior in Letters from the West:

Neither avarice, want, nor any of the usual inducements to the commission of crime, seemed to govern their conduct. A savage thirst for blood--a deep rooted malignity against human nature, could alone be discovered in their actions. They murdered every defenceless being who fell in their way without distinction of age, sex, or color.¹⁰

In real life as well as in The Robber Bridegroom the Harps are senselessly brutal and sadistic. Jamie, on the other hand, steals and "rapes" (his rape of Rosamond is more a seduction than a rape)--but he will not tolerate murder except in self-defense. Apparently Welty based Jamie--at least in part--on another Natchez robber, one Samuel Mason who was slain by the younger Harpe. The point here is the care with which Welty draws the contrast between Jamie -Mason and the Harpes, for Mason (like Jamie) "did not desire to kill any man . . . money was all he was after, and . . . if he could get that without taking life, he would certainly shed no blood [emphasis mine]."¹¹

Jamie Lockhart is, in almost every way, a civilized and "modernized" Harp. Or from another perspective, as Slethaug puts it, "Little Harp . . . is symbolically the extreme manifestation of Jamie's robber aspect"12 Harp is Jamie's "burden" of the past that he cannot easily free himself of, the more brutal and chaotic aspect of both Jamie's past and of the past of the lawless frontier. As such, Harp represents the ugly (he is described as "just as ugly as it was possible to be") and violent past that Jamie, and the region, must stifle if the more "civilized" present and future are to prosper. Thus Jamie's claim not to bother with guilt is his conscious attitude but is not entirely accurate: in a sense Little Harp is Jamie's guilt that must be dealt with even though Jamie would prefer to ignore him.

The relationship between Jamie and Harp is a less sophisticated version of the relationship between the young captain and Leggatt in Conrad's The Secret Sharer. In this case the double (which is a part of the "all things are double" theme throughout the novel) represents the lawlessness of Jamie's bandit self, and of the frontier itself, which must be challenged and controlled before Jamie as merchant can emerge. The past must give way to the future and to more "civilized" actions before the region can develop. This Jamie seems to realize, yet he cannot destroy Little Harp (the past) without committing the very act of violence that

the new times forbid. When Jamie discovers Little Harp has drugged, mutilated, and killed an Indian girl at their cabin, for example, he still will not destroy the chaotic past but only seeks to evade it. Jamie tells his gang:

"Roll him (Harp) down the hill and let him lie, though if the wolves don't touch him, he'll be back with me tomorrow [emphasis mine]." (p. 133)

And indeed Harp will be back, for Jamie has yet to learn that although he may be both robber and bridegroom he must nevertheless adapt to the changes brought by time. If Jamie is to survive into the future, he must first discard the ways of the past.

Jamie's true identity crisis--whether he is to remain the bandit of the past or become the merchant of the future--arrives when Harp questions his identity again and threatens to decapitate him. Confusion and hilarity abound because Goat (who has been following Rosamond) has already displayed the head of Big Harp "in Rodney square under the name of Jamie Lockhart" (p. 155). Goat has also collected the reward for Jamie; hence Little Harp cannot hope to collect again, and he declares that Jamie is actually dead. Jamie is upset, for a moment feeling like Rip Van Winkle when he returns after twenty years' sleep only to discover he has lost his identity: Rip exclaims, "God knows . . . I'm not myself--I'm somebody else--that's me yonder--no--that's somebody else."¹³ Jamie is cockier than Rip, but he protests

too vehemently: "But I am Jamie Lockhart, the bandit of the woods! Not a man in the world can say I am not who I am and what I am, and live!" (p. 157). Like Rip, Jamie is a victim of time: both men attempt to cling to outmoded values and "awaken" to a strange new world. Fortunately for him, though, Jamie has been preparing for a change all along.

As Slethaug observes, in addition to being a robber Jamie "shows love and concern for other human beings."¹⁴ Jamie's ethic demands money but it does not, like the cruel Harp's, require blood. Ironically, Harp is partly correct when he observes that "Jamie Lockhart, the bandit of the woods, is dead" (p. 157). Jamie the merchant is about to be born. Jamie's last act as a bandit is to kill Harp, an irony that Miss Welty is clearly aware of; Jamie leaves Harp and the past dead on the ground and starts "off a free man" (p. 158). He then renounces his bandit life, giving away to Goat his reward money (p. 166). When later he discovers his burned cabin and mistakes the Indian girl's bones for Rosamond, Jamie believes he has made the change in vain and runs "wild through the woods" (p. 167). Truly Rosamond is Jamie's future (p. 177) and the chief reason for his metamorphosis, in that for Jamie it is only an "outward transfer" (p. 184), not a fundamental change of values. Perhaps Welty completes the irony of the change in values by implying that in the modern society Jamie finds himself a merchant is merely a civilized bandit.

Rosamond is in many ways the simplest of the four major characters in The Robber Bridegroom. Her responses to time are probably less significant than are the other characters' perceptions of her. Clement, for example, views his daughter as a living symbol of his first wife, Amalie, and of the innocence of the past before troubles attacked his world: Clement reminisces, "Rosamond . . . is so beautiful that she keeps the memory of my first wife alive and evergreen in my heart" (p. 30). Rosamond's very fairy-tale simplicity and innocence serve to emphasize that she cannot long endure the trials of a world gone sour, particularly the greedy jealousy of her stepmother. To Salome, also, Rosamond represents the guileless innocence of a bygone time, and for that reason Salome finds Rosamond hateful and in her way: Salome must corrupt Rosamond's naive response to life before she can gain total control of Clement's thinking. Thus she sends the brutish and mercenary Goat to follow and do any harm possible to Rosamond. To Jamie, Rosamond represents the future, his "dream on earth." She tells Mike Fink that her true message is not "from out of the past" but "from the future" (p. 178). Specifically, she refers to the news that she and Jamie are soon to have twins, but more generally her message to Jamie is that they can, if they are willing to change, adapt with the times and find happiness in the new world.

On the other hand, Rosamond is not merely a combination of Cinderella and Snow-White. Welty quite deliberately complicates Rosamond's motives, and the character that emerges is human and alive even if simple. As Slethaug shows, for example, "The actual robbing and seducing of Rosamond point up the extent to which Rosamond is not so simple and uncomplicated as her father (or the critics) believes." Evidently Rosamond has fantasized about being carried off by a man and has prepared her reactions: she quotes from the ballad of "Young Andrew" and bases most of her words to Jamie on that poem. She asks him, "Were you born of a woman?" (p. 48) and threatens that her seven brothers will avenge her. Her decision to return home naked also comes from the ballad. Slethaug concludes that Rosamond "evidently enjoys the encounter with the robber and relishes the blending of fact and fantasy."¹⁵

Rosamond is the first of a large number of characters in Welty's novels who utilize memory and fantasy to soften and manipulate the present when it becomes threatening. By blending the actual seduction of the present with her memory of "Young Andrew" Rosamond makes a potentially dangerous experience pleasurable. Another way she guards against present danger is with her mother's locket "which kept her from the extravagant harms of the world and only let her in for the little ones" (p. 45). Hence the past, through her mother, becomes a talisman to protect Rosamond from a world she is ill-prepared to face.

Rosamond can accept and function in the present only if its harsher realities are tempered by pleasant memory, fantasy, and exaggerated tales. In addition, she requires that the present be strictly ordered to block out the chaotic and unknown forces which life might bring in the future. For example, when she decides to run away and find her robber, she discovers the bandits' cabin in a state of chaos:

Everything was in the greatest disorder, bags and saddles lay in the middle of the floor, the remains of big fires lay as if suddenly quenched in the fireplaces. (p. 79)

Jugs, knives, boots, dirty plates, and even rats cover the cabin floor, and Rosamond immediately "put on her own dress . . . and rearranged all the furniture in the rooms and then washed all the plates and the big knives" (p. 80). Such orderliness disturbs the robbers, however; when they return they quickly get busy "undoing all of Rosamond's hard work" and start squabbling among themselves. That Jamie is still partly civilized (his dual nature again) is apparent when he commands the robbers to follow "the order of affairs" and divide up the booty (p. 81).

Rosamond stays and keeps house for the robbers, and indeed for a period her highly structured life--cooking, washing the "robbers' shirts til she wore them out," spinning, singing--remains "like fairyland" (p. 82). Hemingway's Nick Adams must fill his nights to combat the

nada of existence; Rosamond has Jamie to fill her nights but she must struggle to order her days. Thus she evolves a sort of ritual, sorting and storing the robbers' booty-- she "even labeled it, with the date if she could keep account of it in the dream of time passing" (p. 87). Katie Rainey in Welty's The Golden Apples announces that "Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run," and Rosamond contends with the identical adversary although, unlike Katie, Rosamond probably could not articulate her problem. Time escapes us, like a dream, no matter how hard we fight to hold onto it. Rosamond has always enjoyed things-- locketts, silk dresses, "gold hairpins from France"--so now she attempts to use things to control time. When she labels the robbers' treasure with dates, Rosamond creates a calendar of trinkets that can no more control or measure time than can Katie Rainey's barrage of words in The Golden Apples. Rosamond has not yet learned, nor will she, that the only way to "beat" time is to cease to fight it.

Rosamond's efforts to control time by counting things finds its most extreme manifestation in Salome. Salome's insatiable craving for wealth and power, and her domination of her mild ("Clement") husband, are based on the greedy wife in "The Fisherman and His Wife." There the wife demands more and more from the Flounder until it sends her back into the "pig-sty by the sea." In The Robber Bridegroom Welty portrays Salome as a waste product of an era in our American

past--the period of exploration and pioneering. She is not so much villain as victim, much like Clement's original family, for as Clement tells Jamie,

"There was a great tug at the whole world, to go down over the edge, and one and all we were changed into pioneers, and our hearts and our own lonely wills may have had nothing to do with it." (p. 21)

According to Clement they are all victims, but whereas he grows weaker and more contemplative, Salome, with "no longer anything but ambition left in her destroyed heart" (p. 24), grows stronger and more forceful.

Clearly Salome has become the kind of person, so notorious in the years of rapid development in our country, who rapes the land for personal satisfaction:

"Next year," said Salome, and she shaded her eagle eye with her eagle claw, and scanned the lands from east to west, "we must cut down more of the forest, and stretch away the fields until we grow twice as much of everything For the land is there for the taking, and I say, if it can be taken, take it." (p. 99)

But as Clement realizes, such action steals from both the present and future. He replies, "To encompass so much as that is greedy. It would take too much of time and the heart's energy" (p. 99). Like the eagle to which Welty compares her, Salome is a predator--stealing life from those around her and from those who will come after, in the future. If her kind were to prevail, Clement's comments about the Indians must reverberate ominously for the pioneers and

their descendants: "The Indians know their time has come They are sure of the future growing smaller always [emphasis mine]" (p. 21). An ever-diminishing future is the prospect Salome faces.

Her need for wealth and power, like that of the wife in "The Fisherman and His Wife," can only increase until it becomes an all-consuming passion. Consequently, Salome must stop time or become, sooner or later, the prey for her own predatory impulses. Just the opposite predicament--the lack of food and wealth--has a similar result, the stopping of time, when in "Flowers for Marjorie" the young husband first throws the clock out the window and then kills his wife. But unlike the young couple there Salome is not motivated by love; instead her unquenchable lust for power drives her to her doom.

Salome demonstrates her isolation and independence from the rest of the cosmos in what Charles Clark calls "one of the most important parts of the novella." The setting is the Indians' camp, "in a worn-away hollow stirred out by the river, the shell of a whirlpool, called the Devil's Punch Bowl" (p. 148). This "natural mandala" clearly has magico-religious implications, and indeed this is where Jamie will kill Harp and gain his freedom as well as where Salome will perform her ritualistic dance with death. The Indians, surrounding Salome with their "human mandala," create a sundial with her as its center.¹⁶ They

demand that she stop talking: "It is the command of the sun itself . . . that you be still" (p. 160). But Salome defies them and the sun: "'No one is to have power over me!' Salome cried, shaking both her fists in the smoky air. 'No man, and none of the elements! I am by myself in the world'" (p. 161). Ahab would "strike the sun if it insulted . . . [him]," and Salome would "punish the sun" if she wished (p. 161); thus she takes her stand beside Ahab, Faustus, Hawthorne's Rappaccini, and a multitude of other characters who care all for wealth and power but none for other people, nature, or God.

Believing she is superior to anything else in the universe, Salome endeavors to stop time as a supreme test of her powers: "And she threw back her head and called, 'Sun! Stand where you are!'" (p. 162). What follows is Welty's humorous Macabré, one in which the ability to stop time is the sole test of the comparative power of a human being and of a god (the sun); as is usually the case in such a contest, the human loses. Time does stop for Salome because she falls over "stone dead" (p. 163), but the sun (and time) runs on. As the Indian chief says, the sun "is the source of our tribe and of every thing, and therefore he does not and will not stand still, but continues forever" (p. 163).

What does Welty intend with this clearly ritualistic yet farcical dance with time and death? It is difficult to

take very seriously such a ritual when the sacrificial victim is described as dancing "naked as a plucked goose" (p. 163). We are tempted to laugh, as if at a silly fairy tale--yet we are also invited to draw rather profound eschatological inferences, as does the humble Clement:

"The savages have only come the sooner to their end; we will come to ours too. Why have I built my house, and added to it? The planter will go after the hunter, and the merchant after the planter, all having their day." (p. 161)

We are asked, I believe, to conclude along with Clement that time and the passing of the generations of man is the source of our most serious discontent.

To examine Clement is to listen to his often circumlocutory speeches, for undeniably he is a man of words and not of action. Although he is a successful planter and therefore must have acted, sometime, about all he does within the time span of the novel is bring gifts for his wife and daughter--and, of course, wrestle with a willow tree (pp. 105-106). But talk, yes. Clement would appear to be the precursor of a long line of talkers in Welty's novels including Edna Earle in The Ponder Heart and Katie Rainey of The Golden Apples. Perhaps there is a significant difference, though, between Clement and his counterparts; for although Miss Welty pokes gentle fun at many of her "talkers," in no other character does she combine such utter silliness and simple wisdom as she does in Clement. Are we to respect Clement or laugh at him? Or perhaps both?

Gordon Slethaug, for instance, feels that Rosamond and Clement are innocents "who undergo a transition from seeing reality in simple terms to viewing it complexly." Slethaug contends that Clement's early "one-sided, melancholic view" of life renders him incapable of action and that Clement is portrayed as a fool by Miss Welty.¹⁷ For example, Clement meditates on the nature of evil while Indians sneak up and carry him away into the wilderness (p. 144); hence Clement's idealism leads to passivity and is directly responsible for his capture. In his naive and foolish encounters with the Indians and the wilderness Clement resembles David Gamut in The Last of the Mohicans, but certainly Clement is not the stock fool as is Gamut. Perhaps Eunice Glenn more closely identifies the real Clement when she tags him "a sort of Don Quixote," for if Clement is a fool he is a grand fool indeed.¹⁸

What Slethaug refers to as Clement's "Jacquesian, melancholic reaction to evil"¹⁹ is more an impasse resulting from a realization of human transience in a rapidly changing world. "Evil" might be the chief symptom of the new world Clement faces--what he calls "the time of cunning" (p. 142)--but Clement comes to understand that good and evil are relative, that all things are double. This he can accept. Clement never comes to accept that time has passed him by, however. He now knows that there will be no time nor place for him in the modern world: he thinks, "my time is over, for cunning is of a world I will have no part in" (p. 142).

As Charles Davis suggests, Clement is the "chief exemplar" of what Alfred Kazin aptly termed the "lost fabulous innocence of our departed frontier."²⁰ Thus, like Jacques, Clement might claim with justification that his "is a melancholy of . . . [his] own," for here only Clement faces the future while still retaining the values of the past.²¹

Certainly other characters in Welty's fiction are the innocent victims of time. In "Clytie," for example, the title character is a slave to her family and their past who finally "finds" her face and identity in a water barrel. In "A Curtain of Green" Mrs. Larkin strives to change the past by changing her memory of her husband's accident; instead she discovers her helplessness "to defy the workings of accident, of life and death." In "Asphodel" Miss Sabina and three old maids try to stop and re-create time by ritualized talk; they fail, however, to maintain "the intoxicating present, still the phenomenon, the golden day."²² No character in the stories or novels so openly agonizes over time's passing as does Clement Musgrove, though.

An "innocent planter" (p. 1) who "had trusted the evil world" (p. 102), Clement Musgrove never ceases throughout the novel to lament the passing of time and the accompanying loss of innocence. For example, he relates his most horrible nightmare to Jamie Lockhart:

"In the dream, whenever I lie down, then it is the past. When I climb to my feet, then it is the present. And I keep up a struggle not to fall." (p. 29)

Perhaps one possible meaning of this dream stems from Clement's fear of falling and being sucked into the past. On the other hand, the past (lying down) suggests a release from life's struggles through death: to Clement such an escape is not altogether unappealing. For Clement, the present is a constant challenge to enlarge the "maze without end" (p. 103) of his plantation and to stay ahead of the merchants who "have us at their mercy" (p. 27). Surely Miss Welty's gentle irony in having Clement's son-in-law become a merchant at the conclusion of The Robber Bridegroom is quite deliberate: that Jamie Lockhart is a merchant merely punctuates Clement's inability to control the changes time brings and emphasizes all mankind's similar frustrations.

Clement's conflict with time and with the greed and duplicity that surround him leads him to question the identity of man, nature, and himself:

"What exactly is this now?" he said, for he too was concerned with the identify of a man, and had to speak, if only to the stones. "What is the place and time?" (p. 141)

He then sees a vision of the passing seasons (pp. 141-142) which symbolizes to him the "way the years went by"--rapidly, without human control or comprehension. Clement seems to

feel, as did Hemingway of his time, that the turn of the nineteenth century is a time worse than other times: he asks, "and what kind of time is this, when all is first given, then stolen away?" (p. 143).

As Ashley Brown observes, The Robber Bridegroom "turns on questions of identity."²³ For Clement, at least, time is the destroyer of human identity in that its passage leads inexorably to death and non-identity: he asks, "What will the seasons be, when we are lost and dead? The dreadful heat and cold--no more than the shooting star" (p. 144). However, he also recognizes that another, perhaps equally disturbing, aspect of time can destroy one's identity--that one live beyond his allotted season until everyone and everything around him has changed. For Clement this means existing in a world where a person's identity is determined by his wealth and by the things he owns; this is significantly different from the values of the earlier frontier when one's identity was essentially what the individual was or did. Concerning the value of time and its effect on the fragmentation of human identity, Hans Meyerhoff concludes:

For the social meaning of time deeply affects the status and value of the self. If the value of time is measured by what is produced and consumed, and if the individual's life is envisaged as nothing but an accumulation of these socially useful moments of time, the status of the self is obviously threatened. Instead of being endowed with intrinsic value, the self is of purely instrumental, technological value, just like any other commodity.²⁴

Jamie Lockhart, who is "a man of action . . . a man of the times, a pioneer and a free agent" (p. 27), can readily adapt to the new world in which identity stems from extrinsic value. Clement cannot adapt; he is and must always remain as he is at the end of the novel when he visits New Orleans, a man out of time and out of place:

The very atmosphere was nothing but aerial spice, the very walls were sugar cane; the very clouds hung as golden as bananas in the sky. But Clement Musgrove was a man who could have walked the streets of Bagdad without sending a second glance overhead at the Magic Carpet, or heard the tambourines of the angels in Paradise without dancing a step, or had his choice of the fruits of the Garden of Eden without making up his mind. For he was an innocent of the wilderness, and a planter of Rodney's Landing, and this was his good. (p. 182)

Admittedly, this passage suggests a Prufrockian smallness and insecurity in Clement ("I do not think that they will sing to me"; "Do I dare/Disturb the universe?"). Admittedly, too, Miss Welty does poke fun at Clement for his inability to get along in the world. For the most part, however, the verities of the past which Clement represents--his innocence, his sincerity, even his timidity in the face of a hostile world--are admirable and are depicted by Welty with nostalgia. For--" . . . this was his good."

Thus, at least in one sense in The Robber Bridegroom Eudora Welty laments the passing of an era in our American and Southern past that would appear to be simpler, more heroic, and more harmonious than our modern age. In that sense she recreates what Mircea Eliade calls "the myth of

the earthly Paradise and its inhabitants in the fabulous times before History." But as Eliade stresses, the earthly Paradise exists only in "the Great Time, the sacred time," or in other words out of time entirely.²⁵ With time comes a loss of innocence and a corresponding nostalgia for what was. What is, or what will be are never satisfactory.

Clement Musgrove is that type of man (and represents that part of all men) who will never be satisfied with his allotted time. Although in some ways the past that Clement dreams about is preferable to the mercantilism of the present and future, Welty clearly does not view early America as an all good, "free and happy state of the exemplary man, surrounded by a maternal and generous Nature."²⁶ Quite to the contrary, the past that Clement and Mike Fink cling to is one of "danger and death," greed and lies--much like the present for Jamie and Rosamond, in fact.²⁷

In this sense Clement is truly a prototypical American. He represents, as Appel notes, "Miss Welty's version of the American Adam" in this her version of the fall of man from innocence.²⁸ As such Clement is the only character in the novel who is trapped between the old, more innocent times, and the new "time of cunning." For the most part the Harps and Mike Fink remain a part of the past and must succumb with that past. Salome dies, for she cannot adapt nor can she sympathize with other people. Jamie and Rosamond rather

easily conform to the new world and thus they move with time. Clement cannot, however, and he alone of all the characters in The Robber Bridegroom apprehends his dilemma, and he alone endures true conflict. For Clement, the fall into time can bring only anguish: he will never accept what he considers to be evil, nor will he ever accept the mutability of life--for these are inimical to his fundamental existence.

If Salome fails to stop time and Clement cannot adapt to the "time of cunning," Jamie and Rosamond, and their progeny, would seem to inherit the earth. But this fairy-tale does not end with "happily ever after," for although Rosamond seems comfortable at the end, she nevertheless yearns for the "house in the wood, and even the rough-and-tumble of their old life" (p. 184). Miss Welty makes no definitive statement about time here; neither does she recommend one character's response over the others. With its blend of fantasy and realistic detail The Robber Bridegroom seems to lift us out of time for awhile--almost as if Welty were amusing her readers before she plunges more deeply into some turbulent questions about time and its effects. The Robber Bridegroom should also take its place as a significant introduction to the variety of responses to time that will be examined in the other novels. In Delta Wedding, the next novel, the characters consistently dwell on the past but also prove remarkably adept at

accommodating the past with the amenities of the present. For a while at least, Shellmound Plantation seems to offer the peace, the beauty, and the escape from time which The Golden Age had previously provided. But only for a while.

CHAPTER III

CHERISHING THE GOLDEN TIME: DELTA WEDDING

Eudora Welty's second novel, Delta Wedding (1945),¹ is in many ways a complete turnabout from The Robber Bridegroom. Whereas her first novel seemed quite easy to read, with its fairy tale plot and characters, Delta Wedding presents a much more complex world: just to enter Shellmound Plantation is to meet a plethora of characters who are difficult to distinguish, and family relationships are even more confusing. Nothing much "happens" in Delta Wedding, but there is a great deal of talk and even more mental dialogue: essentially we are concerned with the various characters' responses to the Fairchild family's efforts to shut out the external world by controlling time.

The novel begins when Laura McRaven rides the Yazoo Delta train back to Shellmound to visit her cousins and to attend cousin Dabney's wedding. During the following week Laura is totally immersed in the special timelessness and beauty of plantation life, and at first she is allured to become part of the Fairchilds' golden world. Gradually, however, Laura (and the reader) learns that all is not so simple and peaceful as it appears; while the Fairchilds have indeed managed to stop time for awhile, they have done so at the risk of losing their own family unity. Ever since

George Fairchild came up from Port Gibson, cleared the land, and built the Grove, over a century of Fairchilds have clung together in their insular little world of the delta region of Mississippi. The family has had ample heroes and its share of tragedy, but the second and third generation Fairchilds, particularly the women, venerate the past beyond reason.

Living at Shellmound are the second generation Aunts Shannon and Mac (who reared their brother James's children after he died in 1890), Battle and Ellen Fairchild, and their brood of eight fourth generation children--including Shelley, Dabney, Roy, and Little Battle.² At the time of the wedding Ellen is expecting a ninth child, to be named Denis after Battle's brother, the family hero who died in World War I. Battle's brother George, who has married an "outsider," Robbie Reid, returns to Shellmound from Memphis without his wife. She cannot tolerate the Fairchilds' self-love, but she is finally reunited with George near the end of the novel. If all of this sounds confusing, it is, and evidently both Welty and her critics find it difficult to keep the Fairchilds in their proper place.³

Nevertheless, once the morass of Fairchild family history is understood, Miss Welty's objective becomes apparent: Delta Wedding is about one family's attempt to cope with the passing of time, particularly about the family's desire to hold on to and cherish the beauty,

harmony, and idealism of the past. The very name "Shellmound" suggests an enclosed world surrounded by a shell or mound to protect its inhabitants from an external enemy. Ironically, in their endeavor to shut out their enemy the Fairchilds ignore the foe within, much as does Prince Prospero in Poe's "The Masque of the Red Death": in both fictional works time is the eventual conqueror.

Unlike The Robber Bridegroom, Delta Wedding has received quite frequent and perceptive critical attention. However, with a few notable exceptions scholars either have not perceived or have eschewed discussing the prominent role that time plays in the novel. Generally, criticism of Delta Wedding falls into three categories: that which emphasizes family relationship and the prevalence or absence of love in the enclosed world of Shellmound Plantation; on a wider scale, that which examines the relationship of the Fairchilds with the rest of the world and hence is essentially concerned with the novel as social criticism; and on an even wider level, that which focuses on the pastoral vision of the work and therefore on its mythic implications.

Exemplary of the first reading are Vande Kieft and Elmo Howell. Vande Kieft, for example, reads the novel as "A Comedy of Love":

Miss Welty lifted a particular place and time out of history in order to learn what might be continuing and permanent in human relations The question perpetually raised in the novel is "where is the love?" in any action or attitude.⁴

Elmo Howell intimates that time, insofar as it affects the family members, is a subordinate matter here, "But the purpose of the novel is to show the importance of family ties and the way one generation impinges on another." Howell admits that "there is a deeper current of antagonism which threatens to break through the smooth surface of life at Shellmound," but still feels that the family relationships maintain "an image of the peace that ensues from the governance of reason and common civility."⁵

Charles Crawford Nash recognizes that this "current of antagonism" could suggest criticism of people like the Fairchilds whose "leisure and special existence rest on the backs of black people." Nash notes that most of the characters here have "erected a shell-like obliviousness to the world's way of marking time," and are therefore caught in their own past.⁶ John Crowe Ransom vehemently condemns the ethic implied in Delta Wedding: "the distribution of the material benefits of this society was wholly arbitrary, even if strictly according to pattern, and the handsome sensibility of the Fairchilds was at the expense of the shabbiest kind of moral obtuseness." Ransom speculates that an uninformed reader might "even conclude that there was no strategic conception behind this novel other than that Miss Welty was nostalgic for a kind of life that already had passed beyond recognition."⁷

Clearly Welty does not blindly accept the ethical code of the Fairchilds, and several critics have adequately defended her against such a charge. Most critics, like Appel, do so by resorting to what might be termed the "mythic" level of the novel: here the simplistic, "pastoral vision" is the characters' view of themselves--not Welty's view.⁸ Even if we must admit that Welty shares the Fairchilds' attitudes, John Edward Hardy argues, her acceptance is "as a technical principle only." Hardy concludes:

For the purposes of that double attitude of pastoral which William Empson has defined, as well as in a more practical sense for people like the Fairchilds, the Negroes are a great convenience. It is at the expense of these "rude swains" that the Fairchilds can be the "gentle swains" (to use Milton's phrase for it) that they are--so that we can at once look down upon the narrow complacency, and envy the imaginative and moral richness, of their country simplicity. But Miss Welty⁹ implicitly recognizes the "convenience" for what it is.

