Against the Grain: Reparative Readings for Victorian Popular Fiction

Hosted by Jesse R. Erickson
Three metatheoretical & theoretical lenses

Frank B. Wilderson III
Afropessimism

V21 Collective
Strategic Presentism

Reparative Reading

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Three aesthetic & affective refrains

- Speculative Fiction
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The Baker Street Irregulars

The Irregulars (2021)

Color-blind and color-conscious casting. Can they be reparative?
“And so am I, sir,” he answered, frankly. “I don’t believe that I can swing over the job. I give you my word on the book that I never raised hand against Mr. Sholto. It was that little hell-hound Tonga who shot one of his cursed darts into him. I had no part in it, sir. I was as grieved as if it had been my blood-relation. I welted the little devil with the slack end of the rope for it, but it was done, and I could not undo it again.”

“Have a cigar,” said Holmes; “and you had best take a pull out of my flask, for you are very wet. How could you expect so small and weak a man as this black fellow to overpower Mr. Sholto and hold him while you were climbing the rope?”

“You seem to know as much about it as if you were there, sir. The truth is that I hoped to find the room clear. I knew the habits of the house pretty well, and it was the time when Mr. Sholto usually went down to his supper. I shall make no secret of the business. The best defence that I can make is just the simple truth. Now, if it had been the old major I would have swung for him with a light heart. I would have thought no more of knifing him than of smoking this cigar. But it’s cursed hard that I should be lagged over this young Sholto, with whom I had no quarrel whatever.”

“You are under the charge of Mr. Athelney Jones, of Scotland Yard. He is going to bring you up to my rooms, and I shall ask you for a true account of the matter. You must make a clean breast of it, for if you do I hope that I may be of use to you. I think I can prove that the poison acts so quickly that the man was dead before ever you reached the room.”

“That he was, sir. I never got such a turn in my life as when I saw him grinning at me with his head on his shoulder as I climbed through the window. It fairly shook me, sir. I’d have half killed Tonga for it if he had not scrambled off. That was how he came to leave his club, and some of his darts too, as he tells me, which I dare say helped to put you on our track; though how you kept on it is more than I can tell. I don’t feel no malice against you for it. But it does seem a queer thing,” he added, with a bitter smile, “that I who have a fair claim to nigh upon half a million of money should spend the first half of my life building a breakwater in the Andamans, and am like to spend the other half digging drains at Dartmoor. It was an evil day for me when first I clapped eyes upon the merchant Achmet and had to do with the Agra treasure, which never brought anything but a curse yet upon the man who owned it. To him it brought murder, to Major Sholto it brought fear and guilt, to me it has meant slavery for life.” (pp. 208-211)
Before they had even reached the plaza, he could smell the food. It was a heady mix of Indian, Creole, African, Spanish, Chinese fused with sea salt, seeming to cling to the humid air. Holmes felt his knees go weak with desire. At the plaza, he scanned the crowds until he spied the vendors. As his olfactory sense had promised, they were selling what appeared to be a cornucopia of tasty concoctions... (p. 144)

SIR ARTHUR CHARLES HAMILTON-GORDON, ALSO KNOWN AS LORD tall, with wispy gray hair, a long, slightly crooked nose in an equally long, slightly crooked face, and a good-natured, hearty disposition. Stanmore, was the son of a former British prime minister, he was too well bred to mention their battered faces. For that, Holmes was grateful, as it meant he had no need to explain. He and the governor simply greeted one another as though the obvious did not exist, and when Holmes introduced Douglas as his aide-de-camp—a lofty title, given that Holmes himself was little more than that to Cardwell-Hamilton-Gordon did not twitch so much as an eyebrow.

There was a slight, black-haired man in his thirties—Holmes assumed he was the governor's own aide-de-camp who was not so charitable. He looked askance at Douglas, and when the governor requested a platter of biscuits and three cups of rum, the aide could not hold his tongue.

"Three, your Lordship?" he asked, his tone making it clear that he did not approve of Negroes imbibing with their betters. The baron frowned, and turned to Holmes.

"Has your aide other duties to execute at this late hour?" He inquired. When Holmes assured him that Douglas was at liberty, the your governor smiled.

"There you have it, Beauchamp," he declared. "Three glasses. Gentlemen! Make yourselves at home." He indicated two plush leather armchairs on the other side of his desk.

