

## Editor's Column: "Black Men Dressed in Gold"—Eudora Welty, Empty Objects, and the Neobaroque

**10** SEPTEMBER 2008. ON SATURDAY MY FATHER-IN-LAW, BERNIE Miller, died at eighty-seven, a suicide. He was an elfin, elusive man, sparing in his speech and very, very funny. He was an immigrant's son without a middle name but with a library of contemporary novels surpassing my own. His company, Bob Amusement, dealt in pinball, jukebox, and cigarette machines until cigarettes went south, and he was always called Bob at work because, even in Conshohocken, even in the twentieth century, he needed to pass as a gentile if he wanted to place his machines.

My family and I spent the weekend laughing and crying at his house in Philadelphia, a place where take-no-captive arguments that sucked the air out of the room had been fought amid hillocks of cheese steak and chocolate-covered pretzels. Despite scars left from these emotional tournaments, Bernie's house was a gracious place: bright, colorful, cradling.

I returned with four hostages: a flow-blue platter edged with indigo that bleeds into white; a cut-glass sugar bowl sharp to the touch; a purple box made from resin, luminous, with a tiny yellow handle; and a black fedora, worn but with the price tag inside. And now, as these objects assemble before me, I'm baffled. At my in-laws' house everything glowed with—was it the carefulness that went into each object's collecting? the spotlight these objects cast on one family's ascent into the middle class? or the cooling heat, the uneven neon, of each survivor's memories? I don't know. But the histories of those lost people I hoped to bring with me didn't come along.

In the gloom surrounding my collection, nothing is there, not one ghost, not the podcast of a quarrel, not the punch line of a joke. I'm stuck in the moment from Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* just before

the consolations of heaven come in. Chaucer captures the sense that something filled with *caritas* can become inexplicably empty:

And whan that he was slayn in this manere,  
His lighte goost ful blissfully is went  
Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere  
. . . . .

And down from thennes faste he gan avyse  
This litel spot of erthe that with the se  
Embraced is, and fully gan despise  
This wrecched world, and held al vanite

(5.1807–09, 1814–17)

Did I think these “litel” spots of “erthe”—pottery, resin, cut glass—would make me richer, or salve the fact of death? How does an object so full in one dimension become vacant or drained in another? My minor collection, messy and coveted, has become a mere pile of objects, or less: the slap of a closed door, the dissonance of a child playing *Guitar Hero* without the guitar.

In this column I want to focus on people and things that fall in and out of time and on the neobaroque as a genre or aesthetic code useful for recapturing them. The American neobaroque puts together competing genres, estranged temporalities, and emptying objects, and makes exuberant art out of ontological cacophony. We have been schooled to think of the baroque as a historical period or genre. But as this aesthetic of luxurious overdoing migrated into the cathedral cities and plantation economies of the New World, it was characterized by *mestizaje*: a blending of the iconographies of native, slave, and white cultures. Here nascent Old World epistemologies (individuation, human rights, the ascent of private life, the myth of progress) broke and scattered. The neobaroque refracts the anxiety and greed of New World commodity culture's *mise en abyme*: that culture's hot trade in sugar and gold depended on a cold transformation of people into objects.

This issue of *PMLA* explores this tangle of times and epistemologies in “The Neoba-

roque and the Americas” and includes, in the Forum, a conference debate on the problem of periodization and time. The issue also honors Simone de Beauvoir's centenary, a tribute that coincides with Eudora Welty's. In this Editor's Column I want to honor Welty and to continue meditating on the strangeness of things with an analysis of her extraordinary short story “The Burning.” Beauvoir was born in 1908 and Welty in 1909. In 1949, the year Beauvoir published *The Second Sex*, Welty published *The Golden Apples*, an equally obstreperous and gender-savvy text. Welty was a consummate practitioner of the neobaroque. In “The Burning” she chooses an overwrought and fact-withholding style to dramatize the fires that destroyed Jackson, Mississippi, when Union soldiers burned their way south. This blighted white space animates the imagination of Welty's black protagonist. Stung by the death of her child, the victim of multiple rapes, Delilah is liberated from slavery but still hungry and shelterless. A house slave who now roams the natural world, she feels her own thinglessness as the forces of conquest descend: “She listened for the blows, and dreaded that whole army of wings—of flies, birds, serpents, their glowing enemy faces and bright kings' dresses, that banner of colors forked out, all this world that was flying, striking, stricken, falling, gilded or blackened, mortally splitting and falling apart, proud turbans unwinding” (45). Lost in Welty's style, in Delilah's condition, who can take a breath?

