

INTRODUCTION

The Collected Stories (1981, 1999)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

Robert Penn Warren

Henry James once said that, in writing about fiction, 'one speaks best from one's own taste, and I may therefore venture to say that the air of reality (solidity of specification) seems to me the supreme virtue of a novel--the merit on which its other merits helplessly and submissively depend.' Though James here refers to the novel, what he says would inevitably apply to the short story and may serve as our golden text in an introduction to the short stories of Caroline Gordon. Her stories show to a superlative degree 'solidity of specification,' even if the land she knows so well lies thousands of miles and hundreds of years from the great country houses, shaven lawns, family-portrait galleries, and Sevres which so enchanted James.

Caroline Gordon's world lies in southeast Kentucky, along the Tennessee line. It is a section of considerable Revolutionary grant land, chopped up, generation by generation, despite the device of cousinly marriages--which have their abundant and casual place in Caroline Gordon's stories. It was a rolling land of good grass and stands of timber, hedgerows, tobacco fields, and barns, with a scattering of solid or even handsome brick structures, with more modest but sometimes graceful white wooden farmhouses, and inevitably the shacks of tenantry, white or black. There were winding gravel roads, some black-top, streams, and ponds.

It was a world I grew up in and spent most of boyhood's free time in, and now I read Caroline Gordon's stories with nostalgia, shutting my eyes to see landscape. For progress has been at work, with four- or six-lane highways not unusual, seventy-five thousand-dollar tractors at work to flatten hedges and fill branches or creeks, and, with the falling away of tobacco as a money crop, the gradual falling away of the ramshackle housing of tenantry. And on prosperous farms themselves, one sees more and more new houses, with no air of rurality about them, looking as though just lifted from a booming suburb at Nashville. Landholdings get larger and larger, and mechanism more obvious. As far as can be told, the relation of man to nature is more and more tenuous--except for the weather.

That was not the land of Caroline Gordon's stories. There, man--black or white, poor or rich--seemed intertwined with nature. Professor Maury (the character most frequently appearing in the stories and the hero of her finest novel, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*, probably a work made to endure), out for a day's sport, 'could see the frost glistening on the north side of every [corn] stalk.' So he can say later: 'I knew it was going to be a good day.' He sees everything, feels everything. After an August drought, followed by a rainy September, there are the elderberry bushes: 'In October light frosts came. In the afternoons when I sat on the back porch going over my fishing tackle I marked their progress on the elderberry bushes that were left standing against the stable fence. The lower, spreading branches had turned yellow and were already sinking to the ground but the leaves in the top clusters still stood up stiff and straight.' It is not, however, in the sense of formal bits that the sense of man in nature is most sharply felt. Rarely is it felt sharply at all--rather, pervasively, incidentally, two little girls playing happily all afternoon in a branch rushing over stones, the flicker of silver poplar leaves.

The stories in this collection may be divided into the central and peripheral. The peripheral are relatively few, with two long examples, 'The Captive' (the story of a white woman captured by Indians) and 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' (laid in North Africa and France), and some several short pieces involving the Civil War. The central stories, more numerous, refer to the land described above, and in these the enclosing sense of the land combines with the enclosing sense of family and kin. It is true that, at all levels of society in the South, the sense of kinship, of the clan, of the family, hung on long after it died elsewhere, and hung

on with so strong a sense of obligation that to the outsider it seems--or not too long ago seemed--nonsense or mystique.

Caroline Gordon's stories are set just before the breakdown of the sense of family. 'Still,' she writes in 'Tom Rivers,' in a large family connection such as ours every member, no matter how remotely related or how unimportant, had his place and a sort of record in memory.... We sit here under the trees all afternoon and talk about people we used to know: Cousin Owen, who walked from house to house, carrying his teeth in a basket... Cousin Henry Hord, who was deafened by cannonading in the Civil War and lost all his property by ill-advised investments and had to live with any of the kin who would put up with him.' And then there is the last great family reunion, of five hundred members from all over the country, including one who had made it rich and provided all the whiskey--this scene narrated by a little girl, who hears her father, Professor Maury (who had only 'married into' the family), remark: 'All these mediocre people, getting together to congratulate themselves on their mediocrity!'

