

“Considerable Emphasis on Decorum”: Caroline Gordon and the Abyss

(Part One)

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I

CAROLINE GORDON (1895-1981) is America's unacknowledged epic writer. The scope of the historical level of her novels is unequalled by any other American novelist. Seven of her nine novels¹ use American history from before the Revolutionary War until after World War II, especially periods of great national significance, as their enveloping action: in *Green Centuries* (1941) she imagines the westward movement around the time of the American Revolution and reflects upon the frontier experience further in *The Women on the Porch* (1944); the antebellum and postbellum South are the enveloping action in *Penhally* (1931), and war itself is depicted both in *Penhally* and in *None Shall Look Back* (1937). The period of the lost generation just after World War I is also considered in *Penhally*, and the depression years provide the agrarian setting of *The Garden of Adonis* (1937); urban and rural life during and after World War II figure importantly in *The Women on the Porch*, *The Strange Children* (1951), and *The Malefactors* (1956). In all of these novels, her central concern is with the hero as he manifests himself in the circumstances of history, but also with the pattern present in all Western epics, from the *Iliad* on: the *hieros gamos*, or sacred marriage, as a large paradigm for the tensions in being itself.

Only two of her novels fall outside a strict conformity to the American component of the pattern; however, they too firmly evidence her steady “preoccupation with the life and times of the hero.”² Ironically, one of them has probably been her most well-known until the last ten years. *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934), written in the style of a memoir, mounts its action on the efforts of a professor of classics to escape his sense of transiency by hunting and fishing. Maury's choices broadly point to the divided life of the protagonists of Gordon's own generation. With his interest in the classics and his escape to the mysteries of nature to avoid both the political and the religious realm, he is the modern hero who seals himself off from having to confront the disorders of human making. “He represents,” as Louise Cowan writes, “the outcome of a choice Western Civilization made some generations before his birth—to pursue a natural and not a supernatural good.”³

In her last novel, *The Glory of Hera* (1972), Gordon undertakes to reimagine the demigod, the hero Herakles, as an ancient pre-figurement of Christ. His long struggle to overcome the resistance of Hera (from whom his name derives) represents the most explicit treatment in Gordon's work of the epic theme of the hero in conflict, not so much with other

warriors or with monsters, as with the dishonored feminine principle from which all his opposition, hence his greatness, truly derives.

Even a cursory study of Gordon's achievement suggests how seriously critics should take her often stated claim, uttered privately and professionally, that women are always on the lookout for heroes. Recent critics who genuinely appreciate her accomplishment have inadvertently depreciated the centrality of this claim to her fiction. Despite some worthy insights into her struggles and feats as both woman and writer, their own concerns have reviewed her life and writing according to what is deemed politically correct in literary and cultural criticism. Along with the recompilation of her short stories in 1981 and the recent reissue of several of her novels,⁴ these admirers admittedly are helping to usher Gordon's work into the prominence it has long deserved. But they remain disturbed by her views on women's rights, and, to be fair, not wholly without cause. Once when the county registrar sent Caroline Gordon a letter warning that, unless she re-registered soon, she would jeopardize her franchise, she sent back this message scribbled across the envelope: "Unanswered because I don't believe that women should be allowed to vote." Her biographer Ann Waldron comments: "Everything in her life indicates that she was a strong, independent woman—who wanted to be something else. She kept her maiden name, worked all her life, was anything but a stay-at-home housewife. She acted like a feminist, talked like a Southern ninny."⁵

Another biographer, Veronica Makowsky, offers an explanation for the disparity between Gordon's non-traditional domestic life and her atavistic prejudices: "Her father, Professor Gay at Bethany College, Allen Tate: Caroline Gordon's life contained a succession of male mentors who at once enabled her

and yet crippled her by her dependence on their opinion."⁶ It is puzzling that her relations with men are the supposed weakness to which Waldron and Makowsky should choose to draw their readers' attention. Does retaining the exacting criteria that men be heroic also mean the alert woman is a cripple?

