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Between Science and Ethics in Rebecca Harding Davis’s Waiting for the Verdict

Abstract: Rebecca Harding Davis’s still relatively obscure novel, Waiting for the Verdict (serialized in 1867), is a complex study of the vicissitudes of race and class during the Civil War and in its immediate aftermath. Using an array of sentimental/reformist, proto-realist and realist narrative and stylistic procedures, the author creates an ideologically dense text which is ultimately unable to break away from the incipient contradictions, whether on the level of its narrative execution or on the level of its very heterogeneous content. This fascinating, if at times contradictory, heterogeneity is illustrated in the argument, principally through focus on the issues of color and those of class or social status. These issues are cast within the prevailing forms of racialist discourses and theories of society, unfolding under the heading of scientific Darwinism and environmentalism on the one hand, and its counterpart, religious, sentimental, and reformist discourses on the other.

1. Determinism and Mutability, or “Nature against Circumstance”?

Waiting for the Verdict, Rebecca Harding Davis’s novel touching on the vicissitudes of color and class across the Mason-Dixon Line in the midst of the Civil War, was serialized in The Galaxy from February to December 1867 (for more information on the composition, serialization and publishing of the novel, see Harris 1991; Olsen 1985). In this still little analyzed novel, Harding Davis conjoins the issue of the color line and the social divide cast as class, and shows how these two overlap but also pose as distinct conundrums in the turbulent war and post-war years.1 Perhaps due to her encompassing scope, or her experimenting with the sentimental and realist modes, Harding Davis has created an open structure, at times confusingly so. Dana Nelson celebrates this refusal to grant symbolic weight to any one model of representative citizenship of the times, and terms this act as

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1 Knadler (2002) considers the novel within the culture of domestic fiction used as a tool of what Amy Kaplan terms “manifest domesticity” for strengthening the existing socio-political dispensations. Nelson (2002), on the other hand, praises the text for opening up possibilities for new subjects to be included in the post-war nation. The most succinct appraisal is offered by Tillie Olsen, one of the prime contributors to the rediscovery of Harding Davis: “She [Harding Davis] knew that Waiting for the Verdict was a book of far more substance and compass than anything else being written — and praised — at the time; and that it alone recorded, tried to make sense of, the seething current of the Civil War period” (1985, 132).
“countersymbolic representation” (Nelson 2002, 218). Nelson politicizes the narrator’s stance to the extent of attributing to it the capacity to juggle the “messy” and “heterogeneous” (2002, 222) aspect underlying any dispensations, and in particular those of the immediate post-Civil War period, when the nation had, as it were, to re-constitute itself. Whereas Nelson places this potentially exciting messiness of the text in the political domain, and in the changing aspect of the representative democratic procedure required by the Civil War and its aftermath, my reading sees this problematic wavering as a result of the disjuncture between the dominant intellectual models of describing society and its increasingly unfathomable, impersonal and implacable structures that lie outside an individual’s reach. As will become clear from my argument, these models are the scientific, Darwinist model on the one hand, and the religious, reformist and sentimental one on the other.

First of all, several remarks on the overall composition of the novel are in order, since it has presumably been shaped by the serialization of the text. However, some thin features of the plot may derive more from Harding Davis’s ambitious compass than from the demands for timely and convenient openings and closures. Even though the reader is obliged to admire a gamut of characters and settings in the novel, there is the sense of a lack of a deeper, more substantial and detailed, or more realist, vein of representation.

The cast of characters in the novel is admirably wide, as we move from the varied sections of the urban North, here represented by the Quaker City, Philadelphia, and the New York region, then move South to the borderland state of Kentucky, itself torn between the “blues” and the “greys,” and other Southern localities. We glimpse a modest, thrifty and hard-working homestead in the North; a smaller-scale Southern plantation; hovels of the poor, outcasts, and runaway slaves; we have a peek at the military tents; then a sweep through the salons of the newly risen Philadelphia professional class, its degenerate Anglo-Saxon aristocracy, and its working class and Negro slums. Such an ambitious scope indeed exceeds anything we are used to in other writings of this period. Just as she had shown previously in “Life in the Iron-Mills” (1861), albeit on a smaller scale, Harding Davis was able and willing to push forward the presupposed bounds of literary, social and political decorum.

Her characters also contribute to the stirring and novel approach to some themes of the contemporary American scene. The characters in the novel may be divided into two broad groups, initially divided along geographical lines, principally those of the North and South, but then by some more or less skilful narrative contrivances their lines of plot intersect, intertwine and merge. Retroactively, and at this point I just want briefly to draw attention to it and will address it at greater length later on, we need to acknowledge the importance of a somewhat sketchy opening scene set in Philadelphia in 1847, which brings together a number of defining factors for the novel as a whole. First of all, it legitimizes Harding Davis’s proto-realist narrative procedure.2

2 The term realism is used here as a literary-historical category designating a specific set of procedures and stylistic traits used by a number of authors in various European literatures from
The term I would use is realist-but-not-quite, since in the narrator’s use of setting
and her placement of characters therein it becomes clear that she is alert to the
possibilities of using social milieu as a player in her text. Further, issues of class
and status come to the fore in the opening passages as we witness the drama played
out between Ross Comely (Burley), as we later learn an illegitimate peddling girl,
market seller, “the ‘poor white trash’” (I, 347) and her father James Strebling, a
degenerate Southern aristocrat. As another paramount social marker, the race or
color issue intrudes forcefully into the novel. In fact, as we retroactively read
specific meanings into the title of the novel, the verdict refers equally to the moment-
ous social and civic upheaval overtaking the country at war, since it brings to the
fore broader ethical considerations of justice, equity, retribution, opportunity,
responsibility for slavery and for the soon-to-be-freed black population, and to the
issues of individual free agency and the unknown judgement passed down through
blood, heredity and kinship. Finally, the sense of the verdict about to be passed
also evokes several implacable passages from the Old Testament, specifically those
on the sins of the fathers being visited upon the children for several generations, etc.
These layered meanings constitute other frames, rather than just realist ones, for
reading the plot.

