

INTRODUCTION

In June 2013, the CRILA, together with Lille Catholic University, organized an international conference on “Southern Short Fiction: Representation and Rewriting of Myth” in Lille. More than thirty scholars presented papers and we were honored to have a guest writer, Lisa Alther, who presented her work and read some of her stories. Among the plenary speakers, we had the pleasure to host Ben Forkner who not only taught in Angers for many years but who also edited or co-edited major anthologies on the American South that are still in print today: *Stories of the Modern South* (1977, with Patrick Samway, S.J.), *A Modern Southern Reader* (1986, with Patrick Samway, S.J.), *Stories of the Old South* (1989, with Patrick Samway, S.J.), *Louisiana Stories* (1990), *A New Reader of the Old South* (1991, with Patrick Samway, S.J.) and *Georgia Stories* (1992). As an outstanding scholar of southern literature, he introduced *Recollections of Alexander H. Stephens* (1998) and has written numerous essays on the southern short story. In 1980, he also edited an equally important volume entitled *Modern Irish Stories* and, in 1996, *Selected Journals and Other Writings* by John James Audubon. Making primary texts available to a wide readership has certainly been one of the goals of Ben Forkner’s career. He also played an instrumental part in the creation of the *Journal of the Short Story in English*, an international journal published by the Université d’Angers and Belmont University. Born in 1983, the journal is still going strong with two issues every year.

In the inaugural issue of the journal, Ben Forkner discusses William Faulkner’s “Pantaloons in Black,” one of the stories in *Go Down, Moses*. He provides a careful study of Faulkner’s style and analyzes the voices that can be heard throughout the narrative and that somehow enable the main character, a black man, to free himself from the constraints of southern

society. In a 1985 article entitled “Contemporary Stories of the American South,” Professor Forkner starts out with a reflection on one of his previous articles, published prior to some major volumes of collected stories, and shows “the continuing vitality of the short story in the South” (52). He points out the importance of publishing volumes of conversations with southern writers, enabling authors to take story-telling further; he presents new collections by writers whose names had just emerged at the time and who are now fully accepted in the realm of southern fiction: Barry Hannah, Jayne Anne Phillips, Fred Chappell, Bobbie Ann Mason, Breece D’J Pancake and Joe Ashby Porter. Before any other scholar had explored some of the fiction from the Modern South, Ben Forkner had something to say and his comments were like “signposts in a strange land” (to use an expression by Walker Percy) that he knew intimately and helped promote. Unsurprisingly, the anthologies devoted to the Modern South that he co-edited include texts by those writers, and it is important to mention that *Stories of the Modern South*, initially published in 1977, has constantly been updated to include new voices. As is the case for all the collections he made available to readers, many texts can, still today, only be found there.

The text which is presented here is devoted to Eudora Welty’s “The Wide Net” and it is more than a scholarly article. Ben Forkner analyzes the story and puts it into perspective, a very personal one. His reading is framed by his own experience as a southerner but, beyond the anecdotal element, what he shows his readers is that the meaning of a story can only stem from a personal experience. It is a southerner’s reading of “The Wide Net” which highlights the width of the net itself—a net that is big enough for any reader to express his/her own interpretation.

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CONVERGING TOWARD THE HUMAN:
MYTH AND MEMORY IN “THE WIDE NET”
(AND ME)

(for Nadine)

It might seem odd to find me turning to Eudora Welty’s story “The Wide Net” the day I learned I had been invited to respond to the theme of Southern myth (the all-purpose, made-to-order, sempiternel Southern myth). It seemed odd to me too when I began thinking about the challenge of adding anything new to a debate that as we all know began long before the South became the South. “The Wide Net” has been one of my favorite stories for at least forty years. I did recall that it had fascinated (and puzzled) me by mixing together a multitude of myths and legends, reaching far and wide in time and in place, including the local and the regional. But I could not remember that it had revealed the slightest interest in the South as a subject of focus or reflection. I had no memory that Welty had tried to dramatize or imply a single overreaching southern identity, cultural, historical, or otherwise. Still, casting around for something to say about the way the South (from within and without) seems to have been designed, destined, or doomed, to generate a mythic vision, or visions, often in contradiction with each other, my thoughts could not help going back to “The Wide Net.”

On rereading the story I soon realized that my instincts had not failed me completely. There is no great central Southern myth in “The Wide Net.” But I must have half-remembered that the potency of the mythic, including a few old southern folktales or legends, does play a key

role in the story, especially by pounding the pedal throughout on the truth that no myth, potent or not, can ever measure up to one man's solitary predicament. The pounding is musical, given that Eudora Welty is playing the instrument, but it can be felt all through the story, from the ironic chord of the first three words all the way to the final throb of the last line. But more than anything, in rereading the story I realized that my own fading or forgotten memories about growing up in the South had somehow dictated my choice, and that the mythic failures, or inadequacies, of "The Wide Net" to match the intractable selfhood of the living individual clearly harmonized with my own experience.