Waldron interprets Gordon's conversion to Roman Catholicism as another sign of personal weakness, of dependency. Both authors associate her mid-life desire for faith with a need for emotional support after Allen Tate's divorce from her. With characteristic condescension, Makowsky indicates that she herself finds untenable the "fiat" of humility underlying faith: "The pity here is that this intelligent, spirited, even feisty woman ultimately felt she had to accept the verdict of her male-dominated culture and religion and regard herself as a freak or a dog on its hind legs." Makowsky goes on to say that when Gordon was beaten down enough at sixty by male "cultural values," she was too weary to fight them, and thus was unable to "follow the demands of her artistic imagination" (209). The recent publication of the letters between the Maritains and the Tates patently dispels this reductionist view of her conversion and of its integral place in her writing.⁷ The recent critics' analysis of her journey toward faith reflects a flattening into mere concerns of sexual and *personal* power symptomatic of the authors' own grasp of reality. But precisely this isolating and Cartesian characteristic of modernity was Gordon's chief concern. Quoting from her husband's "Mediterranean," "We have cracked the hemispheres with careless hands," Gordon explains to Maritain that those, like her young son-in-law, who depend on non-archetypal psychological explanations have dived into the "abyss caused by the crack (that old Cartesian crack . . .)." (50) The emphasis on personal autonomy reveals itself

to be illusory over and over again in her fictive world; the point of departure for her recent critics is precisely the point on which her heroes stand when they would plunge into the "abyss."

Gordon was at heart a traditionalist who deliberately refused to think of herself in terms of post-Enlightenment rights. She understood human relationships and personal worth as reflecting an intrinsic natural order normally served through familial and civic pieties. As she wrote once to her informal pupil Flannery O'Connor: "It is a fact that in this world nothing exists except in relation to something else."⁸ The connections into which one was born, like the prescriptive order described by Edmund Burke, did not limit one's capacity for self-expression as much as they grounded and informed one's referential center, out of which one could range with great latitude.

The vast hermeneutical task to which Gordon's novels beckon the thoughtful reader is nonetheless ironically served by the enlightenment concerns of her feminist admirers. Their views of sexual, personal, and cosmic autonomy invite us to explore Gordon's apparent traditionalism not from their own standpoint, however, but from the constants of human nature Gordon respected.⁹ An examination of some of her own critical writing and a few key passages in her fiction should help to dispel any taint of provincialism or of unreflective sexual passivity.

Behind the attachment to her Southern roots in Kentucky lay the general assessment that self-identity is dependent upon the definiteness of place and the structures of community. In *The Women on the Porch*, Catherine Chapman's remembrance of the geography around her ancestral home in Kentucky, Swan Quarter, illustrates how place provides a center for the psyche:

It was strange how the geography of this

country stayed in her mind. These remote, rarely glimpsed places had for her a reality, an importance that no other places had. She did not think about them often but when she did the thought seemed part of something that had gone before, not something that was starting, as if some corner of her mind had all the time been keeping them in contemplation. (49)

While the ponds, hill, and springs she recalls are natural, the environs evoke a place in Catherine's psyche which seems pre-existent and subnatural. The natural geography is ever present to Catherine passively in the way that memory is. Stirred by an event in the tangible world of action, memory, in the same moment, reorders and replaces the self in its natural context. This context locates the self both historically and ontologically.

Bereft of the definitional grounding supplied by place and community, the singular human being has difficulty knowing who the self is, let alone what its relational order might be. Catherine's estranged spouse, the deracinated Jim Chapman, whose father moved to Ohio from the East, is one such bereft individual. He compares himself unfavorably to his Southern mother-in-law: "I have no prejudices, no instincts, no convictions that are readily translatable into action." He concludes that he has no character.