However, going back to the ways the narrative skillfully entwines several inter-
secting motivational drives, another signifying system constitutive of the novel’s
overall meaning is the issue of race, at the very beginning highlighted as the conflict
between Ross and Sap, Strebling’s mulatto boy. Thus, we see Ross peremptorily
dismissing Sap and recoiling from him in a show of disgust (“The dirty yellow skin
of the mulatto made her sick, she was sure” [I, 346]), treating him even less gener-
osely than she treated his dog. A little later, however, she is herself snubbed by her
aristocratic father who resents her “most unpleasant odor – that from the markets”
(I, 347), while she is regarded as “a curious beetle” (I, 347). For the moment, Ross
and Sap thus find themselves on the same side of the divide, both being marked
as outsiders and outcasts, a little less than human. This is only for an instant, though,
since in the next moment Ross becomes again aware of the property of her white
blood (I, 347-8), and the gap is open anew, only to be opened and closed intermit-
tently throughout the novel. What the opening shows is how social forms indicative
of marginality (illegitimacy, poverty, lack of respectability, menial employment)
were occasionally underscored and further justified by biological definitions of
race, although also differentiated from these if need be. In other words, even when

the 1840s onwards, finding its way to the United States and promoted by W.D. Howells’s
proclamations in the post-Civil War period, if not even practised before in some isolated
cases, as will be argued here for Harding Davis. For a brief history of such focused use of the
term to define a specific historical poetics, see Wellek 1963, 222-55.

3 For the system of citation, the page number is preceded by a Roman numeral indicating the
instalment and is given based on the pagination of the original <http://cdl.library.cornell.
edu/cgi-bin/moa/moa.cgi?notisid=ACB8727-0003-59> (final instalment: …-0004-124). For
the purposes of my reading, I draw on the electronic text of the novel provided by the Cor-
nell University project “Making of America.” More on this “digital library of primary sources
in American social history from the antebellum period through reconstruction” can be found
at <http://cdl.library.cornell.edu/moa/>. 
Ross is possibly tainted, the stigma attached to her faulty parentage and low social standing is at times comparable to, and at other times much more easily reparable than, the stigma attaching to Sap’s mulatto body: “These half-breeds are terribly diseased in body and mind” (I, 349). The narrative itself points to the shifting opinions passed on these conditions, occasionally seen as circumstantial, and at times as fixed, as understood at the time when Harding Davis was writing the novel, and is not capable of resolving the case. Until its very end, the novel does not really tell us whether it is blood (nature) or circumstance that regulates human fate, and at best evokes either the notion of religious, thus incipiently superhuman, intervention, as suggested by the increasingly Messianic imagery appropriated by Sap turned Broderip, or the role of voluntary, sacrificial work undertaken by Margaret, or the reformist and benevolent zeal continuously exhibited by Rosslyn. It is through this ultimate impossibility or irresoluteness that the realist texture of the novel unravels.

After these introductory remarks, a brief plot summary is in order. Set mostly during the Civil War, the plot weaves together the fates of several families: the working-class, uncouth Northerners, the Burleys; the genteel Southerners, the enlightened slave-owners, the Randolphs and their cousins, the somewhat more licentious Streblings; the Conrads, middle-class Northerners; the mulatto family of Strebling’s slaves, Nathan and his brother Sap/Broderip; and finally some straightforward abolitionists (the Quakers and Lieutenant Markle). Given that the social and political upheaval is here addressed through familial connections and the sentimental and marriage plot, there is a strong indication that narrative discourse will swerve from the pole of the sentimental to that of the realist. These two strands merge in the plot of racial passing, which finds its partly surprising and partly predictable resolution reflecting new, Reconstruction circumstances, namely, the shedding of counterfeit identity assumed in passing, the taking up of the heroic role, and the eventual sacrificial death of the mulatto hero (see Sollors 1997, 220-84).

Thus a question which remains unresolved to the very end – which pricks the plot apart and almost requires a contrived resolution – is the notion of human nature as either perfectible, malleable, free (Rousseau) or predetermined, fixed, immutable (Diderot). Tzvetan Todorov calls this a clash between “scientism” and “humanism” (Todorov 1993, 23). If we opt for scientism, this mechanism involves, according to Todorov, the notion that “knowledge (science) must orient behavior —

