DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 089 285 CS 201 073

AUTHOR Trotman, C. James
TITLE George W. Cable and Tradition.
PUB DATE Nov 73
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (63rd, Philadelphia, November 22-24, 1973)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.75 HC-$1.50 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *American Literature; *Authors; English Instruction; *Literary Criticism; Nineteenth Century Literature; Realism; *Short Stories; *Twentieth Century Literature
IDENTIFIERS American Renaissance; *Cable (George W)

ABSTRACT

There have been no critical studies of Cable's fiction treated for its own sake; and, without such studies, readers may not become aware of these stories or of their possible value. The absence of a critical position on Cable is due to the decline in his reputation as an artist when he became a writer of popular literature. Before 1925 Cable and his works were well known to the American reader. Cable follows a tradition in Southern writing whereby the locale functions as a spatial metaphor. The most unique feature of Cable's work is its social consciousness, which is most readily seen in his themes. In form, Cable's writing is the mixture of romance and realism that characterizes the era of post-war popular fiction. Cable's work at the turn of the century has none of the social criticisms that characterized his earlier writings. The disappearance of his social consciousness contributed to the decline in his reputation. (LL)

GEORGE W. CABLE AND TRADITION

C. James Trotman
Lincoln University

George Washington Cable became famous in 1879 when Charles Scribner's Sons published seven short stories under the title of Old Creole Days. All the stories had appeared in print before, separately, and without attracting much attention. But when they appeared as a collection, the stories catapulted Cable to national fame. To the literary historian, the era in which Old Creole Days was published is generally known as the "local color" movement in American letters, and it is a movement known also for the short story as its principal mode of expression. With the publication of Old Creole Days, Cable became, if not the most important, surely the most popular local colorist of his time.

It is now nearly a century since the publication of Old Creole Days and the modern reader is not likely to be familiar with it, although the collection is familiar to the critic. A reader may know of a story or two from Old Creole Days, included in college survey texts, but is unlikely to be familiar with the collection. Moreover, the modern reader is unlikely to know of Bonaventure and Strong Hearts, Cable's other two collections of short stories, or of the eight novels Cable produced during more than forty years of writing. The point is that there have been no critical studies of Cable's fiction treated for its own sake; and, without such studies, readers may not become aware of these stories or of their possible value.

The absence of a critical position on Cable is due to a charge against him that has virtually cut off evaluations of his work. The charge, tenaciously clinging to his writing and reputation, is the decline of Cable as an artist when he became a writer of popular literature. This is the most persistent interpretation offered for the neglect of his work and, significantly, the charge appears only after his death in 1925. Before then Cable and his works were well known to the American reader. No one source emerges as having first advanced the idea of Cable's decline; similarly, no one surfaces as the first to offer this idea as an interpretation for the neglect of his work. However, the combined effect of the idea and the interpretation has been that many critics accept the notion of Cable's artistic decline without examining his writings.

Clearly this situation is unsatisfactory. Contemporary critics and readers have a right to know what "decline" and "artist" mean when one uses these terms; moreover, there is an obligation to support one's judgments from the material in question. When writing about Cable, critics such as Richard Chase[1] and Edmund Wilson[2] seem to mean a writer's dedication to craft and to maintaining the integrity of his own voice. However, to see Cable's work in its proper perspective, it is necessary to discuss popular and local color literature, its relationship to the larger literary tradition, and its impact on the national, particularly the genteel, audience.

The early decades of the nineteenth century saw the beginnings of popular writing develop around the figure of the wandering Yankee. His "simplicity, penury, and his cautiousness" were the subjects of widespread sketches, portraits, jokes, and tall tales.[3] From almanacs, jest books, and newspapers to traveling shows, writers and entertainers of various persuasions discovered that readers and live audiences would respond to humor and comedy that were burlesque and crude, mocking and full of ridicule. The primary aim was to provide entertainment, whether in anonymously reported jokes or on the stage; and the humor and comedy frequently generated local pride through the tendency of writers and actors to play off one region against another. As Constance Rourke makes clear, the comic roots of popular humor reflect deeply embedded traits in the American character.

