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Jerry A. Herndon
Murray State University

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ALECK MAURY'S TRAGIC SENSE OF LIFE

JERRY A. HERNDON

MURRAY STATE UNIVERSITY

Critics of Caroline Gordon's *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (1934) have generally agreed that the theme is Aleck's contest with time and death, a contest he carries on through a life-long, passionate commitment to the rituals of hunting and fishing. His quarry is delight, his purpose to forestall mutability by wringing from time's grasp every bright, golden day possible.

But, despite agreement on the novel's theme, the critics have varied widely in their assessment of the ultimate meaning of Maury's life. Louise Cowan finds his pursuit of nature's secrets "foredoomed to failure," and sees his pursuit as "a flight," which ends finally in his "defeat and betrayal" as he finds himself "trapped in nature."¹ William Van O'Connor says that Maury lives a "highly successful life,"² and avers that in him "skillful, thoughtful, and sensitive men win at least a temporary victory—all they have ever hoped to win."³

Radcliffe Squires characterizes Aleck Maury as a "perfectly happy hero,"⁴ while most other critics see tragic implications in his story. Louise Cowan⁵ and James E. Rocks,⁶ for example, see it as ending in failure. Others, while commenting on the tragic overtones, do not see the novel as unmitigated tragedy. William J. Stuckey,⁷ for instance, points out that Maury does recover from his wife's death through his rediscovery of his delight in the natural world. He says the novel "is not a tragedy."⁸ Frederick P. W. McDowell comments that, while "there are tragic aspects to Maury's career," there are also "rich fulfillments."⁹ He sees the novel as exhibiting a "double-edged view of life as both exhilarating and poignant...."¹⁰

Critics also tend to divide over the question of whether Aleck Maury's life is properly characterized as "heroic" or as "irresponsible." Mary O'Connor is one of several who takes the heroic view, seeing Maury as an "independent and unconquerable old man."¹¹ Jane Gibson Brown finds him "a hero only by default," who, though he has achieved "a kind of dignity and discipline," has done so at the cost of "renunciation of his family and community...."¹² Andrew Nelson Lytle agrees that Maury has neglected family responsibilities for his sport, and sees "the death of his wife...[as a] judgment upon...his feckless manhood."¹³

Andrew Lytle also suggests that Aleck's "obsessive" commitment to hunting and fishing is a consequence of his sense of dislocation, wrought by the "ruin" of the ante-bellum order:

Behind his pursuit of the arts of the field and stream lies the ruin of the hierarchical values which he might have expected to sustain him. In this society hunting and fishing would have taken their proper place; but because of the ruin, and in his terms this meant a loss of identity...he instinctively turned to the one knowledge and love more nearly a substitute. But the pursuit of his pleasure becomes obsessive, so that in the end it becomes not pursuit but flight....¹⁴

In another critical piece, Lytle remarks further on Aleck Maury. He says that Maury "is an exile...[who] has instinctively chosen the one ritual left which can more nearly use all of his resources. Of course it never quite does it. Hunting and fishing had their places in the society that was destroyed. They were not meant to fill out a man's total occupation."¹⁵

And, Lytle says, Maury, as a "dispossessed" man, "is seeking [a] means of preserving [his] integrity...." In the ante-bellum culture, Maury would have been one of "its ornaments and leaders."¹⁶ Several critics have followed Lytle's lead. James E. Rocks, for instance, says that Maury "spends a lifetime in search of his rightful position in the agrarian society of the modern South."¹⁷

II

It seems appropriate at this point, in view of the notable lack of critical agreement, to give the novel a fresh reading. This reading will overlap the interpretations of several of the critics reviewed, but it will attempt to demonstrate what they usually present simply as assertion.

To begin with, Lytle's influential view of Maury as displaced ante-bellum agrarian deserves some criticism. One suspects, in the first place, that it is man's mortality, not social and economic change, which is Aleck Maury's goad. One suspects that, given the kind of man he is, Maury would have been as much of a sportsman in the Old South as in the New. As a plantation owner, one imagines, he would have hunted and fished far and wide while his overseer ran the plantation. If he were a schoolteacher, he would undoubtedly have spent as

much time in the field and as little in the classroom in the 1850s as he did in the 1890s.

