LIBERALS LIE ABOUT *None Shall Look Back* (1937)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

Gordon treated three of the most influential male critics as friends for many years--Edmund Wilson, John Crowe Ransom, and Malcolm Cowley. Yet Wilson refused to review her fiction because, he said, "I didn't think that I would like it." Gordon said of Wilson and Ransom that they "can't bear for women to be serious about their art." In an interview after she died, Cowley confessed to male prejudice against Gordon: "You have to get the admission of an aged fellow that I was a little bit anti-feminist at that time. That is, in our discussions we were the boys. The boys always got together and the girls weren't asked to join them... Caroline was writing unpublished novels that 'we' didn't read. Later she felt--and rightly, in part--that she was a victim of sexual discrimination." Joseph Epstein has written of the literary establishment that "Politics is frequently a consideration. Being a member of the right club... Sometimes this club is called Feminist, sometimes Jewish, sometimes Black." (*Plausible Prejudices*, 1985)

In reference to other writers, Gordon wrote that "Every masterpiece demands collaboration from the beholder"; "Allen says 'If you write a book which is an innovation both in subject matter and form you must expect to be attacked,' and I did expect--not to be attacked so viciously, but ignored, as usual"; "I wrote two novels, one in Civil War time and one in pioneer times, but people didn't know how to read them"; "The majority of novel readers are not capable of the effort it takes to translate yourself into another age"; "If we are to read a novel with understanding we must first of all lay aside our own preconceived idea of what a particular novel ought to be like and try, instead, to find out what it is"; "The reader who wants to read understandingly...must perform an act of self-abasement. He must lay aside his own opinions for the time being"; "There remains the reader who...feels that the author ought to write books that people want to read rather than the books he himself feels impelled to write."

Most reviewers (1937) praised some of the novel's qualities, but few recognized its greatness and some were incompetent, as in describing it as a "traditional Southern romance." Some women complained that the novel is "not another *Gone with the Wind*," one saying that "even the thunder of guns doesn't explain the absence of someone like Scarlett O'Hara." Stephen Vincent Benet asserted that Gordon is not as successful as Margaret Mitchell, whose "heroine was never out of sight." Allan Nevins the leftist critic was so blind he claimed that General Forrest comes "late" into the novel!--exposing his negative criticisms as sheer prejudice against a conservative writer, especially when he concludes that *None Shall Look Back* does not earn "a place among the better pieces of Civil War fiction."

In *The Modern Novel in America* (1951), Frederick J. Hoffman refers to Gordon only in passing: "The more strictly historical echoes (the South as history) are found in Caroline Gordon, in Andrew Lytle...and, of course, in Robert Penn Warren." (239) Hoffman praises Lytle for his "remarkable" novels and discusses Warren for six pages, but he says nothing else about the woman. Ladies first, then dismissed. By 1967 Hoffman had learned that he should not ignore Gordon but could safely dismiss her because women (dogmatic Feminists) had done so. He tried to justify his previous neglect with insults ridiculous to anyone who has read the novels: "The people of her fiction are often a scarcely differentiated mass; they...lack complexity. Many of her novels have this fault: *Green Centuries, Penhally*, and *None Shall Look Back* have a clutter of personalities instead of a wealth of characters." (37-38) Hoffman reduces Gordon's novels to an undifferentiated mass in order to sweep them aside. Her novels are as complex as any in literature, it is his commentary that lacks complexity, as well as honesty.

Hoffman's sweeping generalization in dismissal is evidence of a reader who skimmed rather than read these novels, if he looked at them at all. He does no analysis of the novels and cites no examples of alleged "undifferentiated masses." I took a modern literature course from Hoffman when he visited Stanford during the summer session of 1962. A nervous intellectual careerist with thinning gray hair, wirerim glasses and a stoop from spending his life bent over a desk, Hoffman was desperate to publish as many books as possible as fast as he could in order to move up to a more prestigious university than the University of Wisconsin,

Madison--the Berkeley of the Midwest. Though not as much of a blowhard as Harold Bloom, like him Hoffman exploited his graduate students by using them to do research for his books. His dishonest view of Gordon probably came through one of his leftist graduate students who would never have read *How to Read a Novel* (1957) by Caroline Gordon because she was conservative.