In an age when Walter Scott's historical romances were the dominant influence in American fiction outside of popular literature, Rourke sees the Yankee, the Negro, and the backwoodsman as representative types.[4] She sees them emerging most often in the popular market of the 1830's and 40's. She asserts, in fact, that the Yankee, the Negro, and the backwoodsman were not only representative types but contentiously representative as well; that is, she believes that this trio stood for the disparate and warring elements in America. Rourke's thesis moves beyond the surface of regional humor to its emotional

core, which, when placed in her framework, was to manifest itself in the extreme and violent form of civil war in less than twenty years.

Rourke's thesis applies in several ways to Cable's fiction, although Cable was not a "comic" writer in Rourke's sense. He was a serious writer and a dedicated craftsman, who, as it happened, became a practitioner of popular literary forms. Yet many of his themes and characters are portrayed along the racial and sectional lines that Rourke describes: to make clear this connection, the fact is that Cable is unique to his own time in displaying a remarkable sensitivity to the plight of the oppressed, and he is unusual in demonstrating an insight into the larger elements in conflict within culture. Numerous illustrations are available from Cable's canon, and a few are outstanding.

In the novels, Joseph Frowenfeld in The Grandissimes and John Richling in Dr. Sevier, are central characters who are Northerners and hence outsiders to Creole culture. In Cable's fiction, Northerners like Frowenfeld and Richling are viewed with suspicion and scorn. The Yankee origin of a character, in fact, often plays a significant part in shaping the story's conflicts; and this struggle happens in the case of Frowenfeld and Richling as each one attempts to cope with an unfamiliar culture.

Among the short stories, "Posson Jone'" and "Jean-ah Poquelin" are representative of the pattern of contentious-

ness among characters and regions. The Creole community, as presented in "Posson Jone'," for example, reflects the regional and cultural resistance to outsiders; in this story, the title character bears a heavy burden because he is white, a backwoodsman, and the object of public humiliation by his slave. Finally, the entire story of "Jean-ah Poquelin" can be read as a symbolic rendering of a cultural clash between the North and South. Cable was not the first, however. Well before he wrote his stories, writing that focused on regional eccentricities and cultural conflicts had become a growing fashion in popular culture.

An attempt to conceptualize the development of popular writing may begin in 1830 because, as others confirm, humor from the East as well as from the frontier began to be well represented in almanacs and newspapers.[5] From 1830 to the 1860's, the epistolary form became the basis from which Eastern humor evolved into portraiture and, later, into authentic descriptions and characterizations. The political satire of Jack Downing, the aphoristic wisdom of Sam Slick, Widow Bidott's poetry and, even later, Artemus Ward were all indicative of humor practiced in the East. In terms of gaining a broader perspective on the development of humor, it is more important to note that the humorous writings of the East had a political content and orientation not present in the written humor coming from the South and the West.

Influenced by the art of the oral narrative, the humorists from the South and West were all concerned consciously or unconsciously about recording the distinctiveness of their region and imparting its flavor. There seems to be a consensus that Augustus Longstreet's Georgia Scenes was the most popular writing in these sections of the country, where the humorists wrote most often about scalawags, gamblers, and about tall tales. But most modern readers are not likely to find much that is amusing in Longstreet's Scenes, because much of the material is set in its own time and requires that a reader know the period in order to grasp its comic thrust. In this regard, it is worth noting that Cable's most critically acclaimed short story in his own time, "Posson Jone'," cannot be fully appreciated by the modern reader because of the topicality and specificity of its humor.

There was, however, a desire among the humorists from the South and West to write "truthfully" and "authentically," a desire Cable shared. To such writers, these terms meant a fidelity to the region; the exaggerated reality of the tall tale and the use of dialect, therefore, seemed to them to be in keeping with their views of "truth" and "authenticity." To be sure, some paid no attention to why they were writing as they did. However the point is that frontier and Southern humor was about life at hand, about the people who lived in the region, and about customs and habits often best revealed

through the language they actually spoke. There was, in addition, a conscious attempt to conceal technique, so that the reader or listener would be conscious only of the "naturalness" of the story.

It is apparent from even a casual reading of Cable's fiction that he inherited the devotion to region distinctive of the humorists' work. All of Cable's writing demonstrates a scrupulous concern for establishing a sense of place, a feeling for local atmosphere and mood. His care with respect to dialogue was as precise as a linguist's.[6] Regionalist though he was, Cable relied on the literary conventions generally available at the time, conventions often used not to conceal the techniques of narration but to mask the historical or the contemporary sources of fiction. Cable himself constantly sought material for his fiction in the history of Louisiana and New Orleans. With few exceptions, Cable's canon is the result of such research, as well as the fruits of direct experience.

