

ANALYSIS

The Modernist Structure of *The Golden Apples* (1949)

Eudora Welty

(1909-2001)

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“Because Eudora Welty herself has suggested that *The Golden Apples* was more than just another collection of short stories. The structural unity of the book has puzzled critics over the years. Nearly all the articles dealing with *The Golden Apples* as a whole tackle the problem and attempt to solve it by establishing close parallels between (mostly) Greek mythology and the various characters and incidents in the book. Whether they underline the recurrent myths that can be traced in the different stories or organize all mythical allusions into echoes and leitmotiv that weave a symphonic web in the book, these critical approaches remain at the surface of the work.

No doubt, the task is not easy, perhaps chiefly because of the looseness of the book. It is composed of seven stories, each a brilliant experiment in technique, and of several different myths--Celtic as well as Greek--collected under a title that seems to introduce yet another myth. The very multiplicity of these mythic readings and the lack of a strong unifying device, such as one finds in *Ulysses*, have marred all attempts at finding a satisfactory structure. Could not then a different approach be used that would do full justice not only to this complex work but to the artist herself, who of her generation is perhaps the most deeply aware of her art?

In *The Golden Apples* Welty very deliberately used what T. S. Eliot called ‘the mythical method’ in his 1923 *Dial* review of *Ulysses*: ‘It is simply a way of controlling, or ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious. It is a method for which the horoscope is auspicious.’ Myth here is technique, imposed on the world of action, shaping our perception and reaction to it. Eliot’s comment is further relevant because he gives credit to Yeats for adumbrating this technique and also mentions the horoscope. Both are directly related to the technique used in *The Golden Apples*. That Eudora Welty intended to experiment with the mythical method in a sustained and deliberate way is indicated by the genesis of her work.

The first story of the cycle, ‘June Recital,’ was originally called ‘The Golden Apples’...partly inspired by ‘The Song of the Wandering Aengus.’ Yeats’s poem was extensively quoted in the first version. This nucleus story was thus under the double parentage of Yeats and Greek myth. Later, it was renamed and the mythical title transferred to designate the collection as a whole--a unique instance in Welty’s work, for the three other collections bear the name of one story. As she worked on the various stories of *The Golden Apples*, she realized, as she said, she was ‘writing about the same people.’

The futility of decoding the characters and events of the book according to a strict mythological system becomes evident from the first story. The warning is there, in the title itself, which functions as a signal to indicate a reality beyond the events in the story. ‘Shower of Gold’ heralds the birth of Perseus to any cultivated reader. But on what level? If we remain on the purely factual level, we read in the story nothing more than the birth of the MacLain twins, Randall and Eugene, not the clandestine birth of an only son. And the ‘quotation’ in the text is scant; the word *gold* is not even mentioned: ‘She looked like more than only the news had come over her. It was like a shower of something had struck her, like she’d been caught out in something bright.’ Moreover, this title appears as an infraction of the functioning of the story, which rests entirely on the ‘truth’ of King MacLain’s visit to his wife on Halloween. Indeed, this title has nothing to do with the fiction if we except the incomplete allusion. (It functions, of course, as a mythical clue for

King MacLain, whom we are thus invited to see as the modern counterpart of Zeus. But this belongs to the surface level of the book; story after story, we are told of the amorous exploits of the character.) We must therefore look elsewhere for the function of the title, beyond the single short story, considering this first piece of narrative as part of a whole, and see whether other allusions to Perseus occur in the book.

The hero reappears, again without being named, in the fourth story, 'Moon Lake.' The parallel is explicit enough never to have left critics in doubt as to the equation of Loch Morrison's bringing Easter back to life after she has fallen into the lake with Perseus' rescuing Andromeda from the sea monster. The reference is quite precise, developed at length and confirmed, so to speak, by the vision of Loch, alone and enjoying his triumph outside his tent as Perseus did after his first victory. But here again, Perseus and Andromeda and their love affair have no part in the plot of the story. What is most impressive is the strong sexual coloration of the life-saving process. We are once more aware that the significance of this episode is on a second level of reality.