Douglas and Holmes did as instructed, sinking into them with gratitude. (pp.149-150)

...The rum warmed Holmes’s belly, but it was the biscuits her craved. He ate one, then another almost immediately. Only sheer willpower kept him from making a complete spectacle of himself with the third.

Douglas, he noted, was more circumspect.

But his age and his coloring have taught him patience, Holmes mused, watching the restraint with which his friend ate and drank—even though Holmes knew full well that they were equally famished. (pp. 150-151)
“To this day I have never troubled about the ethics of the matter,” he continued. “The study of Nature makes a man at last as remorseless as Nature. I have gone on, not heeding anything but the question I was pursuing; and the material has… dripped into the huts yonder…. It is nearly eleven years since we came here, I and Montgomery and six Kanakas. I remember the green stillness of the island and the empty ocean about us, as though it was yesterday. The place seemed waiting for me.”

“The stores were landed and the house was built. The Kanakas founded some huts near the ravine. I went to work here upon what I had brought with me. There were some disagreeable things happened at first. I began with a sheep, and killed it after a day and a half by a slip of the scalpel. I took another sheep, and made a thing of pain and fear and left it bound up to heal. It looked quite human to me when I had finished it; but when I went to it I was discontented with it. It remembered me, and was terrified beyond imagination; and it had no more than the wits of a sheep. The more I looked at it the clumsier it seemed, until at last I put the monster out of its misery. These animals without courage, these fear-haunted, pain-driven things, without a spark of pugnacious energy to face torment,—they are no good for man-making.”

“Then I took a gorilla I had; and upon that, working with infinite care and mastering difficulty after difficulty, I made my first man. All the week, night and day, I moulded him. With him it was chiefly the brain that needed moulding; much had to be added, much changed. I thought him a fair specimen of the negroid type when I had finished him, and he lay bandaged, bound, and motionless before me. It was only when his life was assured that I left him and came into this room again, and found Montgomery much as you are. He had heard some of the cries as the thing grew human,—cries like those that disturbed you so. I didn’t take him completely into my confidence at first. And the Kanakas too, had realised something of it. They were scared out of their wits by the sight of me. I got Montgomery over to me—in a way; but I and he had the hardest job to prevent the Kanakas deserting. Finally they did; and so we lost the yacht. I spent many days educating the brute,—altogether I had him for three or four months. I taught him the rudiments of English; gave him ideas of counting; even made the thing read the alphabet. But at that he was slow, though I’ve met with idiots slower. He began with a clean sheet, mentally; had no memories left in his mind of what he had been. When his scars were quite healed, and he was no longer anything but painful and stiff, and able to converse a little, I took him yonder and introduced him to the Kanakas as an interesting stowaway.”

(pp.116-119)
As they fitted the rope around the young man’s head, his eyes found Laurence and Walter. There was no contentment at seeing them. Not even bewilderment. There was simply a blank gaze, the only thing that could accompany such hopelessness. The two stared at each other, as if nothing else existed.

A whooping cheer erupted as the man was abruptly hoisted up by his neck. Laurence watched in horror as his body jerked and dangled, his bound hands twisting to get free. A spray of spittle burst from his lips, as he sputtered for air. Laurence gritted his teeth, praying the man would die soon so they could flee from this place and these mad people.

A sudden rumbling jerked him from his thoughts. A blast of wind followed, buffeting them like a storm. Laurence pulled his eyes from the dying man to look. What he saw next sent his jaw slack.

For a moment the air in the distance rippled unnaturally, like water. And then, out of seeming nothingness, there appeared a colored man. Laurence blinked several times to make sure he wasn’t imagining things. But no, there was a colored man. Tall and dressed in a dark suit with a top hat, he seemed completely out of place. But it was the figures behind him that gave everyone pause. They were men, giant men, all clad in black. Each stood taller than even the biggest man Laurence had ever seen—and near three times as wide. Their faces and bodies were hidden behind great black robes with hoods. He counted seven in all, still as statues and ominously silent.

The strange colored man who led them pointed a black cane with a rounded silver head at the figure dangling from the tree. Immediately one of the giants lumbered forward, his footsteps a churning heavy sound of whirs and clicks that reminded Laurence of a locomotive.

He lifted a massive arm, and from within his sleeve a light whistled like a bullet through the air. It struck the rope that held the man, cutting it clean. He fell to the ground, gasping and choking, but still alive.

