OF TIME AND THE RIVER: "ANCESTRAL NONSENSE" VS. INHERITED GUILT IN CABLE'S "BELLES DEMOISELLES PLANTATION"

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At the last MASA meeting, in Columbia, Missouri, the outgoing president of the Association, Professor Nicholas Joost, discussed the aims and methods of the interdisciplinary approach to American Studies. One of the chief aims of such study, he said, was to arrive at "viable generalizations" about American culture and its past. An investigator has at his disposal several possible methodologies and various sorts of evidence. Hopefully, he will be at least aware of the many disciplines from which he might draw. An interdisciplinary approach, however, need not imply that we search for the lowest common denominator by which all methods may appear in every paper. Our "viable generalizations" may indeed come from being able to see the results of one method as a part of the many kinds of research being performed in various fields.

All of this is my justification for offering a methodology -- literary "close reading" -- which may seem especially narrow and inappropriate for a general American Studies context. Yet I believe that even this seemingly limited technique may yield fruitful results in achieving the broad answers we are seeking. I hope to show, therefore, that a specifically literary approach to the work of an American writer -- in this case, George Washington Cable -- may add something to our general understanding of what Parrington called the "main currents of American thought."

In his New Orleans tale, "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," George Washington Cable describes the psychological compulsions that bind the the aristocratic Colonel de Charleu and his half-caste kinsman, Injin Charlie, to their respective family homes as "ancestral nonsense."[1] We are not entirely surprised at reading such a comment from the platform companion of that mytho-clastic realist, Mark Twain. Ironic commentary on the romantic idealism of the south comes as naturally to the local colorist Cable as it does to Mark Twain in the local color portions of Life on the Mississippi. The pragmatic and provisional quality of later nineteenth-century American thought, as it appears in the realistic modes of Twain,

James, Howells or genre writers like Mary E. Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett, is often shared by Cable. Recent re-evaluation of Cable's fiction has been especially fruitful in demonstrating just this aspect of his work. Two perceptive essays by Louis Rubin and Edmund Wilson ably connect Cable to his own milieu and even suggest his relationship to serious contemporary southern regionalists, especially Faulkner.[2] Both Rubin and Wilson have particularly emphasized Cable's realism and the astonishing astuteness and courage of his social criticism of the post-Civil War South. This approach, however, has caused them to neglect the more commonly read local color stories of Old Creole Days. It has also caused them to overlook, I believe, some of the literary qualities in Cable's work which give it added dimension beyond social criticism on the one hand or the bizarre romanticism of so much local color on the other.

Richard Chase has described Cable's novel, The Grandissimes, as a "strongly realistic social novel" which "becomes at the same time a poetic melodrama."[3] This intriguing, if paradoxical, generalization points in the direction I think further Cable criticism should move. As an example of the kind of criticism Cable needs, I should like to take one of his most often anthologized stories, "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," and subject it to a critical close reading. Once we see what in fact we have in a representative story we may be better able to clarify our general concepts of Cable both as realistic social critic and as romanticist.

Since Lafcadio Hearn remarked in 1883 that "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" was the "most singular tale" in Cable's Old Creole Days, criticism has been uniformly respectful of the story's charm, but has offered little explanation of its artistic success.[4] This story, however, is more than charming. Its continued popularity is not the result of Cable's "love of mystification," or his treatment of "quaint" regional eccentricities. Instead, a mature control of plot, character and symbolism give it a powerful unity of theme, which raises it above the topical slickness of so much local color fiction.

The theme of "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" is composed of two parts which are closely and intricately related. The first and more apparent aspect of the theme is mutability, the precariousness of human institutions and distinctions -- social, racial or economic. The second, and perhaps more important aspect for Cable, the Presbyterian Sunday School teacher, is the Biblical drama of judgment, the inevitable justice of Providence, Whose agents are mutability and nature: time and the river. Added to this seemingly romantic theme is the subtly ironic tone of the narrator, the pragmatic and provisional commentator whose "common sense" realism deftly highlights the "ancestral nonsense" in the rigid attitudes of the protagonist and antagonist of the story. The tale achieves its peculiar quality of richness and depth by its craftsmanlike tension between a romantic theme of ancestral guilt and mutability and a sensitive, if ironic and pragmatic,

point of view -- a point of view almost Jamesian in its sense of the ongoing, unfolding quality of experience.

Judgment in "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," as in so much American literature, early and late, is exacted not only for the sins of the present generation, but also for the sins of past generations. Early in the story Cable tells us with a characteristic deadpan irony that the first Count de Charleu had left his Choctaw wife behind when he was recalled to France "to explain the lucky accident of his commissariat having burned down with his account-books inside." The Count's excuses were accepted for this almost Faulknerian accident, and he was rewarded by a grant of land. Cable then introduces the ancestral guilt of the De Charleu family ironically: "A man cannot remember every thing! In a fit of forgetfulness he married a French gentlewoman, rich and beautiful and 'brought her out.'" The artistry of the narration is apparent in its evenly balanced tension. Although Cable treats the concept of ancestral guilt ironically, he nevertheless takes the fact of guilt quite seriously. His irony shifts to a mordant indictment of the Count's indifference in the next sentence: "However, 'All's well that ends well;' a famine had been in the colony, and the Choctaw Comptesse had starved, leaving nought but a half-caste orphan family lurking on the edge of the settlement." From this first crime, which resulted in the founding of the De Charleu dynasty, Cable carefully unfolds the consequences, the pragmatic results of the crime. He shows how the inevitable working of judgment, operating in time, destroys the external values -- money, prestige, family, property -- that the first Count and his descendants so cherished.