The most common setting in Cable's writing is New Orleans. In giving his work this relatively uniform background, Cable follows a tradition in Southern writing whereby the locale functions as a spatial metaphor. This practice provides the Southern writer with an identification with his roots through the sharing of a history, a tradition, and an idiom. Although Cable follows this custom, it is but one of the important influences on his writing. In Old

Creole Days, for example, nearly every movement, action, scene and characterization is set against the background of New Orleans; and every theme, every motif projects an image of the city and its most influential class, the Creoles. While Cable's writing is well within the historic conventions of local color fiction, with its backward glance, nostalgic mood and melodramatic plot line, it is precisely the felt presence of New Orleans and the Creoles in Old Creole Days that, in part, prompts Edmund Wilson to say that Cable's point of view is historical and sociological and not fundamentally romantic.

Wilson's comment on Cable's point of view is helpful toward gaining a further perspective on Cable's art, and to see it in relationship to American writing generally. The most unique feature of Cable's work is its social consciousness, which is most readily seen in his themes. Incest, slavery, caste, and mixed blood are Cable's subjects; and to his first readers they presented a bold and uncommon fictional picture of Southern life. To the modern reader, Cable's themes express an attitude toward the emotional components of Southern life that is to be found in such works as William Faulkner's The Sound and The Fury and Eudora Welty's Losing Battles, for example.

In form, however, Cable's writing is the mixture of romance and realism that characterizes the fiction of this era. This statement is not meant to contradict Edmund Wilson's comment on Cable's point of view. When Wilson says

Cable is not fundamentally a romantic, he is calling attention to the social issues present in Cable's work; furthermore, he is partially playing the role of a provocateur, in effect challenging Cable's "bad press" and partially playing the role of an intellectual historian, leading us into a re-assessment of this entire literary milieu. Nevertheless, as an art form, romance has proved a particularly compatible genre with the American experience of searching for an identity apart from old forms, systems, and orders.[7] And it is to romance that Cable owes his greatest debt. It offered to him, as to many other American writers, an acceptable form with which to publish, and a means with which to broaden the regionalists' audience.

This expansion, in fact, had already taken shape. By the 1850's, with the growing fame of Mark Twain's sketches of river life and Erastus Beadle's orangebacked "dime novels," humor became respectable. It was long assumed that local color writing achieved recognition with the publication of Bret Hart's story, "The Luck of the Roaring Camp" in the Overland Monthly for August, 1868. Current scholarship indicates, however, that the roots of "local color" writing are actually to be found in the development of American humor and, more specifically, in the practices of frontier and Southern humorists in the first half of the nineteenth century.

Even allowing for the possibility that our cumulative experiences alter our conception of literature, the fact

is that post-war popular writing visibly expanded in several important respects. By the Reconstruction Period, it had attracted a wider audience and, most important, a wider range of writers especially from the South and West. Cable was in fact discovered through the magazine industry's new mass market interest in fictional and non-fictional work from the Deep South and the Far West, sections which had not traditionally received much attention from the national, particularly the genteel, audience.

With the new popularity of sectional material and with the acceptance of humor by "legitimate" society, creative writers from the South and West must have felt that this was an opportunity to enter the literary mainstream. Cable certainly felt this way; by the time he was discovered he had already made an unsuccessful attempt at being published.[8] The climate of the literary world he was trying to enter, however, was to a considerable degree affected by residues of the Civil War and Reconstruction period. In terms of literary activity, this climate meant that sectional writing, while in demand, was coming increasingly under the influence of genteel readers and editors who wanted a fiction that, while regional in focus, would be nostalgic in perspective, sanguine and inoffensive in its depictions.

So there would have been a period of waiting and of decision-making, as at all moments of rapid cultural change, but we do not have a full picture of this cultural encounter. The new sectional writers could not be expected to accomodate

themselves immediately to the consequences of the war or to the resegregation that happened after it. Probably, although we cannot be certain, the regionalists and the spokesmen for the genteel vied with each other. To magazine editors, the sectional writers brought a heritage of realism, a stress on life as it was. Some were published, but most appeared only once in Century Magazine or Scribner's Monthly in the decade of the 1870's. These were two of the more popular family magazines publishing fiction, and for many of the sectional writers, they represented a dead end in terms of gaining entrance into the literary mainstream. Nevertheless, writers like Cable who were able to succeed left a lasting imprint on American letters. Their work added a concreteness, an exactness of textural detail that had been missing from American literature.