Though I have spent much of my professional life reading and thinking about southern identity and the historical versions of the Old and New South, I really did not encounter anything resembling a theory of the South as a land of myth and mythmaking before I began my graduate studies at Chapel Hill. There I was shocked to learn I may have been born into a myth, despite myself. Ignorant as I was, I had no doubt I was southern, born and bred. I loved the music, the food, the voices, the family stories, and to this day I cannot imagine life without them. Geographically, I had lived outside as a boy in the steamy heat of southern Florida. I had fished and hunted in the great inland swamps, and had built rafts of giant bamboo to ride with my friends down the St Lucie River, surely as haunting and as hidden away as the Pearl River in "The Wide Net." The alligators slept with the water lilies and the night-blooming cereus, and the Spanish moss fell in thick curtains on both banks. Sunlight was scarce and each turn of the river took one deeper into a ripe darkness smelling of frog spawn and wild magnolia. Once every now and then I rode my horse to school where there was a rail fence and where the teachers allowed us to eat our lunch sitting down by the horses. I grew up during segregation, but the racism was subdued, and codified down to a syllable and a glance. The town was neatly divided into black and white neighborhoods, but my grandfather's house had been deliberately chosen because it was right on the border between the two and my cousins and I played and talked with black children every day. My grandfather, as I will discuss later on, was one of the reasons I had trouble with the grand southern myths I discovered at the university.

Rereading "The Wide Net" brought many of these memories back to mind, and it brought back to mind too my dismay in Chapel Hill at fitting them into a theory of myth, or even at weaving them into a common pattern of southern identity. More important to my purpose here, however, they did help me throw some light on the pluralities of myth and legend that had confused me when I had first read "The Wide Net." I realize this is a self-indulgent proposition, but to be honest, I no longer have much faith in finding the definitive myth of the collective South. What interests me more as the years go on is the life story of the individual

southerner. And if my commentaries, such as they are, do make me vulnerable to all sorts of criticism, especially when judged by the principles of pure scholarship (principles I would be the first to preach), at least I cannot be faulted on what I say about my own autobiography. After all, where else can I look for a better source?

I do not mean to suggest that I find anything of myself in William Wallace, nor in his search for Hazel. For one thing, I think I would have trouble arguing to myself, or to my wife and family, that I never existed, even as a boy, yet Eudora Welty is writing in the tradition of the modern folk tale. For much of the story at least, William Wallace and the other characters are closer to the simple stock figures of song and legend than they are to men and women in the real world. At least this is true of the first half of "The Wide Net." The second half is a different matter entirely and herein lies one of the genial transformations that "The Wide Net" performs as naturally and as completely as one season turns into another. Beginning as a folktale of the barely possible innocence of a perennial boy with a cow-lick, at a loss and turning in circles, the story right in the middle changes skin, and the boy and the narrative miraculously transform themselves into a one-of-a-kind human triumph.

It would not be amiss at this point to give a brief account of what happens in "The Wide Net." It might help set the stage for those of you who have never read it, or who, like me before I took it up again, may have to struggle to remember the details of an earlier reading. And, to tell the truth, the details are daunting, especially as we are led down the old Natchez Trace towards the Pearl River, deeper and deeper into southern river country, a vast cradle of natural wonder that teems with vitality and mystery. Perhaps nature itself, the mother of all myth, is the true heart of the story. Lush, precise, and unpredictable in every line, "The Wide Net" is one of the greatest odes to the natural world ever written. The human drama is my main concern, however, and the one day in the life of William Wallace, wild as it is, is much easier to summarize.

William Wallace Jamieson, the first words of the story, and a name I will return to, is a young man who has been married to his wife, Hazel, for a year. Hazel is pregnant, and William is baffled by her changing attitude (she would not speak and her eyes glowed). After all, for William it is only October and the baby will not be born until April (fall and rebirth go hand in hand in this story). William goes out one night with two friends, gets drunk and lies all night in a ditch playing the harmonica. When he comes back the next morning, Hazel is gone, and he finds a letter from her telling him she has gone to drown herself in the river. Faced with the most serious crisis of his young life, William at least has the resourcefulness to ask help from one of his friends from the night out, Virgil Thomas, and they set out to borrow the wide net from Old Doc, and to gather other members of the community to help drag the river.

The group that William finally collects is a motley one, all male, but they are of a kind. Eudora Welty is comically playing on the popular refrain that such a collection of rural men and boys could be found only in the Deep South. They all belong together in the Mississippi chorus line, until William Wallace finally breaks away on his own. There is Virgil of course, living up to his name (but only in the mind of the reader, we need to remember) in that he is there to guide William on his quest, to keep him “on the track,” as he says. There is Old Doc, the local wise man who owns the net. Old Doc lives on a hill and can usually be found in his rocking chair. He loves to pontificate, and spends most of the day talking and giving advice. He possesses an old man’s horde of lifelong certitudes. He plays his role well, lost in his own performance, an unstoppable gramophone of platitudes, talking just to hear himself talk, but sometimes, almost despite himself, repeating nuggets of wisdom that bear directly on the quest itself: “We’re walking along in the changing-time. . . . Any day now the change will come. It’s going to turn from hot to cold, and we can kill the hog that’s ripe and have fresh meat to eat. . . . Old Jack Frost will be pinching things up. Old Mr. Winter will be standing in the door. Hickory tree there will be yellow. Sweet-gum red, hickory yellow, dogwood red, sycamore yellow. . . . Magnolia and live-oak never die. Remember that” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 176). Old Doc reminds me of the old men in another great modern folk story, “The Weaver’s Grave,” by the Irish writer Seumas O’Kelly. Knowing Eudora Welty’s love of Ireland and the Irish, the echo is surely deliberate.

