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The Rhetoric of the Freak Show in Welty's *A Curtain of Green*

IN *ON LONGING*, SUSAN STEWART DISCUSSES IMAGES OF THE GROTESQUE body, distinguishing between the manifestation of corporeal figuration in carnival-grotesque cultural practices and the deployment of such imagery in accordance with the structures of "the spectacle." Following Mikhail Bakhtin fairly closely, she correlates the grotesque body with the gigantic, explaining that as "a body of parts" in which the "productive and reproductive organs . . . are its focus," it is these (the parts) that "come to live an independent life of their own" (105). The sci-fi horror parody skit titled "Are the Findings of Doctors and Clinics Who Do Sexual Research Accurate?" in Woody Allen's *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Sex* (*But Were Afraid to Ask)* (1972) offers a good example of the tendency of grotesque strategies to isolate and exhibit in exaggerated form selected reproductive organs. There, as a result of a silicone injection gone wrong, a massive breast (formerly belonging to Stockard Channing) goes on a comically murderous rampage across the countryside. For Stewart, the specificity of such carnival-grotesque displays of corporeal fragmentation is that they participate in the process of "democratic reciprocity" in which no spatial gap keeps audience members away from performers as they come into contact with each other in the participatory dynamics of communal celebrations (107). In contrast, the spectacle is said both to establish and to work to maintain the distance between spectators and the "aestheticiz[ed]" "aberrations of the physical body" they (the spectators) are shown (107, 108). In visual terms, the difference is thus between the mutually regarding "gaze of carnival and festival" and the one-sided stare that the spectacle solicits; in the latter "the object is blinded; only the audience sees" (108).¹

For Stewart, the freak show best exemplifies the objectifying procedures of the spectacle. Emphasizing the miniature, she explains that this enduring form of popular entertainment is customarily committed

¹See Bakhtin for a related conceptualization of the difference between spectacle and carnival (7).

to the firmly bordered framing of anomalously shaped others for an observing self.² Crucially, the process of constructing the abnormal entity conventionally depends in part upon the verbal spiel of a barker. This is to say, the ear as well as the eye, sound as well as sight, are involved in the fabrication of the human oddity. “Even when, as is sometimes the case in smaller and poorer . . . operations, the freak delivers his or her own ‘pitch,’ there is an absolute separation between the tableaulike silence of the freak’s display and the initial metacommentary of the pitch.” This detachment is experienced most powerfully in the “hesitation,” “the pause before the curtain closes or before the viewer walks on” (Stewart 109).³ The language of the spectacle thus properly belongs to the presenter, the showman as orator who has necessarily “mastered the art of persuasion” (Bogdan, “Social” 27). At many recreational sites (amusement park midways or fairgrounds, circus sideshows, and dime museums), the talking duties were split between an “outside lecturer,” whose task was to convince passersby to come into the venue, and an “inside lecturer,” who would give the entering patrons sensationalized background information on the various attractions. Whereas in the first case descriptive “exaggeration and falsification” (27) were virtual prerequisites for the job, in the second the narrative account rarely took accuracy into consideration, the goal in both cases to affect—to amaze and excite or startle and disgust—rather than to furnish knowledge.⁴ The structure of the spectacle therefore was and remains fundamentally triangular, with the speaker’s epistemologically unreliable (pseudo-scientific) discourse playing a constitutive role in conditioning the way the exhibition of an atypical body appears to fascinated spectators. Dupliciously purporting to know what it is in effect making,

²The next section of Stewart’s study is titled “The Body Made Miniature,” which is in turn followed by an analysis of the tradition of Tom Thumb Weddings (111-25).

³Adams acknowledges the pertinence of Stewart’s model of the spectacle, but argues that “historical evidence reveals how rarely this theory was realized in practice, for sideshows are hardly spaces of restraint or decorum, and things seldom go as planned: freaks talk back, experts lose their authority, the audience refuses to take their seats” (13).

⁴Thomson points out that printed material—illustrated pamphlets containing fantastic stories about “the freak’s always extraordinary life and identity,” as well as advertisements and broadsides—contributed to the manufacturing of the freak as a readily consumable commodity (“Introduction” 7); see also Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies* 53-81.

the voice that designates and discusses the exceptional being as a monstrous aberration is engaged in a speech act masquerading as what it is not—a cognitively tenable statement of fact.

