

ANALYSIS

"The Olive Garden" (1945)

Caroline Gordon

(1895-1981)

"The Olive Garden' is about Edward Dabney, who thinks back to the things he loved before the war and knows that the ravages of the conflict must have made all unrecognizable. He knows that Henry James was wrong when he supposed that one could love 'trees, houses, stretches of road you walked along ten years ago.' Though he does not intend to, he returns to such a scene, at Cap Brun in the south of France, and goes from familiar spot to familiar spot in search of someone he knows. The war has not changed the places at all, however, but it has changed the people. He is no longer with Susan Ferris, his fiancée in former days, and he cannot find the people who kept the Brasserie de la Source, nor Monsieur Dupont the grocer, nor Madame and Monsieur LeClerc, whose villa he had once rented.

As in 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!' the narrator begins to realize that places are real and that they last longer than people. Even the two chairs, dilapidated and fallen, are still on the terrace of the villa where he and Susan had once sat. The tone of the story is distinctly elegiac and in a Proustian mode which is distinctly different from Miss Gordon's usual tone. None of the people Dabney had known are left, not one, and he turns from the terrace to look at the sea, that constant symbol of eternity. Along the coast he has a glimpse of the even greater antiquity of the place when he recalls that the caves below are said to have once sheltered Ulysses. Pirates had used the road during the Roman period. But his thoughts turn from Ulysses to Deucalion and Pyrrha, after the Flood, who were told by the Delphic oracle to strew the earth with the bones of their mother. Remembering this myth and taking comfort in the idea that from the stones a new race of men might spring, he turns and walks back from the sea.

Dabney learns to overcome his personal nostalgia and to absorb himself in a larger vision of the universe and history. In his new-found hope, which arises not out of pure reflection but out of a true search and true experience of loneliness, he earns the right to go on. It is typical of this story that only after sense detail and a journey in search of personal meeting does the ironic turn occur--the turn which changes our expectations. We either suppose that Dabney will, finally, meet someone from his past or will find nothing at all and return disheartened. But it is through an illumination of place by myth and the imagination that he comes to understand why man can never be alone. The insight would be impossible without the experience of loneliness and loss; the hope would be equally impossible without the longer and deeper cultural and moral experience which each man absorbs from his tradition...

['The Olive Garden'] is an illustration of Miss Gordon's flexibility and of her central beliefs. Both [it and 'Emmanuele! Emmanuele!'] are concerned with a young man who finds himself not in terms of his own actions but as a result of understanding the actions of another, whether it be Guillaume Fay or Deucalion and Pyrrha. These, for the purposes of their stories, are equally mythological characters, though the myth of Gide is one that is within living memory. Heyward, whose name suggests 'wayward' and hence a certain amount of aimlessness, is only half-hearted in his attempts to imitate Fay directly. Though he actually loves his wife a great deal, he cannot hold to the kind of rigorous letter-writing carried out by his mentor. When he is allowed to contribute to the poem *Heracles*, his suggestion consists of no more than an exclamation point, an emphasis, so to speak, of something Fay has already said. In the other story, Dabney's wandering also appears to be aimless, a potentially self-indulgent and tearful attempt to search out times past. In the end, however, both men discover themselves by discovering meaning outside themselves. Miss Gordon, meanwhile, never resorts to aimlessness in exploring the random, or seemingly random, nature of their rich experiences."

Robert S. Dupree

"Caroline Gordon's 'Constants' of Fiction"

The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon: A Critical Symposium
ed. Thomas H. Landess (U Dallas 1972) 45-47

"Evidence that Gordon had not yet fixed solidly on a belief in the Christian tradition is found in a short story from this period, 'The Olive Garden' (1945). Here we find another rootless university professor, Edward Dabney, who like Jim Chapman eventually finds meaning and commitment. Yet Dabney's enlightenment is not Christian in scope, but classical; and Gordon seems to be suggesting here that identification with the heroes of the Western historical tradition is a path that, like Chapman's, lies open to modern man.

Dabney's illumination occurs in France, where he is visiting the village in which he and his fiancée had lived for a time years earlier, before they broke up. Much has changed for Dabney since his earlier days in Europe. Then he was enlivened with youthful love and energetic vision; now, ten years later, he is emotionally stale and intellectually fatigued. His return visit is bittersweet; it soon becomes obvious that the summer from his past stands as the most meaningful and important experience in his life--and it is long gone, lost and apparently irrecoverable. Dabney shows no signs that he carries any hope for renewal.