In *The Modern Novel* (1965) it is clear that at least Walter Allen *read NSLB*, though very superficially. He praises the novel for being the most "uncompromising novel about the Civil War that we possess"--that is to say, the most Realistic--more so than *TRB*. "The battle-scenes are brilliantly done, at the level almost of those in *The Red Badge of Courage* [so the woman is not quite as good as the male writer, no matter how well she writes]; and the horrors, the devastation and famine the war brings in its wake, are chillingly rendered.... Throughout the novel an aristocratic lifestyle is beautifully conveyed." (113-14) Yet the superficiality of Allen's reading is evident in a series of falsehoods caused by his intellectual limitations, lack of attention to detail, and dishonesty: "It contains no consideration of the causes of the War [yes it does, but *TRB* does not]; no criticism of the warring parties [many criticisms are implicit throughout, most obviously in the depiction of prisoner-of-war camps with an allusion through the fate of Anderson to Andersonville]; no criticism of the motives of those engaged in the action [many, many scenes *reveal* motives, requiring no explanation except to Walter Allen]."

Allen claims that "no character in the novel is even aware" of the negation of civil rights by slavery. The clearest example to the contrary is the Union officer who declares, "I don't hold with slavery." A liberal playing the race card, Allen is lying when he claims that Negroes "are hardly present in the book at all." On the contrary, there are black people on pages 3, 5, 9, 17, 20, 25, 27, 31, 33, 34, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43, 44, 45, 60, 67, 69, 119, 120, 123, 124, 127, 129, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 140, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 155, 156, 157, 158, 160, 161, 162, 164, 165, 170, 171, 172, 176, 212, 213, 223, 224, 239, 265, 267, 268, 273, 281, 282, 310, 312, 323, 325, 337, 353, 354. This is a measure of Allen's dishonesty and is typical of liberals with prejudice against conservatives.

Walter Allen himself is racist and slanders Gordon when he falsely characterizes all the blacks in the novel as without exception "mindless, almost, as animals, shiftless and ungrateful." Allen is naive when he supposes that Gordon, one of the most scrupulous and deliberate writers since Flaubert, *did* expose the evil of slavery but *did not know what she was doing!*--that she, "I suspect *unwittingly*...exposes the moral corruption that was fundamental to Southern society, the negation of human rights on which it was based." (Italics added.] Allen fails to account for the symbolism in *NSLB*--unwittingly. He senses it, but does not see it, saying, "Isn't the whole conception of life as described in *None Shall Look Back* a literary abstraction?" Yes, the novel has an abstract dimension. It is allegorical like Hawthorne, but also Realistic. A realistic allegory of symbols is the most difficult to write of all forms of fiction--an intellectual feat of which few writers are capable. Allen contradicts himself when he praises the book for unsurpassed Realism and then describes its effect as merely abstract because he fails to see the double vision, the connections between images and ideas, the patterns of symbols--the allegories.

Veronica Makowsky is the Women's Studies professor who declares on the first page of her biography that Gordon failed as a novelist because she did not become a dogmatic radical Feminist. As a Feminist, Makowsky has no literary education and clearly has never read *TRB* because she complains of *NSLB* that "Without an expert knowledge on the Civil War, the reader cannot know what the battle is, why it is important, or even the date." On the contrary, this information is in the novel: dates of or introducing most of the major battles are specific--"early in February, 1862" (73), "the nineteenth of September, 1863" (232), "September 21, 1863" (277), "the eleventh of February, 1864" (310). Six dramatized battles are named after the places where they were fought: Fort Donelson, Chickamauga, Okolona, Brice Cross Roads, Franklin, and Murfreesboro. The importance of each battle dramatized is clear in the behavior of the soldiers, in dialogue, and in the orders given by the generals. Actually, the reader does not need to know anything about the Civil War. The reader need only follow the narrative as a vicarious experience, but a critic needs to know how to read a literary text.

Because she had no literary education, Makowsky cannot infer from implications and requires a writer to explain the meanings of a novel directly, blaming Gordon for her own limitations: "She sometimes forgot the [uneducated] reader's need to follow and understand the action." As if Gordon is the stupid one.