My claim here is that Stewart's explanation of the commercially motivated distraction's predilection for converting atypical corporeality into bizarre spectacle helps us comprehend key aspects of Eudora Welty's *A Curtain of Green* (1941). That Stewart's theoretical model illuminates Welty's literary practice is not surprising given the overall resemblance of the latter's first collection of stories to a freak show. Indeed, as one unsympathetic reviewer put it in *Time* shortly after *Curtain's* publication, Welty seems "preoccupied with the demented, the deformed, the queer, the highly spiced. Of the 17 pieces, only two report states of experience which could be called normal" (Johnston 8). This is not to say, however, that the collection is simply read as a modernist appropriation of the "low" form of popular entertainment. On the contrary, the significance of Welty's early fiction is that it critically discredits the freak show's solicitation of visual stimulation as a means of negotiating subjective anxieties and desires. As Matthew Martin aptly asserts, if "the cast of characters in Welty's early stories reads like a kind of traveling sideshow—the petrified, the outcast, the exotic, the lame, the deaf, the old—these stories in the end refuse to distinguish the freak from the normal person, the spectator from the spectacle" (19). Published at the exact historical moment that the recreational practice had finished its century-long run as a prominent amusement in American culture, *Curtain* reflects back critically on this phenomenon in decline (one that ultimately managed to survive in altered form in the margins of mainstream culture).⁵ Taken together, several stories in the collection analyze with considerable rigor the ways in which the freak show's objectifications of a (non-carnival) grotesque Other—sometimes but not always racialized—functioned socially as a means of maintaining a respectable middle-class identity. Even in the numerous stories in *Curtain* that do not allude explicitly to the freak show, staring at the peculiar and seemingly deviant Other frequently enables the starrer (albeit briefly) to feel reassured that he or she is an unexceptional,

⁵As Thomson puts it, in "the escalating upheaval of modernization between about 1840 through 1940, what we now think of as the freak show flared like a comet and then vanished from view, re-emerging in almost unrecognizable forms in the late twentieth century" ("Introduction" 11).

ordinary member of the community. Insofar as Welty's fictions suggest that the scopic structure of the spectacle is operative in everyday life, one can claim that the cultural enterprise supplied her with a touchstone or general model for understanding what is frequently at stake—emotionally and cognitively—in the visual (and aural) transactions between persons that constitute social existence in her world. My ambition, therefore, is less to utilize Stewart's ideas to conceptualize Welty's undertaking than it is to recognize the degree to which the fiction writer's Depression-era literary enterprise generated insights that directly anticipate those that the critical thinker would formulate with impressive clarity roughly a half century later.

In making this argument, I am to some extent preceded by Susan Donaldson, who makes the important point in her summary assessment of *Curtain* that, like Welty's "characters, we as readers are encouraged to scrutinize these representations of the strange and the marvelous. But we are also urged to consider those who do the scrutinizing and the act of scrutiny itself." Consequently, reading this text "is roughly akin to looking at an exhibit and being vaguely uneasy about the possibility of being on exhibit oneself" (Donaldson 574). What remains to be elaborated is the pivotal significance Welty attributed to the verbal underpinnings of (literally or metaphorically) staged sights. In several of her stories, spoken discourse is registered as the force fundamentally responsible for keeping the fragile structure of the spectacle in place, whether in a theatrical venue or in everyday life. And ultimately in *Curtain* Welty encourages us to attend (as Donaldson herself does in passing) to the potential of the powerful gaze of the carnival-grotesque Other to hurl the spectator into oblivion.

A conversational remark in "Lily Daw and the Three Ladies," the first story in *Curtain*, evokes (critically and comically) the presumably commonplace tendency at the time to equate, on the basis of either physiological traits or sartorial appearances, the intellectually disabled with a type of person exhibited on the freak show stage.⁶ Desperate to convince the childishly recalcitrant Lily Daw that she should agree to go to the Ellisville Institute for the Feeble-Minded of Mississippi, Mrs. Watts, one of the three ladies who have watched out for the abused girl (after her mother's death the girl's father "commenced beating her, and

⁶See Bogdan, "The Exhibition of People We Now Call Mentally Retarded," *Freak Show* 119-146.

tried to cut her head off with a butcher knife" [7]⁷), tries to entice Lily with a present. Mrs. Watts offers Lily "a pink crêpe de Chine brassière" (13). One of the other ladies, Mrs. Carson, who has promised to give her "a big caramel cake" (12), is startled by her friend's concession to Lily's "maturity," as if the invocation of lingerie will encourage the evidently slow-witted girl to engage in promiscuous behavior, which is precisely the greatest fear they all have for her. Mrs. Watts then defends her seemingly contradictory gesture. She does so not on the grounds that Lily "needs it" (13) but because in Mrs. Watts's opinion Lily's accidentally eroticized manner of dressing has already made her resemble one of the entertainment institution's exoticized (and most racist) attractions: an inhabitant of the South Pacific Islands. "What would they think," Mrs. Watts wonders, "if she ran all over Ellisville in a petticoat looking like a Fiji?" (13).⁸ Although the woman is no doubt exaggerating things a bit, her concern is telling in that it indicates that she is worried that others will do what she has done and take the girl's preference for under rather than outerwear as evidence that there is little difference at the mental level between her and a savage. In other words, Mrs. Watts wants to protect Lily from being viewed (correctly from Mrs. Watts' perspective) as someone so uncivilized as to be capable of engaging in an archaic practice as distressing as the eating of human flesh: premarital sex.

