

THE PROSTITUTED ART OF GEORGE W. CABLE

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Master of Arts

by

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PREVIEW

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THE PROSTITUTED ART OF GEORGE W. CABLE

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PREVIEW

THESIS STATEMENT

An ego-defensive bid for fame and recognition led to George Washington Cable's compromise with his principles and the consequent deterioration of his art.

PREVIEW

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CHAPTER I

CABLE'S CONFLICTING HERITAGE

In 1884, George Washington Cable was ranked above Mark Twain in the New York Critic's list of "Forty Immortals,"¹ and had been compared to such literary giants as Hawthorne, Dickens, Hugo, and Daudet.² Cable's reputation at that time was based on his first three published books, Old Creole Days (1879), The Grandissimes (1881), and Madame Delphine (1881).³ Today most critics agree that these three volumes are American classics, and that Cable's sixteen works of fiction that followed have little or no merit. The marked inferiority of this fiction that came after his initial flash of "genius" is important to the student of American literary history.

This thesis is an endeavor to show that the decline in Cable's art was the result of an altered personality and waning idealism. An evaluation of his works will present proof of his potential, and the analysis of Cable materials will reveal that the "gentle" and "charming" little Southerner was a man of many complexes and paradoxes. His self-image encountered in his works, his behavior found in

¹Philip Butcher, George W. Cable (New York, 1962), p. 165.

²Arlin Turner, George W. Cable: A Biography (Durham, North Carolina, 1956), p. 168.

³Madame Delphine has been included in most later editions of Old Creole Days.

biographies and articles, and the constant need for self-assurance disclosed in his letters all lead to one conclusion: George Washington Cable defected from his principles (literary, ethical, religious, and moral) in an ego-defensive bid for fame. I will attempt to show that this drive for approbation and superior position began in childhood, gained impetus about 1885, and continued to the end of his life.

Cable's desire to make his mark in the world was evidenced at an early age. As a child, he had written his father that his first aim in life was to be "an honour" to his parents.⁴ This resolution of the ten-year old lad had intensified by the time he was twenty-one. In a letter to his mother dated January 26, 1866, Cable wrote, "May the world regret me when I die!"⁵ These burning words of ambition forecast the consuming desire for fame that ultimately led to the disintegration of the potential literary powers of a great writer.

That Cable's ambition could become a consuming passion is foreshadowed in a letter to H. H. Boyesen written fifteen months before Old Creole Days came off the press. On January 3, 1878, Cable wrote:

⁴From a letter by Cable to his father in 1854, as cited by Lucy Leffingwell Cable Bikle, George W. Cable: His Life and Letters (New York, 1928), p. 10.

⁵As cited by Bikle, p. 31.

My dear Mr. Boyesen, I have just that discontent-- I keep up just that champing of my bit that you, I know, would want me to indulge in. I ought to be writing. A man ought to keep invested the talents of gold that God has given him as well as the talents of silver. I can write better than I can do anything else. Business is distasteful to me. I love literature; I'm no Samson in it, it's true; but so much the more it doesn't follow that I should have my eyes punched out & go to grinding corn in this Philistia of a country. . . . If it wasn't for one single thing I should be altogether comfortable--the black sheep in my flock is my ambition. I drug it with every possible opiate; I get it to sleep, I jog along with it muffled up in my bosom, I think I have peace, when--here comes a letter from Gilder or yourself, and--it takes me weeks to get the brat quiet again.⁶

Biographers have made much of the conflicting forces of Cable's parental blood. This too is important in a study of the writer's career. Cable's mother and confidante, Rebecca Boardman Cable, served as a spur to his own high ambitions. The qualities he attributed to her were found in the man himself. Of her, he wrote:

to her indomitable energy she added an unconquerable buoyancy of spirits, an intellectual ambition, a keen relish for social relations. . . . She had many features of the artistic temperament: abhorrence of all unguineness [sic] and an intense love of the beautiful.⁷

The moral teachings of this Presbyterian mother also accounted for many of the sterner traits found in Cable in his earlier years. To her,

⁶As cited by Turner, p. 80.

⁷As cited by Bikle, p. 4.

indolence was a vice, industry a duty, honesty a necessity, drink a curse. . . dancing and the theatre were⁸ but traps of the devil to catch men's souls.