Perhaps the most discerning comments on the "pastoral vision" of Delta Wedding, and on the novel's mythic implications, belong to Richard Gray in The Literature of Memory: Modern Writers of the American South. Gray discovers a major difference between "earlier" Southern writers of the twentieth century (Wolfe, Caldwell, e.g.) and the "later" ones like Porter, Gordon, and Welty, to be their attitude towards the golden age of the Southern past. The earlier writer, according to Gray, "has to concern himself closely with what is, along with what might be, because

he is working on the assumption that the redemption of the hero and the recovery of the Jeffersonian ideal is a genuine and distinct possibility." For the latter writers, however, the "possibility of redeeming the dream, and re-creating it in experience in any recognizable form, is more or less dismissed at the outset." Thus these writers (particularly Welty in Delta Wedding) do not "confuse the myth of the old plantation with the realities of either the past or the present." Indeed, they "accept it as a myth, a once powerful but idealized projection of the regional identity that has forfeited the allegiance of all save a few diehards."¹⁰ With this acceptance comes the ability to examine the myth for ways it can illuminate the present.

All three of these thematic categories in Delta Wedding--that of family relations, that of the social implications of the Shellmound microcosm, and that of the mythic vision--can be shown to crystallize around a concern with time. This concern with time, chiefly with the past but also with the present and future, motivates almost every character in the novel. Yet only Douglas Messerli devotes his total focus to the time themes here, stating, "Perhaps more than any other of Eudora Welty's novels Delta Wedding . . . most clearly presents her preoccupation with time."¹¹ Messerli also realizes, however, that the different generations of Fairchilds have quite divergent responses to time, and that all these responses should be considered in any endeavor to understand the novel:

From George and Ellen, then it is clear that at least some of the Fairchild children (perhaps all) have learned to participate in that awareness of time which connects them with the universe; it is clear that, unlike their father, they will live a life attuned to the present but not exclusively of the present, that they will accept the flux of time and will partake of the legacy of the past, of the future's hope.¹²

With this in mind perhaps our main task might be to determine how the individual Fairchilds "accept the flux of time." In particular we might concentrate on the children, for indeed the younger generation Fairchilds do appear to have a greater awareness of time than do their elders. Several critics have attempted to classify Welty's characters according to various criteria. Ellen McNutt Millsaps, for example, labels them as "traditional" or "modern" depending on their family orientation.¹³ Lucinda MacKethan, on the other hand, formulates four categories--Insiders, Outsiders, Objects, and Seers--dependent on the characters' "ability to 'stand still' and see themselves in proper relation to their worlds."¹⁴ Similarly, John Allen, Zelma Turner Howard, and Vande Kieft divide Welty's characters into groups, but for various reasons none of these are completely adequate here.¹⁵ Instead, perhaps we might take a hint from Welty herself.

In order better to understand a character in any novel, Miss Welty suggests, we must consider him in his relationship to time:

Why does a man do a certain thing now, what in the past has brought him to it, what in the future will come of it, and into what sequence will he set things moving now? ("Some Notes on Time," p. 485)

For the characters in Delta Wedding the "now" is 1923, so we might take this year as a reference point and consider the characters here as they relate to the past, present, and future.

As in The Robber Bridegroom where she re-constructs a specific era (ca. 1800) in the distant Southern past, in Delta Wedding Welty again re-creates a specific place and time of the past. On this occasion, however, the time is not so far removed from the contemporary scene, and Welty apparently chooses the year 1923 with great care:

But in writing about the Delta, I had to pick a year-- and this was quite hard to do--in which all the men could be home and uninvolved. It couldn't be a war year. It couldn't be a year when there was a flood in the Delta because those were the times before the flood control. It had to be a year that would leave my characters all free to have a family story. It meant looking in the almanac . . . to find a year that was uneventful and that would allow me to concentrate on the people without any undue outside influences¹⁶

As Charles Nash says, the effect of choosing the year 1923 is "to isolate the setting from the larger, dynamic society and to lend it the illusion of changelessness and exemption from time."¹⁷ In a sense Welty isolates her characters in space and time so that she can, in Vande Kieft's analogy, more precisely analyze this "control group" in an "experiment."¹⁸ Welty's characters never become the less-than-human

distortions of naturalistic writers--such as those of Stephen Crane's Maggie, for example; instead, Welty almost always portrays her characters sympathetically, as complex human beings doing their best in the face of what she describes as our common "enemy"--Time ("Some Notes on Time," p. 483).

Although the family unit is very important in Delta Wedding, in the final analysis Welty is concerned with what James Neault perceives as "the individual perception of the passing moment, the interaction of a single consciousness with each unique moment of passing time."¹⁹ To accomplish the recording of these individual perceptions, Welty experiments with multiple points of view--significantly, all the recording consciousnesses in the novel are female: Laura McRaven, Robbie Reid Fairchild, Ellen Dabney Fairchild, and her daughters Shelley and Dabney. Essentially, these five provide distinct views of the Fairchild clan and of the clan's attempt, in Charles Davis's words, "to create the illusion of timelessness and agelessness by . . . withdrawing into their own provincial family unit."²⁰ Since the various perceptions of "reality" sometimes conflict rather drastically, the reader must become actively involved in judging their merits--a role similar to that of the reader as a "fifth investigator" of Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom!²¹

The first character we meet in Delta Wedding is Laura McRaven. When Laura rides the Yazoo-Delta train back to

Shellmound on September 10, 1923, at first her mind is overwhelmed with her own existence in time: she is on her first journey alone, her mother had died in the winter, she could not be in cousin Dabney's wedding--but the fact "most persistent in Laura's mind was the most intimate one: that her age was nine" (p. 3). But when the conductor yells "Fairchilds," Laura senses "what an arriver in a land feels--that slow hard pounding in the breast" (p. 5). Thus begins her imminent captivation by the magic Fairchilds' timelessness which will draw her further and further from the time-controlled world of Jackson and from her father.

Laura desperately wants to become part of the Fairchilds' world and to partake of their love, but before she can do so, she must learn the Fairchilds' disregard for time. At Shellmound, although clocks and other vestiges of man's preoccupation with time remain, almost no one takes them very seriously. The Fairchild hall clock, like the Compson clock in The Sound and the Fury, always strikes the "wrong" time.²² This clock is off by six hours, but no one cares and Welty punctuates the lack of concern with casual remarks like "as the clock was striking the dot of something" (p. 198). Old Aunt Shannon, who speaks to the dead Fairchild ancestors as if they were alive and well, wears a "watch crusted with diamonds . . . and she would make the children tell her the time by it, right or wrong" (p. 67). At one point Shelley crawls under the house

searching for the lost clock key, but no mention is made of her finding it (p. 29). And even Ellen, once she moves into Shellmound, adopts the family lackadaisical impulse. Once, for instance, after getting her "times mixed up again," she jokes with Shelley and Aunt Tempe, "I was hoping we'd get somebody in the family could keep track of time" (p. 109). Later, the day after the wedding and reception, Aunt Mac and Shelley drive to town not realizing it is Sunday. Ellen speaks for the Fairchild family when she exclaims, "We have every one lost track of the day of the week" (p. 228).

But Laura comes from a world where "man's obsessive desire to measure time" often prevents him from discovering the present moment.²³ Since Laura's mother had married an outsider from Jackson, these parents demonstrate the differences between the Fairchild conception of time and the outside world's. The McRavens had just returned from a summer vacation, Laura recalls:

Her mother, delighting in the threat of storm, went about opening the windows and on the landing leaning out on her hand as though she were all alone or nothing distracted her from the world outside. Her father was at the hall clock, standing with his driving cap and his goggles still on, reaching up to wind it. "I always like to know what time it is." She listened for her mother's familiar laugh at these words . . . (p. 231).

Annie Laurie Fairchild McRaven laughs, of course, because as a Fairchild she comprehends the futility of trying to capture and measure time. While her husband winds the clock,

Annie proceeds to make Laura a stocking doll--a supreme gift of love because created in the "excitement" of the moment right before the storm breaks (p. 232). For Laura's mother, this time before the storm is the "most inconvenient time" (p. 231); nevertheless, she continues because she realizes that the present time is always the appropriate time for action and love.

Fortunately or unfortunately, although Laura still carries the doll, Marmion, with her around Shellmound, the lesson about time the doll represents is slow in coming. As she arrives at the Fairchilds' home, Laura has a series of memories which demonstrate that she clearly has not yet dissociated the present from the past (pp. 7-10). To become like the Fairchilds she must, however:

They were never too busy for anything; they were generously and almost seriously of the moment; the past (even Laura's arrival today was past now) was a private, dull matter that would be forgotten except by aunts. (p. 15)

But the present is not all it would appear, either. Laura's insight is amazing for a nine year old: whereas the Fairchilds maintain a facade of changelessness, she perceives that actually "they changed every moment." Because of their "sparkle of motion" the Fairchilds create a rush of beautiful, alluring impressions that remind Laura of a "great bowerlike cage full of tropical birds her father had shown her in a zoo in a city" To Laura the

spectacle was "like a rainbow, while it was the very thing that broke your heart, for the birds that flew were caged all the time and could not fly out" (p. 15).

Laura's initial reaction--that the Fairchilds are imprisoned within the very present moment and thus not to be emulated--does not last for long; instead she is charmed by what Messerli calls this "insular Fairchild love, this compulsion to act, this uncontrollable whirl of quick and instant fluctuations which in its obliviousness to time seems to exclude her" ²⁴ The past, the present, the exciting future ahead, Laura is confused and frightened; little wonder then that she vomits just as she starts through the door at Shellmound (p. 10).

The Fairchild "family" which Laura meets when she enters the house is not a group of people with uniform attitudes towards time. Indeed, all the adult Fairchilds look alike (p. 14) and share a common reverence for the familial past, but Elmo Howell is perhaps exaggerating when he maintains that "Interest in the individual . . . is subordinate to interest in the family." ²⁵ Many of the Fairchilds are quite complex and vary their actions when they move from one environment to another. Aunt Tempe (whose name suggests "time"), ²⁶ for example, seems to function quite effectively in the mundane atmosphere of Memphis where her husband Pinck Summers works and at Shellmound where she practically takes over all the wedding

preparations. But Tempe appears at other times to be obsessed with the past. From the time she arrives at Shellmound, "keeping time" to the piano music (p. 97), Tempe lavishes praise on the dead Denis whose spirit she senses in the "fields and woods" around the house (p. 116). She and most of the other Fairchilds worship Denis as the "one who looked like a Greek god, Denis who squandered away his life loving people too much . . . Denis that was ahead of his time . . ." (p. 116). For them, only the values incarnated in Denis can shield the fragile Fairchild solidarity from encroachment by outsiders like Robbie Reid, Troy Flavin, and Tempe's own son-in-law, the "Yankee" Buchanan (p. 187).

Similarly, the other elder Fairchilds dwell on the familial past, but Welty carefully sketches each personality so that individual differences emerge. The Great Aunts Shannon and Mac, who reared Battle, Tempe, George, and the other third generation Fairchilds after their father James was killed in a duel "thirty-three years ago" (p. 119), are both obsessed with consanguinity and with the past in general. Aunt Shannon continually speaks to her dead "soldier brothers" and even, in one of the funnier scenes in the novel, flirts with Mac's dead husband, Ducan Laws (p. 119). Aunt Mac, on the other hand, while clearly yearning for the past, chastens her sister: "Shannon, be ashamed of yourself for getting your time so mixed up" (p. 119). Aunt Mac still functions.

quite effectively in the present and is prepared to bring up Battle's children should the need arise (p. 67). That Aunts Shannon and Mac have fostered a fondness for the past in the other inhabitants at Shellmound is evidenced by the prominent display of Great Aunt Mashula's paintings and by the other heirlooms that haunt the mansion. It is at the Grove, though, that the Aunts Jim Allen and Primrose are the curators of a veritable family museum.

"Furnished identically [as] in Mashula Hine's day," the Grove is where "Grandmother's and Great-Grandmother's cherished things were so carefully kept" (p. 40). Here is the house that Great Great Grandfather George Fairchild built for his pioneering wife Mary Shannon and for the following generations. At the Grove Aunt Mashula's ghost still roams (p. 45), and the primary duty of Jim Allen is to make certain "all the ghosts [are] kept straight" (p. 45). Her sister, Primrose, has the even heavier task of cataloguing all the family issue, for it makes "her nervous for people not to keep their kinfolks and their tragedies straight." Indeed, the roll call of Fairchilds in Heaven would probably confuse St. Peter because there are four named Battle and four George, three named Shannon, three Denis--as well as other assorted duplications. Charles Davis concludes:

Such careful attention to naming and thereby to preserving their own provincial world would seem to indicate not only the pride with which the Fairchilds view their own private past, but also the fierce desperation with which they try to perpetuate it and keep it untainted.²⁷

The Grove, "a dove-gray box with its deep porch turned to the river breeze" (p. 37), offers an "eternally cool" and quiet contrast to the hot, noisy activity at Shellmound. Here at the Grove, where even one of the bird dogs is named Lethe (p. 38), the temptation for anyone is to come in and forget what Keats called "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" of the present. But for the younger generation, particularly the highly impressionable Laura, the alternative represented by Battle's family at Shellmound is even more seductive. The intense activity there, what John Edward Hardy calls the Fairchilds' "of the moment" quality, gives them the appearance of supreme satisfaction.²⁸ As Douglas Messerli concludes, the Fairchilds "are a people caught up in present action to such a degree that the flux of time seems to stand still."²⁹ Observing the Fairchilds dancing and drinking at the wedding reception, Ellen thinks: "their legend was happiness. 'The Fairchilds are the happiest people!' They themselves repeated it to each other" (p. 222). Whether this happiness is only superficial as Ellen hints, or whether as Hardy claims it is genuine, "the result of their [the Fairchilds'] feeling supremely confident of their footing in the past"--is impossible for Laura and the younger Fairchilds to judge.³⁰

Nevertheless, the fundamental conflict which divides the attention of Laura, Shelley, and Dabney remains whether to stay with the provincial, apparently timeless world of

Shellmound or to slip away to the rapidly changing and often chaotic external world. Laura wants to join the Fairchilds, but since she is still basically an outsider from the time-dominated world of Jackson she cannot choose their lifestyle. They must choose her, conditionally, much like they accepted Ellen as Battle's wife years earlier. Aunt Tempe reminds us that an outsider's initiation into Shellmound is difficult and tentative:

Not that Ellen hadn't changed in recent years. That shy, big-eyed little thing Battle had brought back with him from school dying laughing at her persistence in her own reticent ways . . . Ellen had come far, had yielded to much, for a Virginian, but still now a crowd, a roomfull of people, was not her natural habitat, a plantation was not her true home (p. 190).

The Fairchilds are incapable of totally accepting anyone, even Ellen, who is not family and who does not share their obliviousness to the vicissitudes of time. Laura clearly feels outside the family circle of Fairchilds: "at hide-and-seek a trick could be played on Laura, for she was still outside" (p. 74). Later when injured, Laura is distressed at the Fairchilds' "unawareness of her" and feels "shorn of pleasure in her cousins and angry in not having known that this was how the Fairchilds wanted things" (p. 74). Gradually, though, Laura begins to question the happiness and timelessness of Shellmound; she grows convinced that the Fairchilds were "compelled--their favorite word" (p. 15). She also comes to recognize the contrast between

"the dead young Fairchilds, ruined people" of the past, and the aliveness and "penetration" of Uncle George (p. 56). Not surprisingly, now, in her child-like enthusiasm Laura sees George as her savior and the other Fairchilds as her enemies: "She stored love for Uncle George fiercely in her heart, she wished Shellmound would burn down and she could run in and rescue him . . ." (p. 76). For Laura, Uncle George combines the best of the Fairchilds, their heroic past, and an ability to live in the present world outside of Shellmound. Thus she wants to buy him a present instead of Dabney; her hopes are encouraged when she returns his pipe and he suggests their relationship will continue into the future:

She was filled with happiness. "Is there any other thing I could give you after this, for a present?" she asked finally.

Instead of saying "No" he said gently, "Thanks, I'll let you know, Laura." (p. 209)

Perhaps the most significant scene in the novel, and the most enigmatic, comes when Roy, age eight, invites Laura to row in the bayou. Welty describes the trip almost as if it were to another world, one virtually motionless in space and time:

The bayou was narrow and low and soon the water's edge was full of cypress trees. They went in heavy shade. There were now and then muscadines hanging in the air like little juicy balls strung over the trees beside the water . . . and imperceptibly they came out into the river. The water looked like the floor of the woods that could be walked on. (p. 172)

Finally Roy and Laura dock at Marmion, the home that time has passed by. Everything about Marmion implies time. It has been uninhabited since its completion in 1890 when James and Laura Allen Fairchild died, for it was too "heart breaking" for the others to stay (p. 120). Annie Laurie (Laura's mother) had given Marmion to Denis and thus it passed to Maureen, Laura's nine year old cousin, for whom time had stopped when she was dropped on her head by her mother (p. 61). Now, however, Dabney and Troy plan to move into Marmion and to start time moving again there. Inside the imposing structure, Roy and Laura stand transfixed by the "tower" which rises before them:

two stairs, wooden spirals that went up barely touching at wavery rims, little galleries on two levels, and winding into the depths of light. (p. 174)

Between the stairs hangs a magnificent chandelier, looking "as though a great thing had sometime happened here." As Roy and Laura gaze at the chandelier, the "whole seemed to sway, to almost start in the sight . . . like a pendulum that would swing in a clock but no one starts it" (p. 175). The clock-work structure of Marmion seems to suggest the plight of the Fairchild family; both Marmion and the Fairchilds have stopped time in the distant past, and both require someone to "start" them moving again. Of course time has moved, both for the house and for the Fairchilds, but Welty's symbolism here demonstrates the accuracy of her

vision: to attempt to stop time is to become out of step with the external world, to become dilapidated, as is Marmion. Nevertheless, there is still much of great beauty and value in the old mansion, just as there is much to be cherished in the verities to which the Fairchilds cling.

Perhaps less perplexing than the clock-work structure of Marmion is the old black woman who hovers over her sack there, Aunt Studney. Douglas Messerli is probably right in praising what he calls the "Pandora metaphor" here,³¹ for although Welty is perhaps too explicit in describing the sack--"Aunt Studney was not on the lookout for things to put in, but was watching to keep things from getting out" (p. 177)--the episode at Marmion remains the most richly suggestive in Delta Wedding. As Pandora, Aunt Studney is the reclusive first woman who understands the secrets of time and creation (Roy thinks her sack is "where Mamma gets all her babies"); but who, when asked any question about her sack or about life, answers only the cryptic "Ain't studyin' you" (p. 173). Possibly Marmion represents a world before time, a world on which Pandora - Studney has yet to release her "multitude of plagues for hapless man."³²

Indeed, it is from the top of the Marmion tower (perhaps for the moment outside of time itself) that Roy has a unifying vision of "the whole creation" (p. 176). From that vantage point Roy can see all around the plantation, and he becomes ecstatic:

"Troy! Troy! Look where I am!" Roy was crying from the top of the house. "I see Troy! I see the Grove--I see Aunt Primrose, back in her flowers! I see Papa!" (p. 176)

Roy and Laura, who seem to share the experience, have an epiphany here, and as Messerli points out, their vision unites the "three modalities of time." Roy sees Troy, who represents the outside world and the future; Aunt Primrose, who remains in the past; and his father, Battle, who of all the Fairchilds is perhaps the most oriented to present time. Messerli concludes:

When the family, self, and the outside world come together with the past, present and future, a vision occurs which transcends all, which presents the individual's connection with all the universe in all of time.³³

Immediately after his vision Roy is stung by a bee. Welty asks from where does the bee come--"out of the piano? Out of Aunt Studney's sack?" Again the symbolism is perhaps too explicit, for the bees represent the "escaped evils of the world."³⁴ Once Roy and Laura recognize the continuity of all time, it seems, they must also accept the unpredictability and pain of the future. This, of course, is precisely what the older Fairchilds have not been able to do. Time is like the chandelier--pendulum at Marmion; it would move for the Fairchilds "but no one starts it." Instead, they struggle valiantly--yet futilely--to keep time still and to remain in the past or to live only for the moment.

Until now Laura, too, has been preoccupied with the past, particularly with memories of her mother, and has been attracted to the moment-by-moment existence at Shellmound. Part of her initiation into the continuity of time demands the acceptance of the pains of the future, but just as important is the acknowledgment that the past must be superseded. After their "vision," Laura and Roy discover the jewel that Ellen searches for throughout the novel--from out of the past, the jewel "might have been there a hundred years or a day" (p. 177). Laura seizes it, intending to deliver it to Ellen. Although the events of the past might be a "treasure" (p. 177) to remember, though, Welty suggests they are not always necessary to build a future on, and in fact must often be sacrificed if life is to progress. When Laura is "baptized" in the Yazoo, the river which, as Hardy perceives, "measures the time or the timelessness of the Fairchild world," she emerges without the pin and without the Fairchild dependence on the past.³⁵

Clearly Welty does not suggest that anyone--even the Fairchilds--must totally reject the past, for it in truth can be a "treasure" and therefore add value to the present and future. What she does insinuate is that the past, present, and future must each contribute equally to the continuity of time. When Laura is finally invited to join the Fairchild island which exists on the periphery of flowing time, she is eager: "Oh, I want to! I want to stay!"

Stepping outside of time always sounds enticing and must be especially alluring to a motherless nine year old. But Laura no longer is the naive little girl "who felt like a little country cousin when she arrived" (p. 54). Deep down, "Laura felt that in the end she would go--go from all this, go back to her father." Ironically, the once innocent nine year old now feels superior and protective towards the magnificent Fairchilds. Laura thinks, "She would hold that secret [that she will leave the Fairchilds], and kiss Uncle Battle now" (p. 237). In the very special sense that she understands the Fairchilds' problems with time, Laura is perhaps more mature than the other Fairchild girls. Shelley, for example, has her own special adolescent problems.

Shelley, at eighteen the oldest and most sensitive of Battle's and Ellen's children, is also the most "afraid of life, life itself, afraid for life . . ." (p. 197). Ironically, she who most fears the future--"Only the things had not happened to her yet. They would happen. Indeed, she might not be happy either, wholly, and she would live in waiting, sometimes in terror" (p. 220)--is also the Fairchild who most understands the present. She does perceive the Fairchild isolation:

. . . but all together we have a wall, we are self-sufficient against the people that came up knocking, we are solid to the outside. Does the world suspect? That we are all very private people? I think one by one we're all more lonely than private and more lonely than self-sufficient. (p. 84)

Unlike the older generation Fairchilds, Shelley is not obsessed with the past; her room is littered with the paraphernalia of her recent life (pp. 83-84). Neither does she glorify the incident at the train trestle--where George "saves" the vulnerable Maureen--as do the other Fairchilds (p. 87). What Shelley does do is block out the past and the future and live one day at a time. Her memory of the scene at the trestle, for example, persists as a tableau of present images: she can "see it again and again, like a painting in a schoolroom" (p. 87). By creating an illusion of stasis, Shelley hopes to deny the interrelationships of past, present, and future--and hence to avoid pain in the future. Unfortunately, since the future may often bring pain, to fear the future is to fear life itself; the result is paralysis in the present which can only vitiate her taste for later experiences--and the cycle goes round and round. Shelley's meditations on the fickleness of life express sincere, perhaps even legitimate complaints, but they remind us of Clement Musgrove's in The Robber Bridegroom in their silly fretfulness:

Life was too easy--too easily holy, too easily not. It could change in a moment. Life was not ever inviolate Dabney at the moment cutting a lemon for the aunts' tea brought the tears to Shelley's eyes; could the lemon feel the knife? Perhaps it suffered; not the vague vegetable pain lost in the generality of the pain of the world, but the pain of the very moment. (p. 193)

When Shelley leaves to bring back Troy, she inadvertently comes upon the overseer, with gun in hand, trying to settle a dispute between several Negro field hands. She has a revelation quite different from Laura's; Shelley, characteristically, wants to stop the future from happening:

As though the sky had opened and shown her, she could see the reason why Dabney's wedding should be prevented. Nobody could marry a man with blood on his door But even as she saw the reason, Shelley knew it would not avail . . . for what was going to happen was going to happen. (p. 196)

Her realization--that neither she nor anyone else can restrain the future from becoming the present even if pain is the result--causes Shelley to return home and, after the rehearsal, turn out the light and fall on her bed, "sickeningly afraid of life" (p. 197).

Of all the Fairchild children Dabney most clearly wants to break from the past and welcome the future which Shelley fears. That she seeks to marry an outsider, Troy Flavin, who "came in from the side door, indeed like somebody walking in from the fields" (p. 212), deliberately flouts the cherished honor and isolation of the Fairchilds. More important, Dabney's actions and her self-perceptions clearly align her with Uncle George who had already ventured outside of the traditional family boundaries to marry Robbie Reid. Thus, like Laura, Dabney chooses George as an inspiration and model for her behavior.

Uncle George is the youngest of Battle's and Tempe's generation, but he obviously is quite different from them in his responses to time and to the outside world. Dabney early recognizes in him a soul-mate, particularly at those times when she "was not so sure she was a Fairchild--sometimes she did not care, that was it" (p. 32). She knows that "It was actually Uncle George who had shown her that there was another way to be--something else." To Dabney Uncle George was the "very heart of the family," yet "he was different, somehow" (p. 33). Uncle George is often contrasted to the dead Denis, the "one who looked like a Greek God" and who "was cut off before his time" (p. 116). Evidently the older generation Fairchilds choose Denis as their hero because he is dead: Denis's past becomes a mythic presence which exists beyond time, unchanging and untainted by the present. George, on the other hand, is human, alive, and susceptible to the effects of passing time, a quality which is unbearable to the older Fairchilds because it reminds them of their own mortality. For the younger Fairchilds like Dabney, and also for Ellen, it is this very worldly mutability which makes George their idol. Ellen, for example, contrasts George and Denis:

How in his family's eyes George could lie like a fallen tower as easily as he could be raised to extravagant heights! Now if he was fallen it was because of his ordinary wife, but once it had been because he gave away the Grove, and before that something else. The slightest pressure of his actions would modify the wonder, lower or raise it. Whereas even the daily presence of Maureen and the shadowy nearness of Virgie Lee had never taken anything away from the pure, unvarying glory of Denis. (p. 63)

Dabney, then, in her struggle to find herself, takes George as her model of the way to escape Shellmound and the past. When she visits Aunt Jim Allen and Aunt Primrose at the Grove, Dabney becomes sick, much like Laura had done when she had returned to Shellmound. The old Aunts can blame Dabney's illness on the pre-wedding excitement, and India can suggest "Dabney's been eating green apples" (p. 42); nevertheless, Dabney recognizes her problems as an identity crisis and sees the immediate cause as the past which hangs so heavily at the Grove and threatens to cut off her future: "'Why India! I feel perfect!'" laughed Dabney, feeling them all looking at her. And all the little parlor things she had a moment ago cherished she suddenly wanted to break" (p. 42). Although she has reservations about accepting a gift from the Aunts, Dabney finally does take the night light and thus attempts to carry the traditions, beauty, and stasis of the past with her on her journey into the future. Just as Laura had to lose the "treasure" of the past before she was able to welcome the future with "both arms held out to the radiant night" (p. 247), so Dabney does, too. As she runs into the house to see Troy, her future, and as Uncle George (her model for behavior in the future) watches, Dabney drops and leaves the past, evidently without any self-incriminations:

But they heard it--running, she dropped the little night night [sic], and it broke and its pieces scattered. They heard that but no cry at all--only the opening and closing of the screen door as she went inside. (p. 53)

If breaking the night light symbolizes Dabney's unconscious desire to break with the past, the reasons for her break are made more explicit when she rides her red filly to visit her and Troy's future home, Marmion. Whereas Marmion was instrumental in Laura's initiation chiefly because it was here that events caught her up while she remained essentially passive, this is not the case with Dabney. The older girl actively seeks an encounter which will bring her a new self-awareness, and therefore she, like Laura earlier, is drawn to the time-suspended world at Marmion and to the Yazoo river. The Yazoo, or "River of Death" (p. 194), also functions archetypally as the "flowing of time into eternity" throughout Delta Wedding.³⁶ In contrast with the slow time at Marmion, for example, the Yazoo "always seemed swift here, though it was the same river that passed through Fairchilds . . . and passed the Grove" (p. 121). Laura is "baptized" here and learns to put aside the treasures of the past, and here Dabney stares into the swirling, murky water in a desperate search for any answer to guide her into the future.