Since the first Count sacrificed his integrity for prestige, for the continuance of his "name" in all its feudal inconsequence, Cable comments indirectly on the results of this act by a subtly modulated ironic symbolism. The fragility of the legitimate branch of the family increases, as we see it rise, "generation after generation, tall, branchless, slender, palm-like." This symbolic attenuation of the masculine strength of the house finally flowers "with all the rare beauty of a century-plant" -- which blooms only once before death -- in the present Colonel's daughters. The "name," therefore, of which the Colonel is so proud cannot, despite his day-dreams, be passed on. As time destroys the male vitality of the legitimate branch of the family, so also the other branch, with the sole exception of the childless Charlie, "diminished to a mere strand by injudicious alliances, and deaths in the gutters . . . was extinct." Similarly, the De Charleu inheritance is slowly worn away by constant attrition from the Mississippi River.

> The Count's grant had once been a long Pointe, round which the Mississippi used to whirl, and seethe, and foam, that it was horrid to behold. Big whirlpools would open and wheel about in the savage eddies under the low bank,

> and close up again, and others open, and spin, and disappear.

The analogy between the action of the river, whose surface is constantly affected by its buried depths, and the buried past of the De Charleus is suggested in Cable's imagery.

> Great circles of muddy surface would boil up from hundreds of feet below, and gloss over, and seem to float away, -- sink, come back again under water, and with only a soft hiss surge up again, and again drift off, and vanish. Every few minutes the loamy bank would tip down a great load of earth upon its besieger, and fall back a foot -- sometimes a yard -- and the writhing river would press after, until at last the Pointe was quite swallowed up.

Until his final recognition of the truth, Colonel De Charleu avoids confrontation with the realities of time and judgment. Although his own plantation is heavily mortgaged, the old man confidently plans to buy and rebuild the decayed property of De Carlos, the last descendant of the Count and his Indian wife. Cable skillfully develops the contrast between external appearance and inner reality. As the river quietly erodes the foundation upon which De Charleu's outer facade of wealth and position is displayed, so inner corruptions gnaw secretly underneath the seemingly unchanged appearance of the man. "He had had his vices -- all his life; but had borne them, as his race do, with a serenity of conscience and a cleanness of mouth that left no outward blemish on the surface of the gentleman." Moral emptiness underlies the Colonel's aristocratic shell as sterility and death lurk behind the final bloom of the century plant. Even De Charleu's Creole virtue, that he "will not utterly go back on the ties of blood," is ironically related to his moral insensitivity and the ancestral guilt of his family. "He is never ashamed," Cable tells us of the Creole, "of his or his father's sins." Under the courtly exterior, there is only pride and self-love. Cable's incisive realism removes the mask of southern gentility. "With all his courtesy and bounty, and a hospitality which seemed to be entertaining angels, he was bitter-proud and penurious, and deep down in his hard-finished heart loved nothing but himself, his name, and his motherless children." One remembers, as no doubt the Bible scholar Cable remembered, that it was Lot, the inhabitant of Sodom, who entertained angels before judgment was executed on his home, and his daughters were rendered motherless.

The intricate dialectic between romantic theme and realistic point of view is further intensified as Cable continues to unfold his narrative. His realistic, though comic, treatment of the aristocratic Colonel's ludicrous and pathetic attempt to bolster his decaying external identity by acquiring Injin Charlie's house in town balances with delicate irony the transcendent

theme of the story against the humorous facts of the situation. Although the attempts of the two old men -- one of them deaf -- to speak English are comic, mutability and judgment are always present, modifying and transforming the quality of the humor.

> "Eh, well Charlie!" -- the Colonel raised his voice to suit his kinsman's deafness, -- "how is those times with my friend Charlie?"
>
> "Eh?" said Charlie distractedly.
>
> "Is that goin' well with my friend Charlie?"
>
> "In de house, -- call her," -- making a pretence of rising.
>
> "Non, non! I don't want," -- the speaker paused to breathe -- "ow is collection?"
>
> "Oh!" said Charlie, "everyday he make me more poorer!"
>
> "What do you hask for it?" asked the planter indifferently, designating the house by a wave of his whip.

This comic scene is finally terminated by what is both a significant revelation of character and an important turning point in the story.

> "I'll trade with you!" said Charlie.
>
> The Colonel was tempted. "'Ow'l you trade?" he asked.
>
> "My house for yours!"

Angered, the Colonel closes the interview. In the careful unraveling of the drama, the Colonel has been offered a choice: he has been given the opportunity to acknowledge the common humanity he shares with his kinsman, a brotherhood symbolized by the two inherited houses. This is the common humanity the first Count De Charleu denied in order to have a "name." The Colonel, like his ancestor, refuses to acknowledge his human brotherhood with De Carlos and in so doing refuses self-recognition as well.