In “The Baroque and the Marvelous Real” Alejo Carpentier argues that we are inundated by too many objects in the New World baroque:

[T]he central axis . . . is surrounded by . . . “proliferating nuclei” . . . decorative elements that completely fill . . . all architecturally available space: motifs that contain their own expansive energy, that launch or project forms centrifugally. It is art in motion, a pulsating art, an art that moves outward and away from the center, that somehow breaks through its own borders. (93)

In its multiplying marauders, from dragonflies to birdlike kings, Delilah's vision replicates the baroque's pulsing borders as well as its object obsessions; she transforms her trauma into portable property. The expensive, damaged goods she collects from the grounds of a burned-down plantation include a jubilee cup and a baroque mirror crowned with gilded black men. The extravagance of white people's objects and the violent sources of New World plenitude threaten to overwhelm not only Delilah but also Welty herself. Welty describes "The Burning" as "too involved and curlicued around with things" ("Interview" 221). What happens when the objects we inherit refuse to behave? Why does Bernie's death bring me to the baroque?

Leaving Jackson for the Yankee encampment, Delilah gathers anything she can sell or trade and scavenges the bones of her son. In carrying my father-in-law's treasures from the East Coast to the Midwest, I, too, hoped to harvest some consecration—but my desire for these objects to breathe again was closer to science fiction than to Delilah's historic journey. I hoped to recover what David, the little boy robot in Steven Spielberg's *A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*, finds in the things around him. David is cast into a world of robot suffering when his human mother tosses him aside in favor of her biological child. By the movie's end this boy robot (the first machine invented to dream and love) finds himself preserved in a helicopter time capsule under the sea, staring at a kitschy statue he imagines as Pinocchio's blue fairy (with her promise of making mechanical boys real). Centuries of longing for his mother pass until David is rescued by a clutch of enlightened robots: his mechanical descendants. They have become sensitive instruments of empathy and try as hard as they can to give the little boy what he wants: his lost mother all to himself. Using a few wayward genes preserved in the pocket of David's teddy bear, these gentle machines re-create the mother's house and bring her back to life, though only for a day.

In reawakening a lost human past to fulfill a mechanical child's need to encounter a mother who disappeared long ago, *A.I.* examines the way that "times older than the present" persist (Bloch 22). In the machine world, where hyper-evolved robots have more feelings than their predecessor humans, a mother avatar reappears, puzzled and dependent on the machine child who summons her. In his summoning we encounter what Ernst Bloch calls nonsynchronism: the intrusion of "unsurmounted remnants of older economic being and consciousness" into a time when these remnants have been superseded (29).

The neobaroque is a genre obsessed with unsurmounted time and focused on empty objects that grow full only to empty again, as if winking in and out of time. Many literary genres articulate the problem of unsurmounted, leftover time that breaks into the present. Science fiction describes the ways in which the future is riven by the errors of the past, by epochal faults in the writer's present. In the gothic nonsynchronous time is also productive and paramount. The gothic is a genre of helplessness, where everyone bumps into the passive voice, where in *Absalom, Absalom!* Sutpen is haunted by old ideas about race and class that even in the twentieth century will not go away and Jim Bond's oedipal howl echoes all the way north. Both genres converge in *A.I.*, where the gothic plot of the uncanny mother meets the sci-fi decline of the human caused by greed and global warming. History is a nightmare from which only the machine can escape.

In search of another path for mobilizing leftover objects and times, I suggest the neobaroque as an aesthetic practice exploring emancipatory versions of nonsynchronism. In neobaroque art unsurmounted, resurrected time becomes not a curse but a gift. For theorists such as José Lezama Lima, "the American baroque is not a mannerist mimicry of the European but, rather, a creative mode in which Old World styles are *acrecentados*—cultivated, mutated, grown, coaxed—into New

World forms of expression" (Salgado 322). Perhaps the southern gothic should not be the premier genre for thinking about United States southern literature. Americanists need to toy with the neobaroque: a genre that plays with the hybrid as the source of the haunted, contemplates cultural and stylistic excess, exposes (formally and economically) the violent, decorative acquisitions of New World imperialism, and suggests the dizzying interpenetration of past and present. As "*a spirit* and not a *historical style*" (Carpentier 95), as an aesthetic practice that "flees from geometrical arrangements" (94) and seeks proliferation, superabundance, and "the marvelous real" (102), North and South America's neobaroque offers rich coordinates for reading Welty's fiction and recovering morsels of unsurmounted time that suggest other paths into history.

Carlos Fuentes proclaims that "the Baroque, language of abundance, is also the language of insufficiency: only those who possess nothing include everything. Their horror of vacuity is not gratuitous; it is due to the certainty of the fact that one is in emptiness, that one lacks security."<sup>1</sup> This is Delilah's plight from the beginning of "The Burning." As Union soldiers maneuver a big white horse through the double doors of Rose Hill, they discover two female relics of the landowning class, Miss Myra and Miss Theo, among "precious, breakable things white ladies were never tired of and never broke, unless they were mad at each other" (30). Welty's story is obsessed with genteel excess, with white people's superabundant goods and objects, which depend on a world of slave labor. Breaking into this superabundance, the soldiers rape the white ladies—or at least they try; Welty's prose twists, proliferates, withholds, maddens. Like the ladies' "precious, breakable things," her style cracks and whirrs, refusing to specify trauma. But Welty's writing becomes clear and pointed when these white women offer Delilah as a sexual substitute to the soldiers: "My sister's the more delicate one, as you see. May I offer you this young kitchen

