

## Evolution: Fact or Fiction?

Character Discourse in *A Fool's Errand*, by Albion W. Tourgée

by

Rebecka Manis

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A thesis presented for the B. A. Degree

with Honors in

The Department of English

University of Michigan

Spring 2011

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Rebecka Manis

To my parents,  
who have inspired me and motivated my own evolution.

## Acknowledgements

Initially, this thesis was to require survey research. I would like to begin by thanking my research advisor Dr. Phoebe Ellsworth of the Social Psychology Department for her guidance in designing the study, processing the data, and editing the report. I would also like to thank Dr. Xiomara Santamarina, my primary thesis advisor, for her enthusiasm and encouragement for my project and for confidence in my capacity to overcome difficulties in its evolution. She was integral to the success of my dissertation project, and it would not be the same project without her. Thank you.

As the project took shape and transformed I also consulted a number of professors inside and outside the English Department. I wish to thank Dr. Tom Green, Professor Emeritus in the Law School, Dr. Samuel Epstein of Linguistics, and Dr. Anne Curzan and Dr. Gregg Crane of the English Department. Professor Crane suggested a list of novels to review as I was searching for literary support, and his advice resulted in the discovery of my primary text, *A Fool's Errand*. Finally, I cannot thank Dr. Catherine Sanok enough. She taught me how to think and write at a new scale; her advice, persistent at times, was always accurate and thoughtfully offered. She was also available for consultations and editing, directing my ideas in fruitful ways.

Lastly I would like to thank my friends and my family, who were always patient listeners and editors, and who gave me a confidence boost when I needed one, and a glass of wine when I didn't. The project's beginning, evolution, and final result were influenced by many minds and I thank each of them for their contribution.

## Abstract

Do not be misled by the title, this is not a formal anthropological study; it is, however an examination of socially influenced evolution; in this case the object of study is a character in the novel *A Fool's Errand*, set in the post-bellum South, by Albion Tourgée. I will examine two different types of discourse using Mikhail Bakhtin's heteroglossic theory, presented in *The Dialogic Imagination*, and how each type operates within the novel to provoke and support an evolution in the main character, Colonel Comfort Servosse. Over the course of the novel we see Servosse change from an idealistic fool into an embittered one through his written and direct interactions with other characters.

The first chapter examines the personal letter as a form of discourse. Letters are a frequent medium for exchange of information and opinion in the novel, and I will examine in particular letters from Metta Servosse, the wife, to her sister Julia in the North, letters exchanged between Comfort Servosse and Washington D.C. politicians, and letters from Comfort Servosse seeking advice from a trusted mentor, Enos Martin. When excerpted these letters reveal, in their own way, the story of Servosse's evolution; to some degree they act as points on a timeline. The letters are not just snapshots of stages of development though; the content of the letters also contributes to Servosse's transformation.

The second chapter explores a more normative form of discourse: that of direct conversation and interaction between characters. Servosse's character is a symbol for Northern political thought, and as such, challenges the traditional political and social beliefs in the South; this Southern ideology is represented in another character, Ezekiel Vaughn. The continued interaction between these two symbolic identities makes it clear that the schism in this generation cannot be healed; the futility of Servosse's efforts to that effect are what drive his evolution as a fool.

Towards the end of the novel, however, Tourgée introduces a second generation. This generation represents a hope that progeny can overcome the hatred of their fathers' generation. There are again two characters that interact to present this idea: Melville Gurney, a son of the South, and Lily Servosse, Comfort Servosse's daughter. They inherit the political symbolism of their predecessors, but the existence of the romantic feelings between them speaks to the possibility of reconstructing the political Union in a would-be marital union of the two characters. There is more than an evolution of Servosse's character implicit in this novel and the second chapter will also examine the transformation of socio-political reciprocity between generations.

An important fact to keep in mind as you read the novel is that *A Fool's Errand* is often read as a fictional account of autobiographical facts. As such it represents a real transformation in the author that he intends to communicate to his audience. You see these intentions refracted in the discourse of the novel and I will examine herein both the surface evolution of Comfort Servosse in his discourses throughout the novel, as well as the refracted authorial intentions of that evolution.

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## Introduction

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“And with a gentle hand [he] led her feet through the fair fields of literature—the history of the world’s thought. Side by side with this, he unfolded before her that other book which we call history—the story of the world’s outward happenings...”<sup>1</sup>

—Albion Tourgée, *A Fool’s Errand*

*A Fool’s Errand*, by Albion Tourgée, is just that which he describes: a history of the world’s thought unfolded alongside the history of the world’s outer happenings. It belongs to the genre of Reconstruction novels and explores in great depth the timeline of post civil-war outward events alongside the combatant ideologies of Northern republicanism and intransigent Southern tradition. Understanding the historical moment for the novel is important, but it is not the focus of this thesis; rather, this thesis will explore two forms of discourse in the novel and how they work within it to form its structure and motivate its plot.

This novel tells the story of a Union veteran, Colonel Comfort Servosse, who, after the war ends, decides to move his family to the South to implement the republican ideals for which he fought. He establishes his home on a former plantation and works toward equalizing the remnant racial and class stratification in the South. His progressive political views however, clash with the traditional social hierarchy of the South and he and his family find themselves isolated from the community.

Years of constant ostracism and disregard from the community change Servosse from the optimist who thinks reconstruction and reconciliation will be a matter of months—a couple years at the most, to a bitter pessimist who does not believe a

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<sup>1</sup> Albion Tourgée, *A Fool’s Errand*, Ed. John Hope Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 343.

resolution is possible. This novel illustrates Servosse's everyday experiences in the world's outer happenings, but also gives a look into how those everyday interactions change his habits, thoughts and way of seeing the world.

As you read this thesis there are two key terms to keep in mind. The first is 'imagined community.' Benedict Anderson coins this term in his book *Imagined Communities*, where it refers to "an imagined political community—[one] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign."<sup>2</sup> In the context of this novel the imagined communities refer to political ideologies, namely that of the South and that of the North. Belonging to a political community means that a person adheres to the political ideology and, in this case, the normative social behavior of the rest of the group, i.e. supporting and enabling the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan. As the text will show, the community in the South is absolute and enduring, which poses a logistical problem for the would-be conquerors from the North.

The second term is 'heteroglossia,' which refers to the communication between different voices in a novel. These voices differentiate themselves in a number of ways, for example: different speaking characters, forms of discourse, languages/idioms, etc. What is important is that each represents "a particular point of view on the world...[that] is highly productive," meaning that it contributes something new to the consideration of the object of the discourse.<sup>3</sup> Here too, the definition of 'voice' is more specific than a lay definition. Linguistically 'voice' refers to "variations in speech habits" that symbolically reflect community or individual "social identities, statuses, [and] value systems."

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 312.

Additionally, how someone reports the statements that others say, directly or indirectly, affects how the viewer interprets those statements.<sup>4</sup> How a character says something, or is reported to have said something, is important to understanding the message conveyed in a novel. This thesis will at times comment on the form of discourse, but with focus primarily on the content of that discourse, as content is the primary way in which the reader observes the evolution of Servosse's political ideology and identity.

In discourse there is an important layering of heteroglossia to keep in mind; heteroglossia "serves two speakers at the same time...: the direct intention of the character...and the refracted intention of the author."<sup>5</sup> As the writer of the novel *Tourgée* directs the discourse in deliberate ways; he manipulates the socio-linguistic history his audience speaks and understands, to change their perception of the object of Reconstruction. He uses the evolution of Servosse's ideological position with regard to Reconstruction and its success to provoke the same change in the reader. What makes a novel a novel is "the speaking person and his discourse" and this thesis will focus on two different forms of discourse in *A Fool's Errand*. These two forms, though separate as objects of inquiry, advance a common argument about Servosse's character evolution, and subsequently *Tourgée's* intent in writing the novel.

The first chapter discusses a series of letters incorporated throughout the text. These letters are from characters in the novel to other characters in the novel, and as such offer a unique location for conversation between characters. Because the discourse in the letters is in a different form from normal character interaction, it accomplishes something

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<sup>4</sup> Webb Keane, "Voice," in *Key Terms in Language and Culture* ed. Alessandro Duranti (Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 324.

different from what normative conversation does. In letters there are different ways of forming thought and character interactions that would be otherwise impossible are possible through written discourse. These letters provide a unique perspective on the events of the novel, and they give the reader a new light in which to consider a character, his ideology, and the evolution of that ideology.