Gordon would go so far as to write in "Cock-Crow" (1965) that the South's defeat was a calamity not just for the South but for the whole world. Unfolding paradigms of age-old heroism, the South produces figures such as Nathan Bedford Forrest, depicted in Achillean terms in *None Shall Look Back*. At the same time, its denouement reflects modernity's most ignorant moment—the near-attainment of a high ideal without a sufficient substantiating reality, evinced in Forrest's scout's, Rives Allard, love for death. It was this potential groundlessness that left the South herself vulnerable to what Gordon configured as the "abyss that

yawns for each of us"; yet, as her fiction shows, this assessment was an imaginative stance, not to be construed as ideological.

The charge that Gordon was unreflectively dutiful to her culture and its moral codes turns out to be the same as the chimerical claim that she could have been a feminist if she were not inhibited by men. That Gordon's life and work is yet another specimen of male domination simply does not square with either the way she wrote or the themes with which she dealt. In her thirty-some short stories and nine novels the unsparing scrutiny with which she depicts a panoply of human choices led Andrew Lytle to comment about her early novels that if she "did not sign her name, it would at first be hard to know her sex. This is a way of pointing out the strictness of her objectivity, and I suppose that last refinement of it."¹⁰ Variant images of dispirited women on the porch—"a stoa to Hades," as Gordon wrote Sally Wood—haunt her novels long before the sixth novel of that title. Several of her figures are homosexual artists, such as Horne Watts (a figure based on Hart Crane) in *The Malefactors*. Through a kind of erotic excess, Watts indirectly comes to signify that breaking of boundaries (certainly of decorum) that the mystics also paradoxically knew. Eros ultimately yearns for a mediator, a *bridge* (the title of Crane's major work and a central image of St. Catherine of Siena's *Divine Dialogues*), to transcendent love.¹¹

More often, Gordon's central male figures are adulterous. In the two novels just cited, this breach of marital decorum is at the center of the literal level upholding Chekhov's view that "He and she are the engine that make fiction move."¹² Gordon accords to nature the source of man's unified perspective toward reality. Nature supplies the human domain a canon of truths, which, observed or not, anchors her fiction, re-

maining open to supernatural possibilities of communion and disunion.

Like Flannery O'Connor's, Gordon's view of nature was Thomistic. She understood that successful mimetic fiction unfolds a natural and supernatural order. Relying on Aristotle's insights into complication and resolution, discovery and peripety, to explicate the techniques of fiction, she likened a story's development to a natural process, "in which the Resolution appears to grow out of the Complication as inevitably, as naturally, as a plant grows from a seed. The vital elements which will make the plant are not visible to the naked eye, but a botanist can discern them."¹³ The task of the discerning reader and the good writer is to see what the vital elements of any story are, and fine models, ancient and modern, instruct them both.

In her class and her writing she would hold up *Oedipus Rex* as having achieved a complete action, "firmly rooted in the natural order" but informed by supernatural meaning. (27) In analyzing Sophocles' story of incest and misguided love, Gordon emphasized the theme of "self-love," seeing in Oedipus a man guilty of a "good deal" of it. This theme emerges strongly in her own stories wherein, like Oedipus, it can be said of the hero: ". . . but at the end of the play he can no longer even love himself, for he is the man who brought these misfortunes not only on the heads of those he loved but also on his own head." (31) She discusses this overarching mimetic theme, *hubris*, theologically; "in short, it is man setting himself up against the established order, man in conflict with the gods" (28). The artist, like the botanist, has the job of giving an account of his subject—the protagonist—which, citing Aristotle, she says includes a "discovery," "the change from ignorance to knowledge, and thus to either love or hate, in the personages marked for either good or evil fortune" (31).

At the very least, then, it is inaccurate to review Gordon's acknowledgment of the established order as no more than an inhibiting prejudice; indeed, it is the framework central to accomplished mimetic action in which the inevitable violations of both the human and the divine order unfold. Without a framework, the protagonist discovers nothing, does not turn around, and fails to experience a "great reversal of fortune, arising from the "probable or necessary sequence of events." (31) In short, there is no drama.

