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## The New Rules of the Democratic Game: Emancipation, Self-Regulation, and the “Second Founding” of the United States

### I. American Psychogenesis and the “Second Founding”

According to historian Leslie Butler, with the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation on January 1, 1863, “America’s first principles seemed up for grabs.” From this point on, Reconstruction was not only a phase of political, social, and economic readjustment but a long-term individual and collective process that “required mental adaptation” (Butler 173). It is with this adaptation process during the nation’s “Second Founding,”<sup>1</sup> and, more particularly, with the early phase of this process, that this article is centrally concerned. The mental dimension of Reconstruction includes the emotional setup of the era and how it changed over the course of time. On a thematic level, this dimension expresses itself in ambivalences about an ideal self, in debates about America’s future society, and in the hopes and fears regarding the organization of the nation to come. By focusing on the connection between individual self-construction and processes of collective reorganization, this article sheds light on the internal struggles that made political Reconstruction such a difficult and multi-faceted endeavor.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> David Quigley introduces the term by writing that “[b]ack in 1787, America’s first founding had produced a constitution profoundly skeptical of democracy. James Madison and his coauthors in Philadelphia left undecided fundamental questions of slavery and freedom. All that would change in the 1860s and 1870s” (Quigley ix).

<sup>2</sup> I anchor my explorations in the broadest definition of the term *Reconstruction* as it has been used by Leslie Butler. Reaching beyond the political definition of the period between 1863 and 1877, Butler’s concept acknowledges interconnected processes of transformation in the postbellum period – a rapid technological and social evolution that was linked to “industrialization, incorporation, state-building, cultural consolidation, social reorganization, or general ‘modernization’” (Butler 153).

With the emancipation of southern blacks, an unsurpassed death toll on the battlefields, and an unprecedented percentage of women who never married, the Civil War and its aftermath forced Americans to rearrange their human relationships and mutual dependencies along the lines of gender, race, class, and citizenship, and to adapt themselves to an increasingly modern world. American men and women from widely different social, ethnic, and racial backgrounds demanded their share in the making of the democratic nation, and this implied not only their active involvement in social and political affairs but also the development of individual and group-specific modes of affect-control and self-regulation intended to secure or increase their social status.

How can this development, particularly with regard to the early, tumultuous phase of individual and social consolidation and crisis, be described? As I hope to show, Norbert Elias's theory of the "civilizing process" is a productive approach to this question. His concept of the self and society emphasizes complex social interdependencies and collective transformation processes while it insists on social variability and individual psychogenesis. It is with this simultaneity in mind that I will be focusing on Reconstruction literature as an instrument of individual and collective self-regulation. Reading books about America's successful social re-figuration, I argue, served the important cultural function of imaginary nation-building. The texts that I will look at addressed white middle-class men and women, for whom reading was an instrument in redefining their social status within a changing social figuration.

To be sure, literature was not exempt from the general unstableness of the era; one could in fact argue that it is precisely for this reason that literary scholars have shown very little enthusiasm for early Reconstruction writing in particular. As John Stauffer has pointed out, there was a marked discrepancy between the "dwindling of literary output among New England men who had been prominent and prolific writers before the war" and a new phase of women's writing that started in the 1860s (Stauffer 121). The first half of Reconstruction, in other words, was a phase of "embattled manhood," as Stauffer puts it, and with few marked exceptions, such as De Forest's *Miss Ravenel's Conversion from Secession to Loyalty*, the literary works that emerged during this time and that sought to structure the immediate experience of the crisis have been neglected in discussions about nineteenth-century American literary history. As my own discussion will show, this relative silence can be read as both a reaction to the postbellum crisis in gender and to a crisis in literary form: women as well as men were struggling for an appropriate mode to represent life. There is often something unfinished about this literature,

even the better-known works abound with contradictions, involuntary ambivalences, imbalances in tone, and unresolved questions while they try to keep pace with the political and social developments.

To grasp the deep transformation processes that were set in motion during those years, one needs to understand how they affected America's social organization both on the level of economic relations and within the family. The emancipation of former slaves and the new responsibilities of women during the (often lasting<sup>3</sup>) absence of their husbands, fathers, and brothers produced new social alliances and a cultural climate that challenged antebellum patterns of black submission and female self-denial. During the armed conflict, thousands of white women took paid jobs in Civil War hospitals or volunteered to work there. It is hardly surprising that changes in gender relations became a major issue in the personal writing of the era. Beginning in the mid-war years, thousands of letters, diaries, as well as lay and fictionalized autobiographies inscribed individual versions of the war and, later, Reconstruction into the tissue of American history. From those texts, images emerge of a society that Americans had not been educated to cope with – a mixture of social classes, immigrant cultures, and different races, and women's increasing claims to participate more widely in the public realm. Beginning during the war years Reconstruction was thus not only a phase of political consolidation but also of individual and collective crisis. Americans reacted almost immediately to the changes in social structure that had come with the war and postwar modernization: not surprisingly, they often reconnected with antebellum norms and traditions, frequently relying on religious rhetoric when they did.

Yet while they often yearned for the past, they at the same time tried to imagine a new self that was ready for what some saw as the "true millennium."<sup>4</sup> On the more immediate, practical level of an everyday ritual it was through writing home to their original communities that both men and women sought to relocate themselves within what for them appeared to be a new country. Soldiers, nurses, mothers, and widows stepped out of anonymity to mourn their dead and to rearrange society through the

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<sup>3</sup> More than one out of every four Union soldiers and one out of three southern soldiers died or was wounded during the conflict. About four percent of the male American population was killed during the war.

<sup>4</sup> This phrase was used by Civil War surgeon Peter Bennitt on 12 October 1863 in a letter to his wife (Bennitt 181). For the role of religion during the Civil War and Reconstruction see Ahlstrom 672, and McPherson 63.

“democratic genre” of American autobiography,<sup>5</sup> while writers as diverse as Louisa May Alcott, John W. de Forest, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, Henry Ward Beecher, and Walt Whitman connected their experiences of the war and its aftermath with a personal vision of the country’s future. The overwhelming need to write and read about the immediate past and its consequences, I argue, resulted in what Norbert Elias has termed a “pronounced spurt in the civilizing process”: in a time of collective crisis, writing and reading helped regulate not only individual “drives,” but also signaled a desire for communication and community (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 400–401).<sup>6</sup> It is in light of this collective desire that we must analyze the inner turmoil in individual American writers but also, by extension, in the larger community of their followers and readers.

I will focus on two works that were particularly popular during their time, and that remained so for decades to come: Louisa May Alcott’s first literary success, the novella *Hospital Sketches* (serialized and first published in 1863, re-edited in 1869 under the title *Hospital Sketches and Camp and Fireside Stories*<sup>7</sup>), and *Norwood*, the only novel by the popular minister and public lecturer Henry Ward Beecher<sup>8</sup> (serialized 1867, published in book form 1868). I will also discuss “The Brothers,” a story that Alcott wrote in 1863 for the *Atlantic Monthly* and that was then published under the title “My Contraband” as one of the *Camp and Fireside Stories*. Speaking to the middle classes in particular, *Norwood*, *Hospital Sketches*, and “The Brothers/My Contraband” are distinct but interrelated efforts to regulate the impulses of the postwar generation. Set

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<sup>5</sup> Alfred Hornung has argued that as the “literary medium of an open genre” autobiography resembles the American Constitution in that it is “potentially open to all people” (Hornung 249).

<sup>6</sup> “The increased demand for books within a society is itself a sure sign of a pronounced spurt in the civilizing process; for the transformation and regulation of drives that is demanded both to write and read books is always considerable.” What Elias writes about the aristocracy may not be true for the middle-class in general, but it was certainly true for American society during the war: “books, too, were intended less for reading in the study or in solitary leisure hours wrung from one’s profession, than for social conviviality; they were a part and continuation of conversation and social games, or, like the majority of court memoirs, they were substitute conversations, dialogues in which for some reason or other the partner was lacking” (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 401).

<sup>7</sup> Digitalized copies of both editions are freely accessible through the Wright American Fiction 1851-1875 digital library service, provided by the University of Michigan.