Mrs. Watts's allusion to this particular freak show phenomenon also accounts, albeit in an inverted manner, for the three ladies' patronizing manner of treating Lily as a primitive creature. That they consider her to have stopped at an early stage of (evolutionary) development is apparent in the way they rely on barter more than rational discourse in their effort to persuade her to follow their advice and leave her hometown of Victory. For them, the best way to deal with her is via rudimentary acts of exchange; they wish to trade things (a pillowcase, a cake, a toy bank, and the aforementioned undergarment) for her word that she will do what they want. The ladies also envision themselves in relation to Lily as Christian missionaries assigned the task of converting

⁷Yaeger takes Lily's scarred body as the point of departure for a wide-ranging discussion of the grotesque body in Southern literature as: 1) a cognitive map of social crises; 2) an affective force; and 3) a testament bearing witness to trauma (121-22).

⁸The semi-bogus presentation of cannibals brought back from the Fiji Islands was initiated in 1872 by P. T. Barnum (Bogdan 180).

heathen to Western religious values: they “sent her to Sunday school to learn the Lord’s teachings, [and] had her baptized a Baptist” (7). They have struggled as well to create her in their own image, to make her like them: proper Southern ladies. “‘And Lily acted so nice. She was a perfect lady. . . . ‘Oh she can be a lady—she can be,’ said Mrs. Carson, shaking her head and turning her eyes up. ‘That’s just what breaks your heart’” (4). And it is because their project of civilizing her has not come to fruition that the women have decided to send her away. Notably, although the two matriarchs and their younger sidekick, Aimee Slocum, disingenuously tell Lily that they have sought divine guidance for what is best for her, it is clear that their primary goal is to exert control over a potentially wayward female body, and that in this respect they are willingly serving as the agents of the town’s more patriarchal authorities. “‘We’ve all asked God, Lily,’ said Mrs. Carson finally, ‘and God seemed to tell us—Mr. Carson [the local preacher], too—that the place where you ought to be, so as to be happy, was Ellisville” (13). Their obvious reward for assuming the responsibility of enforcing prevailing codes of sexual conduct, of preserving Lily’s chastity (they have made sure that “the boys of Victory are on their honor” with her [6]), is that the act of repressing a potentially sinful Other makes them feel virtuous.⁹

The ladies’ ostensibly compassionate sensitivity to the fact that Lily’s eccentricities have left her susceptible to becoming a public spectacle for the community is thus belied by their own tendency to view her in private as a grotesquely freakish Other. Yet they are correct in their assumption that the town, in however good-natured or affectionate a fashion, will exploit her as an object of collective fun. When news spreads that Lily is departing for the medical facility, “Nearly everyone in Victory” (14), eager to see her “all dressed up” (15), rushes to the train station to gawk at her, the civic band assembling there as well. To avoid this mock celebration of her “big day” (18), two of the women have “sneaked her into the train from the other side of the tracks” (15) in the hope of preventing her from being looked at by everyone on the train platform. Yet the ladies themselves are complicit with the analogical premise underlying the parodic event; they share the attitude that Lily’s

⁹Arant situates the ladies’ morally dubious decision in the context of the eugenics movement. On the role the eugenicists’ efforts to incarcerate mentally or physically “inferior” persons in custodial asylums played in the “Decline and Demise of the Freak Show,” see Bogdan, *Freak Show* 62-63.

departure for the asylum is comparable to a high school graduate's leaving for college. We have been alerted to this at the start of the story when the ladies, upon learning that she is "getting in at Ellisville" (3), express themselves in terms indistinguishable from those a proud parent might use after reading the letter informing them of their child's acceptance at an institution of higher learning.

Lily initially resists the ladies' plans for her because she believes, after attending a traveling tent show, that she has received an offer of marriage. Though startled, the ladies can accept the idea that she desired one of the members of the show's band, especially after being told that "she kept her eyes on" his xylophone during the entire show, as if hypnotized by his instrument. ("Didn't turn her head to the right or to the left the whole time" [5]). But only after Lily reiterates her conviction that she is engaged do the scandalized ladies suspect an act of physical eroticism has occurred: "There was a gasp from each lady. The possibility of a lover descended suddenly like a summer hail over their heads" (10-11). On the edge of hysteria, they interrogate her further: "Did he—did he do anything to you?" And they nearly collapse when they take her description of him playing his instrument as a euphemism for intercourse: "He took little sticks and went *ping-pong! ding-dong!*" "Oh, I think I'm going to faint," said Aimee" (11). Already concerned that she is easily manipulated ("Lily lets people walk over her so" [4]), the increasingly frantic women come to fear the worst, that not only has she been seduced by a man "after . . . [her] body alone" (12) but that she may even be pregnant.

A last-minute reversal (or rescue) supplies the basis for a happy resolution, one in which Lily is seemingly integrated back into society via the conventional ending to a comedy. When Aimee realizes after meeting the xylophone player by chance that he does indeed wish to marry Lily, Aimee manages, despite nearly having "a conniption fit" (19), to set in motion the sequence of events that should eventually lead to a wedding. Yet the impending ceremony retains elements of the freak show, suggesting that Lily has not truly escaped the structure of the spectacle, that she is destined to remain an object of visual consumption for the ostensibly normal inhabitants of the town. The would-be bridegroom is himself slightly odd looking in that he is very short and red-haired; yet the fact that he is both hard of hearing and a musician suggests his quasi-freakish status as someone who performs a task on stage few would have expected of him given his particular disability