This is particularly true of Colonel Comfort Servosse, the main character of the novel. In all three sets of letters presented in this first chapter, Servosse's character evolves in complexity as well as symbolically. Evolution in complexity simply means that the letters flesh out his character, adding physical and emotional traits to his repertoire. However, the more interesting evolution Servosse undergoes is the symbolic one. The use of the term 'fool's errand' in title of the novel gives a clue of the nature of this evolution; Servosse's character transforms, due to his experiences in the South, from an idealistic fool into an embittered fool.<sup>6</sup> There is also an interesting semantic shift in the connotation of 'fool' because though Servosse is terminally foolish in his expectations for the South, he possesses a wisdom that the politicians (or 'wise men,' as they are often referred to) lack. The personal letters offer a distinctive perspective for the reader to observe both of these changes.

The second chapter also looks at how Servosse's character evolves over the course of the novel, but looks at more classic character interactions. One of the Southern characters in the novel, Ezekiel Vaughn, acts as a foil to Servosse, and the interactions between them are a primary contributor to the reason Servosse's character evolves the way it does. Symbolically, Vaughn represents Southern thoughts and actions toward

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<sup>6</sup> Dictionary.com, accessed on 19 March 2011, defines a 'fool's errand' as "a completely absurd, pointless, or useless errand; a fruitless undertaking."

Northerners like Servosse. Their encounters, interactions and conversations are what reveal the reality of the Southern antagonism to Servosse, causing his idealism to fade into a cynical state of disillusionment.

The strength of Servosse's disenchantment is partially rooted in his belief that there is a generational facet to Southern contempt; men who fought so wholeheartedly against one another in a terrible war can never come to truly understand and forgive each other. Servosse does, however, have some hope that the next generation will overcome the differences that tore the nation apart. We see this hope of reconciliation in Servosse's daughter Lily and her relationship with a son of the South; the existence of a different kind of foolishness—that of love—offers the possibility of a positive resolution to the foolishness of hate. This second chapter examines these two sets of character interactions as “essential in order to expose—as well as to test—[the] ideological positions” promoted in the text.<sup>7</sup> In the context of this generational juxtaposition the evolution of Servosse's character, and the ideological argument Tourgée's advances through it, are clearly evident to the reader.

Recall that an important component of heteroglossia are the refracted intentions of the author that present themselves through the discourse in the novel. Tourgée's intentions center on the evolution of Servosse, but he goes beyond that when he offers a ‘call to action’ through the narrator in the novel.<sup>8</sup> The purpose of the evolution of Servosse's character is to promote evolution of the reader's understanding in a similar way. Tourgée wrote this novel to open the eyes of the Northerners to the reality of the

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<sup>7</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 334-335.

<sup>8</sup> A ‘call to action’ is a message that “[urges] the reader, listener, or viewer...to take an immediate action” (BusinessDictionary.com).

situation in the South; Blacks were not empowered in any real way by the passage of laws, and the white Southern community had not surrendered their pride or traditions. Tourgée argues that education is the best way to realistically empower Blacks and calls for government action to that effect.<sup>9</sup> Tourgée’s call to action serves to advertize to readers what needs to be done now that they know the truth of the Southern situation.

Another detail worthy of note is that *A Fool’s Errand* is often taken to be an autobiographical work. That does not mean that every instance in the novel is based on a real account, but it does alert the reader to the double-voiced subtext and intent of the novel; it also begs the question of why Tourgée would create a fictional tale instead of just writing his own real experiences.<sup>10</sup> Perhaps because fiction is more entertaining and would reach more people, but one thing that is certain is that fiction is a more malleable medium and Tourgée could shape his arguments in the most effective way

This dissertation examines two of the ways in which the discourse between characters shows the evolution of the Fool, Comfort Servosse. The thesis argues that Tourgée employs different voices, using different techniques, to transform Servosse’s character from an idealistic fool into an embittered one. The many voices of this novel, however, come together to promote the single purpose of transforming the reader.

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<sup>9</sup> Theodore L. Gross’s article “The Fool’s Errand of Albion W. Tourgée,” *Phylon* 24 (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter 1963), tells us that Tourgée’s argument in this narrative correlates with his own personal and political belief “that education was the only solution...for the improved status of the Negro” (Gross 252).

<sup>10</sup> ‘Double-voicedness’ is a term coined by Bakhtin in the *Dialogic Imagination* to describe the surface and sub-text of dialogue in a novel; it is at one “the direct intention of the character who is speaking and the refracted intention of the author” (324).

## Chapter 1

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### Notes of Change

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia presents itself most obviously in a series of letters Tourgée incorporates throughout the text of *A Fool's Errand*. In his writings on 'Discourse in the Novel' Bakhtin isolates "a special group of genres that play an especially significant role in structuring novels, sometimes by themselves even directly determining the structure of a novel as a whole," and the personal letter is one of these genres.<sup>1</sup> The letters in *A Fool's Errand* form themselves into three groups, which support the structure of the novel in showing the evolution of the main character, Colonel Comfort Servosse; recall Tourgée's intent that the novel spark an evolution in the reader's mind. In this way too, these personal letters fit within the scope of Bakhtin's theory because "heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel...serves two speakers at the same time and expresses...the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author."<sup>2</sup>

The first set of letters appears at the beginning of the novel and establishes the Northern preconception of the South, as well as some of the weaknesses in that preconception. Metta Servosse, Comfort Servosse's wife, writes to her sister Julia about the first impressions and experiences the Servosses have in the South. Her writings in some ways act as a reflection of Servosse's idealistic consciousness, but add a prudent caution that tempers his typical Northern optimism. The second series of letters is an

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<sup>1</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 321.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* 324

exchange between Comfort Servosse and ‘wise’ political figures in the nation’s capitol. This dialogue between Servosse as the ‘fool’ and politicians as the ‘wise men’ adds an ironic dimension to the use of such designations and shows how Servosse evolves from the idealistic fool he was at the beginning of the novel. The third set of letters spans the length of the novel, acting as the clearest backdrop for observing the change in Servosse’s character. Where the first two sets of letters enact or provoke a change in Servosse’s character, his conversations with Enos Martin in this third set of letters show that change.

What the letters in *A Fool’s Errand* accomplish is something that could not be accomplished through straightforward narrative prose. The letters explain, provoke and reflect the evolution of Servosse’s character from an idealistic fool to an embittered one, supporting and advancing Tourgée’s message by introducing “points of view that are generative in a material sense...helping to [create different] worlds of verbal perception.”<sup>3</sup> Having different forms of voice come together to promote the same message strengthens the novel’s prose and its educational purpose.

#### Letters to Julia

Julia is the sister of Metta Servosse, Colonel Comfort Servosse’s wife. What is immediately interesting about Julia is that her familial relation to Metta is the single fact the reader knows. Julia never responds to Metta’s letters, nor does the novel ever give her character any other shape than that of sibling to Metta, who lives in the North.

Regardless of Julia’s silence, Metta writes actively to her audience in the North, sharing

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<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 323.

her thoughts and observations on the South. In some ways Metta's character in the novel reflects the purpose of these letters. While the expectation for her role as a mother and wife includes care of Lily, their daughter, and of affairs of the household, she also serves as her husband's conscience and caution and as a balance to his enthusiasm. This latter role is productive because the development of Servosse's character involves the development of prudence and understanding; as Servosse develops these characteristics Metta all but disappears from the novel. This also fits in with the hypothesis that Metta's character is a kind of subconscious or alter ego for Servosse; she is his voice of reason, acting as a balance to his enthusiastic naiveté and it makes sense that she fades as a separate character as he consciously adopts and displays those characteristics.

The first letter she sends seems like a mere report of their journey south to their new home. The observations she makes, however, are more significant than the cataloging tone in which she offers them. One of the first topics she talks about is the weather, and how for "the last twelve hours of the trip it rained."<sup>4</sup> This was not an ordinary rain though, it "rained as you ever saw it, as I think it never can rain except in this climate...it did not beat or blow...it only fell—steadily, quietly and uninterruptedly...shut in by an impenetrable canopy of clouds, and laden with an exhaustless amount of water" (46-47). The literal climate in the South is as intransigent as the community mentality will turn out to be, and it is something Metta notes immediately, but Servosse disregards. His failure to recognize the unique social climate that creates a psychologically impenetrable barrier to Northerners and Northern ideologies is what casts him as a fool.

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<sup>4</sup> Albion Tourgée, *A Fool's Errand*, Ed. John Hope Franklin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1961), 46. Hereafter cited in the text solely with pagination.

