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THE TRUTH FROM FACT TO FICTION IN TWO SHORT STORIES OF THE TWENTIETH-CENTURY OLD SOUTH

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ABSTRACT. ***The Truth from Fact to Fiction in Two Short Stories of the Twentieth Century Old South.*** The short-stories I have chosen to discuss here are "A Worn Path" (1941) by Eudora Welty and "The Artificial Nigger" (1955) by Flannery O'Connor. They are complementary – as I hope to prove – illustrating two versions of a one-(grand)parent family tale. The white grandfather in O'Connor's story and the black grandmother in Welty's story have to cope with ever more difficult tasks in terms of *truth*(telling/teaching) and (self-)discovery. For truth – at least personally, if not philosophically – may mean facing all dangers as an ancient grandmother, for the sake of her sick grandson; it can mean coming to terms with one's own old self – in both stories; it may mean facing qualms of conscience and merciless loneliness – for both young and old.

Keywords: *black – white; grandparents – grandchildren; irony; truth – facts – fiction; prejudice – reality; guilt – grotesque – growing-up; countryside – city; the Old South.*

REZUMAT. ***Adevărul de la fapt la ficţiune în două povestiri ale Vechiului Sud de secol XX.*** Povestirile asupra cărora m-am oprit aici sunt „O potecă bătută" (1941) de Eudora Welty şi „Negrul artificial" (1955) de Flannery O'Connor. Ele sunt complementare – aşa cum sper să demonstrez – ilustrând două versiuni ale istoriei de familie cu un singur bunic. Bunicul alb din nuvela lui O'Connor şi bunica neagră din nuvela lui Welty au de înfruntat încercări tot mai grele în privinţa (spunerii/învăţării) *adevărului* şi a (auto)descoperirii. Căci adevărul – măcar personal, dacă nu filosofic – poate însemna înfruntarea tuturor primejdiilor, ca bunică bătrână, de dragul nepotului bolnav; mai poate însemna negocierea interioară cu bătrânul sine şi acceptarea (limitelor) acestuia – în ambele nuvele; mai poate însemna înfruntarea remuşcării şi a nemiloasei singurătăţi – atât pentru tineri, cât şi pentru bătrâni.

Cuvinte cheie: *negru – alb; bunici – nepoți; ironie; adevăr – fapte – ficțiune; prejudecată – realitate; vină – grotesc – maturizare; rural – urban; Vechiul Sud.*

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The two short stories "A Worn Path" (1941) by Eudora Welty and "The Artificial Nigger" (1955) by Flannery O'Connor share quite a few funny facts of fiction. Their authors are outstanding white representatives of the Old South feminine modern prose. Perhaps this is the main paradoxical privilege that they both enjoy and that entitles them to continue writing a kind of fiction with a moral meaning, during the mid-twentieth century cynical decades. It is actually the ambiguity of this disquieting moral meaning that surprises us (post)postmodern readers, who may have thought ourselves immune to such old-fashioned – if not classic and universal – challenges.

Both short stories focus on anti-heroic/unwise grandparents of orphaned grandchildren. The gap between generations is double, the parents are missing and being silently missed by both young and old. In the first story there is black Phoenix Jackson, whose age is a mystery even to herself:

> "How old are you, Granny?" he was saying.
> "There is no telling, mister," she said, "no telling." (Welty, 2002: 134)

Bearing a ridiculously mythical name that none the less may suggest some secret hope (or even doom) for endless renaissance, Phoenix walks from her village all the way to Natchez, through the woods and across the fields, all by herself, at Christmas time, in order to get the free medicine for her grandson's sore throat.

In the second story, white Mr. Head, sixty years old, Nelson's grandfather, takes his ten-year-old grandson to Atlanta, on (what should be) an initiating trip to show the motherless boy his native city.

By the end of both short stories, both grandparents – black Phoenix Jackson and white Mr. Head – evince a heavy conscience, remorse-ridden, deepening their helpless awkward love for their grandsons. Obviously, in both cases, the road the grandparents take is an allegory of mature guilty introspection. If it only were for these above-mentioned qualities, they would still prove enough to consecrate both short stories as literary masterpieces. Yet the list of such narrative qualities is much richer and runs ever deeper with each new rereading.

"A Worn Path" is an extremely concise story relying on the classic-modern dramatic-narrative technique of the (interior) monologue. Brave, fearless, fragile, frumpish, sly, old Phoenix Jackson talks to herself incessantly, both loudly and silently; moreover, she addresses the animals who may happen to appear in her way, the thorns of a bush, a scarecrow, invisible alligators (this is the Old South), and a stray dog who (almost) attacks her. She would soon talk to a hunter, then to a "nice lady" passing down a street in Natchez, she asks her to tie up her shoe laces; then she talks with an attendant and a nurse at the hospital where she arrives. Finally, she gets the charity medicine for her grandson back home.

