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THE PROMISE OF SUCCESS: POSTWAR WHITE SOUTHERN FICTIONAL APPROACH TO URBAN AMERICA

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> An era of prosperity has begun; and there are few intelligent men at the South to-day who will not at once confess that it is destined to be a far brighter era than they have ever seen. Free labor is unlocking the wealth of farms and mines and falling waters in a way that slave-labor never could have done. New machinery, new methods are bringing in a new day. In the midst of the stir and movement of this industrial revolution these young men are growing up. Hope and expectation are in the air: the stern discipline of poverty goads them on, and the promise of great success allures them.
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> Editorial. «Topics of the Time». *Century*. October, 1882.

After the Civil War and the end of the Reconstruction period, the prevailing idea throughout North and South was that of national reconcilation. Both sections felt that the time to stop waving «bloody shirts» had finally arrived to be replaced by a rapid brotherly reunion. And then the *New South* sprang up in the South. The term was born with an ambiguous meaning, but, according to Paul M. Gaston, it became the symbol which expressed the change of civilization of the Old South into a new one (4). Its main supporter and spokesman was Henry W. Grady -editor of the *Constitution*, the Atlanta newspaper-, and its birth certificate was the speech he pronounced before the New England Society of New York in 1886, which he titled «The New South». The Southerner announced that the Old South of slavery and secessionism had passed away and had been replaced by a new South of union and liberty. Grady and the rest of the prophets of

this New South «aspired to fulfill the American success story in all its ramifications», because the program had that aim and counted, among other elements, on «a fervent gospel of union and brotherhood, to facilitate full acceptance into the union, and tailored its notions of both individual and collective success to the dominant American pattern» (Gaston 84). Besides national reconciliation, another of the main slogans of this project elaborated by the defenders of this New South was that of the richness and power of the modern world which had their origin in the construction of the new railway networks, new factories, and not in the cotton fields. To enrich the South it was necessary to devote themselves fully to lay the foundations of an industrialized urban society and to renew old agricultural methods. Hence, Southerners had to turn their eyes to advertising programs which attracted Northern economic capital and, in Grady's words, «the better class of immigrants», that is to say, Northern farmers and laborers from anglosaxon stock.

When Henry W. Grady pronounced his famous speech, his Northern audience listened to words and expectations that could only be music to their ears. The South, not now representing a political threat, became a mythical land to be described, gloated over, and even longed for. For some Northern writers its prewar civilization came to embody all the virtues and ideals that were missing in their Northern society, which was rapidly suffering a process of industrialization, and thus getting farther and farther from its original Arcadian setting. On the other hand, in the age of literary magazines and local color, Northern editors did not really have to go to great lengths to coax Southern writers into sweetening their stories with decayed mansions, faithful black retainers, empoverished but highly respectful ex-confederates and planters, all served with a drop or two of nostalgia for bygone days.

Yet, the situation lived by postwar Southern white writers is much more complex than that which the common formula of the school of local color seems to imply. Caught in the subtle but slippery, and profoundly risky, web of the political situation at the time, some of these authors spent their lives trying to reconcile opposite feelings: a convulsive attraction to what the North represented with a passionate love and, above all, understanding of what their region really was. The North stood for literary fame and national reputation. The South, on the other hand, meant literary isolation, and insularity. The lives and literary careers of two apparently antithetical writers, George Washington Cable and Thomas Nelson Page, best exemplify this attitude. And their inner struggle is best dramatized in two novels: in Cable's *John March, Southerner* (1894) and in Page's *Gordon Keith* (1903).

These two works show the way Cable and Page, spurred on by the New South's economic regeneration program, were conscious that in their fiction they had to build up the idea that the plantation, as the embodiment of Southern antebellum ideals, was no longer operative. In their desperate attempt to catch up with the rest of the nation, they were committed to creating an alternative: a new fictional urban Southern world

where only those committed to industrial and economic prosperity had a place. But, at the same time, they used this new locale to project their plight as authors isolated from the main streams of American literary trends. Hence, the heroes of this new fiction are launched into initiation rites which take place at the Northern city and return home redeemed, purified, and converted to a new creed which labels them not as regional Southerners, but as full Americans capable of transcending their own social and literary provincial limits.

