

ANALYSIS

"The Forest of the South" (1944)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"In 'The Forest of the South' several...images coalesce to establish the impact of this tale: the madness of Mrs. Mazereau, the mistress of the Villa Rosa plantation; the intensification of her daughter's disorders during the narrative; the Yankee killing, half by accident and half by design, of the returning Colonel Mazereau; the blowing up of the nearby estate, Clifton, because of a Yankee engineer's injured pride; the deserted Macrae mansion with its mute fountain as an emblem of lost greatness; the arrest there as a spy of Eugenie Mazereau's former lover by her Yankee fiancé, Lieutenant John Munford; the lover's subtle confirmation to Munford of Eugenie's eyelids to a magnolia blossom he had seen not long before: 'When he had first come into the country he had gathered one of those creamy blossoms only to see it turn brown in his grasp.'

His love for Eugenie too will wither as the flower once did, for he proposes to her without knowing that she is mad. Once he knows, he is bound in honor to marry her, but he divines that his future with her will be torture for both of them. In this unpredictable world the conquered girl becomes the conqueror of her suitor; the madness of the invader's enterprise recoils on Munford when he innocently allies himself to a girl whose degeneration has been caused by those who have fought like himself for an ideal without being able to foresee the consequences of their actions."

Frederick P. W. McDowell
Caroline Gordon
(U Minnesota 1966) 13-14

"'The Forest of the South' is about a Northern officer who falls in love with a Southern girl on whose plantation he is quartered. At the end of the story, the girl surrenders her cousin to her Yankee lover; the cousin, who is in federal uniform, is doomed to be shot as a spy. The story ends with a startling, but in retrospect, well-prepared-for reversal. The Southern officer reveals that his cousin is mad. In assuming responsibility for her, the Northern officer has given his prisoner a strange victory."

William J. Stuckey
Caroline Gordon
(Twayne 1972) 119-20

"The composition and formal integrity of 'The Forest of the South,' 'Hear the Nightingale Sing,' and 'The Ice House' deserve the closest possible attention. Each story, as a thing made, stands well on its own. Even so, from a necessity created by their themes and settings, the three tales should be treated in conjunction. Each renders as action some portion of the many-sided enemy which the South faced from 1861 through 1865 and in lesser but more deadly struggles before and since. Indeed, in working outward from the Yankee types appearing in this trio, it is possible to identify with remarkable accuracy what the 'second American Revolution' and its sequels once meant to the spiritually rebellious of Kentucky and the upper South. Possible, I say, to discover *from the inside* a felt history and to acquire therefrom some sense of the unbelievably desperate character of the conflict which turned a total culture aside from its natural course toward an imaginary tomorrow about which we now know more than we would like.

From Miss Gordon's recently published meditations (the 'Narrow Heart' material), from interviews, and from her novels, it is not difficult to justify an arrangement of these stories as a declension--a steady progression toward ruin. For if the South's defeat was a 'calamity' not merely for itself but also a 'calamity for the whole world,' then the sequence of stages leading up to that defeat has a sobering significance in its own right and likewise the sequence of agencies responsible for its accomplishment. As Miss Gordon 'knows' from prescriptive authority, as she further recognizes on her own, the North did not come all at once to the effort of making an even more 'perfect Union.' True enough, the War Between the States

brought about the 'second founding' Mr. Lincoln had anticipated since 1838. But only by slow stages, through a painfully circuitous winding *back and in*. The pattern implies, in other words, causation. Shifts in motive--though sometimes contradictory--set these stages off one from another....

No other fiction of hers, not even *None Shall Look Back* (perhaps the most utterly 'unreconstructed' of Southern novels), is so severe upon the destructive innocence of that puzzle, the 'mind of the North.' The hero here, Lieutenant John Munford, is a conventional New England abolitionist type, a decent man flawed by abstractionism. Set over against Munford is his immediate superior, Major Reilly, a representative of the European hegemony rejected by Munford's forbears in the building of that 'city on a hill' of which John Winthrop, Peter Buckeley, and their heirs spoke early and with eloquence in the formation of New England. Another, lesser, antagonist is Captain Frank Macrae, a Southern officer captured by Munford and his rival in self-destructiveness. Eugene Mazereau, however, is at the center of this short story. There is some mystery about her, both a madness and a method. Munford confronts, finally, only her--whether he knows it or not.