Negro, as I've always understood—" (31). The soldiers carry Delilah into the tall grass, and as she is raped her status as a human commodity breaks away: "she screamed, young and strong, for them all—for everybody that wanted her to scream for them, for everybody that didn't; and sometimes it seemed to her that she was screaming her loudest for Delilah, who was lost now—carried out of the house, not knowing how to get back" (33). Once the house is set ablaze (and no one lifts a finger to help Phinny, Delilah's mixed-race son, escape the fire), once the white ladies hang themselves by unknitting a left-behind hammock and jumping off Delilah's back, Delilah is released into designated nothingness.<sup>2</sup> As she looks into a melted mirror and trudges in the direction of the Union troops, Delilah is surrounded with a gorgeous, flowing symphony of sounds and images. Why does Welty embroider cruel acts so beautifully? Is this the aestheticization of predation and prejudice?

While "The Burning" is ostensibly about war and its aftermath, I've suggested that it is obsessed with things: what it means to have them, to leave them or burn them, to take them from others. Before committing suicide, Miss Myra sits on the hammock picking ants out of a silver cup. Her most natural, most casual assumption is that, as a white woman, she should be surrounded by objects. In contrast, the Caribbean writer Kamau Brathwaite insists on the necessary thinglessness and portability of black culture:

And this total expression comes about because people be in the open air, because people live in conditions of poverty ("unhouselled") because they come from a historical experience where they had to rely on their very breath rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines. They had to depend on immanence, the power within themselves, rather than the technology outside themselves. (19)

Welty uses a style that brims with too-muchness to illuminate the great contrast be-

tween plantation wealth and the small change allotted southern blacks. Most stories of the United States Civil War invoke past-induced trances of the South's gothic past, with its haunted slave markets, massifications of money, and Grand Guignol Lost Cause. But despite ruined plantations, hysterical sisters, and remnants of ferocious injustice, Welty casts this could-be gothic tale in an excessive and violent lyricism that emanates from Delilah and the neobaroque Venetian mirror, emblazoned with "black men dressed in gold" (44), that hangs in the plantation parlor.

Instead of reflecting, the neobaroque mirror folds or enfolds; it changes dimensions and chops up events. When the soldiers erupt into the parlor and force Delilah to hold their horse's reins, she can only see the story unfold at a distance, in the mirror's calm.<sup>3</sup>

The first soldier shoved the tables and chairs out of the way behind Miss Myra, who flitted when she ran, and pushed her down where she stood and dropped on top of her. There in the mirror the parlor remained, filled up with dusted pictures, and shuttered since six o'clock against the heat and that smell of smoke they were so tired of, still glimmering with precious, breakable things. (30)

As Fuentes reminds us, only those who possess nothing include everything, and Delilah sees this world through its objects and her own object status. Refusing sorrow, she concentrates on Miss Myra in "the red chair in the mirror. . . . It was the red, rubbed velvet, pretty chair like Miss Myra's ring box" (30). The white woman's hair gleams with fairy-tale objects and streams "bright gold, with the combs caught like leaves in it" (31). Delilah knows the mental trick of dissociating from people and attending to things to escape memories of trauma; she imagines the white woman's parallel dissociation as Miss Myra looks up to see "the little plaster flowers going around the ceiling" (30).

While landowners and soldiers cling to propertied sovereignty, Delilah lacks bare

ownership. Watching objects in the mirror is one mode of possessing them. Returning to the burned-down plantation, where Delilah finds a world of charred, empty objects, is another. Casting aside "an iron pot and a man's long boot, a doorknob and little book fluttering, its leaves spotted and fluffed like Guinea feathers," she spies the melted Venetian mirror

down in the chimney's craw, flat and face-up in the cinders. . . . Though the mirror did not know Delilah, Delilah would have known that mirror anywhere, because it was set between black men. Their arms were raised to hold up the mirror's roof, which now the swollen mirror brimmed, among gold leaves and gold heads—black men dressed in gold, looking almost into the glass themselves. (43–44)

The "bright gold" of Miss Myra's hair may adorn these stalwart men, but their raised arms embrace cinders. Delilah sees, but they "almost" look. Charged with supporting the mirror's roof, these "men dressed in gold" are idle creatures: ornaments sentenced to hard labor. And yet in their weird, melted state they exert a centrifugal energy for Delilah and project collectivity. Delilah "would have known that mirror anywhere," because she cleaned it repeatedly, just as her ancestors created the wealth that enabled its purchase. Welty creates consonance between the baroque artificiality of this looking glass and Delilah's workaday world. And Delilah recognizes the mirror as her own object because of its kindredness, because her race is represented there. As Lois Parkinson Zamora explains:

[T]he gold and silver extracted from Zacatecas to Potosi weigh heavy upon the altars of Baroque churches throughout Europe, as do the bodies of indigenous laborers who mined those metals and whose loss these altars silently commemorate. I stress the reciprocal nature of this transatlantic exchange because not to do so is to misunderstand the Baroque in both Europe and Latin America: These relations are

asymmetrical, but they “continue to impel contemporary Latin American narrative.” (xvi)

I would add that they impel United States narratives as well.