Actually, the interesting thing about the post-bellum southern agrarian's life, as displayed in the novel, is how little it had changed, despite the war. The care and feeding of slaves had given way to the free-labor wage system or to the share-cropping system, but plantations like that of Maury's Uncle James were still owned and managed by the whites and tilled by the blacks, while the gentry still rode to the hounds.

When Aleck Maury was hired to teach a rural community school in southwest Kentucky, the arrangement was for the parents of the students to pay the tuition which constituted his salary.¹⁸ The same system would have been utilized in the Virginia of the 1850s to pay the master of an "Old-Field" school. And Maury finds the agrarian life still possible, hardly ruined. Mr. Fayerlee has sizeable holdings, believes in crop diversification and crop rotation, and expects the fertilizer formula invented by his kinsman, Charles Fayerlee, to be used eventually to help " 'rejuvenate worn out lands all over the south....' " (AMS, 76-77). Undoubtedly, Mr. Fayerlee would welcome Maury as a partner when he marries Molly Fayerlee, but he is simply not interested. Mr. Fayerlee arises at 3:30 every morning (or earlier, in lambing time) and always gets to bed after dark. Aleck Maury has about all he can stand of this steady routine during a one-week stint in lambing time. He tells Mr. Fayerlee, " 'I could get up early when I had something [a fishing expedition or hunting trip] on hand but I didn't believe I could do it every morning to save my neck' " (AMS, 97, 92-97).

The point is this: Aleck Maury, as schoolteacher, has found precisely the "position in the agrarian society of the modern South" which he needs. The occupation gives him considerable free time to spend in hunting and fishing, just as the same position would have in the ante-bellum South. He does not wish to be fitted too tightly into the agrarian scheme; i. e., he prefers being an "ornament" of that way of life to being one of its "leaders." He remarks that, as he rides away from Mr. Fayerlee, bound on a fishing trip:

I remember thinking...that I would not have changed places with him for all the money in the world. He had once told me that he had never gone fishing except as a very small boy and had never had a gun in his hand until at the age of fifteen he enlisted in the Confederate army. (AMS, 97)

Aleck Maury and his shooting partner, Jim Fayerlee, have, in "the farms of the various members of the connection, something like 20,000 or 30,000 acres that we were at liberty to shoot over" (AMS, 81). One cannot imagine how Maury's position, in terms of his vocation and the opportunities for sport afforded him in the neighborhood, could possibly have been any better in the ante-bellum South.

As for Lytle's comment on "the ruin of the hierarchical values which [Maury] might have expected to sustain him," one does not quite know what to say. Surely he is not regretting the demise of slavery! One feels like reassuring him by pointing out that the blacks in Aleck Maury's world still do the work for the whites, still call them "Mister" and "Missus," and still eat in the kitchen, even if they are the most valuable hands in the entire neighborhood.

III

Looking back over his life, Aleck Maury tells of his Uncle James Morris's outrage when Aleck and his cousin Julian, for the hell of it, allow Old Whiskey to catch and kill Old Red, the fox whose running has become a tradition, even a legend, in the neighborhood. The boys were supposed to hold the hound and Uncle James gives the "...damn little scoundrels'the worst licking either of us ever had in our lives" (AMS, 48).

In retrospect, Maury knows all too well the reason for Uncle James's fury. Even at the time, he says, "I had a queer feeling when I saw Old Red's brush held up. It didn't seem possible that he'd never give us another run" (AMS, 47). Uncle James went into his final illness not long afterward. Both Aleck Maury and James Morris would have understood the unwillingness of Ike McCaslin and Sam Fathers to shoot Old Ben, and they would have sympathized thoroughly with Mr. Earnest of Faulkner's "Race at Morning," who unloads his shotgun before finally running down the magnificent buck he has tried for years to outwit and outrun. Mr. Earnest snaps his empty gun at the buck three times in a gesture he is obliged to make, but with an empty gun, he is not obliged to kill him. He explains to the outraged twelve-year-old boy with him that they cannot give chase to a dead deer next season.¹⁹ Aleck Maury, too, finds "no really good day...ever long enough" (AMS, 97-98).