The task, then, that Cable and Page take on in these novels is outstanding. They start writing from the literary myth of the Southern gentleman and re-elaborate it in such a way that they transform it and create a new myth: that of the enterprising New Southern gentleman, or better still, the Americanized postwar Southern citizen. But to achieve their goal they feel forced to strike a balance between reverence for their past and idealization of the present and future. It might be argued that their efforts are perhaps less harsh than one would think because as F. N. Boney claims, «the really impressive thing about the historical Southern aristocracy is the way it has always appeared to be unique while actually swimming in the mainstream of acquisitive, capitalistic American life»[1]. But the striking achievement here is that in their depicting of this new situation, they inevitably fall again into the mythmaking trap and develop a myth which takes hold of the historic reality in the same way that the antebellum aristocratic Southern gentleman did in prewar times.

Cable's *John March, Southerner*, and Page's *Gordon Keith* deal with the psychic and intellectual maturing of their protagonists and their adaptation to a new urban world. Cable is concerned with the problem of creating a new South, tolerant, intelligent, strongly unified in state governments, and with good educational facilities. In order to make his point clear, the writer offers in this novel an important change from his usual fictional setting. It appears as if the urban society of New Orleans and its picturesque creoles were not the most appropriate instruments to achieve his goals, and thus he rejects the two principal elements which had provided his enthronment inside the Southern local color fiction. He selects an area situated in the Southest of Tennessee and Northern part of Georgia because he means the territory to be representative and typical of the entire South, where the mineral resources give him the opportunity to broach, directly, the Southern questions of industrialization, economic recovery, and expansion of the postwar New South[2]. And this is where he sets John March who will

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1. F. N. Boney points out that slavery was the only difference between the section, since «in reality the similarities between the capitalistic, expansionistic, optimistic, racist land of Dixie and the rest of American were much more striking than the variations. All over the emerging United States economic opportunity and social mobility allowed the exceptional white man to rise as high as his abilities (and a little luck) would carry him» (229).

2. «The new book was to be Cable's attempt to show the South as it was, not through the usual haze of local color» (Rubin 30).

change from a state of innocence into a state of knowledge, from his childhood into his adulthood. His first years are imbued with the taint of the Old South and they are regarded as a burden which he has to discharge to achieve full maturity and independence. But, even if he is marked by a dark heritage, this new Southerner –as the title of the novel makes absolutely clear–, opens up to the nation, and does not remain cooped up within his regional borders.

In *Gordon Keith* Page tries to separate the Southern hero from his world and to show that his success in other geographical and social spaces is only possible if the protagonist transcends the code of values inherited from the antebellum civilization. The degree to which Page concentrates on the manner in which contemporary Southerners bring their old code of conduct into contact with new social problems makes the novel a study of the new Southerner and, hence, of his change to new mores. Contrary to the commonly held opinion that the novel, set far from Page's traditional locale of the plantation, implies significant literary deterioration in his production[3], it incorporates the writer's most sincere and critical vision of his postwar society. Page also abandons his traditional setting-the rural plantation- and concentrates on describing the change of a small mining town into a city, from Gumboldt into New Leeds, which sprang «from a chrysalis to a full-fledged butterfly with wings unfolding in the sun of prosperity» (Page 348)[4]. The Virginian needed to place his novel in a locale teeming with life and where real tangible problems could be dealt with as the plantation had become «an idyllic sanctuary, a kind of sunny Shangri-la, into which the cares of the world rarely intruded» (Taylor 150). Likewise, Gordon Keith disregards the code of the gentleman -central in other works by Page- because, as his father confesses, it has deprived old Southerners of taking part in the modern world: «I know no more of science, sir, than an Indian... the only sciences I ever thought I knew were politics and war, and I have failed in both» (21).

But not only that, as Fred Hobson explains, it is «a story not so much in the Southern as in the American grain -a retelling of the tale, told by writers as early as Hawthorne, of the innocent and honorable young man from the country coming to the city to make his fortune»; even more basically, «it is the story of the pilgrim, the knight of virtue, encountering Vanity Fair and surviving -but only after a struggle» (151). Gordon Keith demonstrates that he is not only capable of adapting to the new needs and surviving in the ruthless urban industrial society but, most importantly, of being one of

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3. For Ritchie D. Watson, *Gordon Keith* «becomes poorer fiction as its hero moves farther from his original plantation environment» (178); for Lucinda H. Mackethan, Gordon Keith sets to show in the novel that «the things money stands for are worthless when compared to the values of his region» (325).

4. Further quotations from Page's *Gordon Keith* will refer to the edition which appears in the work cited list and will be identified by page numbers included in parentheses in the text.

its main protagonists and supporters. He becomes the personification of what the New South had to be: honorable, daring and enterprising. He accomodates perfectly to the new order and just remembers the old way with some slight nostalgia.