The Yankee fire that destroys the plantation's grandiloquence also deepens these men's ornate pain. The “black men dressed in gold” are “now half-split away, flattened with fire, bearded, noseless as the moss that hung from swamp trees” (44). Delilah's plight as rape victim is amplified in the men's deformed bodies. But instead of steadying or deepening pain, the mirror offers a dream vision: an odd turn, a slip into a new mode, as if it were customary to slide straight from Faulkner to Chaucer. The dream vision features Delilah's encounter with nonsynchronous time and space:

Where the mirror did not cloud like the horse-trampled spring, gold gathered itself from the winding water, and honey under water started to flow, and then the gold fields were there, hardening gold. Through the water, gold and honey twisted up into houses, trembling. She saw people walking the bridges in early light with hives of houses on their heads. (44)

Delilah has an Old World vision. She sees the honeyed commodification that flowed from the New World to the Old and back again, the traffic in bodies and goods that turned fields, as well as black and indigenous women and men, into gold.<sup>4</sup> The expenditure and over-expenditure of lives made the money that created the extravagance of beehive hairdos and powdered wigs, a world of slavery-fueled ornament populated by men in long coats looking like “dresses, some with red birds; and monkeys in velvet; and ladies with masks laid over their faces looking from pointed windows. Delilah supposed that was Jackson before Sherman came. Then it was gone. In this noon quiet, here where all had passed by, unless it had gone in, she waited on her knees” (44). What kind of space is this? Is it Venice, Bruges, London, the Caribbean? And

what kind of time? What is this carnival of nonsynchronous time doing in Welty's story, and why is it vouchsafed to Delilah?

There may be multiple explanations, but I would argue that Delilah conjures this vision because she possesses “a historical experience where [she] had to rely on . . . breath rather than on paraphernalia like books and museums and machines . . . on immanence, the power within [herself], rather than the technology outside” (Brathwaite 19).<sup>5</sup> By conveying a sense of Delilah's immanence and power through a mirror that holds multiple pasts, Welty shows that it is possible to colonize these pasts even when they are incomprehensible or out of sync. Even when history maims your people, you can still appropriate (lift/pinch/embezzle/purloin) the past's dead citations and give them outrageous life.

In true baroque fashion, one vision gives way to another. As Delilah gazes into the past-struck mirror, it changes again:

The mirror's cloudy bottom sent up minnows of light to the brim where now a face pure as a water-lily shadow was floating. Almost too small and deep down to see, they were quivering, leaping to life, fighting, aping old things Delilah had seen done already, sometimes what men had done to Miss Theo and Miss Myra and the peacocks and to slaves, and sometimes what a slave had done and what anybody now could do to anybody. (44)

The archaic past yields to the near past, to a warring world without order and to the memory of Delilah's own rape and concubinage—that is, her lack of recourse and inability to bring her tormentors to law. Then, “like an act of mercy gone . . . the mirror felled her flat” (44). The rest could be darkness, but Welty's text keeps going, like Delilah's burned heart. Character and narrator erupt in a surfeit of supernaturalism as Delilah protects herself from an army of dangers: “She put her arms over her head and waited, for they would all be coming again, gathering under her and

above her, bees saddled like horses out of the air, butterflies harnessed to one another, bats with masks on, birds together, all with their weapons bared. She listened for the blows, and dreaded that whole army of wings—of flies, birds, serpents . . ." (45). Once again Welty plays with the "explosion of forms," the flight from "geometrical arrangements," the intertwining and shattering, the proliferating hubs, the edgy flights of temperate or tropical animal and vegetable that Carpentier names the New World baroque (93–94).

The supercharged natural world may become an outrider for Delilah's fear, but in this extraordinary surplus of tiny terrors, we stumble across Delilah's mechanism for staying alive. In a South filled with angry white people who've left nowhere to hide, Delilah ratchets up her sensorium. This time she discovers the bones of her child as the mirror brims with images of counterconquest. She imagines that the Yankee's threatening horse, wounded, falls away, its "flayed forehead . . . with ears and crest up stiff." Next Delilah imagines a legion of Maroons drumming, "the shield and the drum of big swamp birdskins," and grabs her own piercing weapons: "the horns of deer sharpened to cut and kill with. She showed her teeth." These are figures of enmity that make way for discovery. "Then she looked in the feathery ashes and found Phinny's bones. She ripped a square from her manifold fullness of skirts and tied up the bones in it" (45).

As Delilah gathers this portable property, all the mirror's times remain copresent: the period of decadent wealth and slave impoverishment stretching from New World colonization to the Civil War; the near past when Delilah was abused by her mistresses and raped by white men; and the present, when Delilah survives and collects the bones of her son as the only item from her private past that can travel. Then she responds to her own "unhouselledness," by assembling more portable property to barter or treasure.