Near the end of the story, however, as he walks to the edge of a terrace overlooking the Mediterranean coast, Dabney has a moment of enlightenment. Looking down at the sea below, he thinks of those ancient heroes who have passed this way before him--Ulysses and the pirates from the days of Julius Caesar come directly to mind. He then thinks of Deucalion, who, he asserts, 'was one hero lonelier than even Ulysses had been on his wanderings.' He goes on to ponder: 'Deucalion, who, after the flood, walked the earth, companioned only by his wife, Pyrrha. The Delphic Oracle told them to strew the earth with the bones of their mother. Pyrrha shrank from the impiety, but Deucalion picked up stones and cast them far and wide and from those stones, just such stones as one found in this flinty soil, a new race of men had sprung up.'

These thoughts bring Dabney to a new level of awareness. He sees now that he--in fact everybody--is integrally linked to the classic Western tradition, and that by following the lead of the ancient heroes, he gains meaning and purpose in life. He now understands through the example of Deucalion that even after disaster and defeat, a person must resume his mission in life and renew his commitment to do the best he can. So refurbished, Dabney turns from the sea, and how all looks different: 'He turned his back on the sea and walked along the moon-splotched path to the gate. He put a hand out as he went, touching a spray here, a flower there. The garden no longer seemed deserted. He did not now wish that he might meet somebody on its paths. Far below, in the rocky caves, that would always furnish refuge, that could, if they were needed, bring forth a new race of men, he could hear the heroes murmuring to each other.'

More than Tate, Gordon looked to the classical tradition as a source for furnishing modern man with meaning and order. With her profound interest in the role of the hero, she had throughout her career suggested parallels between her heroes and those of antiquity. But 'The Olive Garden' marks an important shift. In earlier works, the parallels between modern man and the ancient heroes almost always pointed to a diminishment in the stature of contemporary man. Irony was inevitably present, and defeat before the forces of chaos and anarchy was imminent. In 'The Olive Garden,' however, the ironic vision is absent. Even though he lacks the stature of the active and energetic heroes of previous works, Edward Dabney achieves what they do not: a redemptive vision of man transcending time by taking his place in the ongoing traditions of the modern world. Tate had evoked this sort of vision in 'The Mediterranean'--only to have a stark realization of the course of history come crashing through to shatter the spell. Gordon in the 1940s was more optimistic; for her the classical spirit still lived."

Robert H. Brinkmeyer, Jr.
Three Catholic Writers of the Modern South
(U Mississippi 1985) 94-95

"For 'The Olive Garden,' which is about a man returning to France immediately after the war, she used details of Cap Brun, [Ford Madox] Ford's villa, and the Villa les Hortensias. Allen thought it was one of the best stories she had ever written and wanted it for *The Sewanee Review*, but he realized she could get more money elsewhere."

Ann Waldron
Close Connections: Caroline Gordon and the Southern Renaissance
(Putnam's 1987) 232

"The Olive Garden' is quite Jamesian in style, plot, and narration. The first sentences echo James's hesitations, indirections, and refinements as Gordon introduces the reader to the story's central consciousness.... Like the protagonist of James's 'The Jolly Corner,' Dabney is seeking the memories of a happier time, in his case, the years prior to the Second World War, when he was engaged to Susan Ferris, and both were living in the south of France with another couple, The Matthews.

Dabney finds a postwar wasteland: fountains without water, ruined houses, roads pitted by artillery; it is a landscape that mirrors his interior desolation at the unexplained loss of Susan Ferris. In the gardens of a deserted neighboring villa, Dabney is drawn to, but hesitates to take, Susan's favorite path that leads to a figure of a 'cowled Madonna.' Although he promises himself he will take that path on his way back, the reader does not know if he actually does, for the story ends with his meditation on the caves below. There, according to legend, Ulysses, Deucalion, and pirates found shelter. In the story's concluding sentence, Dabney finds consolation in the rocky caves, that would bring forth a new race of men, he could hear the heroes murmuring to each other.'

Through Dabney, Caroline is evaluating the Tates' past and indicating the direction of their future. The setting of 'The Olive Garden' is Toulon where in 1932 the Tates had spent some happy months with Ford Madox Ford, Janice Biala, and Sally Wood. The bloated wasteland embodies the Tates' marital paradise lost, but through that landscape Caroline is groping for a revivifying change. The path of the cowled Madonna represents her increasing attraction to Catholicism. Dabney's hesitation to take it and his final meditation on heroes, so reminiscent of Allen's 'The Mediterranean,' uncannily presages Allen's initial reluctance to join Caroline on the way to Mother Church. The story must also have contained powerful resonances for Allen since he praised it highly and published it in the *Sewanee Review*. As 'The Olive Garden' indicates, the consolations of religion were increasingly attractive to Caroline in the midst of what she perceived as artistic and marital stagnation."

Veronica A. Makowsky
Caroline Gordon: A Biography
(Oxford 1989) 175-76

"The story was about Edward Dabney, a professor of English, who returned to France after the war and revisited favorite haunts, especially the abandoned Villa Agatha, which he had discovered with his first love, Susan. Although Caroline never used the mysterious line which started her writing, she used both the olive trees and the nightingale within the story as a subtle metaphor for the creation of art out of chaos. The olive trees could not be tamed or domesticated in the garden. Yet beneath the tangle of their limbs, the nightingales created their nests, often startling the unknowing visitor with a burst of song.