No, she did not "forget," she wrote for educated readers, or for anyone with a receptive attitude. Feminists require that fiction be dumbed down so that they can understand it. And they have no sense of literary form, as when Makowsky says, "Some of these public scenes are *enormously effective*, such as the two small boys watching the beginning of the Chickamauga or General Nathan Bedford Forrest confronting his pusillanimous fellow officers at Fort Donelson. *Their inclusion, however, is at the expense of the novel as an integrated whole*." [Italics added.] The scene of the two small boys is an allegory evoking comparison of this Henry to the Henry in *TRB* and provides an innocent perspective on violent death; the Forrest scene at Fort Donelson is one of the most integral in the novel. Makowsky exposes herself here as completely out of touch with the literal plot as well as with the aesthetics of the novel.

Without knowing it, Makowsky responds to a technique of Impressionism: "In a way, this lack of information contributes to a sense of confusion that mimics that of war; a soldier, however, would at least know where he was, the name of his general, and some of his larger purposes." On the contrary, "The private soldier never knows where he is going next or why." (104). In *TRB* young Henry often does *not* know where he is, what the name of the battle is, who is winning, or what may be the larger purposes of his general. Most infantry soldiers in combat do not know. That is a traditional theme in war movies. Makowsky knows nothing about war, let alone the Civil War, yet she presumes to belittle a great Civil War novel by an expert.

The Feminist critic Anne M. Boyle in *Strange and Lurid Bloom* (2002) is so dogmatic she falsifies the text repeatedly in order to make allegations. She has no interest in the novel as written, only in criticizing the patriarchal social order of the Old South. She reduces the large cast of the novel to only two women, Lucy Churchill and Susan Allard, the characters she sees as most like and most unlike herself. She analyzes only one episode, Lucy's visit to the slave quarters (Part I, Chapter 5), which she characterizes falsely as "full of violent energy that is subdued or at least controlled in Lucy's wealthy, aristocratic, and patriarchal world." On the contrary, "The men were all in the field at this time of day but a number of old women and children were on the porches." One is an elderly black dwarf who does no work. Peace is connoted by the pastoral scene, in particular by "the flock of sheep grazing just then not a hundred yards away." The only violence mentioned here is the beating of Della the mulatto girl by the white overseer. Otherwise the slave quarters are peaceful and none of the slaves has run away, in contrast to the ram "which persisted in breaking out of any pasture he was put in."

Boyle makes a false allegation of rape, as Feminists so frequently do, exaggerating "the horrors of racial oppression and sexual violence." Gordon acknowledges horrors with this episode of the cruel beating, and also by referring to the neighbor Colonel Miles: Lucy "had heard of people whipping negroes. There was a man living not a mile from Brackets who punished unruly negroes by fastening them to the back of a buggy drawn by a fast trotting horse. She had heard people speak of this Colonel Miles all her life in disapproval." Gordon implies that extreme cruelty is the exception rather than the rule. The Feminist critic refers to the "lustful white overseer" and claims that Della was a "victim of lust." On the contrary, there is no evidence of sexual assault whatsoever. "There was a purple bruise on her arm and in the middle of her back a great lacerated place clotted with black blood." Della does not say she was raped, she says she was beaten. She does not call the overseer a rapist, she calls him a "mean man."

The Feminist does not mention that Della is mean herself. When they were childhood playmates, Lucy learned that Della was "bold and revengeful": "When Aunt Mimy, the cook, refused to let the children lick the dasher from the ice-cream freezer one day it was Della who had thought of fastening the wire across the path which Aunt Mimy had to traverse between her cabin and the out-kitchen." When Fount Allard asks Uncle John the "intelligent, elderly looking negro" what the trouble is, the black man blames Della, not the overseer: "Hit uz that yallow gal, Della, Marster." The cause of the beating was not a rape: "She sassed him, all right... Hit uz about bringin' water from the spring. He say he tole her three times to fill up that pitcher what set on his washstand and she ain't never done it. He git in there ever' night and they ain't no water to wash with and then he go after Della."

Ironically, the beating is Lucy's fault. The woman the Feminist critic identifies with and characterizes as a victim of the patriarchal order is the white *girl* who owns these slaves and is responsible for their welfare. Lucy is supposed to be supervising the overseer: "These were Lucy's own negroes in whom she was

supposed to take a special interest." Her excuse is that she is female. "If she had been a man and could have assumed...management, [Cabin Row] would not have been the thorn in her grandfather's side that it had been now for years." Boyle the Feminist identifies with the female who refuses to take responsibility. Naturally, when she learns that Della has been beaten by the overseer in her absence, Lucy feels guilty, but she places all the blame on the man: "The horrible, brutal creature! Grandpa doesn't allow anybody to lay a hand on his negroes." Her grandfather has to compel her to go examine Della. Taking responsibility himself, he "now felt that he had been negligent. He should have examined this man's character further before putting him in charge of negroes." Lucy assures Della that "Grandpa'll beat *him*. He won't let him stay on this place." Knowing this, the overseer is already gone.

