



Heritage and Deracination in Walker's "Everyday Use"

by David Cowart

"Everyday Use," a story included in Alice Walker's 1973 collection *In Love and Trouble*, addresses itself to the dilemma of African Americans who, in striving to escape prejudice and poverty, risk a terrible deracination, a sundering from all that has sustained and defined them. The story concerns a young woman who, in the course of a visit to the rural home she thinks she has outgrown, attempts unsuccessfully to divert some fine old quilts, earmarked for the dowry of a sister, into her own hands. This character has changed her given name, "Dee Johnson," to the superficially more impressive "Wangero Leewanika Kemanjo"—and thereby created difficulties for the narrator (her mother), who recognizes the inappropriateness of the old name but cannot quite commit herself to the new. She tries to have it both ways, referring to her daughter now by one name, now by the other, now by parenthetically hybridized combinations of both. The critic, sharing Mrs. Johnson's confusion, may learn from her example to avoid awkwardness by calling the character more or less exclusively by one name. I have opted here for "Wangero," without, I hope, missing the real significance of the confusion. Indeed, in this confusion, one begins to see how the fashionable politics espoused by the central character of Walker's story becomes the foil to an authorial vision of the African American community, past and present, and its struggle for liberation.

Walker contrives to make the situation of Wangero, the visitor, analogous to the cultural position of the minority writer who, disinclined to express the fate of the oppressed in the language and literary structures of the oppressor, seeks a more authentic idiom and theme. Such a writer, Walker says, must not become a literary Wangero. Only by remaining in touch with a proximate

history and an immediate cultural reality can one lay a claim to the quilts—or hope to produce the authentic art they represent. Self-chastened, Walker presents her own art—the piecing of linguistic and literary intertexts—as quilt-making with words, an art as imbued with the African American past as the literal quilt-making of the grandmother for whom Wangero was originally named.

The quilts that Wangero covets link her generation to prior generations, and thus they represent the larger African American past. The quilts contain scraps of dresses worn by the grandmother and even the great-grandmother, as well as a piece of the uniform worn by the great-grandfather who served in the Union Army in the War Between the States. The visitor rightly recognizes the quilts as part of a fragile heritage, but she fails to see the extent to which she herself has traduced that heritage. Chief among the little gestures that collectively add up to a profound betrayal is the changing of her name. Mrs. Johnson thinks she could trace the name Dee in their family “back beyond the Civil War” (54), but Wangero persists in seeing the name as little more than the galling reminder that African Americans have been denied authentic names. “I couldn’t bear it any longer, being named after the people who oppress me” (53). She now styles and dresses herself according to the dictates of a faddish Africanism and thereby demonstrates a cultural Catch-22: an American who attempts to become an African succeeds only in becoming a phony. In her name, her clothes, her hair, her sunglasses, her patronizing speech, and her black Muslim companion, Wangero proclaims a deplorable degree of alienation from her rural origins and family. The story’s irony is not subtle: the visitor who reproaches others for an ignorance of their own heritage (a word that probably does not figure in the lexicon of either her mother or her sister) is herself almost completely disconnected from a nurturing tradition.

Wangero has realized the dream of the oppressed: she has escaped the ghetto. Why, then, is she accorded so little maternal or authorial respect? The reason lies in her progressive repudiation of the very heritage she claims to revere. I say “progressive” because Walker makes clear that Wangero’s flirtation with Africa is only the latest in a series of attempts to achieve racial and cultural autonomy, attempts that prove misguided insofar as they promote an erosion of all that is most real—and valuable—in African American experience. Wangero’s mental traveling, moreover, replicates that of an entire generation. Her choices follow the trends in African American cultural definition from the simple integrationist imperative that followed *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to the collective outrage of the “long hot summer” of 1967 and the rise of an Islamic alternative to the Christianity that black America had hitherto embraced. Proceeding *pari passu* with this

evolution was the rediscovery of an African past,¹ a past more remote—and putatively more authentic—than that of the preceding 200 years. The epoch-making decade of the 1960s was bracketed by two sensational defections to Africa. In 1961 the 93-year-old W. E. B. Du Bois, having been denied a passport and investigated by the House Un-American Activities Committee, moved to Ghana and renounced his American citizenship. In 1968 Eldridge Cleaver—less distinguished and less principled than Du Bois but one of the culture heroes of his day—made a similar gesture when he left the United States on an odyssey that would eventually take him, too, to a new home on the African continent. Midway between these two dates, in 1964, Walker herself traveled to Africa, and one imagines her character Wangero among the enthusiastic readers of the enormously popular *Roots* (1976), in which Alex Haley memorably describes the researches that eventually led him to the African village from which his ancestor, Kunta Kinte, had been abducted by slavers.