'The Forest of the South' opens with Munford and Reilly quartered at Villa Rosa, the Mazereau plantation situated in the country outside Natchez. The two Federal officers are awaiting the destruction of Clifton, a great house close by which is to be blown up because Mr. Surget of Clifton has neglected to protect his interests--has forgotten to invite the Yankee Chief Engineer to his sycophant dinners. This abuse of power is taken as a matter of course by these two champions of statism. Their tacit understanding is that unearned sorrow comes predictably to the conquered caught in the paths of campaigns like that one in which they are engaged. Taken with passivity, yes, but not for identical reasons. Reilly, the cynic and professional soldier who admires Clifton and the culture it represents, is (we are left to believe) dressed in Emancipation's blue coat only because arms are his profession and probable winners his preference in commanders. He never imagines that the war is 'about' anything but power. Munford is something else. He is reluctant to believe that the Chief Engineer has hidden his private anger under the flag, has avenged an imagined insult in constructing the Federal 'line of defense.' For the Lieutenant the delusion of 'collective election,' of the 'holy crusade,' blurs all sense of human limitations...

The older man mocks Munford's idealism and then sends the Lieutenant, well puzzled but uninstructed, back to the routine work of the garrison. The remainder of the story follows from this scene, this first moment of revelation. No detail is inert. Everything interacts--or will be revealed as interactive as the remainder of the narrative unfolds. Munford's exemplary innocence, the product of a mild but uneducable millennialism (and symbolized by the snow of his Connecticut recollections) has plunged him into a 'forest,' a dimension of experience close enough to his expectations to prevent his rethinking the military operation of which he makes a willing part and yet in its fundamental character almost completely unrelated to his 'cause.'

Clifton is a gaudy cotton snob's version of Brackets in *None Shall Look Back* and Penhally. As a trope it operates in the economy of this work in the tradition of the country places so often saluted in the English poetry of the Renaissance...and in much 'Tory' literature written since that time (Yeats, Ransom, Welty, Faulkner, Lytle, and other Southern novelists). Certainly it is, in some sense, the South. And, like the order it personifies, this splendid mansion (with its gardens, fountains, and swan-filled, artificial lake) falls victim to Juggernaut--is converted into a symbolic sacrifice by the minions of that primordial authority. People such as the Chief Engineer (or the nameless Dutchman who slaughters the hapless Colonel Mazereau on his own porch) have found for their private impulses a release from the mandates of civilized behavior through their small part in 'trampling out the grapes of wrath.'

Munford does not share fully in this 'liberty.' He cannot make war on noncombatants, forget courtesy, eschew the rule of manners, or neglect his duty as son and brother. Furthermore, he does not enjoy being hated personally for taking arms in behalf of his 'ideals.' Yet he, as a public man, is so absorbed in the war that he cannot understand such hatred. The word 'yankee' makes him wince, as does the memory of a girl in Tennessee who took an axe to her own piano rather than entertain Federal officers. Even so, Munford is a party to the psychology of 'innocence by association' and plays the game on his foot with the obsequious belly-up cur bitch favored by his men. And then he is harsh with that dog. This interlude on the stairs, occurring with Munford on his way to inquire after the needs of the ladies of the commandeered house,

informs the reader that Villa Rose is as fully 'destroyed' as Clifton--even though interior demoralization, not dynamite, is the cause. And it also marks the Connecticut officer and the objects of his solicitude as an extension of the desecrators vs. Clifton antithesis.

