

The Future Grows:
Voices and Machines in Eudora Welty's *One
Writer's Beginnings*.

Noel Polk (Mississippi State University)

Abstract:

Eudora Welty begins her memoir, *One Writer's Beginnings*, with a short italicized introit, a brief scene in which the very young Eudora pauses on the stairs lacing her shoes while her father shaves in the upstairs bathroom and her mother prepares breakfast downstairs. She listens to her father whistle "The Merry Widow Waltz" while her mother tries to whistle and then hums the same song in return. Eudora finds their song full of joy, unlike the "growling" she hears when they play the new Victrola. This paper explores the ironies introduced in that scene, among them the fact that her father died at a very young age and her mother was anything but a "merry widow" for the rest of her life. The mechanical "growling" of the Victrola becomes, as this paper sees it, a kind of metaphor for their lives as a family.

In the elegant little fable that begins *One Writer's Beginnings*, on the sheet I've passed out and will not read because you know it very well, Daddy is upstairs doing what men are supposed to do, getting ready for work, while mother is downstairs doing what women are supposed to do, preparing breakfast for him. The child Eudora positions herself on the stairs between them, doing what children do, as she would have it: spying. . . The curious phrase, "*When I was young enough to still spend a long time buttoning my shoes in the morning*" suggests that she thinks that her position on the stairs involves some risk, so that the buttoning is a ruse, of innocence: an alibi. If her parents discover her there, they might correctly assume that she is spying, listening for something they don't want her to know. They, of course, do not seem to be aware that she is spying.

The need to spy assumes that her parents are communicating some secret that she is no part of and that is vitally important to know. When she cannot figure out, what they are saying to each other and not to her, she disrupts her way into their communication with her clattering. Her career as a fiction writer begins when she finally understands that she's much more likely to understand such communications if she listens rather than disrupts, maintaining her presumptive even if phony innocence in the triangle, like on the stairs buttoning her shoes.

The episode ends as Eudora forces herself between them: "*I was now just about ready to run dattering down and show them my shoes.*" The "*dattering?*" noise of her shoes disrupts the floating laughter of their music; her presence alters the young lovers' harmonies and their joy, though she does not depict them here as being in any way discomfited by or amused at or even aware of the listening or the interruption. The episode is thus more nearly about her sense of herself as an intruder than about what's going on between her parents. She thus makes of herself a part of their love that necessarily changes their love.

She's much more interested in what she doesn't hear, in what she *might* hear if she just listens hard enough, than in what she does hear. Often what she does hear as a child is the murmur and drone of voices barely audible. When she would finally convince them that she was asleep, her parents would drape

the lampshade with a sheet of the daily paper, which was tilted, like a hatbrim, so that they could sit in their rockers in a lighted part of the room and I could supposedly go to sleep in the protected dark of the bed. They sat talking. What was thus dramatically made a present of to me was the secure sense of the hidden observer. . . . What they talked about I have no idea, and the subject was not what mattered to me. It was no doubt whatever a young married couple spending their first time privately in each other's company in the long, probably harried day would talk about. It was the murmur of their voices, the back-and-forth, the unnoticed stretching away of time between my bedtime and theirs, that made me bask there at my distance. What I felt was not that I was excluded from them but that I was included, in—and because of—what I could hear of their voices and what I could see of their faces in the cone of yellow light under the brown-scorched shade." "I have always been shy physically," she concludes. "This in part tended to keep me from rushing into things, including relationships, headlong. Not rushing headlong, though I may have wanted to, but beginning to write stories about

people, I drew near slowly; noting and guessing, apprehending, hoping, drawing my eventual conclusions out of my own heart. . . ." (861-63)

Thus she learns to position as what she calls a "privileged observer," a position which, keeping her from "rushing into things," or "clattering," allowed her to maintain distance, "a prerequisite of [her] understanding of human events" (862). As a fiction writer, she's always on those stairs buttoning her shoes, trying to figure out what people are saying to each other, how they say it, what mysterious worlds those private communicative sounds create in the air around her head, waking or sleeping—at home, in the car, on the bus or train.