Dabney's conflict centers around the honor of the past and on how anyone could allow this honor to surpass life itself in significance. Dabney's grandfather had died in a duel--over honor and cotton--both of which epitomize the empty relics of the past to Dabney. For her only the present and future have meaning:

The eagerness with which she was now going to Marmion, entering her real life there with Troy, told her enough--all the cotton in the world was not worth one moment of life. It made her know that nothing could ever defy her enough to make her leave it. How sweet life was, and how well she could hold it, pluck it, eat it. (p. 121)

Yet the decision for Dabney is not easy, for to reject the past is in essence to reject her family and to accept Troy; thus Dabney vacillates for minutes. "I will never give up anything!" she thinks; "Papa never gave up anything" (p. 122).

This is perhaps the final irony that Dabney and Welty have to offer, for paradoxically Dabney's arguments against the past and her family are the direct result of the Fairchilds' family strengths: their pride in the heroic family past, their stubborn refusal to allow that past to be tainted by a less-than-ideal present, their zeal in "never giving up anything" but instead to "hold it, pluck it" Just as Dabney is "Proud and outraged together for the pampering ways of the Fairchilds [emphasis mine]" (p. 122), many voices speak within her. On the one hand, she feels rightly proud and secure that she is a Fairchild, part of a family that at least partially has managed to isolate itself in space and time; on the other hand, she knows that the external world and the future cannot be held back forever, and she feels outraged that her family has sheltered her in such an artificial existence. Dabney's inner turmoil must be much like the whirlpool in the Yazoo which she now leans dangerously over: the swirl of the conflicting waters of the past, the present, and the future.

As a family the Fairchilds appear to present a solid wall of uniform resistance to the advances of time. Much of the criticism of Delta Wedding, and of Eudora Welty's artistic vision, results from a failure to realize that this resistance only appears to be a total accord of the family members. Actually, each individual Fairchild fights his own battle with time, and in his own way. The older Aunts, for example, tend to stop time in the heroic Fairchild past, an era when honor and family pride were the important values. By stopping time in the past these Fairchilds automatically protect their honor and family pride from the encroachments of the present and future. Similarly, their model of behavior, the dead Denis, is elevated to the status of a mythical and unchanging champion beyond the grasp of time. Even within this group, however, individual differences exist; Aunt Mac, for example, functions quite effectively in the present.

The third generation Fairchilds--including Aunt Tempe, Annie Laurie, Battle, George, Aunts Jim Allen and Primrose--reflect a wider variety of responses to time. Of this group clearly the Aunts Jim Allen and Primrose, in their seclusion at the quiet family museum called The Grove, are the most obsessed with the past. Others like Aunt Tempe manage to function well in the present, but in their devotion to Denis they demonstrate their true allegiance to a world gone by. Like Tempe, Battle takes a spouse from outside the

traditional Fairchild domain; consequently, he too is pulled in several directions--towards the past and isolation and towards the present and contact with the outside world. Of the living adult Fairchilds, Battle is perhaps the least clearly defined by Welty: that he is at least as concerned with the present at Shellmound as are his children and wife is probably a fair estimate. That he fosters, or at least allows, the considerable rebellion of his children and the younger Fairchilds against his values and against those of the older family members is perhaps the best indication of his tolerance. Of the third generation, however, indeed of all the Fairchilds, Uncle George is the only one who can synthesize a viable strategy against time.

George stands alone as the proponent for a time strategy that Welty seems to espouse. Various parts of his response to time are discovered during the course of the novel, mainly by the fourth generation Fairchilds: by Laura, who learns that the "treasure" of the past must be found, then lost again; by Shelley, who like George is extremely sensitive to the needs of others but who fears the future; and by Dabney, who is all too willing to "pluck" the future even if it means rebelling totally against the values of the past. Only George seems to combine the best of the past (the love for others, honor, family pride) with an almost selfless unconcern for the future; as he tells Robbie, "Something is always coming, you know that." And then, "I

don't think it matters so much in the world what" (p. 187). Thus only George among the Fairchilds recognizes that the past, present, and future are continuous, not discrete entities, and must function harmoniously.

Near the conclusion of Delta Wedding, when the Fairchilds picnic near Marmion, the hustle of the wedding is over and time again seems to drag in this, the most nearly perfect of worlds. All the generations of Fairchilds are in complete harmony, and neither the harsh reality of rats at The Grove nor the impending probability of Uncle George's introducing the future (fruit trees, melons, cattle) into Shellmound can disturb their tranquility. For the Fairchilds know that they will endure, that time cannot harm them. Perhaps they are right to believe they will persist, not blind after all. Even Robbie, in general antithetical to everything the Fairchilds represent, thinks:

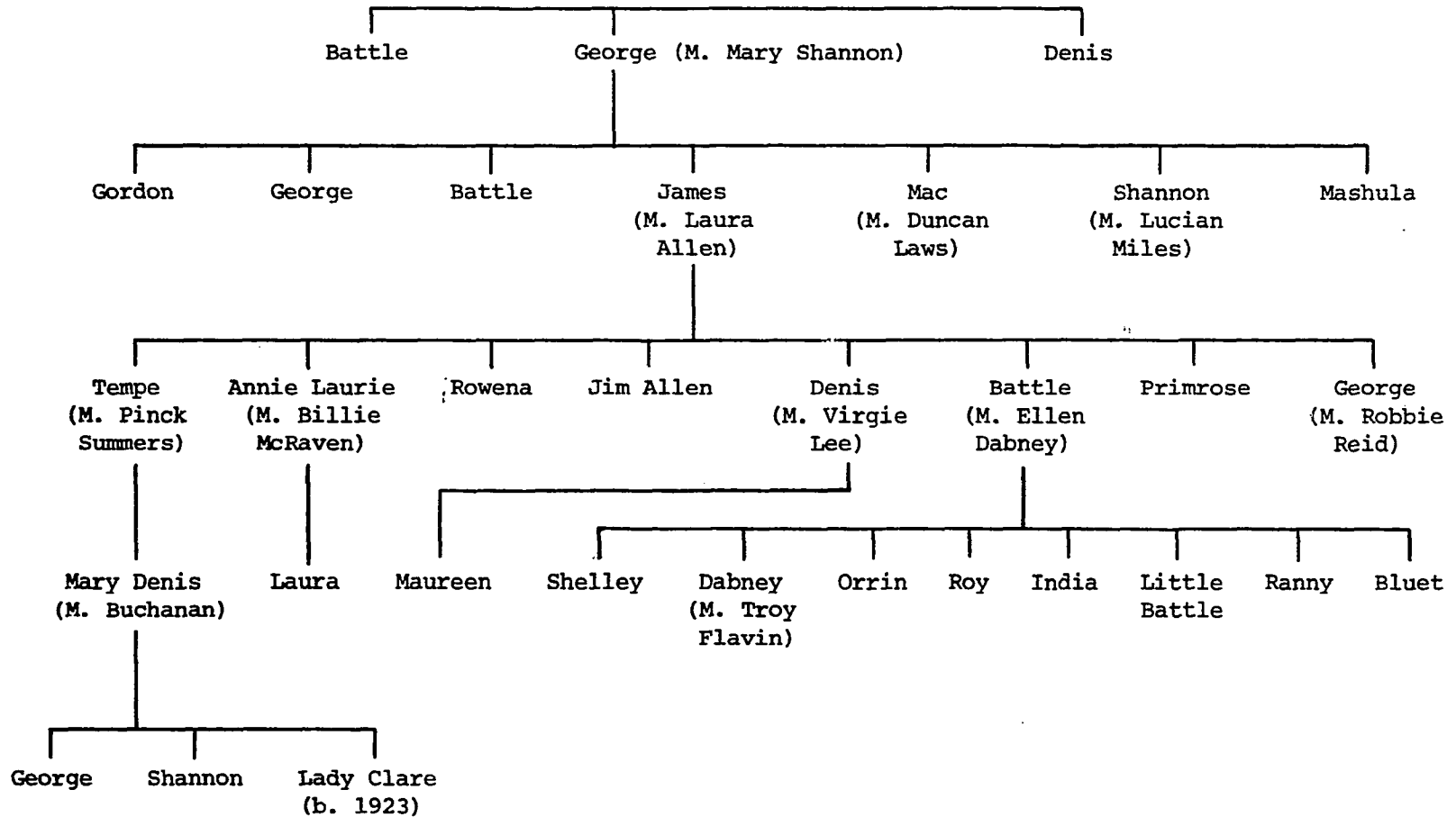
Things almost never happened, almost never could be, for one time only! They went back again . . . started over . . . (p. 244).

In "A Prayer for My Daughter" William Bulter Yeats, after contrasting the disorder of the contemporary world of 1919 with the order he would have for his new-born child, asks, "How but in custom and in ceremony/Are innocence and beauty born?"³⁷ I feel this question is also at the center of Delta Wedding and its world of 1923. Welty chooses a setting that is as isolated in location and in time as

possible in a modern, industrialized America so that her characters can have some control over their fates; mainly they seek control by resorting to the customs and ceremony of the past--the methods that have worked previously. The ordering methods of the past are less and less effective in the contemporary scene, however, so the Fairchilds are frequently in conflict with their environment.

Clearly Miss Welty is constantly aware of the external, impinging world, even if the Fairchilds are not. The Yellow Dog, which threatens the Fairchilds on the trestle and which finally kills the young girl of the bayou woods, is a daily reminder of how the other, mechanized world does affect the Fairchilds even if they attempt to laugh it away; the projected changes in lifestyle which George discusses near the end of the novel reiterate that the future will inevitably come to Shellmound. As Lewis Simpson suggests in The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature, and as Welty would seem to agree, the effort "to arrest the dehumanization considered to be inherent in the industrial-technological process" will be largely futile.³⁸ The Fairchilds do manage to defer the inroads of the external world for a time and to postpone the future by retreating to the customs and ceremony of a world already past, the Southern plantation society. Whatever the future brings, Delta Wedding insists, there will always be "foolish" people like the Fairchilds who refuse to surrender the customs of the past; and as long as these people survive, so will innocence and beauty.

TABLE 1. GENEALOGY OF THE FAIRCHILD FAMILY



CHAPTER IV

TIME WARPS IN THE GOLDEN APPLES

Eudora Welty's third long work, The Golden Apples (1947)¹ is not a novel in the traditional sense but instead consists of seven inter-related stories, somewhat in the manner of Sherwood Anderson's Winesburg, Ohio. Welty recalls the genesis of The Golden Apples in her interview with Charles Bunting:

. . . I didn't begin it as a book of connected stories. I only realized the stories were connected after I was about halfway through the book. Some of the people I invented turned out to be not new characters but the same ones come upon at other times in their lives. Quite suddenly I realized I was writing about the same people.²

Although not consciously connected at first, then, these stories evolved into a book that captured the various characters of Morgana, Mississippi, at different "times in their lives." Probably more than any other Welty novel, The Golden Apples, which the author describes as "in a way . . . closest to my heart of all my books,"³ focuses on time.

The Golden Apples does not have a central character in the same way that most novels do, but the critical consensus indicates that Virgie Rainey is the most important character here. In fact, while several critics write quite

perceptively about the time theme in The Golden Apples, they almost always isolate those sections of the novel in which Virgie Rainey prevails--namely "June Recital" and "The Wanderers." John A. Allen and Lucinda MacKethan are typical of this tendency: both understand that Virgie's struggle with time is in some way epitomized by a picture of Perseus slaying the Medusa which hangs in the studio of Miss Eckhart, Virgie's piano teacher. According to Allen, Virgie is "a type of the true hero" in that she possesses the ability to see "things in their time, like hearing them" (p. 275). Virgie comes to realize that Perseus alone is not heroic; the heroic act, Perseus slaying the Medusa, requires a composite hero--the "identification of the hero with the victim."⁴ In other words, Virgie Rainey understands from studying the picture that life will bring both love and "separateness" (p. 275), both successes and failures. In this sense Virgie is only one of several characters in Welty's novels, including Clement Musgrove of The Robber Bridegroom, George Fairchild of Delta Wedding, Miss Julia Mortimer of Losing Battles, and Laurel McKelva of The Optimist's Daughter, who manage to recognize the doubleness of experience. Virgie, however, is more successful than most of these characters in moving beyond the "separateness" to an acceptance of whatever the future might bring. MacKethan also explains Virgie's special insights into "humanity" as resulting from her ability to see "things in their time, like hearing them" (p. 275):

For Morgana's proper citizens, things find acceptable existence only when they are seen in their place; place is used to fix things in a way that ignores time. Thus these people's vision of life lacks continuity; they are left open to an unrelieved "horror" of separateness. Virgie sees separate people and their places wrapped together in a "constellation" held together by the common bond that all things share through their existence in time: "Every time Perseus struck off the Medusa's head, there was the beat of time, and the melody. Endless the Medusa, and Perseus endless" (p. 276).⁵

If we grant that Virgie Rainey's skirmishes with time are crucial in understanding The Golden Apples, and certainly they are, we must nevertheless consider the other characters in the novel, also. Most critical commentaries on the novel ignore or only superficially treat the other characters with regard to time, but each of these "minor" characters fights a battle, also. Virgie's mother Katie, for example, begins the novel with her incessant chatter about the MacLains, her Morgana neighbors, and in a sense, Katie ends the novel with her death and funeral. In between, approximately forty years elapse and a score of characters are conspicuous by their presence or absence. Virgie Rainey does not even interact with many of these characters, so clearly she cannot speak or act for them. Several critics, including Louis Rubin, Jr.,⁶ and Marie-Antoinette Manz-Kunz, attempt to lump the Morgonians into a time-sheltered community, a tightly knit group of citizens who hope to quarantine themselves from time. Manz-Kunz observes that talk, as it was in Delta Wedding and as it will become increasingly so

in The Ponder Heart and in Losing Battles, is this society's chief means of self-protection:

By institutionalizing every fate by means of Verbalization . . . [the people] invigorate their hold over the members of their society. This method furthermore creates the comforting illusion of their inaccessibility for time. By continuously repeating their stories the events concerned are taken out of time and fixed into the restricted Morgana omniscience. They deal with persons in the same way.⁷

While this tendency to talk away one's fight with time is present here, mainly in Katie Rainey, Mrs. Lizzie Stark, Miss Perdita Mayo, and a host of other Morgana women, with the possible exception of Katie none of the other characters slip very often into this "town talk." Therefore, this facet of Welty's preoccupation with time will be treated more thoroughly in subsequent chapters on The Ponder Heart and Losing Battles. In The Golden Apples, though, individuals talk less than they act, even if their actions are futile in their struggle against time. Hence, although sometimes humorous and even occasionally petty, the people of Morgana earn our admiration for their courage and should be examined in more detail than has been done previously.

Another time-related theme in The Golden Apples concerns music and its ability to transcend time. As both Louis Rubin, Jr., and Ruth Vande Kieft point out, in a sense this novel is about art, particularly music, since both Virgie Rainey and Cassie Morrison devote considerable time

to thinking and talking about Miss Eckhart and piano playing. Rubin feels that an individual's knowledge of time and of "separation" from the rest of the world is what stimulates the "achievement of beauty through art."⁸ More specifically, Vande Kieft suggests:

Paradoxically, it [music] is the art form most dependent on time, existing in a present sequence of moments, which has the greatest power to put the listener outside his ordinary sense of present time. Music enables him to summon the past and imaginatively to perceive its meanings. Its effect in The Golden Apples reminds one of the effect of the little phrase from the sonata of Vinteuil in Proust's Remembrance of Things Past; in Miss Welty's book, music provides insight into the meaning of beauty, love, suffering, and loss, and it has the power to suspend, compress, or protract time and experience.⁹

This Proustian "Involuntary Memory"--here demonstrated when the opening sounds of Für Elise elicit in Cassie Morrison her past music lessons with Virgie and Miss Eckhart--is an important technique Welty utilizes to "create in fiction a 'still moment' that is perceived in the eternal present."¹⁰ Such a technique enables Welty to create a time frame which is virtually independent of clocks, calendars and the usual time-measuring devices, a dimension which Zelmo Turner Howard calls the "unceasing flow of the past into the present, the present into the future, and the future into the all-time."¹¹

Probably the most thorough and provocative treatment of The Golden Apples is Thomas McHaney's "Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples."¹² Although he

occasionally lapses into what would seem to be pattern hunting for the sake of pattern hunting, that is, discovering parallels of image, symbol, and myth where they seem quite tenuous, McHaney nevertheless provides the most inclusive discussion of The Golden Apples. From his vantage point in 1973 McHaney can work from a solid base of Welty criticism including that of Vande Kieft, Alfred Appel, Rubin, Bryant,¹³ and others; more importantly, however, McHaney utilizes his own knowledge of The Golden Bough, William Butler Yeats, and Celtic and Greek mythology to add a substantial contribution to our critical understanding of the book. Because McHaney's thinking is so crucial to grasping the essential features of the novel, particularly the function of time, a brief recapitulation of his chief ideas is necessary.

According to McHaney, the structure of The Golden Apples is not that of a novel but the book "nevertheless manages to create a complex unified impression in the manner of a novel" (McHaney, p. 589). McHaney compares the work to a song or myth cycle:

The connected stories do correspond to the sequences of a mythological cycle, but they may as aptly be regarded as movements like those in a piece of cyclic music, a sonata or a symphony. There is exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda . . . (McHaney, p. 611).

The sources of The Golden Apples are obviously quite diverse. Evidently Harry Morris was the first critic to

note the Zeus-Danäe myth at work here,¹⁴ and nearly every critic mentions the Perseus motif which is central to Virgie Rainey's coming to terms with time. Similarly, Vande Kieft and F. D. Carson expound on the significance of Yeats's "The Song of the Wandering Aengus," the lines of which run through Cassie Morrison's head and the last line of which points to the "golden apples of the sun" of several Greek and Roman myths.¹⁵ Apparently in The Golden Apples Welty continues and perhaps perfects her technique of combining the legend, myth, and fantasy of the past with a very real present to attain a timeless world--the same basic pattern of both The Robber Bridegroom and Delta Wedding.

No one before McHaney explicates in as much detail the Irish influence on The Golden Apples. Not only are there numerous Irish names--Loch Morrison and Parnell Moody, for example--but there are also frequent references to Celtic legends. Welty's debt to Yeats has been mentioned, but McHaney confirms "Leda and the Swan" as a probable source for "Sir Rabbit" and argues Yeats's "No Second Troy" is a likely influence on Ran MacLain's delusions in "The Whole World Knows" (McHaney, pp. 592-593). McHaney's comments about Welty's style, images, symbols, and themes establish that The Golden Apples is more fertile ground than had been previously suspected. Perhaps his greatest contribution to Welty scholarship, however, will prove to be the additional inquiry he provokes. For instance, McHaney only incidentally

notes Welty's concern for time. When Loch conceals Miss Eckhart's metronome under his shirt, fully expecting it to blow up in his face like a bomb, McHaney concludes: "Time is the subject here: how one views it and whether one can, or should resist, or embrace its relentless pace" (McHaney, p. 602). Similarly, when considering the Irish influence on the novel, he initiates but does not pursue:

. . . and perhaps [there is here] some use of Yeats's concept of a gyring, repetitive historical process-- there are parallels or recurrent events in the forty years of Morgana life depicted here, even when a Morgana person dwells elsewhere. (McHaney, p. 592)

One critic who admits a debt to McHaney, Douglas Messerli, furthers this notion of cyclic time although he does not insist on the Yeatsian influence. Messerli contends the following about The Golden Apples:

. . . this book is also deeply grounded in Welty's concept of time, and here specifically she considers not merely the problem of time, but the order of time. Knowing that time may be seen as occurring either in a linear or a cyclical pattern, that time may be experienced either as history or as myth, Welty has structured the individual stories and consequently, the whole book around the encounter between these two perceptions of the order of time.¹⁶

Two time orders exist simultaneously in The Golden Apples. Linear or historical time moves through about forty years in the lives of several Morgana people, and cyclical or mythical time "moves like a dream" for Katie Rainey, as

well as for most of the other Morgana residents, because they cannot comprehend its pace or its meaning.

Katey Rainey, Cassie Morrison, and many of the minor characters of Morgana strive to gain a measure of security from time, chiefly by attempting to re-create the order of linear time to make it fit their own conception of the events that surround them. This is a tendency that was quite prominent in the older Fairchilds in Delta Wedding, and it becomes even more pronounced in Welty's later novels, especially in Losing Battles. But neither Katie nor Cassie seems to succeed in her efforts to control time. When Katie has her stroke, for example, she begins "ordering things done by set times" (p. 231) and lingers on in a state of dependency on Virgie for five years before she dies. Cassie, although she appears outwardly calm, remains inwardly troubled by her mother's unanticipated suicide and by Virgie's intimation that "what was young was all gone" (p. 261).

Yet at least one character in The Golden Apples does manage, at least for a while, to live in what Messerli would call "mythic" time. King MacLain, in his ramblings to and from Morgana, exists mainly for the present and for making the future become present. He describes himself to Virgie as, "So bent, so bent I was on all I had to do, on what was ahead of me." (p. 254). Thus King searches for the "golden apples" of life, relentlessly and in utter contempt

for the mundane; because of his contempt for linear time King appears selfish and in fact a threat to the rather stable, apparently ordered world of Morgana. Katie, for example, resents King (p. 18) not only because of his desertion of his wife Snowdie but also because she simply cannot fathom his flaunting disregard for time. King's lack of respect for the traditional, time controlled life underlies his blatant behavior at Katie's funeral. King MacLain feels that he lives beyond the rules of life and death that govern the rest of the universe:

Then he made a hideous face at Virgie, like a silent yell. It was a yell at everything--including death, not leaving it out--and he did not mind taking his present animosity out on Virgie Rainey; indeed he chose her. (p. 257)

Of course King MacLain is subject to time: Virgie perceives "something terrifying about that old man--he was too old" (p. 246). At Katie Rainey's funeral in "The Wanderers" King's grandson expects the old man to "pop" like a balloon at any time (p. 260). By attributing to King Zeus-like habits, however, Welty goes a long way towards elevating him to a position in mythic time: King's frequent sudden entrances and disappearances make him seem beyond the mortals. Only on those occasions when he chooses to interact with the world does King seem to be subject to linear time or chronology, and even then, as when he seduces Mattie Will Sojourner in "Sir Rabbit," MacLain is portrayed

as god-like. It would seem that in The Golden Apples Miss Welty erects two standards of time. One standard, represented by Katie Rainey, Cassie Morrison, and most of the other characters, flows continuously and smoothly into the future and towards death. This is the time Welty refers to in "Some Notes on Time in Fiction" as our "enemy" when she writes, "We are mortal: this is time's deepest meaning in the novel as it is to us alive" ("Some Notes on Time," p. 48). The second standard of time, represented by King-Zeus MacLain and perhaps by some of his spiritual children, like Loch Morrison, is mythic and cyclical. This time operates somewhat as Yeats's gyres do, spinning and returning upon themselves but nevertheless still moving forward relative to linear time. This is the "fused" time of Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry," for example, or the warped time of Einstein's Special Relativity:

If the nub of Einstein's Special Relativity can be considered as resting within any one sentence it rests here in the realization that one man's "now" is another man's "then"; that "now" itself is a subjective conception, valid only for an observer within one specific frame of reference.¹⁷

Clearly most of the characters in The Golden Apples observe totally neither standard of time; instead, most are trapped between the mythic and the linear. It is this resulting struggle of people torn between two time standards that produces the chief conflict in the novel and is ultimately what the book is "about." In The Robber Bridegroom

and in Delta Wedding Welty's concern was for periods in time and for how people either change with progress or continue to live in the past. The Golden Apples, however, is a significant departure in that now questions of past, present, or future cease to mean very much. Instead, Welty creates in the minds of her characters a continuous present which incorporates the past and even the future. By this fusion of past, present, and future, somewhat as Faulkner does in The Sound and the Fury or in "A Rose for Emily," Welty now focuses on the relativity of time and on the variable perspectives human beings hold on the process of time.

Although two streams of time do exist in The Golden Apples, they are not entirely separated but instead run simultaneously. Frequently Welty allows these two parallel time frames to overlap each other, and what might be called time "warps" occur. These warps are similar to those Welty perceives in The Sound and the Fury as "The dilations, the freezing of moments, the persistent recurrences and proliferations . . ." of time ("Some Notes on Time," p. 490). Welty uses these time warps to freeze and focus on a crucial moment in the development of a character; frequently, the distortions in time happen just when the character is on the threshold of a significant discovery about himself or about life. King MacLain, his twin sons Ran and Eugene, Loch Morrison, the orphan Easter, Virgie Rainey--even a few of the "minor" characters like Nina Carmichael and Mattie

Will Sojourner--all participate in time warps that change their lives. Before we can investigate the nature of the time warps and the changes they produce, however, we must first explain the sequence of linear time in this novel.

Welty provides very few clues as to the dates or sequence of the major events in The Golden Apples (see the Chronology for The Golden Apples on page 124). In fact, the author would probably object to any attempt at a chronology for The Golden Apples for the same reason that she objects to a "timetable" for The Sound and the Fury: that is, she fears we might lose sight of the true subject, "Time . . . not chronology" ("Some Notes on Time," p. 488).