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4 Regional distribution is more than incidental here, as Harding Davis is obviously trying to counter the threat of the divisive war and post-war trauma as it splits the nation in two. Her regional diversity, however, and a sense of the wide spatial compass covered by the novel also point to a more complex ideological spectrum of the Union at war and in its aftermath, not easily reducible only to its Southern and Northern poles. To simplify things, let me point out that each cluster of characters, attached to a specific space, stands for some of the then current models of describing and defining burning social issues: the Conrads, for instance, especially Margaret, represent the predominant racist approach justified by the theory of natural affinities; the Burleys reflect the republican, free-soil but still racist perspective, etc. Arguably, the only other novel from the period that matches this one in its range of settings and national types but also entrenched in the antebellum culture is Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852).
(ethics)” (25). Humanism, on the other hand, stipulates a greater or lesser degree of freedom (25).\(^3\)

On a parallel track, but still somewhat apart from these concerns, and already announced and rehearsed under the heading of Darwinism and Spencerianism, as aptly demonstrated by Richard Hofstadter (1992), there runs another driving force which can be termed enlightened sentimentalism on account of its potential to close the gap between these two opposing views. When sentimentalism, here understood as an important force for social change and reform, acts upon discourses of race and miscegenation, and, standing somewhat apart, the question of class, it destabilizes the fault lines of either the deterministic or humanistic theories of human behavior. However, even if it may admittedly serve as a corrective to more hardened and fossilized biological notions of race and color and the way these determine character traits and temperament, or, alternatively, if it works its effect on the equally intractable question of social status and class that shows itself almost as insurmountable as the issue of color, the question remains as to whether or not it may effectively act as a ‘realistic’ (in the sense of creditable and effective) remedy for the dilemmas faced by the war-torn nation.

Sentimentalism is taken here to mean, as suggested by June Howard, a consistent, coherent philosophical-ethical program committed to individual amelioration eventually leading to social transformations: “I argue that there is a strong relationship between Enlightenment notions of moral sentiments and sympathy and nineteenth- and twentieth-century sentimentalism” (Howard 1999, 69-70). Howard goes on to say how the now recognized champions of sentiments (Jean-Jacques Rousseau and the Scottish common-sense philosophers) “derive benevolence and [...] morality in general from human faculties that dispose us to sympathize with others” (70). Moreover, “for these thinkers, emotions [...] assume a central place in moral thought – they both lead to and manifest virtue” (Howard 1999, 70).

To illustrate briefly what this endorsement of sentimentality and the very ability to feel, to be disposed to sentiments and affects, actually means in the novel’s moral universe, it is useful to think of the aloof, aristocratic and conceited Randolph, and the equally reserved Margaret Conrad as two characters who close themselves off from the beneficial effect of sentiments also as a means of achieving satisfactory interpersonal relationships. Those who refute the validity and the effect of sentiment may easily find themselves not only emotionally but also morally stunted.

In addition, the waiting to be suffered by the characters, and the verdict which is to be handed down, comes to stand for a sentimental agency, for the very reason that it is ahistorical and anti-realist. Sentimentalism, sketched through the wooing and marriage plot, underscores instances both of (successful and foiled) social and racial mobility. The Randolph-Burley union, reconciling across a wide gulf the

\(^3\) However, this convenient distinction may be obviated in the discourse of Protestant theology, where, it would seem, the statute of predetermination – even though apparently severely curtailing free choice and free will – still hardly diminishes an individual’s responsibility and range of options within such a restricted moral universe. Predetermination thus merely intensifies a believer’s moral drama as he or she enacts an illusion of ethical behavior.
Southern aristocracy and the Northern popular element in the midst of the ruptures of the body politic caused by the war, proves more capable of healing these wounds than the conjoining of the two races which remains unaccomplished and which is not even within the imagined horizon of novelistic closures. In fact, that gap is pronounced “unconquerable” (XXXV, 747). I hasten to add that what is at stake is, of course, the conjoining and intermingling on fully equitable terms, since, as pointed out by the mulatta Anny,

[A]s for mixin’ de blood, it’s been the fault ob de whites when dat eber was done. Dar’ll be less of it when cullored women is larned to respect themselves. [...] dat talk of marryin’ is such a fur-off shadder! But the ignorance an’disgrace ob my people is no shadder! (XLIII, 982)

Margaret Conrad voices the implacable and deeply rooted view when she snubs Broderip’s suit: “It is a thing which will exist while the two races endure. I cannot fight against nature” (XXXVI, 842). Still, I would argue that it is unclear in the novel whether this is the narrator’s last word on this issue, since a few scenes earlier the characters evoke a ‘humanist’ notion of the salient features of identity in nineteenth-century America, and voice the idea of enlightened egalitarianism, “[t]here is no poverty of birth, nor hereditary vice” that could stand between a character and his agency (XXXVI, 841). That is, of course, if we discount the issue of black blood and race from the list of “hereditary vices.” Not only is this voiced by sympathetic white characters, but it is also interiorized by Broderip himself (XXXV, 747). Even so, there are some white characters who pointedly avoid this theory of natural affinities and antipathies (e.g., Lieutenant Markle, Quakeress Blanchard, while another Quakeress, Broderip’s adoptive mother, is undecided). Yet the novel ultimately refuses to resolve if we are meant to fully embrace the humanist possibility.

Still, one should admire the sustained interest that Harding Davis shows in the novel for the two salient issues of race and class, as she struggles to articulate how, for instance, the compass of the first will change on account of the Civil War, and, in connection with the latter, that some changes are impending, too. Interestingly enough, there is a character, perhaps somewhat overdrawn, who combines both these prevailing concerns, namely, surgeon Broderip (Sap now grown up), embodying and exemplifying a typical nineteenth-century plot of passing. In his Darwinian and ruthless rise to prominence, wealth and professional esteem, he resembles a typical post-war masculine type, the gilded-age entrepreneur, even as, curiously but predictably, these same Darwinian rules make him prone to the defects inherent in his interracial status.