In other words, the Africa-smitten Wangero one meets in the opening pages of the story is a precipitate of the cultural struggles of a generation—struggles adumbrated in the stages of this character's education. She had left home to attend school in Augusta, where apparently she immersed herself in the liberating culture she would first urge on her bewildered mother and sister, then denounce as oppressive. Now, with her black Muslim boyfriend or husband in tow (her mother hears his name as "Hakim-a-barber"), she has progressed to an idea of nationality radically at odds with all that has hitherto defined the racial identity of African Americans.

Though Walker depicts "Hakim-a-barber" as something of a fool, a person who has embraced a culture as alien as anything imposed on black people by white America, her quarrel is not with Islam, for she hints (through the perceptions of Wangero's mother) that a nearby Muslim commune is an admirable, even heroic, institution. But the neighboring Muslims have immersed themselves in agrarian practicality. They are unlikely to view relics

¹A rediscovery that is itself evidence of a limited cultural horizon: Pan-Africanism had in fact been around since the turn of the century. Readers who know Walker's novels will recognize in this thematic element one of the foundational gestures of a career-long effort to construct or discover an idea of Africa that would not violate the geographical and historical reality. It is a struggle shared by all who seek to recover a suppressed history. The poet Derek Walcott speaks for many when he asks, "How can I turn from Africa and live?" Thus Walker spins a romantic fantasy about the Olinka in *The Color Purple*, imagines an Afro-feminist mythology of Africa in *The Temple of My Familiar*, and strives to achieve utter, unsparing candor regarding Africa's most abhorrent cultural practice—female circumcision—in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*. Africa is a complex place in the psyche of Alice Walker. If in this essay I suggest that it is a less complex place in the psyche of Wangero, I would not like to be seen as arguing that her creator is insensitive to the hunger to know Africa.

of the rural life as collectors' items. Their sense of purpose, their identity, seems to contain no element of pose. Wangero and her companion, on the other hand, are all pose.

Wangero despises her sister, her mother, and the church that helped to educate her. Her quest is ultimately selfish, and Walker focuses the reader's growing dislike for the heroine in her indifference to Maggie, the pathetic sister she seems prepared to ignore in a kind of moral triage. Maggie represents the multitude of black women who must suffer while the occasional lucky "sister" escapes the ghetto. Scarred, graceless, "not bright" (50), and uneducated, Maggie is a living reproach to a survivor like her sister. Maggie is the aggregate underclass that has been left behind as a handful of Wangeros achieve their independence—an underclass scarred in the collective disasters Walker symbolizes neatly in the burning of the original Johnson home. Wangero had welcomed that conflagration. Her mother remembers the "look of concentration on her face as she watched the last dingy gray board of the house fall in toward the red-hot brick chimney. Why don't you do a dance around the ashes? I'd wanted to ask her. She had hated the house that much" (49–50). Wangero did not set the fire, but she delighted in its obliteration of the house that represented everything she sought to escape. When, predictably, the house reappears as before, she may have understood that fire alone cannot abolish a ghetto. This burned house, however, represents more than a failed attempt to eradicate poverty. It subsumes a whole African American history of violence, from slavery (one thinks of Maggie's scars multiplied among the escaped or emancipated slaves in Morrison's *Beloved*) through the ghetto-torching riots of 1964, 1965, 1967, and 1968 ("Burn, Baby, Burn!") to the pervasive inner-city violence of subsequent decades. The fire, that is, is the African American past, a conflagration from which assorted survivors stumble forward, covered like Maggie with scars of the body or like Wangero with scars of the soul.

Assimilation, torching the ghetto, Islam, the Africanist vision—Walker treats these alternatives with respect, even as she satirizes her character's uncritical embracing of one after another of them. The author knows that each represents an attempt to restore a sense of identity terribly impaired by the wrongs visited on black people in the new world. Wangero, however, fails properly to appreciate the black community's transformation of these wrongs into moral capital. She does not see the integrity of African American cultural institutions that evolved as the creative and powerful response to the general oppression. In simpler terms, she is ashamed of a mother and a sister who, notwithstanding their humble circumstances, exemplify character bred in adversity.