She set foot in the road then, walking stilted in Miss Myra's shoes and carrying Miss Theo's shoes tied together around her neck, her train in the road behind her. She wore Miss Myra's willing rings—had filled up two fingers—but she had had at last to give up the puzzle of Miss Theo's bracelet with the chain. They were two stones now, scalding-white. When the combs were being lifted from her hair, Miss Myra had come down too, beside her sister.

The text is not judgmental about corpse robbing. The sisters are dehumanized, reimaged as stones, hot to the touch, "scalding." Meanwhile, Welty's style continues in its filigree: "In the shade underneath the burned and fallen bridge she sat on a stump and chewed for a while, without dreams, the comb of a dirt dauber." Palming "her own black locust stick to drive the snakes," her jubilee cup, her precious rings, "Miss Theo's shoes tied together around her neck," and clutching her son's bones, Delilah faces a precarious future (45–46). Just as the mirror's black men are "dressed in gold," just as, melted, they become fluid, decorative, deconstructive, and subversive, so Welty's scavenging heroine represents the aptitude for bricolage that makes the neobaroque possible and reminds us that "America, a continent of symbiosis, mutations, vibrations, *mestizaje*, has always been baroque" (Carpentier 98).

As we have seen, the neobaroque is also object-obsessed: in love with panoplies of subject-canceling, space-filling things. For William Egginton, this is an epistemological event brought about by secularization. "In the search, by definition frustrated, for the *partial object*," baroque practitioners can access new pleasures because their art speaks to an era when finitude "is no longer perceived as derivative of an eternal plenitude separated from us by temporality." Instead, baroque strategists fill up "the finitude of language" by agreeing to dwell, luxuriously, "in the world as essentially lacking, for all objects are by definition only partial, and all searches by

definition frustrated" (114). As supplement, I have cited Fuentes to insist that the baroque's object obsessions attest to an economics as well as a metaphysics of scarcity. As Joseph Roach suggests, in the New World

entire populations existed as actual or potential commodities and . . . the triangular trade in human flesh, manufactured goods, and raw materials rapidly produced a superabundance unprecedented in both extent and maldistribution. The enduring effects of this superimposition still operate in the fiercely laminating adhesion of bodies and objects, in which the exchange of human flesh signifies the prolific availability of all commodities.<sup>6</sup> (124–25)

"The Burning" explores this triangular trade. Once the commodities of the plantation world have burned to the ground, once the commodification of flesh and bone is no longer legal, what happens? The maldistribution of goods remains. But the baroque plenitude of Delilah's imagination suggests an impoverished freedwoman's perverse strength in a world flooded with too many pasts. Welty suggests the neobaroque's role in the destratification of objects as one route for challenging social stratification: "Light on Delilah's head the Jubilee cup was set. She paused now and then to lick the rim. . . . Submerged to the waist, to the breast, stretching her throat like a sunflower stalk above the river's opaque skin, she kept on, her treasure stacked on the roof of her head, hands laced upon it" (46).<sup>7</sup> Why all these extra words—"like a sunflower stalk"? "opaque skin"? her head like a "roof"? Welty's signs are always exorbitant, and yet they point to Delilah's willful superabundance, to her wavering life as a black woman dressed in gold.

The characteristics attributed to the neobaroque are multifaceted and fantastic. First, the neobaroque aesthetic is grounded in a particular history, in the upheavals of conquest and counterconquest. The Old World enslaves, pillages, and profits; the New World

appropriates and revoices European rationality, making neobaroque art out of cruelty and its epistemes. Some critics argue that Carpentier's over-the-top celebrations of baroque plenitude miss an asymmetry between New and Old World cultural formations. According to César Salgado, a focus on the New World's "utopian ethnic integration," on the neobaroque as instrument of counterhegemony, ignores the fact that its powerful "mongrelization of European high styles resulted from the painful and incongruous overlapping of foreign and native morphologies in conflict" (317).<sup>8</sup> If the European baroque is obsessed with painful dualism, shattered wholes, and the growing pangs of enlightenment, the American neobaroque is obsessed with the elastic bodies that enabled these obsessions.

Second, in dramatizing conflict and counterconquest the neobaroque offers an aesthetic strategy for overwriting poverty and vacuity with an abundance of signs. Carpentier points to the baroque's lack of vanishing points, its giddy foci and oscillating edges. He rhapsodizes, "Every time I see that explosion of forms . . . that seemingly static luminescence surge from the ground to the frame that encloses" the interior of Saint Peter's in Rome, "I think of those paintings by de Chirico in which suns are stuck in cages, caged suns. To me, Bernini's St. Peter's Cathedral is just that: a caged sun, a sun that expands and explores the columns that circumscribe it, that pretend to demarcate its boundaries and literally disappear before its sumptuousness" (93). Although some critics define the highly ornamented architecture and sculpture animating Europe in the seventeenth century as decadent, for Carpentier baroque style is never overripe; its surfeit of time and space richly opposes the uniform classicism of the Parthenon, where columns carve intervals regulating the air. Carpentier prefers the baroque, with its bulging carbuncles, its "proliferating nuclei," where every vacancy fills.