Munford is in his own right a fine man--apart from his notions. Events like the wrathful explosion of the Tennessee girl and the destruction of Clifton give him pause. Indeed he has an inchoate uneasiness about 'the conflict in which he [is] engaged.' Whose land 'by rights'? The question troubles him. And perhaps this (her charms aside) helps to explain his gravitation to Miss Mazereau. As is common in Miss Gordon's fiction, the passion develops swiftly and in large measure thanks to the girl. Munford's implicitly compensatory attentions, proceeding from a number of walks and rides in the country--especially one following hard after that visit to the ladies' cloister in the overseer's room and after Major Reilly's story of their suffering, is a piece of effrontery.

His immediate superior warns the boy that he is 'rash.' But Eugenie has mesmerized him. And perhaps on purpose. At the time of this second moment or climax to the story he has sensed a 'menace' in the shining Natchez air. He has watched the magnolia blossom 'turn brown in his grasp.' He knows that he is out of his element. Nonetheless, in the path of Amasa Delano of Melville's *Benito Cereno* and of his successors among righteous New England heroes, he never falters in the course of his optimism. Eugenie's mad smile in the Macrae garden is to him only an invitation. That it might be a vengeful snare never occurs to his confident simplicity.

Miss Mazereau is a 'queer girl,' as Reilly and John Munford agree. Strange, and as the Lieutenant should recognize, with reason. The mother is distraught at the death of Arsene, her husband, killed before the eyes of wife and child. Even before the war the family had broken with its Southern neighbors; and therefore the two women are without friends. Terror and craft combine in Eugenie's response. Her mother's escape is in pretending she is back in the Virginia of her girlhood. Eugenie pretends that she loves Yankees. First she becomes as obsequious as the aforementioned cur. She is grateful for indignities and thus makes her 'captors' uncomfortable. Then she pushes the strategy further. She plays the coquette with Munford in the Macrae's deserted garden close by Villa Rose. Later, more overtly, she tolls back her 'ogre' lover to that lifeless fountain and melancholy statue of a woman pouring water in the midst of waste. Once more the situation should have a premonitory effect on Connecticut's sanguine son. The scene cries out what forest he is in, that tigers are abroad in this land. But he is overcome by the juxtaposition of a dreamy Eugenie and the inverted image of earth's ordered bounty which frames her 'faint mysterious smile.' He finds her 'the most attractive woman he has ever seen' and ignores the thought that her vacancy has come of 'seeing something [she] cannot look away from.'

At this point we should be reminded of numerous tales of reconciliation through intersectional marriage written in the century following the 'Great Rebellion.' Miss Gordon has constructed a parody--a comment on the presumption of this propaganda fiction; for this marriage is a deepening of conflict, not an armistice. John does not associate Clifton or the garden of the Macraes with Eugenie. Neither will he admit that only a madwoman--a woman bent on terrible private revenge--could accept his suit under these circumstances. Being a man of 'principle,' he assumes that his private relations with the 'enemy' need not be touched by the 'exigencies' of war, by his enactment of a public virtue. The girl's suffering and his status, he assumes, are left behind when he gets Eugenie into his buggy.

Soon he is ready to send her home to his sister (in its inference that personal commitments will outweigh political choice) it contradicts the basic assumption of his position as a Federal soldier. He will not consider Reilly's reference to the men in the Mazereau family who are in Confederate service. For Eugenie does not call him Yankee. Totally feminine, she is beyond ideology. About this he is correct. And for such cause he should be wary of her separation from the notoriously unforgiving attitude of Southern women: a collective and impersonal hatred of persons whose identity is ideology. That the difference between the open hatred of her Southern sisters and Eugenie's smile masks an instinct to draw all her enemies privily [sharing in secret knowledge] after her into the 'dark' and the cobwebs he is too 'noble' to believe. That is, until one more ingredient is added to his adventure in Mississippi.

Miss Mazereau, Munford discovers, does not hate Yankees by name in that her malice has a more inclusive object. Men in general have been her nemesis. She uses John to injure one of them, her cousin Frank Macrae. The precise nature of this cousin to cousin relationship is not specified by the author. Yet it is clear that the Connecticut Lieutenant is lured back to the Macrae plantation only that he may capture the unsuspecting Rebel officer. Munford's first thought when Eugenie summons him from his work is that the girl is going to cancel their engagement. Then, at the door of the Macrae house, he considers the possibility of ambush. Eugenie reassures him that only one man made the boot tracks he finds in the hall. Macrae is, however, not only alone. In fact he plainly expects a visit from Miss Mazereau, has seen the girl here not long before, is off his guard and not at the moment involved in any military business.