(pp. 64-65)
Porter had included several different types of books on the list. He focused a bit on adventure books but also had the complete works of William Shakespeare. He had her purchase the complete works of Charles Dickens and Edgar Allen Poe (which Porter planned to read to the children if they were still on the train by Halloween).

In her own spare time she was reading Jane Austen. Of course she would never admit it to Porter, since she’d turned up her nose calling it romantic drivel, when he included it on the list. So she was happy that he was nowhere near camp when she snuck back onto the wagon to read a few chapters before they were called out to work again.

When she settled into her favorite reading spot and leaned back so that sun could stream over her shoulder, Porter’s journal tumbled off the back of the buckboard where he left it and onto the wagon floor.

Porter… put your things away. I am not your maid, she sighed to herself shaking her head.

As she lifted the journal to stow it back on the seat the pages fell open. Instantly she forgot about Jane Austen, or the snares or Porter. The journal he wrote in religiously didn’t appear to be filled with the personal thoughts and dreams of the enigmatic Porter Dreyton. Instead it was filled, page after page with drawings … machines the likes of which Da Vinci and Benjamin Banneker himself would have been envious. But these weren’t simply drawings. They were modifications. There had to be nine different Airship designs, steam boats, heating and cooling units, vehicles designed to traverse all types of terrain.

It was rumored that Porter was a genius. Now she knew it to be true. Each design carried with it a set of notes describing its inspiration and his intention for its use. The vignettes were compelling, thought-provoking and sometimes whimsical. The romantic in her was enthralled with his lyric prose. The engineer in her was fascinated with the design and proposed methods of manufacture. She ate up page after page of the journal with the time almost standing still.

“Hey, Harry I’ve been calling you for the past five minutes!” Porter’s voice broker her concentration.

For a moment she was paralyzed. Porter had never told her that she couldn’t read his journal and alternatively he never told her that could.

“How long has he been standing there?

“Ah, see! I told you. Jane Austen is entertaining,” he smiled. Jane Austen, she thought and then looked down.

There in her hands was the journal, framed within the pages of the Jane Austen compendium. (pp. 150-151)
If that porter had been a blackbird instead of a black man, he would have flown, so great was his excitement. As it was, he came as near accomplishing that impossible feat as Nature, a narrow aisle, and a rolling car would allow him. He had to go the length of another car before he found Mr. Osborne, but he seemed to achieve the distance in an incredibly short time. Then he came, guiding back the old gentleman, who was white to the lips.

Mildred stood up as he approached.

“What is it?” he asked in an anxious tone.

“Didn’t you see them?” and just then they passed another dog-town, and she cried, “There they are! There they are! Oh, papa, look at them!”

Mr. Osborne saw what the excitement was about and collapsed limply into his seat.

“Mildred, Mildred,” he said, “is this what you have called me for? Where, oh, where, is your reserve, the fruit of a hundred drawing rooms? What would your Aunt Anna say?” and he bent into a very undignified curve.

“I don’t care,” Mildred pouted; “they are just as cute as they can be.”

“Why, you nearly startled that porter out of his wits. He didn’t say it, but he looked as if he thought you might be in a fit.”

And, indeed, the coloured man was still staring at them with wide, white eyes, and when he saw them burst anew into laughter, he left the door and went back to his place, in disgust no doubt with the thought in his mind that here was another instance of white people trampling on, and making a fool of, the black man.

“I didn’t mean to frighten him,” said Mildred. “But it was such a new sight to me! I’ll give him an extra tip before we leave.”

“You should make him pay you for turning him so near white, even for such a short space of time.”
That amiable young Englishman still lingered, and rode, drove, and shot with the joy that only a true sportsman can know. The friendship between him and Landry had increased, and when the latter was not mooning about, they were always together.

Mildred had been seeing almost as little of the one as she had of the other. It was Heathcote’s plan to give her a respite from his importunities, and maybe, he thought, she would come round to his way of thinking. He had decided now, on his return from his hunting trip to go directly East; so the day before the start was to be made, he came to her once more.

She saw his purpose in his eyes, and would have saved him this final humiliation, but he would speak.

“I hope I’m not boring you too much,” he said humbly, “but I have kept silent as long as I can, and on my return, I shall go directly East, so I thought maybe you wouldn’t mind giving me my answer now.”

She looked at him with shining eyes, and he took a moment’s hope, which was destined to be dashed immediately.

“Arthur, my good friend,” she said, “I will not keep you in suspense. I cannot say to you what I said a little while ago, for now I do love another. I thank you for the honour you do me, for it is an honour to be loved by such a man.”