Slight disparagement of Broderip’s expertise and his newly acquired social status, at odds with the old money, initially (while we are still not aware of his darker secret of presuming whiteness) has to do with feigning taste and social distinction on the basis of his meteoric economic rise. In other words, he is a pretender in the social domain, a social upstart, even as this trait is later only corroborated and reinforced by his other, more sinister pretension – that he is white. It is difficult here to see clearly what the narrator’s view of the social mobility of
her characters is: on the one hand, it is hard not to notice the subtle references in
the text to Broderip’s luxurious, over-refined, cloying taste, his penchant for the
exotic and gaudy (later replicated somewhat in the peculiar appearance of his
brother, Nathan), and his social rise thanks to his professional but unscrupulous
practice.6 On the other hand, when it comes to Northerners in the novel, the
emphasis is put on the value of free but unwaged labor, exercised either on New
England homesteads or on farms in the Midwest (where the Conrads venture after
their bankruptcy due, interestingly enough, to business speculation) or undertaken
by Randolph or Ross on a small scale, almost as a form of free labor. So, social
mobility embedded in the pre-industrial system of labor relations is still a morally
privileged form of betterment, and is still considered as an extension and clear
indication of self-improvement. Therefore, any other form of labor, ranging from
enslaved, through industrial, to contractual labor, is not regarded as ethical in the
novel, although it might be socially sanctioned.

Quakeress Ann Yates, however, decides, according to the dictates of her faith,
which in the novel comes closest to the effect that we would in a clear-cut realist
narrative ascribe to more tangible social forces (here pointedly war, revolution,
uproar, education, social and political reforms, etc.), not so much to discount
the “Darwinian,” scientific reasoning as to use its inherent ‘Anglo-Saxonism’ as a
lever to raise a potentially redeemable mulatto boy: it is within the extant model
of racialist thought that Sap’s/Broderip’s “knobbed, protruding forehead, the dis-
content, the appetite for something better than his brute life has yet known” (I, 348)
has to be evaluated. Also, this shows how racialist discourse in the nineteenth
century merged anatomical features with less tangible, elusive markers, whether
psychic or psychological, and turned them into a powerful classifying tool and
sorting device. It is very likely that this broad scope and its web of connections
facilitated the wide application of these categories.

We could, then, claim that this Quaker reformist experiment is situated both
within and outside the prevailing racial model. Broderip himself, now a renowned
surgeon, undertakes a similar experiment by taking under his wing a poor orphan,
Philip, and so, under another rubric, tries to rescue the boy from the prison of
his soiled origin, as he is warned by a solicitous friend: “I would not allow myself to
adopt a child of vicious parents” (XIII, 817). Viciousness and proneness to criminal-
ity are presumably inevitable in the context of pauperism. In the end, we see that
neither of these two experiments has worked: the boy’s education stops short

6 Let me digress here to draw attention to Brook Thomas’s (1997a) argument which he articulates
in his work on American realist fiction of the latter decades of the nineteenth century. He
claims that the contractual form of relations supersedes and displaces the status-based interac-
tions, largely attributable to stable, pre-industrial and by-and-large hierarchical societies. Under a
new social dispensation, the contract now determines the bounds of legality, while in the process
also impinging on the ethical implications of conduct. It becomes possible, contends Thomas,
that an ever widening gap is installed between what is considered legal and encompassed by a
contract, and what is considered ethical, so much so that these two domains may be in open
disagreement. Alan Trachtenberg (1982) talks about a similar development under the heading
of the rise of corporations as legal subjects often to the detriment of individual agents.
when it turns out that his benefactor is ‘black,’ while he himself is ultimately unable to wrest away from his racial heredity. It is interesting that his dilemma is cast as a choice, thus implying a degree of agency and free will, between his manhood and service to his race. The catalyst for this change should be, as is the case in the parallel sentimental plot, a white woman, Margaret Conrad. The fact that in the end this marriage is foiled – and this by the very agent which could promote a reformed, reconstructed black (or miscegenated) manhood – seriously undermines the status of such a subject in the country after the war, as suggested by Knadler (2002, 94; 99).

Even when an element of choice and agency is given prominence, this does not absolve the narrative from again assuming double standards. As suggested by Todorov, who lists defining traits of racialist discourse, one of these is the assumption of an individual’s representativeness with respect to his race; so that Broderip is again, as it were, caught up in a deterministic argument which, for instance, is not the case for Lieutenant Markle or Joe Burley or even Randolph (all white characters). Broderip’s agency is thus limited and bound by the invisible shackles of responsibility for racial uplift. At least, this possibility is more insisted on in the post-war period, although the verdict on this will also be changed in the wake of Reconstruction, as the ability for amelioration and progress begins to be questioned or effectively blocked (Fishel 1996; Foner 1988; Fredrickson 1987). This missed opportunity is – remarkably – also suggested by Harding Davis in the episode of the ruthless murder of a poor anti-racist Southern white teacher by a representative of the ‘ unreconstructed South.’ Later, his orphaned daughter will be included as a foster child in the new, reconciled national family raised by Ross and Randolph.

