

Thomas Dilworth: On "Coon Song"

"Coon Song" by A. R. Ammons is a remarkably metamorphic literary experience. It seems to deconstruct itself by denying its opening narrative description?about a raccoon surrounded by hunting dogs?in order to express something beyond the range of narration and description. The narrative is broken off by the poet's direct address to the reader, which initiates a dramatic monologue. Within this monologue, kinds of relationship between the poem (or poet) and the reader are in conflict. Because the dramatic monologue retains its reference to the initial narrative and because the dominant images of that narrative become metaphors in the monologue, the poem retains its unity. This achievement is especially impressive since the work tends to fly apart because of multiple generic metamorphoses. At eighty-eight lines, it is too long to reprint here in its entirety, so I will quote liberally as I interpret.

The initial narrative captures the moment before action, the imminent attack on the raccoon by the dogs:

I got one good look
 in the raccoon's eyes
 when he fell from the tree
came to his feet
 and perfectly still
 seized the baying hounds
in his dull fierce stare,
 in that recognition
 all decision lost,
choice irrelevant, before the
 battle fell
 and the unwinding
of his little knot of time began. . . . (ll.1-13)

The narrative is followed by an editorial intrusion expanding on the notion of freedom and its limits: "Dostoevsky would think it important if the coon / could choose to / be back up the tree: / or if he could chose to be / wagging by a swamp pond, / dabbling at scuttling / crawdads" (ll.14-21). In one sense, the coon, like any victim, has no choice. He may fantasize himself

into a safe, womb-like, leaf-lined hole "of a fallen oak" (l.24). This is not, of course, a practical option, though it may constitute the sort of choice the poet reads in the coon's eyes: "reality can go to hell" (l.28)?a metaphysical choice of sorts. Realistically, the only decision the coon can make is between "exposed tenders, / the wet teeth" (ll.40-41). Tenders, the ligaments at the back of the hounds' jaws, pun on the commercial term for "formal offers." Which mouth to choose is, for the coon, the only "problem to be / solved" (ll.41-42). Because the editorial intrusion is the sort that narrative can accommodate, no generic change has so far occurred.

But then the poet turns on the reader: "you want to know what happened, / you want to hear me describe it, / to placate the hound's-mouth / slobbering in your own heart" (ll.47-48). The poet catches us in voyeuristic expectation, wanting to witness the consummation of violence; as readers we become analogous to the blood-thirsty hounds. And a corresponding metaphor is implied: the poem?and then, as he speaks for himself, the poet?becomes the coon. (As hounds will consume the coon, readers consume the poem.) The imminent "unwinding" of the coon, we now realize, has affinity for the unwinding that takes place during literary analysis and may recall Wordsworth's dictum, "we murder to dissect." As if to avoid such analysis, the poem itself begins to unwind as the poet says about the fate of the coon: "I will not tell you" (l.49).

But then, apparently contradicting himself, he relates that "the coon / possessing secret knowledge / pawed dust at the dogs / and they disappeared" (ll.49-52). The fantasy breaks the realism that has dominated the narrative and that will go on to characterize most of this dramatic monologue of direct address. As a consequence, the initial narrative is seen as fictitious and therefore, in its conclusion, as potentially a romance, in which the coon can make the dogs disappear. But then the poet undermines this possibility: "maybe he didn't: I am no slave that I / should entertain you, say what you want / to hear , let you wallow in / your silt" (ll.56-60).

Why silt? The only possible explanation is implied by references to the pond where crawdads scuttle (ll.19, 54). If the poet is now the coon, we readers have become crawdads scuttling in silt, which is the comfortable habitat of wish-fulfillment. The hunters (the hounds/readers) have become the hunted, and the coon/poet has caught us, though almost immediately he allows us our freedom, in fact, insists on it.

At first this freedom seems contingent on the generosity of the poet, for he remains in control in so far as he generates what we consume and directs our mental and emotional response. But it is precisely to diminish this control and to increase our freedom that he institutes a new generic shift?to nonsense, which is, as Lewis Carroll realized, closely related to romance though it effects the collapse of all other generic modes: "one two three four five six seven eight nine ten: / (all this time I've been / counting spaces / while you were thinking of something else" (ll.61-64). We are forced to realize that the entire poem has been a counting of spaces, an artifice or conventional fiction and not only as narrative but as monologue. What we have accepted as imaginatively "real" in deference to primary literary convention is actually built on airy nothing. Literary "reality can go to hell."

This the poet further emphasizes as he returns us to romance: "mess in your own sloppy silt: / the hounds disappeared . . . into?the order / breaks up here?immortality: I know that's where you think the brave / little victims should go" (ll.65-71). The effect of this is to make the reader realize that the element of direct address in the monologue is also a fiction since you, surely, are not the fictional reader. That reader is a projection of the poet, someone who was hound-like in wanting the coon killed but able to identify with the coon enough to want (or accept) its

magically making away with the hounds. To that point you may well coincide with the projected reader. But now that the poet continues associating the reader with the hounds, he supposes that you identify emotionally with them. Behind the comedy of this final supposition is implied an immense passivity and egoism on the part of the reader that force you to disidentify with the fictional reader. The "silt," which that reader wallows in, is now not the fantastic escape of the coon from death but the escape of the hounds from death into "immortality," which the poet suggests is equally unreal.

He continues to free the reader from authorial control by generating more nonsense, which is now circular in its unwinding of the poem:

I do not care what
you think: I do not care what you think:
I do not care what you
think: one two three four five
six seven eight nine ten: here we go
round the here-we-go-round, the
here-we-go-round, the here-we-
go-round: coon will end in disorder at the
teeth of hounds: the situation
will get him. . . . (ll.72-81)

Twice we have been offered the contrasting outcomes of brutal realism and escapist romance or fantasy. Now the speaker presents "two philosophies" condensed into images: "spheres roll, cubes stay" (l.82). If we read these as aesthetic philosophies and as reflecting the choices we have so far been given, the rolling spheres suggest romance, which has up to now been a wallowing in accommodating silt, and the static cubes suggest realism. As larger, ontological philosophies, the spheres suggest Platonic idealism; the cubes, Aristotelian realism.

In any case, the poet finally, enigmatically announces, "what I choose / is youse: / baby (ll.86-88). With that decision, he transfers choice, placing responsibility squarely on the reader. How will you, whose "exposed tenders" have been chosen, consume this coon/poem? Will you choose escapist romance? Probably not, since the poet has biased you against romance as a mere wallowing in silt. Will you choose brutal realism? Although it seems more probable, he has also biased you against voyeuristic self-indulgence. Maybe you can refuse the choice.

But what you must accept is the freedom of the poet, who is "no slave that" he "should entertain you" (ll.57-58). He has liberated himself. Moreover, because he has become analogous to the coon and because of the colloquial racist connotations of the word "coon," his self-liberation resonates with the civil rights movement already under way when this poem was first published.

Analogically, the meaning of the work is partly sociopolitical, but the experience that gives substance to the analogy is literary-analytical and consists of the liberation of the poet (and also the reader) from literary bondage through radical shifts in generic modality: from realistic narrative to dramatic monologue and, within monologue, between realism, romance, and nonsense. In the process, the reader's point of view is repeatedly altered and finally brought to the awareness that he or she is not the reader whom the poet addresses, is in no way accommodated by the poem, and is therefore as free as the poet.

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