

## ANALYSIS

"The Last Day in the Field" (1935)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"Nostalgic fervor pervades 'The Last Day in the Field,' as Maury, succumbing to age and failing physical powers, pays a ritual farewell to the chase that has sustained him for so long."

Frederick P. W. McDowell  
*Caroline Gordon*  
(U Minnesota 1966) 12

"The dominant imagery in the second of the Aleck Maury stories, 'The Last Day in the Field,' speaks of life remaining past its due season in something that otherwise should be dead. 'That was the fall when the leaves stayed green so long,' the story begins. Elderberry bushes hit by light frost still stand up straight 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.' Aleck Maury views the bushes and thinks, 'Ah-ha, it'll get you yet!'....thinking how frost creeps higher and higher out of the ground each night of fall.' These and other details reinforce the importance of Aleck Maury's leg, crippled by rheumatism, which, even though Aleck's interior delight at hunting has not abated from his childhood, makes this indeed the last day in the field.

His piety toward the hunt, his skill, his craft--all have grown, over the years, into a body of wisdom revealed to the reader by means of contrast. Joe Thomas, a young man who owns two fine dogs that have been trained in Kentucky and are ready for the field, asks Aleck to go hunting with him when the weather is right. On the morning after a sufficiently heavy frost, Aleck is up, tapping at the boy's window, making breakfast, and taking the lead, eager to pursue the only life that holds transcendent joy for him. The boy is sluggish, hard to awaken, slow to react, and yet in the field impatient, too hasty, careless. Aleck savors each detail and, despite the growing pain of the leg, takes his time.

In his memory, the whole enveloping action of a shared lifetime of hunting is re-evoked: people, places, dogs, events. 'I looked at him [the big dog] and thought how different he was from his mate and like some dogs I had known--and men, too--who lived only for hunting and could never get enough no matter how long the day was.' But this is a long day, this last one. The leg is a crippling hindrance; evidence of Maury's pain abound. 'Man, you're sweating,' Joe says. Aleck explains it as the result of hot work, but he knows that he cannot continue much longer....

They come to 'as birdy a place' as Maury has ever seen; and he knows he will have to hunt it despite the pain. The dogs have covered a bevy of birds; but Joe, careless and over-eager as he has been all day, takes 'one step too many' and the birds explode into flight. Both hunters fire, and both get their birds. But the covey is gone, and no singles seem to remain. Suddenly Joe sees the big dog pointing: he has uncovered a single. 'Your shot,' Aleck tells the boy. But in a gesture of maturity and magnanimity...Joe steps aside for Aleck Maury to have the last shot.

Again the experience of communion is bound up in the experience of death. Aleck Maury is intensely aware of his own mortality--of being 'in the fading light.' For the first time during the day he shoots too quick and must try again. The bird, struck and mortally wounded, takes on the appearance of more intense life for a few moments as it suddenly soars 'above the rim of the hill and above the tallest hickories.' It appears to hang there, 'its wings black against the gold light,' before its rapid descent as a part of universal mortality. It is 'like an autumn leaf,' in its fall, 'like the leaves that were everywhere about us, all over the ground.' Maury, the viewer, is aware of his own participation in the death of what he hunts. Death the great enemy is closer to him now than it was in 'The Burning Eyes.' And it is from death, approaching him by the

inexorable march of time that he flees, though in this story he is simply caught up and merged in that death without rejecting it. And the experience of discovering a noble dog and of helping to educate a young hunter make the story more affirmative than negative."

Louise Cowan

"Aleck Maury, Epic Hero and Pilgrim"

*The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium*  
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 18-20

"The time of 'The Last Day in the Field' is November. It has been a long summer, and Aleck Maury is impatiently waiting for cold weather and the beginning of the hunting season. His wife Molly, always the voice of common sense, says, 'You aren't going to hunt this year, Aleck? Remember how you stayed awake nights last fall with that pain in your leg.' Maury does not reply. But, as he watches the progress of the light frost--'It creeps higher and higher out of the ground each night of fall,' he thinks to himself--'Ha ha. It'll get you yet.' When the chilling frost comes and the weather turns cold, Maury is ready for the hunt. He rises early so that Molly will not hear him; wakes Joe Thomas, the boy next door who has two of the best hunting dogs Maury has ever seen; and they drive off together to hunt quail.

It turns out to be a perfect day for hunting; and the country, which is 'rough, broken ground, scrub oak with a few gum trees and lots of buckberry bushes,' provides all the quail Maury and Joe Thomas can hunt. The dogs, particularly the male, do their work beautifully, and Maury is reminded of a dog he had when he was a young man. Joe Thomas is impatient to shoot and has not learned, as Maury has, the pleasure and wisdom of taking his time and of getting his bird with one, well-placed shot. As Maury silently criticizes Joe Thomas, he also thinks, 'It's a wonderful thing to be twenty years old.' Maury is in his seventies, a heavy man with a bad leg; and, as the hunt stretches out into the late afternoon and evening, he begins to suffer and sweat. He never complains, of course; and, though he thinks about knocking off at sundown, he cannot since he is one of those men 'who lived only for hunting and could never get enough no matter how long the day was.' Actually, these words are used by Maury to describe another man who shot himself when he found that his hunting days were over.