(Bogdan 109). Correlatively, Lily is presented formally to her suitor as “your little Lily” (19), the grammatical diminutive generating the impression that preparations are now being made for an ultimately farcical version of the social ritual: the Tom Thumb wedding. This popular exhibition phenomenon emerged in the wake of what Robert Bogdan has characterized as Barnum’s “finest triumph of freak promotion in the high aggrandized mode” (*Freak Show* 149). The extravagant Civil War-era nuptials of Charles Sherwood Stratton and Lavinia Warren amounted to “the reproduction of an idealized, or model, wedding on a miniature scale, with children ‘playing’ the adult roles” (Stewart 119).¹⁰ If the conventional function of a wedding is to domesticate sexuality, thus symbolizing the subjugation of the instincts or excessive drives, the diminutive version of the institution on the horizon at the end of “Lily Daw and the Three Ladies” purports to enact this event as a form of entertainment, as a public display for a bemused audience.

“Petrified Man,” one of Welty’s most famous and frequently anthologized pieces, and the third story collected in *Curtain*, also addresses in a comic mode the discomfort some women have acknowledging the biological consequences of lived sexuality. Early in the story, one of the characters pokes fun at the commonsense distinction between the anomalies on display at a traveling freak show and a purportedly ordinary member of the community on the grounds that at the level of appearance the pregnant body is as grotesquely formed as are several of the attractions. More provocatively, by the end of the narrative the presumed difference between the titular figure and various women in the town has been complicated by the notion that they all share an investment in covering up the truth of their respective desires to commingle with others.

We may approach this aspect of “Petrified Man” by way of one of Welty’s best reader’s comments on the story. Taking note of the spatial proximity, if not architectural contiguity, of a local beauty parlor and the temporary site of the freak show, Peter Schmidt remarks that the

¹⁰In Welty’s third novel, *The Ponder Heart*, the narrator’s Uncle Daniel recalls participating as a child in one of these: “He has the memory of an elephant. When he was little he was in the Tom Thumb Wedding—Mama’s pageant—and everybody said it was the sweetest miniature wedding that had ever been held here” (34).

businesses selling beauty and ugliness are adjacent, as if they were mirror images of each other. Indeed, as the women's conversations show, they need to have a sense of the grotesque in order to enforce a sense of their own normality, but the more they try to separate what is normal from what is monstrous, the more the two threaten to merge. (82-83)

Indeed, in the initial verbal exchange between Leota, a hair stylist, and one of her regular clients, Mrs. Fletcher, the former blithely mocks the latter's defensive insistence on defining herself in opposition to the spectacle of otherness on display in the vacant store next door. Having already ascertained with the help of the "sharp eye" (33) of her friend, Mrs. Pike, that her "shampoo-and-set customer" (32) is in fact "on the way" (36), is "p-r-e-g" (34), Leota proceeds to tease Mrs. Fletcher, pushing her toward an awareness of the freakish dimensions of her current bodily state. That she is losing a considerable amount of hair is sufficiently distressing; but what is even worse is the suggestion that in the months to come Mrs. Fletcher will inevitably begin to resemble the relatively hideous curiosities she has refused to go see because she loathes such sights:

"What, you ain't been?"

"No, I despise freaks," declared Mrs. Fletcher.

"Aw. Well, honey, talkin' about bein' pregnant an' all, you ought to see those twins in a bottle, you really owe it to yourself."

"What twins? Asked Mrs. Fletcher out of the side of her mouth.

"Well, honey, they got these two twins in a bottle, see? Born joined plumb together. . . . They was about this long—pardon—must of been full time, all right, wouldn't you say?—an' they had these two heads an' two faces an' four arms an' four legs, all kind of joined *here*." (39-40)

To some extent the description is intended to make Mrs. Fletcher feel apprehensive about the possibility that she will give birth to something analogous to stillborn conjoined twins. The attraction's image of corporeal doubleness also evokes the condition of the maternal body during parturition.¹¹ With this in mind, it is not surprising that Leota then tries to make her interlocutor envision one of the freak show

¹¹Schmidt writes, "Part of the women's horror and fascination with this display is that it seems not only to be an example of the frightening disorder of nature (creating two babies instead of one) but also of what they take to be the sickening and unnatural union of mother and child" (83). He overstates the case in attributing such disgust to Leota; her reaction to the twins is feigned, her goal being to scare her customer into an awareness of the challenge pregnancy will constitute to her vanity; see also Berlant 64.

pygmies as her spouse (“Just suppose it was your husband” [40]), which in turn leads Mrs. Fletcher to affirm her actual husband’s status as a tall person (““Well, Mr. Fletcher is five foot nine and one half,’ said Mrs. Fletcher quickly” [41]). Leota’s proto- deconstructive ambition is clearly to goad her customer to acknowledge the possibility of what polite or respectable society has a strong interest in denying: that the dichotomy between the decent and the deviant is in truth a dichotomy within the former category.