For such a voluble character, with her moral vigor and stamina defying all obstacles and despite her old age, Phoenix could hardly be expected to suffer from an absolute rhetorical blank. Yet she is suddenly struck dumb, as if

by (unlikely) amnesia as soon as she has eventually reached the hospital – the actual destination of her formidable and solitary journey. The moment she gets there, for an instant, Phoenix seems to have forgotten both the purpose of her arrival at all and her grandson altogether.

For a superficial reader, this moment in the story might correspond to no more than a realistic depiction of some senile amnesia crisis. Yet when Phoenix says "I'm not going to forget him again, no, the whole enduring time. I could tell him from all the others in creation" (Welty 138) – the *true* meaning of her desperate outburst is a profound sense of guilt. Phoenix's grandson, whom one might assume to be around five years of age, had "swallowed lye" – as the nurse remembers, some two or three years before. This had fatally damaged his throat and the doctor promised Phoenix the charity "soothing medicine" for as long as she could come and get it for the poor child. "But it's an obstinate case" (Welty 137) – according to the nurse.

By this *double* instance of "forgetting her grandson" and the purpose of her own arriving at the hospital, the grandmother allows the reader to get a glimpse at her innermost conscience turmoil: her inescapable memory of herself having neglected the baby boy a couple of years before, for just a couple of moments, enough for the child to have drunk lye. And there is no forgiving herself for this – for as long as she lives. The charity medicine Christmas ritual works as a sort of repentance – if it can work at all for her.

Phoenix would do anything for her grandson now, trespass any conventional moral frontiers: she would even steal a (lost) nickel, from the hunter who had chased the stray dog away, and then jokingly pointed his gun at her, never guessing she *did* have the nickel on her conscience:

> "Doesn't the gun scare you?" he said, still pointing it.
> "No, sir, I seen plenty go off closer by, in my day, and for less than what I have done," she said, holding utterly still. (Welty, 2000: 135)

Then she would leave her pride aside and ask "stiffly" for the second nickel, from the considerate hospital attendant. She wants to buy her grandson "a little windmill" (138) as a Christmas gift, a paper toy that represents the ultimate luxury for the poor sick boy, but also to his guilty grandmother.

Eudora Welty's short story is especially admirable in that its narrator avoids any kind of melodramatic trap. The reader feels bound to resume "A Worn Path" – since the comic and picturesque instances, the tense witty dialogues function so well as to wrap up its tragic *true* meaning in many layers which are so effective narratologically. The reader's path gets itself *worn* in this compelling attempt at deciphering the *true* significance between the narrative lines – thus the reader's conscience is itself empathetically scrutinized. "A Worn Path" is Eudora Welty's sober reflection of/on the classical myth of Sisyphus, the right intertextual allusion for a modern writer like herself.

Perhaps this Sisyphus stamina at the deepest stratum of the story can also exemplify Eudora Welty's claim that "A Worn Path" is about the way in

which her own stories had come into being. There seems to be always a (more or less abstract) contest between *facts* and *fiction* in the writer's quest for *truth*; and perhaps the reader may better grasp this message somewhat indirectly, by glancing at a tale-telling memoir testimony:

> It was taken entirely for granted that there wasn't any lying in our family, and I was advanced in adolescence before I realized that in plenty of homes where I played with schoolmates and went to their parties, children lied to their parents and parents lied to their children and to each other. It took me a long time to realize that these very same everyday lies, and the stratagems and jokes and tricks and dares that went with them, were in fact the basis of the *scenes* I so well loved to hear about and hoped for and treasured in the conversation of adults. My instinct – the dramatic instinct – was to lead me, eventually, on the right track for a storyteller: the *scene* was full of hints, pointers, suggestions, and promises of things to find out and know about human beings. I had to grow up and learn to listen for the unspoken as well as the spoken – and to know a truth, I also had to recognize a lie. (Welty, 2003: 42; emphasis in the original text)

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Like Eudora Welty, Flannery O'Connor was well aware of her own excellent writer's skills. "The Artificial Nigger" has been often praised as a narrative tour de force: my concern is the possibility that this example of O'Connor's narrative virtuosity may have found if not a model, at least a precursor in Welty's "A Worn Path."

The story "The Artificial Nigger" is a much more complex endeavor – for both writer and reader. This time the allegorical journey is undertaken by grandfather and grandson, together, with an openly declared 'moral' purpose: that it should teach arrogant young Nelson a lesson. The 'lesson' is itself ambiguous: on the one hand, it may seem to be a lesson in humility – in which case little had the self-assured grandfather known that his would-be didactic demonstration would eventually hit himself, too, like a boomerang. This is the kind of elusive *truth* that puts Flannery O'Connor on the map not only of the Old South, but also of the best writers of the world ever.