Unlike his father, a giant of a man, the five foot two-inch Cable never weighed more than one hundred and ten pounds. And it is reasonable to assume, in the light of the many references the author made later to his diminutive size, that his arduous bid for fame was in a large measure compensatory. Characteristics inherited from his fun-loving father were important and were not dormant. The warm blood of this adventurous Virginia-born German gave Cable a spirited love of life, while that of his New England Puritan mother chilled and sublimated the impulses of the man. Even to Cable's daughter, these opposite drives were obvious. She wrote that her father's

eager love for the artistic, his keen appreciation of the picturesque, of all that is of the Old World, quaint and indolently charming, as opposed to the glaringly modern and unlovely side of the New World--all this is as strong in his heart as it ever was in a Grandissime of the Grandissimes. But, on the other side, and almost as distinct as if he were two men in one, are those characteristics which he inherited from his Northern mother--an intense energy, an eager, far-reaching ambition, a vivacity like that of quicksilver, always restless, incessantly doing, doing.⁹

⁸Edward Larocque Tinker, "Cable and the Creoles," American Literature, V (January, 1934), 314.

⁹Lucy Leffingwell Cable, "The Story of the Author's Life," The Cable Story Book: Selections for School Reading (New York, 1899), p. 164.

These conflicting forces within the man accounted, to some extent, for the paradoxical turns Cable was to take.

In 1837 the senior Cable, seeking his fortune, had brought his family from Indiana to the fabulous port of New Orleans. The family finances varied as did the occupations of the father, who served as tradesman, tavern owner, grocery store partner, and part owner of a steamboat. At the time George was born, in 1844, the Cable family was fairly prosperous, and the youngster enjoyed a happy childhood indulging in all the pleasures that life offered a boy on the Mississippi and in the picturesque city of New Orleans.

A factor more important than his heritage in the molding of the author was the environment in which he was born. The setting, New Orleans, was unlike any other city in the United States: the Old World was struggling against the forces of the New; race was pitted against race and caste against caste. Cable based his works, in the main, on the exotic and complex Creoles whose Latin culture was in direct conflict with that of the Anglo Saxon. The Creoles, descendants of the French and Spanish, clung to the culture of their heritage: their sons were educated in France; their women ordered their gowns from Paris; their language and literature were French; their entertainment was as lavish as that of the old French courts; "duels were fought over a snicker, a sneer, or sometimes just for the

general hell of it."¹⁰ The first Americans to arrive in New Orleans after the annexation of Louisiana in 1803 consequently found no English influences. These clannish Creoles resisted everything American. Enterprising "Americans" who came to seek their fortune in the swelling port were "invaders--vulgar outsiders, pushing and ill-bred."¹¹

The Marquis de Marbois reported some twenty years after the Annexation that "the two races [Creole and American] retain their habits, and carry this spirit of jealousy even into public affairs."¹²

Born at a time when the proud Creoles were still the aristocrats of society, the sensitive and observant Cable had the opportunity to watch at first hand the decline of this race. It had proved no match for the industrious newcomers. The driving Americans settled above Canal Street, and the haughty tribe retreated to the Old World section of New Orleans, The Vieux Carre, better known as the French Quarter. There they clustered and remained in their lavishly

¹⁰Robert Tallant, The Romantic New Orleanians (New York, 1950), p. 64.

¹¹Jay B. Hubbell, The South in American Literature 1607-1900 (Durham, 1954), p. 817.

¹²Barbe-Marbois, Translated by an American Citizen, The History of Louisiana: Particularly on the Cession of that Colony to the United States of America (Philadelphia, 1830), p. 357.

furnished old homes. The deterioration of their abodes was to become George Washington Cable's symbol for the decay of the inhabitants within.

Unfortunately Cable, the local colorist, has been most remembered as a recorder of this declining civilization, although the true merit of his first and good works lies in his social criticism. Here, too, New Orleans, a cesspool of social ills, furnished untapped material. The city's record of organized crime and corruption dated back to the arrival of the first Americans, the "Kaintucks," knife-wielding, brawling, river boatmen who terrorized the city and attracted to New Orleans the riff-raff and underworld who followed on the boatmen's heels. Crime became rampant. Epidemics of cholera and yellow fever took their toll. Yet corrupt politicians did little to alleviate the unsanitary conditions in the semi-tropical city. Asbury, in his history of the New Orleans underworld, condemns the place saying that it was "until long after the Civil War. . . the dirtiest and unhealthiest city on the American Continent."¹³ None of these corruptions was to escape Cable's pen.