The beginning of De Charleu's self-recognition comes some months after he has refused Charlie's final offer to trade his city block for the plantation house. Sitting on the levee, he muses on the emptiness of his past life, paralyzed and made useless by "pride," "gaming," and "voluptuous ease." Nevertheless, "his house still stood, his sweet-smelling fields were still fruitful, his name was fame enough; and yonder and yonder, among the trees and flowers, like angels walking in Eden, were the seven goddesses of his only worship." As the Colonel begins to perceive the attrition of time and vice on his personality, he turns complacently to the external possessions that have hitherto been his substitute for character -- house, name, property, daughters. At this moment he hears a slight sound which brings him to his feet. "There came a single plashing sound, like some great beast slipping into the river, and little waves in a wide semicircle came out from under the bank and spread over the water." The bank upon which his house stands, the material foundation of his life, which had

seemed so solid, has begun to cave in. Like Henry James's John Marcher, the Colonel has always avoided contact with the real substance of life until, with feral stealth, it slips into his life "like some great beast." Yet this first revelation does not cause a moral awakening in De Charleu; he only sees with brutal clarity the reality of time and decay.

At the threat of losing his property, in which he has always based his sense of identity, De Charleu's moral collapse becomes complete, and he hurries frantically back to town to trade his house for Old Charlie's block. It is not until the two men return to look at the property, that he finally has a true vision of himself; he recognizes that he is about "to betray his own blood," that he does share a common humanity with Charlie which he is ready to violate. Although he warns Charlie, time and the river are inexorable. The thoughtless superficiality and the self-seeking pride of the De Charleus, with their dependence upon externals, are judged. "Belles Demoiselles, the realm of maiden beauty, the home of merriment, the house of dancing, all in the tremor and glow of pleasure suddenly sunk, with one short, wild wail of terror -- sunk, sunk, down, down, down, into the merciless, unfathomable flood of the Mississippi." If Cable has suggested God's punishment of Sodom and Gomorrah early in the story, he suggests finally His judgment of the contemporaries of Noah.

By this final symbolic action of the river Cable fuses his two themes into one. The river, as type and metaphor of time and mutability, the ever-flowing substance that has joined together the generations of the De Charleus and now washes them away, emerges as the agent of divine justice.

What conclusions are we to draw then from our close reading of this local color sketch? Before we come to conclusions, there are some questions that must be answered. Our reading shows clearly, it seems to me, that Cable is making use of the universal themes of mutability, sin, guilt and judgment presented in romantic, idealistic and sometimes gothic modes in the earlier fiction of Poe, Hawthorne or Melville. Does this mean that Cable's story is simply a continuation of the romantic symbolism of the earlier nineteenth century? Not exactly. Our reading seems to show differences and modifications as striking as the likenesses. Cable's delicate control of narrative point of view, his ironic balancing of pragmatic and unsentimental comment with romantic theme, and his sense of the ongoing, unfolding quality of experience relate him to the tradition of critical realism.

What general conclusions may we arrive at, then? Perhaps the work of Cable's friend and colleague, that sometime local colorist and frontier humorist, Mark Twain, may be instructive. It is a continual source of paradox that the elemental themes of a book like Huckleberry Finn have made inevitable mythic and romantic interpretations of Twain, a conscious, even self-conscious realist. In "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" we have a similar fusion of realistic technique with romantic theme. Does not our

close reading, perhaps, make it possible to see Cable as more than an intelligent and socially aware critic of his own time or as a quaint romancer of superficial eccentricities? Do we not see another link in the chain of American literary history? I would like to suggest that in the realistically handled unravelling of the fate of the last of the De Charleaus we may perhaps see even more clearly a stage in development from the openly romantic treatment of mutability, guilt and retribution in, say, "The Fall of the House of Usher" or The House of the Seven Gables toward the realistic myth of Yoknapatawpha County in the twentieth century. And is it not just this sort of concrete example of change, this fusion of traditions, that both illuminates and validates our concept of what Parrington might have termed a "main current" of American thought.

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Footnotes:

[1] All quotations from "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" are taken from Old Creole Days (New York, 1897), 121-145.

[2] See Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York, 1962), 548-587; and Louis D. Rubin, Jr., The Faraway Country: Writers of the Modern South (Seattle, 1963), 21-42.

[3] Richard Chase, The American Novel and Its Tradition (Garden City, 1957), 176.

[4] Arlin Turner writes that the "plot is of the simplest and is only the vehicle for the character study," George W. Cable: A Biography (Durham, N. C., 1956), 58. Carlos Baker, writing of Cable's fiction in general, notices a "gentle love of mystification, a diffusion -- not of syntax but of total effect -- which seems to be the chief source of Cable's charm," Literary History of the United States, eds. Spiller, Thorp, Johnson and Canby (New York, 1948), II, 857. In his generally laudatory essay on The Grandissimes Richard Chase speaks of Cable as a "local colorist who wrote quaint, pathetic and humorous tales," 167.