On the stairs she's listening to her parents' happy if clumsy duet: her mother can't return her father's melody with a whistle, so she returns it by humming. Whistling and humming would seem to be incompatible harmonically, but their duet nevertheless "float[s] with laughter" as they prepare for the day, even if there is a darker edge to the music. Their song is from Franz Lehar's well-known operetta *The Merry Widow*; a song which Welty, writing several decades afterwards and for her own literary and personal reasons perhaps imposes upon this scene. *The Merry Widow* loads *One Writer's Beginnings* with irony: barely two decades after this scene putatively occurs, Welty's father died, leaving her mother *anything but* a merry widow; how un-merry she is for the rest of her life, of course, becomes the subject of much of *One Writer's Beginnings* and of *The Optimist's Daughter*.

Though we do not actually hear from the Victrola in this passage, Welty makes of it here and later a troubling fourth member of her family. Among the earliest devices to reproduce the human voice, indeed to mass-produce it commercially, the Weltys' Victrola must have been among the earliest ones since they were produced from 1901-1929; their owning one reflects her father's interest in gadgets and the future. In a passage soon to follow, Welty notes that her mother "always sang to her children." "Her voice came out just a little bit in the minor key. 'Wee Willie Winkie's' song was wonderfully sad when she sang the lullabies." Her father, responding to the sadness and no doubt wanting to protect his daughter even from that, replaces her mother's voice with the Victrola's mechanical reproduction of a professional singer's voice, which begins with that growl: "Oh, but now there's a record," Welty imagines her father saying. "She could have her own record to listen to,' my father *would have said*" He apparently did *not*

actually *say* that, but might as well have. Her father thus intervenes between Eudora and her mother: “all of Mother’s lullabies . . . could be played to *take her place* [italics mine]. Soon I was able to play her my own lullabies all day long.” We are left to wonder how often he intervened in such situations and how the intervention affected her mother—to be told that her voice is not good enough to sing lullabies to her own daughter? Does she switch from whistling to humming because she fears he will find even her whistling not good enough? How many such minor indignities does it take to undermine joy? How do they chip away at love?

Whatever the effect on her mother, Welty records her own joy in the technology that takes her mother’s place:

Our Victrola stood in the diningroom. I was allowed to climb onto the seat of a diningroom chair to wind it, start the record turning, and set the needle playing. In a second I’d jumped to the floor, to spin or march around the table as the music called for—now there were all the other records I could play too. I skinned back onto the chair just in time to lift the needle at the end, stop the record and turn it over, then change the needle. That brass receptacle with a hole in the lid gave off a metallic smell like human sweat, from all the hot needles that were fed it. winding up, dancing, being cocked to start and stop the record, was of course all in one the act of *listening* . . .” (848-51).

Christian Welty, of course, “loved all instruments that would instruct and fascinate” (839), instruments which “represented” her father’s “fondest beliefs—in progress, in the future. With these gifts, he was preparing his children” (840-41). His view to the future was a manic and perhaps slightly ridiculous need to protect them all against eventuality—a need to control eventuality that seems to have spilled over into a need to control their daily lives, even their pleasure in singing. But he could not anticipate or prevent the illness, or the treatment, that took his life in 1931, at the age of 52.

Part of her mother’s need to save his life was that he had saved hers, earlier, when after the birth of one of their children she contracted septicemia, then “nearly always fatal” (857). Her father believed that champagne could save her. But of course champagne was not sold in Jackson in those days. Undaunted, he used the telephone, also relatively new in Jackson, to call an Italian orchard grower in Canton, a rural village about 30 miles north of Jackson. Mr. Trolio

“sent the bottle in a bucket of ice and my father snatched it off the baggage car. He offered my mother a glass of chilled champagne and she drank it and kept it down. She was to live, after all” (857). They were lucky, of course: her survival was completely coincidental with the champagne, which could have had no effect whatsoever on her septicemia. But the phone and the precious train schedules allowed all of them the illusion that his faith in communication technology – the future – had allowed him to stave off the unexpected and had played a part in saving her.