Still more significant as a background for Cable's work was the city's stratified society and caste system

¹³Herbert Asbury, The French Quarter: An Informal History of the New Orleans Underworld (New York, 1936), p. 290.

which furnished the writer a foundation for the fundamental strength of his literary accomplishments--the universality of man's struggles created by greed and prejudice. Not to be outdone by the Creoles, the Americans had quickly gone about setting up their own echelons of society and privileges. Basing their economy on slavery, many acquired land, and the plantation system set up an aristocracy and tradition that was not unlike that of the Latins.

The years of his own adversity as a youth account in part for the sympathy the author was to show for the sweating, toiling, suppressed people. Cable's father died in 1859 in the midst of a series of financial failures, and the fourteen-year old George, his formal education ended, had to go to work to support his mother, two sisters, and a younger brother. These years of shared miseries and struggle gave Cable a deeper understanding and feeling for the down-trodden, and on the other hand, these lean and hard years probably added fuel to the flame of his high ambition.

Although the nineteen-year old Cable had enlisted in the army as a loyal and patriotic Confederate who was for "Union, Slavery and White Man's Government,"¹⁴ the Negro, low man on the totem pole, paradoxically was to become the

¹⁴George W. Cable, "My Politics," The Negro Question: A Selection of Civil Rights in the South (New York, 1959), edited by Arlin Turner, p. 3.

writer's symbol for the oppressed and underprivileged. When young Cable returned to his native New Orleans at the war's end, he began to question and carefully study the issues of the battle and came to the firm conviction by the mid-seventies that slavery was immoral and the cause of the South was unjust. This democratic principle that oppression of any race or class is morally wrong is strongly felt in everything Cable wrote in his early period.

Although Cable's target was the oppressions of his own day, he chose the pre-Civil War period to present his message. Before Louisiana became a part of the United States, the Negroes were governed by Bienville's grotesquely inhumane Black Code. The practical Americans, after the Annexation, realized the value of "keeping the Negro contented with his lot" and relaxed some of the more stringent aspects of the Code.¹⁵ However, conditions were little improved. Cable saw that emancipation, in reality, meant little, and he assaulted both the cruelties of and indifferences to the situation. Educational and economic opportunities were practically nonexistent. As cruel as slavery itself was the Convict Lease System. Negroes, as well as impoverished whites, were imprisoned for minor and often trumped-up offenses, given long prison sentences, and then leased out

¹⁵Asbury, p. 239.

as chain gang laborers. Through his fiction, lectures, and articles, the little Southerner waged his battle against these tyrannies of his own people.

The polyglot New Orleans, a city of conflicts, contrasts, clashes of races and attendant conglomeration of human sufferings, furnished unexplored materials for Cable whose opportune date of birth gave him "a kind of international experience, which he could hardly, in the prewar period, have got anywhere else in the United States."¹⁶ Cable deplored all injustices and oppressions so abundantly found in the Crescent City. Yet, the future was to show that class-conscious New Orleans inevitably placed its stamp upon its ambitious native son.

¹⁶Edmund Wilson, "The Ordeal of George Washington Cable," New Yorker, XXXIII (November 9, 1957), 193.

CHAPTER II

RECOGNITION OF CABLE AS AN EXCEPTIONAL LOCAL COLORIST

Even though Cable's native milieu furnished a wealth of exotic, fresh materials and the added ingredient of conflict necessary for good fiction, Cable's rise in 1879 as a recognized literary figure was somewhat of a phenomenon, for the South was, as Boyesen termed it, "a literary Sahara."¹ Inducements for the serious writer were practically nonexistent.

According to Spiller, the most serious handicap was the lack of populated cities "that might have functioned as literary centers" where magazines, libraries, and publishing houses might have been available.² Too, the few existing magazines could pay their contributors very little, so a writer had to look to editors in the North.³ The limited Southern audience was also an important factor. Because of the lack of public schools, the illiteracy rate among the Negroes and the poor whites was high, "and the remaining potential audience, an often highly cultivated, aristocratic minority, had archaic tastes and was inclined to give the

¹H. H. Boyesen to Cable in a letter dated November, 1877, as cited by Philip Butcher, George W. Cable (New York, 1962), p. 27.