Other than Old Doc, the characters making up the search party include two sets of young brothers, the white boys, Brucie and Grady Rippin, and the black boys, Sam and Robbie Bell. The fact that William Wallace allows them to come even though they are too young to be of much help may imply that the value of his own fatherhood is beginning to dawn on him. The father of the white boys is rumored to have drowned in the Pearl River, and the father of the black boys had been struck by lightning and, as Robbie cries out during a storm, “was dead three days, dead as that-there axe” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 183). Robbie worries about lightning. Both his grandfather and his father were struck by lightning. It “runs in our family,” Robbie says (Welty, *Collected Stories* 183).¹ This is fatalism raised, or lowered, to farce, but points to a fear of being victimized by mysterious forces (without and within) that William

¹ Robbie is right to be frightened. His grandfather had been branded by the devil in a storm, “Lightnin’ drew a pitchfork right on our grandpappy’s cheek, stayed till he died” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 183). Nature is the wide-open playground of both good and evil, and it is best to be wary when the thunder roars. The storm in “The Wide Net” seems bent more on celebration than punishment, however. Right before it begins in force, a holy-ghostly benediction or aeolian charm—“a wind touched each man on the forehead” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 182)—reassures the reader that all will be well, at least for the time being.

Wallace himself must struggle against, and defeat. Then there are the other adult members of the search party, the six Doyle brothers and their dogs, and the eight Malone brothers, “eight giants with great long black eyelashes” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 173). They stamped the ground and pawed each other, more like horses than men.

The Malones are like horses, and the Doyles are never without their dogs. Later in the story a violent storm with a “blast of wind” covers the entire search party with wet leaves. “Now us got scales,” Sam cried out. “Us is the fishes” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 183). The shifting from one realm to another is a constant possibility. Even the trees have “bones” that crack when lightning strikes. At the beginning of the story William Wallace catches a small rabbit and acts as “if he wanted to take it off to himself and hold it up and talk to it” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 172). He is more at ease with the helpless wild creature of the woods than with Hazel at home. But Hazel is no rabbit as Virgil makes clear: “Anybody can freeze a *rabbit*, that wants to” he says, and promptly chases the rabbit away: “Was you out catching cotton-tails, or was you out catching your wife?” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 172). William Wallace will soon demonstrate a stronger will in a more heroic gesture than catching a rabbit. But the shifting, or loss of identity, is a constant threat. The Malones are indistinguishable from each other, and so are the Doyles. At least the small boys have names that set them apart. Grady is already a sort of father to Brucie. But they remain children, and act their age. When Virgil finds a string of beads in the river, he gives them to Sam and Robbie. “Sam wore them around his head, with a knot over his forehead and loops around his ears, and Robbie Bell walked behind and stared at them” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 179). They are just playing out a role for the simple joy of pretending, and will soon return to themselves. The grown-up Doyles and Malones are fixed in their undefined identities forever.

The strongest proof of identity is the capacity to change, to slip from one role to another if necessary, to pass through the modes of being that nature and time demand, but always to remain at one with oneself. The Pearl River is the prime example in “The Wide Net” and therefore the source of selfhood that will save William Wallace. The river never seems the same, yet even when William Wallace forgets its name, its ageless identity is never in question: “The winding river looked old sometimes, when it ran wrinkled and deep under high banks where the roots of trees hung down, and sometimes it seemed to be only a young creek, shining with the colors of wildflowers” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 178). Still, as Old Doc exclaims to William: “Everybody knows Pearl River is named the Pearl River” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 176).

Once William and Virgil have gathered everyone together, they take the wide net and all set out walking down the Old Natchez Trace. When they reach the river Old Doc remarks that the world has been turned to

gold by the autumn sun: “today, in October sun, it’s all gold—sky and tree and water. Everything just before it changes looks to be made of gold.” Immediately William Wallace “looked down, as though he thought of Hazel with the shining eyes, sitting at home and looking straight before her, like a piece of pure gold, too precious to touch” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 176). Of course the well-trained reader races through the possibilities and may stop on his way to consider the myth of the golden bough in the *Aeneid*. Aeneas needs the golden bough to allow him to safely travel through the underworld to find his father. We may remember his prayer: “If only the golden bough/Might shine for us in such a wilderness!” (Vergil 166). When William dives into the river, and emerges transformed, the myth-minded reader may then think once more of the *Aeneid*, and of the river Lethe which the original Virgil tells us must be imbibed by dead souls in order for them to be reborn. At this point the mythic and symbolic allusions begin to overwhelm, but I believe, as you know by now, that their very proliferation throws into high relief the singular nature of one man’s all too human crisis.