He bowed and she gave him her hand. He was turning away, when suddenly a light broke through the gloom of his face, and he came back to her eagerly.

“I say,” he began awkwardly, “It couldn’t be old Landry, you know?”

“It is Landry,” she said firmly. “That’s good, that’s good,” he said, with a ring of honesty in his voice; “I’d rather him than anybody else except myself. I congratulate you both.” He stood pumping her hand, and smiling down at her, though there lurked a sadness in his eyes.

“There — there — is nothing to congratulate me about. Landry asked me before the stampede, and then I did not know, so I refused him. He has not asked me since.”

Heathcote gazed at her for a moment in silence, and then he turned abruptly and left the room.

“What are you going to do?” she cried. But he did not answer, and she sat down, suddenly laughing and crying, both together.

There was no mistaking Heathcote’s purpose, and Mildred was filled with a great gladness, while her heart quivered with fright. Landry would know, he would know that she loved him, and would come to her. Had she been unmaidenly to take this method to let him know?
To her Consuelo Laurence represented the most objectionable class of women, come no one knew whither, going no one knew whither, their sovereignty an usurpation, their fashion an accident, their position an imposture.

Once or twice Beaufront had felt tempted to tell his cousin of the cause which had first drawn him and Mrs. Laurence together. But he never did; he doubted her reception of it. She was incredulous and cold where her hostilities were concerned, and he felt that it was quite possible that she would disbelieve him and think something worse than she now did.

Consuelo Laurence had been the bastard daughter of a planter of Martinique, by a youthful quadroon. Her father, immensely rich, and passionately attached to her, had brought her up in luxury and culture; life in the beautiful tropical wilderness had been to her, up to the time she was fifteen years old, much what it was to any one of the gorgeous flowers blooming in the rank and humid woods. When she was nearly sixteen, her father was killed by a bite from a yellow snake. He had been a careless, thoughtless, indolent Creole, who, in the full vigor of manhood and flower of prosperity, had never given a moment's reflection to the uncertainty of life. He had made no kind of provision for his daughter, whom he had brought up like an oriental princess, and whose loveliness had unfolded itself before his eyes, day by day, in the hot sunlight, like the blossoms of the tulip-trees before his verandah. He died unmarried and intestate, and his heirs did not recognize in Consuelo any legal title to share their heritage. They expelled her from the paradise of her childhood with the woman who had been her nurse, a negress named Miriam. The child was too delirious with grief to know what happened to her; Miriam, as stunned as herself, and ignorant of all which lay outside the forest swamps of her birthplace, being offered a free passage to Charleston by a ship-owner whom she knew, went thither with her charge, not knowing where else to go or what to do in the future… (pp.209-210)
In Charleston the few thousand dollars given them by the heirs were soon spent, and the ignorant woman and her charge, who had deemed herself born only to command and to enjoy, lived miserably, and would have starved but for the negress' little gains made by any hard work that she could obtain in the poor quarter where they had taken refuge.

Consuelo accepted, apathetically, all that was given to her for many weeks. Then one day, when her nurse brought her some delicate food, she said, suddenly:

"Where does this come from? How is it got?"
"It comes from the ravens, my treasure," said the negress; but the girl looked at her, and colored scarlet.
"Do you keep me?" she said, with an awakening sense of shame.

It was then six months since her expulsion from her home. Her life had been like that flower which only grows on the shores of the Mexican Gulf, which is snow-white at sunrise, ruby red at noon, and is by evening dead.

The next day, when the negress was out at work, Consuelo went down into the streets and wandered about in them, a black shawl folded over her head. She saw a place above which was written its name in large letters, in French: "Salle de Concert. Café Chantant." Her thoughts were still very confused, but she understood that the words meant music of some sort. She went inside, and asked for the director; when he came he was struck by her unusual beauty, and asked her, kindly, what she wanted.

"I want to earn money," she said to him. "I can sing; I know languages; I can play the guitar; will you let me sing here, and pay me?"