When they do finally arrive at their new home, Warrington Place, they find that the furnishings they sent down ahead of time have not yet arrived from the North. Though Metta does not directly contradict Comfort's belief that the railroads will be fixed in no time and "[will] run the train on 'the right of way' pretty soon" she does not gloss over the destruction she sees: "the rails [are] worn and broken, the cross ties sunken and decayed" (46). This subtle contention between what Servosse believes to be true and what Metta sees is a reflection of what Northerners at the time believed of the South and what the reality of the South was. Metta's early divergence from Northern preconceptions mirrors Tourgée's own experiences; "when [Tourgée] went to the South in 1865, he had what he felt was 'a fair reflex of the idea and sentiment of the intelligent Northern man.' He was soon impressed by the contrast between these preconceptions and what he saw of the life around him" in the South.<sup>5</sup>

Servosse's belief that the railroads will be on 'the right of way' soon reflects his character as the enthusiastic fool; Metta's quiet doubt reflects her role as Servosse's suppressed prudence. It is not that Servosse cannot see what Metta sees; it is that he sees it through the proverbial rose-colored glasses at this point in the novel. Metta's letters offer the reader a less tinted perspective on the state of the South until Servosse's character 'wisens up' to the reality of the political and social situation in the South.

Her second letter comes right on the heels of the first, and addresses more directly the social climate, rather than the meteorological or industrial one. Metta's social commentary centers around the unforeseen consequences of inviting some of the local Northern school teachers—who are in the South educating the recently emancipated

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<sup>5</sup> George J. Becker, "Albion W Tourgée: Pioneer in Social Criticism," *American Literature* 19.1 (March 1947): 60.

Blacks—for Thanksgiving dinner. Several days after they host this dinner Metta and Servosse decide to call on their neighbors. They are received with “a restraint of manner, and with positive rudeness in one case”; however, the reason for such a cold reception is not made clear until a visit from their neighbor, Squire Hyman, who takes it upon himself to explain the social faux pas they committed (51).

Before examining the content of that explanation, it is worth noting that Metta, in her letter, transcribes, rather than summarizes the conversation. This method of reporting information has two key results: one, it gives a literal voice to a member of the Southern community; and second it increases the truth-value of the statements. If Metta merely paraphrases the content of the conversation in her own words, she characterizes the truth of that content through her contextualization and the reader “[can] not be sure how close...[it] is to the original wording.”<sup>6</sup> Metta’s direct transcription allows the reader—Julia—to more objectively judge the actual speaker for the content:

“ ‘I hear they’ve got a powerful big school for the—the niggers as we call them—in Verdenton.’ [Squire Hyman]

“ ‘Oh yes!’ [Metta] answered... ‘I don’t see why there should be any thing said against these young ladies’ said [Metta].

“ ‘Well...you know how we Southern people are. We have our own notions...we can’t help thinking that anyone that comes from the North down here and associates with niggers—can’t—well—can’t be of much account at home.’ [SQ]

...“ ‘So you came to warn us that if we continue to associate with these teachers we must forego the pleasure of good society hereabouts?’ [Servosse]

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<sup>6</sup> Randolph Quirk et al., *A Comprehensive Grammar of the English Language*, (New York: Longman 1985), 1025.

...“ ‘I thought it would be no more than neighborly...to let you know, so that you might be careful in the future’” [SQ]. (51-52)

The transcription of this conversation allows the reader of the letter, and the reader of the novel, to draw their own conclusions as to the character of southern society. In effect, the reader of the novel *is* Julia, and *is* involved in judging this interaction. Julia’s lack of character embellishment fits in with this reader/character substitution; because Julia lacks character traits, except that she is a Northerner, it is easier for a reader to assume her position as the intended audience of the letter.

Colonel Vaughn, another member of the community, advises Servosse similarly in this letter: “if [you] associate with nigger teachers, you cannot expect respectable people to recognize [you] as associates” (53).<sup>7</sup> In this letter the reader gains a sense of the southern community through both Metta’s description of her rejection by neighbors and the voiced explanation of that rejection by members of the community. There is also a sense of Servosse’s indignant reaction to the community’s bigotry; Metta, in her role as the semi-removed pragmatist, gives both perspectives making her letters the venue for the meeting and clashing of Servosse’s voice with the voice of the Southern community. Servosse’s interactions with Southern ‘notions’ are what instigate the evolution of his character from the idealistic fool to the embittered one.

This evolution is evident in Metta’s third and final letter to Julia, where her description of Servosse shows that he has his own sense of prudence; this development also indicates that her letters are no longer necessary, as he now possesses that trait which

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<sup>7</sup> Colonel Ezekiel Vaughn’s character acts as the embodiment of Southern thought, and his voice is the “[echoes] the general voice” (399). I will discuss his character role in *A Fool’s Errand* in greater detail in the next chapter.

she offered. This supports the overall structure of the novel's 'evolutionary' argument, as well as explains why Metta, and Metta's letters, disappear from the novel.

This last letter is the only one in which Metta incorporates more than immediate observations; she writes this letter a year after the first two and uses memories to show the changes in Servosse's character. She remembers how "Comfort would not hear a word about trouble with the people here ...[insisting] they were a brave and genial people; that the war was over; and that everybody would be friends hereafter from its having occurred," but that now "he has found his mistake" (101). As Servosse becomes more aware of the realistic circumstances in the South Metta's voice disappears, and Tourgée replaces it with Servosse's own 'wisened' correspondence.<sup>8</sup>

#### Words of the Wise

One of the central tropes of the novel is the dichotomy between being a fool and being wise. In this novel Tourgée uses the two terms frequently, and in different ways. He always refers to the Washington politicians in the novel as 'wise men,' and to Servosse as the fool, but the use of these titles evolves from sincere to ironic. Servosse starts out as a fool in his idealism believing in the wisdom of the politicians; however, as he becomes aware of the reality of the Southern situation and the idiocy of the government, he develops into a fool in his bitter pessimism. Essentially he travels from one extreme to the other, his enlightenment does not make him wise, it just changes his character as a fool. This evolution into a bitter realist is in his correspondence with the

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<sup>8</sup> 'Wisened' here should not be taken to indicate that Servosse is a 'wise man' as characterized in the novel, or in lay terms; rather its use here is limited to an evolution in character that came with the knowledge that the Southern community was more hostile than initially anticipated.

‘wise men,’ and it parallels the semantic shift from sincerity to irony in differentiating the ‘wise men’ from the ‘fools’.

It is important to give context for the first letter to properly establish the circumstances that make the transformation of definitions possible and ironic. Servosse is elected as one of the delegates to the state constitutional convention for his county, and as such has a determining role in the revisions to the post-war constitution. A politician “of wonderful foresight and unerring judgment” writes to him about what he should propose and support at the convention (162). When Servosse initially begins his journey to rehabilitate the South he would have undoubtedly agreed with what this politician says, believing the “social...political...and economic legislation [to be] worthwhile achievements.”<sup>9</sup> What this unnamed politician suggests is realistically the opposite of what is achievable for the reconstruction of the South; the irony is that Servosse now knows it yet the politician remains the ‘wise man’ and Servosse the ‘fool.’

Here again there is anonymity with regard to the particular character of the politicians; even the actual names are omitted. And again, this anonymity generalizes their character such that the reader can substitute any real politician for the politician writing the fictional letter. As with the case of Julia, the generality of the character serves the purpose of the novel; this sequence of letters supports the character of the politicians as one body that is ‘wise’—be it sincerely or ironically—meaning that the perspective of one is the perspective of all.

For the politician it is about party politics, for Servosse it is about what will effect change and real reconstruction in the South. What the politician suggests is that Servosse

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<sup>9</sup> Howard James Jones, “Images of State Legislative Reconstruction Participants in Fiction,” *The Journal of Negro History* 67.4 (Winter 1982): 320.

merely “adopt the former Constitution of the State, with a provision inserted against slavery, and another denouncing secession, prohibit the payment of Confederate debts, provide for impartial suffrage, and adjourn” (163). Servosse, however, knows that such measures would never be effective in truth because while the “legal net [is] formidable” it is not as formidable as “the unique blend of slavery and freedom” in the new labor policies and Black Codes that allowed Whites to circumvent the law.<sup>10</sup> Servosse finds himself “compelled to differ from [a politician] occupying [such an] exalted station” (165). The irony derives from the idiocy of the perspective of the wise men and the wisdom of the fool’s understanding.

Wisdom in this case comes from Servosse’s personal knowledge of the situation in the South; Servosse “has been on the ground, and has studied the tone and temper of the people from the very hour of the surrender” which gives him “a much better opportunity to decide upon what is necessary to be done than [someone] who has had none of these opportunities” (166). This attack on the credibility of the wise men is effective, and establishes Servosse as wiser than the politicians. In this set of letters the term ‘wise man’ becomes ironic, and we see that Servosse is no longer the fool in idealism; the politicians now inhabit that role.