There is certainly no question that William’s dive to the bottom of the river brings him up a new man. The narration speculates on what he experiences in the solitude of the river bottom: “So far down and all alone, had he found Hazel? Had he suspected down there, like some secret, the real, the true trouble that Hazel had fallen into, about which words in a letter could not speak...” Or in a myth, I cannot help adding. The narration continues to speculate “how (who knew?) she had been filled to the brim with that elation that they all remembered, like their own secret, the elation that comes of great hopes and changes...” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 180). William’s dive is not a baptism for the faint-hearted. In fact, it is not a baptism at all. It is a plunge into the inner depths that strains every fibre of his being, and tests his spirit to the limit. When he surfaces he is still in shock: “And when William Wallace came up it was in an agony from submersion, which seemed an agony of the blood and of the very heart, so woeful he looked” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 180). The shock will take a little time to absorb, but he has now found himself, and is beginning to embrace his new role as a father. He is “holding fast to a little green ribbon of plant, root and all” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 181). He lets the little infant plant fall free, and from now on the search is over. William Wallace takes the lead back to Dover, and back to Hazel who has never left their house.

The second half of the story is rich in events, but the outcome is never in doubt. Soon after his triumphant dive, William Wallace smiles for the first time, and falls asleep, but not for long. When he wakes up he affirms his new sense of power and potency by tying a catfish to his belt and launching into a wild Dionysian dance. When the search party spies a

large water snake, a local legend everyone knows as the “King of Snakes,” William Wallace stares him down. When Mother Nature, with majestic abandon, unleashes a storm for the ages (or the makers of myths) to show who will always rule the roost, William Wallace is not deterred or disturbed. Carrying his great string of fish, he enters at the head of the party into Dover which now “looked somehow like new” after the rain (Welty, *Collected Stories* 184). He no longer fears Hazel’s mother, and turns away without a flinch when she appears. Now a host of biblical allusions begin to prevail over the Greek and Roman. There is the miraculous catch of fish, and the hymns William and Virgil hear while walking back home: “They were having the Sacred Harp Sing on the grounds of an old white church glimmering there at the crossroads, far below.” When William arrives alone at his house, he sees something he had never seen, “a rainbow at night” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 187).

The story ends with Hazel calling his name from the bedroom. Though she is changing every day, she has really not changed at all. When she allows William his ritual role of thinking himself the man of the house by letting him tamely slap and spank her, the reconciliation is complete. William Wallace knows now that Hazel holds the secret mystery that will continue to make him more of his own man, and he is willing to follow her lead as long as it takes: “He climbed to his feet too and stood beside her . . . trying to look where she looked. And after a few minutes she took him by the hand and led him into the house, smiling as if she were smiling down on him” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 188).

What is missing in my account of rereading the story is my misremembering the total absence of southern history, a conspicuous absence. Since in the South, as I had finally learned in Chapel Hill, history tends to breed myth as a kind of natural law, I needed at least to consider the question. I had not forgotten the references to history and to historical figures in some of the stories of the *The Wide Net and Other Stories*, notably “First Love,” and “A Still Moment,” to name the most powerful. And I found a note to myself slipped in the pages of my old single volume edition of the collection relating Eudora Welty’s initial concept of writing a fictional history of the Old Natchez Trace. In 1940 she had accepted the offer of Diarmuid Russell (son of the Irish poet George Russell) to be her agent. In one of her early letters to him she wrote about her desire to write a “Mississippi book”:

There are some things about a state that nobody could even know about who has not lived there a long time, and those things should determine the whole approach, don’t you think?... and I believe I could find stories, old ones & new ones, and beliefs and songs and violent events all over the place to show what the life here is, to my belief...Think of all the people who would be in my book—wonderful Indians to start with, and the Indian tales are beautiful and dramatic and very touching some of them—and Aaron Burr & Blennerhassett, and

Lafayette, and Audubon, and Jefferson Davis, and the bandits...and Lafitte the pirate, and all kinds of remarkable people. (qtd. in Marss 67-68)

She also asks Russell: “Do you think I dare to have honest-to-God people walking around in the stories? The thing about this part of the country in the great days is that people like Aaron Burr, J.J. Audubon, Lorenzo Dow, and goodness knows who, were as thick as blackbirds in the pie, and once the pie is opened, they are going to begin to sing” (qtd. in Marss 70-71).

Since William Wallace cannot be contained in any single myth, or even in a multitude of myths, it should not have surprised me that he is able to exist untouched by history, or at least untouched by a southern identity usually defined and distinguished as being overwhelmed and overdetermined by history. The absence of history serves the same purpose, I believe, as the excessive abundance of symbol and myth the reader must negotiate before setting his sights on the inner spirit William Wallace possesses to exist all by himself. I like to think too, along these same lines, that the comic folklore of the first half of the story makes his solitary dive in the Pearl River, and his transformation, more unpredictable, and thus more human. I say this because when *The Wide Net and Other Stories* came out as a single volume in 1943, *Time Magazine* published a review that claimed that the stories were “about as human as a fish.” Eudora Welty was never much affected by reviews, good or bad, but this one raised her hackles, and she wrote to Diarmuid Russell: “I saw the *Time* review but they say those things just because I happen to live in the south—but nobody else had better say I am unhuman” (qtd. in Marss 103).