Aleck's conception of life is essentially tragic, though he does manage to achieve a kind of triumph through the rituals of his sport,

and he is finally not overwhelmed by the tragic view. Still, his rituals are necessary to him as a means of imposing an order on the seeming disorderliness and chaos of life. They are as necessary to Maury as Nick Adams's efforts are to him in "Big Two-Hearted River." Nick avoids fishing the swamp on the first day, one recalls, because in there "the fishing would be tragic....a tragic adventure."²⁰

Perhaps Aleck Maury's researches into nature's secrets are attempts to discover an order in the natural world and thus to reconcile himself to the apparent disorderliness of mortality. But it is definitely the fact of mortality which drives him to seek the utmost intensity of delight in life. He says that "life, the life of adventure that is compacted equally of peril and deep, secret excitement, began for [him]" (AMS, 7) when black Rafe first took him possum hunting at the age of eight. Later, he is "fired with a sudden, fierce desire" to learn the secrets of nature's creatures, "to follow that strange, that secret life," when Uncle James "observed that a man—a sporting man ...might observe every day of his life and still have something to learn" (AMS, 57). Thereafter, Aleck can never view life as commonplace or matter-of-fact; it always remains an adventure for him. Years later, he tells his wife and daughter that he has come to know the waters about Gloversville too well and must move to Poplar Bluff to fish fresh waters, or die (AMS, 187).

Aleck's first awareness of mortality strikes him when he sees Uncle James's horse give way under his weight. Thereafter, too heavy to ride, Uncle James is finished with hunting. Aleck recalls:

I stood there, a boy of fourteen, and I realized that man comes up like a weed and perishes. I had seen old people around me all my life but I had never thought of them as growing old...Foreboding rushed over me. The decay of the faculties came to everybody, would come to me, to Julian, to the very little negroes squatting on the fence rails. I could not bear the bright sunshine ... I turned and went in the house. (AMS, 48-49)

After leaving Virginia, Maury does not keep up his correspondence very long. He says: "After a certain period of my life I never went back...or exchanged letters with any of my connection there. Some men foster these ties all their lives. For me it has always been too painful..." (AMS, 60). Molly Fayerlee, appropriately, first recites for Professor Maury from "Cicero's essay on Old Age": " 'As for the unsatisfied and greedy part of humanity, as they have possessions subject to uncertainty and at the mercy of chance, they who are

forever thirsting for more....' ” (AMS, 82).

Maury is too conscious of the fleeting nature of time, and of mortality, to spend his life trying to “get ahead.” He does not want to win a few brief, scattered moments for sport by the penance of doing the world’s labors with almost no letup for the rest of his life. His sometime hunting partner, William Mason, a prosperous Memphis businessman, has an office the windows of which “looked out on an expanse of brick wall, not even a leaf broke its monotony.” Maury “wondered how a man could endure to look out on it day after day” (AMS, 137). Mason tells him, regretfully, “ ‘Professor, I’m afraid I haven’t as strong a character as yours. I haven’t got in three days’ hunting in the last five years’ ” (AMS, 137).

Harry Morrow, Maury’s able assistant at Oakland Collegiate Institute in Mississippi, where Maury is president for seven years, eventually becomes president of Rodman College of Poplar Bluff, Missouri, and gives Aleck a job. Harry rarely has time for fishing; Aleck goes almost every day (AMS, 221). He gives thanks to God that it is Harry Morrow, not himself, who has to bear the burdens of the president’s office (AMS, 197).