There would appear to be one datable event in the novel: when Virgie begins to work at Mr. Nesbitt's saw mill in 1920 (p. 239). The evidence indicates that she begins work soon after returning to Morgana when she is seventeen (p. 265), but we are not told where she has been or how long she has been gone. If Virgie is seventeen in 1920, though, we can extrapolate and fix her birthday in 1903. Since Loch Morrison tells us that Cassie, his sister, is the same age as Virgie, we can date her birthday in 1903, also, and with the knowledge of the these two girls' birthdays we can speculate with some accuracy about some of the other dates in the novel. For example, we know that Virgie is fourteen when her brother Victor is killed in France (p. 63), and hence the year must be 1917. We can probably

surmise that Virgie had run away from Morgana shortly after Miss Eckhart's abortive attempt to burn the piano and music studio; Virgie was sixteen at the time, in 1919. Similarly, a few other events may be determined within a year or so. Most of the episodes in the novel are impossible to date except within a five to ten year period, however. Much as she did in Delta Wedding, Miss Welty only rarely alludes to external, worldly events or to their effect on the characters of Morgana. One significant exception is the previously mentioned reference to World War I, to Victor's death, and to the effect on Virgie, but even here Welty refuses to accept any causal relationship: "Virgie stopped taking her free lessons when her brother Victor was killed in France, but that might have been coincidence, for Virgie had a birthday . . ." (p. 63). Hence, much like the Shellmound plantation in Delta Wedding, Morgana remains a town isolated in place and time. For the characters who live there and for those who leave only to return later, as Katie says:

"Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run,
and all the time we heard things from out in the world
that we listened to but that still didn't mean we believed
them." (p. 9)

Therefore, it would appear that in The Golden Apples Welty has deliberately omitted or made ambiguous most of the anticipated references to linear time. The effect is that "Time goes like a dream," indeed, both for many of the characters in the novel and for the reader. "Sir Rabbit,"

the third section of the novel, offers the most obvious example of such a "dream" time or warp.

As Franklin Carson points out, several critics-- including William M. Jones and Alfred Appel--misread the two parts of "Sir Rabbit" as taking place on the same day.¹⁸ In the first part Mattie Will Sojourner and the MacLain twins, Ran and Eugene, all three about fifteen, frolic "on the wet spring ground," eat candy after their sexual encounter, then jump "to their feet as though a clock struck" (p. 100). The second part of the story has Mattie Will married to Junior Holifield. Hunting in the woods, Junior and Mattie Will are surprised by King-Zeus MacLain who, swan-like, rapes Mattie Will while Junior lies on the ground unconscious. Welty gives no ages or dates in this section, but it is autumn, and clearly Carson is correct to contend that "at least a few months and very likely several years" take place between the two episodes.¹⁹ What Carson fails to note, however, is that the two episodes do not obey the normal laws of linear time.

In fact, no one seems to recognize that "Sir Rabbit" portrays a time warp when linear and mythic time interpenetrate: the temporal becomes permanently fixed in the memory of the characters, and the mythic or timeless enters the temporal world in the form of King MacLain. McHaney's reading of this section of the novel approaches this interpretation:

The first part [of "Sir Rabbit"] is Mattie Will Sojourner's memory of a day when she had let the MacLain twins pin her down and have their way on the wet spring ground. (McHaney, p. 605)

Manz-Kunz, in contrast, feels that Mattie Will sees the MacLain twins in present time, and they trigger for her a dream of being raped by King MacLain in the future.²⁰ The point is that both McHaney and Manz-Kunz are correct though in contradiction: when mythic and linear time come together, past, present, and future cease to have meaning. Instead, "timeless" is the only way to describe Mattie Will's experience.

Miss Welty strives to reflect this timeless moment by ambiguity. For example, the twins (in Part I) appear from behind a tree "the very spit of Mr. King their father," but only after Mattie Will first mistook them for King (p. 98). She evidently has feared yet yearned for King for months; now she is "lightheaded" and yawns "strangely, for she felt at that moment as though somewhere a little boat was going out on a lake, never to come back . . ." (p. 99). As McHaney notes, such boat images occur throughout The Golden Apples and usually suggest a passage from one state of being to another, but Welty also uses lakes, rivers, and boats here to convey movement or suspension in time, as she did in Delta Wedding. Here the boat image marks for Mattie Will a timeless moment of passage and sexual awakening.

This strange feeling that time stops is even more profound in Part II of "Sir Rabbit." King MacLain appears and disappears in the trees as his boys did, until finally Junior conveniently falls over a tree "dead to the world." Mattie Will orders the Negro Blackstone to pick plums, which he does, mechanically, while King forces her to the ground, and for a moment time seems to stop. King-Zeus lets her fall, walks off, and a dove feather comes "turning down through the light that was like golden smoke" (p. 108). Even the Holifield's dog, Wibur, for the moment moves outside the world of time; he licks Junior and Blackstone but they ignore him:

For ages he might have been making a little path back and forth between Junior and Blackstone, but she [Mattie Will] could not think of his name, or would not, just as Junior would not wake up. (p. 109)

Manz-Kunz does note the "uncanny duration" here, and says the characters act "like puppets dangling on a string."²¹

What has been called a "time warp" occurs in "Sir Rabbit" when two ways of viewing time merge for an instant to create a new time, one subject to none of the usual laws of nature. Because of the difficulty involved in reducing these "timeless" warps to terms comprehensible as normal human experience, Welty frequently describes such warps so ambiguously that it is difficult, if not impossible, to determine what reaction the reader should have. Nevertheless, an effort to understand these warps is central to Welty's meaning in The Golden Apples.

The next major time dilation occurs about 1921, in July, when Loch Morrison saves the orphan Easter from drowning. The entire "Moon Lake" section of the novel centers on the developing consciousnesses of a group of pre-pubescent town girls including Nina Carmichael and Jinny Love Stark (who later marries Ran MacLain), and of several orphans from the county home. Cassie Morrison's younger brother Loch, who is the lifeguard at the camp, remains aloof from the childish activity of the girls, eating, walking and swimming alone. The section is viewed chiefly from the perspective of Nina Carmichael, but clearly the focus of attention is on Easter and Loch, who are kindred spirits.

Easter and Loch are associated with the "shower of gold" imagery that Welty reserves for King MacLain, his progeny, or other spiritual "wanderers."²² In fact, Easter may very well be one of King's many children that Katie Rainey refers to as "growing up in the County Orphan's . . . known and unknown, scattered-like" (p. 4). At any rate, in "Moon Lake" we see Easter and Loch at that point in their development when they have the potential to be wanderers: the time warp they share, when Loch saves the orphan, marks a rite of passage from which they will emerge as characters re-born with a new attitude towards time and life.

Easter's ritual preparation for this initiation "out of time" begins when she leads Nina and Jinny Love Stark into the swamp where it is quiet "as though the world could stop" (p. 126). She leads them directly to an old gray boat as if she already knows it is there, waiting for her (p. 129). This boat is chained to a stump and so is useless as a vehicle to escape out into the lake, away from time-- "And in the boat, it was not so much that they drifted as that in the presence of a boat the world drifted, forgot" (p. 137). Nevertheless, while sitting in the boat Easter and Nina can dream of escape. Nina, for example, dreams "that her self might get away from her": Welty again utilizes ambiguity to imply that Nina desires to "get away" from Easter--"her"--but most probably wants to escape from the immature and time-bound part of "her," that is, from herself. In fact, it is Nina who conceives of perhaps the most poignant commentary about time in The Golden Apples: paradoxically, time ebbs the fastest at the very moment when one is most ready to live.

For a moment, with her powerful hands, Nina held the boat back. Again she thought of a pear . . . beautiful, symmetrical, clean pears with thin skins, with snow-white flesh so juicy and tender that to eat one baptized the whole face, and so delicate that while you urgently ate the first half, the second half was already beginning to turn brown. To all fruits, and especially to those fine pears, something happened--the process was so swift, you were never in time for them. It's not the flowers that are fleeting, Nina thought, it's the fruits--it's the time when things are ready that they don't stay. (p. 131)

Although Welty does not inform us how much of this paradox Nina understands, she seems to realize more than many of the other characters in the novel: her thoughts on mutability, in fact, might be taken as perhaps the key statement on time in The Golden Apples, for the principle of transience described here motivates most of the characters in this novel and perhaps in all of Welty's novels as well. Nina thinks in terms of pears, thus continuing the imagery of the golden apples and figs which permeates the entire book and looking ahead to the white strawberries which are central to The Optimist's Daughter.

Nina's rather precocious meditation about time reminds us of Clement Musgrove's anxious debates with himself in The Robber Bridegroom, but without his whimsicality: Nina is much more resigned to the caprices of life than is Clement. As she sits in the boat with Easter and Jinny, Nina hopes to launch out on Moon Lake, suggesting perhaps her "ripeness" to try the unknown and to mature with time. The boat is tied down, however, and her opportunity to escape from linear time passes momentarily. This time the boat will not move for Nina, and soon Loch blows his "golden horn"--an ironic signal for the girls to return to camp and to the time-bound world. Of the three girls in the boat, Nina would seem to be the most prepared to confront the vagaries of time; in fact, she does encounter a kind of time warp later, after Easter has been rescued. Nina spots some shells in the sand:

And suddenly this seemed to her one of those moments out of the future, just as she had found one small brief one out of the past; this was far, far ahead of her--picking up the shells, one, another, without time moving any more. (p. 151)

But the little girl who intuitively comprehends the passing of time will probably have no other chance to further her desire for freedom from the mundane: evidently her fate will be to remain an old maid in Morgana for the rest of her life (pp. 156, 240). Nina--like the pear she thinks about--misses her one best moment to grow because she is too ready, and time passes her by.

Jinny Love Stark, on the other hand, shows no promise of insight into time or anything else; she remains a rather stolid and obtuse woman into middle age and appears again as Ran MacLain's fickle wife in "The Whole World Knows" and in "The Wanderers." Easter, though, receives another chance to grow with time.

When Easter is tickled by the Negro Exum and falls into Moon Lake, she begins her rebirth (interestingly, the paperback that everyone is passing around at camp is The Re-Creation of Brian Kent). Time stops for Easter when she falls (p. 145), and slows down for all present: "Was time moving? Endlessly, Ran MacLain's dogs frisked and played" (p. 151). Clearly, the time warp here will bring about a change in Easter although Welty does not provide any hints about the orphan's later life. As Douglas Messerli summarizes, "Easter undergoes a baptism which mythologically permits the

self-renewal which the name she has given herself signifies (her name is spelled Esther)."²³

Loch's ritualized and sexually suggestive life-saving of Easter, which is "odious" to Jinny Love's mother, represents a regeneration for him, also. His potential for stepping outside of time is demonstrated in "June Recital" when he captures and hides under his shirt Miss Eckhart's metronome, risking what Zelma Turner Howard calls "the explosion of time."²⁴ Loch sulks around the camp at Moon Lake, however, and does not realize his capability to get outside of time until he dives into the murky water, "joined himself" to Easter (p. 142), and brought her "back from the time she fell" (p. 145). Loch learns, much as Dr. Ferguson does when he saves Mabel in "The Horse Dealer's Daughter," that to revive another person to new life is often to be re-born oneself. After the rescue Loch returns to "his tent of separation in the middle of the woods" (p. 156) where he undresses "for the world to see" (p. 155). To Nina and Jinny Love, who watch from outside, Loch seems to be "pounding his chest with his fists" and "Bragging on himself" (p. 156), but we learn very little about what his new life will bring just as we do not know what will happen to Easter. In "The Wanderers" Virgie remembers Loch before he escaped from Morgana to go to war; even then he was "too young and already too distant" (p. 261). Evidently Loch now lives in New York and "Likes it there" (p. 261). To

Virgie, although Loch is not dead he may as well be: she realizes she "must have hurt Cassie some way, if only by that moment's imagining that what was young was all gone-- disappeared wholly" (p. 261). Cassie, though, accepts that Loch can live apart from her and Morgana and still have a good life. One of the chief ironies of The Golden Apples is that the gifted and searching "wanderers" like Loch and Virgie, who somehow try to escape from time, are never satisfied but must always pursue the "golden apples" of life; the more conservative and less gifted characters, like Cassie, are time-bound but seem to be content with their plight. Not until Laurel McKelva in The Optimist's Daughter do we meet a character who can completely resolve this dilemma.

If Welty intimates that Loch Morrison and Easter participate in a time warp which enables them to begin new lives not predicated on total obeisance to time, she also suggests that such an event must fatefully happen: a person cannot make it occur. Ran and Eugene MacLain strive again and again to escape from the time-bound world but with little or no success. In "The Whole World Knows" Ran MacLain has married Jinny Love Stark, who is twenty-five (p. 166) and probably ten to fifteen years younger than he. Jinny has shamed Ran by leaving him, and as his mother says, "The whole world knows what she did to you" (p. 178). Thus Ran suffers embarrassment, and he feels that if he could go back in time

and start over he could avoid his mistakes with Jinny. Ran works in a cage at the local bank (p. 166), but his real cage is that he feels confounded by time: Ran is the living embodiment of Katie Rainey's dictum that "Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run" His mother tells him that he is "walking around in a dream" (p. 164). As McHaney points out, the many images of speed in The Golden Apples connect with the Perseus myth, but with the MacLain twins in particular, nicknamed Ran and Scooter, Welty is probably punning on their futile attempt to out-run the "dream" of time (McHaney, p. 603).

McHaney sees as a possible influence here Yeats's "No Second Troy," but in his rambling monologue Ran is more like Prufrock. Like Prufrock, Ran dreams of doing things he would not dare in actuality: Ran "kills" Jinny's lover, Woody Spights, with a croquet mallet (p. 167), and shoots Jinny "full of bright holes" (p. 171). He is frequently thinking about time, and the "shooting" of Jinny comes just as a clock strikes loudly, so loudly "the pistol hadn't drowned that [the clock] out" (p. 171). Croquet and parlor games abound in "The Whole World Knows," perhaps reminding us that Ran--like Prufrock--inhabits an unreal dream world "like the floor of the sea" (p. 168).

There are no climactic time warps of the type Welty employs with King MacLain or Loch and Easter in "The Whole World Knows"; time is not described as stopping or standing

still here. Like Prufrock, Ran MacLain is a "little man," "an attendant lord, one that will do/To swell a progress, start a scene or two," and probably for this reason Welty chooses to portray Ran as merely muddling through life as best he can. Nevertheless, because of what he views as a grave problem with his life, specifically the failure of his marriage, Ran endeavors to re-live his past. Maideen Sumrall, the eighteen year old whom Ran uses to replace Jinny, "looked like Jinny . . . was a child's copy of Jinny" (p. 163). Ran takes Maideen along when he visits Jinny so that he can imagine the two women as the same: Maideen, young and untainted, can become the surrogate for Jinny who is part of his past. As Jinny and Ran walk into the Stark home, with Maideen following behind, Ran thinks, "A thousand times we'd gone in like that" (p. 170). After Ran discovers that Maideen is not Jinny and that he cannot change the past, he travels with Maideen to the Sunset Oaks motel in Vicksburg where he places his pistol in his mouth and attempts suicide. Even this last pathetic effort to stop time fails, though, and Ran's story ends as it began, with his feeble calling out for help from his family with his "overwhelming" question: "Father, Eugene! What you went and found, was it better than this? And where's Jinny?" (p. 181).

Unfortunately, Eugene MacLain could be of no help to his brother even if he could hear Ran's miserable plea. In

"Music From Spain" we see Eugene several years later in San Francisco, and he, too, has difficulty with his wife Emma:

One morning at breakfast Eugene MacLain was opening his paper and without the least idea of why he did it . . . he leaned over the table and slapped her face. (p. 182)

Like his brother, Eugene works in a cage (p. 189), but Eugene's job is more emblematic of his obsession than is Ran's: Eugene is a watch repairman at Bertsingers' Jewelers, and this twin feels time pushing him constantly. One of the reasons he slaps Emma, he decides, is that he is in his forties and needs another lover (p. 186). Like his wife, Eugene needs to forget the loss of their daughter, Fan, who died one year ago: Emma, like Amy in Frost's "Home Burial," lets her grief shut out the living, and Eugene knows "he was not to be let in" (p. 190). His job also disturbs him, and on this fateful day he is just "not able to take those watches apart" (p. 187).

Although Eugene is obviously perplexed by the time-obsessed society which surrounds him, his chief problem is more personal; he simply cannot cope with the growing realization that time is passing him by. Like Ran, Eugene dreams of "vague times in the past, of long ago in Mississippi" (p. 191). As he wanders the streets of San Francisco in search of the answers to life's problems, Eugene's anguished cry reminds us of the Ubi sunt verses:

"where had the season gone?" (p. 191). Unlike Ran, who tried to find his past in a new Jinny, Eugene feels "sure in some absolute way that no familiar person could do him any good" (p. 192). The scene is set for Eugene's time warp. He requires a stranger for a guide in his quest, and he encounters an appropriate one in the streets of San Francisco: the Spanish guitarist he and Emma had heard perform the night before. In fact, it had been the Spaniard's playing that had triggered Eugene's need for escape. As he and the giant Spaniard practically race down the street, Eugene feels "fleet of foot, at the very heels of a secret in the day"; he recalls the Spaniard's music from the night before:

He [had] felt a lapse of all knowledge of Emma as his wife, and of comprehending the future, in some visit to a vast present-time. The lapse must have endured for a solid minute or two, and afterwards he could recollect it. (p. 197)

Thus the artist, the man of total freedom from time and place, becomes for Eugene the "perfect being to catch up with" (p. 193).

The two men wander the streets and restaurants, Eugene always showing the Spaniard the way and paying, for the Spaniard seems totally unaware of the world around him (Eugene saves the guitarist from being run down by an automobile). Actually, as McHaney discusses in detail, Eugene and the Spaniard act out a modern version of several ancient myths, including that of Perseus-Atlas and Theseus-Minotaur (McHaney, pp. 612-614). Generally though, the

effect of the mythological allusions is to contribute to the feeling of timelessness, and of slowed time, in which Eugene's initiation almost takes place. Welty carefully selects every detail to reflect Eugene's "mixing/Memory and desire." As they meander toward the Pacific and Land's End (a real place here, but also where Perseus goes after killing the Medusa), Eugene's past in Mississippi blends with his sterile life in San Francisco. He recalls his father who was almost always gone from home. He recalls also the "framed Sibyl" on the wall in Miss Eckhart's studio, probably hanging close to the picture of Perseus and the Medusa which Virgie recalls so vividly. The Sibyl might be appropriate for Eugene to remember, of course, because she guides Aeneas to find his father, and Eugene (like Ran) desperately yearns for the father he never really knew. The Sibyl also shares Eugene's concern for time since she had forgotten to ask Apollo for eternal youth. Hence Eugene might cry, as does the Sibyl, "My youth and youthful strength fled long ago."²⁵

Eugene and the Spaniard move inexorably westward, towards Land's End and the end of time. A streetcar runs a woman down, killing her, but the people move unhurriedly toward her as if in slow motion (p. 206). Eugene visualizes himself as a heroic artisan:

Suppose another fire were to rack San Francisco and topple it and he, Eugene MacLain out of Mississippi, had to put it all back together again. (p. 210)

More to the point, how could he stop time, move outside it, and then start it again: "How could he put a watch back together?" (p. 210). Eugene decides that he cannot, that life is a spiraling maze, of coiling springs, like a fire escape (p. 211). For Eugene the tangle of time is overwhelming, and (like Ran) he is ready to accept the end of time, his death, at the hands of the Spaniard.

Once at Land's End Eugene and the Spaniard playfully wrestle on the precipice, with Eugene clinging to the Spaniard "almost as if he loved him, and had found a lasting refuge" (p. 221). To Eugene, the bullish Spaniard represents creativity and a freedom from the trivialities of a mundane, time-burdened existence. When Eugene loses his hat to the wind, he chases down and wears the Spaniard's, thus perhaps suggesting his desire to change places with the artist. Then in a final time warp Eugene once again has the opportunity to move outside himself and experience a kind of rebirth:

As he gasped, the sweet and the salt, the alyssum and the sea affected him as a single scent. It lulled him slightly, blurring the moment. The now calming ocean, the pounding of a thousand gentlenesses, went on into darkness and obscurity. (p. 224)

Then the Spaniard whirls him in space over the cliff, and the second hat blows away, leaving him "without a burden in

the world." Yet Eugene is incapable of escaping time's restrictions, and for him the past blocks the way to the future. As he hangs suspended in time and space, Eugene's "vision--some niche of clarity, some future" is nothing more than an instant replay of his past: he sees Emma coming down their stairs and wonders if there "would be a child again" (p. 225). He still wonders:

Could it be possible that everything now could wait? If he could have stopped everything, until that pulse, far back, far inside, far within now, could shake like the little hand red fist of the first spring leaf! (p. 224)

But for Eugene the time warp closes quickly, before he can walk through. When he rushes home anticipating that Emma will still be in shock from his slap at breakfast, he discovers she has forgotten the whole incident. Eugene's day of glorious escape from time has not changed one iota of his life or of anyone else's.

There are other time warps in The Golden Apples. In "The Wanderers" Welty catalogues the dead or dying of Morgana and lists the survivors. Some, like Cassie Morrison's mother, just give up and commit suicide (p. 261); others, like King MacLain, are defiant to the end. All will eventually succumb, of course, but if Miss Welty recommends a strategy against time here, it would be that of Virgie Rainey. Hating death, Virgie dedicates herself to life and to a re-commitment to do whatever is necessary to defeat time. As a child Virgie had threatened and had actually tried

"to butt her brains out against the wall" (p. 43). Now she recognizes the meaning of her action and her kinship to King MacLain:

Virgie had felt a moment in her life after which nobody could see through her, into her--felt it young. But Mr. King MacLain, an old man, had butted like a goat against the wall he wouldn't agree to himself or recognize. What fortress indeed would ever come down, except before hard little horns, a rush and a stampede of the pure wish to live? (p. 264)

But as she leaves her mother's grave, Virgie realizes that time cannot be stopped, that all "would topple . . . and so had, or might as well have, done it already; this was the past now" (p. 263). She is reminded of another time, coming home when she was seventeen, and so concludes that "she had lived the moment before" (p. 264). To Virgie, life has become a series of new beginnings, and she is fully prepared to start her life over again. Even though Virgie is saddened by her mother's death, Welty writes,

Virgie never saw it differently, never doubted that all the opposites on earth were close together, love close to hate, living to dying; but of them all, hope and despair were the closest blood--unrecognizable one from the other sometimes, making moments double upon themselves, and in the doubling double again, amending but never taking back. (p. 265)

Virgie Rainey's version of Clement Musgrove's "all things are double" philosophy is much more reconciled to the mutability of life. Virgie understands, whereas Clement did not, that yes one must continue to butt "like a goat

against the wall," but that one must also accept the inevitable changes of time. Once a person realizes that hope can be built on despair, that in fact the two are identical, then she can proceed with time as her ally, not her enemy.

Virgie's new understanding of time re-unites her with the cosmos. As she swims naked in the Big Black River, she feels "All was one warmth, air, water, and her own body" (p. 248). Later she senses the "sand, grains intricate as little cogged wheels, minute shells of old seas" (p. 248). Washing away the despair and death of the past enables Virgie to face the future. At the end of The Golden Apples Virgie sits alone in MacLain, Mississippi, in front of the Courthouse. She has just visited the cemetery where the MacLains, Miss Eckhart, and other friends from her past are buried, and she is absorbed with their ghosts. An old beggar woman disturbs Virgie's reverie, bringing her back to the present. The soft rain is described much as the all-enveloping snow at the end of Joyce's "The Dead":

October rain on Mississippi fields. The rain of fall, maybe on the whole South, for all she knew on the everywhere. (p. 276)

Like Gabriel Conroy, who hears the "snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead," Virgie is ready to move on into the future.²⁶ For Virgie,

linear and mythical time are joined, and she is in tune with the universe:

Then she and the old beggar woman, the old black thief, were there alone . . . listening to the magical percussion, the world beating in their ears. They heard through falling rain the running of the horse and bear, the stroke of the leopard, the dragon's crusty slither, and the glimmer and the trumpet of the swan. (p. 277)

TABLE 2. CHRONOLOGY FOR THE GOLDEN APPLES

- c. 1897, Easter. King MacLain leaves his hat on the bank of the Big Black River and disappears (p. 7).
- c. 1898, January 1. Lucius Randall and Eugene Hudson MacLain born (p. 9).
- 1903. Virgie Rainey and Cassie Morrison born.
- c. 1904, Halloween. King MacLain returns home and is frightened away by his disguised twins (p. 11). One week later Katie Rainey tells her story, "Shower of Gold," to a passing stranger.
- c. 1913, Spring. MacLain twins, about fifteen years old, "frolic" on the ground with Mattie Will Sojourner; "Sir Rabbit," Part I.
- c. 1913, October. Mattie Will Sojourner Holifield, now married, seduced by King-Zeus MacLain; "Sir Rabbit," Part II.
- 1916, June. Virgie Rainey, thirteen, has her "coming out" recital at Miss Eckhart's studio (p. 240).
- 1917. Virgie's brother Victor killed in France; Virgie, age fourteen, stops her free piano lessons (p. 63).
- c. 1918. King MacLain gives chair to Katie Rainey and disappears (p. 254); Snowdie MacLain sells her house and moves to MacLain with the twins (p. 65); Miss Eckhart discontinues piano lessons.
- 1919, June. Virgie Rainey, sixteen, meets sailor Kewpie Moffitt in vacant MacLain house.
- 1919, July. Ran MacLain, twenty-three, hunts at Moon Lake (p. 149); Loch Morrison saves Easter from drowning; Eugene still lives at home (p. 154).
- 1919.* Eugene MacLain leaves home, eventually settling in San Francisco.
- 1920, July. Virgie, seventeen, returns home to Morgana (p. 239, 265), probably for her father's funeral.
- 193 ,* August. Ran MacLain attempts suicide.

- 193 .* King MacLain returns home at "the age of sixty-odd" and stays (p. 246).
1938. Katie Rainey has a stroke and begins "ordering things done by set times" (p. 231).
- 1942.* Eugene MacLain, in his forties and married for twelve years (p. 182), slaps his wife Emma and begins his quest for freedom.
- 1943.* Eugene MacLain returns to Morgana and, unreconciled with his father, dies of consumption (p. 273).
- 1943, Last Sunday in September. Virgie, past forty, watches her mother die.

*Denotes speculative, approximate dates based on chronological relations suggested in the text.

CHAPTER V

THE ATTRITION OF TIME: THE PONDER HEART

At first glance Welty's fourth novel, The Ponder Heart (1953),¹ would appear to say little about time, or for that matter, about anything of consequence. The story is told entirely from the point of view of Edna Earle Ponder, a kindly spinster, in one relentless barrage of cliché and provincial naiveté. Edna Earle speaks to a wayfarer who happens by the Beulah Hotel in Clay, Mississippi, because of car trouble. She begins by warning the stranger that Uncle Daniel Ponder will talk her ears off; the novel concludes over one hundred pages later when Edna Earle, still rattling on, finally calls Uncle Daniel down to meet the "company." In the meantime Edna Earle has narrated a disjointed tale about the Ponder family's history, focusing mainly on Uncle Daniel and his eccentricities.

Uncle Daniel is "Grandpa's baby" (p. 9), born late in Grandpa's life, and thus he is only a few years older than his niece Edna Earle. Daniel never lies and loves "happiness" more than anything else in the world--in short, he is blessed with the "fond and loving heart" (p. 36) which has for a long time been the mark of the Ponder family. Daniel also inherits the huge Ponder head (p. 11). Unfortunately, his huge head is empty, as Grandpa Ponder

realizes: "When the brains were being handed around, my son Daniel was standing behind the door" (p. 40). Thus Uncle Daniel's empty head, and his "eccentricities," including his penchants for windy talk and for giving away the family fortune, become the subject of Edna Earle's monologue.