Finally, Perseus' slaying Medusa is the object of Virgie Rainey's long meditation in 'The Wanderers.' The meditation functions no more directly in this narrative than in the other two stories. It should be noted, however, that Virgie's interpretation is rather unorthodox and shakes the commonly accepted views of the myth: 'Miss Eckhart had had among the pictures from Europe on her walls a certain threatening one. It hung over the dictionary, dark as that book. It showed Perseus with the head of the Medusa. 'The same thing as Siegfried and the Dragon,' Miss Eckhart had occasionally said, as if explaining second-best...[Virgie] saw the stroke of the sword in three moments, not one. In the three was the damnation--no, only the secret, unhurting because not caring in itself--beyond the beauty and the sword's stroke and the terror lay their existence in time--far out and endless, a constellation which the heart could read over many a night.' At this stage we can draw two conclusions. The myth of Perseus is undoubtedly present in *The Golden Apples*, and Welty's use of this myth is highly deliberate, creative. There is another technical difficulty to solve before examining more closely the function of the myth of Perseus: the title of the collection itself.

The quest for the golden apples is very distantly linked to the myth of Perseus--some late accretions, which critics bent on finding thematic unity have hunted for and made the most of. But generally speaking, no one connects Perseus with the golden apples (though he is Heracles' ancestor). Since the title 'Shower of Gold' functions symbolically, we may infer that the only other title with a mythical connotation, the general title of the collection, functions in the same way: it would thus refer not to a definite search but to *any* search. The text corroborates this hypothesis. The title was at first given to 'June Recital,' which originally included the full last stanza of Yeats's poem, with the reference to 'the silver apples of the moon, / The golden apples of the sun.' When Eudora Welty revised she eliminated the too explicit lines, favoring indirectness to pedantry, the more refined method of distant allusion to a labored exercise in name dropping. In fact, she kept the spirit rather than the letter of the poem. And what quest had Yeats in mind? Several times he pointed out the duality in the myth and legends about those who live in the waters and can take any shape like 'the little silver trout' which became 'a glimmering girl': 'The people of the waters have been in all ages beautiful and changeable and lascivious, or beautiful and wise and lonely, for water is everywhere the signature of the fruitfulness of the body and of the fruitfulness of dreams.'

Indeed, the search for the apples provides a loose thematic link between the different short stories. By their Greek and Celtic parentage the golden fruit represent the artist's attempt at showing the universality of myth--human desire and longing, at bringing about a new awareness of the fundamental ambivalence of man through a comparison between several worlds. The brilliant fabric of mythological names and echoes that adorns the surface of the text functions in this same way. Welty's use of this technical device is quite original; it is not coincidence or influence but technique. She uses mythology as deliberate 'quotations' from Yeats, Joyce, or T. S. Eliot, with the resulting effect of implying that she is writing about universal passions as eternal as *art*, and the created world itself. (Another way of doing it is to project what takes place on earth into the stars and constellations, whose names are derived from the myth, what T. S. Eliot implied when he mentioned the horoscope.) This effect of quotation is a means of guaranteeing the truth of her fiction, just as, paradoxically, this truth is warranted at the other end, the realistic end, by the list of the characters printed at the beginning of the book.

What is more, these highly sophisticated literary 'quotations' are a means of suggesting that literature is itself the endless repetition of the same stories. Welty's attitude becomes reflexive, just as literature, she seems to suggest, is a mirror. She questions her art in the very moment she is creating it. Somehow, those 'quotations' are the play within the play, contesting the story and the genre while functioning within it. They constitute the mirror that Welty holds to her fiction. Perseus does nothing else: the writer is Perseus. To the point here is Reynolds Price's superb definition of the artist--not unconnected with *The Golden Apples*, it seems, as it appears in an essay significantly entitled 'Dodging Apples': 'The central myth of the artist is surely not Narcissus but Perseus--with the artist in all roles, Perseus, Medusa and the mirror-shield.' Here, brilliantly summed up, are indeed the elements of the myth..

The centre of this trinity is fascination--Medusa's deadly gaze, or rather fascination defeated, overcome by another gaze--Perseus' in the mirror. At the mythic as well as the symbolic level, fascination means death. At the level of human relations, it refers to that spell...by which we tend to objectify the other, to make him lose his identity and become a thing, an object.... All the complexities of feelings based on fascination, tearing man between attraction and repulsion, loving and loathing, fulfillment and destruction inform the treatment of human relations in *The Golden Apples*. There is the fascination for an unworthy type--King MacLain, a rascal who brazenly defies all the social and moral conventions in 'Shower of Gold' and 'The Wanderers.' The nausea linked to the flesh and the self as experienced in sex is central to 'Sir Rabbit' and 'The Whole World Knows.' Death also provides a perilous allure in 'Moon Lake.' In the more complex stories the theme of fascination shapes with infinite subtlety the projection of the self onto the idealized alter-ego, as in 'Music from Spain' and 'June Recital,' which present the most devastating picture of feelings related to this theme.

