

POLITICAL ENMITY AND PERSONAL RESPECT IN POSTWAR SOUTHERN
LITERATURE: THE EXAMPLE OF GEORGE WASHINGTON CABLE
AND THOMAS NELSON PAGE

No author in the South during the forty or fifty years after the Civil War could forget that he was a southerner, even though he might avoid the deprivations and pressures and prohibitions that generally prevailed.

Arlin Turner, *Southern Literary Study*. 1975.

George Washington Cable and Thomas Nelson Page were contemporary southerners but, to judge by the existing evidence, it seems they never kept any sort of personal or professional relationship. Notwithstanding this, critics have taken it to heart to antagonize them not only in the literary field but also personally. Louis D. Rubin, Jr. is the only one who offers information about the first and perhaps one of the fewest personal meetings of these two southern intellectuals¹. While Cable was waiting for a train in Washington on his way to the South in 1887, he came across Thomas Nelson Page, who at the time was also a collaborator of *Century* and who had achieved national reputation with his stories collected in the volume *In Ole Virginia*, published that same year. In a letter to his wife, dated 25 May, Cable tells about this happy meeting and how Page "recognized me in the Washington depot & introduced himself. I traveled with him, his wife & one or two other Richmond people" (Rubin 198). It is obvious that Page's open and friendly character was congenial to Cable who hit it off with the Virginian immediately. Unfortunately his letter does not mention either the general content or the topics they discussed during their conversation. Some years later Cable turned his critical attention to Page twice and on both occasions he praised his personality as well as his literary works.

Page would only show his interest in Cable once. I have not found any direct evidence which justifies Rubin's belief when he compares Cable's eulogistic and highly favourable treatment of the Virginian in the articles he wrote about him, with the unfavourable attitude with which Page approached Cable and his works years later. To tell the truth, Rubin does not provide any evidence for this and he simply limits himself to add another brush-stroke which becomes

¹I have only found another indirect reference about a possible encounter between the two writers in Knight. This critic refers to a letter from Dr. Van Dyke to James Lane Allen in which the former "recalled a dinner for some thirty or forty literary people at the Aldine Club, with Allen making a speech in the course of which he gave his hearers to understand that gentlemen no longer engaged in literature, and since Thomas Nelson Page, Francis Hopkinson Smith and George Washington Cable were at the table, that part of the address fell upon embarrassed ears" (149). Unfortunately, Knight neither provides the date of this speech, nor makes any comment about the meeting of these southern writers.

the finishing touch on the conservative canvas of Page's portrait: "Apparently Cable liked Page; years later he wrote a sketch describing the meeting and praising Page as a writer and a man". Page "did not respond as warmly to Cable, though he disguised his feelings well. On several occasions in later years he spoke and wrote unfavorably of Cable". But, on this occasion, "he was all cordiality", as a letter he wrote to Gilder, with the same date as the one Cable had sent to his wife -25 May 1887- shows: "I fell in with Mr. Cable on the platform in Washington yesterday; made his acquaintance by boldly asking if it wasn't himself. We had a pleasant ride together . . . I do not agree with all of his views, but I had made arrangements to have him meet some of our Editors who I believed on meeting him would come to understand him better than they do generally in the South. I introduced him to a friend of mine, the red-hottest, old, Bourbon democrat, who sent him a card to the Westmoreland Club" (Rubin 198). The critic wonders if Page's comments were due to his desire to show his better self to his southern countryfellow, or if indeed what he really wished was to impress Gilder with an open and tolerant attitude towards a writer who stood for an ideological position completely opposed to his own.

It is my belief that none of the two reasons he brings out are appropriate to understand this apparent friendliness Page felt for Cable. Rubin does not make a difference between two levels of appreciation: the mere personal esteem and the professional or literary respect. Page's words to Gilder must be considered from a strictly personal point of view. The epistolary correspondence between writers and editors should be read as private communication, though it informs about literary questions on many occasions, since it is not aimed at any type of public circulation beyond that of the sender and recipient. Page seems to be sincere. Even if he recognizes that Cable's company made the journey pleasant, he still admits openly and frankly that "I do not agree with all of his views". Both Cable and Page are able to differentiate between the human being and the public figure and, even more important, between the social and political commentator and the fiction writer.