While recuperating at Jim Buford’s place near Cadiz, Kentucky, from the effects of Molly’s death, Aleck listens for perhaps the thousandth time to Jim’s story of how as a boy he had learned that channel cats are night, surface feeders. He remarks that this story “was Jim’s only sporting anecdote out of a life of hard labor...” (AMS, 233-234). Aleck observes, “The average man wears out his life in uncongenial employments whereas...I had done very little that I didn’t want to do and that only for a small portion of my time...I had been lucky” (AMS, 225). After Molly’s death, Aleck engages in some serious introspection, and realizes that it is the “almost transfiguring excitement [of the chase or fishing stratagem]...*Delight*....” (AMS, 223-224) by which he has lived, and which he has feared to lose: “I knew now what it was I had always feared: that this elation, this delight by which I lived might go from me...” (AMS, 224).

For therapy after Molly’s death, having discovered that he has indeed lost the elation, the delight, he has always found in fishing (his weight and game leg have already made him give up hunting), Maury conducts experiments in the feeding and management of pond fish. He carries on these experiments on several ponds on Jim Buford’s place near Cadiz, Kentucky, for two years, in the company of a black boy named Wisdom. Aleck remarks that it is there, “drifting about on

the still waters of Lake Lydia that for the first time in my life I was able to contemplate the thought of my own death" (AMS, 241).

Near the end of his stay at Cadiz, Aleck goes fishing on the Cumberland River near Canton, at Lock E, with a young friend (AMS, 242-244). Having never allowed himself more than the biblical three score and ten and being nearly seventy, he broods over his mortality, but the sight of an old fishing friend, Colonel Wyndham, restores him to himself. Colonel Wyndham is now ninety, yet fishes every day with as much delight as ever. Aleck muses:

Ninety years old...It seemed a great age, not as old as I once would have thought it but far beyond the Biblical three-score and ten which I suddenly realized was all I ever allowed myself. Well, a man who reached the age of ninety had achieved something: he was free from the fear of approaching old age. It was already here. One might return then, in a sense, to the timelessness of childhood. Every day would be a gift from the gods and it would be a man's plain duty to enjoy it. (AMS, 245)

Significantly, with this altered perspective on his life, Maury responds to Tom's " 'Well...we are here,' " with " 'Yes, by the grace of God' " (AMS, 245). Shortly after this fishing trip, Maury watches an expert, but not superb, fisherman land a magnificent bass from Lake Lydia, replays the fight in his mind, and recovers the elation, the delight he has lived by (AMS, 253-256). He soon goes to Florida, looking for fresh waters to conquer.

IV

The views of some critics that Aleck Maury irresponsibly neglected his family and thus helped erect a barrier between his wife and himself are contradicted by other commentators. Frederick P. W. McDowell finds Aleck's attitude toward his wife and children "the affection of a large-souled man"²¹; Radcliffe Squires says Aleck's "capacity for compassion and love is never in doubt."²²

It is true that Molly once upbraids Aleck for being more concerned for the safety of Gyges, his dog, while they are travelling to Mississippi, than he was for six-year-old Dick when he had travelled alone from Louisville to Gloversville. Aleck tells her that "Dick had been put in the care of the conductor who was a friend..." then thoughtlessly adds, " 'Dick to anybody but his parents looks like any other little boy...Gy is the smartest bird dog in Kentucky' " (AMS, 135). Molly

does not dry her tears until Aleck reassures her by reminding her that she and the children mean more to him than any bird dog. Aleck remarks that she shows that she believes him. Later, however, Aleck's apparent rapid recovery from Dick's tragic death by drowning at age fifteen causes a constraint to develop between them:

...sometimes coming out of one of those wild fits of sobbing she would turn to me utterly spent and I would have to sit beside her and tend her as if she were a child. But gradually her attitude changed. It was as if my apparent recovery from the bereavement—and to her distraught mind I must have appeared perfectly recovered—had put a barrier between us. She rarely spoke to me now of Dick. (AMS, 161)

The significant words are "apparent" and "must have appeared." Aleck remembered far more vividly incidents in the boy's life than he did those of the girl, Sarah's (AMS, 129-130); he was trying to make a wing shot and hunting companion out of Dick that year (AMS, 153-154); he realizes that he had held Dick back, thinking that he had enough of what no man ever has enough of: Time:

I stood there under the great pine tree and watched the light fall on the dark leaves and tried to realize that it was Dick who lay so still on the bed in there. I stood there and thought how short his life had been and it seemed to me that I had held him back from many pleasures he might have had, feeling that everything was yet in store for him...And now he would never do any of these things. (AMS, 158)

When Aleck sings his daughter Sally to sleep on the night of the tragedy, he chooses "Der Erlkönig," singing it through, he says, even to the line: "In seinen armen das kind lag tot ["In his arms the child lay dead"]" (AMS, 156-157). One sees, as Aleck sings for his daughter, that his thoughts are with his dead child. He expresses his grief by indirection. Later, when "inaction" becomes "unendurable" (AMS, 161), he goes hunting again. One understands that the ritual is a mode of coping with grief. Earlier, on the night of the boy's death, he had held Molly in his arms beside the child's body until the breaking of the day (AMS, 158).

Aleck's real feelings and the reality of the grief he never really gets over are suggested in his description of the way the scene periodically comes back to him and forces itself on him even after the lapse of many years. He refers to the day of the tragedy as "that Sunday afternoon whose every event remains etched in my brain, a cinematic

film that every now and then and seemingly without volition unrolls itself and goes on minute incident by incident to the end" (AMS, 154).

One senses the unstated horror he must have felt whenever he had to view the scene again. Years later, after Molly's sudden death and her burial in Gloversville, Aleck returns to Poplar Bluff "in time for [his] eight o'clock class" (AMS, 219). The lesson was "the final magnificent chorus" of Sophocles's great tragedy, *Oedipus Tyrannus* (AMS, 219). A presumably typical translation reads:

Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without
pain.²³

One realizes, in this skillfully handled, superbly understated passage of the novel (the chorus is given in Greek), where Aleck's thoughts really are and how necessary the resumption of routine is to him to enable him to cope with the tragedy of life. He remarks that "The Robbins girl said *theneton* for *thneton* and I corrected her as I had done a hundred times before" (AMS, 219). According to Dr. Howard Keller, Professor of Russian at Murray State University, *theneton* is a nonsense word; the correct word, *thneton*, may be translated, "liable to death, mortal."

Aleck's correcting the girl for the hundredth time in regard to this highly significant word indicates that, just as the rituals of sport are for him necessary devices for imposing an order on life, so too are the rituals of the academy—anything to keep a sense of chaos at bay.

After the two years spent in recovering from Molly's death "as much as people ever get over such things" (AMS, 221) and with the recovery of his capacity for the "almost transfiguring excitement" of sport, Aleck goes to Florida. He is disappointed in the fishing, because a likely-looking lake is filled with eel grass, but his daughter Sally, now married, rescues him. She and her husband Steve invite Maury to come to Tennessee to help them select the home he is to share with them. They agree that it is to be on a good fishing stream.

Steve and Sally fall in love with a house on a river which Maury says will be muddy half the year. It is also too far down to the water for a man as old and heavy as he has become (AMS, 275-278). At a bus-stop restaurant in McMinnville (when Steve and Sally calculate that it will take three months to get the house ready to move into, and

tell Aleck that it won't kill him to go without fishing for three months, if he is going to spend the rest of his life doing it), Aleck tells them he has just turned seventy. Sally clucks at him, failing to understand what he is telling them. At seventy, he is living on borrowed time, and he doesn't have three days, let alone three months, to spare (AMS, 284-286). So, while Steve and Sally continue their planning, Aleck Maury eases out the restaurant door, deserts them, and catches a bus to Caney Fork, where there is excellent food, good lodging, and superb fishing—all year 'round.