Gordon was among the best teachers of these Aristotelian principles, granting to education the task of showing how unnatural actions like incest can hold within them such vistas of self-knowledge. In life, such violations more often than not do not; in fiction, they can. She begins *How to Read a Novel* (1957) with the ironic "I have an aunt who disapproves of adultery." Gordon goes on to say:

She does not hold with incest, either, or mayhem, rapine, or murder. Whenever I publish a novel I receive from her a letter whose contents seldom vary—a letter of stern rebuke, written, she maintains, in my best interests. She is convinced, she says, that I myself have never committed any of the crimes that occur so often and so lamentably in my novels, and I am indeed incapable of committing them. But how, she concludes plaintively, are other people to know that?

Gordon clearly recognizes that the conventional norms, of which Waldron and Makowsky would have her alternately be the unconscious minion or the knowing victim, possess their own profundity:

My aunt's standard of behavior is that of a Southern lady of the old school. But she is no fool. If she places considerable emphasis on decorum it is because she knows it for what it is: the thin ice on which we all must skate as long and as skillfully as we can if we are not to fall into the abyss that yawns for each of us. (3)

What is this "abyss"? The key to assessing Gordon's literary achievement lies in clarifying what she understood by this ominously vague term.

II

Southern ladies of the "old school," from whom Gordon presumably is absenting herself, are not guilty of the "scorn of forms," Alexis de Tocqueville's description of the typical American's distaste for decorum. However, Gordon asserts that her aunt would be a "fool" if she were to see the observance of decorum as an end in itself. While her aunt "knows" how crucial it is to observe the forms "skillfully" if one would survive, she knows it for the limited thing that it is: "thin ice." Decorum is more than self-preservation, but less than a completely felicitous conduit of the human enterprise.

Indeed, Gordon's choice of imagery unsettles as much as it affirms a reliance on decorum, suggesting that the veneer of civilization is all that keeps each human being from fathomless jaws of some unspecified nothing. And, as Lacy Buchan, the narrator in Tate's novel, *The Fathers*, asks, "is not civilization the agreement, slowly arrived at, to let the abyss alone?"¹⁴ Her aunt's sense of the abyss suggests that the codes of conduct arising from natural associations protect us from being consumed by a dark and unmade but primal reality. Viewed positively, decorum in part reflects the meaning of Tocqueville's "habits of the heart," a people's moral and intellectual core from which springs their unified action as a people. Behavior outside the decorum synonymous with these habits reflects man's deep-seated desire for personal autonomy which, unrestrained, leads to the abyss of anarchy.

Gordon's image of the yawning fissure points to more, though, than the social dangers latent in man's breaking away from the order into which he has been born. When man seeks to define himself solely through his freedom, ironically,

he becomes the prisoner of his own dark passions. The compatible vision of the abyss in Tate's *The Fathers* leads to Arthur Mizener's observation that there is a "central tension between the public and the private life, between the order of civilization, always artificial, imposed by discipline, and at the mercy of its own imperfections, and the disorder of the private life, always sincere, imposed upon by circumstances and at the mercy of its own impulses."¹⁵ Beyond the public realm, human conduct is accountable to an ontological structure grounded in metaphysical truth.¹⁶

But as Gordon's study of the hero shows, it is man's relentless desire for his unimpeded freedom which makes him most aware of how fragile the forms are which he seeks to reject, not because they are simply false, but because they can never fully comprehend the dimensions of truth and falsity which contend even within his own soul. The "considerable emphasis on decorum" turns out to be an intuition of the delicacy needed to preserve soul, ontologically prior to man's sociality. The two are not commensurate because decorum is always part of the *nomos*, radically external, and soul is internal form, its truths common to each person, its laws natural. In linking insistence on decorum with not going over into the abyss, Gordon clarifies her aunt's perspective as classical and Christian: man is naturally dependent on forms and structure. Inadequate as they might be, man completes himself within them.