"It all comes back to houses," Walker remarks in her essay on Flannery O'Connor (*In Search* 58). Freud associates houses with women, and this story of three women is also the story of three houses, one that burned, one

that shelters two of the fire's survivors, and one, never directly described, that is to be the repository of various articles of this family's past, its heritage. This last house, owned by and symbolic of Wangero, embodies also the cultural problem Walker seeks to address in her story. How, she asks, can one escape the margins without a catastrophic deracination? Is the freedom Wangero achieves somehow at odds with proper valuation of the immediate cultural matrix out of which she comes? Can she, like Dickens's Pip, embrace a grand heritage only by betraying the simpler heritage necessary to emotional and psychological wholeness?

Wangero claims to value heritage, and Walker is surely sympathetic to someone who seems to recognize, however clumsily, the need to preserve the often fragile artifacts of the African American past. But Walker exposes Wangero's preservationism as hopelessly selfish and misguided. Though the author elsewhere laments the paucity of photographs in the African American historical record (*Living by the Word* 63), she evinces little patience with Wangero's desire to photograph mother and cow in front of the house. Wangero's desire is to have a record of how far she has come. No doubt she will view as "quaint" these images of a rural past. She wants the photographs—and presently the churn lid, the dasher, and the quilts—for purposes of display, reminders that she no longer has to live in such a house, care for such a cow, have daily intercourse with such a mother and sister. She "makes the mistake," says Donna Haisty Winchell, "of believing that one's heritage is something that one puts on display if and when such a display is fashionable" (81). Wangero seems to think the African American past can be rescued only by being commodified. She wants to make the lid of the butter churn into a centerpiece for her table. She wants to hang quilts on the wall. She wants, in short, to do what white people do with the cunning and quaint implements and products of the past. Wangero fails to see the mote in her own eye when she reproaches her mother and her sister for a failure to value their heritage—she, who wants only to preserve that heritage as the negative index to her own sophistication.

One wonders if Wangero's house, unlike the houses of her childhood, will have a lawn. Doubtless she has never paused to think about the humble yard of her mother's house as anything more than another shabby badge of poverty. But like the more obviously significant quilts, this yard—a description of which opens the story—is another symbol of the cultural something produced out of nothing by people lacking everything:

A yard like this is more comfortable than most people know. It is not just a yard. It is like an extended living room. When the hard clay is swept clean as a floor and the fine sand around the edges lined with tiny, irregular grooves, anyone can come and sit and look up into the elm tree and wait for the breezes that never come inside the house. (47)

A paragon of meaningful simplicity, this yard. The grooved borders even put one in mind of the artfully raked sand in a Japanese *hira-niwa* garden (indeed, the breezes sound like a plural visitation of *kamikaze*, the “divine wind”). In Japan, such a garden affords emotional balm and spiritual serenity to those who tend or contemplate it, and Walker implies similar restorative properties in the uncluttered plainness of the narrator’s yard. Mrs. Johnson mentions neither grass, nor shrubs, nor (surprisingly for Walker) flowers. In its stark vacuity the yard evokes the minimalist lives of poor people; yet the author describes that emptiness in terms suggestive of spiritual wealth.²

If conversely Wangero is described in language evocative of spiritual poverty or confusion, the reader does not completely despise her, for even as it satirizes her pretensions, “Everyday Use” hints at an affinity between its author and its central character.³ “Walker’s *writing*,” says Marianne Hirsch, “constitutes a form of distance” (207) from the real-life mother and home on which she bases the story. The story can be read, in fact, as a cautionary tale the author tells herself: a parable, so to speak, about the perils of writing one’s impoverished past from the vantage of one’s privileged present. The deracination of Wangero, that is, can represent the fate of anyone who, like the author, goes from sharecropper’s daughter to literary sophisticate. I refer here to an autobiographical dimension that proves interestingly unstable, for Walker’s self-depiction as Wangero actually displaces an intended self-depiction as Maggie. That Walker would represent herself in the backward, disfigured Maggie strains credulity only if one forgets that the author was herself a disfigured child, an eye having been shot out with a BB gun. In a 1973 interview, moreover, Walker makes clear the autobiographical genesis of a poem (“For My Sister Molly Who in the Fifties” in *Revolutionary Petunias*) in which an ignorant and unglamorous girl discovers that her “brilliant” older sister, home for a visit, is ashamed of their uncouth family (*In Search* 269–70). “Everyday Use” is the prose version of that poem.