Her reaction is more than understandable. She had just published a masterpiece of modern realism in which dream and the inner world are as vividly brought to life as the outside, but this is an affirmation of the living human mind, not an evasion. Eudora Welty is a master of subjective impressionism, but there is not an escapist reflex in all her work. *The Wide Net and Other Stories* deliberately refuses to shy away from vice, racism, pride, self-indulgence, and violence. Are there many other collections of the time framed with a stronger cry against the harsh realities of human fate? It begins with the story of a deaf boy whose parents have been killed or captured by the Indians and who is left abandoned in the end, completely alone: “He did not know how far he had gone on the Liberty Road when the posse came riding up behind and passed him. He walked on. He saw that the bodies of the frozen birds had fallen out of the trees, and he fell down and wept for his father and mother, to whom he had not said good-bye” (Welty, “First Love,” *Collected Stories* 168). And the final story in *The Wide Net* (and thus the collection itself) concludes with the portrait of a young woman who is rejected, and is forced to face absolute desolation and a serial rape. No wonder Eudora

Welty was ready to lash out if anyone else showed the same dimwittedness as the reviewer in *Time Magazine*.

Still, going back to William Wallace, I can hear someone somewhere asking about his name. Even though there is no southern history in the story, surely his name is steeped in historical associations. I would agree, and I did try to explore its implications as I reworked my way through the story.

His full name is William Wallace Jamieson. During the wars of Scottish independence in the thirteenth century, William Wallace was the great leader and hero, whom popular tradition in the mists of time has now elevated to mythical proportions. Jamieson takes a bit more twisting to unravel a historical connection. In keeping with the Scottish link, it might be reversed to be read the son of James. One of the most famous sons of a James was Bonnie Prince Charles, son of James Stuart, grandson of King James II, and leader of the final Jacobite Rebellion in the middle of the eighteenth century to restore the Scottish Stuarts to the throne of England and Scotland. The Rebellion failed, and Bonnie Prince Charles escaped to become another legend of Scottish resistance. Failed rebellions are choice makers of myths, as another failed rebellion was to prove a century later. Scottish heroes and William Wallace Jamieson of "The Wide Net" surely, we might be tempted to think, the combination brings southern history into the story despite all evidence to the contrary.

There is, however, a simpler explanation, of the South to be sure, but leaving the story still uncomplicated by history. Sir Walter Scott celebrated both William Wallace and Bonnie Prince Charles, the latter in the most popular series of historical novels ever written, the Waverly novels. Whenever Walter Scott is mentioned in the context of the South, Mark Twain's theory of the Civil War and the southern imagination immediately leaps to mind. In *Life on the Mississippi*, one of Eudora Welty's favorite books, Twain makes the outrageous, though irresistible, claim that Scott and his historical romances helped cause the Civil War by promoting a mythical vision of history, and by shaping the southern character: "It was Sir Walter Scott that made every gentleman in the South a Major or Colonel, or a General or a Judge, before the war; and it was he, also, that made these gentlemen value these bogus decorations... Sir Walter Scott had so large a hand in making the southern character, as it existed before the war, that he is in great measure responsible..." (266). We may take this with a grain of salt, but the fascination with Scottish heroes in the South would have made the name of William Wallace a common choice. The more common it is, however, the less likely it can be seized upon for special consideration.

Think of another name in "The Wide Net," Edna Earle. She is one of Hazel's cousins. When William Wallace praises Hazel's intelligence, Virgil agrees: "She's a lot smarter than her cousins in Beulah... Edna Earle..."

never did get to be what you'd call a heavy thinker. Edna Earle could sit and ponder all day on how the little tail of the 'C' got through the 'L' in a Coca-Cola sign" (Welty, *Collected Stories* 171). The name of Edna Earle comes from the heroine of the most popular novel in the South after the Civil War, *St Elmo* by Augusta Jane Evans. It was a huge success, a romantic tome so overwritten and full of adjectives that Eudora Welty in her autobiography says her mother told her it used to be recommended to take it out with a chair when watering the roses. The roses needed a lot of water. Welty's mother refused to have a copy in her house. As Welty adds in her autobiography, there were Edna Earles all over the South. An Edna Earle is the narrator of Welty's novella *The Ponder Heart*. Finding an Edna Earle in "The Wide Net" is like finding a magnolia tree in Mississippi, and should not force us to go back to *St Elmo*, heaven forbid.

But there is an even better reason not to insist too much on the historical significance of names in "The Wide Net." Names are chosen for us, not the other way around, and "The Wide Net" insists upon individual choice as the primary measure of character. To me, there is more irony than history in the name William Wallace. It is more of a distraction than a signpost, unlike, I would be the first to admit, the names of Virgil and Hazel, more fixed in their roles.² If we must look for hidden meanings, perhaps the symbolical would be a better avenue to explore than the historical. William must will himself into a new man, and as a Jamieson, he must cease being a perpetual son, and affirm his status as a father. Once again, however, we cannot escape the fact that names are chosen for us. In "The Wide Net," William Wallace must make his own way, and history, southern or otherwise, mythical or not, does not provide him (or the reader) with any guidelines.