Her main concern, however, seems to be Uncle Daniel's "trial" marriage to Bonnie Dee Peacock, a wispy seventeen-year-old from Polk, Mississippi. In a sense Welty's plot, if indeed that term can be used with The Ponder Heart, revolves around trials: the trial marriage, the trials "across the street from the Beulah, in the Courthouse," that Daniel was so fond of (p. 49), and the trial of Uncle Daniel for the murder of Bonnie Dee. In fact, as Charles Davis points out, the name Daniel means "God is my judge" and suggests, along with the Biblical allusion of the surname Ponder, that Welty here records the trial of Uncle Daniel by the townspeople of Clay and Polk who are themselves incapable of judging anyone.²

Edna Earle decides to arrange for Uncle Daniel to marry Miss Teacake Sistrunk Magee who sings solo in the Baptist Church choir--mainly because Daniel is in his forties and needs someone to take care of him. This marriage does not work out, however, and Grandpa sends Uncle Daniel to the asylum in Jackson. Once when Grandpa takes Daniel back to Jackson a mistake is made: Grandpa is locked up and Daniel

returns home telling everyone about the joke. Meanwhile Bonnie Dee Peacock--poor, ignorant and mercenary--has come from Polk to seek her fortune in Clay. Uncle Daniel uses Grandpa's absence to marry Bonnie Dee--a "trial" marriage for her, and she and Uncle Daniel move into the Ponder home- place with Narciss, the family cook and chauffeur. After five and one half years of the "trial" marriage, Bonnie Dee runs away to Memphis, sending Uncle Daniel into depression. Of course Edna Earle takes care of him, but Uncle Daniel "just didn't want to be by himself" (p. 56). Finally Edna Earle and Judge Tip Clanahan, the Ponder family's lawyer and best friend, compose a poem and send it to the Memphis newspaper:

Bonnie Dee Ponder, come back to Clay.
 Many are tired of you being away.
 O listen to me, Bonnie Dee Ponder,
 Come back to Clay, or husband will wonder.
 (p. 59)

Bonnie Dee returns, moves back into the Ponder home, and throws Uncle Daniel out. She begins to order items from mail order houses in Memphis: clothes, a washing machine (the Ponder home has no electricity), a telephone. About this time Edna Earle begins to meddle again; Uncle Daniel is "happy" living in the Beulah hotel with Bonnie Dee "out yonder dressing up and playing lady with Narciss" (p. 69). Edna Earle thinks, "Could I go on letting Uncle Daniel think that was the right way to be happy? Could you let your

uncle?" (p. 69). So Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel drive out to convince Bonnie Dee to take him back; a lightning storm breaks just as they get there, and Bonnie Dee dies on the couch in Uncle Daniel's embrace. The remainder of The Ponder Heart consists of Uncle Daniel's trial for the murder of his beloved Bonnie Dee, and Miss Welty keeps the reader in suspense as to the exact cause of her death. Edna Earle strives to protect him, but eventually we learn from her that Uncle Daniel tickled Bonnie Dee to death trying to relieve her fright from the storm. The trial breaks up when Uncle Daniel, in one final act of generosity, gives away all the Ponder money:

Uncle Daniel stood still a minute on the witness stand. Then he flung both arms wide, and his coat flew open. And there were all his pockets lined and bursting with money. I told you he looked fat. He stepped down to the floor, and out through the railing . . . and commences handing out big green handfuls as he comes, on both sides. (p. 144)

Any attempt to summarize the plot of this novel will inevitably miss the elusive flavor of Edna Earle's ceaseless talk, unfortunately. For it is this talk, along with the other local color elements, which make The Ponder Heart a masterpiece of entertaining fiction. Understandably, the few critics who examine The Ponder Heart in any detail focus on the local color and on Miss Welty's achievement as a story teller.

Ruth Vande Kieft, for example, speaks of Uncle Daniel's ruling passion or "humour," his "over-generosity." She also mentions the comedy of the novel, "which is inherent in the speaker's tone and manner of speech as much as in characters and situations." But Vande Kieft disavows finding any deeper significance in the humorous escapades of the Ponders: ". . . the story is not a parable; it is a light-hearted 'murder mystery'--Miss Welty's single venture into that particular fictional mode."³ Similarly, Appel describes The Ponder Heart as little more than "a comic portrait of an indefatigable talker,"⁴ and Neil Isaacs sees little here beyond what he terms a "performance"--a tour de force of attitude and language.⁵

Perhaps the most accurate account of this viewpoint is Merrill Skaggs' recognition that The Ponder Heart, even if it is not profound, stands as a supreme achievement in local color writing. Skaggs points out the many local color traditions used by Welty, like the "uppity" prosecuting attorney Dorris R. Gladney and the "casual" judge, Judge Waite; Skaggs describes the hilarious courtroom scene as the "culmination of a southern genre of humor . . . begun by southwestern humorists." Hence to Skaggs, whatever may be absent from the novel it remains the "quintessential product of the plain folk tradition, expertly manipulated by a talented writer."⁶

While it must be admitted that The Ponder Heart is not as profound as, say Delta Wedding or Losing Battles, it

nevertheless is much richer in meaning than most critics have allowed. And it also must be admitted that this novel does not appear to focus on time as a theme, certainly not in the same degree as the other novels. But the laughable misadventures of these characters are performed on basically the identical stage of the more sombre novels, and with the same persistent refrain: time and change move on, relentlessly. In the face of time, laughter is no more effective nor any less a defense than is weeping. One can be "tickled" to death as is Bonnie Dee Peacock, or one can cry cynical tears and die as does Cassie Morrison's mother in The Golden Apples: time eventually is victorious in either case.

A few critics recognize but do not pursue the ramifications of the time theme in The Ponder Heart. Edward Weeks, in a review of the novel, says that Welty discloses "the vagaries, and loyalty, and the experience of a fading gentility."⁷ Charles Davis mentions that the "close family ties of the Ponders" are insufficient "to survive time."⁸ Ellen McNutt Millsaps views the entire novel as a "recitation of family history" and concludes that here the "traditional" family, represented by the Ponders, is dying out and being replaced by the "modern" family represented by Bonnie Dee Peacock.⁹ And Robert Holland observes that Welty records the spoken word of her characters as a "vocalization of the design of the culture in which

they move." Thus, Holland argues, Welty's characters employ the verbal traditions of the South as one way to order the present world and to provide comfort from the unpleasant:

If verbal order is a reflection of the "design" of Southern culture, it is also an assuagement for defeat. As the only defeated man in the nation, the Southerner is historically on the defensive; his verbal posturing is an assertion of ego in compensation.¹⁰

Certainly one of the "unpleasantries" to which Holland alludes (although he never speaks of it directly) must be the passing of time. So far we have seen a multitude of responses to time, varying from Clement Musgrove's debilitating reveries in The Robber Bridegroom to King MacLain's stubborn head-butting in The Golden Apples. Not even in the time-protected world of Shellmound Plantation, though, do we observe the apparent obliviousness to time as is implied in The Ponder Heart. As we shall see, however, Edna Earle's constant chatter and the laughter it provokes cannot conceal the very serious onslaught of time. As Miss Welty writes:

time may pass at many different rates: it can throb like a pulse, tick like a bomb, beat like the waves of a rising tide against the shore, it can be made out as the whisper of attrition, or come to an end with the explosion of a gun. ("Some Notes on Time," p. 486)

In The Ponder Heart time seems to move slowly and quietly, "as the whisper of attrition," but it moves inexorably nevertheless.

In a sense Edna McNutt Millsaps is quite correct when she sums up The Ponder Heart as a "recitation of family history." The Ponders, like so many families of the South, take pride in their name which to them is synonymous with a genteel tradition and abundance. Grandpa Sam Ponder, for example, is "of the old school" which maintains high ideals for himself and for other people (p. 8). Edna Earle's pride in her grandmothers and mamma is reflected in her list of their accomplishments, and Grandma Ponder's name is preserved against time in the Beulah Bible Class and Beulah Hotel (p. 21).

But there has been a gradual attrition in the Ponder fitness for the world, a fact which is symbolized, perhaps, by the beating Ponder heart--which overflows with love and kindness but which is subject to palpitations and speed-ups. When Grandpa Ponder is mistakenly taken for Daniel and locked up in the asylum, and then returns home to discover Daniel has brought in a new bride, Miss Bonnie Dee Peacock, he understandably suffers a heart attack and dies (p. 40). Throughout the novel, Dr. Ewbanks and Edna Earle worry about Uncle Daniel's "racing heart" (p. 61). Ironically, it seems that the more generosity and love the Ponder heart holds, the weaker it becomes and the less capable of surviving in the world. Uncle Daniel, for example, whose mindless and selfless generosity is both his bane and greatest strength, is unable to function outside of Clay except in the state asylum at Jackson (p. 53).

In fact, Uncle Daniel must give away the Ponder fortune, just as he must talk and tell his stories--as the "best way . . . [he] can keep alive" (p. 70). These compulsions are his way to avoid succumbing to the passing of time. Edna Earle realizes that the old world of the Ponders, and of their idealistic values, has gone forever. She describes the Beulah Hotel, for example:

It was Grandma's by inheritance, and used to be perfectly beautiful before it lost its paint, and the sign and the trees blew down in front, but he [Grandpa Ponder] didn't care for where it stood, right in the heart of Clay. And with the town gone down so--with nearly all of us gone . . . and with the wrong element going spang through the middle of it at ninety miles an hour on that new highway, he'd a heap rather not have a hotel than have it. (p. 13)

More than anyone else in the novel, Edna Earle seems aware of time, its passing, and its effects. She dates Uncle Daniel's sojourn in the asylum, for instance, by the fact that "it was the last year we had a passenger train at all" (p. 16). Later, she recalls how Professor Magee, husband of Uncle Daniel's first wife, had died: "A passenger train hit him. That shows you how long ago his time was" (p. 21). Throughout the novel, Edna Earle reminds us that she and Uncle Daniel are the only two surviving Ponders (p. 55, p. 146). Surely part of Welty's irony here resides in this revelation that the two most generous Ponders, one a kindly moron and the other a confirmed spinster, will bequeath their world entirely away to people like the

mercenary Peacocks. Uncle Daniel, of course, elicits pathos, because he is totally ignorant of his fate just as he is totally innocent. He cannot conceive that Edna Earle has a life and a story to tell of her own (p. 70)--but she does. The reader's gradual realization, along with Edna Earle's, that she does not have a future of her own creates some of the most poignant moments of the novel.

Despite her frequent references to Mr. Ovid Springer (a drug salesman) as her suitor, Edna Earle is only playing a game with herself and with the townspeople. Deep down she knows that her future is "intended to look after Uncle Daniel" (p. 26). She pretends to believe that she and Mr. Springer will marry and keep Daniel as a permanent ward, as "in plenty of marriages there's three--three all your life" (p. 26). How can she hope for a future when even the present is preoccupied with Uncle Daniel? Her selfless dedication to him often interferes with her own activities. As Charles Davis notes, for example, "Ovid" Springer is "an incredibly inept lover whose trips to Clay invariably include boring dates with Edna Earle."¹¹ Boring dates, it might be added, that usually include Uncle Daniel: Edna Earle recalls that sometimes she went "for a quick ride before dark with Mr. Springer when he was tired (so tired I drove) and Uncle Daniel sitting up behind" (p. 69).

Edna Earle has reconciled herself to a role of self-denial which, paradoxically, is her only reason for

living. Without Uncle Daniel, Edna Earle's life would have no meaning whatsoever, for she even talks and thinks for him: "I'm the go-between, that's what I am, between my family and the world. I hardly ever get a word in for myself" (p. 120). Of course we should not take Edna Earle too seriously, for clearly she does manage to "get a word in" for herself over and over again. Her "selfless" dedication to Uncle Daniel becomes, then, her reason for living, and she constantly reminds the townspeople and the stranger to whom she speaks of her charity. Nevertheless, her protection of Daniel does interfere with any plans she might consider for her future. When she considers what to do with the old Ponder homeplace, for example, she can only postpone instead of act:

Nobody lives in the house now. The Pepper family we've got on the place don't do a thing but run it. A chinchilla farm may be the answer. But that's the future. Don't think about it, Edna Earle, I say. So I just cut out a little ad about a booklet that you can send off for, and put it away in a drawer--I forget where. (p. 44)

Perhaps it is significant, after all, that the Ponder coat-of-arms hangs so prominently over the clock (p. 73). In a sense the once prestigious Ponder family represents how the best of Clay, Mississippi, has been defeated by time. Instead of leading the other people in the never-ending struggle against time, the Ponders seem to have become hostages themselves. No one cares about fighting any

more. The Ponders' best friend, Judge Tip Clanahan, refuses to help at Uncle Daniel's trial; instead, he slips off to Hot Springs to relax (p. 83). Although Tip's grandson, De Yancey Clanahan, does serve as Uncle Daniel's defense attorney, after the trial De Yancey is impatient "to get drunk"--apparently drunkenness is the "Clanahan failing" (p. 152) and serves as another way to escape responsibility. Judge Waite (whose name suggests one who postpones decisions until a later time) does his best to be fair and conscientious, but he is "behind the times" (p. 118) and unable to control his own courtroom.

The citizens of Clay, including Uncle Daniel and Edna Earle Ponder, have ceased to struggle against time. Louis Rubin, Jr., judges that Welty's characters "do not contend with time" but "pretend that it does not exist."¹² Clearly Rubin's generalization does not accurately describe characters like Clement Musgrove or Virgie Rainey, but the characters in The Ponder Heart do seem to have surrendered to the attritions of time. What few efforts the characters do muster are inconsequential, for the most part, and generate more a sense of pathos than of heroic struggle. Uncle Daniel's attempts to give away the Ponder fortune, for example, merely complete the basically meaningless cycle of his life. As Edna Earle describes it, Uncle Daniel's life goes nowhere in time, for in a sense his life stopped back in the past when his mental and emotional development ended:

And Uncle Daniel had got right back to where he started from. He went from giving away to falling in love, and from falling in love to talking, and from talking to losing what he had, and from losing what he had to being run off, and from being run off straight back to giving away again. (p. 148)

While it may be true, as Robert Drake maintains, that Uncle Daniel possesses the "love which never fails, never questions, but waits and is patient,"¹³ so also might a faithful German Shepherd. Welty does not advocate that we all become as Uncle Daniel--meek, naive, and unable to cope with the world. Quite to the contrary, while Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel do have admirable qualities, namely their Ponder charity, they are no longer effective in their struggle against time. That is, in essence they have given up.

Edna Earle is also a loving individual, and if Uncle Daniel does not realize that his life is a battle against time it is mainly because she has so successfully protected him. But Edna Earle is not totally oblivious to time and its effects: she recognizes time's erosion on the town as we have noted, on the cook Narciss, and on Grandpa's old Studebaker, "both getting older by the minute" (p. 43). Edna Earle's problem with time is slightly different from Uncle Daniel's; because of the many disguises time wears, Edna Earle does not understand what or whom she must fight against.

Time is an insidious enemy in The Ponder Heart. It does its work slowly and methodically, almost imperceptibly,

yet it is devastating none the less. Although Edna Earle is occasionally cognizant of the passing of time, for example, she does not seem to be aware of time's effect on her. As she sits in the lobby of the Beulah Hotel recalling the events that led up to Uncle Daniel's trial, Edna Earle most certainly has had ample time to evaluate the importance of the past several days. Thus, that she remembers a vision of herself, as she recalls the panicked activity surrounding Bonnie Dee's death, would normally portend a significant revelation for Edna Earle. Uncle Daniel, of course, had been unable to act once he realized Bonnie Dee was dead or unconscious. Edna Earle recollects:

Of course I couldn't go off and leave him there, to get help. I only ran after the ammonia, and that only takes a second, because I know where to find it. In the bathroom I glanced in the mirror, to see how I was taking it, and got the fright of my life. Edna Earle, I said, you look old as the hills! (p. 142)

But this is merely an observation for Edna Earle, nothing more. There is no further pause for contemplation as occurs, for example, in Fitzgerald's "The Rich Boy" when Anson Hunter sees an old gray man with watery eyes, is reminded of his own age, and grows depressed. It is as if Edna Earle is so inured to the deprivations and attenuations of time that she is no longer interested except in some objective, impersonal way. She may be briefly frightened by her image in the mirror, but there is no epiphany here for Edna Earle,

nor will there be later on. What Welty calls the "attrition" of time has happened so subtly that no one, not even Edna Earle, is alarmed enough to take action.

If Edna Earle observes but is not sufficiently disturbed by the effects of time on her and on her town, it is at least partly because the "enemy" is so deceptively easy-going. The worst kind of enemy is one that seems to present no immediate threat until it is too late, and this impending future in The Ponder Heart comes in the guise of the Peacock family. At first sight the Peacocks would seem less a threat than an offense against human propriety:

The Peacocks are the kind of people keep the mirror outside on the front porch, and go out and pick railroad lilies to bring inside the house, and wave at trains til the day they die. The most they probably hoped for was that somebody'd come find oil in the front yard and fly in the house and tell them about it. Bonnie Dee was one of nine or ten, and no bigger than a minute. A good gust of wind might have carried her off any day. (p. 29)

The Peacocks, particularly Bonnie Dee, are so backwards and naive that no one, certainly not the charitable Edna Earle, would ever consider them an enemy. Edna Earle endeavors to rationalize the Peacocks' behavior, especially Bonnie Dee's:

The way I look back at Bonnie Dee, her story was this. She'd come up from the country--and before she knew it, she was right back in the country. Married or no From the kind of long pink fingernails she kept in the ten cent store, that hadn't been her idea at all. Not her dream. (p. 49)

Even at the end of the novel, Edna Earle still feels only kindness for Bonnie Dee, who "ordinary as she was . . . [is] the kind of person you do miss" (p. 156).

Ordinary, poor and frail, ignorant--the Peacocks clearly seem to be no threat to the Ponders and their way of life. Yet they are, for the Peacocks possess one strength that the Ponders lack: the ability to adapt with time and thus to survive. When the Clay entourage visits Polk for Bonnie Dee's funeral, Edna Earle discovers the Polk countryside as the wasteland she had already imagined: no grass, old auto tires in the yards, the church a burned-out shell, even the mirror on the Peacocks' front porch (p. 76). Edna Earle notes that Polk "did use to be on the road" (p. 79) and that the Peacocks "at one time used to amount to something" (p. 78). Now, however, neither town nor family "amounts" to much, for time seems to have passed them by.

Bonnie Dee, though, decides to "get up and follow" (p. 78) the road; she is determined to adapt with time and to survive no matter what the cost. And for a while, at least, Bonnie Dee does manage to avoid time's changes. A few weeks after Bonnie Dee and Uncle Daniel marry, for example, Edna Earle describes her as "Seventeen years old and seemed like she just stayed seventeen" (p. 42). The trial marriage lasts for "five years and six months" (p. 48) before Bonnie Dee runs away to Memphis, but when she returns

she "looked just exactly the same--seventeen" (p. 59). Even after she dies Bonnie Dee still looks seventeen (p. 77), so evidently she, unlike Edna Earle, holds up well to the passing of time.

Bonnie Dee does die, of course, which would appear to stop time for the Peacocks--just as time will stop for the Ponder family when Edna Earle and Uncle Daniel are gone. However, probably because of the severity of their earlier struggles, the Peacocks--somewhat like the Renfros in Losing Battles--are better prepared to fight and to survive. At least the Peacocks are fully aware that life must be a struggle, a fact about which the Ponders have become complacent. For the Peacocks every moment is important, and they insist on knowing the correct time and how they are progressing. Throughout Uncle Daniel's trial, for example, old man Peacock keeps "raising up from his seat and intoning, 'anybody here got a timepiece?'" (p. 105). Another advantage the Peacocks possess in the battle to survive is their family size. When Edna Earle sees the family piling from the truck Uncle Daniel had given them, she counts the "girls going down in stairsteps looking funnier and funnier in Bonnie Dee's parceled-out clothes, and boys all ages and sizes . . ." (p. 87). There are many Peacocks to take the place of Bonnie Dee. Edna Earle's understatement, "They're not dying out," (p. 87) reminds us that the Ponders are dying out, and rather rapidly. And

fortunately or not, the Peacocks and their kind are ready to inherit the earth.

In The Ponder Heart, Welty seems to criticize an economic and social system that has turned sour with time. Neither the abundant wealth and quaint noblesse oblige of the Ponders nor the crass materialism of the Peacocks is a viable alternative in the contemporary world of Clay, Mississippi, for both families (and both perspectives) depend too heavily on money to protect them from the fortunes of time. The Ponders, because they do still feel love and charity for their fellow man, clearly represent Miss Welty's preferred response to life, but they are out of step with the rest of the world. Even more importantly, they have grown insensitive to the steady attrition of time and now do not comprehend its effect on themselves. Hence at the end of the novel Welty projects a bleak future for the two surviving Ponders, for "money has come between . . . [them] and everybody else in town" (p. 155). Now there is nothing for Uncle Daniel to enjoy, only the "Empty house, empty hotel," and there "might as well be an empty town" (p. 154).

The Ponder Heart is probably Welty's most humorous novel, at least rivaling Losing Battles for that honor. The humor here seems light-hearted, what Neil Isaacs terms "a parade of humorous characters in a pageant of humorous episodes."¹⁴ The humor is deceptive, though, in that it

masks with a smile the fundamental pathos of the lives of these characters. In Welty's previous novels, time was usually a hard-hitting and often destructive opponent; therefore, characters could put up the good fight although they would eventually lose, of course. Or they might seek to hide from time in a sheltered environment, which is exemplified most patently in Delta Wedding. In a very special sense, though, The Ponder Heart presents Welty's continuing concern with her characters' responses to time. Ultimately, I believe, the Ponders and the Peacocks represent the nadir of human reaction to time: they have given up the struggle. It will remain for the characters in Losing Battles and The Optimist's Daughter to renew the effort and, hopefully, discover a judicious strategy that will enable them to live in meaningful compromise with time.

CHAPTER VI

STRATAGEMS AGAINST TIME: LOSING BATTLES

In many ways Losing Battles (1970)¹ is Eudora Welty's most ambitious novel. What began "as a story of the return of a boy from the pen"² grew until it became a grand experiment in point of view: by far the longest of Welty's works, Losing Battles consists almost entirely of dialogue with very few stage directions by the author. As Lucinda MacKethan acknowledges, here is a narrative "without a true center of consciousness who actively reflects on the world around him."³ There is virtually no attempt to provide the characters' thoughts,⁴ and the only hints as to these people's innermost conflicts are their actions and, more frequently, their words. Hence MacKethan concludes that Losing Battles "offers an experiment in focusing that makes it unique among Miss Welty's works."⁵

Because the meaning of Losing Battles inheres in its surface detail, a summary of its plot would seem judicious. Welty delineates the setting as "a summer in the 1930's" in "The hill country of northeast Mississippi." Most of the action occurs from dawn to dusk on a Sunday at or around the home of Ralph and Beulah Beecham Renfro, but the events spill over into the next day and into nearby Banner Community. The specific occasion is the Renfro-Beecham

reunion which coincides with the ninetieth birthday of Elvira Jordan Vaughn, Beulah's mother and the "Granny" who reared all of the Beecham children--much as Aunt Mac reared the parentless Fairchilds in Delta Wedding. As the novel opens, the reunion eagerly anticipates the arrival of Jack Renfro, the oldest son of Ralph and Beulah and the chief hope of the family to save them from destitution -- this even though Jack is not due to be released from Parchman prison for at least another day. Gathered at the Renfro's newly tin-roofed house are an assortment of Renfros, Beechams, and in-laws, along with Jack's wife Gloria and his daughter, Lady May, about whom Jack has not been told.

Characters from outside the Renfro-Beecham clan have significant roles in the drama that will ensue. Judge Oscar Moody (who had sentenced Jack to prison) and his wife are invited to participate after Jack, Gloria, and Lady May force the Moody's car off the Banner Road and onto a cliff. Undoubtedly some of the most hilarious scenes in all of literature center around the efforts to extricate the Judge's Buick from its teetering position on Banner Top, where it sits--engine running--the entire day and night of the reunion. Another important outsider, Miss Julia Mortimer, the teacher at Banner School, has just recently died and does not appear in the novel; nevertheless, Miss Julia's influence on the other characters here has been overwhelming and her role is as crucial as if she were alive. With these major characters

and a multitude of "extras" from the surrounding countryside, Miss Welty creates a novel which is part slapstick comedy and part detective story, part seemingly trivial talk and part deadly earnest inquiry into the predicament of modern man.

While Losing Battles is indeed a richly connotative, even ambiguous novel, critics generally agree that the novel is about human struggle (as the title suggests) more than about anything else. The chief differences of interpretation stem from an endeavor to ascertain the specific nature of the human battles and to decide if, ultimately, Welty is optimistic or pessimistic about mankind's future. William McMillan, for example, finds the main battle is between two lifestyles, that represented by Julia Mortimer (intellectual, barren, future oriented) and that represented by Granny (physical, fruitful, past oriented). For McMillan there is no irony or ambiguity in the novel's conclusion: Jack and Gloria will "step into a new and hopeful life" because they have managed to join "both the physical world of Granny Vaughn and the intellectual world of Julia Mortimer."⁶

Actually, of course, the struggles in the novel take place on several different but related levels. While some critics like McMillan focus on the individual skirmishes of Jack and Gloria, other writers emphasize the changes in family structure that are hinted at here. Clearly Granny and the Beecham-Renfro crowd compose a traditional consanguine

family with shared values and deep roots. Miss Julia Mortimer's new-fangled ideas about progress are a threat to the old family values, as are Gloria's attempts to lure Jack away. But whether the family or Gloria "wins" the battle is not nearly as transparent as McMillan seems to think. Thomas H. Landess, for example, perceives this dichotomy of values but feels that the "conflicting . . . orders are presented with a fine impartiality" Landess adds, "as they emerge from the narrative, both sides have their virtues; but these have been significantly undercut by ironies which finally leave the scales almost perfectly balanced" ⁷

A third level of struggle in the novel involves what M. E. Bradford calls "cultural survival": whether the familiar order of the old South can "absorb and adjust to an alien pressure." Bradford feels that most readers tend to sympathize with Julia Mortimer's progressive philosophy because we are "heirs of the Enlightenment," but that Welty, "from her high perspective" is writing an "elegiac novel." That is, she is not affirming Julia Mortimer's or anybody else's position. Instead, Welty uses the elegiac mode to demonstrate "good losing": the wisdom and courage to go on can come from defeat, and all of these characters (including Miss Julia) are defeated. ⁸

Defeat in the struggles of life may appear to be inevitable in Losing Battles, at least ultimately, but for

a time these characters can create a false sense of security --the illusion of holding their own if not of winning. In this respect Losing Battles may seem like a later version of Delta Wedding, for in both novels ritual and talk become what Carol Moore calls "the prime defense in the Welty fictional world against losing battles."⁹ James Boatwright extends this notion even further, contending that "Losing Battles not only is the voices, and the silences that sometimes lie between them, ticking like time bombs: it is also about speech and silence, about these profoundly curious phenomena." To Boatwright, the "flood of talk" here is a means of survival for the family and the community because it "creates a fragile surface that will hold us up."¹⁰

The characters in Losing Battles have many adversaries: economic conditions, social institutions like the schools and courts, and mental and physical weaknesses within their own personalities. Ultimately, however, each of these characters succeeds or fails depending on how he views himself in relation to the passing of time. As we have already seen, Miss Welty feels that man "is prone to regard time as something of an enemy" ("Some Notes on Time," p. 482). Nowhere else in her novels does she portray this antagonism in as many various forms as she does in Losing Battles. Here time consistently and, it would seem, inevitably, thwarts every endeavor that mankind would initiate, whether on a personal, familial, or social level.