In the process of John March's and Gordon Keith's transformation into new Southerners they are confronted with a number of perils which they have to dodge as part of their moral contest to prove that material success in an urban South does not endanger them spiritually. John March, encouraged by local leaders and Yankee capitalists, starts to exploit his lands, following the dictates of the new creed. But this turns out to be not an easy task, because he dithers between the teachings of his father, which are based on honesty and good manners reminiscent of the Old South, and the present situation, which not only involves the natural problems but overt corruption. If, on the one hand, March feels attracted by the project of collaborating with this New South; on the other, he cannot help condemning it morally. Nonetheless, it is only when the young Southerner contacts the Northern capitalist that he sees a new perspective: «It's not because he's a Yankee. It's simply because he's in with the times. He knows what's got to come and what's got to go, and how to help them do it so's to make them count! He belongs-pshaw-he belongs to a live world. Now, here in this sleepy old Dixie» (Cable 199)[5]. But, at the same time, this process leads him to become conscious of the fact that the changes announced by the governing class are far from being a threat to the sacred foundations upon which the region is based, because, even though the South is being shaken by the impetus of this new order, «still the old plantation slumbered on below the level of the world's great risen floods of emancipations and enfranchisements whereon party platforms, measures, triumphs, and defeats only floated and eddied, mere drift-logs of a current from which they might be cast up, but could not turn back» (235). John March faces a painful process of discovery throughout the novel. But the clash with the actual motivations that underly this creed of progress does not launch him into a crusade for political purity. He rather comes to grips with reality and finally consents to associate with the local leaders. Thus, far from becoming a quixotic character fighting against the gigantic but corrupted machine of power, March appears as a mature Southerner trying to make the best of a bad situation. In this context his journeys to the North, to look for economic support and publicize an immigration scheme, are seen as the logical step in his process of education, or better, re-education.

Similarly, it is true that Gordon Keith despises the materialistic ethic of the Gilded

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5. Further quotations from Cable's *John March, Southerner* will refer to the edition which appears in the work cited list and will be identified by page numbers included in parentheses in the text.

6. Harriet R. Holman writes that «Page's answer to the New South... was after all no answer, for his young man... reverted to the *summum bonum*, the old way of life as it had been lived before the war» (167). And Theodore L. Gross considers that «Gordon Keith... is convinced that society has become corrupt because of industrialization» (123).

Age and this has led critics to read the novel as an indictment against the New South[6]. But, in fact, the crude materialism in the novel is simply associated with the North, first with the dishonest projects carried out during the Reconstruction and, later, with the deceitful, though fashionable, world of New York. Gordon Keith condemns only those new capitalists who manipulate wealth without producing it, and who differ significantly from the attitude of the protagonist, who tries to boost industry at home. In fact, his journey North is not regarded as a simple initiation trip of the hero, but as the necessary nightmare of the young Southern man who must adapt to other ways of life different from those in which he has been immersed. «He was alone in the wilderness» (149), says Page of his protagonist. Hence, when Keith returns home he is new man who has left his adolescence behind and is imbued with the aura of knowledge and experience. In fact, his struggle in that world has left permanent marks on him: «The mouth had lost something of the smile that once lurked about its corners... Experience of life had sobered him» (158, II). Thus, what he experiments is symbolic of the confrontation between the rural South and the industrialized North.

John March and Gordon Keith come to terms with the new social situation, and to do this, they have to shake off their past heritage, a pack of ideals derived from an extinct civilization, which has become obsolete in the modern world. But their acceptance of the new ideology is not automatic. They go through a kind of conversion, full of difficulties, since they cannot reject their past cultural and social legacy all of a sudden. In the same way they mature and gain experience, their towns, once flourishing rural societies but during the postwar suffering from an economic underdevelopment, decide to embrace the progressive creed of the New South and endeavour to prosper by encouraging foreign investment. Thus, when they come face to face with the deprived postwar reality, they show that Southerners, though defeated and humiliated, have the moral stamina to overcome the social, cultural, and economic obstacles that separate them from the latest social advances and, naturally, from success; as well as, with their dynamic and energetic spirit, to lead their region to a new era of urban and industrial splendor.

But it is not only John March and Gordon Keith who are pro-New South men in the novels. Most of the characters are convinced that this postwar South, similarlike as the Phoenix Bird, will rise from its own ashes with renewed youth and energy to compete with any modern society: «There's enough mineral wealth in Widewood alone to make Suez a Pittsburg, and water-power enough to make her a Minneapolis, and we're going to make her both, sir!» (139), says a local leader in *John March*. But this will only be possible if it can count on Northern economic help and Southern moral and political support. Hence, one of the main questions discussed in the novels is the attempt to attract Northern capital into the region. «All we want in Dixie is capital» (140), states a character Cable's in the novel. «The mineral resources were simply enormous, and were lying in sight for any one to pick up who knew how to deal with the people to whom they belonged» (78), exclaims a Northern capitalist in Page's novel, convinced

that economic and social difficulties are no hindrance to those Southerners who, willing to let aside sectional political questions, show an open spirit which makes it possible to recover past historic glory and, most important, to join the economic progressive current of postwar America.