In 1891 Page would leave clear evidence of his appreciation and admiration for Cable, when he published his essay, "Literature in the South Since the War". After revising the career of some authors whose literature had appeared in some southern literary journals and magazines during the postwar period and which had failed to attract readers' and critics' attention outside their native section, Page introduces Cable: "Down in New Orleans a young man began to tell the romantic stories that came to him among the old houses and gardens of that ancient haunt of gayety and romance, and he told them with supreme art". Page dug out the accusations launched against Cable when he had published his Creole stories and novels in order to defend him publicly from the literary field. The Virginian stated firmly that "for purposes of art, however, the proportions of prosaic fact may be modified, the lines thrown into perspective". If Cable's literature was not a realistic reflection of the society they described, this did not prevent them from standing out as real artistic literary pieces as "they rise into the high plane of ideality; they are true to human life" (747).

What had happened was that the author of *The Grandissimes* had been heading towards what the South “cannot but deem grave errors” since his first romantic stories based on the old history of Louisiana. Because of this attitude, “he has been assailed with that vehemence which has ever characterized the attacks made by the South, whether on the field of battle or in the arena of forensic discussion”. Once again, Thomas Nelson Page voiced his defense of Cable and recalled that “much, however, must be forgiven to sincerity. The heart that made possible the characters of Aurore, of Raoul, and of Dr. Sevier must have depths of tenderness as surely as the brain which conceived them has genius”. The Virginian stated, for the first time and publicly, his real opinion on Cable with a sincerity, resolution and elegance which surprised because of the outstanding clarity with which he separates the social commentator from the writer. Unfortunately the majority of critics have ignored this. Thus Page, even if he confesses that he “reprobates Mr. Cable’s theories of politico-social economy as unsound and unsafe”, he boldly manifests that “*he will never cease to be proud that, whatever direction Mr. Cable’s philosophy may assume, his literary genius is the offspring of the South*” (my italics). The Virginian ends up with a brief review of Cable’s works, among which he highlights “Posson Jone”, as it “made the author’s reputation: it should have made it had he never written anything else”. And he complains about the low level of literary craftsmanship of Cable’s latest works compared to his first books where he had combined a great artistic quality with a deep thematic treatment. Page finished his survey on Cable with a surprising comment: he warned southern letters against the danger of losing the great talent of this New Orleans writer, since the artist was blending and melting under the guise of the “professional apostle” (748). Nobody could ask Page for more objectivity and equanimity in his brief portrait of his fellow countryman.

Cable, for his part, reviewed Page’s *The Gentleman of the Black Stock* for *Book Buyer* in December 1900. The excessively eulogistic tone of his criticism amazes the reader when one learns who its author is. After congratulating himself on the wonderful Christmas edition brought out by Scribner’s and recommending the book as the ideal present, the author of “The Silent South” went on to describe the story as “a beautiful tale”, “a love story of the simplest sort”, where “not a vehement note disturbs the narrative’s limpid and gracious flow from beginning to end”. The description of an innocent reality, without conflicts or problems, and the development of a naïve charming theme coloured the book with “a classic value” (378). Its author had transformed the simplicity of the narration into virtuosity because, although it reflected life as it was led by thousand of its readers, he had been able to elevate it to a spiritual sphere “without one refraction of fantasy” (379). Firstly, its powerful attraction lay in the delicate and noble presentation of one of the most common problems affecting people and, secondly, in the southern local colour which drenched its characters and which had been added by Page in the second edition of the book. After identifying the anonymous protagonist of the story with Page himself Cable concluded with a highly favourable reference to his previous works and confessed his profoundest admiration: “certainly whoever reads the lovely story enters into an inspiring and revised acquaintanceship with the man -the mind and heart- that wrote it, however many of his masterful tales we may have known him by be-

fore" (380). The change in Cable's critical attitude comes to light in these literary appreciations written at the turn of the century and it coincides with his new period as a writer of historical novels fully rooted in the most genuine southern literary tradition.

Nine years later Cable would write about the Virginian once more. In an article titled "Thomas Nelson Page: A Study in Reminiscence and Appreciation", he recalled with nostalgia the first time he had met the author of "Marse Chan". Cable's memoirs in this little essay help to complete the landscape he described to his wife in the letter he had written to her in 1887. One summer day, some twenty-four years ago¹, Cable and a friend were waiting for a train which would take them to the South at Washington's station. Needless to say, the conversation between these two southerners, exiled from their homeland, delved easily into the most urgent questions of their section. But it is worthwhile noticing the way Cable starts this article devoted to Page with a political explanation as an introduction. The writer goes on to tell all the details of their lively dialogue and recalls that "both thought they recognized that far beneath the dead issues of secession and slavery the persisting strife was due to a genuine incompatibility between two fundamental schemes of society". The North and the South stood for two completely different systems of life. Defenders of both sections did not succeed in imagining that the other's model enclosed interests favourable to their own region. Writing as if with a justifying tone, Cable remembered that both sections had admitted that "the Southern system being frankly and conscientiously designed to promote the elevation of one part of the community by purposely massing another part beneath it and by reserving the very name of public society, as well as of private, to the upper element alone, it would naturally show some very attractive traits and aspects in both the public and private life of that upper element". His words cannot help hiding his disapproval of the system he describes, but, at the same time, they stand as a justification of the attraction and success that the literary exploitation of this same system secured Page. Even if it was true that this upper social class boasted elements less appealing, it was obvious that "the better ones were likely to have a grace and charm hardly to be surpassed, if equaled, for a long time to come, under any opposite system, any system designed for the larger task of uplifting and advancing its entire people as one politically undivided mass" (139). Thus Cable espoused the southern aristocratic myth and recognised the superiority and alluring attractiveness of this social class. His words seem intended to justify Page's literary ability as the greatest chronicler of this southern aristocracy, which he himself considered as an example to be copied².