<sup>8</sup> In *The Most Famous Man in America*, Debby Applegate discusses Beecher as the most influential – and most disputed – figure in nineteenth-century America.

in the politically charged contexts of gendered and raced conflict, all three texts are centrally preoccupied with the nineteenth-century trope of individual self-regulation. By focusing on protagonists who seek to control their war-related unruliness, and by involving the nineteenth-century reader in a debate on (and partly an exercise of) individual self-regulation in the changed social and cultural field of postwar modernity, their authors suggest possible solutions to the challenge of political and social Reconstruction. As this article shows, neither Alcott nor Beecher reactivated the antebellum philosophy of disciplinary intimacy in a straight-forward way: both of them were centrally concerned with redefining the role of individual self-restraint in an increasingly heterogeneous, consumer-oriented society.

Taken together, Alcott's and Beecher's contributions to the writing of the early Reconstruction years were central to the "human figuration" that emerged during these years. They are, in other words, formative of what Elias has described as a historically specific constellation of human interdependencies and power relations.<sup>9</sup> The "Second Founding" marked the beginning of constitutional reforms that aimed at establishing an interracial democracy. Reconstruction politics and the prominence of public leaders like Frederick Douglass and Elizabeth Cady Stanton reflected "an inclusiveness unthinkable in Madison's day" (Quigley x).<sup>10</sup> Most nineteenth-century Americans, however, perceived of Reconstruction as a time of political divisions, corruption, and social crisis. The dominant white middle-class feared that it might lose its cultural sovereignty (what Elias has termed "zivilisatorische Hoheit"), and many did not support the changes that a postwar interracial democracy entailed. As Quigley argues, Reconstruction was primarily a collective struggle that "involved countless Americans fighting over who would be able to play in (the democratic) game, and on whose terms" (Quigley ix).

These "terms" and the "game" itself were defined and contested not only on the political stage but also in the mass media, including a large number of literary works. While in recent years, *Hospital Sketches* has

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<sup>9</sup> On the term "figuration" itself and the problems of limiting the idea of a "development" to a short historical period see Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, particularly the "Introduction."

<sup>10</sup> See also Richard Franklin Bense, *Yankee Leviathan: The Origins of Central State Authority in America, 1859-1877*, and Akhil Reed Amar, *The Bill of Rights: Creation and Reconstruction*.

attracted some scholarly attention,<sup>11</sup> few scholars have taken the trouble to look at *Norwood* in any detail. Yet as the only novel by one of America's most influential religious leaders and public speakers, *Norwood* was an important factor in the making of the postbellum human and political figuration.<sup>12</sup> Both works were first serialized in newspapers to secure high circulation before they came out as books. They effected several reprints, and the popularity of their authors and their respective families made them crucial contributions to the public discourse of the era. While *Hospital Sketches* evokes some of the more liberating aspects of the Civil War, particularly with regard to white middle-class women, *Norwood* has rightfully been described as a "cosmic success story" that celebrates the "powerful ideology of civilization, progress, and Manifest Destiny that dominated American public discourse in the 1850s" (Smith 58).

Some may object that my discussion of these two works lends itself to what Elias has termed a "still" (*Standbild*) rather than for an insight into a more dynamic cultural "psychogenesis" (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 402)<sup>13</sup> that is an aspect of the civilizing process. Yet my limited focus on Alcott's and Beecher's popular works is particularly suitable for investigating the historical and cultural transformation from a more "informal" early Reconstruction culture (1863-1865) to an effort to integrate this informality into the American cultural heritage (1865-). Published only five years apart and remaining in print until the end of the century, they address a similarly open-minded, middle-class readership, and yet they point to a dramatic alteration of the American self-image. A liberal-minded traditionalist, Beecher could not ignore the rebellious cultural atmosphere that had emerged during the war years, when *Hospital Sketches* was first published. When Alcott, on the other hand, republished her 1863 novella in 1869, she had to make concessions to the cultural atmosphere of the

<sup>11</sup> Most of this research comes from the field of gender studies, including a chapter in Elizabeth Young's *Disarming the Nation* and Jane E. Schultz's article, "Embattled Care: Narrative Authority in Louisa May Alcott's *Hospital Sketches*."

<sup>12</sup> Henry Nash Smith was one of the few to recognize Beecher's "remarkable" contribution to the intensified relationship between popular fiction and religion in an era of cultural anxiety (Smith 61-62). Ann Douglas counts *Norwood* as "one of the crucial documents of its period" (Douglas 289).

<sup>13</sup> As Elias explains here with regard to the phenomenon of "rationalization" since the sixteenth century, this is "not something that arose from the fact that numerous interconnected individual people simultaneously developed from 'within,' as if on the basis of some pre-established harmony, a new organ or substance, an 'understanding' or 'reason' which had not existed hitherto. What changes is the way in which people are bonded to each other" (Elias, *Civilizing Process* 402).

postwar years. As fictional contributions to the changes in the human figuration that took place between the early and mid-Reconstruction years, these two narratives reveal how historical change can affect the perspectives of men and women in particular ways, producing gender-specific behavioral codes, psychological patterns, and literary rhetoric that can hardly be reconciled.

In line with Elias's definition of the "figuration" as a structured and yet highly dynamic chain of human interdependencies,<sup>14</sup> this article links these two interconnected fictional "stills" to the larger cultural transformations that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. By doing so it frees the "still" from its presumed stasis and highlights its function within a larger network of social interactions. The academic universalist Elias<sup>15</sup> and the social scientist Cas Wouters<sup>16</sup> have researched historical manners and advice books to identify the ideals and practices, the *habitus* of a specific era and to relate them to the larger transformation processes in western societies. Trained to identify the cultural functions of fictional works, the literary scholar is particularly qualified to analyze how more complex genres, including novels, short stories, and autobiographical fiction, add to such transformation processes. Such an endeavor is, of course, based on a different set of theoretical prerequisites and analytical methods. Even in its most didactic form fiction goes beyond the manners book by providing the reader with a surplus of ideas and feelings, making fiction a privileged site for an investigation into the minds and emotions of nineteenth-century Americans. Together with what we know about the manners and advice books of the era, a contextualizing approach promises to be the best possible method for accessing the psychological transformation process that distinguished the early Reconstruction years from the antebellum period.

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<sup>14</sup> On the necessary interconnectedness of any figuration, Elias writes: "The sequence of moves on either side can only be understood and explained in terms of the immanent dynamics of their interdependence" (*What is Sociology?* 80).

<sup>15</sup> On the theoretical schools that influenced the philosopher, see chapters 1 and 2 in Ralf Baumgart and Volker Eichener, *Norbert Elias zur Einführung*.

<sup>16</sup> See Wouters, *Informalization: Manners and Emotions since 1890* and *Sex and Manners: Female Emancipation in the West, 1890-2000*.

## II. Louisa May Alcott: Female Self-Restraint and the Future of White America

Told from the perspective of her alter ego Tribulation Periwinkle, Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* was so influential that Walt Whitman measured himself against it when he wrote his own memories of the war.<sup>17</sup> Using what one contemporary critic objected to as an inadequate "tone of levity"<sup>18</sup> that was to become a core feature of Alcott's literary style, the novella's first chapter starts with the young female protagonist's extending to her countrymen and women a request for an alternative to what she perceives as the useless life of a young middle-class woman: "I want something to do." As the girl's plea is "addressed to the world in general," however, "no one in particular [feels] it their duty to reply" (*Hospital Sketches* 9).<sup>19</sup> Like many of her historical contemporaries, the narrator/protagonist recodes the public's silent disapproval as an invitation, packs her bag, and travels to Washington, D.C., to become an army nurse.<sup>20</sup> Only later, upon her return from the hospital, does she complete the task her father had advised her to accomplish in the first place: "Write a book." In other words: it is only after this initial resistance and her subsequent experience as a nurse that the daughter acknowledges her father as the main reason for her creativity, as "the author of [her] being" (9). The resulting novella is based on the six weeks Alcott spent in a Civil War hospital and insists on the authentic experience of a true female patriot rather than on the imagination of the "scribbling woman" that her father had in mind. Such a compromise between feminist rebellion and the confirmation of patriarchy is characteristic of Alcott's entire oeuvre. An act of rhetorical self-control, it relies on the idea that only by breaking the rules can traditional norms be taken to a more democratic level.

The irony that inheres in the nurse's belated acknowledgment of the male rules for female creativity does not imply that she distances herself fully from tradition. To downplay what in 1863 was still considered an "unwomanly" act, Alcott explains that her father's initial skepticism had quickly changed to enthusiasm. Representing her ideal of a consensual collective, the narrator insists on the family's shared decision to let her go.