Third, while Carpentier elevates baroque over classical forms, Mieke Bal elevates the contemporary baroque over Romantic aesthetics:

In the case of baroque sensibility [narrative processes] emphasize the recognition and exploration of the object exterior to the subject for the formation of subjectivity, whereas in the case of Romanticism, the subject is the condition for the possibility of the object. . . . In spite of Romanticism's profound engagement with nature, it is primarily in the baroque sensibility that we can learn to accept and respect nature's irreducible difference. In other words, the subject-object distinction . . . is itself questioned by the baroque explorations of space.

For Bal the neobaroque is not a style but "a way of thinking" that uses waves or folds instead of oppositions and thrives on multiplying the mysteries of objects instead of objectification (16). It is only Romantic in attracting a glamorous fandom, a subculture of enthusiasts who pledge their homage. Like Carpentier, professing love for Saint Peter's, Bal confesses that her own desire for the baroque's embodied excess should no longer be closeted. She adores the baroque's multibodies, mirrors, labyrinths, and entanglements, where subjects fold into objects and leave viscous remains: "The romantic code folds the subject back onto itself, deriving meaning from that enclosure; the baroque writer, perhaps stimulated by the colonial situation of cultural fracturation and transplanted models in which she found herself, is involved in exploring the grounds for attributing meaning to the self through its irremediable exteriority" (237). This is a complex way of saying that the neobaroque plays with history's detritus and refuses to subsume this detritus into the multiplying self. When we loosen the grip of personification, objects become events: "A drummer boy with his drum around his neck caught both Miss Theo's peacocks, Marco and Polo, and wrung their necks in the yard.

Nobody could look at those bird-corpses; nobody did" (Welty, "Burning" 34).

Fourth, if the neobaroque refuses to be classical or Romantic, it also refuses to be postmodern. Zamora argues that "postmodern pastiche" may have "been confused with Neobaroque parody, but . . . the difference is clear. The former juxtaposes cultural fragments without respect to their historical or cultural status, whereas the latter places cultural fragments (texts, traditions, objects, historical figures) in dynamic relation in order to reimagine histories and cultures" (295). The baroque becomes "countermodern" (294), putting histories in awkward contact, mixing times and populations.

Finally, the neobaroque's use of *mise en abyme*, its labyrinths, theatricality, and mirroring, reopens the problem of disrupted, unassimilated time. Welty takes objects that have been emptied of their pasts (that is, deterritorialized or dispossessed) and fills them with expectation. Delilah treats time without ceremony. When treasure is "stacked on the roof of her head," eras of artifice mingle with the finite everyday: "she did not know what day this was, but she knew—it would not rain, the river would not rise, until Saturday" (46).

It must be clear by now that I, too, am a fan: in love with the neobaroque's loopy recursions. But I am also serious about its use value. Its overwrought style and thematic overachievement help us recapture the aesthetics of expenditure, the outright cost of becoming minor in the Americas. The baroque's layered artifice vivifies not only Latin America's but the United States's verbal and visual arts. If Welty joins the neobaroque's folds to dress Delilah's black men in gold, the American painter Kehinde Wiley gilds entire neighborhoods. You can see Wiley's *Go* on the cover of the March 2007 issue of *PMLA*. Here Nike-clad men gambol in a Tiepolo sky, intertwining eighteenth- and twenty-first-century artifice. In *Three Graces* Wiley turns the decorative curlicues of the Old World baroque

into a New World sports melancholia. Men fresh from the streets of Columbus or Harlem replace Raphael's apple-cheeked Graces and hang out in a neobaroque shower of gold (figs. 1 and 2). Wiley memorializes the Negro baseball leagues in his subjects' brightly colored logos: "I started looking at sports gear differently. Ultimately [the frame] provides a stage; it isolates an object, and surrounds it with a sense of importance that I think can really change the way we see the mundane or the pedestrian or the overlooked" (qtd. in Combs; interpolation in orig.). In Wiley's painting the Graces' clasped fruits oscillate between apples and baseballs; at best, they're partial objects. Even as the Graces' sad faces register the fading history of the Negro baseball leagues (as acts of counterconquest or countercreation in the face of white prejudice), these young men also participate in an exuberance of signage and the funk opulence of sports couture, and

Wiley's painting fluctuates between a culture of loss and a map of counterabundance.

In Wiley's *Charles I and Henrietta Maria* two unsmiling men in T-shirts and jeans exchange a laurel wreath; enshrined in a floral bower, they assume the postures of royalty, while behind them the slim shadow of trees echoes the tree line of a Van Dyck painting (figs. 3 and 4). How can these times coexist? "Gallery director Tim Peterson says Wiley's work gives these young men a sense of power and importance, while at the same time playing with ideas of sexuality and identity" (Combs).