But how many of Walker’s post-*Color Purple* readers recognize its gifted author in the Maggie of the earlier story? Indeed, as Walker’s literary reputation grows, her readers may with increasing frequency identify the apparently successful and prosperous sister of “Everyday Use” as some kind of distorted reflection of the author, an exercise in autobiographical self-

² For the ingenious suggestion that the yard, in its tended state, becomes “ritual ground . . . prepared for the arrival of a goddess” (311), see the article on this story by Houston Baker and Charlotte Pierce-Baker.

³ Alice Hall Petry documents “autobiographical dimensions” (19) in a number of Walker stories, notably those in *You Can’t Keep a Good Woman Down* (1981). Petry sees only a kind of narcissism in Walker’s autobiographical characters. I argue here that “Everyday Use” is exceptional in the sophistication with which it exploits the self-regarding impulse.

criticism of the type that, on a larger scale, generates a Stephen Dedalus, a Paul Morel, or a Hugh Selwyn Mauberley. (Toni Morrison, I have always thought, projects a male version of herself in Milkman Dead, the *Song of Solomon* character with whom she shares a birthday—and Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin all critique themselves in their protagonists.) Projections of this type constitute the examined life of the artist, at once an exorcism of unworthy versions of the self and a rhetorically effective shielding of the vulnerable ego, whose pretensions might otherwise be dismissed by captious readers.

Walker, then, actually doubles the self-mocking portrait of the artist, projecting herself as both the benighted Maggie and the sophisticated but shallow Wangero. She does so, I think, because she recognizes and wants to respond to the distorting pressures brought to bear on African American identity and the discourse that, over time, reflects or shapes it. In a sense, Walker's life as a writer has been devoted to preserving a proximate past in the form of its language (or, as will be seen, languages). In her essay "Coming in from the Cold," she discusses her desire to preserve the language of "the old people," her forebears—even when cultural displacements cause it to ring false. Thus she points out that words like "mammy" and "pickaninny" (long since appropriated in the construction of racial stereotypes) actually figured in the speech of earlier African Americans.⁴ These words, and the language of which they are part, constitute an irreplaceable record of otherwise unrecorded lives, generations denied the "visual documentation of painting and . . . photography" (*Living by the Word* 63). By transmitting the words of the ancestors

in the context that is or was natural to them, we do not perpetuate . . . stereotypes, but, rather expose them. And, more important, we help the ancestors in ourselves and others continue to exist. If we kill off the *sound* of our ancestors, the major portion of us, all that is past, that is history, that is human being is lost, and we become historically and spiritually thin, a mere shadow of who we were, on the earth. (*Living by the Word* 62)

In short, to preserve the sound, the artist must preserve the words. To preserve the words, the artist must preserve the meanings and the sense of linguistic difference. Thus the great challenge of Walker's career (met most memorably in *The Color Purple*) has been to write a language at once true to "the old people" and viable in the marketplace of mainstream American ideas. Thus, too, like the poets of every literary renaissance, Walker engages in a

⁴She also claims that these words are of African origin, but in fact "pickaninny" derives from the vocabulary of Portuguese slavers, whose wares included children, *pequeninos*.

necessary program of linguistic reclamation. Like Wordsworth, she aspires to recover “the language actually spoken by men”—and women. Like the Frost of “The Pasture,” she clears the leaves of linguistic debasement and co-optation away from the Pierian source of linguistic purity and good art. Like the Toomer or Hurston she admires, she insists on recapturing the authentic African American voice—whether in dialect, as they do, or in standard English, as in “Everyday Use” and the other stories of *In Love and Trouble*.

But things are never this simple. When Wangero greets her mother in Lugandan (“Wa-su-zo-Te-an-o!”—52),⁵ she affirms her repudiation of English, the language of slavery. By implication, she indicts the practice of authors—Joyce, for example, or Walker herself—who decline to abandon that language at the bidding of political visionaries. Thus Walker remains enmeshed in problems of cultural access and linguistic authenticity, for writers at the American margins have long struggled with a paradox basic to their artistic identities: their language and their craft are inextricably intertwined with the hegemonic Anglo-Saxon culture that has systematically denied them their own voice, their own autonomy, their own identity. Black writers, their very tongues colonized, find themselves torn between the language they grew up speaking and some more authentic language or cultural orientation. How, demand artists like the American James Baldwin or the Caribbean George Lamming, can they ever achieve a voice of their own, a cultural authenticity, when they remain in linguistic bondage? Such writers fashion work that exists in a precarious and almost parasitic relation to a dominant and more or less unfriendly cultural and linguistic mainstream. They create what has been called a “minor literature.”