In the second, and final, set of letters Servosse contradicts his disdain for the government when he writes to them about several recent accounts of the actions of the Ku Klux Klan, expecting that they will not only care, but also proceed to enact some kind of plan for opposite action. He grasps at straws in his distress over the severity of the violence, falling momentarily back into the idealistic mentality that the government can

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<sup>10</sup> Pete Daniel, “The Metamorphosis of Slavery, 1865-1900,” *The Journal of American History* 66.1 (June 1979): 92.

provide an effective plan of action to stop this ‘invisible empire’; the “dull horror” that engulfs his mind is reason enough for this slip, but regardless of what he newly hopes the government can achieve, their letter in response quickly reestablishes them as ineffective.<sup>11</sup>

Again the politician in question is anonymous, which goes to show that any and all politicians would respond in a similar manner. He begins the letter agreeing that “the state of affairs which [Servosse] pictures is undoubtedly most distressing and discouraging” but that “[he] can not see how it can be improved by any action of the general Government” (233). Furthermore, this politician operates under the illusion that “the lately rebellious states are now fully restored” and it is their responsibility to punish such acts of violence.

In order to understand the full foolishness of this sentiment it is important to know that at this point in the novel the depth and strength of the KKK is so completely established that the reader knows upon seeing these words from the ‘wise man’ that they are not wise words at all. Nonetheless, Servosse’s response reveals the folly in the politician’s statements:

...there is no *State* in the sense [you] use it, but only a skeleton, a lifeless body...It is all well for you, sitting safely and cosily in your easy chair under the shadow of the dome of the Capitol, to talk about asserting ourselves, protecting ourselves...[but] either you have not apprehended our condition, or you are inclined to ‘mock at our calamity.’ (236-238)

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<sup>11</sup> Albion Tourgée, *The Invisible Empire*, ed. Otto Olsen (New York: Fords, Howard & Hulbert, 1880).

The message is clear: the ‘wise men’ are fools in ignorance and the Fool is enlightened. With his wisdom comes a certain sense of abandonment and hopelessness as well; Servosse cannot hope to accomplish anything substantially reformatory without real aid from the General Government. This sense of futility is what triggers the final step in the evolution of his character: he goes from feeling like anything is possible to believing that nothing can be accomplished—a pessimistic attitude shared by Tourgée due to “a lifetime of political failure.”<sup>12</sup>

#### A Friend, A Mentor...An Advisor?

Tourgée exhibits this completion of Servosse’s evolution in yet another set of letters, accompanied by a face-to-face conversation. This sequence of interactions shows the total evolution of Servosse’s character with three snapshots. Sometimes it is difficult to see a change in a gradient of interactions, but in his three conversations with Dr. Enos Martin, one at the beginning, one in the middle and one at the end, the reader clearly sees how much Servosse’s character changes over the course of the novel.

Martin is the most stable character, against which the reader can contrast Servosse most effectively to see his evolution most clearly. Unlike the characters’ writing in the other two letter recipients, there is no sense of anonymity; Martin is a named character who interacts with Servosse. Martin is also different because he does not write in an incendiary way, as do the politicians, nor does he enumerate his own observations of change, as does Metta, he merely reflects what Servosse thinks and believes.

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<sup>12</sup> Theodore L. Gross, “The Fool’s Errand of Albion W. Tourgée,” *Phylon* 24.3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Qtr., 1963): 253.

The first correspondence is from Servosse and is a solicitation for advice. Metta is actually the one who prompts him to write to Martin; her doubt about moving to the South in contrast to Servosse's enthusiasm causes him to seek a 'third' opinion. This is an early point in the novel and Servosse is still very much the idealistic fool, and all Martin does is affirm Servosse's idealistic notions about the South: " 'It is too soon to speculate as to what will be the course of the government in regard to the rebellious sections...[but] it seems to me that the only way to effect [change] is by the influence of Northern immigration'" (26-27). What is interesting to note is that Martin does not offer this as advice per se, even going so far as to say: " 'of course I cannot *advise* you...'" (26). Rather, he reiterates what Servosse already believes, encouraging Servosse to go ahead with his plan to move south.

The second letter concerning Enos Martin is also from Servosse, but oddly, this letter is in response to one that Tourgée does not include in the novel's text. Servosse writes: "*My Dear old Friend*—You kind and welcome letter, so full of congratulations and bright anticipations, was duly received, and for it I render my thanks" (170). As the readers we are unsure what exactly the congratulations and anticipations are, but given where this letter appears in the novel, as well as the introduction to the chapter, they most likely refer to Northern idealism. The introduction to the chapter describes the Northern preconception that "the transition period was over...it was all over—the war, reconstruction, the consideration of old questions. Now all was peace and harmony...the South would take care of itself, manage its own affairs [and] look after its own interests" (169).

All of this comes on the heels of Servosse's second, rather scathing, letter to the politician, rejecting Washington's notions of what needs to be accomplished in the South. Where this letter occurs in the text seems to define Martin as belonging to the greater group of 'wise men,' at least ideologically; the difference is that Martin does not offer ignorant advice, or disregard Servosse's admonitions like the politicians do. Martin is a quasi-silent auditor to whom Servosse can write to display critical points in his evolution.<sup>13</sup>

Because Tourgée never presents the reader with Martin's salutary letter to Servosse, all we know of this interaction is what Servosse says in his response letter to Martin. In this letter Servosse shows that he is no longer the fool in idealism, and shows considerable progress towards being the bitter realist. He tells Martin that

the state of affairs which you picture does not exist at the South; and the bright anticipations which you base upon mistaken premises have, in my opinion, little chance of fulfillment...they expect all but impossible things...that it will fail is as certain as the morrow's sunrise. (170)

Clearly, Servosse no longer suffers under the illusion of idealism, and is actually frustrated with those who do. Notice here too that Servosse refers to the wise men as a third party, excluding Martin from their ranks in a significant way; Martin can be reasoned with, politicians cannot.

The final interaction between Servosse and Martin comes at the very end of the novel; The Servosse family travels for a year, and Comfort spends a portion of it in the

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<sup>13</sup> The term 'silent auditor' comes from M.H. Abrams, "Structure and Style in the Greater Romantic Lyric," in *Romanticism and Consciousness*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1970).

North visiting with old friends. When he visits Martin they engage in a platonic-style dialogue where “Wisdom and Folly Meet Together” (375).<sup>14</sup>

Martin is, at this point, a man of “that riper age which...brings not a little of philosophic calm” whose interest in “the relations of the nation” makes him eager to speak with Servosse. Servosse is not the only character that undergoes an evolution, and Martin’s evolution corresponds to that of Servosse. The first question Martin asks, referring to Servosse’s last letter, is whether Servosse thinks “what has been termed Reconstruction is a magnificent failure” (377). Demonstrating his complete change in character Servosse says that he sees “Reconstruction [as] a failure so far as it attempted to unify the nation...[and] so far as it attempted to fix and secure the position and rights of the colored race” (377). The only thing Servosse sees that Reconstruction accomplishes is that “the wrong [is] admitted, and is therefore without excuse,” but for so much bloodshed it seems a rather small win (378).

This conversation also acts as a conclusion for the ideological thesis advanced by the novel. For Servosse “the North and the South are...irreconcilable” and his predictions for the future are as grim as his observations of what has passed (381). When asked when the violent “practical subversion” will end he replies: “when the North learns to consider facts, and not to sentimentalize; or when the South shall have worked out the problem of race-conflict in her own borders, by the expiration or explosion of a system of unauthorized and illegal serfdom” (383). Either way Servosse tastes the bitterness of the defeat in the loss of the idealistic notions with which he began.

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<sup>14</sup> Plato’s writings are famous not only for their content, but also for their form, which is that of a philosophical discussion or debate in the form of a narrative—not to tell a story per se, but to make a point or an argument (SEP Plato).

This bitterness, however, does not make him wise, it only makes him blinded by bitterness rather than idealism. There is a fine line between working with reality to change it for the better, and rejecting the possibility of change because of the reality of a situation. Enos Martin writes back to Servosse exactly what Servosse expects to hear. This is still materially productive, however, because all of these characters are the product of one mind, that of Albion Tourgée, and they all, ultimately, serve his intentions. Martin reflects Servosse's own mindset back to him providing a different perspective that sees the same thing. Using this mirror effect establishes where in the evolutionary process Servosse's character is at a given point in the novel.

All three sets of letters speak to one argument: the education of Servosse, and subsequent evolution of Servosse's character. All of the voices in the letters come together to show how and why Servosse turns from the idealistic fool he is at the beginning, into the embittered fool he is at the end. Metta's letters both outline the Northern preconception of the South and break down that idea; the politicians' letters to the 'fool,' and Servosse's letters to the 'wise men' show how Servosse changes from being a blinded follower of the idealistic, to a wisened observer of reality; and finally, Martin's reflection of Servosse's change in character demonstrates that the change is complete.