On the other hand, Mr. Head's lesson may be – above his own (thick) *head* – one against narrow-mindedness and racial prejudice, and intolerance; also one against cowardice – in which case again he would be himself the *true* target of a terrible revelation. An "artificial nigger" shatters the stubborn conscience of an old white man and brings about a shock of *authenticity* to his mind, regarding (his own way of looking at) *true*/living African Americans all around – on the one hand, and his own white implacably growing-up grandson – on the other hand.

Flannery O'Connor's "The Artificial Nigger" may satirically illustrate *avant la lettre* African American writer Toni Morrison's concept of *Africanism* – i.e. the

white writers'/people's tendency to project any fallible aspect of mortal humanity, any moral flaw upon the wide screen of the African race (Morrison 1993; 6 – 7). Here in O'Connor's daring story, this screen is *doubled* by the cityscape. To the self-righteous white Mr. Head, Atlanta is what Natchez is to versatile black Phoenix Jackson in Welty's short story: the *double* screen upon which utter moral defeat is projected – irrespective of the anti-heroic grandparent's skin color. The guilty shadow of an old conscience has to come out to light here and now.

Unable to make up for his embarrassment in the boy's eyes, Mr. Head gets (them both) lost in Atlanta – and thus the old man painfully reveals his actual lack of life experience, despite all efforts to cover it under his insistence on racial prejudice as a would-be piece of wisdom. His rhetoric is too poor to cover the *truth*. As a mocking image of the illuminating guide, he finds himself at a loss in the (mock-Dantesque) infernal city, thus awkwardly getting Nelson entrapped, as well, in this nightmare by daylight.

Then the old man abandons and "denies" his own grandchild. When Nelson accidentally runs into a passer-by and the outraged lady threatens to call the police, Mr. Head betrays and repudiates the boy, in front of a horrified mob of perfect strangers:

> Mr. Head was trying to detach Nelson's fingers from the flesh in the back of his legs. The old man's head had lowered itself into his collar like a turtle's; his eyes were glazed with fear and caution.
> "Your boy has broken my ankle!" the old woman shouted. "Police!"
> Mr. Head sensed the approach of the policeman from behind. He stared straight ahead at the women who were massed in their fury like a solid wall to block his escape.
> "*This is not my boy*," he said. "*I never seen him before*."
> He felt Nelson's fingers fall out of his flesh.
> The women dropped back, staring at him with horror, as if they were so repulsed by *a man who would deny his own image and likeness* that they could not bear to lay hands on him. Mr. Head walked on, through a space they silently cleared, and left Nelson behind. Ahead of him he saw nothing but a hollow tunnel that had once been the street. (O'Connor, 1962: 209 – 210; emphasis mine)

The dramatic quality of this scene is even heightened by a minimum of descriptive details; the focus is obviously on the (*double*) conscience: on the one hand – that of the protagonist, on the other hand – that of the mob. There can be no way back after this decisive moment. Nelson has just realized he is on his own from now on. Mr. Head has signed his sentence to loneliness for the rest of his life. The solipsistic revelation of the terrible *truth* is therefore *double*. And the classically anonymous mob has just witnessed and confirmed it.

Yet somehow, Mr. Head and Nelson must get back to their countryside home from this urban inferno. There comes the rescuing "fat man" guiding

them to the suburb train stop, since it is already too late for the two travelers to reach the station anymore. Still the moral break between grandfather and grandson seems beyond redemption.

Then the *deus ex machina* appears in the funny (ironical) shape of a plaster lawn jockey – the so-called "artificial nigger" that gives the story its title:

> He had not walked five hundred yards down the road when he saw, within reach of him, the plaster figure of a Negro sitting bent over on a low yellow brick fence that curved around a wide lawn. The Negro was about Nelson's size and he was pitched forward at an unsteady angle because the putty that held him to the wall had cracked. One of his eyes was entirely white and he held a piece of brown watermelon.
> Mr. Head stood looking at him silently until Nelson stopped at a little distance. Then as the two of them stood there, Mr. Head breathed, "An artificial nigger!"
> It was not possible to tell if the artificial Negro were meant to be young or old; he looked too miserable to be either. He was meant to look happy because his mouth was stretched up at the corners but the chipped eye and the angle he was cocked at gave him a wild look of misery instead.
> "An artificial nigger!" Nelson repeated in Mr. Head's exact tone. (O'Connor, 1962: 212)

This kitsch decorative object, so specifically Southern, miraculously brings about the reconciliation they had both lost any hope for. Grumpy Mr. Head exclaims: "An artificial nigger!" – and "*Nelson repeated in Mr. Head's exact tone*" (my emphasis) the same dumb remark. This is enough for them, more than any formal agreement: now they can go back home together again; they belong together.