We're close to Carpentier's baroque as utopia, but the juxtaposition of Wiley's guys off the street and great inherited wealth should give us pause. Black men encounter discrimination on the job market, compose the largest proportion of the male prison population, and have the poorest health care of any Americans. Wiley told journalists that



FIG. 1

Kehinde Wiley, *Three Graces*, 2005. Oil and enamel on canvas, 182.9 × 243.8 cm. By permission of the Kehinde Wiley Studio.



FIG. 2

Raphael, *The Three Graces*, 1504–05. Oil on panel, 17 × 17 cm. © Musée Conde, Chantilly, France / Giraudon / The Bridgeman Art Library.

all but one of his Columbus subjects had disappeared from the city's streets a year after he painted them (Collins). The pendulum that swings from fullness to emptiness, from synchronous to nonsynchronous time, is also a property of the neobaroque and gives these images their power and poignancy. In her chapter "The New World Baroque and the Dynamics of Displacement," Zamora invokes "the spatial drama between abundance and absence" as well as Lezama Lima's argument that "the Baroque offers 'una nueva integración surfriendo de la imago de la ausencia' ('a new integration emerging from the *imago* of

absence'). . . . For Lezama Lima, the European Baroque is dead but its forms were reborn in America, where they have reclaimed the 'amplitude of its lands' and its 'ancestral world'" (119–20). Welty and Wiley layer ancestral haunting with an object-laden amplitude that recaptures and chides the golden breast of the New World.

For Gilles Deleuze the "swarming holes" of the baroque find their double in "folds in the soul, where inflection becomes inclusion (just as Mallarmé writes that folding becomes a layering): we're no longer seeing, we're reading" (31). This baroque layering is amplified

## FIG. 3

Kehinde Wiley,  
*Charles I and  
 Henrietta Maria*,  
 2006. Oil on canvas,  
 213.4 × 243.8 cm.  
 By permission of  
 the Kehinde Wiley  
 Studio.



in the variety of essays in this issue of *PMLA*. For some subscribers, each *PMLA* gets shelved or shoved aside: we are too busy to read everything. For others new issues offer the chance to scan for topics close to our hearts—academic perks no longer come to those who know the classics from *Beowulf* to Virginia Woolf; they trail after hyperspecialization. But a third approach is to recognize each issue as strategically, helplessly neobaroque. Encompassing multiple focal points, the current issue moves from Timothy Aubry's essay about Afghanistan on the Internet to Paul Cefalu's essay on obsessive-compulsive disorder in popular culture. Enrique García Santo-Tomás describes the meaning of eyeglasses in early

modern Spain, Elaine Yee Lin Ho depicts the early cosmopolitanism of Edmund Blunden's teaching sojourn in Hong Kong, and Aaron Kunin explores Shakespeare's infertility fantasies. Meanwhile, Ayon Roy observes Hegel, Schlegel, Kierkegaard, and de Man in hot debate, while Ralph Bauer expands the field of hemispheric studies, Julie A. Buckler clarifies the new aims of post-Soviet Russian studies, and Steven E. Jones finds a second life navigating the spaces between video games and social texts. In the neobaroque diverse times and spaces hurry apart and collide. Partial contexts quarrel; dialectics fall apart. We need to appropriate and stitch together as many worldviews as possible. Increasingly



FIG. 4

Anthony Van Dyck, *King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria*, 1632. Oil on canvas, 113.5 × 163 cm. Archiepiscopal Palace, Kroměříž, Czech Republic.

pressed together and nonsynchronous, our ideas are dressed no longer in gold but in globalization and credit cards. The current credit crisis becomes a neobaroque labyrinth where the world's politicians and financiers swoon in their own *mise en abyme*: the impossible arcana of credit default swaps.

Patricia Yaeger

## NOTES

1. Qtd. in Kadir (89–90). Egginton cites this passage and links it to the invention of new *criollo* aesthetics celebrated by Lezama Lima and Carpentier (110–11). Zamora also cites this passage, to oppose neobaroque form (where disrupted sight becomes insight, “an explosion in a cathedral”) and a postmodern aesthetic that dabbles in the weak politics of refused metanarratives (295). Supplementing these readings, I want to foreground Fuentes's economic message.

2. Although the story indicates that Phinny is Delilah's son, at points his status seems ambiguous. Miss Myra claims he is her son and registers surprise when her sister suggests that since Phinny is black, consanguinity would be impossible. Unlike Miss Myra and Miss Theo, Delilah worries about his fate instead of his color: “‘Could he be got out,’ called Delilah in a high voice. ‘He strong,

he.’ ‘Who?’ ‘Could be Phinny's out loose. Don't cry’” (39). The sisters remain in a gothic plot of racial torment, but Delilah claims his kinship and carries his bones.