Unlike the enervated characters of The Ponder Heart, however, the people in and around Banner Community never cease to fight back against time. Talk, laughter, work--there are almost as many weapons against time in Losing Battles as there are barefooted urchins roaming the dusty countryside. In the war with time there are defensive as well as offensive tactics, and nominal winners as well as nominal losers; finally, Miss Welty seems to suggest, the strategy one employs and the values one espouses are more important than the winning or the losing.

Welty selects the time and place of the battlefield in Losing Battles with the same clinical procedure that she used for Delta Wedding. In the earlier novel Welty chose a time and place that would allow the almost total isolation of her characters from the outside world, so she could concentrate on the Fairchilds as a family practically unaffected by time. In Losing Battles, by contrast, the author emphasizes not only the regional problems of one family but also the universal implications of their struggle. In this sense, Losing Battles is much less a "Southern" novel than simply a novel about people who are at the nadir of their lives. In her interview with Bunting Miss Welty summarizes her purpose for the setting of Losing Battles:

I wanted to get a year in which I could show people at the rock bottom of their lives, which meant the Depression. I wanted the poorest part of the state . . . where people had the least . . . I wanted . . . to show them when they had really no props to their lives,

had only themselves, plus an indomitable will to live even with losing battles I wanted to take away everything and show them naked as human beings. So that fixed the time and place.¹¹

The Renfro family is indeed at the "rock bottom" of their lives, as are most of the Beechams who come to the reunion. The past has not been kind to Granny and her clan. We learn, for example, about the mysterious deaths of Euclid and Ellen Vaughn Beecham (Beulah's parents), who inexplicably rushed away from home one morning only to crash through the Bywy River bridge, leaving Beulah and her brothers orphans (pp. 214-217). We learn part of the tragic tale of Beulah's brother, Uncle Nathan, how he "killed Mr. Dearman with a stone to his head, and let 'em hang a sawmill nigger for it" (p. 344). In expiation Nathan cuts off his offending hand and becomes an outcast from his home for the rest of his life. Just as significant as these personal crises, perhaps, is the extreme poverty of the Renfro-Beechams, a poverty which has increased because of Jack's absence.

Jack's imprisonment in Parchman works both for and against his family having any chance in their struggle. The already intolerable conditions of their existence seem to worsen drastically while Jack is away: Curly Stovall, the family nemesis, confiscates their truck and horse; Boone County Courthouse burns, destroying all the family records (p. 68); and Grandpa Vaughn dies. Even worse, a drought strikes the farm so that noching will grow (p. 70).

Because their present lives without Jack seem almost hopeless, and because their past lives have bruised them so severely, the Renfros and Beechams resort to defensive tactics: they formulate their own, less hostile version of the past and retreat there whenever they feel threatened. With words they seek to order the past any way they wish, and since the members of the family dare not question this re-created history, the illusion of security remains intact --at least as long as it is not shattered by the harsh reality of the world of the present.

Control over time is precisely what the family reunion strives to maintain with its ceaseless talk. All of the family members participate, vowing to talk until the "Crack of Doom" (p. 129)--even the family mule wants to tell his story (p. 137). Since the death of Grandpa Vaughn one year ago has left the reunion without its proper leader, the family adopts Brother Bethune, a self-proclaimed preacher and mythmaker (p. 103), as its guiding spokesman. Like Granny Vaughn, Brother Bethune confuses the living with the dead (p. 182); moreover, his muddling of past and present allows the reunion to forget about the painful little details of the family history. Privation, tragedy, even death are acceptable ingredients of the family's story, for these can be made heroic and hence gratifying. When the integrity of a family member is questioned, however, the plot of the tale is cunningly re-created or details are omitted entirely. For

example, the drownings of Mamma and Papa Beecham make a glorious story until someone asks why they ran away, as does Aunt Beck (p. 218), and then the members of the reunion seem confounded. Evidently that part of the story has been "lost to time," as Uncle Curtis remarks (p. 218); the intimation which the reunion suppresses, though, is that the parents were trying to abandon Beulah and her brothers (p. 217).

Similarly, when Uncle Nathan's dark secret from the past is almost revealed, Beulah jumps to his defense. In the process, though, she presses to maintain an illusion that will justify her lie and make heroic a somewhat less than grand family history. Aunt Cleo, the new wife of Noah Webster Beecham, is understandably curious about the family she has married into, and especially perplexed by Nathan's missing hand and strange behavior. When she asks, "Well, what's he got to hide?" Beulah's reply is over-zealous, part reality and part fabrication:

"Sister Cleo, I don't know what in the world ever guides your tongue into asking the questions it does!" Miss Beulah cried. "By now you ought to know this is a strict law-abiding, God-fearing, close-knit family, and everybody in it has always struggled the best he knew how and we've all just tried to last as long as we can by sticking together." (p. 344)

Part of the irony here, of course, is that Beulah really believes her own version of the truth, and in a sense her family is "law-abiding" and "God-fearing." As long as her

version of the truth is not tested by the external world, Beulah is free to "believe what she wants to believe" (p. 267). Therefore, as Michael Kreyling points out, the reunion "can hold the past within the present, erase unwanted time or events that do not fit into the archetypal pattern"; thus the clan eliminates the "pressure of the future by making existence the constantly recurring pattern of what has always been."¹² But to the outside observer, as Judge Moody notices, Beulah twists details in order to fabricate an illusion of truth or fact. When the "law-abiding" actions of Jack conflict with the established laws of the land--as when Jack lugs home Curly Stovall's safe--then Jack must go to prison and the family's version of fact is revealed to be superficial. Miss Welty seems to be suggesting that man can control the past and the present as long as he hides in his closet: this family, for instance, invents, deletes, and changes the "facts" of the past to suit its needs. This stratagem against time is exemplified most blatantly in the reunion's explanation of Gloria Short Renfro's parentage.

Gloria Short Renfro looms as the chief menace to the solidarity of the Renfro-Beecham family. Whereas the family is content to live in an illusory past-present, to do so they must throw up a wall against the outside world and against the future. At first the family might believe that "Gloria's a little nobody from out of nowhere" as Aunt Beck

says (p. 60), but they soon learn she is a force to contend with. She easily takes control of the reunion, for example, when its members want to follow her and Jack to Judge Moody's car (p. 93). Throughout the novel, Gloria is a woman with a plan--she had previously calculated to become a teacher, then to marry Jack, and now she is determined to force Jack to leave his family and move away with her. Therefore Gloria represents a double threat to the reunion and to the Renfro-Beecham family: she will escape with their savior, Jack, who has promised them bountiful crops and better lives, and she exists only for the future whereas they dwell in the past. Throughout the novel, Gloria rejects what little she knows about her past as unimportant and declares her allegiance with the future:

"I'm one to myself, and nobody's kin, and my own boss, and nobody knows the one I am or where I came from," she said. "And all that counts in life is up ahead."
(p. 315)

This orientation towards the future is especially antagonistic to the members of the reunion, for it runs against every notion of security they have fostered by illusion. If the future is all that is real, then their belief in the defenses of the past is a lie. As Kreyling sums up their dilemma:

For the reunion the future is an unknown concept. The past and the present, interchangeable in the circle of existence, are all they know or care of time. But for

the likes of Gloria, time is not a circle which eternally turns up the identical pattern, but a road that leads ahead, and runs to an end whether people keep up with it or not.¹³

Therefore the family must defend themselves against Gloria's attack or admit that their lives are not "keeping up" with time. They decide, of course, to defend themselves against Gloria's assault. Their strategy is to absorb Gloria into the family circle and thus render her powerless, for once an outsider joins the Renfro-Beecham family she must also comply with the family's concept of time.

In detective novel fashion, Miss Welty withholds and reveals clues to the mysterious past of Gloria Short--who had been placed on the doorstep of the Boone County home demonstration agent and had been named after the "glorious" but "short" day she was carried to the orphanage (p. 255). Many years later, when she rejected the life of a teacher and decided to marry Jack Renfro, Gloria was warned by Miss Julia Mortimer "that there was a dark thread . . . running through my story somewhere" (p. 251). But Gloria stubbornly ignored the past then, as she continues to do: "I said it suited me all right kept dark the way it was. I didn't mind being a mystery--I was used to it" (p. 251).

But the reunion can never forget the past, unless of course it is painful to the Renfro-Beecham family. Since Gloria's past is unknown for the most part, the reunion feels free to create a past for her--a past that, fortuitously for

the family, will bring Gloria into the Beecham family and force her to surrender to their concept of time. Welty's brilliant stroke of irony here produces another dilemma for the family and one that underlines a central message of this section of the novel: the father the family conjures up for Gloria is Sam Dale Beecham (the last heroic Beecham, the one idolized in much the same way that Denis Fairchild was worshipped in Delta Wedding). The reunion also speculates that Gloria's mother was Rachel Sojourner, a young girl who had visited Miss Julia Mortimer when the teacher lived with the Beecham family. The irony here is patent, but masterful. If Gloria's father was Sam Dale Beecham, then she becomes a blood member of the family and must yield to the family's conception of time and history; Gloria will no longer be able to alienate Jack from his family and will not take him away. What the reunion does not realize at this point is that Mississippi law forbids the marriage of cousins, and if Gloria and Jack are indeed cousins they must either flee to another state or go to prison. Here again Welty demonstrates how the Renfro-Beecham family's attempts to change or re-create the past backfires when they must confront the external world.

Although Gloria insists she will accept neither the Beechams nor the Sojourners as her past, the family is resolved to initiate her into the reunion, thus hopefully nullifying her attack on their values. Certainly one of

the pivotal scenes in Losing Battles occurs when the women of the reunion attempt to force Gloria to say "Beecham," signifying her capitulation to the family's version of the past. The women pelt Gloria with watermelon, stuff it in her clothes and hair, and finally wrestle her to the ground, in what William McMillan calls "an attempt to rape Gloria of any individuality."¹⁴ This endeavor to strip Gloria of her assertive, future-oriented individuality is instigated, we should remember, by all of the Aunts who themselves had once been forced to surrender to the Beecham values. As they are caught up in the ecstasy of the ritual, it becomes clear that the Aunts now consider themselves part of the reunion, but that at one time in the past they also had sacrificed their individuality:

"Come on, sisters, help feed her! Let's cram it down her little red lane! Let's make her say Beecham! We did!" came the women's voices. (p. 269)

But Gloria does not give in easily. She refuses to say "Beecham" and she refuses to surrender to the family's attack on her individuality. For Gloria to accept the reunion's concept of time would be painful because her past has been painful; unlike the Renfro-Beecham family, Gloria could never accept an epistemology which held that one could know the past by re-creating it in any mythologized way he sees fit. Instead, Gloria's way of escaping the pain of the past is simply to forget it. Thus she hopes to live entirely in the present for the future.

Gloria derives her talent for focusing on the future from her period of tutelage with Miss Julia Mortimer. There Gloria learned to work diligently, emulating Miss Julia, so the younger girl could continue to "pass on the torch" of education to future generations (p. 244). Now that she has rejected the "sacrifice" of Julia's lifestyle and has chosen instead to marry Jack Renfro, Gloria is just as determined to control her future. She realizes, though, that to have Jack means to rescue him from the clutching hands of his family and from their past, as she exclaims to the reunion: "I've been trying to save him since the day I saw him first." When Beulah incredulously asks, "From what?" Gloria shouts, "This mighty family! And you can't make me give up!" (p. 320).

For the moment Gloria is able to withstand the barrage of words thrown at her by the reunion. For the moment the issue of whether Gloria and Jack will become absorbed back into the Beecham past or strike out boldly into their own future is left unresolved. This--whether the past or the future more deserves our allegiance--is the central issue of Losing Battles. Miss Welty's only hint at this juncture is ambiguous. When Beulah asks Gloria "just how" she is going to escape, the response by Gloria is vague:

"That's still for the future to say." And she looked out to see the distance, but beyond the bright porch she couldn't see anything at all. (p. 320)

The woman from whom Gloria learns her respect for the future, Miss Julia Mortimer, was not nearly so ambivalent in her goals as is Gloria. Miss Julia's values, and those of her protégé Judge Moody, lie at the very crux of the issue being considered here. As Michael Kreyling observes, "Julia Mortimer is the leader of the forces of the historical consciousness in the novel, just as Granny Vaughn is the head of the clan."¹⁵ Any effort to interpret the ultimate meaning of Losing Battles must deal with Miss Julia Mortimer.

After the reunion "solves" the puzzle of Gloria's parentage, the talk lacks focus; indeed "quiet threatened" (p. 340) to let the darkness of night and silence prevail. However, it soon becomes obvious that the war of words will not cease and that the recently deceased Julia Mortimer will now become the topic of discussion. Although Welty uses battle imagery throughout the novel, it is probably Julia's reference to battles that most directly leads to the novel's title. From the letter she mailed him right before her death, Judge Moody reads the following:

"All my life I've fought a hard war with ignorance. Except in those cases that you can count off on your fingers, I lost every battle. Year in, year out, my children at Banner School took up the cause of the other side and held the fort against me. We both fought faithfully and singlemindedly, bravely, maybe even fairly. Mostly I lost, they won. But as long as I was still young, I always thought if I could marshal strength enough of body and spirit and push with it, every ounce, I could change the future'" (p. 298).

It would seem that Miss Julia, like Miss Eckhart in The Golden Apples, is defeated by time. Gloria and Virgie Rainey, who personify the future for the two teachers, seem to rebel against the values the older women held so precious. But while Virgie Rainey strays for awhile into the time-burdened world the music teacher hoped to escape, at the end of The Golden Apples Virgie once again discovers a harmonious relationship with the past, present, and future. Similarly in Losing Battles, that Gloria marries into the Renfro family represents only a temporary set-back for her at worst. The values Miss Julia inculcated in Gloria are permanent, and even if Julia loses a battle here and there the war will go on.

Perhaps Thomas Landess has a cogent argument when he points out that Miss Julia's "failure to marry and to fulfill a traditional social role is only indicative of a larger and more radical deficiency in her nature."

Mr. Landess continues:

For Miss Julia, admirable as she may seem to be, is an abstractionist, one whose view of life is unconditional and a priori. She always sees the world not as it is but as it ought to be, and thus she lives in the future rather than in the present, which can accommodate the past and is concretely real.¹⁶

While Miss Julia was perhaps foolish in her bulldog tenacity to educate the ignorant--even when the people are too proud to learn (p. 236), and even after a cyclone disrupts the

school routine--her persistence must be viewed as admirable. Miss Julia could never be a perfunctory person; she cared deeply about everyone and everything and sought to improve the circumstances which prevented impoverished human beings from realizing their potential. Hence she bought and "carted milk to school in a ten-gallon can" for the poor children of Banner, even though she probably was not surprised when these same children poured the milk out on the ground because of their family pride (p. 236). While it is certainly true that Miss Julia stubbornly fought for a future of enlightenment and physical well-being for her reluctant pupils, at the same time she kept a firm grip on the ignorance and poverty of the present. To call this "abstractionist," it seems to me, is to mis-interpret the elements of caricature that are an integral part of almost all the characters in Losing Battles and, for that matter, of most of Welty's characters in the other novels as well. Miss Welty's vision is grand enough to admit that human frailty often causes us to look silly, particularly when we dare challenge the cosmic laws which we cannot comprehend. Just because Welty invites us to laugh, however, does not mean that she condemns a character; if Miss Julia was foolish, Welty seems to suggest, all of us should be more willing to risk such silliness.

Just how are we to take Miss Julia? Does her obsession to change the future render her ineffectual in the present?

Again, to Welty the measure of Miss Julia's success lies not in the battles she won or lost but in the tactics she employed. As we have seen, the Renfro-Beecham clan uses words to construct an essentially defensive, rear-guard action against time: they avoid the future as much as possible by re-creating and lessening the pain of the past-- basically the same strategy utilized by the Fairchilds in Delta Wedding. The only problem with this approach is that the resulting anesthesia can deaden the senses not just to pain, but to life itself. The family circle ritual which is such an important part of the Renfro-Beecham reunion (p. 249), for example, is intended to exclude outsiders just as much as it is to include the family members. Miss Julia's battle plan, on the other hand, is predicated on a much more vital principle: the dissemination of knowledge and life both within and without the Banner Community.

Of course there is a very real sense in which Miss Julia waged nothing more than a war of words, just as do the members of the reunion. All of her huffing about the children never missing a day of school is a good example, as is her absurd demand that she be buried under the door stone of Banner School (p. 291). But probably a better indication of the success or failure of Miss Julia's battles would be a roll call of the troops she has "conquered," that is, of the lives she has touched--with or without their cooperation.

Miss Julia admitted, of course, that her struggle with the "dragon of ignorance" (p. 245) was a losing battle. But the statistics of the war do not necessarily support her claim. If the folk we see in the course of the action here are typical, Miss Julia's successes are quite impressive. Gloria, for example, who was to be Julia's hope to "carry on the torch" to the future, does choose to marry Jack and wage her combat on a more personal level. Julia was successful through Gloria, however, if we can place any confidence in the youthful enthusiasm of Jack's sister, Elvie, who wants to attend Normal after hearing Gloria describe it:

"Come and see me!" Elvie invited her. "That's where I'm going. I'm going to come out a teacher like Sister Gloria." (p. 246)

The rest of the Renfro-Beecham crowd berate Miss Julia, but in the good-humored context of the reunion their criticisms are little more than small talk. Uncle Percy, for example, recalls that "She put an end to good fishing" (p. 235). Uncle Dolphus complains that "She held that five months took out of our lives every year wasn't punishment enough" (p. 235). Uncle Noah Webster is perhaps closer to the true motives of Miss Julia when he laughingly says, "She thought if she mortified you long enough, you might have a hope of turning out something you wasn't!" (p. 236). Gradually, the complex picture of Miss Julia that emerges

from the reunion talk is that of a ridiculed, but loved, lonely woman: Miss Julia's eccentricities, like her sending free peach trees to everyone in Banner (p. 243), reflect her love for the people around her and a desperate reaching out for love and companionship. That she hoped to improve the future for the citizens of Banner is merely another indication of her love for human kind, but Miss Julia also craved reciprocation--which the proud folk of Banner would not give. Thus in Miss Julia Mortimer Welty creates a superbly human character who, neither totally altruistic nor completely selfish, died a solitary victim because she was ahead of her time.

But Miss Julia does change the future. Even Beulah grudgingly admits, "She's responsible for a good deal I know right here today" (p. 234). Uncle Nathan owes his entire life to Miss Julia, for after he killed the Snopes-like Mr. Dearman, Nathan asked the schoolteacher for advice. Her response, typical for her, was optimistic for the future and encouraged Uncle Nathan to never give up:

"Nathan, even when there's nothing left to hope for, you can start again from there, and go your way and be good" (p. 344).

Since that dark moment in his past, Uncle Nathan sees and hears Miss Julia everywhere he wanders (p. 294). The other members of the reunion finally concede that Julia's main failing was, in Aunt Beck's words, that "she put a little

more of her own heart in it [her teaching] than she knew" (p. 294).

Of course Miss Julia's most steadfast and most empathetic advocate is Judge Oscar Moody, but because of his status as an outsider and as the outsider who sentenced Jack to prison, Judge Moody's appraisal of her is not weighed very favorably by the reunion. Nevertheless, he employs basically the same offensive tactics against time as did Miss Julia, and he too, is central to the meaning of the novel. Judge Moody represents Julia's greatest success in controlling the future, for not only did she influence his education but also she was the reason he never moved away from the state to better his career (p. 305). As he sits on a Banner school seat (p. 186) at the reunion, Judge Moody is almost like a child again, this time in the presence of Miss Julia's ghost. He feels that fate has brought him here to the "very pocket of ignorance" (p. 304) so that he can defend and explain Miss Julia's hopes for the future.

Reluctantly Judge Moody is drawn into the inter-meshing puzzles of Gloria's parentage and of Miss Julia's influence over Gloria and the rest of the people at the reunion. The family presents various bits of evidence to "prove" that Sam Dale Beecham was Gloria's father: a postcard from Sam Dale to Rachel Sojourner which describes a watch, a "present for our-baby, save it for when he gets here" (p. 266); the memory that Miss Julia had discovered the distraught Rachel

on Banner Bridge about the time a baby appeared on the county agent's doorstep (p. 257); Granny's announcement that Rachel was Gloria's mother (p. 253). As has been mentioned, the question of Gloria's parentage is critically important, for if Sam Dale Beecham were her father then she and Jack are cousins and are violating Mississippi law. Judge Moody, of course, is the titular representative of that law and would have to enforce it. Hence he finds himself in the unenviable position of perhaps having to take Jack away from his family for a second time.

Although Welty's manipulations of the various pieces of evidence concerning Gloria are intriguing, the emphasis here is clearly on something more than just suspense. Writing about the relationship of time and plot in the detective novel, Welty concludes that plot is a "living metaphor" which is "designed for the searching out of human truth" ("Some Notes on Time," p. 487). In Losing Battles the plot, particularly that part which centers around Judge Moody and his role in the reunion, is concerned with "searching out the human truth" about the effect of time on knowledge.

As a judge, Oscar Moody strives to make decisions about life based on tangible evidence and on reason. He realizes that even with these advantages, the decisions we make about the future are tenuous at best. The lesson to be learned from Miss Julia's life is just that: no matter how hard we fight, no matter how well prepared we are, time changes the

circumstances of battle and leaves us defenseless. In reply to his wife's remark that Julia "Might not have known who she was herself," Judge Moody answers:

"She knew exactly who she was. And what she was. What she didn't know till she got to it was what would happen to what she was. Any more than any of us here know."
(p. 306)

Similarly, Judge Moody has changed with time and now faces the prospect of making a legal and moral decision based on hearsay evidence: this, of course, goes contrary to all his previous training and experience. He now must do the thing he hates the most, taking the law into his own hands (p. 325). At first he demands hard evidence--"My kind of evidence" (p. 322)--but soon he realizes that he must relinquish this requirement, for since the courthouse burned "there's very little of that left now for any of us" (p. 322). Finally Judge Moody decides in favor of the accomplished fact: Gloria and Jack are married and already have a child. No amount of legal evidence can change that, even though it does place the judge in a compromising position:

"It's that baby. I think we'll have to close one eye over that everlasting baby," Judge Moody said. "You end up doing yourself the thing you hate most, the thing you've deplored the loudest and longest . . . Here I am, taking the law into my own hands" (p. 325).

The judge's "way of knowing," as it turns out, is little more accurate or more just than is the family's way. Until now Judge Moody believed in absolutes and denied that

time could alter facts and knowledge: the curé was bequeathed to him by Miss Julia who died affirming that one could change the future. The Renfro-Beecham family, on the other hand, fails to consider the future at all. Instead, they all seem to believe that the past is the proper direction for man to hide from time. Hence their knowledge of the past is slanted by what they want to know, which is often quite meaningless. When it becomes apparent that Judge Moody was quite intimate with Miss Julia, for example, Aunt Birdie challenges his way of knowing with "See if you can tell us her horse's name" (p. 302). Unfortunately, the Renfro-Beecham family quite frequently reduces life to such simplistic terms.

Regardless of Judge Moody's admonition to the contrary, the members of the reunion have faith that they can "change what's happened by taking a voice vote on it" (p. 345). Therein lies the fundamental difference between the reunion's way of knowing and Miss Julia's and the Judge's way: the first consists of nothing but words that can, as a matter of faith, change the past; the second consists of words plus deeds that can, as a matter of fact, affect the future. As a novel that deals substantially with epistemological questions, Losing Battles does not proffer any definitive answers. Indeed, it suggests that both how and what we know are constantly changing because of the effects of time. Consequently, to live in the past or to live for the future

are alternatives equally objectionable because past, present, and future are one ceaselessly flowing river.

In the final analysis, perhaps all of the characters in Losing Battles are caricatures and are foolish in their petty endeavors to outwit time. Miss Welty's ultimate comments about mankind and its battles against time come in the guise of three non-human actors. One is the bois d'arc tree which family legend says was rooted long ago when Grandpa Vaughn stuck his horse switch in the ground and forgot it. This tree hovers over and shelters the reunion, as it did in the past and as it undoubtedly will continue to do for future generations of Renfros and Beechams. In a sense the tree epitomizes the Renfro-Beecham family, and all mankind:

The tree looked a veteran of all the old blows, a survivor. Old wounds on the main trunk had healed leaving scars as big as tubs or wagon wheels . . . (p. 181).

Like the bois d'arc tree, man must learn to grow stronger with time and to accept the wounds of life with unbending pride. Man must use what he learns from the passing of time to foster and protect the future generations, for only then will the scars have any meaning.

A second emblem which contributes to Welty's message in Losing Battles is Beulah's century plant, a variety of which appears in both Delta Wedding and The Golden Apples. The reunion anticipates the plant's blooming throughout the

novel, and when it finally does, Mrs. Moody exclaims, "You've produced a night-blooming cereus! I haven't seen one of those in years" (p. 349). Coming as it does at the end of the reunion, the blooming of the cereus marks an emotional climax of the novel. The family and all attending the reunion have just joined hands in a circle representing their solidarity against whatever the future might bring, and the flower becomes an omen--predicting the rain which will fall during the night and that better times will follow for the Beechams and Renfros. More importantly, however, the conditions under which the plant has thrived indicate that this family, as well as much of mankind, can and will endure the vicissitudes of time. Commenting on the cereus, Beulah describes her family also:

"And not a drop of precious water did I ever spare it," said Miss Beulah. "I reckon it must have thrived on going famished." (p. 349)

As Louise Gossett recognizes, the central attraction in this novel is Judge Moody's car, which "hangs suspended like an extravagant and preposterous image of man and his subjection to the strains of life."¹⁷ Miss Welty seems to laugh with mankind as she creates in the battered automobile a paradigm of human temporality, its engine sounding "like the old courthouse clock trying to strike again, and not making it" (p. 333). As it teeters on Banner Hill, the Buick reminds us that mankind, like the car, can slip

backwards to safety and the past or can plunge directly over the brink to the unknown of the future. In one of the funniest scenes in Losing Battles, the Renfros accompany Judge Moody to Banner Hill to rescue his car. With ropes they form a human chain to pull the car down; the family stretched out in a line, working together, contrasts vividly with the defensive and passive family circle that concluded the reunion. Even here, though, the battle will not be easy. As they hang on for life, the car slipping away, Judge Moody exclaims, "We're holding on here now by the skin of our teeth! Can't conversation ever cease?" (p. 390). Gloria, who has always lived for the future, clings to the rope and gasps, "I don't see our future, Jack We're still where we were yesterday. In the balance" (p. 390).

A tree, a flower, a car--these are Miss Welty's last images of man and his confrontation with time in Losing Battles. Contradictory as these images might seem, they nevertheless capture the essence of man's struggles: the stolid resignation of his eternal vigil for the future (the tree); the fragile brevity of his opportunity (the century plant); and the hilarity of his predicament (the car). There is no resolution of man's conflict with time in Losing Battles, only an uneasy truce. In The Optimist's Daughter Miss Welty portrays the war as breaking out again before it ends, finally, with man living in peace with time.