Notably, it is the *voice* of her interlocutor that intensifies the threat the freaks pose to Mrs. Fletcher’s ultimately superficial sense of her own corporeal normalcy. The beautician may rely on her friend Mrs. Pike’s “acute” visual observation of Mrs. Fletcher’s pregnancy, and Leota may also utilize what she has herself seen at the show next door, but it is her spoken deployment of the recollected images, of what the attractions looked like, that enables her to unsettle her client’s sense of self. Feasibly serving as a surrogate for Welty as author, Leota articulates verbally the visual parallels that startle Mrs. Fletcher. It is therefore appropriate that an element of wordplay is operative in Leota’s final attempt to undermine Mrs. Fletcher’s certainty that she has nothing in common with the distasteful freak show performers. Reflecting on the peculiar traits of the petrified man at the show, Leota explains to Mrs. Fletcher, in a kind of impromptu lecture, that “ever’thing ever since he was nine years old, when it goes through his digestion, see, somehow Mrs. Pike says it goes to his joints and has been turning to stone” (41). This bizarre condition strikes Mrs. Fletcher as “awful” (41), but it is evident in the context of the conversation that the description of the living wonder ostensibly suffering from a rare disease, one that results in the ossification of damaged connective tissues, is meant to resonate with the experience, post-conception, of the maternal body. If, when the oddity eats “his food,” it “goes down, see, and then he digests it ... and it goes out to his joints” (41), a good deal of what the pregnant woman consumes will furnish nutrition for her developing fetus. The implicit pun on digestion and gestation reinforces the discursive alignment of the lived consequences of an unusual genetic mutation and the typical functions of the female reproductive system. The Petrified Man (whose real identity is detected when Mrs. Pike sees his photo in a copy of *Startling G-Man*) is the inverted image of the Pregnant Woman, his body producing inside itself an inanimate thing (“it’s stone—pure stone” [41])

while the procreative process inside of hers gives shape to an animate being.

The comparison is sustained throughout the story despite the revelation that the freak show performer is a fugitive wanted for the rape of several women. That Mrs. Pike detects and divulges the secret desires Mrs. Fletcher and Mr. Petrie both strive to obscure positions them together as objects of the same discerning gaze. Whereas the man seeks to hide his past acts of criminal violence, the woman struggles to mask the effects of socially sanctioned intercourse, albeit in part to allow herself the freedom to contemplate engaging in a then illegal medical procedure (“If a certain party hadn’t found it out and spread it around, it wouldn’t be too late even now” [46]). Correlatively, both try to disguise with the help of makeup the secret of their respective sexual behaviors. The Petrified Man turns out to be a fraud, one who has sought to alter his appearance artificially (“I didn’t recognize him with that white powder all over his face” [54]), while Mrs. Fletcher, like Mrs. Mountjoy before her, seemingly wishes to veil her condition cosmetically, the façade of coiffed beauty designed to distract attention from or ward off the impending somatic messiness of labor. (Leota has previously informed Mrs. Fletcher about the extreme lengths Mrs. Mountjoy went to “Just . . . to look pretty while she havin’ her baby” (48), going so far as to get a permanent after her contractions had begun (while “havin’ one pain right after another” [47]).

“Keela, The Outcast Indian Maiden,” Welty’s most direct confrontation with the freak show as a cultural practice, can be viewed as a critique of what Bogdan calls the social construction of “exotic ethnics” (“Social” 5) for predominantly commercial purposes. Reportedly based on an actual incident she had learned about anecdotally, Welty’s fictive version of the abduction whereby a mild mannered, physically disabled black man is forced to exhibit himself in public as what he is not—a wildly aggressive Native American woman—repudiates on moral grounds the perniciously exploitative, duplicitous production of the geek as a spectacle of grotesquely exaggerated, primitive Otherness.¹² That Little Lee Roy is nothing like the role he had been compelled to play years before in the circus sideshow is evident throughout the story. The savage voraciousness he was made to display on stage behind bars

¹²Welty heard about the abduction from a man she encountered at a country fair while working for the WPA. See Claxton 550-58; Almeida 37.

(“dressed . . . in a red dress . . . it ate chickens alive” [75]) is belied in the opening scene by the fact that in moving calmly about his current milieu he pays no mind to the chickens that wander safely around or sit quietly beside him. Moreover, he maintains a gently respectful demeanor and constrained excitement when visited by two men, who are determined to find out whether “the only little clubfooted nigger man was ever around Cane Springs” (75) was once the suffering victim of unscrupulous showmen. This non-aggressive behavior stands in stark contrast to the uncontrolled hostility he had been instructed in the past to enact when anyone approached his cage. In the present context it is crucial again to emphasize the verbal dimensions of the procedure; Welty is especially concerned to recognize the power of speech to condition ultimately false visual impressions of difference. Feelings of disgust arise as much from what is said as from what is shown. For this reason, the story pivots around the guilt of the ex-barker, Steve, who only discovered after it was too late that in “rhetorical[ly] framing . . . Keela’s performance” he repeatedly fooled not only those in attendance at the spectacle of repulsiveness but deluded himself as well into believing that the cynically fabricated spectacle of cultural alterity was authentic (Khailova 283).