²Robert E. Spiller et al. (eds.), Literary History of the United States (New York, 1963) third ed., p. 607.

³Jay B. Hubbell, The South in American Literature 1607-1900 (Durham, 1954), p. 753.

English classics preference. . . ."⁴ There were other reasons for the appeal of English books. The South was in a state of unparalleled violence following the Civil War and nostalgically looked to the past; consequently, the Southern aristocrat turned to the English romanticists. Furthermore, the lack of an international copyright law made the books of the English less expensive and hence more attractive.

Even if conditions had been promising, Cable's entry into the literary field in his own territory would have been impossible--his realistic stories attacking the very core of the Southern tradition were a far cry from the aristocratic literature of the plantation that emerged in the South immediately after the Civil War.

Despite these limited publishing possibilities in the South, there existed literary conditions in the country at large compatible with Cable's talent and materials. The Civil War had scattered men to far flung parts of the United States, and the awareness of sectional differences brought about the era of the local colorist. The realist was replacing the romanticist who had been writing of faraway places. And it was only natural for the realistic writer to use the local color of his own surroundings.⁵ Ekstrom defines these writers as self-made men, receiving "their education in the school of

⁴Spiller, p. 608.

⁵Kjell Ekstrom, George Washington Cable: A Study of His Early Life and Work (Cambridge, 1950), p. 1.

life," and adds that their "experience from different walks of life" gave them an insight lacking in university men.⁶ Local color was a perfect niche for Cable. His artistic use of the unexplored mine of materials on the fast disappearing Creole civilization coupled with his penchant for the bald truth in his early career places him, as Spiller does, far above the "run-of-the-mine" local colorist.⁷

But it was not as a local colorist that the public first saw Cable's writing in print. In his much quoted "May the world regret me when I die!" letter to his mother, Cable had written, "The cotton business is very pleasant--but I cannot help striking higher, & trying for an honourable profession."⁸ Cable was twenty-six years old when he gave up his accounting job with a firm of cotton factors in 1870 and started on his cherished and "honourable profession" as a reporter and columnist for the New Orleans Picayune.

His lively interest in things cultural and civic and his bent for reform were quickly revealed in his column "Drop Shot." The ensuing fifteen months on the New Orleans

⁶Ibid., p. 2.

⁷Spiller, p. 859.

⁸G. W. Cable in a letter to his mother dated January 26, 1866, as cited by Lucy Leffingwell Cable Bikle, George W. Cable: His Life and Letters (New York, 1928), p. 31.

newspaper, which Arlin Turner calls Cable's "Literary Apprenticeship," gave Cable an opportunity to experiment in style and subject matter.⁹ And it seems that his "apprenticeship" was terminated because of his staunch adherence to his religious principles, and Cable's stand at this time is significant--he was poor and had a widowed mother, a wife and a baby to support. About his dismissal, Cable wrote, "I would not violate my conscientious scruples, or, more strictly, the tenets of my church, by going to the theatre to report a play."¹⁰

There are also indications that there were political reasons for his discharge. The native born Southerner had initially denounced in his column the meeting of black and white teachers on equal terms in the same meeting room. Other papers in the city took up the issue, but Cable, after thinking the matter over, had nothing more to say in his column. About this incident, Cable later wrote that "the proprietor of the Picayune was greatly vexed at me for losing the lead in this exhilarating chase."¹¹ So for his refusal to push

⁹Arlin Turner, "George Washington Cable's Literary Apprenticeship," Louisiana Historical Quarterly, XXIV (January, 1941), 168-86.

¹⁰George W. Cable, "My Politics," The Negro Question: A Selection of Writings on Civil Rights in the South (Garden City, 1958), edited by Arlin Turner, p. 10.

¹¹Ibid., p. 8.

the issue, Cable had apparently lost favor with his employer before the theatre episode.