<sup>17</sup> In a letter to James Redpath, Walt Whitman wrote that his "idea is a book of the time, worthy the time – something considerably beyond mere hospital sketches" (Whitman 1:171).

<sup>18</sup> Quoted by Alcott herself in her 1869 "Preface to *Hospital Sketches*" i.

<sup>19</sup> Page numbers refer to the 1863 edition.

<sup>20</sup> On what it meant to become a nurse in the Civil War, see Jane E. Schultz, *Women at the Front*.



On the second page of the story, the "P" (Periwinkle) family imagines an idealized democratic hospital where each member's individual achievements are fully recognized. In this dreamy anticipation of what soon turns out to be an illusion, the borders between home, hospital, and ideal nation appear blurred:

A model hospital was erected, and each member had accepted an honorable post therein. The paternal P. was chaplain, the maternal P. was matron, and all the youthful P.'s filled the pod of futurity with achievements whose brilliancy eclipsed the glories of the present and the past. (10)

In this case the ironic undertone highlights the extreme differences between the ideal nineteenth-century home and a supposedly chaotic public sphere. Contrary to what might be expected, an extension of the domestic into the public realm proves to be a failure.<sup>21</sup> In the course of Tribulation Periwinkle's hospital adventures the dream of transforming the "hurly burly" hospital into a *real* healing space where "order, method, common sense and liberality" (71) rule is thoroughly shattered. When she is looking for someone to help her carry the torch of civilization to the sick American patient, the motherly nurse finds herself surrounded by undisciplined, uncivilized, childlike white men: "Frank, the sleepy, half-sick attendant, knows nothing ...; we rummage high and low; Sam is tired, and fumes; Frank dawdles and yawns; the men advise and laugh at the flurry" (72). As the nurse's democratic vision begins to falter, she threatens to lose control over herself and those in her care, feeling "like a boiling tea-kettle, with the lid ready to fly off and damage somebody" (72). She survives by adjusting her roles to the demands of the metaphorically "sick nation" and combines the role of Victorian woman with the "soldiering nurse" (Young 75).

Shifting between carnival and discipline, a semi-serious Periwinkle experiments with human constellations beyond the normative patriarchal family and its dysfunctions with which Bronson Alcott's daughter Louisa was very familiar.<sup>22</sup> In a carnivalesque scene she obtains masculine agency by turning "military at once:" "I called my dinner my rations, saluted all new comers, and ordered a dress parade that very afternoon" (*Hospital Sketches* 11). Later on, however, the masculinized nurse becomes a mother

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<sup>21</sup> On the implications of "manifest domesticity" in nineteenth-century America, see Amy Kaplan, *The Anarchy of Empire in the Making of U.S. Culture*.

<sup>22</sup> Regarding this constant shifting in connection with Alcott's own childhood and youth, see Young 77.

to the wounded whom she calls her "sleepy children," a pitiful lot who sometimes "colored like bashful girls" (36). A few pages later she merges back into a more masculine, matronly figure who divides her ward in military fashion, sorting out the patients to create her "duty room," her "pleasure room," and her "pathetic room," the latter being reserved for the dying patients (47). Through her carnivalesque gender performances she balances the "unnecessary strictness in one place" with the "unpardonable laxity in another" (72), thereby trying to construct a somewhat impossible space of female agency. In its distanced, often ironic representation, Periwinkle's role-play has "the status of adopted performance, rather than innate identity" (Young 74)<sup>23</sup> and yet her constant shifting between roles is not a purely subversive act of feminist resistance. Through the lighthearted tone of her narrative the adult woman's mission to "do" something is rhetorically toned down to a young girl's childish wish to play. Moving through what she terms the Washington "Hurly-burly hospital" in a highly energized, "topsy-turvy" manner, Alcott's fictionalized alter-ego substitutes the notion of institutionalized discipline and control through a breathless and ultimately unfinished effort to heal a fragmented and disturbed social structure.

By changing her gender identifications just as often as she changes bedpans and linens, and by moving among men who appear to be women and children as well, Nurse Periwinkle participates in rather than witnesses the disintegration of the antebellum American self and the social figuration that it had been a part of. Whenever the nurse is able to regain her agency within the democratic promise that is the hospital, she realizes the temporariness of her role and her fundamentally endangered self. Her cultural repertoire of motherly care and soldierly self-discipline, between a female Jesus and a military general, is as helpful as it is limited, leaving her in the same constant flux that marks her immediate surroundings. As one sick soldier puts it, the war has not only disintegrated the self and society but has also challenged the meaning of both. Reconstruction, in other words, can only be successful if Americans shed their older ideas about what constitutes them individually and collectively:

Lord! What a scramble there'll be for arms and legs, when we old boys come out of our graves, on the Judgment Day: wonder if we shall get our own again? If we do, my leg will have to tramp from Fredericksburg, my arm from here, I suppose, and meet my body, wherever it may be. (*Hospital Sketches* 25)

<sup>23</sup> On the role of Periwinkle's male performance, see also Jane E. Schultz, "Embattled Care" 106.

The nurse's meandering between carnival and discipline is also not just an expression of fluctuating gender-relations but immediately linked to the new racial constellation that had been caused by the 1863 Emancipation Proclamation. Emancipation has not alleviated the white middle-class woman's difficult position. During a nightly visit to the Senate chamber the nurse wants to find out whether "this large machine was run any better than some small ones I knew of," but she soon finds herself among a "family" that is as different as could be from the model nation that she had ventured out to construct. She

found the Speaker's chair occupied by a colored gentleman of ten; while two others were on their legs, having a hot debate on the cornball question, as they gathered the waste paper strewn about the floor in bags; and several white members played leap-frog over the desks ... (75)

Turning her back on a government that is as little in control of itself as of its citizens, the nurse wanders through the galleries of the Senate. Although she "likewise gambolled up and down, from gallery to gallery" to sit in Sumner's chair and warm her feet "at one of the national registers," her own unrestrained behavior differs considerably from "the somewhat unparliamentary proceedings going on about [her]" (75): the nurse's informal behavior is a playful enactment of basic democratic options and reminds the reader that democracy depends on the responsibility of citizens who *care* for the nation as a whole. While the men play for the individual goal of winning, the female visitor seeks to define her place within the social figuration of the new democratic nation.

The term "informal behavior" is important here. Used in particular by the Elias scholar Cas Wouters, it refers to the "emancipation ... of ... impulses and emotions" that takes place when older power relations and interdependencies become unstable (Wouters, "On 'Psychic' and 'Psychological'" 502). Tribulation Periwinkle on the one hand insists on a rhetoric that confirms the traditional ideal of Victorian self- and womanhood. Yet while she represents herself as a responsible, "used-up nurse" (*Hospital Sketches* 74), she realizes that her place is neither among "use-less" men, nor the "colossal ladies and gentlemen" that make up the Capital statuary. Appalled by the "looseness of costume" and the "passé" ornamentation of the marble ladies, the young Victorian underlines the norms and customs of American antebellum culture, thereby again downplaying the profound psychological changes that went along with the social transformation processes that lie at the heart of *Hospital Sketches*. To resolve the tension between informality and self-restraint Periwinkle finally celebrates a

figure that combines both: the Washington Statue of Liberty that in 1863 had not yet been lifted to the top of the Capitol but stood flat in the metaphorical “mud” of the young democracy.<sup>24</sup> Admiring how the statue shelters a bird’s nest in her marble hand, the nurse pleads for a less formal but increasingly responsible emotional economy and democratic leadership. An independent, unmarried woman in a male environment, Alcott’s fictional alter ego is careful enough to acknowledge the nineteenth-century maternal ideal. At the same time, however, the image is deeply ambivalent, as it casts the female citizen as both a sheltering mother and as a bird that needs protection. The mother, in other words, represents an idea of social interdependencies that also involve the state as an enabling frame and institution. While it does not answer the soldier’s question regarding the integration of a historically constituted self and nation, the concept of republican motherhood anchors the young woman’s disintegrated self in the monumental promise of a nation – and a social figuration – to come.