Fear of invalidism, of the loss of delight, is something that Maury confronts on a number of occasions; but in this story the positive emotion--the joy of being alive, the pleasure of the hunt--predominates. As the sun goes down and twilight comes, the two hunters are about to call it a day when the dogs pin down a single bird. 'Your shot,' Maury says to Joe Thomas; but Joe shakes his head and answers. 'No, you take it'... The conclusion of this story, unpretentious and beautifully evocative, catches exactly in its rhythms and in the image of the hunter, the falling bird, and the autumn leaves not only this last poignant pleasure that Maury gets from hunting but also the immemorial value of this kind of life."

William J. Stuckey

*Caroline Gordon*

(Twayne 1972) 115-16

"In 'The Last Day in the Field,' Maury is an old man hobbled by a bad leg and poor health. Yet in November, with the first killing frost, he takes to the woods with his young friend Joe for some bird hunting. He is still an expert shot and loves the sport as much as ever, yet as the title makes clear, this is Maury's final day of shooting. His decrepit leg will from now on bar him from the pursuit: 'My leg was stiff from the hip down and every time I brought it over the pain would start in my knee, zing, and travel up and settle in the small of my back. I walked with my head down, watching the light catch on the ridges of Joe's brown corduroy trousers and then shift and catch again as he moved forward. Sometimes he would get on ahead and then there would be nothing but the black tree trunks coming up out of the dead leaves that were all over the ground.'

This story ends as Maury takes his last shots of the day and watches the bird fall. '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.' Maury knows that he too will soon be following the fallen dove [quail] and the autumn leaves."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.

*Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South*

(U Mississippi 1985) 83-84

"In 'The Last Day in the Field,' Maury goes hunting for what will probably be the last time. The route he takes out of Gloversville can be traced in present-day Clarksville: 'We got in the buggy and started out, up Seventh Street, on over to College, and out through Scufftown...on over the Red River bridge and out into the open country.' Caroline's descriptions of the countryside are peerless.... The last lines, after Maury shoots a bird, are memorable."

Ann Waldron  
*Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance*  
(Putnam's 1987) 142

"In 'The Last Day in the Field,' Maury confronts a snare which he cannot escape, his own mortality. As he rests his bad leg, before returning home, he decides to take a last shot at a bird. The quiet elegance of Gordon's autumnal imagery conveys a sense of how the autumn of life feels to Aleck Maury. '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.'"

Veronica A. Makowsky  
*Caroline Gordon: A Biography*  
(Oxford 1989) 124-25

"Caroline had originally intended to use this episode in her novel. In the tale the aging sportsman had to face his own mortality and come to grips with the fact that he was no longer physically able to hunt. He went on what would be his last day in the field with an eager but inexperienced twenty-year-old. Caroline sketched the contrast between youth and age in poignant, bittersweet tones. Aleck fought hard against his limitations but could no longer escape. His reflections almost became his own elegy."

Nancylee Novell Jonza  
*The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon*  
(U Georgia 1995) 149

Aleck Maury is heroic in continuing to hunt despite his bad leg, in contrast to Charley Morrison, who implicitly shot himself on his last hunt. This contrast is also made in "One More Time," where Aleck's friend Bob Reynolds drowns himself rather than undergo the suffering of cancer and his inability to fish anymore. By enduring his pain Aleck is able to teach the boy Joe Thomas and to handle and enjoy the fine dogs as they work the field and flush birds in response to his directions. The dogs are so good they remind him of his pointer Gyges, "the best dog any man ever had." These dogs are an inspiration to the old man: The female "had one of the merriest tails I've ever watched."

"The Burning Eyes" (1945) depicts Aleck's initiation into the mystique of hunting as a child only eight years old. "The Last Day in the Field" (1935) depicts him as an old man at the end of his life as a hunter, mentoring a boy, teaching him patience and good judgment. Rather than kill himself, hereafter Aleck devotes himself wholly to the joys of fishing. In "The Burning Eyes" he sees the eyes of the possum up in a tree reflecting light and they are "golden." In this story as the quail falls out of the sky the light is "gold." Life, truth and these intense experiences are more precious to Aleck than gold.

The plain style of the story is consistent with the character of Aleck, focusing the attention of the reader on the subtle implications of actions and images without the distraction of figurative language. Also like Hemingway, Gordon increases the sense of forward movement by minimizing internal punctuation and inverted syntax, maintaining for the most part sentence structures of subject-verb-predicate, contributing to the impression that she "writes like a man." This plain style sets up the long final sentence of the story, in which seven commas create rhythms and a tempo that mimic the falling bird and falling leaves: "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."

Michael Hollister (2020)