Liberals want you to believe that all southerners who owned slaves abused them. They reinforce and perpetuate stereotypes, whereas Gordon debunks them. To the dogmatic Feminist, Fount is a patriarchal oppressor, whereas Gordon depicts him as respectful, even deferential to his slaves. The first paragraph ends with the slave woman Mrs. Sampson--whose name suggests great strength--criticizing Fount: "You going to Cabin Row? I was saying to Henry last night it was about time some of you all was over." Her complaint, repeated by other slaves, is that their white owners are ignoring them, not that they are oppressing them. These slaves have independent minds and are outspoken. Old Henry spits on the ground and disagrees with Fount's judgment in hiring the present overseer. Fount believes the account of the beating given by Uncle John and does not even ask the overseer for his version of events. He trusts the blacks more than he trusts his white overseer.

Feminist critics such as Makowsky and Boyle rewrite books by misinterpreting them in ways that promote their political agenda. Boyle turns Gordon's novel about male and female heroism in the Civil War to a novel about the alleged oppression of women: "*None Shall Look Back* must be seen as a work of violent confrontation with a *culture* where traditional race and gender arrangements have been disrupted." [Italics added.] That is to say, this is not a novel about the violent confrontation of two armies of men, it is a novel about women as victims in a patriarchal *culture*. All the dead male soldiers represent the liberation of women from men. At the same time, Boyle suggests that the Civil War was important primarily as a "betrayal" of southern women, depriving them of happiness.

Feminists are very pious about the evil of prejudice against blacks, who are one of various ethnic groups, whereas Feminists themselves are prejudiced against half the human race and have produced a toxic "woman's culture" that persecutes men on campuses all over the country. Women's Studies programs teach women to regard all men--white and black--as rapists. "Men who are unjustly accused of rape can sometimes gain from the experience." (Catherine Comin, Assistant Dean, Vassar College). Boyle's lesbian perspective is expressed when she claims that Gordon depicts "the incompatibility of masculine and feminine values, needs, and desires and the failure of heterosexual love." No, the novel opens with the Allard family celebration that demonstrates the *compatibility* of masculine and feminine values in a traditional society that is both patriarchal and matriarchal, with separate gender roles. All the dancing and romancing demonstrates the compatibility of needs among heterosexuals and love fails because of the war, not because all heterosexuals should turn gay.

Boyle emasculates the hero of the novel, Rives Allard. She is so oblivious to the effects of war on a soldier that she does not consider it a factor in changing his character: "Rives' silence, discomfort in social situations, gloomy nature, and morbidity may be attributed to his mother's inattention to traditional familial comforts and customs." His "morbidity" is caused not by the bloody carnage all around him in battle after battle, it is caused by his traditional mother. His "love of death...may well represent the *longing* of a *genderless or androgynous* [nonsense] man who, having known no maternal tenderness, *no paternal authority* [the opposite is true], wishes to die on *the bloody fields that his mother tends*." [Rives does not die in Georgia, he dies in Mississippi.] So the motive of the hero is not to win the battle and to drive invaders from his country, it is to spite his traditional mother. The male hero is not really brave and strong and masculine, he is petty and ignoble. He just wants to die. At the same time, however, as a weakling he is a Feminist New Man--"androgynous"! This is supposedly because his mother, Susan Allard, is traditional--"weak and pathetic." [italics added]

Boyle hates traditional roles so much that she even claims that the traditional mother is *sadistic!* Susan Allard "unconsciously taught her children to love the pain and loss to which she gives *all* her attention." Susan spends most of her time on horseback supervising her field workers. If she was sadistic she would have a sadistic white overseer who would beat her slaves instead of a *black* man, Uncle Mack, who is "more like a member of the family than a servant." [Italics added.] If Susan was sadistic she would not have forgiven the murderer of her husband: Susan Allard declared that "vengeance belonged to the Lord, and she quoted something about giving the stranger thy cloak also." She is quoting Jesus Christ. She also exhibits Christian charity by affirming that "her husband was quite right in sharing his horse with the stranger even though he turned out to be his murderer." As a battlefield nurse caring for wounded soldiers Susan sets an example of charity and love. Loving her neighbor as she loves herself, she gives away the furniture in her house to invalid neighbors: "A carved rosewood sofa carried out to a negro cabin because rheumatic old Aunt Dolly liked to sit up close to the fire." Boyle the Feminist sees no love in all this charity. Susan Allard is the most Christian character in the novel, the most like Jesus: "She was indefatigable in her charities." It is not Susan who is sadistic, it is Feminists rabid for revenge.