Importantly, however, the concept does not resonate within the hierarchy of the hospital. Immersing herself in her civilizing effort, the nurse issues commands to incapable male attendants, circumvents bureaucratic rules, “flies” to the surgery to ask for adhesive plaster, makes demands that are ignored, hammers away on locked doors, and “circulates through the house” (73) not only to heal the wounded but to reinvent what Quigley has termed the “rules of the democratic game.” In the end she is forced to acknowledge that her adaptive, informal style is bound to fail. Infected with illness, she resigns herself to passivity:

I was learning that one of the best methods of fitting oneself to be a nurse in a hospital, is to be a patient there. ... The doctors paid daily visits, tapped at my lungs to see if pneumonia was within, left doses without names, and went away, leaving me as ignorant, and much more uncomfortable than when they came. (83)

In the end the nurse’s father appears “like a welcome ghost on [her] hearth” and demands her to come home: “and so ended my career as an army nurse” (84). While in Alcott’s later career as a writer, adolescent girls would finally succumb to the logic of married life,<sup>25</sup> the narrator-

<sup>24</sup> Today, the statue she mentions here is known as the “Statue of Freedom.” It was placed on the dome of the Capitol on December 2, 1863. Contrary to popular belief it does not represent a Native American but a female allegorical figure. Alcott must have seen it when it was temporarily displayed on the Capitol grounds.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of this theme in *Little Women*, see Brodhead 101-102.

protagonist of *Hospital Sketches* does not withdraw into the passive namelessness of an ideal nineteenth-century femininity. In chapter 5 of the narrative, Nurse Periwinkle experiments with an alternative position within the as yet undefined interracial constellation of early Reconstruction America. The nurse-become-author proclaims that she will set forth her civilizing quest: "The next hospital I enter will, I hope, be one for the colored regiments, as they seem to be proving their right to the admiration and kind offices of their white relations" (102). Tribulation Periwinkle fights her battle about American citizenship with a wink of the eye when she argues that in America a "good fit of illness proves the value of health; real danger tries one's mettle; and self-sacrifice sweetens character" (79).

In Alcott's narrative, the resistance to passivity goes along with the dissolution of essentialist categories: just as gender-roles appear blurred, race "infects." Throughout the narrative, the nurse turns to African Americans as a source of invigoration. One of the most interesting episodes describes her "infection" with what is staged as "black disorderliness:" when she opens her window to look at some African Americans who celebrate the Emancipation Proclamation, she "electrified her room-mate by dancing out of bed, throwing up the window, and flapping my handkerchief, with a feeble cheer, in answer to the shout of a group of colored men in the street below" (82). Elizabeth Young has interpreted this moment as a "proclamation of emancipation for Alcott herself" (Young 82). Yet, as the scene maintains, too, Periwinkle avoids closer physical contact with the "colored men in the street below," and quickly regains her composure. It is through this racialized act of identification *and* self-restraint that the white woman marks her place within the human figuration of the post-Emancipation world: by acknowledging and subsequently resisting her own "black" impulses<sup>26</sup> the narrating nurse first highlights and then downplays her own "unruliness" and thereby legitimizes the notion of white female leadership as a combination of human understanding and racial superiority.

This racialized cultural rhetoric becomes even more explicit in Alcott's "The Brothers/My Contraband."<sup>27</sup> Sharing Tribulation Periwinkle's desire to work among black soldiers, the narrative's main character, Nurse Dane, is helped by an African American "contraband" attendant. She feels "decidedly more interest in the black man than in the white" ("Brothers" 584),

<sup>26</sup> On the implications of "blackness" in Alcott's work, see Young 70.

<sup>27</sup> Page numbers refer to the 1863 publication of the story in *The Atlantic Monthly*. The quotes also appear under the new 1869 title "My Contraband" in Alcott's *Camp and Fireside Stories*.

and yet she suppresses her erotically charged attraction to the angry freedman by "civilizing" him instead. Dane abolishes her assistant's slave-name, Bob, and makes a *man* of him by naming him "Robert" – a highly ambiguous, symbolically overdetermined act that was well understood at the time: the 1869 reprint of the story gave it the telling new title "My Contraband."

Cast as a democratic mother figure, Nurse Dane saves the nation by metaphorically adopting the freedman. After "Robert" has exchanged his "bad," male slaveholder for a "good" white "mother," he no longer wishes to kill his slave-holding half-brother but volunteers to fight in the Union army. Alcott's carefully construed interracial mother-son configuration emerges as a national security measure when Nurse Dane frees Robert from his "slavish" aggression against his former master and manages to protect the "contraband's" white half-brother from his brutal revenge. The nurse's not so motherly, erotically charged admiration of the "quadroon's" "color in lips and cheek, waving hair, and an eye full of ... passionate melancholy," her impulse to "know and comfort him" (585), her "helpless pain and passion" (590), are channeled into educational measures: after elevating the slave "Bob" to the status of a man, "Robert," the white woman transforms the threatening freedman into a "useful" patriot soldier, who is then symbolically "colonized" to a Christian heaven when he dies in a Civil War hospital.

On an important level, "The Brothers/My Contraband" is a story about an interracial, mutual attraction and about a white woman's successful efforts to channel her erotic impulses into patriotism. Yet while the formulas of the mother, of female self-regulation and disciplining go hand in hand here, all of these cultural codes and practices fail to erase the erotic attraction that exists between the two protagonists. The story "solves" this dilemma by slightly altering what Elias has said about human interdependencies in increasingly complex societies: in such a context, he argues, "new forms of emotional bond will be found. As well as interpersonal bonds there will be bonds connecting people to the symbols of larger units, to coats of arms, to flags, and to emotionally-charged concepts" (Elias, *What is Sociology?* 137). Alcott inscribes such a connection on the ticket above the hero's hospital bed. As the nurse approaches the dying black veteran, she finds that "an awful change had come upon him" and, "turning to the ticket just above his head," she sees "the name, 'Robert Dane'" ("Brothers" 593).

As part of a new, democratic figuration, the black veteran signals his right to bear the name that he has fought for. Yet the truly liberated "Robert Dane" dies before his symbolic claim can become a serious object

of discussion, leaving it to the reader to speculate on the story's political message and social meaning. Leaving behind the white woman, who has made a man of him, he is metaphorically reunited with his black wife and culture that are both external to the white nation (595). The fear of miscegenation, which during Reconstruction preoccupied American minds more than ever, is thus solved somewhat paradoxically through the white nurse's transgression and subsequent redrawing of racial borders. Figuring as the story's protagonist and narrator, she first makes a man of the slave in order to then let him die as a consequence of the soldiering man's superior manhood. By excising him from the realm of the living, in other words, the black man is symbolically sacrificed to protect the white woman from social death in a society that denies her fundamental political and social rights. The narrative confirms what Elias has argued with regard to conflicts within an established group, which in the case of Alcott's narrative is defined as northern and white: to secure the hard-won role as moral guarantors, the white American woman, Nurse Dane, excludes the black other on the grounds of a negative "character trait" – race.<sup>28</sup> The story's final death-scene not only protects white men, but also goes along with an effort of female self-restraint that secures the moral consensus of the Union. Cast as a social figuration that laments the death of its black brothers and sisters, the new "America" is construed as a monoracial democracy that owes its legitimacy to the white woman's sexual self-regulation in the name of the nation.

Yet to read "The Brothers" exclusively as a rhetorical denial of the black soldier's right of full citizenship ignores the erotic attraction that continues to exist between the two until the very end, when Nurse Dane feels "the touch of lips upon [her] hands" (592). On the metaphorical level of the narrative, the veteran's death makes her a black man's white widow: at an earlier point in the story, the white nurse had replaced Robert's

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<sup>28</sup> In Elias's and John L. Scotson's 1958-59 study (published as *The Established and the Outsiders*), this group was a community they called Winston Parva, located on the outskirts of Leicester, England. The excluded group were workers from London who had moved there; the "negative subgroup" was a minority of economically and socially deprived families. By identifying all the workers from London with this deprived minority, those who originated from Winston Parva were able to define themselves as superior. Interestingly, this superiority was defined via their ability to self-regulation. In extension of his findings, Elias argues that race-relations are "simply established-outsider-relations of a particular type," because here, racial "differences" are used as a "reinforcing shibboleth," a visible code to makes it easier to recognize the outsiders (15).