Deleuze and Guattari, who refer briefly to “what blacks in America today are able to do with the English language,” say that in “minor literatures . . . everything . . . is political” and that “everything takes on a collective value” (17). They argue, too, that the minor writer—notably Kafka—often effects revolutionary advances in literary sensibility. I remain doubtful that such an argument is really needed to explain the ability of marginal writers to produce substantial work across a broad spectrum. I would argue that in the hands of a sufficiently resourceful literary practitioner language can always be made to subvert hegemonic structures. Walker casts her lot with writers who remain confident of the boundlessness of literary affect achievable in English—writers like the Nobel laureates Derek Walcott and Toni Morrison, who seem effortlessly to transcend the kind of anxieties Deleuze and Guattari would wish on them. These writers believe that culture is naturally enough eclectic, and that a language as rich as English, not to mention the manifold cultures that speak or are spoken by it, provides plenty of latitude for new voices,

⁵I am indebted to my colleague, Carol Myers Scotton, for identifying the language.

however subversive. They seem to view the possibilities of literary art as affording sufficient latitude to circumvent linguistic colonization. They prefer to see the resources of the English language and its canonical literature, as well as the larger cultural resources of the West, as theirs for the appropriating. Thus in *Beloved*, as Ellen Pifer has argued, Morrison rewrites *Huckleberry Finn* (511), and thus in *Omeros* Walcott reimagines several millenia of colonial history and culture to shape a vision that remains wholly of its Caribbean time and place. Thus, too, Walker loses nothing when she opts not to write in dialect—or Lugandan.

Walker refuses, then, to write "protest literature," in which "the superficial becomes . . . the deepest reality" (*In Search* 262). She credits Tolstoy with showing her "the importance of diving through politics and social forecasts to dig into the essential spirit of individual persons" (*In Search* 257). In "Everyday Use" Walker explores with great subtlety the demands—often conflicting—of ideology and art. She contemplates the culturally distorting pressures brought to bear on another kind of language, another vehicle whereby African American experience is embodied and transmitted. This other language—the quilts—exhibits a special integrity resembling that of the language in which the author writes her story. As this story engages the theme of heritage, it resolves the dilemma inherent in ideologically self-conscious art (how simultaneously to be politically engaged and free of a limiting topicality) by inviting a connection between writing and quilt-making, a connection between types of textuality that prove complementary.

"In contemporary writing," Elaine Showalter observes, "the quilt stands for a vanished past experience to which we have a troubled and ambivalent cultural relationship" (228). Certainly the quilts over which Wangero and her mother quarrel represent a heritage vastly more personal and immediate than the intellectual and deracinated daughter can see; indeed, they represent a heritage she has already discarded, for she no longer shares a name with those whose lives, in scraps of cast-off clothing, the quilts transmute. Moreover, Wangero herself has not learned to quilt—the art will die if women like Maggie do not keep it up. Yet as Barbara Christian observes, a "heritage . . . must continually be renewed rather than fixed in the past" (87). Thus for Maggie and her mother the idea of heritage is perpetually subordinate to the fact of a living tradition, a tradition in which one generation remains in touch with its predecessors by means of homely skills—quilt-making and butter-churning, among others—that get passed on. The quilts remain appropriate for "everyday use" so long as the art of their manufacture remains alive. They can be quite utilitarian, and, indeed, they are supposed to be a practical dowry for Maggie.

Of course the quilts, like this story, are beautiful and merit preservation. Walker seems to intimate, however, even in her own literary art, a belief in the idea of a living, intertextual tradition, a passing on of values as well as

skills that ought only occasionally to issue in canonization or any of the other processes whereby something intended for “everyday use” ends up framed, on a wall, on a shelf, in a library or museum. Indeed, as Faith Pullin notes with regard to the quilts, “the mother is . . . the true African here, since the concept of art for art’s sake is foreign to Africa—all objects are for use. Dee has . . . taken over a very Western attitude towards art and its material value” (185). Walker, by the same token, seems to conceive of her own art as part of a dynamic process in which utility (domestic, political) meets and bonds with an aesthetic ideal. Her story/quilt is intended as much for immediate consumption—that is, reading—by the brothers and sisters of these sisters as for sacralization on some library shelf or college syllabus.