I began this paper with a confession. When I was invited to speak about the myth of the South, the thought of Welty's "The Wide Net," came to my mind in a flash. I believe my shock at having to account to myself as a southerner when I arrived in my early twenties in Chapel Hill, and faced the impressive body of scholarship on southern myth then in fashion, helps explain why. Saying so, I freely admit my pirouetting into "The Wide Net" does take some special pleading.

I am ready to plead, however. Now that I have tried to do justice to my rereading of the story, which was, and is, my main purpose throughout these reflections, there should be no objection if I back up a bit and

² Virgil of course is Dante's guide in *The Divine Comedy* through the *Inferno* and most of *Purgatory*. It will not be lost on the reader that the structure of "The Wide Net" roughly follows the same literary source, proceeding from hell, to purgatory, and finally to paradise. Hazel's name evokes the Celtic symbol of wisdom and the source of life hidden in underground water. Hazel wands were traditionally used as dowsing rods.

mention a few of the memories I carried with me when I entered the new world of the Old South at the university.

Even as I write, the memories come flooding, but two or three should be enough to make my case. To begin with, the southern world I grew up in, a small coastal town in Florida in the years after WWII, was not all that representative of the South. It was, however, filled with southerners. The white families, like my own, had migrated there from their farms in South Georgia in the hope of improving their prospects. The black families had moved in the same direction to escape their hard lives as sharecroppers and a harsher form of racial discrimination. So I grew up surrounded by southern voices. But the town itself was lively and busy and relatively sheltered from the poverty and misery that remained a plague throughout the greater South even in the 1950s. In my town there were cattle ranches and orange groves to the west, and a small fleet of shrimping boats chugging back and forth on the Indian River to and from the Atlantic. What I remember most about growing up was the joy of being outside for most of the day in a sort of tropical paradise. It did not cost much to have a horse and a small motor boat. Later on I was given an army jeep salvaged from the war. It was perfect for riding out on the sand dunes at night, and for taking friends to the honky tonks to hear one of our classmates wail out his versions of the old standards of Hank Williams and the brand new songs of Jerry Lee Lewis. If all this seems too good to be true, it's only because I choose to stop. I could easily call to mind other memories that would deepen and darken the story. This is the advantage of relying on memory rather than myth when digging back for the truth.

What was missing in this southern town was southern history, or at least any striking display of history. The town was a typical Florida collection of frame houses, shady streets, and sandy alleys held together by a compact center of brick banks, churches, cafes, shops, and one movie theater, on the western side of the river within walking distance of the ocean to the east. It had blossomed overnight during the boom years of the twenties. It was the county seat, so there were a few imposing public buildings. But there were no old plantations or slave quarters, and no signs to mark the battles of the Civil War since there had been no battles. A more distant past was hidden behind the Spanish place names and the faces of the Seminole Indians who worked as cowboys on the ranches. But the history of the South itself came to me mainly through the stories I heard in my family. All of these stories were about life around the old family farms and houses back in Homerville, Georgia, not far from the edge of the Okefenokee Swamp.

A few of these stories were comic, but most of them dwelled on hardship and tragedy. I learned that several young ancestors had been killed fighting for the Confederacy or had died soon after the war from disease. But I learned too that the family prided itself on having been

against slavery, and on having never owned a slave. One day on a summer trip to Homerville, my mother took me to a field in the countryside and showed me two old tombstones under a tree. Engraved in large letters beneath the names was the single word: "Murdered." These were the graves of her maternal grandparents who had been viciously axed to death by two men looking for easy prey and a few dollars. What impressed me most was the incongruity of seeing such a stark inscription on a Baptist tombstone. Instead of one of the more conventional pieties, here was a crying out to both God and man against injustice. Later on I was told that the killers were black men, and that members of our family had made sure they were given a fair trial. There seemed to be a force in the family that drove it to act or speak out, with or without the common consensus.

But these Georgia tales were of the kind that Eudora Welty describes as "old and complete" in "Asphodel," one of the short stories in *The Wide Net*. What touched me more, and what I remember best now, were the lives around me while growing up. They were even stronger reasons to question the myths of the South I later encountered. As I have already mentioned, my grandfather lies at the heart of these memories.

He was the county judge, famous for his fairness in court, and loved by everyone who knew him, thus by the entire town. I walked with him often on his way to his office in the courthouse down by the river. He was a tall dignified man who dressed in a white suit and always had a Stetson hat on his head or in his hand. Walking down Orange Avenue he stopped in each of the three barber shops to tip his hat and say hello, and then picked up his daily cigar at the post office. In those days the post office had a small shop that sold tobacco and newspapers. He did not smoke the cigar, he chewed it, and as a boy it was best to stay on his windward side.

But I digress, drifting with the memory. What I want to single out is not his place in the community, which was central, but his difference from most of the adult white men I knew and observed. I said earlier that the town was segregated, but with little visible racial tension. Downtown black and white mingled and spoke with each other every day. We bought ice cream at the same shop even though there were white and colored water fountains outside on opposite sides of the shop. We saw the same films at the same movie theater, even though the whites sat downstairs and the blacks up in the balcony. And we fished for the same fish from the same piers in the inlet. As far as living space was concerned, however, the town was strictly divided into white and black, and though the blacks were often seen in the white district, there were few whites who ventured into colored town. This was not because it was dangerous, or unseemly; it was simply against the code.