Servosse misses the mark of wisdom and transforms from one type of fool into another; this in itself is a lesson to the reader to temper idealistic notions and not to fall so hard that it is impossible to get up again. The reader is meant to mirror Servosse's evolution because Tourgée's novel seeks to educate readers not only of Servosse's

misfortune, but to prevent idealistic sentimentalities from inhibiting actual change. Discourses, like these personal letters, offer different perspectives and voices in a single conversation, that of the author with the reader. The purpose of this particular conversation is to expose the difference between what people think and what really is, with the intention of bringing the two closer together so that ignorance and idealism will not continue to cloud the view of the next generation.

## Chapter 2

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### The Generational Gap

Throughout the letters Tourgée explores the idea that “a new generation... must arise before the North and the South can be one people, or the prejudices, resentments, and ideas of slavery, intensified by unsuccessful war, can be obliterated” (107). This is because the North and South have different traditions and political beliefs, a difference also reflected in socio-linguistic diversity between the two communities.<sup>1</sup> In *A Fool's Errand* there are two generations of people who drive the plot and the development of post-war interactions: the generation of those who possessed the lands and ideologies before the war, fought the war, and lost the most because of the war; and the children of that generation who “had grown up under the new phase which conquest had imposed on their affairs” (167).

The first generation is scarred by the Civil War and is blinded by the contempt for their enemies; the next generation is less blinded, but still influenced by the traditions of the first. Tourgée exposes the hopeless tension between the first generation Northerners and Southerners to illuminate how foolish it was to expect that military surrender means ideological surrender. The activities of the characters, as outlined in this chapter, demarcate the ideological preconceptions of the characters, and the evolution of those preconceptions.<sup>2</sup> He later alleviates some of this hopelessness in the moderated

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<sup>1</sup> Here, ‘community’ refers to Benedict Anderson’s definition of the word as a nationalistic association among a people. It is important to understand that the ‘imagined community’ is “inherently limited and sovereign” (6). Furthermore, in this context the community of interest is geographic *and* generational.

<sup>2</sup> Mikhail Bahktin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 334-335.

interactions between children of the North and South; even if slight, the second generation shares more common history than the generation before it. Ezekiel Vaughn and Comfort Servosse represent the first generation conflict, while Lily Servosse and Melville Gurney—of the next generation—offer some hope that this conflict can be resolved.

### The Generation of Contempt

Ezekiel Vaughn represents the character of the post-civil war Southern community. He evolves along with Comfort Servosse—the Fool in the text—but in a contrary way. Vaughn's character both drives and reflects the change in the character of the Fool, which takes place because of their interactions over the course of Tourgée's novel; Vaughn's embodiment of the Southern character ultimately leads to Servosse's disillusionment. As Servosse becomes increasingly bitter, he observes the 'newly revealed' hostile character of the south in Vaughn. The parallel—if opposite—evolution of these two characters also works to develop the ideological definition of a 'fool' in the novel.

Heteroglossia does not just pertain to different genres of dialogue in a text, but applies to characters as well. In the same way that the letters offer different perspectives on Servosse's evolution at different points in that evolution, interactions between characters also drive and display character development. In this case, Vaughn's interactions with Servosse serve as eye-opening interactions that push Servosse towards the embittered fool he becomes.

Vaughn's first appearance in the novel is his "surrender" to Colonel Comfort Servosse. Just days after the actual surrender takes place at Appomattox, on April 9, 1965, 'Colonel' Ezekiel Vaughn presents himself to Colonel Servosse's station post in the South claiming his desire "to surrender and take the oath of allegiance" (29). What follows is a mildly amusing, but informative, monologue from Vaughn about what has happened to push him into this surrender. Most importantly, he laments that "you uns have freed all the niggers, so that we have nobody to work for us"; this loss "coming as it [does] during an unsuccessful war, [hardens] the hearts of Southern whites" and is what defines the post-war conflict and reconstruction in the south (30).<sup>3</sup>

Here 'reconstruction' does not refer to the Northern government's plan to physically rebuild and reconnect the South with the Union; it refers rather to the reconstruction of southern identity. Slavery was a major part of how the South constructed its identity before the war, not only because the enslavement of a 'race' of people influenced the power structures between peoples, but also because the South defined itself through its agricultural prowess, which required slave labor to support. The loss of something so central to Southern identity had to be replaced in some manner in order to actually reconstruct the Southern community.

The brief exchange between Servosse and Vaughn in this scene depicts this destabilization of identity. The Fool repeatedly asks Vaughn what regiment he is from, and Vaughn evades the question; but when the Fool finally demands that he answer, Vaughn wonders " 'what difference [it] can make now'" and offers the only thing he has

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<sup>3</sup> The second quote is from Pete Daniel's "The Metamorphosis of Slavery, 1865-1900," *The Journal of American History* 66 (June 1979): 88.

left that defines him: his honor, “the honor of a Southern gentleman” (31).<sup>4</sup> The Fool rejects this as a means of identification and insists that Vaughn “be fully identified”; when Vaughn cannot “remember” his regiment number Servosse throws him in the guardhouse, a place to hold troublemakers until something can be done with them (31). Simply identifying himself with tradition is not enough for Servosse’s idealistic expectations.

Over the next few days people from the community stop in to reiterate Vaughn’s self-identification, emphasizing that “he [is] loudmouthed and imprudent; but there [is] not a bit of harm in him, and he [is] very much of a gentleman, and of a most respectable family” (38). In the face of such solidarity Servosse decides to release him and sends him a missive:

Sir--Having learned the origin of your title, I have ordered your release, and beg to say that the government of the United States does not consider any parole necessary in your case. You are therefore at liberty to go anywhere you choose.

At this point in the novel Servosse is an idealistic Fool, and is still an employee of and advocate for, the government as a Colonel in the Army. A good deal of the foolishness Servosse overcomes in this novel has to do with a discrepancy between the Northern government’s idea of how the South is, and how the South actually is. Here Servosse’s actions demonstrate the Northern belief that military capitulation meant that the ideological strength of the South had been beaten as well; they did not anticipate the solidarity and intransigence of the Southern community.

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<sup>4</sup> This self-proclaimed notion of honor turns out to be a pride in and justification of the violence that maintains White supremacy in the South. Lily Servosse “trumps the Holy Honor of the South with her own version of romantic and secular virtue,” which we will examine later in this chapter (Miller 17, 25).

Colonel Servosse's acceptance of Colonel Vaughn's 'identity,' and decision that no "parole" is necessary, reflects the Union government's policy with regard to the South in the immediate aftermath of the war; the North "gradually lost interest in policing the South."<sup>5</sup> The government ignored the vacuum created in the abolition of slavery and prescribed no direction for constructing a new identity to fill the void; the South was adrift and harbored a lot of resentment. While the Northern government did pass laws, and make plans for Reconstruction, these plans concerned only the literal rebuilding of the South; railroads, towns, etc. There was a "dereliction of duty" when it came to establishing an identity or purpose for the Southern community and they were left to their own devices.<sup>6</sup>

Given his freedom though, Vaughn initially attaches himself to Servosse and discusses the "subject of Northern immigration, the revival of business, and the re-organization of labor" contending that "what the subjugated section most required was Northern capital, Northern energy, and Northern men to put it again on the high road to prosperity" (39). Vaughn's character at this point is a mirage of the desires among "southern planters, railroad companies, and industrialists [who] aggressively sought immigrants from the North and from Europe to replace...[the] labor of the former slaves."<sup>7</sup> This ideal of immigration is in fact the foundation for the next significant interaction between these two characters; because the success of many of the Reconstruction plans relied on Northern immigration to succeed, how Servosse interacts

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<sup>5</sup> Pete Daniel, "The Metamorphosis of Slavery, 1865-1900," *The Journal of American History* 66 (June 1979): 88.

<sup>6</sup> George J. Becker, "Albion W Tourgée: Pioneer in Social Criticism," *American Literature* 19.1 (March 1947): 69.

<sup>7</sup> Robert M. Myers, "'Desirable Immigrants': The Assimilation of Transplanted Yankees in Page and Tourgée," *South Central Review* 21.2 (Summer 2004): 63-78.

with Vaughn during his own emigration allows the reader to understand the failure of Reconstruction.

Vaughn fraudulently acquires a place called Warrington Plantation and corresponds with Servosse inquiring as to whether or not he wants to purchase it when he emigrates. Servosse does buy the Warrington Plantation from Vaughn and moves his family to the South; it is “not till afterwards that he [finds] out how many prices he had paid” for it (44). Warrington Plantation itself embodies some of what characterizes the South, at the very least occupying the same timeline as slavery; it is one of the oldest structures in the state, is bereft of ownership after the war, and is in desperate need of an attentive hand to make it productive again.