But beside the absurd or pretentious side of this world flowers story after story that is humorous (directly so as in 'The Petrified Woman'), touching, or shocking. The artist here, sometimes by assuming the child's vision, shows the complexity of life. Few stories can match 'The Enemies' or 'The Long Day' for shock, or for a more subtle kind of shock, scarcely less powerful on reflection, at the end of 'The Burning Eyes,' in which a child goes on his first possum hunt. Or the muted conclusion of 'One More Time,' with its tangle of emotion at the end, especially for Professor Maury. He is old and slow now, his whole life now given to fishing and the study of expertise of fellow sportsmen, and at a fishing resort he meets a man whose strength is failing. The story ends with the body of the frail fellow sportsman at the bottom of the Blue Pool, with dumbbells in his pockets.

This, of course, is a companion piece to 'The Last Day in the Field' (which we may take to be that of Professor Maury, who, feeling his age, gives up the field entirely for the stream). It is his narrative: '...I shot too quick. It swerved over the thicket and I left her go with the second barrel. It staggered, then zoomed up. Up, up, up, over the rim of the hill and above the tallest hickories. I saw it there for a second, its wings black against the gold light, before, wings still spread, it came whirling down, like an autumn leaf, like the leaves that were everywhere about us, all over the ground.' (How subtle the touch of the word *us* here! The implied identification of the dying bird rising against the gold light, and the old man in his last act of a sport he lived for.) Subtlety of effect, poetic effect somehow entwined with a lucent prose, is one of the qualities of this writer. And sometimes it requires more than a second casual look.

In this book there are more than a few strong or subtle stories, with several about Professor Maury. Before turning to 'Old Red'--perhaps the most memorable of Caroline Gordon's stories--we may mention 'To Thy Chamber Window, Sweet.' Here at a boarding-house at a fishing resort, Professor Maury, long a widower, meets a widow some ten years or so his junior, a woman charming, handsome, Virginian--all the heart could ask--and he holds her entranced, on the evening veranda, as he quotes in his magnificent voice from 'Lycidas' and *Atlanta in Calydon*--not to mention some Shelley, for which he is inclined to ask God to forgive him. But a fellow fisherman turns up with splendid news from another locality. So after bedtime the two conspirators drive off, leaving a letter for the Virginia charmer, and the Professor is heard to mutter as they pull away from the temptation that would cramp his art: 'And snatch'd his rudder and shook out more sail'--identifying himself with the 'grave Phoenician trader' who flees westward when he sees the merry Grecian coaster come and seeks the open sea.

'Old Red' is the story of a somewhat different flight, this time from the sacred bosom of the family, which he had been dodging for years, the family who sit under the trees and talk of the dead and expect him to give up a day's fishing to go to a family funeral--the funeral of a distant relative. Everything--even the beloved family, his own daughter, his new son-in-law--is a trap. Even, he realizes ambivalently, his own marriage had been a trap, for his wife had wanted him to cut some sort of figure in the world, with his talents. In his sleeplessness, he finally drifts off into a dream of his boyhood in Virginia, a fox hunt, and the first sight of 'Old Red,' the fox always too fast and too shrewd for the pack. Suddenly he feels himself running as though he were the fox to a last refuge 'in black dark, on moist earth while the hounds' baying filled the valley and reverberated from the mountainside.'

The story up to this final moment has been full of tenderness and humor, and of the affection of the family for him, but Professor Maury finally realizes that nobody, not even here, understands him. They do not realize that he is the only one of the lot to whom Time is really precious, for whom life is an art and a discipline and a continuing joy, and who cannot afford to lose a moment out of the few precious years left. In other words, even in the bosom of the family--a family that to the modern world would have been incomprehensible in its virtues and pride, with the intellectual son-in-law and beloved daughter--he realizes that no eye can see him other than strange. He is the outsider--in perpetual flight from all that might bind him--from love, from the practical, vain, professional, and ambitious world. He is in flight from all that would deny the deep aesthetic texture of life and of nature, and their interrelation. 'That look! Sooner or later you met it in every human eye.' Professor Maury--sportsman and poetry lover with the beautiful voice--is, in one perspective, a wastrel, egotist, and bum. But in another he is a philosopher and a hero. He knows the most difficult truth about the process of living.

The stories gathered in *The Collected Stories of Caroline Gordon* are more than admirable examples of the 'solidity of specification.' They are dramatic examples of man in contact with man, and man in contact with nature; of living sympathy; of a disciplined style as unpretentious and clear as running water, but shot through with glints of wit, humor, pity, and poetry. Caroline Gordon belongs in that group of Southern women [Porter, Gordon, O'Connor, Welty] who have been enriching our literature uniquely in this century --all so different in spirit, attitude, and method, but all with the rare gift of the teller of the tale.

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The Collected Stories of Caroline Gordon
(Louisiana State/Farrar, Straus, & Giroux 1981, J. S. Sanders 1999)