In this respect, my grandfather was a rare exception. He walked through the streets of colored town as naturally as he walked to work. He

had nothing to gain, and everything to lose, by defying convention, but I do not think his prestige in the white community was ever at risk. As for me, being known as his grandson allowed me, and my two cousins who lived in his house, special status among the blacks, and a carelessness about crossing the color line. When we went to the movies on Saturday night, we would never hesitate to stop outside the county jail across the street from the Sunrise Theater. Wives and girlfriends would be gathered under the windows, and the banter and singing between them and the men in jail are impossible to exaggerate. It was a far better show than the movie.

I think my grandfather's reputation helped me too in an experience that will stay with me as long as I live. In the afternoons my friends and I would go down to the icehouse where sacks of ice were filled for the professional fishing boats. The workers, all black men, would let us sit on the blocks of ice waiting to be crushed. They talked sometimes about a black giant named Foots. He had earned the name by winning a juke joint contest for having the biggest feet in Florida. That was only part of the legend. He hated fighting, but he had never lost a fight, and all his rivals had given up trying.

I met Foots the first day I was hired to work in a local fertilizer plant for the summer. I was fifteen years old, and was the only white in the group of workers. Foots was in charge. Physically, he was everything the legend had promised. He towered over the others, who were all big and tough. He could lift hundred-pound sacks of fertilizer with each hand. Seeing I was struggling with my bucket and shovel, he came right over and helped show me the right way to do it. But the real proof of his character came at noon, when we all stopped to have lunch. Usually there would be shade trees to stretch out under and cool off, but there were none here. The only shade was provided by a long tin shed next to the sludge bin. The workers filed in, one by one with their lunch bags, and sat down on a wooden bench. Foots waited until they were all inside. He made a sign for me to follow him in what was now a blind tunnel steaming with sweat and humidity. He took me in and introduced me to each worker by name. Then he announced "Boys, look right here, the Judge is his granddaddy. Me and Ben'z tight as a pair of shoes." The whole shed shook with laughter, given the reference to his feet, and from that day on I was home free and part of the gang. When later on I read Faulkner's praise of "natural courtesy" I thought of Foots at once.

There is one more story about my grandfather that I need to relate. Shortly after I finished graduate school and began to read more widely about the South I learned that Zora Neale Hurston had lived her last years in my home town, and was buried there. My mother had met her and gave me the names of several people who had been her friends. One was the Florida artist A.E. Backus, locally known as Beanie. Like my grandfather,

Beanie was color blind as far as race was concerned. I was not surprised he had been a good friend of Hurston, but I never found any reference to him in the standard biographies. When Alice Walker wrote her essay about finding Hurston's unmarked grave, and lamented the lack of a headstone, she was writing only part of the story. Given her love of Hurston, a spell had been cast, and the promise of a new myth stopped her in her tracks. She could have easily searched out one of the old Backus crowd willing to share the memory of Beanie's role in the funeral and the missing headstone. He himself would have been too modest to mention it.

Beanie deserves his own story. The one I want to tell about my grandfather concerns another man involved in the Zora Neale Hurston saga. His name was Patrick Duval. He was a black deputy who had saved Hurston's letters and manuscripts from a fire after her death. They were later given to the University of Florida. He had never been given much credit for his act, though in the recent biography of Hurston, by Valerie Boyd, written long after my visit home, he is singled out for praise (436). I wanted to talk to him, so my mother invited him over to the house. He was a big man, steady and straight despite his age, and must have been a formidable force in making an arrest. After politely answering my questions about the Hurston papers, he turned to me and spoke for a good thirty minutes about my grandfather. I learned my grandfather had been instrumental in having him named the first black deputy in the county. He told me that my grandfather had told him he had left Georgia to come to Florida because he hated the way blacks were treated. He was on a mission. I had suspected something like this as a boy, but now it was confirmed. As Mr Duval finished, and stood up to leave, he reached out to me and shook my hand: "Your granddaddy was the only white man I ever loved."

I do not want to leave the impression that my grandfather was in any sense a rebel or an outsider. As a matter of fact, he was a pillar of the community. County judges are elected, and he never lost an election because there was never any opposition. In many respects he cherished the community as much as his family, but it had to be the whole community, white and black. Among everything else, he was generous almost to a fault. He surely died the poorest judge in all of Florida, but he did leave me his gold Hamilton watch which had been given him when he retired from working on the railroad as a young man in Georgia. Walker Percy has written somewhere that a boy who has a Hamilton from his grandfather is a true son of the South, and I still have mine.

These were some of the memories humming in my head when I began reading the books about Southern myth in Chapel Hill. I should make it clear it was not the quality of the scholarship in what I read that puzzled me, but my consternation in not finding anything of my own life in the popular myths contained in the books. I realized that the origins of

these myths had to be traced and analyzed, not least of all to better understand their impact on American culture and history. I benefited from these books as much as anyone. After all, there were some brilliant minds at work on the subject, minds who could spot a stereotype or a caricature a hundred miles away, and there was much to learn. Still, the shock of my initial consternation never left me, thus my impulse to turn back to Eudora Welty and my memory of “The Wide Net” and its mysteries when I was invited to talk about the great myths of the South.