Servosse here does on a small scale what the Union Government does not accomplish on a large scale: he redistributes the land. He sells 10-acre plots of Warrington’s 600 acres to the recently emancipated Blacks creating a place and purpose for them. After the war in reality, the Whites, in large part retained their land ownership either through share-cropping or wage labor, continuing to control a major source of agency in the post-war South. There is a necessary distinction here between true land ownership and sharecropping because “the roles of freed people in share-cropping were virtually identical to the roles of slaves on a plantation.”<sup>8</sup> Without land “there could be no economic autonomy” and the failure of the national government to recognize that and act accordingly is negligent.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Jeffery W. Miller, “Redemption Through Violence: White Mobs and Black Citizenship in Albion Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand*” *Southern Literary Journal* 35 (Fall 2002): 20.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America’s Unfinished Revolution* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 106.

The place and purpose of Servosse's actions to economically empower are limited however, because they really only function as a part of the Black community; this ownership of land does not effect a change in the social status of Blacks in the eyes of White Southern society. Servosse forgets "that the social conditions of three hundred years are not to be overthrown in a moment" (24-25). Even if his actions do not resolve the stratification between the whites and the blacks, they do attempt to move in that direction by assigning Blacks a role in *a* community other than that of slavery.

This open advocacy for equality defines the next encounter and offers one of the most interesting looks into the psyche of the South. The Fool attends a stump meeting where the men of the Southern community meet to consult "in regard to the general interests of the county"; the most important topic at this stump meeting is what role they think the recently emancipated slaves should occupy (59). Servosse intends only to observe and learn about his new community, but Vaughn prompts the request that Servosse speak on the topic. Vaughn already knows about Servosse's movements towards equalizing the races so he calls for "a speech from the Yankee" hoping to elicit the Fool's 'radical' beliefs to polarize the crowd (59).

This is the first outright divergence of interests between Vaughn and Servosse, and, as a result, the conflict between them increases because Vaughn's actions no longer fit the Northern preconception of how Southerners are. Having started out as amiable acquaintances, their relation to one another is now unfriendly, if not hostile quite yet. In this scene Vaughn's aggression towards Servosse marks a point of evolution; Servosse realizes how unfriendly the Southern community can be towards Northerners and Northern ideologies and senses that "the North and the South are simply convenient

names for two distinct...irreconcilable ideas” (381). Southern antagonism towards the attempted change in identity forced upon them by emancipation keeps them from looking forward to the logical and necessary next steps. The South wants to go back to how it was before the war and Servosse sees forward movement as the only way to reconstruct the South.

The Fool embodies Northern republicanism in form as well as content in the speech he gives: his “terse sentences...[are] in very marked contrast to the florid and somewhat labored style” of the southerners (63). The manner in which Servosse, a representative of the North speaks, reflects the “earnest practicality and abundant vitality of the North-West, compared with the impracticality and disputatious dogmatism of the South” (63). How characters speak in a novel helps to define them because the author selects “typical aspects of language [for their] characteristic or symbolically crucial elements.”<sup>10</sup> This marked contrast is also apparent in the assumptions—or preconceptions—Servosse expresses in his speech with regard to what the council decides. He calls the southerners foolish for discussing matters such as Blacks being allowed to testify, because, in Servosse’s mind, “they are already decided” (65).

The Southern community does not welcome the fool’s words, and a contingency of men, led by Vaughn, plan to waylay Servosse on his ride home—a preview of the type of violence that will later become normative behavior for the Ku Klux Klan. Clearly the tension between Vaughn’s character and Servosse’s character escalates to the point of hostility and violence. Vaughn’s plan fails however, and Tom Savage, one of Vaughn’s accomplices, becomes the victim of the plot, rather than the perpetrator of it.

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<sup>10</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 336.

Vaughn and the other accomplices assume that Savage is deceased—though there is no body—and seek to place blame, resulting in the unlawful arrest and accusation of three Black men. This is immediately relevant because it exemplifies the recent stump discussion over whether or not Blacks should be allowed to testify in court. Servosse rides to the Justice’s home, where the ‘trial’ is being held, and listens to Vaughn lay his accusations before the court. He bases these accusations in the racist belief that the “defendants...being malicious and evil disposed persons, moved and seduced by the instigation of the Devil...[concluding that they] did kill and murder” Tom Savage (78). Vaughn here represents not just the South’s prejudice against blacks, but their honest belief that the recently emancipated slaves did not gain a change in their social status. In his article “Redemption Through Violence: White Mobs and Black Citizenship in Albion Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand*” Jeffery Miller examines the “hegemonic power of white culture [in the] combination [of] vigilante justice with legalized prejudice; he presents a case study comparison of an 1876 racial conflict in Hamburg, SC with “Albion Tourgée’s fictionalized version of race and mob violence in his 1879 novel, *A Fool’s Errand*.” Something of particularly interest here are his comments on white “[unwillingness] to attribute elements of citizenship to blacks.”<sup>11</sup> The Black man, in the eyes of the Southern White was very much for the convenience of the white man, especially if “a scapegoat was...necessary...to satisfy the natural demands of public justice” (77). This interaction is where both the reader and Servosse really get a taste of the character of Southern thought.

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<sup>11</sup> Jeffery W. Miller, “Redemption Through Violence: White Mobs and Black Citizenship in Albion Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand*” *Southern Literary Journal* 35 (Fall 2002): 19.

Servosse confronts Vaughn's abuse first in asking if "the prisoners had not a right to be heard and to introduce testimony on their own behalf" and is met with "looks of blank amazement, not unmixed with righteous indignation" (79). Met with this reaction he swears himself in as a witness and testifies that the men accused did not kill Savage because Savage "is alive, and at [his] house" (80). His circumstantial knowledge makes the point that Blacks should be allowed to testify on their own behalf to prevent miscarriages of justice. Justice when it came to Blacks in the South was far from equal to the Whites; the Southern judiciaries did not prosecute assault and murder of Blacks, even for something as little as "sarse."<sup>12</sup> The fact that the Fool 'wins' these confrontations with Vaughn reflects the stage of the evolution of the Fool; Servosse is yet hopeful that the South will construct a new, fruitful, identity for itself, one that includes Blacks. This hope, however, disappears and the Fool wisens to the reality that the ideological ground that was supposed to have been won in the North's victory in the war is still firmly rooted in Southern tradition.

The interactions between Servosse and Vaughn decrease in frequency as the magnitude of the hostility between the members of the first generation becomes increasingly apparent. It is at this point the Tourgée moves his discussion of post-war politics and social norms to the next generation of these two ideological combatants. Ezekiel Vaughn and Comfort Servosse represent something more specific than the voice of the Southern community following the Civil War; they represent the generation that was most affected by it; the generation that had been in power before the war began, and lost the most in its conclusion.

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<sup>12</sup> Gregg Crane, *Race, Citizenship and Law in American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002)

### A Generation of Hope?

Servosse's daughter, Lily Servosse, and Melville Gurney, a son of the south, represent the new generation. The foregrounding of Lily's womanhood, and the subsequent development of the relationship between Lily and Melville represents the hope that the voice of Vaughn's generation can be drowned out by a different set of voices, characterized by different kind of foolishness: that of love.

The very suddenness with which Lily's story becomes the thread upon which the plot hangs, startles the reader. Having introduced her as a small, enthusiastic child at the beginning of the novel, Tourgée reintroduces her two hundred and four pages later with the "rounded form and softened outlines indicative of womanhood"; even "Lily's name underlines her status as a...woman" (259).<sup>13</sup> Her feminine form, however, does not necessarily reflect typical womanly characteristics. It is important to remember that the climate in which she grows up is one hostile to the presence of her family, which obliges the development of "a prudence unknown to one of her years who had lived in quiet times and under other conditions of society" (260).

The post-war circumstances do not seem to affect Melville in terms of a development of uncharacteristic traits, rather, he is a "splendid specimen of the stock of Southern gentleman from which he sprung" (262). The explanation of both Lily's and Melville's respective characters is important to understand the significance of their first interaction at a gathering of mutual friends. Upon meeting Lily, Melville, "with the frank impetuosity characteristic of his nativity...asked for an invitation to Warrington" so that

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<sup>13</sup> Robert M. Myers, "'Desirable Immigrants': The Assimilation of Transplanted Yankees in Page and Tourgée," *South Central Review* 21.2 (Summer 2004): 71.

he might call on her (263). She, however, being ever aware of the “anomalous position in which they stood” asks Melville if he is “in earnest,” because this is the first time she is “asked to extend the hospitalities of her father’s house to any of her associates” (263).