There is, though, explanation for this offense against the blood located earlier in the story, explanation in keeping with the perverse 'logic' of Eugenie's derangement. On the occasion of their first trip to the Macrae home Munford is told by his sweetheart that Cousin Frank once mischievously 'decorated' the statue Eugenie stands in front of. The girl's eye brightens in recounting the story and she withdraws from John's caress. All of which is to say that (among other things) young Macrae is like the Federal soldiers: he has ruined the 'garden' in which woman's role is affirmed symbolically and thus reduced her dignity to a jest. In the historic action, he renders the sin of the Old Order in subjecting its women to the unendurable trials of total war.

What more is involved we cannot say. But as Frank tells his captor, there is a bond linking him to Eugenie, a bond beyond the concern for property that he mentions which compels him to marry her before his imminent execution. (Macrae is a spy, and is captured in a Federal uniform--a fact which adds to the already complicated overtones of the episode.) Munford does not consider the curiosity of his lady's conduct. His innocence (which equates his courtship of Eugenie and his earlier attentions to Connecticut girls) can concede only a gust of pity for his male captive and a moment's indignation when Macrae proposes to marry Eugenie himself. He answers 'haughtily,' lifting his 'fair head': 'That is impossible, Captain. Your cousin has promised to marry me.' He will make her happy, make her forget everything that had happened. Macrae is more surprised by this speech than he is with his cousin's treachery. But with the authority inherent in his situation and his previous words of solicitude for the girl, he brings home finally to the Northern soldier the awful truth about his commitment to Eugenie.

The third moment of illumination is too quiet to be called an epiphany. But it does round off Miss Gordon's evocative story on an appropriate note. After hearing from Eugenie's lips the sound that madness makes, after being told 'I do not envy you' by a man who is devoted to her and yet soon to die, Munford finally understands the enigmatic smile. Having made the engagement public and having committed himself to intersectional combination (as the North, on the level of the story's historical-political significance), Munford must submit to the image of his future as a deceptively pleasant green meadow, set in a 'dark and gauzy' frame under an ominous, exaggerated light.

Macrae's victorious glance confirms that Eugenie is the South John Munford deserves. As womankind's mythic representative, she is taken but still certain to punish the taker--through any military business. There is, though, explanation for this offense their archetypal Union manque--just as she has punished for correlative misdeeds Munford's Confederate counterpart. Surface action, topical envelope, and anagogical thrust mesh with telling symmetry in the Yankee soldier's 'dull' submission to his fate--perhaps more telling today than at the time of Miss Gordon's composition."

M. E. Bradford

"The High Cost of 'Union': Caroline Gordon's Civil War Stories"
The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 115-120

"In 'The Forest of the South'...the...powerless Eugenie Mazereau retreats into a vindictive madness, but the story concerns not only masculine insensitivity toward women, but the North's moralistic obtuseness to Southern culture. The central intelligence is Lieutenant Munford, a Union officer who falls in love with the daughter of the house his forces are occupying. He is uncomfortable about courting Eugenie under the circumstances, but never doubts the Northern cause. 'He would do it all over again, to strike the shackles from the wrists of slaves.' Despite the warnings of his superior officer and Eugenie's betrayal of her own

cousin to Federal soldiers, he persists in blindness to her madness. 'He swore that he would make her forget everything that had happened.'

'Everything' includes the murder of her father and her mother's premature senility. M. E. Bradford points out that 'Munford's innocence' is the 'product of a mild but uneducable millennialism,' and, 'in the path of Amasa Delano of Melville's *Benito Cereno* and of his successors among righteous New England heroes, he never falters in the course of his optimism. Eugenie's mad smile in the Macrae garden is to him only an invitation. That it might be a vengeful snare never occurs to his confident simplicity.'