Because she wishes to bring to the reader’s attention the triangular or tripartite structure of the cruel hoax, Welty concentrates on the pitch as the cornerstone of the popular entertainment. It was less the garb Keela had to wear, and less the gruesome acts she was compelled to perform, than the amplified spiel Steve was hired to deliver that perpetuated the profitable illusion of human degradation: “I sold tickets and I thought it was worth a dime, honest. They gimme a piece of paper with the thing wrote off I had to say. That was easy. . . . I call it out through a pasteboard megaphone” (75). Conversely, the entity on display was prevented from communicating with anybody. Forbidden to articulate any utterance, Keela was allowed only to make undifferentiated sounds that would confirm “its” pre-linguistic beastliness. “But it couldn’t say nothin’. Turned out they’d tole it it couldn’t say nothin’ to anybody ever, so it just kind of mumbled and growled, like a animal” (76). Though the spectacle did depend on the maintenance of spatial barriers (“Why, if anybody was to even come near it or even bresh their shoulder against the rope it’d growl and take on and shake its iron rod” [77]), it was even more important that the attraction not be allowed to pronounce the words that would facilitate its recognition as a civilized subject. The

combined prerequisites for hoodwinking the gullible into accepting the evolutionary status of Keela as a missing link was that she be neither touched nor heard. In the story, the eye is thus stripped of its conventionally accepted epistemological value, for even repeated observation failed to engender any skepticism in Steve. "I'd go in an' look at it. I reckon I seen it a thousand times" (77), he declares; but he remained unaware of the fraudulent nature of the egregious image of otherness whose visual consumption he verbally encouraged. Consequently, after learning that he has been tricked, Steve loses the capacity to place any cognitive faith in visual immediacy: "I can't look at nothin' an' be sure what it is. Then afterwards I know. Then I see how it was" (85). If upon critical reflection the character claims to be able to comprehend situations accurately, visually obtained understanding is strictly retroactive in this assertion. To see correctly is to have had one's optical and aural first impressions decisively negated; to behold, in the words of Wallace Stevens, "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (15), the ex-barker now realizes, one must cease trusting one's eyes as well as the lies one has unwittingly told to oneself and others.

As he confesses his morally disgraceful complicity in the scam, Steve obsessively talks about the deceptive consequences of his sensationalized discourse. Moreover, in accepting full responsibility for his previous actions, the guilty character admits to Max, the proprietor of a local juke joint who has accompanied him on his visit, that it was the persuasive force of his speech that kept the spectacle in place: "'It's all me, see,' said Steve. 'I know that. I was the one was the cause for it goin' on an' on an' not bein' found out—such an awful thing. It was me, what I said out front through the megaphone'" (79).¹³ Only when an unnamed person turned a deaf ear to the barker's cautionary declarations was the power of his falsely descriptive discourse cancelled. This man was not influenced by Steve's threatening prediction that if anyone ignores the directive to "not try to touch Keela" she will "beat your brains out with her iron rod and eat them alive" (80). Only by refusing to abide by what the announcer has been instructed to announce can the sympathetic observer perceive the truth, and his accurate scrutiny leads to the performer's release and to the circus owner's incarceration. (Significantly, like Mrs. Pike, this equally shrewd embodiment of the discerning gaze

¹³For Coulthard, the story as a whole is premised on this egotism of the male protagonist (35-41).

remains an absent presence in the story; we only hear second hand about those who have eyes to see.) Removed from the position that had granted him the authority to misrepresent a physically impaired individual as a grotesque Other, Steve slides into the slot Keela had occupied in the triangular structure of the spectacle: when “affably” accused by Max of being crazy (85), the overly sensitive boy first defends himself and then slugs Max, knocking him to the ground and, in so doing, supplying a stirring climax to the delightful entertainment the two had constituted throughout the story for Lee Roy. At one point the latter “tossed his head back in a frenzy of amusement” (84) while watching the antics of the two agitated interlocutors.

The significance of the thematic attention Welty pays in “Keela” to the cognitively misleading effects of the (in this instance, unintentionally) duplicitous voice of the sideshow pitchman emerges in light of the compositional method of “Why I Live at the P.O.,” the next story to appear in *Curtain*. This story pivots around the same type of voice, but the untrustworthy first-person speaker is a constitutive element of the story’s *form*. Correlatively, the text henceforth inscribes the reader into the triangular structure of the spectacle as the primary addressee of a motivated verbal performance. We are now positioned as if we are the audience at a freak show, and the function of the accompanying spiel—Sister’s subjectively slanted account of why she has left her home—is to entice us to believe in the truth of what we are hearing and seeing.

Even more revealing is the penultimate story in the collection, “Powerhouse,” for here Welty employs the same rhetorical strategy as a way to caution against the racist assumptions that tend to govern (white) audiences’ fascination with African American entertainers. What we learn from this story is that if we let our guard down we are in danger of becoming complicit with the voice of collective prejudice. The author’s purpose at this point is not merely to question the epistemological status of a first-person speaker’s sensationalized report of the reasons for her actions (as it had been in “P.O.”), but also to shock the reader as auditor into an awareness of the ethically dubious power of the pitch to play upon prevailing assumptions about the inherent traits of racial Others. Moreover, as the structure of the spectacle cracks, we secure additional insight into the degree to which an ostensibly informative voice may utilize the illusion of cognitive certainty in conjunction with the promise

of intense enjoyment as a means of encouraging his listeners to do what he wants.