African American wife, Lucy, who had been murdered by her white suitor. When in a state of delirium Robert calls his dead wife's name, Nurse Dane "follows the fancy" and answers, "Yes, here's Lucy" (587). "The Brothers," in other words, makes a concession to nineteenth-century fears of racial miscegenation when it removes the patriotic freedman from the social realm of the American family and nation. Yet by symbolically burying him under the ticket of "Robert Dane," the narrative clearly signals his full belonging in the multiracial national family. Joined in their readiness to sacrifice themselves and their romantic relationship for the creation of the democratic nation, the white nurse and the black soldier represent a new concept of the self and its relationship to others. By shifting the protagonists' feelings of love and desire from an individual other to the beloved nation, Alcott's story anticipates Elias's concept of the "We-and-I." As he points out in *The Society of Individuals*, the self is always already a part of a human constellation that extends from the family to society as a whole: "Only in relation to other human beings does the wild, helpless creature which comes into the world become the psychologically developed person with the character of an individual and deserving the name of an adult human being" (Elias, *Society of Individuals* 21). As if echoing this theory of individual and social evolution, the former slave claims the name of a full-grown man and citizen, "Robert Dane," and, by posting this name above his sickbed, boldly inscribes himself as a white woman's family-relation. This act of naming, in other words, marks the freedman's true liberation, his departure from the racial stereotype of the "childlike savage." Importantly, this act connects a personal, romantic relationship and an "official" one that is linked to the state. Instead of merely celebrating an interracial relationship, the story acknowledges the larger national context that "makes" an individual. At the same time, however, this shift is also the outcome of an unresolved ambivalence regarding the multiracial figuration of post-slavery America, and in that respect it marks the emotional setup of the Reconstruction era.

Like *Hospital Sketches*, however, "The Brothers" is not only about American race relations during Reconstruction, but it merges this topic with a debate on gender. Therefore, without this category any analysis of Alcott's fictional translation of the emotional setup of the Reconstruction era would be incomplete. When Robert dies, he not only frees American society from the burden of granting him the civil and political rights of a family member, but he also spares the highly independent Nurse Dane the role of a veteran's devoted wife. Relieved of such responsibilities she moves on to teach former slaves. The freedman's death, in other words, reconciles her patriotic consciousness with a feminist agenda. As a narra-



tive intervention into the political and social dilemma that followed black enrollment in the Union army, the figure of the nurse suggests that the future of American society relies on the active involvement of white women in the increasingly interracial public sphere. As a healer of both the nation's multiracial body and of the national imagination, Alcott's fictional nurse and storyteller represents America's ability to imaginatively reconnect American men and women, whites and African Americans, and to reconcile the diverging feelings that threaten the very concept of a national, democratic union.

Both "Hospital Sketches" and "The Brothers" were reprinted in 1869, one year after Henry Ward Beecher's *Norwood* had come out. During these years Americans found themselves in a heated debate about two things that were often discussed in conjunction: the future of the freedmen and women's suffrage.<sup>29</sup> Like Alcott's fictional characters, middle-class nurses did not always return to their traditional roles but moved to the South instead to teach in the newly established freedmen's schools.<sup>30</sup> In the late 1860s these schools had become a "battleground for debates over poverty, dependency, race, and gender" (Faulkner 136).<sup>31</sup> To secure financial support, abolitionists emphasized that the freedpeople were "led toward middle-class values" (Cimbala and Miller xxviii) and prepared to be "useful, virtuous, Christian, obedient blacks" (Butchart 53) who would remain dependent on white men and women.<sup>32</sup> Female schoolteachers in particular found themselves scorned by the white population of the former Confederacy and eyed suspiciously even by northern sponsors. Although they often "gained access to government power and policy" (Faulkner

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton's letter to Charles Sumner may serve as an example. She wrote that "the question of woman's suffrage to us who have labored for that purpose over twenty years, has the same importance that negro suffrage has to you, no more, no less" (quoted in Venet 152). On the political events that led to the political isolation of the women's cause, see Brown 190-191.

<sup>30</sup> The best-known historical example of this is Cornelia Hancock. Regarding the individual motivation of female teachers, see Butchart 134.

<sup>31</sup> On the deep ideological divide between white abolitionist men and women on how best to support the freedmen, see the entire eighth chapter of Faulkner's book.

<sup>32</sup> I do not claim that the majority of teachers did not act from a deep missionary impulse, and yet a historical examination of the issue is still wanting. At least some early Civil War diaries and private sources by teachers themselves indicate a surprising skepticism vis-à-vis such assimilationist approaches. See, e.g. Esther Hill Hawk's *A Woman Doctor's Civil War: Esther Hill Hawks' Diary*.

136), many white “schoolmarms”<sup>33</sup> walked a thin line between their roles as obedient teacher-missionaries and rebellious northern daughters, and the letters and diaries of the time show that they often suffered accusations of unwomanly behavior and racial transgression.<sup>34</sup>

### III. Henry Ward Beecher: Happiness and the Hierarchical Harmony of the New Nation

As a book by an author who was known for having a keen eye for the right moment, *Norwood* allows us to further analyze the human figuration of the era when it is read in conjunction with “Hospital Sketches” and “The Brothers/My Contraband.” Henry Nash Smith’s summary of *Norwood* indicates the blatant weaknesses of the novel:

There are two pairs of young lovers. One ritual of mating ends triumphantly at the altar. The other is frustrated by the death of the secondary hero at Gettysburg: he has had the poor judgment to fight on the side of his native state, South Carolina. ... The principal heroine, Rose Wentworth, is introduced as a child ..., and as she approaches maturity radiates piety along with refined notions about art ... When Barton Cathcart [the novel’s hero] is in the throes of a prolonged struggle with unbelief, Dr. Wentworth [Rose’s father] tells him he will never be able to reason his way to faith but must rely on intuition and imagination ... Needless to say, Barton’s conversion comes at last. (Smith 62-63)

This heavily formulaic novel ends with a vision of the nation’s “Second Founding:” having returned from the war, Barton takes up his role as community spokesman by marrying the daughter of the idealized village patriarch, and the happy-go-lucky black war veteran – who has, after all, saved Barton’s life – grins broadly and ignorantly from behind the fence. In this final tableau everybody has found his or her place – the married white couple, the simple-minded honest workman, and the “inferior” African American. The latter is an ape-like figure, incapable either of controlling himself or of acquiring knowledge, but nevertheless a useful member of

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<sup>33</sup> Regarding the cultural work of African American schoolteachers in the South, see Heather Andrea Williams’s *Self Taught: African-American Education in Slavery and Freedom*.

<sup>34</sup> Sarah Jane Foster’s diary and letters are one of the best primary sources to study this personal tension. See Sarah Jane Foster, *Sarah Jane Foster, Teacher of the Freedmen: A Diary and Letters*.

society because of his superior access to the original world of plants and animals. Published at the height of educational Reconstruction, *Norwood* keeps the black man at bay to uphold the class dynamics that in 1867 were seriously challenged through the debates around the Fourteenth Amendment. What is more surprising is the narrative's ultimate female other, the white northern "schoolmarm" Alice. Barton's unhappy sister is exiled to an otherworldly "desolate island" in the American South, where "monsters may seize" her "or rough men," who "snatch up" the "little voyager into some ship of foreign tongue" (103-104). The harshness of tone and the absoluteness of Alice's exclusion are strikingly disproportionate. The narrative isolation of the white female teacher issued a warning to young women who, like Alcott's nurses and schoolteachers, turned their back on the antebellum status quo of gender and race relations.<sup>35</sup> Inscribed within a narrative of fallenness, rape, and miscegenation, the Reconstruction "schoolmarm" emerges as America's ultimate other.

Beecher profited from the authority he had built up when he sounded the bell for national reconciliation at Fort Sumter. Although many nineteenth- and twentieth-century literary critics agree in their assessment of the narrative's poor plot and wooden characters, *Norwood* sold very well and was welcomed by the majority of readers and nineteenth-century critics. William Dean Howells praised its author as "perhaps the most hopeful element in New York" and celebrated *Norwood* as "the beginning of a social rather than a religious regeneration. It is American and good; it has sound sense and wholesome impulses" (Howells 637). That nothing was really new in the minister's system of thought may have been the main reason for the novel's success: it was "designed to soothe the sensibilities of its readers by fulfilling expectations and expressing only received ideas" (Smith 50). *Norwood* was a welcome "remedy" for the insecure, war-shaken white American middle class, and it reflected "the general complacency of public discourse in the North after Appomattox" (Smith 62).