In 'The Olive Garden' Caroline recreated scenes from her memories of Toulon in 1932. Experimenting with mood and setting, she again inverted traditional patterns. While Edward wandered through the Villa Agatha and the surrounding countryside, he remembered people from his past, so vividly the reader might expect the story to end with a reunion. But all the people Edward had known and loved were long dead, just as the villa had long been deserted, and Edward's only reunion was with his memories and shades from the underworld.

Caroline closed the story by extending the metaphor of the nightingales hidden in the olive grove. Looking at the sea, Edward remembered the legend that Ulysses had found refuge in one of the nearby caves during the course of his wanderings. Wallowing in his own loneliness, Edward also thought about another hero, one 'lonelier than ever Ulysses had been in his wanderings,' Deucalion. And suddenly Edward no longer wished to meet someone during his walk through the garden: he realized that he was not alone. 'Far below, in the rocky caves, that would always furnish refuge, that could, if they were needed, bring forth a new race of men, he could hear the heroes murmuring to each other,' Caroline wrote. Like the underground stream of Caroline's early fiction, or the nightingale in the olive garden, the subterranean world was a source of inspiration, and the heroes of myth were comforting companions for lonely wanderers."

Nancylee Novell Jonza
The Underground Stream: The Life and Art of Caroline Gordon
(U Georgia 1995) 244-45

In "The Olive Garden" Gordon diverges from Henry James, a major influence upon her but "in many ways an old fool." She mimics his style at first with abstract analysis, withheld facts, vague specificity, and a question, much as James opens *The Ambassadors*: "On the way over Edward Dabney told people only that he intended to stop in Paris [the destination of Lambert Strether in *The Ambassadors*]. He did not mention the name of the other city. And indeed, he had never actually planned to go there. It was merely that the idea, coupled with an incident from the past, had so persistently presented itself to him all that spring. An incident?" Then Dabney proceeds like Marcel Proust in *Remembrance of Things Past*, treasuring precious memories that lead to a revival of spirit in the olive garden.

Dabney's soul has run as dry as the fountain in the garden. This fountain, like the one in the garden of Southerners ruined by the Civil War in "The Forest of the South," has been abandoned due to war. His loneliness and sadness also seem due in some measure to the end of his romance with Susan Ferris, who contributed so much to his happiness before the war and whose last name evokes the generic term Ferris Wheel (1893), which may be comparable in movement to his relationship with her. To imbibe the joys of that time he must risk pain and break the neck of a wine bottle to drink it, exposing himself to getting cut: "He took a long draught, feeling the splintered edge of glass sharp against his lip." The only hint we are given of why he never married Susan is that they preferred different paths, hers religious and his literary, romantic and classical: "Susan's favorite" was a walk ending at a religious statue: "A cowed Madonna, with lilies thrusting up about her feet. But he had always preferred the path that led *downhill* through the olive orchard. The moon was up." [Italics added.] The moon is up, a traditional symbol of romance, but the path of romance leads downward to death. Those he knew in this place "are all dead." As a Realist, Gordon debunks romanticism. The romantic Dabney prefers the path to a "wild spot" where the trees grow in a tangle. He wants to "see a tree thrusting its limbs out as wildly, as uncontrollably as nature intended." From within the tangle he hears the song of nightingales, a bird associated in literature with the ode of the romantic poet Keats, evoked in Gordon's story "Hear the Nightingale Sing." Elevated by natural beauty, from here he "took the path up to the villa" and gazes down at the sea.

Thinking of literature, Dabney identifies with Ulysses, from Homer and from Joyce, who according to legend took shelter in the caves below where he is standing. Then he identifies with a "hero lonelier than ever Ulysses had been in his wanderings." Deucalion cast stones far and wide, representing the bones of his mother, and the stones gave birth to "a new race of men." Like Ulysses, Dabney takes refuge in the caves, which for him evoke the history of lonely heroes. Inspired by them, he hopes that from the bones of those who died in the war will spring an improved race of men. Note that, in the end, "He turned his back on the sea and walked along the *moon-splotched path* to the gate." [Italics added.] Accompanied by the heroes in his mind, "The garden no longer seemed deserted." He touches the perishable flowers on his way out and proceeds to the path toward eternity: He has already said that he will now follow the path that Susan preferred: "He would go out that way." Though his soul is revived by romantic feelings, by Nature and by classical myths, in the end he will follow the path of religious faith.

More specifically, the statue of the Madonna identifies the path he will be following as Christianity, which makes this olive garden evoke the most famous olive garden in history, the garden of Gethsemane on the Mount of Olives, where Christ was taken away to be crucified.

Michael Hollister (2020)