This omission, or this added burden, is all the more telling in view of Ross and Randolph’s marriage union, which signals terms for the inclusion of regenerate white slaveholders into the nation. We have already seen how Ross’s indigent status brings her one step short of the ostracism suffered by her mulatto counterpart, Sap. Further, she liberally surrounds herself with a number of socially marginalized characters, among them blacks, specifically the runaway slaves. This testifies that even if at the beginning Ross’s intolerance of Sap may have been a childish, thus instinctual (natural), expression of the racial antipathy posited to exist between the two races, this impulse would have been overcome and reworked into a program of Christian and philanthropic benevolence. However, as shown by Fisher (1987,)

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7 Even if my wording is more than suggestive here, I do not intend to indict Harding Davis for perpetuating or being unable to shed racialist views; firstly, that is not a primary role of a fictional text even when displaying strong social awareness, as this one does; secondly, I would rather insist on the text’s ambiguity and a sense of confusion about the changing realities that it is trying to gauge and accommodate rather than fix; thirdly, this sense of groping for answers is what the text shares in the domain of social and race issues in the second half of the nineteenth century, ranging from legal, social, fictional and non-fictional discourse, as demonstrable in Cable, Du Bois, and “Plessy v. Ferguson” (in Thomas 1997b). The value of Harding Davis’s text is its willingness to open up many distasteful questions, even if nowadays we cannot quite endorse all its values.

8 As for the natural sentiments underpinning segregation, one of the far-reaching wordings was undoubtedly that encapsulated by the Supreme Court of the United States in the majority opinion in the Plessy v. Ferguson case, which was decided by the Court in 1896 (Thomas 1997b).
sentimental benevolence, even though it carries a powerful reformist and humanistic appeal, is itself invested in keeping a distance between the sentient subject and the suffering object, and is thus implicated in the maintenance of the very same power structure which it tries to dismantle.

Such enlightened sentimentality, in the words of Howard, derives from a tradition of philosophical and ethical reasoning, and is not simply a cover-up for buttressing the dominant order. Even though we can acknowledge the authentic drive behind the Quakers’ and true abolitionists’ (Markle’s) dedication, it still becomes difficult to sidestep the inherent power relations entailed in the display, indulgence and use of emotions. For instance, what distinguishes an enlightened, even if sentimental, reaction is the ability to exercise control over its duration, course and final effect, such as is possible by the white characters, whether Ross, Quakeress Blanchard or Quakeress Yates. Mulattoes and black characters, on the other hand, are not capable either of exhibiting appropriate emotions (such as we see in the strangely anti-climactic encounter between Nathan and his old father) or, if they are, they are unable to harness them or channel them appropriately.

Thus, Broderip is often described as a nervous, hypersensitive, melancholic man; repeatedly, his mood swings and his hysterics are likened to effeminacy, and he is discredited as a man not in full possession of his emotional responses (he has been seen “as weak-willed, akin to hysteric women” [XXXVI, 840]). Even when he obviously shows emotions, it is usually in an excessive, neurotic and sick way, in line with the freakishness and the attendant anxiety attributed to the mixed-bloods, and reinforced through the plot of passing. His physiognomy is a tell-tale sign (VIII, 605). Nathan’s (Sap’s elder brother) repertoire of emotional reactions also draws interesting comments; he moves from periods of intense emotional engagement and alertness to periods of stupor and insensitivity, and although this can obviously be ascribed to his shocking experiences in slavery, especially during the war and the episodes recounted in the novel, it could also be construed as inherent in his hybrid, mongrel origin. Additionally, at this stage the novel does not quite resolve the problem of the status of the emotional and sentimental capacity of black people; towards the end we are waiting for the verdict on that count.

Broderip also figures as a foreigner, which at least points to the possibility to construe the formative influence of nurture, environment and circumstances on man (XII, 811). Still, he is a mysterious character, with few family connections, a new make of man, ambitious, slightly immoral and successful, lacking definable rank and claiming spurious gentility. His phenomenal rise is a token of the disruption of the social order precipitated by the war.

It is in this respect significant, however, that Harding Davis underscores the notion of family and collective (‘racial’) ties between slaves and freedmen. In the part of the plot relating to Nathan’s family and their commitment to maintaining family ties against all odds, with the emotional ties enhancing the biological ones, the appreciation of kinship bonds testifies to the humanization of the slave.

For a much less prejudicial but nevertheless confident expression of the similar view, see Cable 2002.
History has provided ample evidence to suggest what verdict was ultimately passed on the black population in the Union. However, in order to underscore the dilemma which the text is unable to suture, we should go back to one of the final exchanges between two mothers, one mulatto, the other white. When Anny announces towards the end of the novel that freedmen are intent on the "verdict" which is about to be passed by the white authority structure (XLIII, 981), she is just rehearsing and reiterating an age-old argument entailed in the notion of the chain of being which mercilessly pins down the position of blacks and those with an improper mixture of blood. Simultaneously, Anny herself disputes and unsettles this notion ("it's told on our blood" [XLIII, 981]), when she pleads for "a chance to show what stuff's in us," apparently through education and free work. The suture in the text in this case lies in the precariousness of waiting, in a suspension between the status of “man or beasts” in Anny’s plea (XLIII, 981).