The director, who was a Frenchman with a travelling troupe of third-rate music-hall singers, was quick to perceive the use she might be to him; he engaged her with out even caring whether she could sing or not, and set her behind the flaring gas-jets of his stage, between some shabby singing-women, in gaudy attire and with painted cheeks, whose bold eyes and stereotyped simpers made her heart grow sick. (pp. 210-212)
She could not sing a note, from nervousness, terror, and the sobs which choked her throat; but she stood there in her black frock, holding her mute guitar, and her beauty bewitched the audience. Her first appearance, though she neither sang nor played a note, was successful; all the city wanted to see her, and the music-hall was night after night crowded to overflowing. Before then, it had been scarcely more than a gathering-place for the lower kind of loafers; it now became the resort of all the best men of Charleston. “Have you seen Consuelo?” was the one question on all their tongues. There would have been but one issue to this had not the negress been there; but Miriam stood like a rock between her nursling and the crowd of adorers, who offered up to her bouquets, jewels, verses, serenades, and all the gamut of homage except one thing, the one thing for which the negress stood out: “If you want her, marry her,” she said always, but no one would do that; the old woman was obdurate, and so contrived to be forever beside her charge, and to screen her perpetually from all her suitors, that the child passed through this winter of danger and of degradation without harm, or even any suspicion of her own peril.

One man alone fell so madly in love with her that he threw all prejudices to the winds and offered her marriage. He was Horace Laurence, an Englishman, who had come for shooting to the South. He was good-looking and well born; he appeared rich. Miriam was won over to his side at once, and by her entreaties, joined to his importunities, the girl’s reluctance was overcome and she became his wife.

Six months later he took her to Europe. There she bore him a child, and before she was eighteen years old had discovered that her husband was an adventurer, a spendthrift, and a gamester; that his social position was dubious, his means precarious, and his passion for herself a sensual self-gratification united to a callous self-interest. He had a small showy apartment in Paris, and there as at any of the fashionable watering-places to which they went, he desired that his wife’s beauty should attract young men of rank and riches whose knowledge of play would not be equal to his own. She spent years of a cruel and humiliating struggle beside which the music-hall of Charleston seemed in her memory like a haven of peace.

As Laurence sank from bad to worse, and grew deeper and deeper in the mire of debt, he made no scruple of bidding his wife get money for him in any way she could.

“I am a mari-complaisant, why don’t you profit by my good nature? What a fortunate woman you should think yourself!” he said with a brutal laugh.
Violent scenes followed on her refusal to be led into what he wished; and her efforts to warn off those whom he decoyed. She had a small apartment in the Rue Rouget de Lisle, very high up, but giving her a glimpse from the balconies of the trees of the Tuileries, and made attractive by her own taste and the flowers which all the men she sent her in all seasons. There Laurence, throughout the season, brought his acquaintances to play baccarat and écarté and chemin de fer; there she filled a position which she abhorred, and strove as far as she could to diminish the evil he did; there her little child lived for three short years, a pretty baby, tumbling on the grass of the Tuileries, and giving her the only joyous moments of her existence; and there one evening came Ralph Fitzurse, a man of higher rank and emptier purse than the other associates of Colonel Laurence.

At the time of his first visit there the child, little Margot, was ill, wasting sadly and silently away, and one afternoon he entered the salon unannounced and found her alone there with the dying child in her lap, while the sunny air was sweet with the scent of lilac, and the noise of the carriages going down the Rue de Rivoli came up to the silent room.

Laurence was away at Chantilly, her servants were out, the child was dying; he did all that its father should have done, and stayed beside her while the dusk deepened, and the roar of the traffic went on, and the puff-ball of daisies with which she had tried to call a smile from the dim drowsy eyes, rolled from the baby’s hand on to the floor, and with a cooing sound its small breath sighed itself away.

His accidental presence there that day, at such a moment, laid the foundation of an unchangeable friendship between them. He had seen the true nature of this woman who was deemed a cold-hearted adventuress, and she had found how much of tenderness, of delicacy, and of sympathy there existed under the reckless and cynical exterior of a man who at that period of his life was classed as a patrician décavé.

Never afterward did Beaufront smell the odor of the Paris lilac on an Easter day, or see the children throw their balls across the daisies in the Tuileries gardens, without thinking of little Margot lying dead and dumb in her mother’s arms, while all the movement and gayety of Paris stirred in the April air.

It was he, and not Laurence, who had gone down with her to put the small white coffin away under the green earth of a little village burial-ground on the edge of the great Fontainebleau woods. When the whole world of London gossiped its heart out and tortured its brains to imagine what the secret could be which united the Duke of Beaufront and Consuelo Laurence, it little dreamed that it was nothing more or less than the remembrance of a little grave under an old oak-tree, planted thick with snow drops in memory of a child. (pp.214-216)