Until her conversion to Catholicism at age fifty-two, Gordon guided her life by her singular commitment to the crafting of *literary form*, to art. In "Letters to a Monk" she reports:

The analogies between the religious life and the working life of the artist are striking—and, I'm sure, dangerous to contemplate because we are tempted to press them too far. I was nearly fifty years old before I discovered that art is the handmaid

of the Church. Up to that time it had been the only religion I had and I served it as faithfully as I could.¹⁷

She religiously insisted upon fidelity to the perfection, discovery, and teaching of literary form. With Spartan discipline she offered her life to an imaginative and dangerous exploration of the abyss—as dangerous in its way as skirting its edges is for the hero.

The totality of her writing from *Penhally* in 1931 to "A Walk with the Accuser," 1977,¹⁸ charts the course of difficulty in holding one's balance above the abyss, one "so deep and dark that no human eye has ever penetrated it." (561) It is the hero, above all, who "spends his life in combat with the common and only enemy, Death." As she explains more fully in "Cock-Crow," "the novelist, like the soldier, is committed by his profession to a life-long study of wars and warriors." (558) The battleground is not necessarily a visible one; at its deepest level it takes place, mysteriously, against the "dragon" as he coils and uncoils in the "earth of our own hearts." (569) In the symbolic language of the craftsman, as Bainard Cowan suggests, the tension dwelling within the heart is redeemed: "The serpent's coils seem to stand for the imprisonment of meaning in things—the rules of things and of earth over the human soul, before meaning can be liberated through language."¹⁹

This second passage from "Cock-Crow" on the abyss and the hero suggests that the achievement of Caroline Gordon is to be gauged not by the current canons of feminist orthodoxy, but by how successfully she gave literary form to the perennial battle with the dragon, whose name is legion and whose weapons are lies. The declaration of Gordon's self-proclaimed task shows that literary structures are guided by psychic ones, the grooves set by man's seminal experience of good and evil. Given man's

first defeat in the garden, the yawn of the abyss represents the sustaining source for the "grinning devil," whose cunning robs the self of its identity. A scene from *The Women on the Porch* provides insight into the residual character of the serpent's question. Catherine Chapman reflects to herself:

But when the question is fatal the self seems to lose its identity or rather it splits into many selves, which engage in a Protean struggle for mastery. We may abhor the grinning devil who dispatched the note that broke up a lifelong friendship or shattered a happy marriage, but no matter. In the moment he became master he assumed our mask. We may call as loudly as we please but our friend, our lover will not answer, will hear only him. (182)

Beyond physical mortality, death for the modern means living in the consequences of the Cartesian split. The depth of the abyss—and its claim on the living—is archetypal; it is the realm of Hades whose dominion, in Gordon's reimagining of it, is as multiple as the human heart.

In Gordon's epic account of modernity, America embodies the edenic and ancient presumption man proves ever reluctant to dispel: America represents a Promethean risk-taking wherein a god-like freedom is assumed to be man's due. In her work as a whole this presumption is not depicted as altogether tragic, but rather comic and purgatorial: "It's a circle we're traversing—not necessarily vicious," explains the protagonist of her sixth novel, a reader of Dante, to another wayfarer (22). The energy of Caroline Gordon's epic corpus is thus driven by the perennial spiritual struggle in which the self somehow must rescue the heart under siege by its own lies.

To reiterate, what recent critics do not seem to know, which the old-fashioned aunt did, is that public norms, though not a perfect account of reality, protect the self from the dangers of its desire for personal autonomy. The outer

forms of civilization, which the aunt's emphasis on decorum protects, are superficial, in the way that literally staying on top of the ice is for ice skaters, a capacity which is nonetheless crucial, grounded as it is in the avoidance of death. On the other hand, man's repeated efforts to "domesticate the universe," as one of Gordon's favored theologians puts it, potentially wall him in so that his soul, the substanding reality beneath the surface, becomes inaccessible. Louis Bouyer points to the source of the dilemma in terms similar to those depicted in Sophocles' ancient Thebes: Society, while it "furnishes [one] with objects ready to act on, at the same time, walls him up in neglect of God."²⁰

(TO BE CONCLUDED)