CHAPTER VII

A RAGE AGAINST TIME: THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

After an initial reading of Welty's latest novel, The Optimist's Daughter (1972),¹ one might be tempted to dwell on the work's typicality. Much like her earlier novels (excepting The Robber Bridegroom, which is unique), The Optimist's Daughter develops around a family ritual: so far we have attended a wedding (Delta Wedding), a trial (The Ponder Heart), a reunion (Losing Battles), and a funeral (The Golden Apples). Perhaps it is only fitting, then, that The Optimist's Daughter treats us to a public funeral with "bridesmaids," Judge and "jury," along with a family reunion of sorts--all in one book.² And of course this novel reminds us of the earlier ones in other ways, also, with its copious talk, small town atmosphere, and its concern for the passing of time.

But we need not read very far into The Optimist's Daughter before we sense some major differences, too. There is less clutter here: almost immediately we realize that a terrific struggle is going on, but that it is to be increasingly within the mind of Laurel McKelva Hand. Whereas in the earlier novels the characters often employed words as their weapons against time, Laurel quickly recognizes that such a tactic--whether words are used offensively or

defensively--is futile. Laurel does not surrender to time, however, but instead pulls a strange maneuver: she ceases to fight. As a result, Laurel, more than any other character in Welty's novels, resolves the human dilemma of what approach to take in the face of implacable time.

The plot of The Optimist's Daughter belies the profundity of the novel's statement about man's rage to live. Part I opens with Judge Clinton McKelva, seventy-one, his daughter Laurel McKelva Hand from Chicago, and his new wife of a year and half, Fay Chisom McKelva--all in New Orleans to visit Dr. Nate Courtland because of the Judge's eye problem. We suspect almost immediately that the novel will be about "seeing" and "eyes": what should be the proper "vision" of life? The Judge, for example, has been an "optimist" all his life, and even after seeing his first wife, Becky Thurston McKelva, suffer physical and spiritual anguish, he still "could not control . . . his belief that all his wife's troubles would turn out all right" (p. 146). Another, very different vision of life is represented by Fay, who is extremely selfish and sees every action in the world only in so far as it affects her: about the Judge's illness, for instance, she complains, "I don't see why this had to happen to me" (p. 8). Almost immediately, however, the attention of the novel draws away from Judge McKelva and Fay and focuses on the daughter Laurel who more and more slips into her past, particularly into the time when her mother was alive.

Judge McKelva dies unexpectedly. Although Fay probably hastens his death when she shakes him--"abusing him," the nurse calls it--more than likely he "just plain sneaked out on us," as Dr. Courtland puts it (p. 34). In Part II Laurel and Fay return to Mount Salus, Mississippi, for the burial. The traditional encomiums emphasize the Judge's magnificent past, but Laurel denies their truth. When the half-drunk Major Bullock (the oldest family friend) acts out one episode of what was allegedly Judge McKelva's bravado, Laurel can no longer restrain her protests, blurting out to Tish Bullock (the Major's daughter): "He's trying to make Father into something he wanted to be himself." A moment later she exclaims to Major Bullock, "Father really was modest" (p. 80). Clearly Laurel is very concerned, even obsessed, with the way others view her and her family's past. Later she will revert to that past in order to gain control over her own present and future.

At the funeral we also meet Fay's family, the Chisoms from Madrid, Texas. With the exceptions of the Grandfather and the young son Wendell, the Chisoms are spiritually and emotionally vacuous. Evidently Fay's selfishness merely reflects a long tradition of her family's economic and cultural poverty.

Part II sets the tenor of the novel. Although still chiefly concerned with surface details and with the present, the story obviously aims backwards and inwards to Laurel's

memory and the past. In Part III almost nothing of significance occurs in the present. Laurel cleans out her father's desk. A chimney swift, a "blundering, frantic bird," (p. 130) gets into the house--reminiscent of a similar incident in Delta Wedding. Laurel, fleeing from the bird, is driven further and further into the innermost rooms of the house and, correspondingly, further into her memory of the past. As Danièle Pitavy describes her:

Laurel est devenue par surprise prisonnière du temps, contrainte de le subir dans ce qu'il a de plus éprouvant et de plus tangible, la durée. Impuissante, elle doit en accepter les traces visibles, le remariage, la maladie, la vieillesse, la mort.³

In Part IV Laurel finally confronts Fay, ostensibly over Becky's hand-made breadboard. Phil Hand, Laurel's deceased husband, had lovingly crafted the breadboard for Becky and she had treasured it--using it with care and tenderness as if it were alive. The breadboard is a precious heirloom to Laurel, representing as it does the warm love and security of her past with both her mother and husband. Now, however, Laurel feels that Fay has "desecrated" the breadboard by cracking and scarring it (p. 173); Fay's contempt for the past astounds Laurel and precipitates a confrontation in which she threatens to crush Fay's head with the breadboard. Here, as well as in the remainder of the novel, the conflict centers on one's response to time: how are we to react to the passing of time? How can memory

cope with a painful past? Whose attitude more accurately predicts the future, Fay's or Laurel's?

Any effort to appraise the time theme in The Optimist's Daughter should probably begin with a tribute to the novel's organic form. Although he does not pursue the time theme, John Desmond sums up the structural beauty of the novel most eloquently:

What makes The Optimist's Daughter such a remarkable achievement is that Welty's thematic concerns serve as formal, organizing principles in the structure of the novel. For example, the fact that Laurel's interior life is largely kept hidden from us throughout the first two-thirds of the novel is a direct reflection of the extreme privacy she maintains. Conversely, the gaudy public nature of Judge McKelva's funeral serves appropriately to define important aspects of his character and reveal its weaknesses. On a broader scale, Welty's structural technique of shifting between raw experience and memory, past and present, corresponds perfectly to the dynamic interaction between them she wishes to represent.⁴

What Desmond describes as the "shifting between raw experience and memory" becomes the central technique of the novel; moreover, as Welty leads us more and more into the realm of memory and the past, it becomes apparent that time is the major thematic concern here, also.

Nowhere else in her fiction does Miss Welty so deliberately weave references to time, clocks, and watches into the pattern of her narrative. While other images, such as those of birds, fire, and water, certainly contribute to the design of The Optimist's Daughter,⁵ the time references are much more frequent. For example, there are fourteen

specific references to clocks and watches (See Table 3). These may vary from the quite literal need to know the time, as when Judge McKelva asks Laurel "what time her watch showed" (p. 18), to the figurative description of a seagull as "like a stopped clock on the wall" (p. 45). None of the characters here ever move far from a watch or clock, even if it is a stopped clock like the one which dominates the mantel in the McKelva home (p. 73). The reader, too, is constantly reminded of time, bombarded by softly whirring, striking clocks (p. 178). Quite frequently, the effect on both the characters in the novel and on the reader is bewilderment. When Laurel returns home after her father's sudden death, for example, she yearns for any consoling sight or sound. But she focuses on time, hoping perhaps to discover comfort from the rhythms of the old house:

What Laurel listened for tonight was the striking of the mantel clock downstairs in the parlor . . . [which] never came. (p. 58)

Later in the novel, after the Judge's funeral, Laurel returns home at night, noting that "The Courthouse clock could not be read" (p. 128). She then agonizes over the past for the entire night.

These allusions to time are quite clearly crucial to Miss Welty's concern. Laurel, and to a certain extent the other characters in the novel, suffers from a time disorientation not unlike Quentin Compson's in The Sound

and the Fury. But whereas Quentin's obsession with watches and clocks becomes pathological and leads to his suicide, Laurel's quest for the patterns within time will lead her to recover from her metaphysical wanderings.

Of course most critics have recognized that The Optimist's Daughter is about time, at least in some general way. Cleanth Brooks, for instance, notes that "The novel . . . moves from fairly broad satire and social comedy into Laurel's reexamination of the past."⁶ To this Lucinda MacKethan adds the following:

Fay is . . . the future, the unknown factor of life that only time can bring into focus The Optimist's Daughter becomes a battleground between future and past, the past represented by Becky McKelva, or more correctly by the memories and mementoes of Becky McKelva that keep the past in the present.⁷

While the consensus among readers might be that The Optimist's Daughter is concerned at least peripherally about what Pitavy calls "l'effritement du temps,"⁸ few seem to recognize the degree of Welty's preoccupation. The chief difference between the statement about time here and in the earlier novels, however, stems from Welty's tone: there is more urgency here, and a sense of time's running out--for the characters, for the author, perhaps, and for all human kind. The earlier novels conclude with the various attitudes toward time in a stalemate; there is always the feeling, so prominent in Laura's stargazing at the end of Delta Wedding, and even in Virgie Rainey's meditation in the rain in The

Golden Apples, that tomorrow is another day with another opportunity to learn how to face time. In The Optimist's Daughter, on the other hand, Laurel McKelva can no longer look to the future without some solid philosophical attitude towards time. She must adapt and change her assumptions about time; otherwise her already tragic past will suck her into the same black hole of cynicism that subverted her mother and father at the end of their lives. In other words, whereas the earlier novels conclude with a question about man's relationship to time, The Optimist's Daughter ends with a declaration.

Essentially this is the point Reynolds Price reiterates in his contrast of the New Yorker version⁹ of the story with Miss Welty's earlier stories:

Yet in those early stories the last note is almost invariably rising, a question; the final look in the onlooker's eyes is of puzzlement--"Anyone could have had that. Should I have tried?" Not in The Optimist's Daughter however. The end clarifies. Mystery dissolves before patient watching--the unbroken stare of Laurel McKelva Hand, the woman at its center.¹⁰

Price returns to this notion when he observes the "complicated sense of joy" that comes for the reader, and for Laurel, at the end when she decides to leave the breadboard for Fay and begins her return to Chicago. For Mr. Price, Laurel "is now an 'optimist' of a sort her father never knew."¹¹ Although Price's view that Laurel's conflict and the issues of the novel are resolved in affirmation would seem the most prevalent, there are dissenting opinions.

Michael Wood, for example, contends that even though we tend to like and identify with Laurel, and dislike Fay,

"our" kind of consciousness . . . is a debilitating disease, an incapacity to take on the encroaching world, and that her [Fay's] kind of consciousness, her greed, is a way of staying alive and winning.¹²

If Fay represents the future, and if her selfishness depicts the only way of "staying alive and winning," then Welty is painting a bleak picture indeed of our prospects. As Charles Nash bluntly puts it, here "the future is no longer a promise but a threat."¹³

Any attempt to clarify Eudora Welty's vision for the future as portrayed in The Optimist's Daughter must deal with Laurel McKelva Hand's "dark night of the soul" in which she agonizes over her past with her mother, father, and husband Phil.¹⁴ Out of this tormenting night and the following day Laurel somehow pieces together a philosophy of life, mainly an attitude towards time and memory, which allows her to maintain her composure later when confronting Fay and the "desecrated" breadboard.

The evening begins auspiciously enough: Laurel's "bridesmaids" give her a farewell dinner at the home of Tish Bullock, the daughter of Major and Miss Tennyson Bullock, who are perhaps the McKelva's oldest friends in Mount Salus. During the usual after-dinner chatter, the subject turns to Laurel's magnificent wedding to Phil Hand, who was killed after one year of marriage by a kamikaze in

the Pacific, and to her parents. The "bridesmaids" poke fun at Judge Mac, as they affectionately call him, and at Becky, often laughing "til they cried." But Laurel still has a very tender spot for the past and cannot accept their fun:

"Since when have you started laughing at them?" Laurel asked in a trembling voice. "Are they just figures from now on to make a good story?" (p. 126)

This is the same reaction Laurel had earlier shown when Major Bullock had told heroic stories about the Judge, stories which Laurel had called untrue. The bridesmaids remind Laurel that they are grieving with her, and she smiles and forgives them. What is quite clear, nevertheless, is that Laurel cannot as yet take the same lighthearted attitude towards the past as these other people do. The discussions after dinner at Tish's will trigger a sequence of memories for Laurel later on in the night, memories which will cauterize her spirit and make her a stronger character.

The wind and rain predict the stormy atmosphere of Laurel's inner turmoil as the Bullocks drive her home:

In the poorly lit park, the bandstand and the Confederate statue stood in dim aureoles of rain, looking the ghosts they were, and somehow married to each other . . . (p. 128).

And then when she enters the darkened house, the chimney swift darts in; a harbinger of the struggle to come, the bird's frantic rushing from room to room parallels Laurel's

own desperate efforts to escape from time as she plunges further into the interior of the house. Finally she is driven into her father and mother's room, now Fay's, and she hesitates--this will be the "first time she had entered it since the morning of the funeral" (p. 130). This room and all its memories, along with what Laurel considers the trespass by Fay, is the immediate catalyst for Laurel's journey into the past of her own soul.

At first Laurel focuses on the most pressing threat--Fay and the values she represents. Laurel cannot comprehend that the "abusing" of Judge McKelva in the hospital was not "wrong" to Fay:

Fay had never dreamed that in that shattering moment in the hospital she had not been just as she always saw herself--in the right. (p. 131)

Laurel worries that, unlike her father, she "cannot feel pity for Fay" and therefore may be "as lost a soul as the soul Fay exposed to Father" (p. 131). The key to Laurel's metamorphosis during the night, then, and the incentive for her inventory of her own soul, is the fear that she is becoming like Fay--a creature living entirely in one time frame. Laurel thinks, "Father, beginning to lose his sight, followed Mother, but who am I at the point of following but Fay?" (p. 132).

In rebelling against Fay, Laurel turns to her mother, Becky, and begins a sliding into the past that almost

overwhelms her. Because of her great love for her mother, Laurel accepts Becky's vision of life without question, but Becky's attitude towards time was one sided, also.

Becky Thurston McKelva frequently returned "up home" to West Virginia where she "was too happy to know what went on in the outside world" (p. 141). There she could live in an idyllic, nearly perfect world, as Laurel recalls it:

Sometimes the top of the mountain was higher than the flying birds. Sometimes even clouds lay down the hill, hiding the treetops farther down. The highest house, the deepest well, the tuning of the strings; sleep in the clouds; Queen's Shoals; the fastest conversations on earth--no wonder her mother needed nothing else! (p. 141)

At sixteen, Becky was so accustomed to life's graciousness that she invented tricks to "make the time pass quicker." When bothered by such a necessary tedium as riding her horse Selim back and forth to school, for example, she recited poetry. Later, near the end of her life, after her sight was lost, she recited Southey's "The Cataract of Lodore," thinking that the more she could recall of the poem "the better she could defend her case in some trial that seemed to be going on against her life" (p. 147).

Becky's problem with time was that she wanted too desperately to cling to the sensations of the present--as long as they were comfortable. Once her life became painful, however, she resorted to memory as a way of creating an eternal present. Even the poem she chose to recite, with its replication of present participle sounds, creates an

illusion of stasis and of the eternal present. The concluding lines of the poem suggest this timelessness and also remind us of Becky's "up home" at Queen's Shoals:

And so never ending, but always descending,
 Sounds and motions forever and ever are blending,
 All at once and all o'er, with a mighty uproar;
 And this way the water comes down at Lodore.¹⁵

As Michael Kreyling summarizes,

Instead of pushing time forward, Becky's energies were devoted to clenching the moment, isolating the timeless essence of things and people, trying, against all odds, to hold the moment still in a fragile present instant of unity--already gone.¹⁶

This obsession Becky had, to grasp every sensation and to hold it, is perhaps best reflected in her tale of the white strawberries. When dying and suffering, Becky called for "spiritual guidance" and Laurel invited over young Dr. Bolt, the Presbyterian minister. After finding fault with everything he did, Becky told Dr. Bolt about the wild white strawberries which "grow in only one spot in the world." She chided the minister as unworthy, continuing:

"Deep in the woods, you'd miss them. You could find them by mistake, and you could line your hat with leaves and try to walk off with a hatful: that would be how little you knew about those berries. Once you've let them so much as touch each other, you've already done enough to finish 'em." (p. 149)

To Becky, life was like eating the white strawberries: "You had to know enough to go where they are and stand and

eat them on the spot . . ." (p. 149). Becky was courageous and confident that she could handle adversity, as she had done when she was fifteen and had traveled with her father to a Baltimore hospital, where he died (p. 143). Her own illness, when it first began, was merely another experience to her; after her first eye operation she was "affected with the gayest high spirits and anticipation" (p. 145). But after five years of tormented illness Becky no longer looked forward to daily experiences, so she turned to her memory as a way of maintaining the sanctity of her life. But even that seemed to fail to console her. She died, "without speaking a word, keeping everything to herself, in exile and humiliation" (p. 151).

Becky rejected both her daughter, Laurel, and her husband, Judge McKelva. She bitterly chastened Laurel, for example, with words that the daughter would remember forever:

"You could have saved your mother's life. But you stood by and wouldn't intervene. I despair for you." (p. 151)

Exactly what Becky meant by her denunciation of her loved ones is never explained, but what is clear is that she refused to tolerate pain and suffering as a part of experience. As long as her past was comfortable and secure, she could redeem the present through her own memory and by little tricks like reciting poetry. Once the memories themselves became unpleasant, though, as they must have during her five years of illness, she had no other recourse. Becky's

unwillingness to acknowledge that human beings must often interact in agony and sacrifice in order to forge a stronger, more lasting future probably derived from the same impulse which caused her to cherish the white strawberries. Like the white strawberries, the present was so ephemeral to her it simply could not become the foundation of anything lasting.

Ironically, Laurel already possessed the key to unlocking her problems with time, whereas Becky--to whom Laurel had turned as a model--did not. On Laurel and Becky's many trips to Queen's Shoals Laurel had frequently observed Grandmother Thurston's pigeons; at first she had been frightened by the birds, but gradually she had learned to watch and feed them. Finally they had come to symbolize an important lesson to Laurel:

But Laurel had kept the pigeons under eye in their pigeon house and had already seem a pair of them sticking their beaks down each other's craws, swallowing down all over again what had been swallowed before: they were taking turns They convinced her that they could not escape each other and could not themselves be escaped from. (p. 146)

Like pigeons, people depend and feed upon each other. Individuals cannot exist as islands for very long; instead, each of us "traps" those people who care for us, and in turn we are trapped, also. The more intense the relationship, the greater the entrapment and the greater the sacrifice of personal freedom. As a child in West Virginia Laurel could not accept nor totally understand the message the pigeons

convey; indeed she was rather repulsed by the notion that pigeons, much less people, fed upon one another. Nevertheless, Laurel was more capable than her mother of judging experience objectively, for Becky always sought to impose her blind idealism on experience. Laurel now realizes that "when her mother looked closely, it was not in order to see pigeons but to verify something--the truth or a mistake" (p. 141).

Welty's concern here is with the "blindness" of people towards an experience that does not confirm their predispositions. She does not seem to be suggesting that self-sacrifice and "feeding" upon one another are necessarily good, or bad, but that one must not distort life, Procrustes-like, to suit a preconceived vision. This Becky had done; consequently, she could not adapt when later in her life the harshness of her suffering conflicted with her vision of timeless pleasantries.

Laurel's reverie about her mother concludes in a "flood of feeling." The daughter now begins to recognize that she had inherited the mother's impulse to idealize the past. Since her husband's death, for instance, Laurel had lived in a beautiful memory of what could have been: she "had gone on living with the old perfection undisturbed and undisturbing" (p. 154). She had always dreamed of the ideal life they could have shared "If Phil could have lived--" (p. 154). Like her mother, Laurel had ignored the unpleasant reality that when two people love each other they inevitably

cause each other pain; until now Laurel had denied the facts of life suggested by the pigeons, that people, also, feed upon one another.

The specter of Phil Hand rises before Laurel's eyes, and "he looked at her, Phil himself--here waiting, all the time, Lazarus." Laurel still has not learned what Phil's ghost is to remind her, that we must crave life, even its pain. Laurel wonders:

What would have been their end, then? Suppose their marriage had ended like her father and mother's? Or like her mother's father and mother's? Like-- (p. 154)

Of course the answer to Laurel's question is patent: had Phil lived, their marriage would have ended like her mother's and grandmother's--in pain, suffering, and death. If human life moves inexorably towards death, so too must human love move towards sacrifice, mutual pain, "feeding" upon one another. Significantly the vision of Phil that Laurel sees here portrays him as an extension of the feeding pigeon image: "He looked at her out of eyes wild with the craving for his un-lived life, with mouth open like a funnel's [emphasis mine]" (p. 154). As Laurel weeps "for what happened to life," the wind and the house seem to echo Phil Hand's hungry cry for life, and any life be it pleasurable or painful, with his raging "I wanted it! I wanted it!"

Laurel's struggle within her soul leads her backward to a collage of memories about her mother and father, her

grandmother, and her husband. The process of recalling the past, with its heartaches and disappointments, prepares her to accept the present which she feels has been cut off from that past. Evidently Laurel still believes that memory can be used to purge the past of its pain, making the present more bearable. To so use the memory, however, requires that the present not interfere with, and certainly not contradict, the past. This is the essence of the older, unnamed woman's discovery in Welty's "A Memory."

In this story an older woman remembers when she was a child at the beach, and how she had lain on the sand and had tried to recall an earlier incident. This memory within a memory seeks to recapture a moment when the child had touched the wrist of her boyfriend when she had passed him on the stairs; thus the woman wants to "withdraw to . . . [her] most inner dream." The circumstances here approximately parallel Laurel's delving more and more deeply into her and her mother's past. The woman in "A Memory" recollects that there was a family of uncouth bathers at the beach that day, and that their "common" squealing had interfered with the completion of her dream. She had managed to feel the "heavy weight of sweetness which always accompanied this memory" but the "memory itself" had not returned. Therefore, she concludes, memories can be negated--both by the passage of time and by the interference of an antithetical present: the girl "did not know, any longer, the meaning of . . . [her] happiness"17

At first Laurel views Fay as this antithetical present and as the chief remaining obstacle to her recapturing of a safe and pleasant memory. Hence Laurel seeks revenge against Fay. During her night-long vigil, however, Laurel begins to realize that in her battle with time she is her own worst enemy: she has sought to maintain an illusion of the goodness and permanence of life, and has denied the hatefulness and transience which are also so very real. Part IV focuses on the brief confrontation between Laurel and Fay, and culminates with Laurel's coming to terms with Fay and with the future. More importantly, though, Laurel learns to live with herself.

The last section of the novel begins with Laurel's awakening from a dream about her and Phil's train ride from Chicago to Mount Salus to be married. The dream "had really happened," and in it she and Phil had looked down from a great elevation at the union of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers: "All they could see was sky, water, birds, light, and confluence" (p. 160). Their "joint act of faith" in deciding to marry had made them a part of the confluence, Laurel had felt, and she now recalls how she had exulted in their "going to live forever." Yet within the next year, Laurel remembers, Phil had been left "bodiless and graveless of a death made of water and fire" (p. 160). Earlier Laurel had clung stubbornly to the belief that she had been cheated by time because she and Phil could have had such a perfect

life together; now she can embrace his loss and can resolve that Phil "could still tell her of her life." Indeed, Laurel perceives, "her life, any life . . . was nothing but the continuity of its love [emphasis mine]" (p. 160). Later on, in her bout with Fay, Laurel will return to this affirmation that the past can continue into the present as a meaningful aid to any individual who must contend with tragedy and loss. Laurel must still learn, however, that the past cannot be changed, nor even tainted, by the present.

As Laurel prepares to fly back to Chicago, she also tries to eliminate from the McKelva home any of those family memorabilia which, she feels, would be especially vulnerable to Fay's meddling. Laurel feels, for example, that her father's, mother's, and grandmother's letters--along with the "saved little books and papers"--would become soiled if read and handled by Fay, as if Fay's contempt for the past could somehow defile Laurel's memory of her parents and grandmother. She burns all of the past she can find (p. 169). She offers Becky's special stone boat, which had been a courting gift from Judge McKelva, to the trusted friend Miss Adele Courtland (p. 170)--so that Fay could never profane it. These actions demonstrate Laurel's final misconception concerning time: that the present or future can somehow change what has already occurred. From the final clash between Laurel and Fay, a near-violent confrontation, comes Laurel's peaceful resolution of her

conflict with time, what Reynolds Price refers to as the novel's "complicated sense of joy."¹⁸

Laurel and Fay are deadly serious in their struggle over Becky's handmade breadboard, but this "shootout" at high noon is undercut by the mock-heroic. The battle takes place, for example, precisely between 11:30 and 12:00, and Laurel is stopped from hitting Fay by the "soft whirr" of the parlor clock striking noon (p. 178). The "weapon" is a breadboard and the battlefield is the kitchen. Gradually even Laurel realizes that her opponent Fay "did not know how to fight" and that the entire battle is foolish. Fay was, Laurel recognizes, "without any powers of passion or imagination" and "could no more fight a feeling person than she could love him" (p. 178).

Nevertheless, the sides in the battle are drawn and the ideas they represent are fairly obvious. Fay, who has "desecrated" the McKelva house (p. 173) and who has gouged holes in the breadboard, cares absolutely nothing about the past or about the sanctity of memory (p. 173). She exclaims, "The past isn't a thing to me. I belong to the future, didn't you know that?" As the representative of the future, Fay is an extremely practical woman who demands a selfish basis for the existence of any thing or any person. She cannot comprehend why Phil would devote so much time and energy to creating the beautiful breadboard and "couldn't care less" that his was a "labor of love" (p. 175). Likewise,

when Laurel questions her about the Judge's death, Fay responds that she was "trying to scare him into living!" Fay explains, "I wanted him to get up out of there, and start him paying a little attention to me, for a change" (p. 175).

Laurel, on the other hand, has throughout the novel struggled to protect the past. Even at this juncture she still feels the necessity to defend the sanctity of the "whole solid past," as symbolized by the breadboard (p. 178), from the attacks by Fay and the present and future. Laurel, of course, is dedicated to what she remembers as the values of the past--love, harmony, and family unity. Her first obstacle in formulating a workable attitude towards time has been learning to accept that pain and suffering, along with family bitterness, are also parts of life. She understands now, as she confronts Fay, that "there is hate as well as love . . . in the coming together and continuing of our lives" (p. 177). Her second lesson has been more difficult, however, and ironically it is Fay who finally convinces Laurel that she must cease trying to protect the past.

As Laurel argues with Fay over the breadboard, Laurel almost slips into the past again. Thinking about Becky's bread and her baking, Laurel recalls how Phil "loved good bread." But suddenly she realizes these are all "Ghosts," and she pictures herself "pursuing her own way through the house as single-mindedly as Fay had pursued hers through

the ceremony of the day of the funeral" (p. 177). Therefore Laurel comes to differentiate between the past, which is permanently fixed and immutable, and the individual memory of the past, which is vulnerable to the whims of time and to the attacks of the present and future:

The past is no more open to help or hurt than was Father in his coffin. The past is like him, impervious, and can never be awakened. It is memory that is somnambulist. It will come back in its wounds from across the world, like Phil, calling us by our names and demanding its rightful tears. It will never be impervious. (p. 179)

What Laurel realizes here, it seems, is that Fay cannot pose a threat to the past; in this sense there has been no conflict between Laurel and Fay at all. Once she learns that the past is impervious to Fay and the future, Laurel begins to grasp that it is only her own selfish memory which she has been defending so ardently; consequently, Fay can be a problem only if Laurel continues to cling to her notion that memory must be inviolate and unchanging. Here she finally concedes that "memory can be hurt, time and time again--but in that may lie its final mercy." Laurel now knows what neither her mother nor father could apprehend--that memory must remain "vulnerable to the living moment," for only then can we "give it up its due" (p. 179).