Welty composed "Powerhouse" shortly after attending a musical performance featuring Fats Waller and his orchestra. Her primary goal, however, was neither to reproduce accurately nor to capture the excitement of the experience of watching the jazz pianist play with his touring band.¹⁴ Instead, the event furnished her with another opportunity to examine critically the role of the voice both in fabricating a spectacle of monstrosity in the realm of popular entertainment and in perpetuating ethnic stereotypes. As Schmidt aptly puts it: "'Powerhouse' unmistakably dramatizes this truth: we see the audience ogling 'freaks' created by racism, not by 'nature'" (42). What is initially striking in the opening paragraph is the persuasive imperative of the speaker, whose second-person address extends beyond the inhabitants of the town in the story to the reader outside it. The anonymous speaker insists we will be amazed at the sight of an unclassifiable wonder. Powerhouse, we are told, constitutes a genuinely enigmatic entity on stage; he is a uniquely heterogeneous being bearing a resemblance to a wide assortment of exotic ethnicities, while also possessing animal and reptilian features: "There's no one in the world like him. You can't tell what he is. 'Negro man'?—he looks more Asiatic, monkey, Jewish, Babylonian, Peruvian, fanatic, devil. He has pale gray eyes, heavy lids, maybe horny like a lizard's, but big glowing eyes when they're open" (254). This disarmingly disembodied or floating voice may belong to an official or unofficial master of ceremonies trying to drum up interest in the performer and thereby increase ticket sales. Alternately, it might belong to someone attempting to convince a friend to join in the fun. Either way, it draws its auditor's attention to the grotesquely large mouth of the performer, hoping the thought of such a disgustingly sizable orifice will compel others to go to the show to look at and listen to the peculiar creature in question. Functioning a bit like the superego as theorized by Lacan and his followers, this voice, which does not necessarily have our best interests at heart, calls upon us to gratify ourselves via an encounter with a cavernous aperture that when "it opens" is "vast and obscene."¹⁵ More disturbingly, this thing is said to be "going every minute: like a monkey's when it looks for something," as if probing for victims on which to

¹⁴For a reading along these lines, see Bearden.

¹⁵See Dolar 98-103.

satisfy its lust while singing. “Improvising, coming on a light and childish melody—*smooch*—he loves it with his mouth” (254).

The speaker’s affectively-charged evocation of the delightful horrors of Powerhouse on stage takes an unexpectedly skeptical turn in the next paragraph of the piece. Just as we are getting caught up in the fervent appeal, the speaker interrogates the outlandish claims he or she has set forth. Suddenly, the racial bias that had been surreptitiously shaping the descriptive characterization comes to the forefront. “Is it possible that he could be this! When you have him there performing for you, that’s what you feel. You know people on a stage—and people of a darker race—so likely to be marvelous, frightening” (254-55). The intimate aside unnervingly cues the multiple addressees (the distanced reader included) to the role ideological assumptions play in their willingness to buy the hyperbolic pitch to which they are still in the process of being subjected. To recognize oneself in the call to attend the show, we henceforth realize, is to be interpellated as a complicit member of a community of racists; the performer is appearing after all, as the next sentence points out, at “a white dance” (255).

The speaker does not linger on the humiliation he or she presumably intended to induce in us by fooling us into revealing our susceptibility to debatable notions about racialized Others. Instead, as if to demonstrate our propensity to abandon self-awareness when fantasized enjoyment is at stake, the speaker picks up where he or she had left off, exaggerating the stupefying impact the musician has on his audience (“Powerhouse is so monstrous he sends everybody into oblivion” [255]). Next, our prurient interest in seemingly hidden, essential differences is solicited:

When any group, any performers, come to town, don’t people always come out and hover near, leaning inward about them, to learn what it is? What is it? Listen. Remember how it was with the acrobats. Watch them carefully, hear the least word, especially what they say to one another, in another language—don’t let them escape you; it’s the only time for hallucination, the last time. (255-56)

We should not hesitate to allow our senses to distort empirical reality, for the opportunity both to be thrilled and to satisfy the impulse to know or discover a veiled truth about the highly skilled and therefore strange persons is a fleeting one: “They can’t stay. They’ll be somewhere else this time tomorrow” (256). The issue of embarrassment surfaces when the speaker, having adopted a calmer tone, takes note of the fact that

Everybody just stands around the band and watches Powerhouse. Sometimes they steal glances at one another, as if to say, Of course you know how it is with *them*—Negroes—band leaders—they would play the same way, giving all they've got, for an audience of one. ... When somebody, no matter who, gives everything, it makes people feel ashamed for him" (258-59)

Here the various members of the crowd are said to behave in a furtive fashion, hesitantly looking around for support as they struggle to figure out how to react properly to the excessive emotionality on display in front of them. The narrator's speculative formulation of what is not said causes the web of prejudice that typically governs (white) responses to such spectacles of expressive wildness to tear slightly. What now stands revealed is the degree to which the internalization of naively racist convictions conditions audience judgments. The belief that African Americans are innately predisposed to be uninhibited, and thus cannot help but abandon themselves when on stage, prevents one from grasping the fact that insofar as impassioned performances are an expected feature of the act they remain a prerequisite for commercial success.¹⁶