Thus Walker, though she mocks Wangero’s idea of heritage, nevertheless aspires to project herself as sensitive artist of the African American experience, and she does so by inviting recognition of a further parallel between the contested quilts and her own fictive art. Quilts are the “texts” (the word means *weave*) of American rural life. Moreover, they are palpably “inter-textual,” inasmuch as they contain literal scraps of past lives. Engaged in her own version of quilt-making, Walker weaves in stories like this one a simple yet richly heteroglossic text on patterns set by a literary tradition extending into communities black and white, American and international. The interested reader may detect in Walker’s work the intertextual presence of a number of writers she names as influences in the 1973 interview mentioned previously: Tolstoy, Turgenev, Gorky, Gogol, Camara Laye, García Márquez, Flannery O’Connor, Elechi Ahmadi, Bessie Head, Jean Toomer, and especially Zora Neale Hurston (*In Search* 257–60). Like any other writer, any other user of language, Walker “pieces” her literary quilts out of all that she has previously read or heard. Perhaps it is with Maggie after all that the author exhibits the most comprehensive affinity.

African American writing, according to Henry Louis Gates, enjoys its own distinctive brand of intertextuality, and I should like to conclude this discussion by glancing at a couple of the ways in which “Everyday Use” exemplifies the theory developed by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey*. Borrowing a term from the vernacular, Gates argues that texts by African American writers “Signify” on prior texts: they play with their predecessors in a perpetual and parodic evolution of meanings congenial to a people whose latitude for direct expression has been historically hedged about by innumerable sanctions. Gates explains Signifyin(g) with reference to Bakhtin’s idea of a “double-voiced” discourse, in which one hears simultaneously the present text and the text being augmented or ironically revised. Not that Signifyin(g) need always be at the expense of its intertext: in one of the analytic set pieces of his book, as it happens, Gates reads Walker’s *The Color Purple* as what he calls “unmotivated” (that is, non-disparaging) Signifying on texts by Rebecca Cox Jackson and Zora Neale Hurston.

In "Everyday Use" one encounters Signifyin(g) in both its street sense and its literary sense. "To rename is to revise," says Gates, "and to revise is to Signify" (xxiii). Thus Wangero thinks she is Signifyin(g) on white culture when she revises her name, but inadvertently she plays false with her own familial culture, as her mother's remarks about the history of the name Dee allow the reader to see. Indeed, if the mother were not so thoroughly innocent, one would suspect her of Signifying on her daughter's misguided aspirations. The master manipulator of the intertexts is of course Walker herself as she Signifies on Africanist pretension, calling into question the terms with which a number of her contemporaries are repudiating the language and culture of what Wangero calls "the oppressor."

Though Gates more or less exclusively considers how African Americans Signify on the discourse of other African Americans, his theory also lends itself to sorting out relations between the shapers of a "minor literature" and the mainstream or majority writers encountered on the road to a problematic literary autonomy. Gates himself dismisses as "reductive" (59) the idea that the Signifying Monkey's adversarial relationship with that ubiquitous authority figure, the powerful but unsubtle Lion, can be understood as symbolically representative of power relations between black and white. However, I would argue that insofar as those relations are literary, they prove interesting and complex. The critic interested in them ought only to keep in mind Gates's assertion that when "black writers . . . revise texts in the Western tradition, they . . . do so 'authentically,' with a black difference, a compelling sense of difference based on the black vernacular" (xxii). Surely, then, one can legitimately consider the possibility that Walker plays the Signifying Monkey to a white literary Lion more or less literally in her own Georgia back yard. To come to cases: what is the relationship between Walker's story and the respected and influential body of short fiction about the rural South written by Flannery O'Connor?