What then was the specific character of post-war popular fiction? It is, as generally acknowledged, a literature censored by the essentially Victorian values and attitudes of the Genteel Tradition, whose social philosophy was happiness and whose aim was to avoid the unpleasant--and, if necessary, by overlooking it. Local color literature was primarily magazine literature intended to reach the entire family. Therefore, sex was treated indirectly, if at all; religion was inviolable and, in one or another form, nearly omnipresent. Humor was almost never used and certainly not to play off one race or region against another, as in the past.

Two reasons may account for this: regional writers such as Cable, Edward Eggleston, Joel Chandler Harris, and Mark Twain were capable of using other writing techniques and forms besides the crude, comic devices employed by their literary forebears; and, as a consequence of the Civil War, genteel censorship would not sanction the older use of humor as an instrument for mocking other regions and races, with the exception of the black man. Cable, for instance, wrote only one story, "Posson Jone'," in which he uses the older form of humor, and he encountered stiff opposition before it was finally accepted by Appletons' Journal.

Part of Cable's success was due to his rendering the particular ingredients of his region. He wrote stories of love and of "caste, class, race, customs, and manners, the clash of the past with the present, the complex and colorful textural fabric of New Orleans."[9] The latter were the native elements of Cable's region and closest to his experiences as well; but they constituted new literary subjects for genteel readers generally and gave them a great deal of satisfaction. However, in presenting these subjects, Cable was not only doing what a serious writer must do in order to write honestly; he was also acknowledging his debt to his literary forebears in his attention to dialect and to portraits of his region.

Cable's concerns may be viewed in a broader and, I think, richer context. The authentic Cable is concerned

with social outcasts. Whether it is a black in a white world, a quadroon in the Creole caste system, a Creole in American society, or a "Yankee" in Creole culture, these are members of submerged population groups who exist on the margins of society. They look but are not seen; they speak but are not heard; they feel but do not make contact with humanity. And they are lonely. Their situation denies them any meaningful relationships with their fellow man. In this context, social marginality functions as a metaphor for human loneliness in Cable's fiction. In his work, Cable gives this condition a voice and attempts to reveal its dimensions. Thus, when authentic, Cable's writing is not only local color art. It is imaginative literature in the romantic tradition of Emerson, Hawthorne, and Melville. Moreover, Cable was like them in that he was writing against the critical judgment of most American critics who were intimidated by the English tradition, rather than questioning the essentially European basis of their values.

Despite the novelty of his subject matter and the general regional character of his work, Cable's success contained the seeds of his artistic failure. In mastering the popular and sanctioned forms of expression, Cable changed; that is, while the regional focus is always present, the uniqueness of his fiction, which is its social consciousness, its concern with the elements in conflict within culture, disappeared when he became

famous. Cable's was a vision of social reform, of consciousness-raising, which he wanted to present honestly and artistically. However, his work at the turn of the century, as instanced in Strong Hearts and in The Cavalier, have none of the social criticisms that characterize the earlier writings in Old Creole Days and The Grandissimes. In sum, few writers were more successful than Cable in rendering local color; but none was to sacrifice more of the authority of his art while gaining a national reputation.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Richard Chase, "Cable and His Grandissimes," The Kenyon Review, XVIII (Summer, 1956), p. 382.

[2]Edmund Wilson, "The Ordeal of George Washington Cable," New Yorker, XXXIII (November 9, 1947), p. 180.

[3]Constance Rourke, American Humor: A Study of the National Character (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1931), p. 12.

[4]Ibid., p. 141.

[5]Walter Blair, Native American Humor: 1800-1900 (New York: American Book Company, 1937), p. 17.

[6]Lafcadio Hearn, "The Scenes of Cable's Romances," Century Magazine, XXVII (1883), p. 42.

[7]Daniel Hoffman, Form and Fable in American Fiction (New York: Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 353.

[8]Arlin Turner, George W. Cable: A Biography (Durham: Duke University Press, 1956), p. 47.

[9]Louis D. Rubin, George W. Cable: The Life and Times of a Southern Heretic (New York: Pegasus, 1969), p. 18.