In this instance, the telephone did its illusionary work. In *One Writer's Beginnings*, it works as a communicative arm of the redoubtable Miss Duling, the fiercely dominating teacher and principal of Davis School: for her the phone served the same peremptory service as the loud daunting bell that she rang to call the children to school and to send them home, to dismiss them for recess and lunch and then bring them back to the classroom. Miss Duling, like her father “a lifelong subscriber to perfection” (863), used the telephone as an instrument of her indomitable will, as did her father in ordering the champagne. The phone was for her an extension of the bell at the end of her arm that she used to call to attention all the state and city leaders she had taught during her three-generation rule at Davis school, just as if they were still her students:

When she wanted something done—some civic oversight corrected, some injustice made right overnight, or even a tree spared that the fool telephone people were about to cut down—she telephoned the mayor, or the chief of police, or the president of the power company, or the head doctor at the hospital, or the judge in charge of a case, or whoever, and calling them by their first names, *told* them. It is impossible to imagine her meeting with anything less than compliance. (863-64)

One other telephone appears in *One Writer's Beginnings* that has a quite different effect on the young Eudora—a typical incident, one takes for granted—when her mother received a call from one of her friends

who always talked a long time. I knew who it was when my mother would only reply, now and then “Well, I declare,” or “You don’t say so” or “Surely

not.” She’d be standing on the wall telephone, listening against her will, and I’d sit on the stairs close by her. Our telephone had a little bar set into the handle which had to be pressed and held down to keep the connection open, and when her friend had said goodbye, my mother needed me to prize her fingers loose from the little bar; her grip had become paralyzed. “What did she say?” I asked.

“She wasn’t saying a thing in this world,” sighed my mother. “She was just ready to talk, that’s all” (852-53).

She’s thus listening again, spying—though this time listening to only one side of the conversation. But she’s much less interested in her mother’s bored minimal responses than in what the caller on the other end of the phone might be saying.

Given her father’s absorption in gadgets and technology, it is perhaps to be wondered that Welty didn’t share her father’s sense of the modern. Very little of technology appears in her fiction and, usually, when it does it does so with a growl of one sort or another that problematizes it. In *The Ponder Heart*, Uncle Daniel telephones Edna Earle with fear and trembling in his voice to order her to come out to the Ponder plantation to save him from his wife. In “Why I Live at the P.O.” Edna Earle, who has been in constant miscommunication with her family, is finally driven to take her belongings, move out of the family home, and move to any community’s communication center, the post office; she drags with her the radio and listens to the war news (69). A radio in a very early story, “Magic,” plays a sickening Hawaiian music, the “grovelling sweetness of the guitars” (6) that evokes the faraway romantic islands while a family sits “under a fringed lamp, their heads sunk as though all their necks had been broken” (6).

Communication technologies thus seem in Welty’s work instruments of power, control, used for the dissemination of one-way directives, logorrhea, orders, commands, information—a peremptory clattering one-way transfer of information, and which largely disrupt communication rather than make it possible. *The Optimist’s Daughter*, perhaps her most modern fiction, does indeed have jet planes in it, but it too is largely void of modern communications.

In Philip Roth’s *Exit Ghost*, Nathan Zuckerman returns to Manhattan after a ten-year idyll in the New England woods and observes a stunning new world:

What surprised me most my first few days walking around the city? The most obvious thing—the cell phones. We had no reception as yet up on my mountain, and down in Athena, where they do have it, I'd rarely see people striding the streets talking uninhibitedly into their phones. I remembered a New York when the only people walking up Broadway seemingly talking to themselves were crazy. What had happened in these ten years for there suddenly to be so much to say—so much pressing that it couldn't wait to be said? Everywhere I walked, somebody was approaching me talking on a phone and someone was behind me talking on a phone. Inside the cars, the drivers were on the phone. When I took a taxi, the cabbie was on the phone. For one who frequently went without talking to anybody for days at a time, I had to wonder what that had previously held them up had collapsed in people to make incessant talking into a telephone preferable to walking about under no one's surveillance, momentarily solitary, assimilating the streets through one's animal senses and thinking the myriad thoughts that the activities of a city inspire. For me it made the streets appear comic and the people ridiculous. And yet it seemed like a real tragedy, too. To eradicate the experience of separation must inevitably have a dramatic effect. What will the consequence be? You know you can reach the other person anytime, and if you can't, you get impatient—impatient and angry like a little stupid little god. I understood that background silence had long been abolished from restaurants, elevators, and ballparks, but that the immense loneliness of human beings should produce this boundless longing to be heard, and the accompanying disregard for being overheard—well, having lived largely in the era of the telephone booth, whose substantial folding doors could be tightly pulled shut, I was impressed by the conspicuousness of it all and found myself entertaining the idea for a story in which Manhattan has turned into a sinister collectivity where everyone is spying on everyone else, everyone being tracked by the person at the other end of his or her phone, even though, incessantly dialing one another from wherever they like in the great out of doors, the telephoners believe themselves to be experiencing the maximum freedom. I knew that merely by thinking up such a scenario I was at one with all the cranks who imagined, from the beginnings of industrialization, that the machine was the enemy of life. Still, I could not help it: I did not see how anyone could believe he was continuing to live a human existence by walking about talking into a phone for half his waking life. No, those gadgets did not promise to be a boon to promoting reflection among the general public. (64-65)

I suspect that Welty would have found this passage to her liking. More often than not, phones appear as tools of power, as when Miss Duling calls her former students to tell them how to run the city of Jackson; as instruments of illusion, as when the Weltys assume that her father saved her mother's life with champagne and a telephone call; and, like Victrolas, Dictaphones, as one-way communiqués, as with her mother's caller, who hardly lets her mother

get in that edgewise word. In Welty, technology seems to block communication rather than being an instrument of it. To be sure, her human communicants don't always do much better face to face: so perhaps technology is primarily an extension of communication difficulties in general.

For Zuckerman, cellphones, those “gadgets[,] did not promise to be a boon to promoting reflection among the general public.” But I suspect that the “growl” Welty invoked in contrasting her parents' love-duet to the sounds of the Victrola may represent something a little menacing, threatening, latent with inarticulateness and misunderstanding. It's hard to forget that her father used the Victrola to supplant her mother in one of the most intimate of mother-child moments, lullabies at bedtime, apparently considering her lullaby voice less than perfect—and, as I suggested, we may well wonder whether her mother, who began their duet whistling, became self-conscious and switched to humming to keep from being criticized—or replaced—but in any case found herself, perhaps yet again, chafing under her husband's watchful and ever-so-nicely critical eye. Victrolas distort the voices they reproduce, first in the growling as the turntable slowly turns at first, then as it slows and has to be rewound, depending on how accurately the turntable turns at the proper revolutions per minute, producing static and instability in the voices it reproduces: nobody who's heard one would confuse it with a real human voice.

Welty's comparison of her parents' odd duet is distinctly in favor of their joy, their love, which is different from the Victrola's “growling.” But in another oddly constructed sentence, she introduces that “*difference*” before telling us what her parents' duet is different *from* the effect is more than a little disorienting. It's as if that growl has been lurking all along from the beginning of their marriage, as it is being wound up to begin, lurking there precisely to disrupt and confuse, to *datter* into their pleasure in each other and, no doubt, in Eudora. The difference is the growl: that is, the Victrola “from the beginning” growled loudly and obviously. In her parents' duet, the growl is there, though not so obviously, hidden in the first flushes of love and family; but it is definitely *there*, lurking in the language that young Eudora hears and doesn't hear, in their complicated attempts at harmony. That mechanical growl is thus a premonition that Welty imposes backward on what otherwise might be a completely happy memory. It's a

premonition of her father's death, her mother's bitterness, her own career as a passionate observer of the ways human beings love and misunderstand each other, of all the clatter and growl even the happiest families make.