Thus the novel ends. The reader responds to the noble gallantry of the man for whom sport was not a mere "pastime," but a "passion,"²⁴ and who would not succumb willingly to time's inexorable grasp. Aleck's mood, as we see him last, is that expressed in "Old Red," an Aleck Maury story which the author did not incorporate into the novel. In that story, Aleck's awareness of the pathos of time's swift flight makes him determined to keep pace with it: "...time was a banner that whipped before him always in the wind! He stood on tiptoe to catch at the bright folds, to strain them to his bosom."²⁵ In the novel, Aleck succeeds in keeping time at bay, as much as anyone in this world ever can. The image of the protagonist we are finally left with is not, as Andrew Nelson Lytle sees it, one of "feckless manhood," but one of heroism.

NOTES

¹ "Nature and Grace in Caroline Gordon," *Critique*, 1 (1956), 18-19.

² "The Novel of Experience," *Critique*, 1 (1956), 43.

³ "Art and Miss Gordon," *South: Modern Southern Literature in Its Cultural Setting*, ed. Louis D. Rubin, Jr., and Robert D. Jacobs (Garden City, 1961), pp. 320-321.

⁴ "The Underground Stream: A Note on Caroline Gordon's Fiction," *SoR*, 7 (1971), 469.

⁵ Cowan, pp. 18-19.

⁶ "The Short Fiction of Caroline Gordon," *TSE*, 18 (1970), 124-129.

⁷ *Caroline Gordon* (New York, 1972), pp. 33-41.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 35.

⁹ *Caroline Gordon* (Minneapolis, 1966), p. 19.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ "On Caroline Gordon," *SoR*, 7 (1971), 465.

¹² "The Early Novels of Caroline Gordon: Myth and History as Fictional Technique," *SoR*, 13 (1977), 298.

¹³ "Caroline Gordon and the Historic Image," *SR*, 57 (1949), 583.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ "The Forest of the South," *Critique*, 1 (1956), 9.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

¹⁷ Rocks, p. 124.

¹⁸ Caroline Gordon, *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (New York, 1971; rpr. of 1934 edition), p. 75. All subsequent references are to this edition and will be designated parenthetically in the text with the initials AMS and appropriate pagination.

¹⁹ *Selected Short Stories of William Faulkner* (New York, 1961), pp. 285-306.

²⁰ "Big Two-Hearted River: Part II," *The Short Stories of Ernest Hemingway: The First Forty-Nine Stories and the Play The Fifth Column* (New York, 1938), p. 329. At this point, it is appropriate to specify what is meant by Maury's "tragic sense of life." His sense of life as tragedy derives from his haunting sense of mortality and the brevity of man's time on earth. His sense of man's limitations is underscored later in the book (AMS, 219) by the introduction of the final chorus from *Oedipus Tyrannus*. But Aleck's sufferings derive not from pride or moral blindness, but from his sense of time's ultimate victory. *Oedipus at Colonus*, which Sophocles wrote in extreme old age, adds this sense of time to the tragic theme. Oedipus tells Theseus, "The immortal/Gods alone have neither age nor death! / All other things almighty Time disquiets." *Oedipus at Colonus*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald, *Sophocles I: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, ed. David Grene (Chicago, 1954), p. 107. The translation of these lines and a subsequent line by Gilbert Murray, as given in an article ("Sophocles") in the *Encyclopedia Americana* (New York, 1971), 25: 261, is also apropos:

Only to gods on high
Not to grow old is given, nor yet to die,
All else is turmoiled by our master, Time.
Decay is in earth's bloom and manhood's prime....

²¹ McDowell, p. 18.

²² Squires, p. 473.

²³ This is from the version of the play translated by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, copyright, 1949, by Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.; rpr. Patrick W. Shaw, ed., *Literature: A College Anthology* (Boston, 1977), p. 473.

²⁴ In the "Afterword" Gordon prepared a few years ago for the reissue of the novel, she commented on her displeasure with the English edition's title, *The Pastimes of Aleck Maury*, because it "seemed to ... contradict the book's content." Her own title had been "The Life and Passion of Aleck Maury." See the "Afterword," *Aleck Maury, Sportsman* (Carbondale, 1980), p. 289.

²⁵ Caroline Gordon, *Old Red and Other Stories* (New York, 1971), pp. 126-127.