I have tried to explain, to myself more than to anyone else, that the multiplication of myth and legend in “The Wide Net” is there, in all its rich jumbling, to nudge the reader elsewhere. Eudora Welty could use myth otherwise, as she does in such works as her masterpiece *The Golden Apples*. Myth and meaning in that book are indivisible. In “The Wide Net” there are too many myths to make a whole. William Wallace is beset on all sides by distractions, advice, omens, signs of all sorts. It is enough to make Virgil sigh with despair: “when you go looking for what is lost, everything is a sign” (Welty, *Collected Stories* 179). Of course these signs and symbols enrich the story at the same time they divert William Wallace from his search. References to babies, for example, can be found everywhere, from the little man on the toy-like train, to the baby alligator, all the way to the corn shuck doll waiting by itself on the bench back in Dover.

Just as William Wallace is beset on all sides by a welter of signs, until he forgets the name of the Pearl River and takes his dive to the bottom, the reader is mystified by the dazzling parade of mythical allusions until he too reaches the same place. Myths and legends and symbols are filled with wisdom, but it is the human spirit which has done the filling, and not the other way around. This is the truth that William Wallace discovers by himself, and somehow memory, lost and found, is crucial to the discovery. Myths are necessary to our lives and imagination, especially as children. Like the theater, like the wearing of masks, like the playing of games, myths are ways of trying out the world, testing other lives, often for the sheer joy of forgetting our own predicament. But even children are sensitive to the boundary between the real and the fictional, and would hate to hear their father repeat the soliloquies of Hamlet from breakfast to bedtime even if he made a living as an actor.

Myth may help shape an identity, but memory is the single vital source of selfhood, and the key, I believe, to William Wallace and “The Wide Net.” Despite the help of the search party, the willingness of the community to lend a hand, William Wallace must forget the outside world before he plunges into the inner, and by so doing, he recovers Hazel, who as Old Doc knows, has been there all the time. He has recovered his memory too, and with it, we know now, a new power of self-direction, decision, and acceptance. It has been a delightful day of adventure on the

river for the Malones, the Doyles, and the others (including the reader), but the wide net (a sort of local myth itself) has caught nothing, except a haul of fish, a big eel, old shoes, the baby alligator, and a string of beads. William Wallace has done the real catching, unless of course, it has been Hazel herself.

When I finished rereading “The Wide Net” I reread Eudora Welty’s autobiography, *One Writer’s Beginnings*. It was written forty years after “The Wide Net” but I was gratified to find her speak of myth and memory in a way that confirmed what I thought I had found in the story. She begins by describing a milestone in her childhood, a gift of the ten-volume *Our Wonder World* on her sixth or seventh birthday:

There were the fairy tales—Grimm, Andersen, the English, the French, ‘Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves,’ and there was Aesop and Reynard the Fox; there were the myths and legends, Robin Hood, King Arthur, and St. George and the Dragon, even the history of Joan of Arc; a whack of *Pilgrim’s Progress* and a long piece of *Gulliver*. They all carried their classic illustrations. I located myself in these pages and could go straight to the stories and pictures I loved... (Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* 8)

Here is the same confused hodgepodge of myth and fable we can find in “The Wide Net.” They are the wonderful fictions out of which an adult life finally emerges, but never forgets. The never forgetting is another gift of becoming oneself, the power of memory.

Of course writing her autobiography is a proof of that power, but Eudora Welty goes further. She ends *One Writer’s Beginnings* with a celebration of memory that for her has now become a personal creed, and has allowed her to begin her life as a writer. She is in her early twenties (an age we might give to William Wallace) when she discovers the gift of memory, and in her seventies when she confirms it: “Writing fiction has developed in me an abiding respect for the unknown in a human lifetime and a sense of where to look for the threads, how to follow, how to connect, find in the thick of the tangle what clear line persists. The strands are all there: to the memory nothing is ever really lost” (Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* 90). She continues several pages later: “It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover; and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge” (Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* 102). And finally, on the last page, memory is evoked again, this time in words to be engraved in stone: “Of course the greatest confluence of all is that which makes up the human memory—the individual human memory. My own is the treasure most dearly regarded by me, in my life and in my work as a writer. Here time, also, is subject to confluence. The memory is a living

thing—it too is in transit. But during its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead” (Welty, *One Writer’s Beginnings* 104).

I have talked about William Wallace and “The Wide Net,” but I have said little about the assigned subject, the myth of the South. Neither does Eudora Welty in her autobiography, and she is one of the most southern writers who ever existed. Still, if I should apologize, I do. In leaving you now, I am reminded of an old story out of Georgia. It was told by Alexander Stephens, the vice-president of the Confederacy. Apparently, there was one male survivor of the Battle of the Alamo in 1836. When he escaped he went back to his native state of Georgia and lived to a ripe old age. Right after he got back, though, some of his old friends met him at a local tavern and asked him if it were true that he had run away from the fight. “Boys,” he said, “I didn’t run, but I did some mighty high walking.” I hope I have not run away from the myth of the South, but I admit I may have done some “high walking.” Thank you for the indulgence, and the invitation.

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