Her instinctive suspicion of “the words and acts of all whom she [meets]” in reaction to his cavalier request forces him to consider the significance of his spontaneity; his hesitation in response to her query reaffirms her preconceptions as to the shallowness of his thought, and she courteously declines to consider his request (261). But this interaction does give the reader a glimpse of a generational gap here, which might be just wide enough to allow a glimmer of hope for the reconciliation between the North and the South; Melville, an upstanding Southern gentleman of traditional stock is distanced enough to appreciate a “carpet-bagger’s daughter” for who she is rather than the reputation of her father. Similarly, Lily is receptive to Melville’s offer, but only if it is a sincere offer, with full consideration of the significance of the action and any potential consequences.

A few days later Melville, having given the matter some thought, renews his request and seeks to call upon Lily at Warrington. Lily, upon receipt of this note, takes it to her mother with “blushes [that] told that her heart was awakened”; the potential for a joined understanding is there, but the development of that potential is not easy given their social circumstances. These verbal interactions symbolize the tentative and tenuous trust that signifies a mutual development in the ideologies of the North and South.

The second interaction between these two “star-crossed lovers” occurs during one of the most thrilling scenes in the novel: Lily’s nighttime ride to save her father’s life.<sup>14</sup> Here too, a little bit of background information is necessary to understand the full significance of their meeting: Servosse is in Verdenton, a neighboring county visiting a Judge who is sympathetic to Servosse’s manner of thinking. The KKK has orders to lynch this Judge that night on his ride home, and Servosse as well, should he accompany Judge Denton. Lily receives an anonymous warning of these plans and sets off on a daring night ride to intercept her father and Judge Denton before they leave town. Her second meeting with Melville Gurney is when she unintentionally finds herself among the group of KKK who have been sent to murder her father.

Finding Melville in such company is interesting because the KKK represents the ideals of the generation of contempt. Melville explains the oddity when he tells the leader of the group that he is merely there “ ‘to take some friends’ places who couldn’t obey the summons’ ” (282). That he is not there of his own belief, but rather as a favor/obligation to a friend, speaks to his character as a part of the more moderate generation of Southerners who do not engender the “Holy Honor” of the previous generation.<sup>15</sup> As previously footnoted, this type of Southern ‘honor,’ which is what Vaughn, early in the novel, claims as his only means of identification, turns out to be a pride in, and justification of, the violence that maintains White supremacy in the South. Melville is not only there under divergent pretenses, but when he does recognize Lily, he acts to

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<sup>14</sup> William Shakespeare, “Romeo and Juliet,” in *The Norton Shakespeare*, ed. Stephen Greenblatt (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), 905: Prologue ln 6.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffery W. Miller, “Redemption Through Violence: White Mobs and Black Citizenship in Albion Tourgée’s *A Fool’s Errand*” *Southern Literary Journal* 35 (Fall 2002): 17.

protect her from the rest of the group, signaling a deviation from this archaic form, towards a different type of honor, characterized by more ‘honorable’ values.<sup>16</sup>

Melville is the sentry for the group, and when Lily makes a break for it from her hiding place at the edge of the tree line, he pursues her thinking her some kind of threat. When he recognizes her, he makes a show of the chase and then heads back to the group where he makes up a story about being startled by a rabbit. His actions protect her from further pursuit, and she makes her getaway. Lily and Melville don’t meet and interact directly in this scene, and, in fact, Lily does not recognize Melville, or know of his involvement until after the fact. Nonetheless, this suspenseful—literal—run-in demonstrates the virile hatred of the Civil War generation, and the new generation’s simultaneous separation from and inclusion in it. The contempt that serves as the foundation for organizations like the KKK is not as potent in the next generation of Southern men; this shows that the ideological differences between the North and South have some hope of resolution.

There is, in fact, a kind of resolution to the nighttime ride scene in the next interaction between Melville and Lily; in fact, this interaction takes place because Melville feels honor-bound to confess to his involvement in that situation—something no old Southerner would feel obligated to do. It is here too that we come to understand the root of Melville’s feelings towards Lily; she has a certain ‘pluck’ that convinces Melville that no matter the cost he “will win and wed” her if he can (289). Her acts “symbolically oppose her to the men of the elite South” and there is an appreciation of deeper character

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<sup>16</sup> The “more ‘honorable’ values” refer to what a reader would normally consider honorable, i.e. chivalric actions and a sense of doing what is right.

between Melville and Lily because of it.<sup>17</sup> They sense and esteem something more intrinsically valuable in one another than the combative ideologies of their fathers allowed for.

When they do meet in the aftermath of Lily's daring rescue, Servosse mediates the interaction because Lily is still recovering after the exhaustive excitement of the ride. Melville first speaks with Servosse and confesses to everything, transforming from a murderer to a savior in Servosse's eyes as he tells the story. The only request Melville makes is that he be allowed to return Lily's hat to her in person, which he does and then departs.

What is interesting about this scene is that some leveling of social status seems to take place; as carpet-baggers Servosse and Lily are always second-tier society, usually shunned from normal social interactions, but here, Melville, a first tier southern gentleman humbles himself before Servosse and Lily, confessing to his wrong doing and submitting to whatever social punishment they might see fit to exact. It is true that the social power Servosse has is limited to controlling Melville's access to Lily, but Melville's ardor for her is so well established at this point, that that control represents a real power. There is a new reciprocity between ideologies, and even generations, after this incident.

The final direct interaction between Melville and Lily comes when he asks for her hand in marriage, and she refuses him. This scene begins again with Servosse mediating between the two lovers because Melville goes to Warrington to request permission from Servosse to "pay addresses" to Lily (352). There are two notable things right away in

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<sup>17</sup> Jeffery W. Miller, "Redemption Through Violence: White Mobs and Black Citizenship in Albion Tourgée's *A Fool's Errand*" *Southern Literary Journal* 35 (Fall 2002): 25.

this chapter, one being Servosse's shock at Melville's proposal, and that the title of the chapter in which he proposes to Lily is "Unconditional Surrender" (352). Servosse, who is a member of the older generation, and usually a man of "cool self-possession," is unusually agitated by Melville's apparent love for his daughter (352). Once he regains control of his turbulent, but not troubled emotions, Servosse gives his blessing, and Melville sets out to find Lily.

The 'unconditional surrender' comes into play in his proposal, where this title takes on a double meaning. First, it indicates Melville's consideration and decision in his love for Lily; returning back to their first interaction, his deliberate actions here are the result of deep emotion and not simply superficial interest. He is also willing to risk alienating his parents to marry her indicating that his love is quite literally without conditions; he offers up everything, and asks for nothing but her love in return.

The second meaning in this title refers to the representative nature of these two characters and their interactions; they represent a hope that was impossible to get from the generation that "gazed into each other's faces over gleaming gun barrels" (132). Their unique position as individual representations of Northern and Southern ideologies, but not so married to those ideologies as to blind them to the benefits of another, offers the best chance of reconciliation that can be hoped for in the aftermath of the war: mutual respect of differences, and cooperation through compromise. What Tourgée proposes here is a marriage of the North and the South.

What is interesting about this particular proposal is that marriage of that era did not necessarily represent an equal relationship, and it was the women who were expected to be subservient to the men. That Tourgée places the North in a subordinate position to

the South has interesting political implications. No character interaction is divorced from authorial intent, and here Tourgée brings to life his disgust with Northern inaction. Even Servosse in his correspondence displays a disdain towards Northern inaction after the war and sees Southerners as more “‘instinctive natural rulers’ who have ‘the elements that should go to make up a grand and kingly people.’”<sup>18</sup> Tourgée’s own experiences in the South, and his interactions with the politicians, convince him that the “North lacks virility,” which is reflected in this gendered paradigm of a potential marriage between Melville, a Southern gentleman and Lily, a daughter of unsupported Northern ideals.<sup>19</sup>

Remember, however, that the relationship Tourgée develops is unique from the typical power dynamic of a traditional suit; Lily is a steely and prudent woman, while Melville is more open to change and compromise than the men of his Father’s generation. In the same way that Metta serves as Servosse’s cautious conscience, Lily would temper Melville’s ‘virile Southern-ness.’ In a sense this *is* a more modern relationship that could potentially support the kind of equality necessary in a compromise of the type Tourgée is proposing.

Yet another conundrum lies in Lily’s answer to Melville’s proposal; her refusal to marry him based on his parents’ disapproval would seem to eternally suspend a consummation of the hope their relationship represents. General Gurney, Melville’s father belongs to the generation blinded by hate and contempt, which would, given Lily’s condition as a daughter of the North, perpetually obstruct any kind of progress towards reconciliation in a new generation.

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<sup>18</sup> Robert M. Myers, “‘Desirable Immigrants’: The Assimilation of Transplanted Yankees in Page and Tourgée,” *South Central Review* 21 (Summer 2004): 73.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 74.