2. Impurities of ‘White’ Blood

The novel attempts to attenuate and diffuse the intractability of the determinants associated with ‘blood’ in the case of the Burley-Randolph connection. Inherent in Rosslyn’s lowly status is potential moral corruption, further exacerbated by her illegitimate status. Poverty and illegitimacy here combine to create another set of Darwinian circumstances likely to affect temperament, and indelibly mark the individual’s nature, so that Rosslyn ferociously claims “good and pure” Burley blood: “You taught me yourself that vice or virtue comes to us from our fathers in the blood” (IX, 696). However, this view becomes complicated because it is sifted through mutable factors such as geographic position and place. Namely, what apparently might save Ross from the possible taint of her doubly damnable origin, the socially inferior status on her mother’s side and the moral lapse on the father’s side, is precisely the fact of her place in the Northern as opposed to Southern social-economic milieu, coupled with the beneficial and healthy influence of the rural dwelling, far from the potentially corrupting influences of the urban lairs.

Being placed in the North instead of the South, she is, according to her grandfather’s practical populist views, beyond the reach of the polluting influences brought about by slavery: “I’ll not put her where she’ll grow tainted an’ cunnin’ for all the money or edication that ‘ud make her a lady” (II, 360). Southern society, and here the principal target is its upper classes, is seen as morally reprehensible, while the appurtenances of class and status avail them very little against the charge of affectation and sham. The Southern sense of caste is seen as incompatible with

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9 I use the term here to highlight the almost impossible tensions between the political and the psychological, between biology, body and the disembodied notion of rights, between at least two if not more competing models of being human that circulated in this period; ultimately, we could locate this unsutured gap between what Burgett (1998, 3-23) contrasts as republican and liberal models of citizenship and civic participation. The former is universalistic and extended generally, while the latter is particularized and embodied (in the case of women and freed slaves in this period, making them subjects rather than citizens).
the sound moral codes which prevail in the North. This anti-class, and implicitly anti-slavery and republican, thrust in the novel even carries across geographical boundaries as conveyed in the narrator’s unsparing look at the fossilized relics of the Northern aristocracy, which, as suggested by Randolph’s change of heart at the end of the novel, will finally be wiped out by the war. This is part of the larger issue of the incompatibility of the aristocracy with the republican order. Purported aristocratic excellence, insofar as it resides in the blood, is therefore also subject to degeneration, no less than other hereditary facets, as shown in the case of the decline – moral, biological and financial – attributed to the Philadelphia old stock, as blisteringly recorded by the narrator (XV, 7-9).

Further, Ross as a working girl is singularly positioned to examine Garrick Randolph’s code of aristocratic leisure, cast as languor, lassitude and a punctured moral code. This code can neither sustain nor endorse tremendous shifts and disruptions attending the war and post-war upheaval, which overtake and overturns any number of social, regional and cultural positions. Randolph’s potential for change has been stunted and stifled, just as his class is bound for extinction in a new social dispensation. Through him, we are reminded of the fact that the South still retains traces of an old social order, also reflected in and reinforced through the domestic sphere and the fixity of gender positions, which Randolph projects in his misperceptions of Ross as an imperfect model of the Southern belle. The point is, of course, that he finds himself attracted to her precisely insofar as she departs from or openly refuses to fit the mould. He finds himself out of place in a bustling, energetic, but also collectivistic, defamiliarizing, and impersonal Northern urban setting. Conversely, his accommodation to a new order can be enacted in a more balanced setting, a thrifty yeoman household in Pennsylvania, where Ross resides for a while. Much like a fossil, a form of life cancelled out precisely for its failure to adjust to new circumstances and to its environment, so Randolph and his class as a whole are perceived to belong among “the cases of minerals and mummies,” “as did the little dried-up skeletons of birds and fleshes” (XII, 805; 806). Through the incontrovertible scientific logic enshrined in material traces pertaining to a biological cycle, we can read signs of the inevitable course of social evolution spelling out demise for Randolph and his compeers.

Ross herself, on the other hand, exhibits the malleability of her class: she is anxiously observant of her purportedly inescapable heritage (stock) and eager for an opportunity for escape, growth and mobility; she vacillates between belief in naturally preordained behavior and a capacity for self-making (X, 712). Still, the question remains: can a person be reformed, or does the core remain?

Thus, in the novel’s moral universe, it is the aristocracy – principally Southern but also Northern – which shows signs of moral degeneration. Along these lines, the roles in the Randolph-Burley union are reversed: one should not fear the unsavory effect of Ross’s vulgar descent but rather the possible weakness of Randolph’s over-cultivated, hypersensitive and unsound blood. Southern ladies and their Northern patrician counterparts are discredited in the face of the plain but determined agency of the Quakers, and in the sentimental soft power which Ross exercises
over her morally unstable husband, an offshoot of a genteel family now in economic and moral shambles. She not only makes him see the sham and pretence of the Southern aristocratic code of chivalry (XXXIX, 861), the code which is also mocked by Randolph’s treacherous treatment of his former slave presumably to preserve the family’s honor, but which almost imperceptibly works change in his opinions on the inclusion of freedmen in civic life (XLI, 963). However, we need to be aware that this change of heart is once again conceived not surprisingly within the purview of the dominant appraisal of the potential of the “negro race,” among which its “imitative” capacity is highlighted: “[the Negro] is everywhere imitative, and what thrift do you expect from the slaves when Southern masters were – what they were?” (XLI, 963). Eric Sundquist (1993) points out that this imitation proceeding from the contiguity between the two races reflected the fraught position of the black race. On the one hand, “they should be made fit to vote” (XLI, 961) and exercise other prerogatives of free manhood in the republic. At the same time, approximating the whites is a tenuous process of imitation which, as pointed out by colonial discourse analysis such as that suggested by Homi Bhabha (1994, 85-92), ends up as mimicry, as not-quite-white. Obviously, a two-way exchange occurs here, as both parties involved in the performance of free citizenship have their separate agendas, and the whites are obviously invested in maintaining a clear-cut boundary between the two positions. Thus, the imitation, an imitative man, can never become the real thing. Broderip resents his life as “a perilous imitation of the white man’s” (XXXV, 747).

