

Lighting Candles

The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews, by Eudora Welty, *New York, Random House, 1978. 355 pp. \$10.00.*

TO HEAR EUDORA WELTY tell it, she was born to read. Some children seem to have all they can handle, just attending to the sensations that happen to them, while others seem so desperate to find new experiences that they learn to read "storybooks" almost before they learn to walk. For the latter, every day can be a birthday, with the excitement from reading's constant novelty heightened by the fear that fiction, like other forms of fuel, might be in limited supply. Decidedly one of the latter children, Miss Welty, in "A Sweet Devouring," describes the tribulations that she had to endure in order to return from the local Carnegie with the Grail. There was the ritual torture: at least two petticoats for decorum (in Jackson, Mississippi, in the summer). There were the absurd stipulations, to be swallowed on faith alone: no book could be returned the same day that it was borrowed! no more than two books to anyone! *Silence!* She would have suffered more—Job's boils, if necessary—for she seemed to know from the moment when lines of ink jumped off the page as words that in reading she took the measure of reality. She devoured fiction not in romantic escape, but in realistic encounter.

Miss Welty has never gotten her fill of fiction. In a beautiful image she describes the effect of fiction on her life: as a child she was taken into the darkness of Kentucky's Mammoth Cave; when the guide struck a light she was dazzled by all the splendor of the rock formations that had been around her all along. So fiction lights up the experience that would otherwise slip by us unnoticed. That is to say, Miss Welty regards fiction as an exploration of reality, each new fiction "some fresh approximation of human truth." She would not dismiss that reality consisting solely of material objects, a view of the world so entrancing these days, but she clearly thinks that a superior reality derives from the morality which resides

in human relationships. That reality is most clearly revealed to us by fiction, which can intensify our personal response by suffusing it with the accumulated insight of the race.

"Making reality real is art's responsibility," Miss Welty asserts in her famous "Place in Fiction," and she has held fiction—for her the most realistic of art's forms—severely to account. But if she has had high expectations for fiction, she has been quick to praise when her expectations have been met. Some of the best essays here are her appreciations of fellow writers. Her first essay is devoted to Jane Austen, who is worthy to introduce a book about the craft of fiction if anybody is. Miss Welty's point about Miss Austen is constant to her belief: "She has command over our vision, . . ." With Henry Green, a contemporary, Miss Welty is no less appreciative, but somehow not so formal in the way that she expresses herself: in drawing from us a regard for the beauty and a wonder at the mystery of the world, he brings us "slap up against the reality of fiction." Like Jane Austen, Katherine Anne Porter is praised for the keenness of her vision, and, like Henry Green, she is praised for her ability to present reality; what Miss Welty finds distinctive about her fellow Southerner is a capacity for sheer hard work, in order to wrestle order and form out of the slippery stuff of life. Willa Cather is praised for the same dogged pursuit of meaning: "A work of art is a work," Miss Welty says, *apropos* of Miss Cather, "something made, which in the making follows an idea that comes out of human life and leads back into human life." There is a hint, here and elsewhere, that Miss Welty might be just a little tender to the public perception of a writer as a sedentary creature, freed of any necessity to strain in life by some miraculous gift of gab. With Chekhov, the last subject in the section "On Writers," Miss Welty comes home to her abiding interest, reality; the Russian is praised for his success at rendering life realistically. But it should be clear by now that for Miss Welty reality in fiction is achieved when none of its mystery is lost in the transfer from the outer realm to the inner.

Eudora Welty early discovered that, as instructive to her soul as another's fiction might

be (and this is the testimony in each of her essays about other writers), it ultimately remained that person's province. At that point she knew that either she could be thankful for, or at least content with, a world defined by others or she could attempt to craft her own, even though the labor would consume her life. She must have realized that, for one of her temperament, no other activity would gain her total involvement, hence that no other expenditure of her time could be justified. She had discovered that, as she closes her eloquent essay on Katherine Anne Porter's work, "the art of making is the thing that has meaning."

The human activity in making fiction is the farthest thing from the fine frenzy and head-rolling that is too often the writer's image. Rather, making fiction, like any other ordering and shaping, relies upon technique, skills which can be devised, practiced, improved. This is not to deny the intuition, the natural gift, that marks the greatest performances in any activity—it is only to give thinking its due. Miss Welty's fictions testify that she is blessed with a profound insight—there are times when she conveys life's fragility with a pain that hurts like an autumn day. But the plentitude of her fictions and the brilliance of her essays "On Writing" declare that she has not let brilliance keep her from working at her craft.

These essays on her tools, especially "Place in Fiction" and "Some Notes on Time in Fiction," reveal a craftsmanship that is filled with pride, in the sense that Miss Welty sees pride in Katherine Anne Porter's prose, that is, "pride in the language, pride in using the language to search out human meanings, pride in making a good piece of work." Miss Welty's work (and that word cannot be too much stressed) reveals self-respect and satisfaction in effort spent, those meanings of "pride" she detects in Miss Porter's work. The subjects, place, and time respectively, are so immediate to every consciousness that any effort to say anything about them would be risking triviality. Yet because of her respect for the significance of her subjects she chances her reputation, in order to confront those two conditions that bind us as firmly as gravity. Even stripped of their contexts, her basic ideas are so impres-

sive that every lover of literature (surely this category subsumes every teacher of literature?) should take an oath to defend them, to the death, if necessary. Place localizes human relationships; it is impossible to speak of a specific human relationship without placing it in a specific world which affects it: any art that succeeds to the universal, then, does so because it is sufficiently local. Concern with time is ultimately the subject of all fiction, for it is the mind's ultimate, most feverish concern: "in our sense of our own transience may lie the one irreducible urgency telling us to do, to understand, to love."

For more than forty years Eudora Welty has, in her urgency, made magnificent use of her tools. For too many of those years she was that other writer from Mississippi or one of that wondrous generation of Southern women writers. Even yet there is not a body of criticism commensurate to her achievement—too often she suffers when the generalizations about Southern literature or about any one of her fellow practitioners are applied to her.

But with the colligation here of her own best pieces of criticism there can no longer be any excuse for mistreating her. Her critical perceptions about other writers are like boomerangs: they fly straight to their mark, but if that target should be removed, they speed directly back to her. There they join the body of comment that she has made about (her own) technique. All in all, what the comments say is that Eudora Welty must know more about loneliness than ever Robinson Crusoe did. Loneliness here is not understood as social isolation, but that vision which has, if only for a moment, glimpsed the flimsiness of all those social constructions that advertise communion. Miss Welty's characters are obsessed to talk, and sometimes the complaint is heard that nothing happens except talk in a Welty novel. That is precisely the point: nothing happens—and would happen more if we did not talk. We talk to spin the fragile threads of human relationship and weave worlds. By talking we "do, . . . understand, . . . love." Of Henry Green's novels, Miss Welty says, "In each novel, the characters within its world are busy, no matter what happens, *making* a world—with the hands

perhaps, but certainly with the emotions; something will get positively pulled into shape, patched together, to hold on to against time and death." In her own *Mammoth Cave*, Eudora Welty has been lighting candles against time and death all these years.

Reviewed by LEWIS A. LAWSON