As noted previously, Walker considers O'Connor an influence, and Margaret D. Bauer, who has remarked some of the parallels in the work of these two artists, tends to see their relationship as healthily non-agonistic (149–50).⁶ But anyone who dips into the essay on O'Connor that appears in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* will be struck by the ambivalence of the younger author's feelings about the elder. "I have loved her work for many years" (42), declares Walker, but she goes on to gauge feelings of "fury" (57) and "bitterness" (58) when she visits O'Connor's house outside Milledgeville, Georgia. Thus one should not be surprised to discover something other

⁶Bauer sees some especially intriguing similarities between O'Connor's *Wise Blood* and Walker's "Entertaining God" (another story from *In Love and Trouble*). She also notes some similarities of "plot line and character type" (150) between "Everyday Use" and O'Connor's short fiction.

than simple homage in "Everyday Use," the little comedy of superficial sophistication and rural manners in which Walker replicates and plays with the many such fictions of O'Connor.

O'Connor contrasts intellectual pretension with certain transcendent realities: Original Sin, Grace, prospects for redemption. Walker, meanwhile, assesses ideas of cultural identity within a community only a few minutes' drive from the home in which O'Connor spent her last years. O'Connor relentlessly exposes liberal pieties—notably regarding race—as humanistic idols that obscure the spiritual realities central to her vision. Writing at the height of Civil Rights agitation, she delights in characters like Asbury in "The Enduring Chill" or Julian in "Everything that Rises Must Converge"—characters who have embraced the new ideas about race only to be exposed for their concurrent spiritual folly. I have been arguing all along that Walker, too, satirizes the heady rhetoric of late 60s black consciousness, deconstructing its pieties (especially the rediscovery of Africa) and asserting neglected values. At the same time, however, she revises—Signifies on—the O'Connor diagenesis, which allows so little real value to black aspiration. Thus Walker parodies the iconoclastic tricks that O'Connor uses over and over again. As Wangero meets in Maggie the self she wants to deny, Walker Signifies on O'Connor's fondness for characters that psychologically double each other. Walker Signifies, too, on the O'Connor moment of divine insight, for Mrs. Johnson's decision to reaffirm the gift of the quilts to Maggie comes as heaven-sent enlightenment. Mrs. Johnson, however, enjoys a positive moment of revelation—unlike Mrs. May in "Greenleaf," Mrs. Turpin in "Revelation," or the Grandmother in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." When, finally, Walker represents Wangero's intellectual posturing as shallow beside the simple integrity of her mother and sister, she plays with the standard O'Connor plot of the alienated and superficially intellectual young person (Hulga, in "Good Country People," is the definitive example) who fails conspicuously to justify the contempt in which she or he holds a crass, materialistic, and painfully unimaginative female parent. Walker tropes even the O'Connor meanness. Where O'Connor allows at best that the petty complacency and other failings of the mothers in "The Comforts of Home" and "The Enduring Chill" are venial flaws beside the arrogance, the intellectual posturing, and the spiritual blindness of their children, Walker declines to qualify her sympathy and admiration for Maggie and Mrs. Johnson.

One of the ironies here is that both Walker and O'Connor are themselves intellectuals struggling to make their way in a world of competitive ideas and talents—not to mention competing ideologies. Each critiques herself through mocking self-projection, and each stakes out an ideological position at odds with prevailing thought. O'Connor addresses herself to the spiritual folly of a godless age, Walker to a kind of social shortsightedness. The measure of

Walker's success may be that one comes to care as much about the question she poses—"Who shall inherit the quilts?"—as about the nominally grander question posed by O'Connor: "Who shall inherit the Kingdom of Heaven?"

In "Everyday Use," then, Walker addresses herself to the problems of African Americans who risk deracination in their quest for personal authenticity. At the same time she makes the drama of Wangero and Maggie emblematic of the politically charged choices available in minor/minority writing. With wit and indirection, she probes the problem of postcolonial writers who, as they struggle with a cultural imperative to repudiate the language and the institutions of the colonizer, simultaneously labor under the necessity—born in part of a desire to address an audience that includes the colonizer and his inheritors—of expressing themselves in that language and deferring to those institutions. In her problematic repudiation of oppressor culture, Wangero represents, among other things, the marginalized individual who fails to see this dilemma as false. She seems willing to lose her soul to be free of the baleful influences that she thinks have shaped it.

Walker hints that the false dilemma behind Wangero's blindness afflicts the narrowly political writer as well. The alternative to the dilemma is the same in both instances: a living tradition that preserves a true heritage even as it appropriates what it needs from the dominant culture it may be engaged in subverting. African Americans, Walker says, can take pride in the living tradition of folk art, seen here in the example of the quilts, and they can learn from a literary art like her own, a literary art committed at once to political responsibility and to the means—through simple appropriation of linguistic tools—of its own permanence.

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