

ANALYSIS

"The Burning Eyes" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"In the first story about Aleck Maury, 'The Burning Eyes,' (incorporated verbatim into the novel *Aleck Maury, Sportsman*), the boy encounters the beginning of his vocation. He has grown up in a womanless home, Oakleigh, where the ground is barren under the huge oak trees. 'There are no flowers on the lawn, not a shrub breaks the stark outline of the house where it rises among black trunks,' Aleck Maury recalls. 'I know now that this was because no woman's hand had tended Oakleigh since my mother's death and I used as a child to wonder if it was because grass and flowers would not grow in that soil'....

The boy surveys the landscape before him 'standing on a stump,' and for him the world is 'a curving dark stretch of woodland' and an 'old, red, winding road.' When he is eight years old, 'life, the secret life, that is compacted equally of peril and deep excitement' begins one night as he is taken on a possum hunt by a Negro servant, Ralph, whom Aleck thinks of as a kind of Cyclops because he is seven feet tall and has only one eye. The boy believes Ralph's wife's story that he 'poked [the other one] out on them old brambles' while he was hunting. When he and Ralph and the dog Ming go out together into the dark woods, it is a bright moonlit night; the dog bounds ahead of the hunters and gives out a 'loud, ecstatic note'; Ralph carries the boy along to the foot of a tree wherein a possum has taken refuge.

The boy looks up into the dark foliage of the tree; he sees the round, golden eyes of the possum. 'They regarded me steadily, or rather they regarded nothing. They glowed, and it was as if there was nothing in the world but whirling blackness and, set in it, those immense, those golden orbs.' The boy loses track of time, is caught in the blend of blackness and gold. Finally, the gun shatters the experience. 'A coarsely furred grey ball dropped onto the dead leaves at our feet.' This is the boy's first encounter with death; he is led to see it as an enemy in the life of nature which he seeks to share. That it must come to the quarry is part of the shared ritual; yet, though he accepts the death of the victim, Aleck Maury is never able to surmount his dread and horror of what is to be his lifelong adversary.

'The Burning Eyes,' then, depicts a joyless world, the 'waste land situation' of the epics--a gloomy house, a barren soil, a dark forest, tree stumps, a one-eyed guide, a domineering woman (his sister), a trip into the darkness. Into this gloom comes an encounter with the ecstasy of the hunt; the boy looks into the heart of life in the possum's eyes, and the grey ball that falls at his feet onto the dead leaves is what is left after the transport of communion. From here on, Aleck Maury will live a life of single-minded dedication in his desperation to keep communion with the primordial life of things. That one must spill blood to do so is the familiar paradox of the hunt, though he never loses his compassion for the life he spills or his love for the dogs and men who participate in the chase."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium

ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 17-18

This story dramatizes the beginning of Aleck Maury's life as a hunter at eight years of age and reveals psychological reasons for leading his adult life as he does. The boy has idealized the hunt and learns that it is not as simple as he imagined. There are hazards. He gets tangled in a vine like a "noose," gets scratched in the face by briars and is knocked down when he runs into a stump, experiences evoking the challenges and dangers of life as a hunter. Ralph lost an eye to brambles. Vines are a symbolic motif in Gordon's fiction, associated with snakes and evil in *The Strange Children*. Her depictions of the natural world are consistently archetypal. The hunt, as in Faulkner and in traditional Indian culture, disciplines character and is a spiritual quest that unites the hunter with the natural world.

The sense of attaining spiritual elevation Aleck feels on his first hunt is due to his being lifted up onto the shoulders of the giant Ralph, a guide who is black like the dark woods and who carries the only light. The light is truth. "The gun barrel was a moving shaft of light." Ralph introduces the boy to Nature, the fundamental reality of life on earth, which must end in death: "I seemed to be looking down instead of up." But he is actually looking up, at the possum. "Then I saw the eyes, round, golden." The roundness, the circularity, implies the perfection of the natural order. The burning eyes of the possum reflect Nature: They are golden. Life is precious, the opposite of death, the blackness. "They glowed, and it was as if there was nothing in the world but whirling blackness and, set in it, those immense, those golden orbs." That they are "burning" means they must sooner or later burn out.

That Ralph is black evokes social prejudice against him for his race. "White people and Negroes did not look at things the same way." In the story, Aleck has no guidance from white people. "I had perfect confidence in Ralph." That Ralph is the boy's guide is consistent with the prejudice Aleck will experience not for his race but for his lifestyle as a hunter and for his desire to be independent of women. "Sis Patty won't let me go." The death of his mother and governance by his sisters help to explain his solitary masculine priorities. Until recently, he has been dressed like a little girl, in a "pinafore."

His mentor has only one eye, like the Cyclops--and "the whole eye looked red"--symbolizing the incompleteness of Aleck's vision of life, its lack of a religious dimension, which in lesser souls than his can be monstrous. Aleck's father is missing in the story, as is the Father.

Michael Hollister (2020)