After setting this sociohistorical background which helps the reader to understand the literary role played by Page, Cable goes on to describe his meeting with two young men who

¹ Cable showed to have a memory like a sieve here, because if they had met twenty-four years before, their meeting would have taken place in 1885 and, as his letter to his wife Louise and Page's letter to Gilder corroborate, it was on 24 May 1887.

² "In praising his traditional adversary, Cable had not changed so much as he had simply tired of the battle. His tribute to the South's great defender showed the extent to which the once outspoken Southerner had retreated in the year 1909" (Hobson 124).

were also strolling along the platform: "It is to give point to this fact that these remarks begin with the slender incident of travel first mentioned; to illuminate the assertion that he is himself a striking instance of the things he so lovingly tells about", states Cable later (1909, 140). But, when he introduces Page, he sketches a new picture of the Virginian which critics have not heeded. Cable admits that Page and his companion are the very image of "typical Southerners", and his innovation, coherent with the reigning ideology at the time, lies in his believing that "one of them in particular ... was as fine an incarnation of the Virginia idea in its original Virginian consciousness and definite high purpose as one might find in a long search". Cable's comparison goes back to the American ideal set in her colonial days and the origins of the country, in short, it freezes the national myth. The Virginian embodies the literary figure of the southern mythic aristocrat, perfectly representing the social class he himself describes in his fiction since "in Thomas Nelson Page the spirit of the literary artist and the spirit of the public citizen strike a single chord" (140).

Page is, for George Washington Cable, the famous author of "those beautiful stories of old Virginia, and of those lofty pleadings for the nobler civic and social relics of the Old South", which are evidence, Cable urges to write, of "the sincerity and ardor of his patriotism as a citizen of a whole America". His literary career mirrors clearly his efforts "to show the truth and beauty of the things he knows best, whether long past and gone or just past and gone", and thus "make the ways of life clearer and smoother for whoever, from North or South, looks his pictures" (140). Page was one of the first southern writers to show that "the romance of our Southern States was to drop all its old-time exorbitant assumptions and to be as perfect as any in artistic sincerity". Cable underlined some of his personal and moral traits: his kindness, his interest in world affairs, his conservative trend -contrary to any radicalism and which never found satisfaction "without a sincere show of liberality"-, as well as his continuous preoccupation for the national progress and integrity. All these elements made the Virginian essential in the national literary field and helped him rise "unsurpassed as an interpreter of the highest social life in the choicest South of yesterday and to-day". Cable concluded this long list of praises with the final declaration that "he is a national asset, and it is a fact to rejoice in most heartily and everywhere that he is still at work, with nothing to indicate that he has either passed or reached the summit of his powers" (141). He strives to explain that Page is an American writer whose works appeal both to the North as to the South, as well as one of the best representatives of the literary national reconciliation who struggled to destroy the provincial and regionalist vision of the southern reality.

After studying the articles which Cable and Page wrote about each other, it seems obvious that their content denies flatly the personal antagonism to which they have been condemned over the years¹. As southerners committed to the social reality of their section, they espoused different ideological positions, especially as regards the racial question, and their critical so-

¹ Even Michael Kreyling, in his introduction to Cable's *The Grandissimes*, remembers mistakenly with regard to the decline of the writer's reputation during the 1890s that "influential Southern voices such as Thomas Nelson Page's had repudiated Cable's work in retaliation for his views on race" (x).

cial vision must be judged bearing in mind their role as public spokesmen and commentators. As fiction writers, both respected and felt a deep admiration for each other. For George Washington Cable and Thomas Nelson Page, literature was above any other social question and both recognised the importance that the literary postwar renaissance would bring to the cultural reconstruction of the South.

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