Nonetheless, both protagonists have to face problems at home. John March is aware of domestic corruption and plans for self-enrichment. But, this new Southerner, far from burying his head in the sand, decides to deal with trouble alone. And it is his resoluteness and frankness which are recognised and praised for the benefit of his society, as he is regarded as a key person in the development of this new state of things. His town becomes famous and the nation's eyes turn on Dixie, even though, «hardly in faith», as Cable claims ironically, «yet with a certain highly commercial hope and charity», since «the lighting of every new coke furnace, the setting fire to any local rubbish-heap of dead traditions, seemed just then to Northern longings the blush of a new economic and political dawn over the whole South» (458). But this radical transformation from a rural society into a industrial society where prosperity is booming, and «the way the're slappin' money, b' Jinks, into improvements and enterprises - quarries, roads, bridges, schools, mills- 'twould make a Western town's head swim!» (459), has a pernicious effect on the heroes of these novels. John March and Gordon Keith are made aware of the fact that the prosperity desired for their region by some of their most socially outstanding countryfellows actually hides a limitless yearning for self-profit. And that is the price they have to pay to survive in these new times. As March confesses, «I know that with even nothing left but the experiences, I'm a whole world richer, in things that make a real manhood and life» (481).

On the other hand, the attraction that Northern urban society exerts on John March and Gordon Keith cannot overcome the intense personal qualms that both writers have about their region. When John March is asked, «what is it in the South we Southeners love so?» (326), he reveals that «Our South isn't a matter of boundaries, or skies, or landscapes... It's a certain ungeographical South-within-the South-as portable and intangible as-as-'. 'As our the souls in our bodies'» (326-327). This is a new John March breaking the shell of his southerness. But he is only capable of reflecting on his region, once he has confronted the harsh reality of life, that is the North. And it is there where his regional background makes him stand out, and in the same way Thomas Nelson Page's Gordon Keith is noticed because «He's a Southerner, that's plain; and a gentleman, that's just as certain» (348).

John March's career and the knowledge he acquires throughout the social and economic change of his region bring to mind Cable's own plight in the South. Thus, when March feels frustrated because his attempts to bring about his own regeneration scheme for his property fails, and he is invited to move North and start business there, he opens up his heart in a way reminiscent of the way Cable's feeling had been: «I just can't go! I musn't! ...You know, this Suez soil isn't something I can shake off my shoes as you might... I'm part of it!... My place is here!» (482-483). Likewise, Gordon Keith

is tempted by the dazzling Northern world, but he decides to return home and work for the progress of his region. In fact, Keith comes back to New Leeds, the new urban and industrial Southern city, not to Elphistone, his old family plantation, setting himself apart from the past. This becomes a symbol of the protagonist embracing the new Southern civilization and endowing the pastoral environment with dreamy tones, as his conversion to the new Southern creed represents his sole justification for delving into new age capitalism. Both novels, then,.become the stories/histories of a life, the growth of a soul in a new world gradually rising, in a very disorderly fashion, out of the wreck of the old. John March and Gordon Keith, similarly to their authors, become involved directly with the problems of their region and experiment contradictory feelings of attraction and rejection. At the same time, they discover how deeply their roots sink into their land and their belonging to the South makes them different, even morally superior.

Cable's and Page's attitude in their two novels about the New South -*John March, Southerner* and *Gordon Keith*- share, then, important common points: both try to make their hero the prototype of a Southerner who was able to adapt himself to the times of the postwar urban New South; both feel an urge to interpret this period to outside observers and justify their way of life; both feel an urge to interpret it to Southerners and to themselves and, thus, construe their novels as introspective studies on inner regional problems; both underscore their new yearning of belonging to the nation betraying their sense of loss as defeated Americans in a country of plenty; and, finally, in their construction of an imaginary literary new South, they find the only cathartical relief for their psychological frustration as Southerners and as writers. Hence, *John March, Southerner* and *Gordon Keith* are more than just lists of Southern social problems and shortcomings. They are Cable's and Page's bold confession in front of their region and the world of what they felt the «new Southerner» had to be and the type of society they wanted their South to become.

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