Although it came out only a few years after the first edition of Alcott's *Hospital Sketches* (1863), *Norwood* marks an ideological turn from the emancipatory impulses and self-regulatory measures that are interwoven in many of the narratives that women wrote during this time. Confirming much of what Brodhead has said about the social function of postbellum American literature, Beecher's literary vision is primarily concerned with creating a "secure sense of homogeneity" that consolidates white, patri-

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<sup>35</sup> I do not claim that Beecher responded directly to Alcott, whose work he had published as editor of the *Christian Union*, but that he reacted to a more general cultural atmosphere.

archal, middle-class superiority in a distressingly pluralistic postwar nation to a vision of distinctly demarcated spaces that provide limited freedom and agency to all who inhabit them (Brodhead 135). Whoever moves beyond the walls, hedges, and fences that define the literary landscape of *Norwood* is excluded from its narrative of national progress, cultural leadership, and personal happiness. America's true others are symbolically exiled from the inclusive narrative tableau at the end of the novel and never to be heard from again. That this symbolical removal was more than an older man's response to postwar utterances of female self-reliance manifests itself in Alcott's preface to the 1869 postwar edition of "Hospital Sketches:" criticized for her narrative "tone of levity" and the nurse's "sad want of Christian experience," she feels compelled to resort to claims of authenticity and feminine modesty. The "sharp contrast of the tragic and comic," she insists, mirrors the unique atmosphere in the war hospital, while her refusal to share her prayers with the readers of *The Atlantic Monthly* proves the depth of her religious experience.<sup>36</sup>

Notably, what is at stake here is not the routine of religious rhetoric but a deep personal experience of the Divine: according to her 1868 journal, Alcott had followed the recommendation of her publisher when she removed "biblical allusions" from the 1863 version to "suit customers" (Alcott, *Journals* 164). It was apparently easier for postwar readers to concentrate on a female figure either as "angel of the house" or as a rebellious Civil War daughter than to merge both concepts. The rhetorical maneuver in Alcott's introduction highlights this as a double standard that forbade the mixing of humor and religion while at the same time insisting that the female writer authorizes her writing through recourse to her deep Christian faith. The year 1868, it seems, marked not only a political break but also a decisive change in the cultural climate. An increasingly accepted rhetoric of female expansion that was balanced through acts of self-regulation was now met with the concept of a harmonious, undisturbed national household. This social figuration, in which everybody knew his or her place, differed from the antebellum model and from Alcott's literary struggle between submission and rebellion<sup>37</sup> by declaring the concept of self-restraint a thing of the past. In *Norwood* the young republic has come of age, leaving the impulses, religious doubts, and social transgressions that had marked its immediate past behind it. According to America's

<sup>36</sup> Alcott quotes these critics in "Preface to Hospital Sketches" (i) only to characterize them as misunderstanding her work. According to the same diary-entry and in line with the reconciliatory mood of the time she also softened "all allusions to rebs."

<sup>37</sup> Brodhead makes this central point in his chapter on Alcott (Brodhead 69-106).

influential religious leader, American civilization had moved from forceful self-regulation to joyful assimilation.

Beecher's dismissal of women who continued their lives of wartime independence was approved of by many war-weary Americans. During the immediate postwar years, social attitudes regarding women's suffrage had begun to change, making the subject secondary for many abolitionists and leaving feminist leaders relatively isolated in their political work. Beecher nevertheless participated in the first meeting of the American Equal Rights Association (1867) to proclaim: "If you have any radical principle to urge, any higher wisdom to make known, don't wait until quiet times come, until the public mind shuts up altogether" (quoted in Harper 276-277). One year later, however, he opposed radical feminists like Victoria Woodhull and supported women's suffrage only on the grounds that "great hearts and strong heads" were a prerequisite to make women's rule within the domestic household a natural success (quoted in Clark 198). Significantly, this revaluation of the Victorian regime of separate spheres went hand in hand with a widespread anxiety regarding the black right to vote. After fierce debates in 1867 and 1868, the Republican nominating convention of the North had introduced "negro suffrage" in the former Confederacy but not in the northern states: elected president in 1868, Ulysses Grant owed his political victory to the votes of southern freedmen. Although privately Beecher had urged the former president, Johnson, to support the 1866 Civil Rights Act, he never openly protested his racist course (cf. Applegate 360). With Reconstruction, the man who had once sent rifles to Kansas to support the fight against slavery sacrificed his former radicalism in favor of generous sectional reconciliation.

Although the politically turbulent postwar era may have been characterized by a wish for a more general complacency, many Americans continued to be fascinated with the unruly, lighthearted women in Alcott's and other female writers' literary fantasies that continued to appear on the market. To be successful, in other words, Beecher had to reconcile the image of the rebellious yet self-regulating wartime daughter with the nostalgic national memory of an idealized antebellum gender order that was grounded in patriarchal leadership and female acceptance thereof. Significantly, then, *Norwood* avoids the slightest echo of antebellum female self-denial: the heroine, Rose, is a new, independent type of woman who has spent three years in Boston to study the natural sciences, art, and music. During the sectional conflict she joins the so-called "army in white" and volunteers as a nurse in a civil war hospital. Only at the end of the novel when she marries the new leader can we imagine her as a prototypical Victorian "angel of the house" and yet Beecher carefully

abstains from making this explicit. Rose finds her designated place naturally; with the "Second Founding," self-restraint and female obedience have given way to an open-hearted, welcoming embrace of a wife's traditional duties. The cultural work that *Norwood* accomplishes relies on such efforts to balance the old and the new and thus to respond to a crisis in gender: American women who had learned to hold their own on the home front and in the potentially offensive male space of the war hospital could no longer be denied access to the public sphere merely by appealing to their more delicate nature. Beecher more than considered this transformation when he granted women a limited right to break into traditionally male spheres. Thus although Rose's father forbids her to actively perform surgery because as a woman she is "to be a nurse, not a surgeon" (433), she at one point is

inspired by danger and desperate necessity to take the surgeon's knife. ... Seized with an inspiration, Rose, without an instant's hesitation, put her hand to the saw, completed the severing, tied the arteries, joined the flaps, and bound up the wound. The man recovered. She had often been called the "Surgeon's Daughter;" but now the men changed it, and called her the "Daughter-surgeon." (448)

Although Beecher was careful enough to keep the female doctor tied to her father's traditional authority, the idea of a woman performing amputations was a bold provocation: to my knowledge *Norwood* is the only Civil War narrative that challenges the official ruling that female doctors were not permitted to work in an army hospital, and even Alcott's Nurse Periwinkle had made a point of stating that she was never directly involved in such an operation. Through a historical distortion *Norwood* grants its female readership a superior moment; its problematic informality (Rose loses control of herself as she acts according to a higher "inspiration") is rhetorically neutralized by elevating it to a metaphysical level. After this exceptional moment of inspired female leadership, however, Rose returns to a woman's traditional place in the patriarchal household. What in antebellum literary texts had been defined as feminine self-restraint is now translated into a model citizen's calm awareness of her role in the larger social context:

[a]t one time she was seriously bent upon leaving home and seeking a place in the South or West as a teacher, and resisted from the purpose on seeing how much pain it would give her parents. She also revolved plans on teaching at or near home, but found that

she would do it only by dispossessing others who depended on teaching for their bread. (432)

While earlier in the novel the reader witnessed the male hero's struggle with religious dogma and his eventual conversion to a liberal brand of Christianity, the woman's struggle with tradition appears strangely detached. In Beecher's postwar vision, the white woman is beyond suffering: instead of struggling with her own desires she has come to understand herself as a defining and defined part of a new, harmonious society. Rose, in other words, is a postwar patriarchal fantasy whose unselfish habitus differs significantly from Tribulation Periwinkle's hunger for female self-realization. Unlike her wartime sisters who sought to govern their impulses through fierce self-discipline and by taking on the responsibilities of female leadership, Rose "no longer has to endure inner struggles over moral issues" because she *knows* her intellectual and professional worth: in the words of Henry Nash Smith, the "tension and rebelliousness arising from the insecurity of earlier heroines has given way to a tranquil mood" (Smith 62-63).

This mood, however, is not as "natural" as it may seem. Beecher's ideal female citizen is the result of a liberal Christian education. Her best friend Alice's personal "doom," by contrast, stems from an outdated mixture of New England bookishness and dry Puritan religiosity. Unlike Rose, who has the benefit of a liberal-minded teacher-father and an African American half-wit who introduced her to "more things in natural history than any person in this town" (87), Alice has to rely on her father, a solid yet uninspired reader of the Bible who did not know how to make letters come to life.<sup>38</sup> Unlike Rose she has never had the chance to listen to real "stories" (110); she has not, in other words, been exposed to the balancing influence of fiction. Beecher's promotion of fiction as the nation's ultimate teacher shows how much he had changed since 1844, when in *Seven Lectures to Young Men* (1844) he had warned against the "arts of the seducer" in the guise of books, plays, and other amusements.<sup>39</sup> *Norwood* however, is meant to entertain and amuse its audience as much as to be "serious" literature aimed at the status-conscious consumers of the

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<sup>38</sup> This is one of the many irritations in the novel, since Abiah was initially introduced as an ideal reader. In an idealizing narrative like *Norwood* such a person should be expected to be a perfect storyteller as well.