Whatever the true reasons for Cable's discharge, the Picayune must have appreciated his talents. Following his dismissal, they asked him to write a series of sketches on the churches and charities of New Orleans. The research for these led him to the archives of the city where he "discovered both an abundance of materials and an interest of his own that was to give direction and shape to his entire literary career."¹² Shortly after this assignment, the same newspaper commissioned him to write about the nefarious Louisiana Lottery Company. On August 12, 1872, he wrote his mother that he had been "solicited to attack the Lottery company with all the virulence" he chose and had done so.¹³

The fruit of this assignment was to become "'Sieur George," Cable's first published story, an account of a lottery addict. While working as an accountant, Cable had written this and several other stories, "known only within his family." Early in 1873, Edward King, on a Southern tour for Scribner's Monthly, met Cable and visited in his home. On his last evening in New Orleans, King read Cable's stories

¹²Arlin Turner, George W. Cable: A Biography (Durham, North Carolina, 1956), p. 48.

¹³As cited by Bikle, p. 44.

and was so impressed that he took them to the publishers.¹⁴ "Bibi," which later became the noted chapter on Bras-Coupe in The Grandissimes and is considered by many to be Cable's most powerful piece of writing, was rejected because of its unpleasant, harsh realism, but "'Sieur George" was accepted and published in October, 1873.

This story opens:

In the heart of New Orleans stands a large four-story brick building that has so stood for about three-quarters of a century. Its rooms are rented to a class of persons occupying them simply for lack of activity to find better and cheaper quarters elsewhere. With its gray stucco peeling off in broad patches, it has a solemn look of gentility in rags, and stands, or, as it were, hangs about the corner of two ancient streets, like a faded fop who pretends to be looking for employment.¹⁵

The beginning words, "in the heart of New Orleans," were appropriate to the launching of Cable's stories of the Creoles. And the vivid conception of the old house, typifying one of its occupants, is perhaps one of the most quoted examples of the author's descriptive powers.

The very fact that Scribner's published Cable's story is a tribute to Cable's talent. "They expected a plot with definite complication, suspense, and resolution." Relying

¹⁴Turner, George W. Cable, pp. 52-3.

¹⁵George W. Cable, "'Sieur George," Old Creole Days (New York, 1961), p. 177.

on "effects through lightness of touch, half-revelation, and suggestion,"¹⁶ "'Sieur George" met none of the requirements of the magazine. Nevertheless the editors were eager to receive more of Cable's works and prophesied great things for the writer. Two stories, "Belles Demoiselles Plantation" and "'Tite Poulette," were published the following year. The first has a much simpler and more direct plot than "'Sieur George" and is a study in Creole loyalty to blood.

Cable had used the Creole in "'Sieur George" as a vehicle to present the viciousness of the lottery, but in "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," he directs his criticism boldly at the haughty Latin. The Colonel

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. . . . he was bitter proud and penurious, and deep down in his hard-finished heart loved nothing but himself, his name, and his motherless children.¹⁷

In "'Tite Poulette," Cable made his first charge in fiction against society for the plight of the mixed breed, the quadroons, whose tragedy and sufferings were that they were not "either white or black." Cable, although a racial purist, had a great deal of compassion for these misfits. Barrie, in

¹⁶Turner, George W. Cable, p. 57.

¹⁷Cable, "Belles Demoiselles Plantation," Old Creole Days, p. 99.

his introduction to the British edition of The Grandissimes, was to write that he liked Cable "best when his one arm protects some poor, wounded quadroon, and he is fighting for her with the other."¹⁸

One of Cable's best stories, and certainly one of his most dramatic, "Jean-ah Poquelin," came out in May of 1875. This, like the previous stories, is not without social implications. Equally as strong as Cable's assault on the quadroon "system" in "'Tite Poulette" is his charge against mob violence in his tale of old Jean Marie Poquelin whose seclusion gives rise to the rumor that he has murdered his missing brother. The shocking and dramatic scene at the conclusion of the story, a faithful slave carrying the casket of old Jean followed by the "living remains" of the missing brother--"a leper, as white as snow,"¹⁹ stuns the reader as it does the mob who had come to torment. Turner, in his appraisal, declares that the dramatic intensity of "'Jean-ah Poquelin' left no doubt that a fiction writer with uncommon dramatic power had appeared."²⁰ Baskervill, in his study of Southern writers, feels that this tragedy, "painted in gloomy

¹⁸James M. Barrie, as cited by Lucy Leffingwell Cable, "The Story of the Author's Life," The Cable Story Book: Selections for School Reading edited by Mary E. Burt and Lucy Leffingwell Cable (New York, 1899), p. 160.

¹⁹Cable, "Jean-ah Poquelin," Old Creole Days, p. 154.

²⁰Turner, George W. Cable, p. 61.