Lily's belief that she is honor-bound to refuse Melville's proposal however, reveals an interesting twist to General Gurney's character; it is only because Lily discovers that General Gurney sent the message about the planned attack on her Father's life—which subsequently results in her thrilling night ride—that she feels she owes something to him. This begs the question however, as to why General Gurney, a member of the Klan, would act to save his political and social rival's life. Furthermore, upon seeing how unhappy Lily's rejection makes Melville, General Gurney goes to Warrington with the intent of rescinding his disapproval of the engagement. Both of these actions imply that the generation of contempt is susceptible to the more honorable social and political penchants of the generation of hope.

What is entirely frustrating about these possibilities is that Tourgée resolves none of them at the end of the novel: Gurney arrives just after the Servosses leave for the North, and cannot submit his consent; and Melville and Lily never interact after his proposal, so we never find out whether they marry. This frustration, however, serves its own purpose because it symbolizes the uncertainty of the future of the South, and of the nation as a whole.

The unresolved nature of the relationship between Melville and Lily represents the state of Northern-Southern political and social interactions at the time. Reading with hindsight indicates that they do not marry because history tells us that the nation does not heal, and the South lives in a state of unofficial rebellion for another ninety years.<sup>20</sup> The North and the South miss their opportunity for hope and reconciliation because the generation of contempt comes up a day late and a dollar short; General Gurney shows up

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<sup>20</sup> True progress in the civil rights of African Americans did not take place until the advent of the Civil Rights Movement beginning in the mid 1950s.

the day after Lily departs and the tardiness of his acceptance of her—and all she represents—results in the loss of a crucial opportunity.

### Reconciliation?

To exacerbate this unsatisfying ending, Vaughn makes his final appearance in the last pages of the novel. Servosse is ill and suffering through the last days of his life and it is incredible to see “how quickly the thought of disease or death [eradicates] all thought of hostility from the minds of those who had been the most avowed enemies” (398).

Vaughn is the most vehement about visiting Servosse and seeing to his comfort and wellness, even recommending “organizing a committee to take care of him” (399). What is more interesting though is that General Gurney insists on being a part of this committee, even sending for Lily and Metta, who are still in the North. There is a sense of both false and sincere reconciliation: Vaughn’s efforts attempt to attain a good, but false, face; and Gurney’s actions, likely the result of a deep seeded—honorable—understanding of the effects that the pride of their generation produced. Unfortunately, by the time General Gurney and Vaughn arrive it is too late for any kind of reconciliation because Servosse cannot understand “the kindness that flowed in upon him from all sides” (400).

There is a sequence of timing issues at the end of this novel that frustrate the reader’s expectations for a happy ending: here, Servosse loses consciousness before he can see the care that Southerners may possess; earlier, Lily leaves Warrington before General Gurney can repeal his denunciation of Melville’s suit; and later, Lily and Metta

arrive to Warrington the day after Servosse is buried, not getting the chance to say goodbye.

It is hard to find the hope one seeks at the end of this novel; a reader wants to have some kind of resolution, and preferably a happy one. That Tourgée denies the reader of this satisfaction speaks to the novel's place in a history not yet complete, as well as its strategic interaction with the reader. Because the reader seeks closure, but doesn't get it from the novel, he will seek closure in his own actions, which, because of the novel, are now more prudent and well informed. Tourgée can only write about what he knows to be the case, not what he predicts might happen, so the offer of hope in this new generation is a genuine offer, but one that only the reader can accept or decline.

## Conclusion

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“The law may abolish slavery, but God alone can remove its traces.”<sup>1</sup>

—Alexis de Tocqueville

Seven generations after the end of the Civil War our society still suffers from segregation, racism and stereotyping. However, to discuss the reason for, and result of, these social phenomena—beyond that they still exist—lies outside of the direct scope of this thesis. That these troubles still plague social interactions, however, gives some indication of how a sequel would have developed had Tourgée benefited from the hindsight we enjoy today: Lily and Melville do not marry, but sustain an interdependent relationship in hopes that one day they can reconcile their pasts and become one as the North and South converge in ideological and technological progress.

But let us not get too caught up in what might have been a happy ending. There are a number of interesting themes that run through *A Fool's Errand*, and it is easy to lose oneself in the effortless way they weave together. This dissertation in particular examined two threads: the letters, and the generational differences in character interactions.

Even in the first reading the letters immediately stand out as an odd form to be used so frequently in the novel. Upon closer inspection, the letters divide themselves into three groups, each of which represents a distinct voice that contributes to one message. Metta's letters to her sister Julia portray an incongruous, but not off-putting, picture of the post-war South; the letters of the 'wise men' present the ignorant arrogance of the

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<sup>1</sup> Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*. Trans. Gerald E. Bevan, Vol. 1, p. 400.

national government with regard to Reconstruction efforts in the South; and Servosse's introductory and conclusive interactions with his mentor allow for reflection on the change in mentality that takes place over the course of the novel.

It is almost as if Servosse is the attorney and the witness in the trial of Reconstruction, but he changes sides somewhere in the course of the testimony: he gives an opening statement for the defense, defending the feasibility and legitimacy of the national government's republican idealism; he then presents the evidence through the tale of his own interactions; and his closing statement supports a would-be prosecution's condemnation of Reconstruction as an utter failure and accusation of negligence. The voices in these letters speak with singular intent in demonstrating how Servosse evolves over the course of the novel—or trial, as it were.

Generations illustrates this trial and what the voices in Letters say: Servosse's idealism with regard to the South fades into bitter pessimism through a series of interactions with the 'voice' of the South—Ezekiel Vaughn. We even see the letters' predictions for the new generation played out between Lily Servosse and Melville Gurney.

#### Another Straw

A question that nags the mind is: where are the Blacks? *A Fool's Errand* is a Reconstruction novel about implementing republican ideals in the South after the Civil War, particularly the newly awarded equality and emancipation of African Americans; yet the arguments presented herein barely skim the surface of the race issue. Servosse does initially move down South to help in this equalizing process; he parcels his land and

sells it to local Blacks so that they can make their own living; and he is concernedly aware of the dangers Blacks face from the Invisible Empire, also known as the Ku Klux Klan. These are the points salient to this particular thesis but what connects all of these seemingly separate points on another level is that Servosse's interactions with Blacks are also important to his evolution. Servosse's recognition that the Black community will never have agency within the Southern community is an important piece of what finally changes him from an idealistic fool working to realize his political and moral beliefs, into the embittered fool who knows his efforts are futile.

There are a number of interesting venues for a literary analysis of the place of Blacks in the novel, and how their role in the novel reflects the place of Blacks in society at the time. There is even a different dialectic perspective; the Blacks in the novel all speak a vernacular that casts them as uneducated and poor. This 'undeveloped' form of speech correlates with the physically crippled character Jerry Hunt, who appears the most consistently as a Black character in the novel.<sup>2</sup> Despite his physical disability, or perhaps because of it, Jerry is a leader within the Black community. His gruesome death at the hands of 'The Regulators' represents the ultimate crippling of the agency of the Black community; not only does the White Southern community reject Blacks' rights, but the White community literally rips apart this binding tie within the Black community.<sup>3</sup>

The murder of Uncle Jerry (as he is commonly called) is actually the impetus for the final letter Servosse writes to the 'wise men.' Jerry Hunt lives on the land that

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<sup>2</sup> 'Undeveloped' refers to the perception of vernacular dialects in comparison to Standard English. Dialects are actually just as complex in their grammars as 'High' English, but can be perceived as signs of deficiency.

<sup>3</sup> 'The Regulators' is a name for the organization that is the precursor to the Ku Klux Klan.

Servosse distributes; he is the one who originally warns Servosse of that trap Vaughn lays after the stump meeting; and he alerts Servosse to the phony trial after the trap is bungled and Vaughn needs a scapegoat. Hunt is a supporting character in the novel's motivation of Servosse's evolution, and their relationship is part of what drives the crucial breaking point of Servosse's idealism. The portrayals of Blacks and the attitudes and behaviors of white Southerners toward them reflect the postwar marginalization of Blacks on both sides of the Mason-Dixon Line.

The trial is over, but what is the verdict? Is Reconstruction a failure? Is the National Government negligent in its care of the post-bellum South and the newly emancipated Blacks? Servosse is vocal in his condemnation of the government's plans for Reconstruction, but he is only the arguing attorney (and primary witness); it is up to the jury to determine the verdict, and the jury in this case is the collective readership of the novel. That the jury must ultimately make the decision does not preclude the necessity of jury instruction however, and Tourgée counsels the reader as to his recommendation. Servosse's journey enlightens him to the reality of the post-bellum political tensions and the futility of government action; education is the evolution in this novel, and with it Tourgée attempts to educate his audience, and calls for them to act accordingly.

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