<sup>39</sup> After the Civil War, *Seven Lectures* was not only circulated widely, but it was reprinted in 1879, 1881, and 1925, thus pointing to the continuous public influence of an increasingly outmoded moral concept in some parts of American society.

postbellum era. The most remarkable aspect of *Norwood* is not the motherless, self-reliant female citizen educated by her white transcendentalist Christian father and an imbecile black servant, but the harmonious social hierarchy that it constructs. To accept this hierarchy as “natural,” the reader is explicitly invited to “visit” the recreational space of the novel. On the first pages of *Norwood* the narrator leads us through a lush tunnel of New England elms. Upon entering the “mansion” at the end of this highly symbolic tunnel we are led through its edenic garden and, by extension, through a peaceful rural landscape where reading men and feeding horses live side by side (5-8). Pushing aside an inadequate New England tradition, *Norwood* reimagines another City Upon the Hill that is fueled by the “healthier” American tradition of pantheist thought and a liberal version of Protestant Christianity. On this basis *Norwood* not only projects a glorious antebellum past to effect a brimming postbellum future, but it also promises a mock experience of this future: by reading *Norwood* the “visitor” joins the imaginary community of Norwoodites. A critic from the *New York Times* seems to have understood this perfectly when he told potential readers that

the true way to enjoy “Norwood” is to read it aloud in the home-circle; or, what is still better, to listen while some other person reads it. No sentence should be skipped – no thought overlooked. Thus studied, the story is likely to be read several times over by all thoughtful people who enjoy reading it once. (anon. 5)

Beecher, in other words, thought of the “Second Founders” as a society of readers who instead of practicing self-restraint and/or exerting social control re-constructed themselves by taking an imaginary stroll through the village of Norwood, where they enjoy its idealized surroundings and overhear the inspiring conversations of its inhabitants. By taking fictional journeys to the clearly demarcated spaces of a literary, pastoral landscape, the reader too was meant to find his or her own beautiful place in the outside world. Reconstruction, in other words, is not represented as a (potentially self-interested) struggle to change the nation but as an almost meditative act of voluntary collective assimilation. The text that this new society was to rely on was deeply familiar to American “Victorians,” but Beecher knew that in order to secure his role as public spokesman, he would have to change at least one of the basic presumptions.



#### **IV. Conclusion: Female Education and the Making of the White Republic**

Published during and after the war, respectively, Alcott's and Beecher's narratives seek to imaginatively reconstruct the human figuration during a major period of political, social, and literary consolidation in American history and culture. Tracing the chronology of their publication, they move from female independence to the patriarchal backlash of the late 1860s. The psychological and intellectual economies that are represented in these works permit certain conclusions about what Elias has termed "psycho-genesis." Both authors make a serious effort to meet the presumed expectations of their audience and its set of norms – Alcott by balancing acts of female revolt and self-control, Beecher by first highlighting women's principal capacity for active leadership and then subordinating "her" to patriarchal rule. Differing in important nuances, they both project a liberal, open-minded, abolitionist, white middle-class, feminist audience, and yet they recognize and support the racist and patriarchal undercurrents of their society. Ironically, however, their narrative strategies work toward very different ends: while Alcott seeks to exploit the liberal climate of the Civil War era in order to metaphorically secure "woman's seat" in a mixed-race Senate, Beecher imagines a mix of traditional and modern ideas and values to marginalize black men and to keep white women out of a position of power.

Taken together, these works can be seen as highlighting a crucial moment during Reconstruction but also during the larger civilizing process. While Alcott tells a complicated story about individual self-regulation and its limits, about social integration and necessary social change, Beecher counters the notion of self-control *tout court*: he suggests a new understanding and a joyful embrace of an earlier social status quo. These texts are thus not only about the changed human figuration after Emancipation but they also challenge the notion of self-restraint as a central prerequisite of and instrument in nineteenth-century American culture. In *Norwood*, the notion of the self becomes purely relational: individuality is a human function at the service of society. The novel stages the immediate historical past as a time of individual and collective crisis that was necessary for this re-directing of the individual self. Referencing both the Garden of Eden and a heavenly afterworld, Reconstruction emerges as an enlightened, peaceful era in which everything, finally, falls into its natural place. Marked as a time and place that comes after the grand national struggle, the reconstructed world of *Norwood* has turned human suffering, pain, and also self-restraint obsolete.

While at first sight the social figuration that Beecher suggests in *Norwood* seems to return the reader to antebellum ideals, including the concept of female self-regulation, it is considerably different from that time, because what the narrative suggests is a psychogenesis that (contrary to Elias's concept) emerges from a divine master-plan (cf. Elias, *Civilizing Process* 402). Infused with the knowledge gained from religion, science, and nature, the protagonists have not only come to *understand* the superiority of those earlier values, but they have internalized that knowledge as a part of their *emotional* setup. After the Civil War, in other words, the antebellum female has advanced to a point where she no longer needs to regulate the self, because self-regulation has become second nature to her. Thus, even if Rose struggles for a moment with the lure of an independent life, this is nothing but a reflexive and faint echo derived from a culture that she has long outgrown. Unlike Alcott's nurses, who evoke the notion of female self-restraint and self-sacrifice to legitimize the new social figurations that the stories imagine, such self-disciplining measures do not belong in Rose's more mature repertoire. A postwar response to the "un-American" heroines of the early Alcott and other female writers of the Civil War era, Rose embodies a new type of woman whose "healthy" Christianity and natural intuition connect past tradition with modernity. While Nurse Periwinkle is brought home by her father only to make plans of how to proceed on her public mission, Rose works with her father in the hospital and finally returns home not despite but because of her liberal education.

Thus in this particular historical moment in the civilizing process, when both texts were read by a similar audience, the notion of joyful assimilation (Beecher) exists side-by-side with a renewed concept of self-restraint (Alcott) that serves to authorize women's increasing involvement in public matters. What these concepts project is more than a choice between radical reform and assimilation; they offer a choice of an ongoing struggle between a) white female self-regulation and the erotically charged lures of a multiracial reality, and b) a harmonious lifestyle that is regulated through the reading of "good books," such as *Norwood*. Importantly, however, this "regulation" is not cast as an act of either self-control or as a disciplinary instrument that is transmitted by guide-books and Sunday services, but as a voluntary leisure activity of the independent consumer self. If according to "Hospital Sketches" female self-regulation (and its possible failure) is the price that a woman pays for her participation in the chaotic reality of the post-Emancipation nation, leisurely reading takes the place of both self-regulation and external control in *Norwood*. The postwar emphasis on leisure, consumerism, and an increasing informality in the

private realm, in other words, are cast as an ideal environment to internalize a liberal version of antebellum Christianity and to establish new but ultimately fixed human interdependencies that resemble a light version of the traditional Victorian household.

For Alcott, however, female self-restraint is necessary to survive in an increasingly informal world, where the traditional borders between social groups are steadily crumbling. In their ordering function, women have a crucial role to play in this new society; yet as Alcott points out, their new public functions involve not only an increasing amount of energy to regulate the female self but also a principal readiness to take the risks that inhere in the reality of everyday life and accept the possibility of moral failure. Unlike Beecher, Alcott does not project a divine mastermind: after religion is declared unrepresentable, female agency takes the place of Christian Providence. In *Norwood* the female readiness to embrace "experience" itself threatens the entire social setup that secures the dominant role of the white middle-class. In the national "household" that the village of Norwood signifies, upholding these borders is a necessary prerequisite that enables an unrestrained, happy life for all its inhabitants, regardless of their class, gender, race, or age. More in line with the "separate-but-equal" ideology of the postwar era than with a rigid separation of spheres, the novel construes "natural" interdependencies that enable the increasingly informal lifestyle of the postbellum home: with the abolition of slavery and more and more institutions of female higher education, African Americans, white women, and the white male elite have entered a new phase of national progress that links them all without challenging their respective political and legal definitions as citizens. These "natural interdependencies" rely centrally on little white girls who learn about nature from an "uncivilized" black man who carries them on his shoulders, and when they grow older these girls have something to contribute to white men's philosophical debates in the home library. Beecher's "Reconstruction Woman," in other words, infuses white cultural progress with a mediated version of "black" nature and intuition to guarantee the nation's spiritual and philosophical "Second Founding." Yet the promise of a new, postwar informality that goes along with this must be prevented from turning into interracial chaos. It is for this reason that black education is the greatest threat to the community of Norwoodites: by "civilizing" the nation's supposedly "imbecile" other, the playful informality that is fundamental to Beecher's concept of the "Second Founding" would forever lose the primeval innocence that defines it.