The remark itself sounds shrill, meaningless, pointless; it seems to belong to the theater of the absurd rather than to a (decent) realistic short story, but its moral mission has been accomplished and this is all that matters. Mr. Head's conventionally/perfunctory *racist rhetoric* is resumed – for this obviously expresses the *conformity* of the white people from the Old South above any genuine race-hatred. Having spent his entire life in his obscure little village, Mr. Head evidently lacks the necessary life-experience that would provide him with any reasonable argument for such a mentality. Mr. Head's blunt racism works as another expression of his fear of the other, of the unknown; maybe even his fear of inevitably losing Nelson, one day, to the frightening city.

Yet, as if just to confirm this unhoped-for return to the precarious normality of their routine relationship, as grandfather and grandson, Mr. Head needs to acknowledge the secret significance of this reconciliation moment in his own awkward narrow-minded way:

> Nelson's eyes seemed to implore him to explain once and for all the mystery of existence.

> Mr. Head opened his lips to make a lofty statement and heard himself say, "They ain't got enough real ones here. They got to have an artificial one."
> After a second, the boy nodded with a strange shivering about his mouth, and said, "Let's go home before we get ourselves lost again." (O'Connor, 1962: 213)

Poor things, grandfather and grandson, belong together again, bound now to that ineffable place they both call *home*. Nelson has learned forgiveness. Mr. Head has learned to acknowledge "his true depravity" (O'Connor 213) and to be grateful not only for divine mercy, but also for his grandson's forgiveness. The artificial Negro reflects in their *double* image: neither young, nor old; neither happy, nor miserable.

In the reader's memory, this is how they will stay, the touching awkward *double* image of (un)heroic *truth* above all facts of life:

> *The two of them stood there with their necks forward at almost the same angle and their shoulders curved in almost exactly the same way and their hands trembling identically in their pockets. Mr. Head looked like an ancient child and Nelson like a miniature old man*. They stood gazing at the artificial Negro as if they were faced with some great mystery, some monument to another's victory that brought them together in their common defeat. (O'Connor, 1962: 212 – 213; emphasis mine)

Perhaps it is particularly this appearance of local color that attracts more and more today's readers to Flannery O'Connor's sharp short stories. With(in) it there may be an illusion of safety, of reading just for curiosity, about remote places and their utterly different cultures.

Yet in her non-fiction writings, which can be just as sharp as her fiction, Flannery O'Connor herself warned such willingly self-deluding readers against their superficiality. Wherever her readers may be, they cannot be too far from her universal *diegesis* that is free from picturesque idealization. Here is a most convincing illustration:

> When we look at a good deal of serious modern fiction, and particularly Southern fiction, we find this quality about it that is generally described, in a pejorative sense, as grotesque. Of course, I have found out that *anything that comes from the South is going to be called grotesque by the Northern reader, unless it is grotesque, in which case it is going to be called realistic.* (O'Connor, 1995: 40; emphasis mine)

There are multiple layers of *truth*, from (mere) facts of life to the disquieting/shifty/pragmatic Jamesian concept of *truth-in-the-making*. There is also the *personal truth* of both Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor – the truth of being white women writers of the Old South, therefore bound to deal with the black character's presence in their fiction. Then there is the hard historical/

political/*social truth* of the Old South, which allows no honest writer to (pretend to) just ignore it. Then there is the (poetic) *truth* of the story-making and the self-denying detachment writers need when writing *about* the writing of their fiction.

And yet the inexhaustible layers of fiction itself are even more numerous, hard to grasp and alluring. How safely far away from their fiction can such wise writers stay – I wonder – even then and there, writing about their own craft?

Though a white Southern writer, Eudora Welty created a(n in)credible short story about an old African American grandmother and her *Sisyphus*-like *doom of a heavy heart*. She was soon followed by Flannery O'Connor, known as a Southern Catholic white writer, (paradoxically) judged by some literary critics as the anti-intellectual Southern writer *par excellence* – who achieved here a strange unforgettable story, about a white American grandfather failing his grandson and trying to recover him by all means, even by the preposterous image of garden gnome as an artificial Negro.

There is no possible conclusion/reconciliation/solution to the complicated issues of such relationships as those between grandparents and their (orphan) grandchildren; just as those between black and white people in the American Old South. Paradoxically, due to their exquisite literary gift, irrespective of their skin color, writers of the Old South have reached a better way to tell the *truth* about these intricate issues.

Today, after the age of Eudora Welty and Flannery O'Connor, as we are reading compelling African American women writers like Toni Morrison, or even so much younger (but no less talented) Yaa Gyasi – we can contemplate many of the same intricate issues also from the opposite viewpoint. All their ineffably metaphorical fiction is incomparably more convincing and closer to unfathomable *truth* than most clear-cut facts, whether recorded or not, as dry dignified history.

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