Significantly, Randolph’s ascension to the status of more fulfilling, reconstructed Southern white citizenship occurs as he negotiates his new position among his recently emancipated slaves, and acts as a benevolent counselor to Nathan (XLI, 963). The narrative is rather clear on the point of the necessity of his reform, in view of “the great seething whirlpool” of war and emancipation heralded “by men alien to him in their creed, their past and their future” (VII, 589). His class and his way of life are increasingly becoming obsolete, while a new type of citizen takes over:

muscular lumbermen from Maine: Massachusetts lawyers and doctors [...] stolid, honest Pennsylvania Dutch: Iowans, New Yorkers, men from the shores of the great lakes, and from the prairies, with brawny bodies and clear, sensible eyes. (VII, 589)

However, in the context of the novel’s continuing ambiguity on questions of the capabilities for (social and personal) reform and the agency needed for this, it is necessary to consider ways in which both Randolph and Strebling, another character embodying a receding past, are in fact offered a second chance through the redemptive influence of Ross. Only when she herself undergoes change and turns into a fierce abolitionist and a promoter of humanity for black people, Ross is able to act as a catalyst of change, unlike her counterpart, the unchanging, immovable and firm Margaret Conrad. In a way the inflexible Margaret is unable to, except at the very end, Ross retains the role of a borderline character who, through the force of radical sentimentalism, is capable both of reforming the wasted life of a slaveholding aristocrat and to rehabilitate through her Christian
sentiments (the force of forgiveness) another quite unregenerate Southern gentleman, namely, her wayward father, Strebling. Such a sentimental arrangement, however, puts in even sharper relief the inability of mulatto, mixed-blood, and interracial characters to achieve the same kind of sanction, as is painfully clear in the case of Broderip.

Margaret Conrad, a Pennsylvania-raised preacher’s daughter, when introduced for the first time, is immediately recruited to signify the trope of whiteness (her “slow, solid, white body” [III, 454]), and, as we see later, is called upon to reinforce the anathema cast on miscegenation. Even though she stands as a type of Northern, New England girlhood and womanhood, she is unconcerned for their “vulgar radicalism about slavery or spirit rapping” (III, 461). Margaret is “a new type” of woman, departing from the constrained environs of womanly pursuits, and pursues “unwomanly work,” that is, horse trading (III, 463). In her case, too, there is a concern with “blood,” parentage, recast as the rumor of a taint of “Indian blood” (III, 462), but in the end this is somewhat assuaged by “a lineage on which there had fallen no stain of dishonor” and her family connections with the Randolphs (III, 462). In view of this obsession with family ties and genealogies, it is not coincidental that the Conrads used to deal in thoroughbred racing horses, where questions of breeding, interbreeding and descent also loom large (III, 463). Margaret’s whiteness, however, is of an ambiguous nature, as suggested by her physiognomy: “He could not make up his mind whether the pale, full, high-featured face was German or Indian,” and this potentially degenerating effect of intermixture translates into her apparent psychological defects (III, 463). In a telling sleight of hand, however, she has been recruited as a sentry guarding the line of color, with her “keen physical disgust in her blood to the black skin” (IV, 467) and with her purportedly intellectual argument against the capacities of the Negro race, even though the narrative implies that her lineage is testament to previous racial mixings. This is quite a clear indication – as firmly as the narrative could perhaps push it given the representational strictures (Olsen 1985, 132) – that the argument of ingrained racial antipathies as well as their more innocuous derivatives rests on an impossible illusion of whiteness.

3. The Reformist Impulse: Evolution or Revolution?

Earlier readings have placed Harding Davis’s texts in a continuous line of social reform narratives, which conjoin a strong moral and religious undercurrent with a sense of the urgency of political and social intervention (Olsen 1985; Yellin 1990). We have already seen this happening in the crisis attending Broderip’s moral choice about whether to stay an imitation white, or to sacrifice his social position by acting as a prophet, redeemer and a scapegoat for his race, as it turns out in his meditation on “Jesus of Nazareth” – significantly not simply as a martyred victim, but as a “carpenter’s son,” a heroic persona, “whose visage was more marred, and whose life was more heroic than any other man’s” (XXXVIII, 857). The narrative propels us toward conceiving of a decisive reformist, revolutionary potential
entailed in Christianity, as confirmed by a number of reformist tracts and texts of the period, including some of Harding Davis’s other works. The transformational and salvational force attributed to the Christian religion comes out strongly in the case of the blind evangelical preacher Conrad, intractable Margaret’s father, who ‘sees’ Broderip with his inner, spiritual eyes, and exonerates him.