When critics make things up they claim that the author or the character was "unconscious" of what the critic has discerned with insight superior to that of the author. According to Boyle the traditional Christian mother and battlefield nurse Susan actually loves to see people suffering and teaches her children to be sadists. No, she taught Rives to be a self-sacrificial hero. Rives' mother "abandoned her domestic duties to tend to community needs." No, that is what Feminists do. "Susan was in the saddle from early morning on, overseeing the work in her fields or attending to the wants of her neighbors." Boyle claims that "Her children are often victims of neglect." No, they are "victims" of discipline: "Her sons--and her foster sons--were required to work in the field along with the negroes for half of every day." Boyle says "Rives and Lucy inhabit a world *without parental authority or love*." [Italics added.] Like most Feminist critics, Boyle is unable to recognize love in any form, especially not between heterosexuals.

Susan Allard is heroic as widow, mother, farmer, and battlefield nurse. She teaches her children to be disciplined, strong, hardworking, egalitarian, family-oriented, and Christian--traditional. However, like most kids, her children were "young and pleasure loving" and rebel against her "moral compulsions," against the "burden" of doing good--of being like Jesus. Since her children love pleasure, they must not have been altogether denied it by their mother. Susan sets an example of self-sacrifice that inspires her son Rives and is required of many others in the war. Feminists hate self-sacrifice and instead teach self-interest and revenge. Susan's daughters marry young and her sons leave home not because she is *sadistic*, but primarily because they feel the house is too crowded after Susan takes in seven neighbors whose house burned down: "But Mama," asks one of her daughters, "where can we *put* them. In my room?" Most people would not take in seven neighbors. Jesus would.

How little Boyle understands the novel is evident when she says that Susan Allard "seems to be treated more harshly by critics of Gordon than by Gordon herself." Yes, the traditional Christian is treated harshly by atheist critics like Boyle, whereas Gordon makes Susan the spiritual and moral exemplar in the novel. "It was his mother's character and way of life that set the Allards apart." It is ironic that the most Christian character is also feminist, as distinct from a dogmatic radical Feminist like Boyle: "Susan Allard, after her husband's death, went on farming her land with the help of old Uncle Mack as overseer." She is feminist in taking over management of her farm, supervising the workers herself, reversing gender roles, and rejecting the large plantation system in a step toward equality by dividing her land out to her sons as soon as the oldest came of age.

Susan Allard represents social progress, treating blacks like members of her family and bonding with her neighbors. Her feminism confuses Boyle, who cannot therefore condemn Susan completely as a sadist. She must admit that "Susan Allard is perhaps Gordon's most balanced and objective portrayal of an 'unfeminine' woman." She says "In portraying both her heroism and her difficulty in openly demonstrating love for her children [no evidence of such difficulty is cited], Gordon *comes closest to accepting and perhaps even celebrating* the life of the woman who, though a mother, finds herself at home in the masculine landscape. Like Gordon's own mother--like the artist herself--Susan Allard's field is not limited to the kitchen." Unlike Gordon, the dogmatic Feminist Boyle cannot bring herself to celebrate a traditional woman and resists anyone else doing so. [Italics added.]

At one point Boyle refers to the marriage of "John and Lucy in *None Shall Look Back*." Apparently all men are Johns to this Feminist. She also claims that the novel demonstrates "the bleakness of the modern patriarchal world." The Old South in the 1860s was not the "modern world." At the end of her discussion, she claims that Rives Allard is "like Quentin Compson, [who] finds solace in death." In Faulkner's *The Sound and the Fury* Quentin is an immature romantic boy so weak he faints rather than shoot the man who took his sister's virginity--a trivial cause--and eventually *kills himself*. Rives is a combat veteran who fights bravely in many savage battles and dies leading the charge on enemy lines carrying the flag of his cause. Feminist absurdities interpreting texts reflect their absurd interpretations of life.

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