Beecher's ideal Reconstruction woman, however, enjoys an education that combines Christian and transcendentalist concepts with the latest

"scientific" findings. Unlike her antebellum sister she is now explicitly included in the system of higher education and thus qualified to not only train her children and husband in virtue and civic consciousness but to actively participate in current scientific debates within her "empire," the home.<sup>40</sup> Rose's studies with the famous zoologist, glaciologist, and geologist Louis Agassiz, whose racial classification system had helped legitimize slavery, immunize her against what one might call "cultural miscegenation." Because she has been educated to read the contents of the book of nature without attaching any value to "the person who opens and shows them" (87), the white woman of the late 1860s can spend her childhood on the shoulders of an ape-like "negro" without inheriting any of his "inferior" character traits. The white Reconstruction-era woman, in other words, is the product of a liberal education that meets the challenges of the new, mixed-race society by forever categorizing its members. Following this logic, the rebellious woman of the early Reconstruction years, exemplified by Nurse Periwinkle, was ill-prepared to confront the post-Emancipation situation: it was her lack of a modern, American education that had blackened her metaphorically while she was merely looking at dancing freedmen. Beecher, of course, did not present women's higher education as either a disciplinary measure or an instrument of self-regulation, but as a privilege that makes her an "informed citizen" without the legal rights that have traditionally been attached to the concept.<sup>41</sup> Women's suffrage, in other words, is not an issue in this debate.

As my reading exemplifies, early Reconstruction culture was marked by the desire of the white middle class to secure its dominant place within the newly emerging society and to project individual ideas about an ideal social constellation to come. Nostalgia does play a role here, yet the white middle class was well aware that with the Civil War, many of the social interdependencies that had existed during the antebellum period had ceased to function. After some initial skepticism, female Civil War nurses had become a widely accepted and welcome phenomenon, and African American soldiers had shown that the race was "worthy" of full American citizenship. The human figuration that emerged in the course of these changes had not only a political and legal dimension but a psychological one as well. It can be concluded from Alcott's narratives that (at least imaginatively, tentatively) a new figuration was beginning to take form, one that went along with a physical proximity that contradicted the official

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<sup>40</sup> For an analysis of how female citizenship and education were linked in the nineteenth century, see Richard B. Brown 183-187.

<sup>41</sup> See in particular Brown 154-195.

norms of white Victorian society: both *Hospital Sketches* and “The Brothers” contain numerous scenes where the nurse is tempted to touch or actually touches white and black men in an intimate hospital situation. While this behavior was not acceptable at the time, its superior role in Alcott’s fiction, together with the popularity of her work, points to an “emancipation of impulses and emotions” that according to Wouters is typical for phases of social and political instability. The new intensity of desire that Alcott describes in many passages in the two works corresponds to the protagonist’s immense effort to suppress her feelings; the narratives can in fact be seen as staging a particularly intense moment of self-restraint that points to what Elias has termed a “pronounced spurt in the civilizing process.” In a way, Alcott’s (in many ways autobiographically inspired) Reconstruction oeuvre can be perceived as an aspiring author’s effort to regulate her own erotically charged drives as they emerged in close connection with the profound social changes during this era. What it tells the reader, however, is not so much that she should increase her efforts to regulate herself, but to take more risks of moral failure. If the later Alcott used the genre of the juvenile novel to designate a “respectable” place for theoretically “unwomanly” behaviors,<sup>42</sup> her earlier works do not fall into this category. In these stories female desire and rebelliousness are not yet an attribute of an adolescent woman’s character but grounded in history and female patriotism.

Alcott interpreted the Civil War as creating new interdependencies between men and women, races, and classes, and the survival of this new social figuration depended on an increasing tolerance with regard to informal behavior, including a new physical dimension in the interaction between white women and black and white men. Paradoxically, then, the personal freedom of the white middle class woman now depended even more on the successful suppression of her (fundamentally sexual) impulses – which in turn made heterosexual, cross-racial desire a major feature of her writing. Although the desiring, female risk-taker always manages to successfully suppress her sex drive and control her unruly impulses, the “thrill” of her stories consists in the notion and fantasy of possible moral failure. Together with Beecher’s unconcealed fiction of a harmonious fairyland, Alcott’s early postwar writing teaches us something about the social transformation processes that cannot be expressed by any of the guidebooks and public speeches of the era: besides providing insight into the crisis of the domestic ideal that emerged alongside political debates about postbellum democracy, these texts also betray a telling crisis of form

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<sup>42</sup> This is one of the core arguments in Brodhead’s chapter on Alcott.

and meaning. Striving to make their writing commercially successful and trying to meet the expectations of a war-wary public, these two writers struggle with the role of history, nature, science, and religion in order to imaginatively remake the new nation and its literature.

What is so disturbing about these two exemplary authors is how unbridgeable their positions seem to be, and how long into the nineteenth century these works continued to be popular. Largely unreconciled, their respective constructions of human interdependency competed for the same middle-class, leisure-oriented, consumer readership. Both authors aimed to entertain instead of teach. Although Beecher advertised his novel as a vacation of the mind, he was unable to shed the didactic tone of the Congregationalist minister. And yet, even as Beecher lost much of his authority as the spokesman of America's middle-class, *Norwood* was republished several times until the turn of the century. Alcott, on the other hand, continued her career as one of the country's most influential popular women writers. Her story is one of strategic compromises and literary niches that was fundamental to her success as a writer and to her reputation as a "respectable" woman. As her alter ego confesses in *Hospital Sketches*, she was "a woman's rights woman" but "quite ready to be a 'timid trembler,' if necessary" (11). As the literary market became consolidated even more along the lines of social status, both authors came to occupy a more sharply defined place as writers for the middle-class. The later Alcott strategically chose to write "girls' books," a genre that allowed her to further construe "unruly" white females who learn to resist their impulses and embrace the traditional ideals of domestic womanhood.

The two authors remained remarkably popular during an era when the American literary scene underwent profound aesthetic and discursive changes, yet popularity is not equivalent to effectiveness. What, then, can we say about the role of fiction in the civilizing process? This is, after all, a question of aesthetic effect. As a contribution to a historical analysis that takes Reconstruction and the white middle-class as its starting point, the contradictory and ultimately fictional human figurations that this article has sketched out may help explain the initial failure of political Reconstruction and its late triumph during the era of Civil Rights and women's emancipation. Together with a debate about black and female dependency, the ideal of self-restraint that lay at the heart of both the domestic ideal and racial exclusion remained central to the nineteenth-century "democratic game," a game in which fiction writing participated, using various strategies to win its audience. Investigating the developments of those strategies with regard to the "game" and analyzing the meaning of the "Second Founding" in the post-Reconstruction

development of United States literature could be an important step in the analysis of the American “civilizing process.”

In 1868 and 1869, the outcome of the social transformation process of the age was not yet clear, and Americans struggled for a compromise between traditional norms and necessary change. The trend toward less formal behavioral norms went along with social stratification and tensions, ghettoization, and a deep-seated fear of the racial other, resulting in racial segregation and exclusion laws. Women in particular still risked social death whenever they acted in an “unrestrained” manner. Although a loss of self-control was a major feature of her war-related writings, Alcott was fully aware of the invisible confines of her gender, and she subsequently published her thrillers anonymously or under a pseudonym. By the end of the century, the idea of a truly unruly middle-class American woman was still a fiction of the mind. Somewhat ironically it was Beecher who publicly denounced antebellum norms and promoted what was formerly considered uncivilized behavior as a part of the modern Christian habitus. Since the famous “Brooklyn Scandal” had disclosed a man who did not live up to his own moral ideals, Beecher “no longer felt the need to cover himself with the mantle of orthodoxy” (Applegate 462). Shortly before his death in 1888 the spokesman of the middle-class stood by a Republican candidate who had fathered an illegitimate child, and openly discussed his own adultery.

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