3. Bleikasten aptly describes the mirror as an image of the white ladies' narcissism. While he acknowledges that the mirror is, momentarily, Delilah's *speculum mundi*, I want to amplify this idea. While for Bleikasten the narrative only comes gradually to “concentrate on Delilah,” I have argued that Welty uses Delilah as focalizer throughout “The Burning.” When he contrasts this story to “the great baroque frescoes of Southern fiction” or calls it “a pocket tragedy, a tempest in a rococo china cup,” I disagree; Welty refuses to miniaturize Delilah's trauma. But I concur with Bleikasten's assessment that “‘The Burning’ is a masterpiece—not a *minor* masterpiece.”

4. As Galeano comments, “Caribbean island populations finally stopped paying tribute because they had disappeared . . . totally exterminated in the gold mines, in the deadly task of sifting auriferous sands with their bodies half submerged in water, or in breaking up the ground beyond the point of exhaustion, doubled up over the heavy cultivating tools brought from Spain” (15). He adds that the “rape of [Atahualpa's] accumulated treasure was followed by the systematic exploitation of the forced labor of Indians and abducted Africans in the mines” (29).

5. See my “Ghosts” for an analysis of Braithwaite's relevance to African American literature.

6. See my “Circum-Atlantic Superabundance” for an elaboration of Roach's analysis.

7. Welty's careful balancing of Miss Myra's combs with the dirt dauber's and of the hyperbolic “roof” of the gold mirror with the treasure-laden “roof” of Delilah's head: these parallels contrast white ownership and African

American cadences of possession/dispossession. This is an unusual preoccupation for a white woman writing before the civil rights movement, but see the discussion of Welty's WPA photographs of African American women in Westling and in Pollack and Marrs.

8. For an excellent discussion of neobaroque versions of counterhegemony, see Kaup 113–14.

## WORKS CITED

- A.I.: Artificial Intelligence*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Warner Brothers, 2001. Film.
- Bal, Mieke. *Quoting Caravaggio: Contemporary Art, Preposterous History*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999. Print.
- Bleikasten, André. "Homespun Horrors: 'The Burning.'" *Colloque Eudora Welty: The Poetics of the Body*. Fondation William Faulkner, 2002. Web. 7 Nov. 2008.
- Bloch, Ernst. "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics." Trans. Mark Ritter. *New German Critique* 11 (1977): 22–38. Print.
- Brathwaite, Edward Kamau. *The History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry*. London: New Beacon, 1984. Print.
- Carpentier, Alejo. "The Baroque and the Marvelous Real." *Magical Realism: Theory, History, Community*. Trans. Tanya Huntington and Lois Parkinson Zamora. Durham: Duke UP, 1995. 89–108. Print.
- Chaucer, Geoffrey. *Troilus and Criseyde*. *The Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*. Ed. F. N. Robinson. Boston: Houghton, 1961. 385–479. Print.
- Collins, Lauren. "Lost and Found." *The New Yorker*. CondéNet, 1 Sept. 2008. Web. 21 Nov. 2008.
- Combs, Marianne. "Repainting Art History." *Minnesota Public Radio*. Minnesota Public Radio, 11 Mar. 2005. Web. 10 Nov. 2008.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*. Trans. Tom Conley. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993. Print.
- Egginton, William. "The Corporeal Image and the New World Baroque." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 106.1 (2007): 107–27. Print.
- Galeano, Eduardo. *Open Veins of Latin America: Five Centuries of the Pillage of a Continent*. New York: Monthly Rev., 1997. Print.
- Kadir, Djelal. *Questing Fictions: Latin America's Family Romance*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986. Print.
- Kaup, Monika. "Becoming-Baroque: Folding European Forms into the New World Baroque with Alejo Carpentier." *CR: The New Centennial Review* 5.2 (2005): 107–49. Print.
- Pollack, Harriet, and Suzanne Marrs. "Seeing Welty's Political Vision in Her Photographs." *Eudora Welty and Politics*. Ed. Pollack and Marrs. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 2001. 223–51. Print.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. New York: Columbia UP, 1996. Print.
- Salgado, César Augusto. "Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory." *Journal of American Folklore* 112.445 (1999): 316–31. Print.
- Welty, Eudora. "The Burning." *The Bride of the Innisfallen and Other Stories*. New York: Harcourt, 1955. 28–46. Print.
- . "An Interview with Eudora Welty." By Jan Nordby Gretlund. *Conversations with Eudora Welty*. Ed. Peggy Whitman Prenshaw. New York: Washington Square, 1985. 211–29. Print.
- Westling, Louise. "The Loving Observer of One Time, One Place." *Mississippi Quarterly* 39.4 (1986): 587–604. Print.
- Yaeger, Patricia. "Circum-Atlantic Superabundance: Milk as World-Making in Alice Randall and Kara Walker." *Global Contexts, Local Literature: The New Southern Studies*. Spec. issue of *American Literature* 78.4 (2006): 769–98. Print.
- . "Ghosts and Shattered Bodies; or, What Does It Mean to Still Be Haunted by Southern Literature?" *South Central Review* 22.1 (2005): 87–109. Print.
- Zamora, Lois Parkinson. *The Inordinate Eye: New World Baroque and Latin American Fiction*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2006. Print.