'The Forest of the South' is in many ways a Southern version of Hawthorne's 'Rappaccini's Daughter' that might better be called 'The Garden of the South.' The story is full of menacing gardens. The first image is the blowing up of Clifton with its famous gardens by a Yankee engineer who destroys it in a fit of pique. In contrast to the engineer, Munford refuses to recognize the poisonous effect of the exotic Southern garden on a Northerner, although he senses it. As he watches a brilliant hummingbird and hears men's distant voices, he muses that 'He had never known it so quiet before. But the stillness was oppressive, and the landscape, he thought suddenly, too bright. This shining air held a menace.'

In the deserted garden of her cousin's house, he proposes to Eugenie, even though he associates her with the threatening Southern vegetation: "The lids [of her eyes] were heavy, so heavy that they dimmed the brilliance of her glance. And the lids themselves had a peculiar pallor, wax-white, like the petals of the magnolia blossom. When he had first come into this country he had gathered one of those creamy blossoms only to see it turn brown in his grasp.' Love once more withers in the poisonous atmosphere of the Garden of the South, and paradise is lost again."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 169-70

"An account of Yankee occupation and the courtship of a Union officer and a southern girl, 'The Forest of the South' inverted the typical patterns: the marriage of blue and gray led not to reconciliation but to terror, because the southern belle had gone mad."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 243

"The Forest of the South" concludes with a plot surprise of the kind characteristic of Poe, but it is also rich in irony and revelations of character and culture that are largely absent in Poe. What stands out most is the grace under pressure of Captain Macrae and how honorable both he and Lieutenant Munford display themselves to be. The plot depends on their sense of honor. Their honor reflects well upon many officers who fought in the Civil War, North and South. The story opens with an example of the opposite type of officer, also common, the Chief Engineer who blows up a mansion and its beautiful gardens "because he was not invited to dinner." That he is the "Chief Engineer" is an indictment of the personal vindictive spirit with which many acts of destruction were inflicted by the Union Army upon the South. The genteel southern girl Eugenie has been driven insane just witnessing the war, and she may have a suppressed desire for revenge a lot stronger than what motivated the Chief Engineer.

Few men today would sacrifice their own happiness for the rest of their lives to care for an insane woman who has lost all normal feelings and values including fidelity. Eugenie appears to reject the Confederate Captain in favor of the Union Lieutenant because of whose side won the war. Such a woman could not love a man back and would be a torture, as Isabel is to Kevin Reardon in *The Strange Children*. Lieutenant Munford embodies the ignorance of the South and its culture that Southerners considered typical of Northerners. He is naive about human nature as well. Simply because he is lonely and she is the most attractive girl he has ever seen, he wants to marry this girl even though he asks himself, "how could you make yourself agreeable to a girl when you were occupying the house that by rights should have been hers?" And who is also indirectly responsible for the axe murder of her father in front of her eyes. And who takes her away from her home to cold far-off Connecticut among the enemy. And "Munford wondered what his mother and sister would think when they were confronted with the old woman and had to listen to

her ravings." Not to mention his insane wife. And now, in the end, he will have been responsible for the execution of her betrothed, a handsome gallant childhood sweetheart she will likely idealize. How will Munford live up to that? No wonder, reversing the outcome of the war, the look that Macrae gives Munford after forcing him on his honor to take on all the responsibilities involved in caring for the mad girl, is "victorious." He is escaping a fate worse than death.

The South has figuratively reverted to a forest because it has gone wild: its gardens have gotten blow up, been abandoned or fallen into decay. Gardens are archetypal symbols of the heart, recurrent in traditional American literature. The fountains have gone dry. Fountains in Gordon as in Hawthorne and O'Connor are symbols of spirit--the essence of the soul. Eugenie stands beside the dry fountain in the garden of the Macrae mansion where she once was courted by the man she will betray to the enemy: "in much the same attitude as that of the marble figure" in the center of the fountain, a woman with a water pitcher that once poured into the fountain, but "no water had run there for a long time now."

Michael Hollister (2020)