1. In the order of their original publication: *Penhally* (New York, 1931); rpt. (New York, 1971); *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (New York, 1934); rpt. (New York, 1971); *The Garden of Adonis* (New York, 1937); rpt. (New York, 1971); *None Shall Look Back* (New York, 1937); rpt. (New York, 1971); *Green Centuries* (New York, 1941); rpt. (New York, 1971); *The Women on the Porch* (New York, 1944); rpt. (New York, 1971); *The Strange Children* (New York, 1951); rpt. (New York, 1971); *The Malefactors* (New York, 1956); *The Glory of Hera* (Garden City, 1972). All subsequent references to the novels will be from these editions. The Cooper Square reprints retain the pagination of the originals. 2. Caroline Gordon, "Cock-Crow," *Southern Review*, I, N.S. (Summer 1965) 554-569. 3. Louise Cowan, "Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim," in Thomas H. Landess, ed., *The Short Edition of Caroline Gordon* (Irving, Tex., 1972), 15. 4. J.S. Sanders & Company, Nashville, in the Southern Classics Series under the editorship of the late M.E. Bradford, has recently reissued *Green Centuries*, *None Shall Look Back*, *Penhally*, and *The Women on the Porch*. 5. Ann Waldron, *Close Connections, Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance* (Knoxville, 1987), 357. 6. Veronica A. Makowsky, "Caroline Gordon: Amateur to Professional Writer," *Southern Review*, XXIII, 4 (October 1987), 790. See also by the same author: *Caroline Gordon: A Biography* (Oxford, Eng. 1989). 7. John M. Dunaway, ed., *Exiles and Fugitives* (Baton Rouge, 1992). 8. Sally Fitzgerald, "A Master Class: From the Correspondence of Caroline Gordon and Flannery O'Connor," *The Georgia Review*, XXXIII, 4 (Winter 1979), 832. 9. Caroline Gordon, "Some Readings and Misreadings," *Sewanee Review*, 61 (1953), 384-407. 10. Andrew Lytle, "Caroline Gordon and the Historic Image," *Sewanee*

Review, LVII (1949), 562. **11.** By eros I mean the sum of human beings' unfocused uninformed desire for self-satisfaction, a desire which can become resolved into particular aims, sexual gratification among them; it includes the acquisition of boundless land in the wilderness, the achievement of victory in war, the headlong plunge into circumstances of moral or physical peril—but it is never satisfied by any particular object. For the heroes of Miss Gordon's novels, eros contains the possibility of coming to recognize transcendent good by experiencing the emptiness of transient satisfactions. **12.** Fitzgerald, 831. **13.** Caroline Gordon, *How to Read a Novel* (New York, 1957), 27. **14.** Allen Tate, *The Fathers* (Chicago, 1938), 186. **15.** Arthur Mizener, introduction to Tate's *The Fathers*, ix. **16.** Brainard Cheney and Thomas Landess speak of Miss Gordon's work as depicting an "ontological quest." In the "dramatic sequence in her successive pieces,"

Cheney sees the composition of an epic "ordeal," adding that her "panoramic dramas of disintegration" take readers through an "ordeal of rediscovery." "Caroline Gordon's Ontological Quest," *Renaissance*, XVII (Fall 1963), 3. Stated otherwise, the key to interpreting Gordon's literary achievement lies in specifying the character of that disintegration, one that can lead to the abyss. See also Thomas H. Landess, ed., "Caroline Gordon's Ontological Stories," *Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon*, 53-73. **17.** Rose Ann C. Fraistat, *Caroline Gordon as Novelist and Woman of Letters* (Baton Rouge, 1984), 35. **18.** Caroline Gordon, "A Walk With the Accuser," *The Southern Review*, XIII, 3, 597-613. **19.** Bainard Cowan, "The Serpent's Coils: How to Read Caroline Gordon's Later Fiction," *Southern Review* N.S. (1980), 281-298. **20.** Louis Bouyer, *Introduction to Spirituality*, trans. Mary Perkins Ryan (Collegeville, Minn., 1961), 161.