It is indeed necessary to consider carefully the Quaker element and the role it plays in the text. I have in mind not only the Friends’ willingness to facilitate and, to some extent, to enable the color line to be crossed (Broderip can pass, but the line is drawn when he decides to mix), but they are also among the characters who resolutely challenge the line of class. This point is especially pertinent to Quakeress Blanchard and her tutorship of Ross, taken up to counteract the possibly evil influence due to her earlier street life. Quakeress Blanchard is, however, even when acting as a moral and social guardian for Ross, herself enacting a kind of downward mobility by disavowing her aristocratic heritage. By spurning the moral code of her class, which, as suggested by Thorstein Veblen (1934, 35-65), amounts to a set of inculcated mannerisms which become a kind of second nature (showing its workings also in the case of Randolph Garrick or James Strebling, and even after so many years of her strenuous work, “the simple, subtle grace of a fine manner remained, as the delicate aroma with the dead flower” [VII, 585]), she enacts a resolute program of self-reform, which should become exemplary for other characters, too. Namely, if she can get away from the institutionalized practices of conspicuous leisure, conspicuous display and invidious comparison, which Veblen sees as almost inherent to aristocracy and the upper classes, then the novel would seem to suggest a broader possibility of change.

Besides this instance of resolute self-reform wrought by religious impulse, there are in the text suggestions of other methods of social self-improvement, although perhaps not so favorably endorsed. One of them is the Darwinian discourse of self-help, also exemplified by Broderip and his rise in the white world: “Why need Negroes whine for God or man to help them? White men help themselves. You see what I have made of myself; any of my people can do the same” (XXXVI, 847). However, are we to ascribe, within the worldview established by the novel and its moral, social and scientific parameters, this rise to prominence to the effect, presumably, of his white blood, rather than to his willful undertakings?

The other path open to the blacks and taken also by Broderip is the route of active participation in the war and revolutionary intervention entailed in the emancipatory character of the struggle for black freedom. In a startling exchange between the two brothers, Nathan and Broderip – themselves on two different sides of the racial divide – another figure emerges as a beacon of liberation and dignity, that of Moses, who in Nathan’s words figures as non-white, “a stranger.” Moreover, as “a chile ob de slave woman, […] he went an’ stole all de learnin’ ob his

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10 See a reading of her other much better known text, “Life in the Iron-Mills,” which strains to accommodate both the discourse of ethical outrage at the injustices fomented by the new industrial order and struggles to resolve them in a quasi-utopian vision of Christian activism, again ascribed to Quakers (Olsen 1985; Hassell Hughes 1997).
masters, an’ den come back an’ took his people cross de riber inter freedom. His own people, suh” (XXXVI, 846-7). Nathan’s patois here reflects a vernacular, populist idea of racial liberation and articulates the interesting mix of political and millennial activism of an emergent black nation (within the nation). Still, even when this activist, revolutionary potential has been recognized and voiced, it remains to be seen whether this imminent formation is to turn itself into an independent factor of its own transformation. Nathan, however, seems very articulate on the stakes involved in this incipient bid for nationhood. He denounces the passivity and inarticulateness ascribed to the enslaved population by laying the blame on the lack of precisely those congealing factors which contemporary political theories identify as nation-building mechanisms and as promoters of racial, and national, self-consciousness: “Dey neber know’d dey was so great a people …’Pears to me when dey kin speak to each oder by newspapers an’ books, like de white men, dey’ll feel dere strength, an’ use it” (XXXVI, 846). In other words, it is not simply the issue of color, but of a whole superstructure of culture which will signify the emancipation of the race as a self-sustainable entity, in line with Du Bois’s concept of the “conservation of races” (1999).11 Nathan is here a spokesperson of rising black self-awareness as a political factor, as he denounces the unwillingness of the nation to incorporate blacks as full-fledged political subjects, and instead suffers them to fear an undetermined fate: “Dey hears dat de Yankees’ll sell dem down inter Cuba” (XXXVI, 846). Nathan, through his heroic activism and his participation in the fighting, and Broderip, as a leader of black soldiers in the ranks of the Northern army, serve as important reminders in the text of the potential of an activist black manhood.

Thus, as pointed out in Fredrickson’s (1987) overview of historical changes affecting the social status of the black people in the Union, this incipient duality cast as ‘constitutionalism’ (inherent traits) as opposed to ‘environmentalism’ (changeable aspects), bores into the American social system, complicating not only the racial but also a number of other social issues, notably those of class.

By choosing to ground underlying definitions of blood, racial stock, heredity, bloodlines, parentage and the like in a parallel plot of potential mergers between aristocrats and commoners, and between the two races, and implying how one substitutes for the other, Harding Davis strives to disentangle principally her lower caste characters (consigned to the nether region either by the badge of their poverty or their color) from the stranglehold of scientifically embellished prejudice. We see that behind the fixation on questions of immutable and foreordained traits lurks social and racial panic overtaking intransigent structures which are, according to Harding Davis, thus essentially unchristian, undemocratic, anti-republican, and by extension also patently un-American. Even though Waiting for the Verdict to some extent unmasks and destabilizes the purportedly inherent determinants of class and color in nineteenth-century American society under siege from reformist, enlightened and Christian practices, it still quite forcefully shows the spectral

11 Some of these developments are outlined in Anderson’s (1991) model of nation-formation.
shadow of race, as perhaps the most intractable social issue of all. The verdict, it seems, is still awaited, but Harding Davis has boldly shown willingness to anticipate and question its underlying assumptions and demonstrate their fateful entanglement with the social and political foundations of the republican, democratic order.

Works Cited