Perseus is not a 'culture hero' in the sense Prometheus and Heracles are culture heroes, that is, the saviors of mankind, the transgressors, the 'transformers' who by their heroic action help civilization progress. Perseus' victory is of a more private kind and concerns the terrors of the soul and the agony of the heart rather than the ordering of chaos.... Perseus in *The Golden Apples* is above all that most complex character who alone was able to conceive the full horror of Medusa, since he overcame it: 'Because Virgie saw things in their time, like hearing them--and perhaps because she must believe in the Medusa equally with Perseus--she saw the strike of the sword in three moments, not one.' Those three moments in one represent the utmost fascination and the awareness of it... Perseus stands for the fascinated become fascinator, the slaying of Medusa for the lover who could grasp the full essence of his beloved only by killing her. The severed head is not only the visible sign of that permanent scandal--death; it is also the visible sign of that other scandal--the destructive power of love, any form of love (of fascination). For it is the essence of fascination, the utmost form of gaze, to become annihilated in the very accomplishment of the transgression it implies. This failed epiphany Eudora Welty calls 'separateness.' In 'A Still Moment' Lorenzo the watcher and Audobon, seer and voyeur, slayer and lover, knew already that fascination is a knowledge and a love that contains in itself the death of all knowledge and love.

The agony of separateness is what most married characters in *The Golden Apples* experience. Whether it be an unfaithful husband ('Shower of Gold'), an unfaithful wife ('The Whole World Knows'), or an inadequate spouse ('Sir Rabbit,' 'Music from Spain,' Mrs. Morrison in 'June Recital'), they all feel the unbreachable gulf between what they dream or hope for and the reality that makes their lives. In 'The Wanderers,' Virgie Rainey's long chain of lovers shows that she too has not been able to find fulfillment in love. Just as excruciating can be the loneliness of thwarted affection, whether born of unrequited devotion--a maternal love transfer, Miss Eckhart's feelings for Virgie Rainey in 'June Recital'--or the result of death, the scandalous distress of the orphaned child ('Moon Lake'), or of the hundred smaller sorrows daily experienced.

The third constituent of the myth, the mirror, points to the fascination of Perseus--his awareness of horror and its fascination for him. The place of desire, the mirror becomes the door to death. A reflection, it is the sign of the near identity of opposites: '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.

This endless doubling upon oneself is fascination--again. And this is true not only of 'moments,' but of the short stories themselves as structures. They are built on this endless reflection, which doubles and doubles again. There are two parts or two movements in each story that are based on the ambiguity between a real experience and a dreamed one, between asserted reality and hypothetical reality.... In "The Wanderers" the axis is 'the feeling of the double coming-back,' as Virgie Rainey experiences it (or the double departure, which is just its reverse, its reflection in the mirror). Starting from that evident dichotomy, Eudora Welty elaborates on a most sophisticated play on reflections.... [The book] rests on two major trends, a comic one based on the celebration of the word--the art of telling--and a tragic one based on vision--the fascination of the *spectacle*.

The reflection at times functions as the proof of the authenticity of the object, as in 'Shower of Gold.' The narrative problem here is the 'truth' of King's visit on Halloween. In the first part, Mrs. Rainey draws a portrait of King MacLain, a rogue pursuing his amorous career all over the South, and through her we hear the adoring voice of the community. In the second part, she tells at length how he was seen at the door of his house on a surprise visit to his wife, how he thought better of it when circled by his two young sons disguised for the day, and ran away once more. But these facts cannot be proved. Apparently, part two illustrates the gossips told in part one and corroborates them. However, a close study of the narration shows that it is just the reverse: the legend surrounding King MacLain is what makes the aborted visit credible--in the narrative system of the story.

With a more refined composition, based on the alternating voices of Loch Morrison and his sister Cassie, "June Recital" sends back and forth a series of reflections that contribute to the most scathing criticism of human relations in society. The overall effect is that of the play within the play, since for each witness the *spectacle* he sees constitutes the epitome of his vision--a reflected microcosm of his world. To this mirror-effect within each narrative, a more subtle one is added, which provides the structural link between the two parts. The grey dull picture of what seems the preparation for a celebration is followed by the brilliantly colored image of the celebration itself--the recital. We hesitate over the true nature of what we see (which is the reflection? Which the object?), and a new awareness of the tragedy of human relations is born as the second mirror-effect begins to dawn on us. Until we realize we should superimpose the two scenes so as to see the complete picture, we do not fully apprehend the structure--hence the subject of 'June Recital.'