The story's final reversal alludes to the desire that generates such distorted impressions of a grotesquely stylized Other. Continuing to present Powerhouse as a fundamentally musical being, the speaker describes how after intermission the band leader demonstrates that he has perfect pitch and therefore does not need to rely on his instrument, or rather can utilize his body as one, to get everyone in tune: "He didn't strike the piano keys for pitch—he simply opened his mouth and gave falsetto howls—in A, D and so on—they tuned by him" (273). Maintaining the focus on the performer's mouth, the speaker wonders rhetorically "who could ever remember any of the things he says? They are just inspired remarks that roll out of his mouth like smoke" (273). When Powerhouse speaks, it is as if there is something material burning inside his belly and the words he emits are the senseless effects of this invisible process of combustion. The urge to probe the depths to locate the invisible source of these meaningless sounds may explain why he agrees to the audience's request that he play "Somebody Loves Me" (composed by George Gershwin in 1924), for the tune's lyrics (written by Ballard MacDonald and Buddy DeSylva) are the means through which he manages to deliver a message to the eager members of the

¹⁶For a historically detailed examination of this topic as it pertains to Depression-era cultural practice, see Batiste.

crowd about their own unconscious desires. “Now and then he calls and shouts, ‘Somebody loves me, I wonder who!’ His mouth gets to be nothing but a volcano. ‘I wonder who’” (273). Briefly keeping his listeners in suspense as to the identity of his lover, he then assertively designates the guilty party: “‘Maybe . . .’ He pulls back his spread fingers, and looks out upon the place where he is. A vast, impersonal and yet furious grimace transfigures his wet face. ‘. . . Maybe it’s you!’” (274).

Peeling away the mask of subservient happiness he had donned to conform to the demands of the marketplace, the entertainer reveals the hostility his position in the spectacle engenders in him; similarly, he characterizes his by-no-means innocent onlookers as objects meriting his wrath. It would seem that Powerhouse has taken into consideration from the start the longing of the white subject to find in the ostensibly primitive Other a capacity for extreme pleasure not readily available in mundane existence. It follows that the image of raw creative energy he constitutes on stage is little more than an artificial construct, a trick of the trade designed to satisfy the foolish. Although neither the crowd nor the reader is entirely engulfed in the dreadful abyss of his crater-like mouth, the auditory and visual separations on which the spectacle depends collapse due to the last minute declaration cited above. The author’s impersonation or mimicry (throughout much of the second half of the story) of the black speaker/singer therefore turns out to be less a literary deployment of a jazz-blues aesthetic than a cunning rhetorical tactic. Like Powerhouse in relation to his audience, Welty convicts the readers of her story of having participated in a linguistically facilitated act of (pseudo)transgression, one predicated on the baseless assumption that the awe-inspiring racial Other serves as the means of access to a yearned for state of ecstasy.¹⁷

A decade and a half later, in *The Ponder Heart* (1954), Welty would extend to novelistic length her deployment of the kind of voice-image relationship undergirding the freak show. As Edna Earle, an egocentric spinster (“It’s always taken a lot out of me, being smart” [10], she says), spins the tale of her Uncle Daniel to an unnamed guest at the hotel she operates, the reader too is caught inside a verbal web. Heavily invested in the events she narrates, Edna confides to the guest that her uncle is so kind that he is liable to give his considerable wealth away during one of his “sprees” (10). Edna would thus have her listener believe it is fortunate

¹⁷See Žižek 223-26, 259-60.

that she managed to trick Daniel into giving her the hotel he stood to inherit. Of course, it soon dawns on us (and perhaps on her ostensible interlocutor, though we cannot be sure since he never gets a word in edgewise) that the decidedly untrustworthy speaker has devoted much of her life to scheming to gain control over her relative's fortune. Simply put, Edna is—as were before her Sister in “Why I Live at the P.O.” and the announcer in “Powerhouse”—an unreliable narrator; and we should therefore be wary of staying lodged in her partial perspective.

My goal here has been to disclose the degree to which Welty's comically stylized manner of deploying this quintessentially modernist tactic has its origins in a form of popular entertainment. It is with this in mind that we may identify her as a crucial (yet infrequently acknowledged) historical intermediary between, on the one hand, Ring Lardner, whose work she admired, and, on the other hand, such black humorist/new journalists as Terry Southern and Hunter S. Thompson. For, as the latter two did shortly after her, Welty, on several occasions, cleverly integrated aspects of the freak show into her literary enterprise as a means of drawing critical attention to the power of ostensibly honest discourses to manipulate and mislead. Her oratorical put-ons may not have been as grotesquely exaggerated as the drug-fueled escapades reported in Southern's “The Blood of a Wig” or Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, yet readers of her equally deviously constructed fictions tend to remain in a comparable state of epistemological suspension, perpetually uncertain whether they are hearing the truth or being played for absolute fools.

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