Fortified with the knowledge that time's relentless pace demands that we move in step or move aside, and with the wisdom to admit that we will eventually cause distress for those we love, Laurel will now nurture her fledgling

optimism with a degree of caution and uncertainty far surpassing that of her father's blind acceptance of life's difficulties. She is much better prepared to face life because of him and because of her memory of him, though. When she lays the breadboard "down on the table where it belonged," Laurel acknowledges that she could "get along without that too" (p. 179). Laurel declares her willingness to face the future with hands freed of the past, "pardoned and freed," and with a "heart that can empty but fill again" (p. 179). Clearly she now anticipates, as her mother did not, that the future may bring suffering for her and for those she loves. But Laurel is much better prepared to face life because of Becky and because of her memory. With "these fragments" Laurel has shored against any "ruins" the future may bring.

The Optimist's Daughter concludes on a note of Laurel's inner and outer harmony as she ignores Fay and dashes to catch her plane to Chicago. Certainly we cannot forget the tragedies which are so vivid a part of Laurel's memory-- the ranting of the dying Becky, the apparent surrender of Judge McKelva to blindness and death, and the raging for life of Phil Hand. Nor are we supposed to forget. Unlike so many of the characters in Welty's earlier novels who attempt to conceal their fear and anger at the passing of time and death by talk and ritual, Laurel moves beyond these rather hollow gestures. Instead, she becomes reconciled to the

hatred and suffering in life and now understands that human life, whatever form it takes, is precious, and that her father, her mother, Phil, even Fay--each in his or her way--were simply raging "against the dying of the light." With this knowledge she need no longer protect the past nor hide from the future. She can live.

TABLE 3. TIME REFERENCES IN THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

1. "As though he had all the time in the world, Dr. Courtland, the well-known eye specialist, folded his big country hands with the fingers that had always looked, to Laurel, as if their mere touch on the crystal of a watch would convey to their skin exactly what time it was" (p. 4).
2. "In the mornings, Judge McKelva ground his teeth, Laurel spoke to him, he waked up, and found out from Laurel how she was and what time her watch showed" (p. 18).
3. "Dr. Courtland stood in the doorway, the weight of his watch in his hand" (p. 40).
4. ". . . the window filled with a featureless sky over pale smooth water, where a seagull was hanging with wings fixed, like a stopped clock on a wall" (p. 45).
5. "She must have slept, for nothing seemed to have changed before her eyes until the seagull became the hands on the clock in the Courtland dome lit up in the night above Mount Salus trees" (p. 45).
6. "What Laurel listened for tonight was the striking of the mantel clock downstairs in the parlor. It never came" (p. 58).
7. "And she [Laurel] saw that the clock had stopped; it had not been wound, she supposed, since the last time her father had done duty by it, and its hands pointed to some remote three o'clock, as motionless as the time in the Chinese prints" (p. 73).
8. "Unable to hear the ticking of the clock, she listened to the gritting and hissing of the fire" (p. 73).
9. "Mr. Pitts was revealed in their midst as though by a spotlight, in the act of consulting his wristwatch" (p. 82).
10. ". . . the crowd of bridesmaids had succeeded among them in winding the clock on the mantel and setting the hands to the time--only ten minutes past noon--and starting the pendulum" (p. 93).

11. "The clock struck for half-past twelve. 'Oh, how I hate that old striking clock!' cried Fay. 'It's the first thing I'm going to get rid of'" (p. 100).
12. "The Courthouse clock could not be read" (p. 128).
13. "Over the white-painted mantel, where cranes in their circle of moon, the beggar with his lantern, the poet at his waterfall hung in their positions around the clock, the hour showed thirty minutes before noon" (p. 171).
14. "From the parlor came a soft whirr, and noon struck" (p. 178).

CHAPTER VIII

A TIME TO LOVE

To claim that Eudora Welty, or any other author, expresses a profound concern for the passing of time and for human transience requires little temerity, of course, for certainly many writers have voiced such an anxiety from the earliest days of recorded history down to the present. In a sense, a person who complains about time, either about its passing too rapidly or about its being out of joint, merely excoriates life itself and its perceived unfairness. Ultimately--I believe--human mortality, when juxtaposed to the timelessness of nature and of the universe, becomes for most people the hollow core of all their physical, emotional, mental and spiritual yearnings; to rage against time is perhaps no more, and no less, than to refuse to admit that some moment will be the last, and that time will cease to exist. What distinguishes Eudora Welty's novels from most other fiction which rages against time, however, is her peculiar ability to complain gently about human mortality without becoming pessimistic: while human aspirations are often frustrated in her fiction, Miss Welty does not vociferate against the injustice of the universal order. Instead, she quietly asks that human beings adapt their behavior to live in harmony with the system they are

given. Indeed, Welty's vision accommodates the tenet which holds that for all alive there is a season, and a time, for "every purpose under the heaven."¹

On the other hand, Welty realizes that while human nature can easily accept the time to plant, the time to dance and laugh, or even the time to mourn, it will despise the inevitable time to die. And so it must be, for Miss Welty sees the burden of time as the essence of the human paradox: the acceptance of life and its rewards demands the resignation to live--and die--within the behest of inexorable time.

While it is true that a concern for time as it affects human destiny has held a prominent place in the literature of the entire world, perhaps the writers of the American South have recognized the paradox of time and have lamented the predicament of man with a particular intensity. Writers such as Thomas Wolfe, William Faulkner, and Robert Penn Warren, among many others, provide ample evidence to support Louis Rubin's contention that one of the chief characteristics of "Southern writing worthy of the name" remains "a sense and awareness of time, of past and future as well as immediate present." Rubin discerns a "deep and omnipresent feeling" in Southern literature for the various manifestations of time:

. . . for the historical and tribal memory, for tradition and continuity: a belief and conviction . . . that human beings exist and have existed in a condition of becoming as well as being.²

Because she perceives that life must exist "in a condition of becoming as well as being," Eudora Welty is very much a part of a rich Southern tradition in literature which is substantially concerned with human responses to time. In her novels Miss Welty portrays a wide spectrum of responses, but with few exceptions her characters refuse to confront time squarely; instead, they usually seek to protect their temporal vulnerability with a camouflage of words and deeds, as if they believe they can hide in the past or present and thus prevent the future from overtaking them. Consequently, their vision of time remains fragmented, and the characters themselves persist in the illusion that time will, for them, continue forever. This tendency to ignore time is reflected most obviously in the enclosed plantation society of Delta Wedding, but it exists in all the other novels, also. To Eudora Welty, probably the most pervasive failure in human experience is the inability to live within the flow of time and to acknowledge the fusion of past, present, and future in one harmonious flux.

This failure causes people to regard time as their "enemy," which in turn leads to Separateness and the paralysis of love. Clement Musgrove, for example, cannot comprehend the vicissitudes of time, and although he strives to love and protect Rosamond, he remains passive and inept throughout The Robber Bridegroom. King MacLain and Becky McKelva, on the other hand, are so caught up in the sensations

of the present that they have little time to spare for anyone else, and their hedonism becomes in fact a retreat from responsibility. While Miss Welty would seem to agree with Katie Rainey that "Time goes like a dream no matter how hard you run," this does not make of time an enemy. Quite to the contrary. For Welty, running from time is certainly futile, but if we learn to move with time, and to accept its challenge, then life can be fulfilling. If Welty does not condemn King MacLain's selfish behavior, it is because she feels sympathetic toward any human being who struggles to live with time, even if the effort is misguided. King MacLain's "butting" against the wall is indeed a sign of life and therefore preferable to surrender and death; it is, however, a perverse last resort, and Welty constantly searches for a more meaningful relationship to time.

Discovering this more meaningful relationship to time--while not condemning any human effort to muddle through--is perhaps the ultimate goal in Miss Welty's fiction, and in this sense her objectives are ontological rather than eschatological. While it is possible to argue that time is man's "enemy," mainly because it is time which frames and accentuates human mortality, Welty has very little to say about the way people should confront their deaths and their own timelessness. Neither does she entertain strictly "religious" or spiritual questions. Time is not humankind's "enemy," but unfortunately many people misconstrue it as such,

and hence are fostered confusion and anxiety which prevent their living life to the fullest. Welty concentrates on determining the proper manner to live with time, but she does not console or fret because humans are mortal. She smiles at Clement Musgrove's metaphysical curiosity, for example, and more often such matters are simply crowded out of the novels by the life that abounds there. Tragedy, death, even suicide, are very much a part of Welty's fictional world, and many of her characters would probably wish, along with Robert Frost in "Birches," "to get away from earth awhile/And then come back to it and begin over." But Welty would obviously agree with Frost, also, that "Earth's the right place for love."³ And time is mistakenly viewed as man's "enemy" precisely because it would seem to cause Separateness and hence interfere with the human ability to love and interact with the rest of the world.

Throughout the novels time, or more exactly the human response to time, obstructs the fulfillment of the individual's potential to love and to share his life with those around him. Clement and Salome Musgrove, most of the Fairchilds, the MacLains, Becky and Fay Chisolm McKelva, even Miss Julia Mortimer, ultimately fail because their conception of time is distorted--leaving them obsessed with the past, the present, or the future. Actually, Miss Welty demarcates two conflicting time systems in her novels, and characters fail because they cannot, or will not, merge their idiosyncratic notion of time with the

universal. Each character has his own internal clock or calendar, as well as a sense of past, present, and future. This subjective conception is variable, and the individual can control--to a degree at least--his relationship to time. Hence the older members of the Fairchild family can live and function in the past with few apparent difficulties, and hence Mattie Will Sojourner can blend her sexual experiences with King MacLain and the MacLain twins into one seduction in "Sir Rabbit." Similarly, for Edna Earle in The Ponder Heart time moves so slowly and so uneventfully that she hardly realizes its erosions. Becky McKelva, in The Optimist's Daughter, exists in and for the present sensation; consequently, she refuses to admit the pain and frustration that come in later life, and dies blaming her husband and daughter for their not saving her from misery.

But--Welty is quite emphatic on this point--there also exists an external flux of time which is inexorable and not recapturable. This "eternal" time is perhaps similar to Bergson's duration in that Welty perceives it as a continuous flowing of past into present into future; it exists whether the individual is aware of it or not. It inevitably governs a character's life: sooner or later the flux of time will encroach on the enclosed world, and the "shell" of illusion (as at Shellmound Plantation) will crumble. If many of Welty's characters appear content, it is because she frequently chooses to describe them at a time just before the

external world of experience is about to impinge. That she usually selects remote, or at least, isolated settings testifies to Welty's desire to examine characters who have yet to be initiated into the external world of time and multability.

When actual or external time penetrates the internal or subjective, a time "warp" results. Produced is a moment of stasis when time seems to slow or even stop, and Welty utilizes these moments to dissect individual characters on the threshold of a major change in their perceptions of reality. Clement Musgrove's meditations in the woods and the Fairchilds' wait on the trestle as the Yazoo Delta approaches are Welty's preliminary attempts to create moments of stasis, but her technique is not perfected until The Golden Apples. Of all the characters who participate in a time warp, however, perhaps only Virgie Rainey and Laurel McKelva realize a genuine epiphany: they receive an insight which allows them to merge their personal conception of time with an understanding of the external flux. Learning that time is cyclic, they can put aside their mistakes of the past and begin life again. They learn to accept pain and death, and gain the courage to face the future. Most important, they recognize that time is not their enemy unless they make it so by struggling futilely to maintain their illusions of human control and permanence. Paradoxically, once they cease to fight with time, they become victorious and regain their proper place in the universal design.

In her novels, as well as in her other fiction, Eudora Welty seldom lifts her scrutiny from the plight of human beings who have "fallen" into time, that is, people whose mundane and narrow conception of chronology differs markedly from the true external flux, people who thus are separated from the prevailing cosmic order. Most people, along with Lorenzo Dow in "A Still Moment," still find it incredible that God has "given Love first and then Separateness, as though it did not matter to Him which came first." But Miss Welty's vision, reflected in that of Virgie Rainey and Laurel McKelva, ranges beyond that of ordinary men. She feels we must reconcile our personal conception of time with the universal, but, failing that, we must continue the struggle. For Eudora Welty, the struggle itself is the essence of life in this world, and she--like Robert Frost--does not pretend to "know where it's likely to go better."

ENDNOTES

CHAPTER I

PLACE AND TIME: THE COORDINATES OF WELTY'S FICTION

- ¹"Place in Fiction," South Atlantic Quarterly, 55 (Winter 1956), 57-72; rpt. in South Atlantic Quarterly, 76 (Fall 1977), 439. I follow Welty's discussion of place (pp. 439-49) throughout my first two paragraphs.
- ²"Place in Fiction," p. 443.
- ³"How I Write," Virginia Quarterly Review, 31 (Spring 1955), 243.
- ⁴Eudora Welty, "Some Notes on Time in Fiction," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 483. Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.
- ⁵"Place in Fiction," p. 444.
- ⁶"To See Things in Their Time: The Act of Focusing in Eudora Welty's Fiction," American Literature, 50 (May 1978), 259.
- ⁷"The Interior World: An Interview with Eudora Welty," Southern Review, 8 (Fall 1972), 717.
- ⁸The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South (Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1963), p. 131.
- ⁹"Eudora Welty's Art of Naming," Diss. Emory University 1969, p. 11.
- ¹⁰"Time in the Fiction of Eudora Welty," in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), pp. 35-50.
- ¹¹In addition to Neault's article the only other attempt to provide an overview of time in Welty's novels is Charles E. Davis, "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction: A Changing World," Studies in American Fiction, 3 (Autumn 1975), 199-209.
- ¹²Neault, p. 35.

¹³J. T. Fraser, ed., Introd., The Voices of Time (New York: George Braziller, Inc., 1966), p. xviii.

¹⁴"Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom and Old Southwest Humor: A Doubleness of Vision," in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), p. 71.

¹⁵The Rhetoric of Eudora Welty's Short Stories (Jackson, Miss.: Univ. and College Press, 1973), p. 102.

¹⁶Neault, pp. 35-36.

¹⁷Bunting, p. 732.

¹⁸"The Eye of the Story," Yale Review, 55 (Winter 1965), 265-73; rpt. in The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 37.

¹⁹A Season of Dreams: The Fiction of Eudora Welty (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), p. 177.

²⁰Eudora Welty (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), pp. 176-77.

²¹See especially Appel, pp. 174-83.

²²"A Still Moment," in The Wide Net and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1943), p. 75. Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²³Literary and Philosophical Essays, trans. Annette Michelson (London: Rider and Comp., 1955), pp. 79-87; rpt. in Faulkner: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Robert Penn Warren (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), p. 91.

²⁴"The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction," p. 202.

²⁵"Pattern and Vision in The Optimist's Daughter," in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), p. 118.

²⁶Appel, p. 235.

²⁷"Eudora Welty's Parody," Notes on Mississippi Writers, 11 (Spring 1978), 16.

CHAPTER II

THE FALL INTO TIME: THE ROBBER BRIDEGROOM

¹The Robber Bridegroom (Garden City: Doubleday, Doran and Company, Inc., 1942). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²Appel, p. 202.

³"The Robber Bridegroom: Realism and Fantasy on the Natchez Trace," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 625.

⁴Clark, p. 637; Clark's summary of the sources of The Robber Bridegroom has been verified and supplemented by Welty's own comments in "Fairy Tale of the Natchez Trace," The Eye of the Story, pp. 300-14.

⁵"Eudora Welty and the Mythos of Summer," Shenandoah, 20 (Spring 1969), 29-32.

⁶Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 186.

⁷"Initiation in Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom," Southern Humanities Review, 7 (Winter 1973), 77-86.

⁸Davis, "Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom and Old Southwest Humor," p. 71.

⁹Davis, "Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom and Old Southwest Humor," pp. 71-77.

¹⁰Judge James Hall, Letters From the West (London: Henry Colburn, 1828), pp. 265-81; rpt. in A. B. Botkin, ed., A Treasury of Mississippi River Folklore (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1955), p. 198.

¹¹Josephus C. Giuld, Old Times in Tennessee (Nashville: Tavel, Eastman and Howell, 1878), pp. 93-96; rpt. in A Treasury of Mississippi Folklore, p. 203.

¹²Slethaug, p. 84.

¹³Washington Irving, Selected Prose, ed. Stanley T. Williams (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1950), p. 103.

¹⁴Slethaug, p. 84.

¹⁵Slethaug, pp. 80-81.

- ¹⁶Clark, pp. 634-35.
- ¹⁷Slethaug, pp. 77-78.
- ¹⁸"Fantasy in the Fiction of Eudora Welty," Criticism and Essays on Modern Fiction 1920-1951, ed. John W. Aldridge (New York: The Ronald Press, 1952), p. 514.
- ¹⁹Slethaug, p. 78.
- ²⁰"Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom and Old Southwest Humor," p. 72; Davis refers to Kazin's review "An Enchanted World in America," New York Herald Tribune Book Review, 25 October 1942, p. 19.
- ²¹As You Like It, in The Complete Plays and Poems of William Shakespeare, ed. William Allan Neilson and Charles Jarvis Hill (Cambridge: The Riverside Press, 1942), IV.i.15.
- ²²In A Curtain of Green and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1941).
- ²³Brown, p. 35.
- ²⁴Time in Literature (Berkeley and Los Angeles: Univ. of California Press, 1968), p. 114.
- ²⁵Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries, trans. Philip Mairet (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), pp. 23-39.
- ²⁶Eliade, p. 41.
- ²⁷Davis, "Eudora Welty's The Robber Bridegroom and Old Southwest Humor," p. 76.
- ²⁸Appel, p. 202.

CHAPTER III

CHERISHING THE GOLDEN TIME: DELTA WEDDING

¹Delta Wedding (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1945). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²See the Genealogy of the Fairchild Family on page 90.

³Miss Welty refers to "Great Great-Uncle George" as murdered on the Natchez Trace (p. 14), but later she says that "Great Great-Uncle Battle" was the one murdered while traveling to visit "Great-Grandfather George Fairchild" (pp. 54-55). Richard Gray, in The Literature of Memory (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1977), also confuses the Fairchilds, speaking of "George Fairchild, the son of the owner of Shellmound" (p. 179), and of George as Shelley's "older brother" (p. 181); actually, of course, George is Battle's brother and Shelley's uncle.

⁴Vande Kieft, p. 109.

⁵"Eudora Welty's Comedy of Manners," The South Atlantic Quarterly, 69 (Fall 1970), 474-78.

⁶"The Theme of Human Isolation in the Works of Eudora Welty," Diss. Univ. of Minnesota 1975, p. 74.

⁷"Delta Fiction," Kenyon Review, 8 (Summer 1946), 507.

⁸Appel, p. 203.

⁹"Delta Wedding as Region and Symbol," Sewanee Review, 60 (Summer 1952), 414.

¹⁰Gray, p. 151.

¹¹"The Problem of Time in Welty's Delta Wedding," Studies in American Fiction, 5 (Autumn 1977), 227.

¹²Messerli, p. 239.

¹³"The Family in Four Novels of Eudora Welty," Diss. Univ. of Tennessee 1976, pp. 7-8.

¹⁴MacKethan, pp. 259-60.

¹⁵Allen in "Eudora Welty: The Three Moments," The Virginia Quarterly Review, 51 (Autumn 1975), 605-27; rpt. in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), pp. 12-34; Howard, pp. 102-20; Vande Kieft, pp. 121-23.

¹⁶Bunting, p. 721.

¹⁷Nash, p. 36.

¹⁸Vande Kieft, p. 110.

¹⁹Neault, p. 35.

- ²⁰ Davis, "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction," p. 202.
- ²¹ Edmond L. Volpe, A Reader's Guide to William Faulkner (New York: The Noonday Press, 1964), p. 191.
- ²² See Welty's remarks about timepieces in The Sound and the Fury, "Some Notes on Time," p. 488.
- ²³ Neault, p. 38.
- ²⁴ Messerli, p. 228.
- ²⁵ Howell, p. 471.
- ²⁶ Davis, "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction," p. 203.
- ²⁷ Davis, "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction," p. 203.
- ²⁸ Hardy, p. 416.
- ²⁹ Messerli, p. 228.
- ³⁰ Hardy, p. 416.
- ³¹ Messerli, p. 238.
- ³² Thomas Bulfinch, Bulfinch's Mythology (New York: Collier Books, 1962), p. 24.
- ³³ Messerli, pp. 238-39.
- ³⁴ Messerli, p. 238.
- ³⁵ Hardy, p. 413.
- ³⁶ Wilfred L. Guerin, Earle G. Labor, and others, A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), p. 119.
- ³⁷ "A Prayer for My Daughter," The Norton Anthology of English Literature, ed. M. H. Abrams, E. Talbot Donaldson, and others (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1968), II, 1583.
- ³⁸ The Dispossessed Garden: Pastoral and History in Southern Literature (Athens: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1975), p. 65.

CHAPTER IV

TIME WARPS IN THE GOLDEN APPLES

¹The Golden Apples (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1947). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²Bunting, p. 714.

³Bunting, p. 714.

⁴Allen, pp. 15-16.

⁵MacKethan, p. 272.

⁶Rubin, p. 131.

⁷Eudora Welty: Aspects of Reality in Her Short Fiction (Zurich: Franke Verlag Bern, 1971), pp. 82-83.

⁸Rubin, p. 149.

⁹Vande Kieft, p. 149.

¹⁰Neault, p. 44.

¹¹Howard, p. 116.

¹²"Eudora Welty and the Multitudinous Golden Apples," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 589-624. Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

¹³J. A. Bryant, "Seeing Double in The Golden Apples," Sewanee Review, 82 (Spring 1973), 300-15.

¹⁴"Eudora Welty's Use of Mythology," Shenandoah, 6 (Spring 1955), 35-40.

¹⁵See Franklin D. Carson, "The Song of the Wandering Aengus Allusions in Eudora Welty's The Golden Apples," Notes on Mississippi Writers, 6 (Spring 1973), 14-18.

¹⁶"Metronome and Music: The Encounter Between History and Myth in The Golden Apples," in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1978), p. 82.

¹⁷Ronald W. Clark, Einstein: The Life and Times (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1971), p. 88.

¹⁸"The Passage of Time in Eudora Welty's 'Sir Rabbit,'" Studies in Short Fiction, 12 (Summer 1975), 285; Carson refers to Jones, "The Plot as Search," Studies in Short Fiction, 5 (Fall 1967), 41, and Appel, p. 224.

¹⁹Carson, "The Passage of Time," p. 285.

²⁰Manz-Kunz, p. 92.

²¹Manz-Kunz, p. 92.

²²Vande Kieft, p. 122.

²³Messerli, p. 95.

²⁴Howard, p. 108.

²⁵Bulfinch, p. 262.

²⁶The Portable James Joyce (New York: The Viking Press, 1946), p. 242.

CHAPTER V

THE ATTRITION OF TIME: THE PONDER HEART

¹The Ponder Heart (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1953). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²Davis, "Eudora Welty's Art of Naming," pp. 177-78.

³Vande Kieft, pp. 69-70.

⁴Appel, p. 52.

⁵Eudora Welty (Austin, Texas: Steck-Vaughn Company, 1969), p. 5.

⁶The Folk of Southern Fiction (Athens, Ga.: Univ. of Georgia Press, 1972), pp. 245-46.

⁷Rev. of The Ponder Heart, by Eudora Welty, The Atlantic, 193 (February 1954), 78.

⁸Davis, "The South in Eudora Welty's Fiction," p. 201.

⁹Millsaps, p. 49; p. 144.

¹⁰"Dialogue as a Reflection of Place in The Ponder Heart," American Literature, 35 (November 1963), 353-57.

¹¹Davis, "Eudora Welty's Art of Naming," p. 182.

¹²Rubin, p. 131.

¹³"The Reasons of the Heart," Georgia Review, 2 (Winter 1957), 426.

¹⁴Isaacs, p. 14.

CHAPTER VI

STRATAGEMS AGAINST TIME: LOSING BATTLES

¹Losing Battles (New York: Random House, Inc., 1970). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²Bunting, p. 717.

³MacKethan, p. 262.

⁴The only exception to Welty's refusal to focus on the thoughts of the characters comes when, right after the reunion ends, we enter briefly the mind of Jack's younger brother, Vaughn Renfro.

⁵MacKethan, p. 262.

⁶"Conflict and Resolution in Welty's Losing Battles," Critique, 15 (Spring 1973), 113-23.

⁷"More Trouble in Mississippi: Family Vs. Antifamily in Miss Welty's Losing Battles," Sewanee Review, 79 (Fall 1971), 627.

⁸"Looking Down From a High Place: The Serenity of Miss Welty's Losing Battles," in A Still Moment: Essays on the Art of Eudora Welty, ed. John F. Desmond (Metuchen, N. J.: The Scarecrow Press, 1978), pp. 104-07.

⁹"The Insulation of Illusion and Losing Battles," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 651.

¹⁰"Speech and Silence in Losing Battles," Shenandoah, 25 (Spring 1973), 4-9.

- ¹¹Bunting, pp. 721-22.
- ¹²"Myth and History: The Foes of Losing Battles," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 644.
- ¹³Kreyling, p. 645.
- ¹⁴McMillan, p. 120.
- ¹⁵Kreyling, p. 647.
- ¹⁶Landess, p. 630.
- ¹⁷"Eudora Welty's New Novel: The Comedy of Loss," Southern Literary Journal, 3 (Fall 1970), 124.

CHAPTER VII

A RAGE AGAINST TIME: THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

¹The Optimist's Daughter (New York: Random House, Inc., 1972). Subsequent references will be placed in the text in parentheses.

²The "bridesmaids" are Laurel's six girlfriends who served in her wedding and who attend the funeral as a group; the Judge, of course, is Judge McKelva, and his mourners sit "more or less together on a row of dining room chairs, like some form of jury" (p. 72).

³"La Guerre Du Temps Dans Losing Battles Et The Optimist's Daughter," Recherches Anglaises et Americaines, 9 (1976), 189. "Laurel became by surprise a prisoner of time, forced to undergo it in its most testing and tangible form, duration. Powerless, she must accept its visible traces, remarriage, illness, old age, and death [translation mine]."

⁴Desmond, p. 118.

⁵Desmond, pp. 118-20, includes images of birds, patterns, food and feeding, water, fire, and touch; he omits the flower and time images which are quite crucial to understanding the novel.

⁶"The Past Reexamined: The Optimist's Daughter," Mississippi Quarterly, 26 (Fall 1973), 581.

⁷Mackethan, p. 273.

⁸Pitavy, p. 188.

⁹The shorter version of The Optimist's Daughter which appeared in The New Yorker, March 15, 1969, is essentially the same as the later book.

¹⁰"The Onlooker Smiling: An Early Reading of The Optimist's Daughter," Shenandoah, 20 (Spring 1969), 62.

¹¹Price, pp. 72-73.

¹²"Cunning Time," rev. of The Optimist's Daughter, by Eudora Welty, The New York Review of Books, 29 June 1972, p. 9.

¹³Nash, p. 143.

¹⁴Brooks, p. 581.

¹⁵"The Cataract of Lodore," in English Romantic Writers, ed. David Perkins (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc., 1967), p. 540.

¹⁶"Life With People: Virginia Woolf, Eudora Welty, and The Optimist's Daughter," The Southern Review, 13 (April 1977), 262.

¹⁷"A Memory," in A Curtain of Green and Other Stories (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1936), p. 156.

¹⁸Price, p. 72.

CHAPTER VIII

A TIME TO LOVE

¹The allusions to Ecclesiastes are taken from the Authorized King James Version of The Holy Bible.

²"Thomas Wolfe in Time and Place," in Southern Renaissance: The Literature of the Modern South, eds. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1953), pp. 291-92.

³"Birches," in The Pocket Book of Robert Frost's Poems (New York: Washington Square Press, Inc., 1969), p. 89.

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