In Loch's narrative, Miss Eckhart's lavish decoration of her studio with 'maypole ribbons of newspaper and tissue paper' reads like a black and white snapshot of the June recital narrated in Cassie's part, its negative rather. The relation between the two scenes provides the key to the understanding of the story; in spite of appearances they are very much alike. Just as we see a proliferation of stage properties in part one, part two presents a proliferation of visual elements to the prejudice of musical ones. The empty stage in part one represents a distortion of the spectacle, produced for its sole end without any audience, just as the June recital deprived of its musical end is similarly distorted. The finality of both spectacles is elsewhere. For that one night in the year the ladies of Morgana cooperate with Miss Eckhart to celebrate themselves, in the end, under the pretense of honoring their daughters.

Staged by a narcissistic town enamored of its own image, the brilliantly colorful recital derives its deceptive splendor from success and power. It presents the supreme illusion of the town contemplating its social achievement therein. In the other scene, stripped of its false appearances, the studio looks what it is really--an empty stage for a demented puppet. Likewise, Miss Eckhart's loneliness is made visible together with the destructive effect of her love for Virgie; she has been drained of her vital flux by the dazzled gaze she gave her idol-pupil. Thus the two scenes function like Medusa's head and its reflection in the mirror. The reflected head loses its power to fascinate because it is deprived of the deadly glamour. Vulnerability becomes apparent with the emptiness that fascination implies. The reflection is 'truer' than the object, and cannot be dissociated from it. When superimposed, the two pictures give an image of relief, so to speak, suggesting the depth of the tragedy of human relations behind the brilliant surface.

The three elements of the myth of Perseus thus correspond to the major themes and techniques of the book: they are present in every story, and each element functions in the same way as it does in the myth. This structure suggests three organizing principles: all the short stories have a plot based on fascination,

they are all constructed with a mirror-effect, and the theme of separateness runs throughout the volume. In other words, the narratives that constitute *The Golden Apples* are dramatizations of the functioning of the myth of Perseus--the essential theme of the book... [It] can be read at the ordinary level of dramatic action. It offers then the picture of a microcosm with its passions and frustrations, hate and prejudice, heroes and scapegoats. At a more significant level, it is concerned with the kinds of awareness various minds have of death, which it is man's fate to fear, fight and fool as much and as long as he can.

As the protean figure of Death makes his insidious way into every passion, great or small, that seethes in the heart of man, there are thousands of encounters before the final destruction. Man's dignity or heroism is this endless fight against death and all forms of evil, which are forms of death. For this, he has 'the pure wish to live.' He has love or art: Miss Eckhart 'had hung the picture on the wall for herself. She had absorbed the hero and the victim and then, stoutly, could sit down to the piano with all Beethoven ahead of her. With her hate, with her love, and with the small gnawing feelings that ate them, she offered Virgie her Beethoven.'

The myth of Perseus is central to Welty's thought from 'A Curtain of Green' to *The Optimist's Daughter*. Only in *The Golden Apples*, of which she said that 'in a way it is closest to my heart of all my books,' has she fully developed it. The mythic method, which she uses again in *Losing Battles*, though quite differently, leaves the fight endless and somewhat unresolved, except by art. 'In Virgie's reach of memory a melody softly lifted, lifted of itself. Every time Perseus struck off the Medusa's head, there was the beat of time, and the melody. Endless the Medusa, and Perseus endless. 'Pursuing her own ceaseless war with time and death, the artist comes to a different compromise in a more classical novel like *The Optimist's Daughter*. The answer is no longer determined by the fixed revolutions of the heavenly bodies, but is inscribed in human time, and relies on that best of man's weapons, memory. A crucible in which man's heart and spirit are purified of desire and remorse, memory becomes the privileged place where the patterns of our lives--any lives--are written and disclosed to the artist, whose creative vision can thus dominate chaos.

In *The Golden Apples* the stars are not alone in transcending time in their eternal movement; so do myths, becoming as fixed in their revolving through centuries and cultures as the constellations which bear their names. And so does the work of art, which first explores the depth of the human heart, then stands in black letters against the white page. Gaining immortality, the work of art thus gives the reverse picture of the luminous stars against the black sky, as Mallarme once wrote. 'You noticed, one does not write with light on a dark background; the alphabet of the stars, alone, is marked in this way, uncompleted or interrupted; man pursues black against white'."

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